

WOMEN IN ITALY: BETWEEN COMMODITY AND ACCESSORY

A Critique of the State of Modern Italian Women through their Portrayal on
Television in the age of Berlusconi

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of French, Italian, and Arabic

Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

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May/2013

L'espressione del femminile attraverso il corpo è una tappa fondamentale per l'evoluzione delle donne.

Lorella Zanardo

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents for giving me the amazing opportunity to attend a school in which I have been able to thrive and to study the subjects that most interest me.

Thank you to my sister for always believing in me and inspiring me to be the best that I can be.

Thank you to the French, Italian, and Arabic department of Colorado College for all the help and guidance that I have received throughout the past four years.

A very special thank you to Professor Andrea Righi for helping to find what I am passionate about and transforming that passion into this project. I could not have completed this without your help and I will truly be forever grateful for the guidance, the edits, and the critiques that have helped me make this paper everything that it is.

Thank you to Brenna Day for putting up with reading this and helping me to work through the parts that were continually giving me trouble. Truly, you kept me sane throughout this process.

And finally, thank you to Colorado College for giving the best college experience that I could ask for. I couldn't imagine a better place to find myself and to find my passion.

Thank you.

Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Epigraph.....	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Images	iv
Introduction	1
1 – A History of Modern Italian Feminism	5
1.1 – Women in Italian Capitalism	6
1.2 – Italian Feminism Today	12
2 – Italian Television	17
3 – Berlusconi: Politics and Television	24
3.1 – Berlusconi’s Views on Women	26
4 – Lorella Zanardo: Women on Television	32
4.1 – Foreign Perceptions of Italian Women	36
5 – Conclusions	39
5.1 – A Better Future?	39
5.2 – An Answer from the Past?	41
5.3 – A Middle Ground for the Present.....	43

List of Images

Sexyshock Poster	13
The Black Cat (Screengrab Zanardo 7:55 min)	33
Breast Implants on Television (Screengrab Zanardo 6:38 min)	34
Woman Compared to Ham Hocks (Screengrab Zanardo 2:49)	34

Introduction

In Italian society, both men and women continue to hold very traditional roles, especially when compared to other western countries. Italy is very far behind with respect to women's rights, male attitudes towards women's role in society, and the portrayal of women in the media. Italy is a traditionally Catholic state and as such it often keeps women in the traditional maternal role held by the Virgin Mary. Historically, women were rarely educated and if so, they often stopped at a very early age compared to that of men. Even today it is commonly understood that as children, girls are meant to help their mothers in the home. Girls are raised to marry well (maybe a soccer star or a doctor) and then to take over the role that their mother held in their childhood home. They are meant to do domestic work and cater to every need of their husband. Even educated women with successful careers are often expected to resume this traditional role after they are married.

The fact that the women's rightful place is within the home is still a strongly held belief in Italian culture. This continues, despite the fact that in most other comparably modern countries, even those with strong Catholic influences, women's roles have dramatically changed. Women are leaving the domestic sphere in order to have jobs and lead independent lives. In the United States, as well as other countries, women can hold high managerial positions in corporations while still having a family and home life. In Italy, the change to a more independent feminine culture has been incredibly gradual. It

has always been very difficult for women to change their role in any society and it is especially difficult in a society, like Italy, that is very set in its ways.

Originally, women in Italy that wanted to leave the home were viewed with a negative connotation. Not only were they seen as women who were betraying their natural role, but also as individuals going against their religion. Consequently, women are generally only viewed in one of two roles: the mother or the prostitute. These portrayals are supported and intensified by Italian television and even by the Italian government, most clearly the government of ex-prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. On television, women are generally required to play the parts of mothers or prostitutes. Even in serious roles, like a police officer, they can never solve problems on their own and the male always has to come to the rescue in order to show that women must always rely on men to get anything done. There are no female equivalents to those police inspectors like Montalbano or Marshal Rocca, but women do appear alongside these men, always as assistants or as distractions from their difficult and masculine careers (Buonanno 128). Quiz shows, which are very popular in Italy, have male hosts with female assistants that are dressed in very little clothing. A clear example of this is The Black Cat (*La Gatta Nera*), a showgirl on the quiz show *Il Mercante in Fiera*, who struts the set in a black leather cat suit in order to attract viewers. When they are not assisting the hosts, women are often used in humiliating ways to draw viewers.

