

The condition of women during Fascism

The question at the basis of this thesis is what was effectively the condition of women under Fascism. More specifically, what was the role reserved for women in society, laws and rights concerning them, the policies made against them? We will focus in particular on the generations who lived during the years of the dictatorship. It will be seen that the Duce implemented a policy against women that was instrumental to his drawings, for example as in the case of prevention adopted for the protection of motherhood, because if "the number is power" it was necessary to do everything possible to protect those mothers and convince them to take care only of children, not of work, of rights and equality.

If we talk about negation and abnegation of the Italian women, in the thesis we will try to understand which changes led to the dictatorship for them and if indeed there was a sharp deterioration compared to the conditions of life under liberal governments. If about of dictatorship we can not speak of democracy, however we can not define even a democratic government which excluded from political debate half the population, not worrying about to grant the right of vote to women. We also try to determine whether the restrictive measures taken by the Mussolini's government got the desired results, for example, if the obsessive natalist campaign produced a tangible increase in the birth rate and if the wage repression helped to decrease the male unemployment. This does not mean that women affected by these amendments accepted them passively: there were attempts to protest and the search for alternative solutions but, as it will be seen later, they did not get big hits. Finally, focusing on those numerous women who supported fascism, we will also try to understand if their consent went to the man or to the regime, and to understand the reasons of their choice.

So the thesis will focus on these issues by analyzing in detail a rather large period of time that goes from the birth of the *Fasci di combattimento*(vedi wiki in inglese) in 1919 to the dissolution of the Republic of Salò in 1945, last Fascist mirage. Precisely in the first chapter, it is necessary to start from the years preceding the First World War to explain why Italians, included Italian women, confided in that nascent political movement. This clarification about Great War is important also to explain how the national sentiment spread among the people and how it was the basis of dissatisfaction, disappointment, during and after the war, when the same people saw betrayed all the glorious predictions which belonged to Italy victorious. So, in this context of despair, hopelessness, anger post-war, just the fascists tried to make that Risorgimento's national sentiment revive, to honor the fallen heroes in the battle, against that government inept and the growing forces of the left-wing.

Not by chance the fascists were able to involve many veterans and women who had been marked by the loss of a husband, a child, or even worse women that were next to injured and depressed men which necessarily they had to take care of. Together with the widows, in the immediate post-war, women from different social backgrounds, converged between the followers

of Fascism. Most of them were high-ranking, cultured, refined, but affected by the conflict, injured to having seen their country betrayed, grown up and educated with a patriotic spirit, convinced interventionist before the war and attracted by anyone who demonstrated openly of wanting to honor Italy. In these years there were two main categories of fascist, so-called "of the first time": the *sansepolcriste* and the *Fiumane*, all destined to be eclipsed, crushed by the dictatorship.

It is also appropriate to mention the organization of women par excellence of the PNF, the *Fasci Femminili*. The *Fasci* developed sporadically from 1920 and they were constituted mostly by interventionist and nationalist women, enough lively and independent. The PNF did not consider the fascist women and ignored this phenomenon, it left them enough autonomy, so that the women ruled themselves by electing to turn a secretary. Not surprisingly, once that the fascist recognized the power that these women were acquiring, in 1931 they decided to pass the *Fasci* under the direct control of the leadership of the party.

So Fascism did everything possible to erase all traces of Italian feminism, discouraging any attempt of feminists to obtain rights, equality and participation, which were elements that were too uncomfortable for the implementation of the Duce's natalist campaign. Feminist movements related to the Socialists and the Communists had the same fate of their parties and were suppressed; but it is also true that, even among the same feminists, there were too many misunderstandings and prejudices, such as those of the older women, linked to family values, to the younger that in their opinion were not feminists but rather exhibitionist. Despite this, there were grievances against those amendments avowedly anti-feminist, but in general these women could not do much and they had just the memory of the immediate postwar period, when the goals seemed more sharper and nearest, and instead Fascism swept them away: feminism was to be forgotten along with the liberal ideas.