Sadly, it seems that a consistent number of Italian men exploit women's traditional role as mothers in order to keep them in the domestic sphere and out of the

workplace, and especially out of the political sphere, and take advantage of their role as prostitutes (commodities) in order to attract a larger audience to their television shows so that they can make more money for the company that owns the television stations. In the case of Silvio Berlusconi, the owner of multiple television companies and leader of the most important right wing party in Italy, this use of women is used to gain more control over the Italian government. In short, both on the screen and off, women are not taken seriously in Italian society and even though things have improved in recent years, it is still almost impossible to find women in managerial positions within companies and they hold very few positions within the government. Even when women do manage to break through stereotypes, they are often faced with the problem of trying to be both a professional and a mother, while their male counterparts are usually able to focus exclusively on their professions.

The view of women in Italian culture needs a drastic makeover. There are several strong feminist groups in Italy that work to affect change, but despite some success, a real breakthrough does not seem to be coming any time soon. One even begins to wonder if women, faced with such an inflexible male dominated society, should fight against these derogatory images or embrace the fact that they are sexual beings and use the power that that gives them to affect change in both the political and social spheres. This paper will discuss the spectrum of representation of Italian women from the role of the mother to the role of the prostitute. By looking at Italian television and the government of Silvio Berlusconi, it is possible to see examples of women that are being exploited, and

through the work of Italian feminist groups and author Lorella Zanardo, it is possible to see examples of those women fighting this exploitation. This paper will conclude with a discussion of what can be done in Italy to transform the prominent view of Italian women by looking to both historical and modern sources of inspiration.

1 - A History of Modern Italian Feminism

Modern Italian feminism can be traced back over a hundred years to the days of severe political controversies following World War I. After the war, many political parties were vying for the support of the Italian people, and went to many lengths in order to gain it. Women had gained many freedoms during the war, when they were required to work in the factories while the men were away, but suffered major losses in the workplace when the men returned to claim their jobs and there was no longer a need for production of war materials. Women had quickly gone from job-holding and contributing members of society back to their traditional familial roles within the home. Without the right to vote and with such a low presence in the workplace, it looked as though they would not be able to have much of an impact on society. Political parties, including the Socialist Party (PSI) used this fact to gain support. They promised to fight for the emancipation of women and even though they did not immediately affect change in this area, the campaign gained them a lot of support throughout the country.

However, both in politics and outside of it, women were forced to remain within the portrayal of their familial role as the mother. Of course, the reality of reproduction means that only women can be mothers, but in Italy this fact has been taken to a new level. Women's lives "appeared precisely to be made up of a cyclic succession of pregnancies" (Righi 51) that made it virtually impossible for them to hold a job. How could women have jobs if they needed to constantly be giving birth to children, and attending to all the domestic duties? Mussolini's fascist government made this motherly

role incredibly clear by rewarding families for producing more children, banning birth control, and taxing bachelors (Righi 47-53). But it is here that we come upon a crucial point in the study of Italian feminism, that of a woman's very important role in capitalism, and the fact that a capitalist system cannot survive without a woman's procreative power to support it.

1.1 - Women in Italian Capitalism

Capitalism can be seen, in a Marxist point of view, as the endless accumulation of capital. In a capitalist society, men go to work every day in order to provide for their wives and children at home. Marxist thought views this system as highly exploitative of men's labor power, which is essentially used to fuel the machine that is our society (Marx 384-5). This idea of a capitalist machine is further expanded on by two French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who in their book *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* viewed capitalism as a machine that produces commodities through the exploitation of labor power, or of the individual desiring machines (humans) that make up the societal mechanism of capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari 9-13). While neither Marx nor Deleuze and Guattari look specifically at women, it is easy to see how their concepts can be applied to the Italian feminine condition. Italian capitalist society exploits women's labor power both as mothers and as sexual commodities in contemporary society. As mothers, women are exploited as sources of free domestic labor,

companionship, and sexual pleasure. As sexual commodities, women are exploited as sources of sexual desire both through sex and through showing off their bodies on Italian television and in Italian films to draw larger audiences. Here we can once again see the two portrayals of women in Italy mentioned above: those of the mother and the prostitute.