The second chapter is dedicated to the discussion of a key aspect of the fascist's policy: the thumping natalist campaign which hit especially women, that were custodians of the characters of pure Italian race. The power of a people is measured by their number and the Italian women, at home and in the colony, had to contribute giving birth to healthy and robust babies, future soldiers of the Empire. From here the prohibition of the use of contraceptives and harsh penalties for those who decided to have an abortion illegally, a policy that also saw concord the Catholic Church. Moreover the huge differences between north and south that characterized the whole Fascist period was evident: in fact, between 1921 and 1925, the birth rate per thousand inhabitants in northern Italy was 26.6, while in the south it reached the 36.3 per thousand; in the end, between 1941 and 1945, the rate stood always on a difference of about ten percentage points between north and south, respectively, 16.6 and 25.3 per thousand.

Therefore, over this huge gap between North and South, the data showed that the birth rate went from 27 per thousand in 1926 to 23 per thousand in later years, continuing to fall year-on-year. This shows that the natalist campaign did not have the desired effects because (although the population had steadily increased until reaching 44 million inhabitants in 1940) it did not

increase the number of births, but simply the mortality decreased and the phenomenon of emigration lowered. The difference in birth rate was not only geographical but also social, because bourgeois women gave birth to a maximum of two children, while the farmers more than four.

However the second chapter speaks of the measures that were taken by the regime to assist those mothers, such as the establishment of an institution dedicated to motherhood, called ONMI. It was founded on December 10, 1925 (will be abolished in 1975) with the aim of assisting the needy mothers and orphans, but it was especially concerned to give support to single mothers so that did not abandon the unwanted children in orphanages. This aspect was significant because it shows how for the regime was important to take advantage also of those children born out of marriage and Fascism did everything possible to make them grow up strong and robust: only breastfeeding and maternal warmth could make this, at least the fascists preached so. Or even they promulgate labor laws to protect pregnant workers or new mothers. This were measures never taken before, which were undoubtedly synonym of modernity, but one has to wonder if these helps were very efficient and practical for those women.

In the next chapter goes on to explore the question of women's work. Machines and women were the cause of male unemployment: the machines that now allowed less use of labor and women who already had replaced them by the Great War in the fields, factories and offices. For those reasons Mussolini emanated continuously decrees that reduced women's employment, not only in the factory, but also in public administration and teaching. Yet, if in words the majority of men agreed with the repression, in fact many did not suit, primarily the employers. As explained before, the female labor force was less expensive, the strikes were sporadic events and, if the crisis shipped back the women to the house they accepted in silence (as was the case with the wage regressions between 1926 and 1932). You should be noted, however, that in the Fascist period the sectors occupied by the Italian women were those who the society considered more appropriate to them: assistance, education, trade and domestic services. Especially in the "domestic" field, the women had to undergo to frequent harassments and continuous threats of dismissal by elegant ladies, that were noble women in public and cruel owner in private.

Women who were married were still being destitute and did not even have the right to redundancy pay. So, here the discourse becomes a contradiction: when these employees were action against employers, the Court can answer them that it was true that the Duce asked them to marry and that, so, they had done their duty as good citizens, but it was also true that it was their free choice and therefore were not entitled to compensation. The same was true for those women who simply resigned voluntarily, reducing drastically the family income and who were forced to bend the illegal work, if they wanted to return to work. We must be admitted, however, that never before like in '34 so strict measures were adopted for the protection of female workers: they were mainly focused on the mothers, that were entitled to two months' paid leave after childbirth, the preservation of the place, a cash prize for the birth , a break from work for nursing. However, this put again into light the contradictory nature of those years: Fascism tried to hinder the female employees to reduce male unemployment, but employers preferred the low labor cost,

then the regime was forced to protect working mothers for the good of the breed. So even the apparent benefits granted to women once again were intended to utilitarian purposes.