However, the idea of women as prostitutes is one that becomes relevant only in a society that is ruled by a culture of television and new media. First we must look to women in the home. Both Marx and the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci recognized that women played a crucial role within the capitalist system, a role that could be considered the most important of all. Because women can produce children, they are essentially reproducing the labor power that is required for the system to function. In this role, women not only produce labor power, but also ensure that the laborer is cared for, well fed, and makes it to work on time every day (Righi 57). Here it is possible to see the capitalist idea of gaining profit for immaterial labor. Women do all of this work without any kind of payment, ensuring that the capitalist system will continue to run smoothly. Therefore, while they are not producing a material commodity for profit they are providing immaterial labor to the system in the form of labor power. When looked at in these terms, women seem to hold the key to the continued success of the capitalist system. However, men and therefore western society takes a different view of this. Instead of admitting any kind of exploitation of labor, men have convinced themselves

that being a housewife is truly all that women want out of life, and that women do not feel fulfilled unless they have become mothers (Morris 24).

This view can go as far as saying that women who choose to step outside of the domestic sphere are seen as evil. These women are believed to be putting themselves above their families, and if any kind of problem appears within a marriage it is always seen as being the fault of the woman (Morris 33-39). Men take this negative view of women outside of the home because they are afraid of the changes that this break from tradition will cause. By viewing the other sex as negative, men are able to see themselves as the ones in the right and blame any and all problems on women. The fact that childbirth gives women power within the capitalist system is something that men have a hard time reconciling themselves with. It leads them to attempt to take back that power in any way they can: by imprisoning women within the domestic sphere or by exploiting their bodies in a way that shows male dominance (Dominijanni July 30, 2010, 3, Cavarero 124-126). According to this male dominated perspective, the woman's natural role is in the home with the family, and any step outside of it can be viewed as going against that role and therefore as being negative.

However, there were, and are, those who chose to fight against women's traditional domestic role. Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox are two feminist militants that expanded on Marxist themes during the 1970's. As mentioned above and reiterated by Federici and Cox, the woman's traditional female role in a patriarchal society was in the family. In their work, they discussed the fact that the woman is not only a producer of

labor power through the procreation of children, but is also the means by which the worker came to work every day prepared to be productive. By feeding him, clothing him, and satisfying him sexually, the woman ensured that the man would go to work and work productively throughout the day. Federici and Cox refer to this role of women as one of “wageless slavery” (Federici and Cox 5). They see women as having a full-time workday in which they are constantly producing surplus for the capitalist to use. The woman never gets to go home and relax, for the home is her factory, and the raising of her children is her full-time job. They even go so far as to state that women should be compensated financially for their role in the familial household, which to most people would sound absurd, but which created a large “wages for housework” movement. These two authors state that capitalism sees the family as the glorified private world where men and women can have their individual roles, but in the end the woman is working for the good of the man, and for the good of the system (Federici and Cox 4-9). In other words, the capitalist system wanted to have “a feminine figure completely defined by her procreative role and the strengthening of families as ‘state controlled units of social stabilization’” (Righi 53). Capitalism made the biological role of women as mothers into the political role of women as producers of labor power (Righi 50-55).

In her book, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Silvia Federici even goes so far as to say that women shouldn’t ask for wages for their housework, but should give up on housework all together. According to Federici, capitalism has made housework a natural and unavoidable thing and the only

way to fight the system would be to refuse to do domestic work altogether (Federici 15-18). However, she does not deny that things are beginning to change within contemporary Italian society. Federici states that there is more division of labor within the home these days with men willing to take on more responsibilities, and even sometimes being “stay at home dads.” The idea of getting wages for housework, according to Federici, would de-sexualize this kind of domestic labor and lead to more equality in the domestic sphere. However, the fact that women can have children makes it impossible for them to escape the domestic role completely (Federici 46-8). According to this feminist view, work is equated to liberation for women, but what kind of work are women suited for within this society?

In Italy, and all over the world, women often hold jobs related to what they supposedly know best: the home. Therefore it is common to see women in cleaning, organizational, and healthcare fields. It is assumed that women want to have jobs related to their domestic work because that is what they know and also what they enjoy doing. These jobs are also seen as easier and less demanding. Women need these kinds of jobs because, unlike men, they must return home to their other full-time job of being a wife and a mother. This is why many, if not most, Italian women do not return to work after childbirth. Women have trouble getting higher profile positions because men assume that at some point they will leave the office to have children and even if they do return, they will be gone for nine months more than once throughout their career. Also because of

this, women generally receive lower salaries than men. It is unclear, though, whether it is the low salaries that make these jobs available to women, or it is the women that make these jobs have lower salaries (Ginsborg 2003, 35-6, Morini 9, 11).

Due to the fact that women are attempting to break this family stereotype, the birth rate in Italy has dropped drastically in recent years, giving women more power by diminishing the available workforce, which opens up more jobs for women in different fields (Ginsborg 2003, 68). The domestic and lower paid labor that Paul Ginsborg discusses in his work: Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State, 1980-2001, is labor that cannot be outsourced to other countries. A key component of capitalism is the idea of “runaway factories,” or the outsourcing of production in order to find a cheaper labor force and therefore more profit through the production of commodities (Wallerstein 80, Morini 1). However, jobs in the above-mentioned fields cannot be outsourced and they must therefore take advantage of a female labor force that is eager to leave the cage of their domestic life at any price. But can women truly escape this life?

There has been a largely increased trend in the mixing of the professional and personal spheres for both men and women in recent years. The obsession with advancing in the workplace leads to doing work even when no longer in the office and the importance of family means that it cannot be forgotten while at work. The reality of women and of childbirth makes this problem even more apparent for women. Once they have children, it is impossible to abandon them to focus on work. Children must be taken care of, picked up at school, taken to soccer practice, told to do their homework, and not

to watch too much television. When women do not have time to do this, they hire other women to do it for them. Here we can see the fact that Italian women are not alone in their caretaking duties. Often, migrant women are used as nannies and domestic workers while the Italian women are out of the house. In this way migrant women are subsisting Italian women in carrying out reproductive labor. These migrant workers are once again being exploited for their supposed skill in household tasks, and even though they are paid for this work, it is a very low salary and they are working in someone else's home. In these cases the home becomes a workplace not only for the mother, but also for the cleaning woman or the nanny that is employed there (Morini 6). The fact that the professional sphere has invaded the personal sphere makes it harder and harder for women to both have families and work, and must in many cases lead to a difficult decision. This decision is one that is intensified and supported by political parties and religious views, which encourage women to choose either work or family (preferably family), rather than attempting to do both at the same time.

1.2 - Italian Feminism Today

From what has been discussed so far, it is clear that women are not on an equal level with men within Italian capitalist society. This explains the presence of several strong feminist groups present within Italy. Four of these groups are *Sconvegno*, *Sexyshock*, *Prec@s*, and *Se non ora, quando?* *Sconvegno* is a group of graduate students

based in Milan, *Sexyshock* is a group of gender and media activists based in Bologna, and *Prec@s* is a nationwide group of researchers interested in feminism and gender studies (Fantone 8). These four groups produce literature and other material surrounding pertinent feminist issues that are appearing throughout Italy.

Sexyshock is a group that uses shocking imagery and material products in order to educate their followers and anyone who sees their posters. By displaying images of women seen as objects or as blow-up toys with no use other than as representations of sexual pleasure, they hope to shock viewers into taking notice of the issues that they are fighting. An example of this is an advertisement that the group put out in 2011, which features a woman portrayed as a blow-up doll and reads: “Against those that look at you only this way.”



The poster was used to advertise for a day against violence towards women, and the shocking imagery was used to draw attention. By using such strong images in their paraphernalia, *Sexyshock* has been able to gain attention within the Italian media, leading to a larger influence nationwide (Greco 1).

Alongside *Sexyshock*, *Se non ora, quando?* is a fast-growing group of Italian women that pride themselves on their diversity. The group members are from different backgrounds and incomes that come together to fight against the derogatory imagery that Berlusconi and others are broadcasting on television. The name of the group, as well as their slogan, means “If not now, when?” and when they have rallies or gatherings, the group will answer this question with an emphatic “NOW!” The group is asking Italian women if they want to fight their oppression and leading their followers in rallies that show women how to question their oppression. By educating women, this group is able to ask women to take another look at how they are portrayed and decide whether or not they want to accept the role that they have been given. They are hoping to get women thinking about the issues that come up about women’s sexuality on a daily basis and to recognize that they must take action immediately if they want to change the way in which they are viewed. If they hope to gain power within the capitalist machine, women must no longer wait for change to come, but instead must affect change themselves (Manifesto di *Se non Ora, Quando?*)

An issue often addressed by these feminist groups is the mixing of the professional and personal spheres. As noted above, women’s workdays do not end at five

o'clock because after work they must return to their full time jobs within the home.