It is wrong to believe that women, as well as men, accepted passively the wage repression and layoffs: on the contrary they organized strikes and demonstrations against the government, despite the severe penalties provided, such as arrest or immediate expulsion from work; women workers from different sectors were in the first row, just you remember the strikes of *mondine* or those of 1931 in the metal industry in Turin. Rather, the problem was due to the different ideals and reasons why they protested: if the workers were fighting for greater safety at work and decent hours, the burghers fighting for have equal rights with men in competitions and occupations carried out in the public service. It was impossible to find agreement between the various categories, each took care only of their interests without realizing that the discrimination made by the dictatorship treated all at the same way.

At last, the fourth chapter contains an extensive period of time, starting from the Thirties and arrives at the 1945, end of the war and sunset of Fascist regime. In particular, is dedicated to describing the lives of those women and girls who were born and grew up under the dictatorship and there remained involved. It is interesting to find out how many of those young girls actually remember with pleasure those years when they were part of fascist gatherings, demonstrations and days, taking as an opportunity to escape from the control of their families and meet together; the girls participated proud, fairs and happy as the Fascist education taught them, just look at physical education teachers or those forming part of the *Fasci Femminile*. It is no coincidence that in this area is highlighted one of the more modern aspects introduced by the regime: it had extended the teaching of physical education and the practice of sporting activities also to the female gender.

The physical exercise was always a male-dominated field, but Fascism made also participate women from 1930: Mussolini wanted them sportive, ready for war, athletic, strong, always preserving their femininity, or better, their sexuality. In fact, the training should not affect the future function of the girls as mother, who had to perform exercises that, according to doctors, were in preparation for this role. So the women made postural and corrective exercises, but they could not daily trainings and competitions. It was an important change that the Italian women welcomed electrified, they finally had access to new areas and especially experienced another trick to get away from home. Many of them are amused when remember the times spent together to do gymnastics, while other less athletic remember the scorn of classmates and their teachers that jeered them.

The narration then moves from Italy to tell the choice and the lives of the Italian women who decided to pander the imperialist projects of the Duce and that departed for Africa with the hope of achieving greater independence and consideration. In the mid-thirties in fact the fascist policy not only took care of most domestic issues but began to expand his horizons, went to the South in search of "a place in the sun." The African campaign began in 1935, involved major changes for many Italian women and, above all, new sacrifices. Life in the colonies was not easy

and the Italian women who moved there did not enjoy good reputation: the Church confirmed it, siding against the fascist campaign to convince them to leave and proclaiming so indignant because these women put at risk their own safety and their respectability. Indeed, the objective of the regime was to send the women in AOI (Italian Eastern Africa) to overcome the shortcomings of the colonists and brake as soon as possible the risk of "miscegenation," considered as disgrace for the pure Italian race. But the girls who responded enthusiastic to the demand of the regime did not put these problems, because the desire to escape from Italy was too great. However, the number of colonizing was quite disappointing and Mussolini realized that Italian women were not willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the pure breed.

After the chapter focuses on the disastrous years of the Second World War, when the consent of the Italian to the regime began to fade, and the women once again took charge of the enormous responsibility, that arose between poverty and rampant destruction. And in this devastating climate, finally the Italian women chose voluntarily: those who sided with the Resistance to liberate the country from German enemy and those who remained faithful to Fascism, becoming an active part of the Republic of Salò.

In conclusion you may note that in this second conflict, in contrast to the situation during and after the Great War, women occupied not only the seats of their husbands, fathers and sons who were called to the front, but formed a coalition becoming an active part of the fighting. Despite choosing opposing sides, partisan women and the fascist women of Salò had in common the desire to honor the homeland and liberate it from the enemy, both feeling equally betrayed: the first by the regime and by the King, the second by the Italian who left Mussolini and Italy in the hands of foreigners. How to wake up from a deep sleep, most of the Italian women wondered if really Italy became the great potency that the Duce promised. At least according to the outcome of the war, of course not.