However, these groups are also fully supportive of women making headway within the workplace and are fighting for things like a (now non-existent) paid maternity leave.

According to these modern Italian feminists, women do not need to make a choice between family and a career. In fact, women are demonstrating an incredibly unique ability to "actively piece together an invented, patchwork identity, by cutting and pasting various roles and inconsistent parts of their lives" (Fantone 13). In other words, women are able to balance both work and family and should be allowed to commit to both roles.

Because of the fact that women are leaving the domestic sphere, it is clear that Italian families today are undergoing marked changes. Women are both getting married and having children at an older age. The idea of settling down to raise children without having any kind of independent career is practically non-existent. The choices of what age to marry and whether to have children or to have a career are women's to make, but modern feminists are also trying to show men that these matters are shared between genders. Men who say that they are sympathetic to feminist views do not realize that these issues are not only feminine, but need to also be addressed as both masculine and gender relations problems in order to make any changes (Dominijanni July 30, 2010, 1). Despite the fact that men distance themselves from feminine matters, it is clear that in terms of a woman's role specifically within the family, modern Italian feminism is making some very strong and clear impacts (Fantone 8-16). However, an issue that they

have yet to make significant headway with is the second portrayal of women in Italy: that of women as prostitutes (commodities), which is most clearly represented on Italian television.

2 - Italian Television

Italian television had its beginnings in a very different form than it is today. The first television broadcast began on January 3, 1954 at 11:00 a.m. and was put on by Italian Radio and Television (RAI) (Calloni 2). By 1965 forty-nine percent of Italian families owned a television in their home. The first television network, RAI, was, and remains to this day, a highly politically affiliated television station. At its beginning it was run by the Christian Democrat Party, which used television's intense popularity to promote family values. The president of RAI imposed severe codes of conduct on this early television, stating that they could not play programs that would "bring discredit on or undermine the institution of the family; nor were they to portray attitudes, poses or particulars which might arouse base instincts" (Ginsborg 1990, 240). RAI would broadcast only those series that were approved by whatever political party was in power, as the control of the company was fully handed over to the government in the 1960's (Mammone 91-3).

The television was a means of bringing the family together, and family members would come together after the working day to watch their favorite programs. These shows were generally aired only at certain times of the day and were therefore geared towards whatever audience would be watching at a particular time. This meant that right before bedtime, RAI would air thirty-minute shows called *Carosello's*. *Carosello's* were blocks of advertisements that consisted of 5 minutes about the advertised product at the

beginning and the end, and other twenty minutes devoted to a story or fairy tale that would appeal to the whole family and hold their attention.

By the 1960s, these advertising blocks became the most watched programs on television (Ginsborg 1990, 241). Daytime television became a companion to the housewife staying home alone and as such, was often geared towards advertising home appliances. These advertisements always had an emphasis on how easy the products were to use because women could not be expected to know how to work complicated appliances.

Because of television's appeal to women, housewives became the principle target for consumerism, with the emphasis being on their role within the home. The image of the perfect housewife on television had a profound effect on Italian women, and the percentage of working women fell to one of the lowest in western Europe in the 1960's as more women stayed within the home in an attempt to emulate the perfect woman that they saw on television (Calloni 2-3, Ginsborg 1990, 240-248).

However, once the men returned home from work the image on television took a dramatic turn. Quiz shows became the most popular dinnertime entertainment, and with private televisions present in almost every home, it was difficult to find a family without one facing their dining room table. These quiz shows appealed to the whole family, but were geared specifically towards the men in the household and progressively featured women wearing less and less clothing. These women were more prominent on privately owned networks due to the governmental control over RAI, especially under the

Christian Democrats. This was, and still is, also true in most of the advertisements on television, and especially those on the private television networks owned by media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi.