While if we want to answer at the questions that we posed at the beginning of the paper, and see if the fascist policies adopted against of the female population had been as successful as hoped, again according to what we explained in the thesis the results are questionable. For example, with regard to the natalist campaign unleashed by Mussolini, the data mentioned in the second chapter show its failure because was followed only by some women and ended, on the contrary, to increase the number of abortions and the abandonment of infants. The Duce extolled the prolific, not because he esteemed really them, but to try to involve the whole of the Italian women. But Mussolini failed in his attempt, despite of the prizes and accolades that he gave to women.

Embittered, he looked for other ways to force women to support him and focused therefore on the female job, hampering continuous amendments: but if the female workers were the cause of infertility of Italy and even worse of male unemployment, as ever despite their forced expulsion, the first continued to decrease and the second increase? Another demonstration that the problem was not women but the progressive changes that modernity brought with her, against which even the Duce could make something.

However, many of the women affirmed at work in full Fascist period were already quite mature, grown up in a context and education not exactly fascist. So Mussolini had to focus on girls and adolescents influencing their mindset since childhood. So he made participate the young women in the community for the first time in Italian history, through the organizations, events and fascist rallies, but always pointing out the difference with the boys. That is why, as explained in the thesis, many women let themselves engaged and remember that period of youth without rancor, when they finally felt too, as women, part of the system, taking advantage of the opportunity to escape from the obsessive control of the families and stay together. And here is how to explain why women gave their consent to the Duce that, while emphasizing in his aulic speeches the subjection of women as inferior beings, he was able to give them the impression of being protagonists equally with men. So you can understand why some women responded to the call of the last fascist who accused of treason those cowards men and, instead, exalted the women who were in the streets to honor the homeland, as we read in an article in *La Stampa* of Turin in January 1944.

Therefore they followed the fascist project until the end. No one knows for sure what the fascist of Salò knew at the time of the violence unheard of *repubblichini*, the massacres committed by the Nazis in Italy, deportations, probably very little, as they were locked in that little reality rebuilt on the lake of Garda; but is incomprehensible how it is possible that, once denounced the atrocities after the war, most of the ex Auxiliary justified those brutality, in fact they denied strongly, reaching even to deny the Holocaust.

To sum up, so it is improper to speak of a deterioration in the condition of women during Fascism, or better, if it is obvious to those who study today that history, especially for emancipated and established women in the modernity of the twenty-first century, it was not the same for many the Italian women that lived in those years, in particular for those which have been discussed in the fourth chapter. Their perception of reality was in fact constrained by the context in which they lived, and in the total absence of any mention of feminism, those women could not demand gender equality if they had never heard of; while those who were born before the advent of Fascism had received equally indifference and disinterest by liberal governments, and only a few more educated and independent were concerned of feminist struggles. And the situation did not change much after the war.

In fact, as mentioned above, especially between men of the Resistance (of which they were part 70000 women) there was no proper gratitude, but once again emerged that bigot mentality against the Italian women. It is true that, finally, women voted in the constitutional referendum in 1946, and exercised the right to vote on April 18, 1948 for the first time in the political elections. The result of the election decreed winners the men of the Christian Democracy disappointing left-wing forces that, instead of reflecting on their mistakes and their failed union, blamed the Italian women, regretting the fact that they granted them the right to vote. In fact most of them were once again affected in their choice: the statements of the Church and politicians of DC against the advance of the Red influenced them so much that they vote en masse against the left.

In some history books even speaks of "totalitarianism" of the DC and the situation of the Italian women effectively did not undergo the hoped change, but remained strongly bound by the decisions of men. Yet feminist groups began to flourish, women more aware and with a concrete political consciousness resumed fighting for old and new rights. When the feminist wave in the Seventies also invaded Italy, the women won the first successes, which began disrupt the unchallenged power, until then, of DC: in 1974 the divorce referendum to repeal the law Fortuna-Baslini decreed the victory of the NO, the first of the future achievements that gave start to the independence and freedom of choice for the female gender.