Television had a profound impact on Italy. It was an equalizer; it put wealthy and poor families on the same level, as it was able to appeal to diverse audiences, and in the beginning only gave them the option of watching one show at a time, so that everyone was always watching the same thing no matter where they were located. Due to the political leanings of the television stations, the Italian government was able to ensure continued support by constantly reminding the Italian public of their shared beliefs and values. Especially in the early years of broadcasting, Italian television was determined to instill traditional family values in women either by having advertisements geared specifically towards the housewife during the daytime, or by showing programs and movies that demonstrated the ideal role that women were supposed to play within the home and that women as viewers wanted to use as an example of how they should act.

However, RAI couldn't hold the monopoly over the Italian television world forever, and eventually private companies began broadcasting their own stations. Because these stations were free of any political or religious ties they were able to be much more liberal with what they showed on television broadcasts nationwide (Calloni 4). While RAI eventually split into several stations, with each one dedicated solely to each Italian political party (RAIuno- Christian Democrat, RAIdue- Governing Coalition, RAItre- Communist Party, etc.), the private stations were committed to making a profit

through consumer marketing. They needed to have advertisements in order to make money, and so these became a huge aspect of what private stations would broadcast (Mammone 92).

With the growth of the private sector came the growth of advertisements and the use of women in advertising. Here we begin to see the use of women in a new way. Television companies began to realize that the use of women both in television shows and in advertising could appeal to a wider audience. Nowhere was this fact more clear than on the television networks owned by Silvio Berlusconi. Women could see other women on television and want to emulate them, or want to buy the product that they were selling. Men could see women on television and want to watch the show over and over again, especially when the women were wearing very little clothing. This sexualization of consumer capitalism is something that Gramsci saw as early as during the Fascist regime, but that became much more apparent when television began to be broadcast throughout Italy. Women were being exploited for the one thing men wanted above all else: their bodies.

In a society where women are supposed to strive to be mothers and to abstain from any sexual activity until marriage, men were and are eager to get a glimpse of what could be called the “forbidden fruit” on public television. However, this new role of essentially using their bodies to sell material goods or to attract viewers to shows is what gained them the stereotype of prostitutes. While they may not have actually sold themselves for sex, these women were selling themselves in other ways, and being very

poorly paid for it. They became known throughout Italy as *Veline* or *Dive*, and were essentially showgirls that made appearances on quiz shows and advertisements. These women became famous throughout the country, by using their bodies to sell themselves and through that to sell their product, be it a material one or a television show.

In Marxist terms, these women were, and still are, selling their labor power on the labor market, but unlike men who sell their ability to work, women's labor power consists of their looks and of their bodies. While most sources would view this as highly negative, there is another view that can be taken. Women have been shut out of the Italian labor market for so long, that it seems that any step forward can be seen as a positive one. By selling their bodies, women can take control of their own labor power and the importance it has in the market. In other words, by marketing their bodies on television, women are accepting a male view of their sexuality and using it to their advantage. In this way they may seem to be taking control of their own sexuality, which is something that they have been striving for all over the world for centuries.

This idea can be traced back to Gramsci, who stated "Until women can attain not only a genuine independence in relation to men but also a new way of conceiving themselves and their role in sexual relations, the sexual question will remain full of unhealthy characteristics..." (Gramsci 296). While the unhealthy characteristics that Gramsci mentions will never be completely gone, women have the possibility of taking control of the oppressive situation in which they find themselves. However, it is still

oppression and must be fought as such, but by accepting the oppression and using it in a new way, women can gain some form of power. This acceptance should not be viewed as women agreeing to a subservient role, but rather as a means of women empowering themselves in order to fight against the system that oppresses them. It is a very limited struggle, one that completely falls within the coordinates of (male) power. Nonetheless, it is symptomatic of a desire to gain power. We are able to deduce from this that women need to break out of their traditional familial role and take control of their sexuality in order to gain a footing in the capitalist system and have any kind of power over men. Even now, women in Italy are accepting their role as the exploited sex because they have realized that it is the only way for them to gain a footing in the capitalist system. While this is not a positive fact, it is one that has led women out of the domestic realm. Women are allowing themselves to be used. Some women can, and do, view *Veline* as women who are in control of their own bodies and have broken free of the cages that they call their domestic spheres in order to make an impact on the Italian capitalist system. Unfortunately, this leads to women that are permitting themselves to be exploited in the hope that it will change their future, and by allowing men to control women's sexuality, they are giving up their right to define themselves.

It is abundantly clear that women are being exploited on Italian television, and the fact that they can be seen as taking control of their sexuality does nothing to change this view. Seeing countless examples of women on Italian television can easily demonstrate the intense humiliation that they must often endure at the hands of both male show hosts

and men with managerial positions within television companies. Silvio Berlusconi was one of the first to recognize the influence that he could have through television and especially through making his television stations appeal to many different types of audiences. He understood that by using women in essentially any way possible, he could gain more viewership and through that he could earn more money and gain more support for his political campaigns (Calloni 4-5). Through both Berlusconi and RAI it is easy to see that the portrayal of women and the politicization of Italian television are inextricably linked, especially in recent years. It is necessary to look at Berlusconi's influence on television to truly understand how they are being portrayed today and how that portrayal is being accepted by all men and most women as perfectly normal because it is what they have come to expect and relate to.

3 - Berlusconi – Politics and Television

Silvio Berlusconi began his career as a builder of condominiums, primarily in Milan. However, when television broadcasting began to grow, he decided to try his hand in the world of new media. By forcing other companies so far into debt that they had no choice but to sell, Berlusconi's company, Mediaset, was able to buy out several large television networks, including *Italia 1* in 1983 and *Rete4* in 1984. Berlusconi's stations were not legal, but after forming an alliance with the PSI's Prime Minister of the time, Bettino Craxi, his stations were declared legal and he was able to broadcast primarily American soap operas and films at a very low cost, while charging incredibly high prices for advertising space (Mammone 93-4). Berlusconi took advantage of his former career by installing cable televisions in many of the condominiums that he had built, for example *Milano 2*, a very large complex located in the outskirts of Milan that had been built in the 1960's. When private television became legal in the 1980's, Berlusconi was able to use these television sets to great advantage as he burst full force into the Italian world of broadcast media.

With his rise to power came general wealth and prosperity for the city of Milan, and Berlusconi became even more popular when he led the AC Milan soccer team to victory as their club president. He was even able to bring soccer to the people as he broadcast AC Milan games on local networks, gaining support for his stations through the support for the team (Foot 101). It seemed that Berlusconi could do no wrong as he slowly took over the city of Milan, took control of the television stations on a national

scale, and created important alliances with local and national politicians. When Italian politics began to move in a direction of which he did not approve, Berlusconi founded his own political party: *Forza Italia*. The party seemed to appear almost overnight and Berlusconi supported it very publicly through his television networks (Ginsborg 2003, 285).

As a self-made man who could broadcast his political propaganda on almost every major television network, he was a formidable opponent to anyone hoping to gain office. *Forza Italia* was a non-political party. It appealed to people's wants and needs more directly, and avoided overly political slogans and messages. Berlusconi had his reputation to lean on, and as he had made himself very popular in Milan and elsewhere in the nation, support was very forthcoming. Italians trusted this man that was broadcast into each of their homes, showing them a model citizen, someone they hoped to be like in the future, and someone they could see leading their country (Foot 102-3).

In 1994, after fierce campaigning taking place through his television networks, Berlusconi was appointed to Prime Minister of Italy and his monopoly over Italian society and economy seemed complete. However, his first term in office was very short-lived and he had several problems with the Italian Judiciary system and the authenticity of his promises to the Italian people that he had made during his campaign. It took him several years to regain the people's support, but he finally managed it when he was re-elected as Prime Minister in 2001. By this time, the derogatory and humiliating images of

women that appeared on his private television networks had become the norm, and he had won the trust of the large majority of the Italian people.

When Berlusconi was re-elected in 2001 he owned ninety percent of all Italian television. This created a huge conflict of interest between public and private and gave him an unbeatable advantage in the political sphere. People loved that he wanted to prove himself as a true politician and by using his television networks he was able to make this process and his plea to the Italian people very accessible (Ginsborg 2003, 319). While several members of Berlusconi's government attempted to pass a bill stating that the Prime Minister could not own three television networks and control almost every part of the media, his connections and his power over television easily gave him a loophole that let him do whatever he wanted in terms of the media (Mammone 95). Over the seven years that it took Berlusconi to return to political office, he had greatly strengthened his media empire. He had begun to understand what he needed to make his networks successful, namely he understood that the exploitation of women's bodies in shows, advertisements, and even as parts of his political campaigns was the key to drawing in support to generate more money as well as keep him popular in government.

3.1 - Berlusconi's Views on Women

Berlusconi has always been very open with his feelings towards women, who he sees as objects of pleasure and entertainment. He refuses to see women as intelligent beings, and because of this women on television are always portrayed as being very dim

and always in need of men's help. The clearest example of how women are portrayed on Berlusconi's television networks is that of the *Velina*, or showgirl. Showgirls are essentially very scantily dressed women that appear on reality television and quiz shows. These women do not serve any purpose on the show other than as objects of humiliation and of the male gaze to attract viewers. The "male gaze" is a term that has become widely used throughout the country because it is how women on television are viewed both by men and by women (Pritchard 117). Women have started to view themselves through this gaze because it is what is shown to them every day. They have started to see themselves through a man's eye and therefore to ignore the exploitation that is taking place in front of them every day. Berlusconi is said to have "built his media empire on a cocktail of flesh and glitz in the 1980's" (Michaels 3) and by turning on the television in Italy for just a short period of time the truth of this statement becomes very clear. In his advertising campaigns, "when you don't have to use women, you use women" (Michaels 3).

The presence of women in almost all commercials and shows has become the norm for Italians, and has a very strong impact on viewership. Berlusconi's intense dislike and fear of women comes out clearly when he puts them in humiliating and silent positions. He tolerates them "as voiceless wives and whores" (Pitch 1) because he knows that he must do so in order to make money. The showgirls that he puts on television have spilled over from quiz/game shows and into the realms of the nightly news and family oriented programs. In these positions they are not anchors or spokespeople, but

accessories, used merely for show and so that more people will be interested in watching the news and more adults will watch the family oriented programs along with their children.

According to the 2007 Global Gender Gap, Italy ranks the lowest in Europe in terms of gender equality, coming in at number 84 out of 128 (Povoledo: Dec. 14, 2012, 1-2). Berlusconi is clearly helping this image along by being very public on his television networks about his distrust of women in politics. For instance in 2011, “Mr. Berlusconi ... has been forced into a half-hearted apology to Rosy Bindi, a well-known Left-leaning politician in her late 50s, after he told her on TV this week that she was more pretty than intelligent – a slur intended to mean that she was neither” (Michaels 2). He even went so far as to say that women need to cook for their party’s representatives rather than ever trying to be party representatives themselves. He made this statement in front of a crowd of cheering women, who it must be said have come to accept their housewife image without any significant fight (Babington 1).

Berlusconi has done an impressive job of keeping women in their “rightful place” by broadcasting a public image of servitude and humility that many women have come to accept and to follow. Italy is truly at a standstill when it comes to providing more positions for women within politics. In contrast with other European countries, Italy has an incredibly low percentage of women in office, especially because it is widely believed that women wouldn’t have the time necessary for politics because they need to be at home with their families taking care of their children. This silent housewife image is of

course one that Berlusconi strongly supports, and many people believe that the only true way to get women into political positions would be to create a fixed number of cabinet spots reserved specifically for them (Povoledo Dec. 14, 2012, 1-2). Berlusconi has opposed this idea, but due to pressure from other politicians as well as the example set by other countries, he has been unable to keep women out of politics completely. However, instead of allowing intelligent women that could possibly contradict him into office, he has instead placed several television showgirls in political positions, with the guarantee that they will follow his lead in making decisions (Poveledo Dec. 14, 2012, 1).

The fact that Berlusconi has such a strong sway over the Italian people becomes especially clear when one looks at his own sexual preferences. He portrays women as sexual toys on television and uses them for sex at home. In 2010, Berlusconi was found to have had intercourse with an underage girl, Ruby Rubacuori. After this scandal it became clear that he had had relations with many prostitutes, several of which were not of legal age. As a man in his seventies, it would have been expected that Berlusconi would have been ashamed of his actions, but the opposite was true. Berlusconi took pride in the fact that he was an older man that was still able to have sex every day and many of the men of Italy greatly admired him for it. They projected onto Berlusconi their own aspirations and their masculine desire for possession. As if that wasn't sobering enough, Ruby was also arrested for soliciting herself as a minor and Berlusconi was left in office, completely unharmed. Ruby was never seen by the public or by the media as a victim,

and this scandal turned into demonstrations against prostitutes rather than against Berlusconi (Pitch et al: Il Manifesto 11).

This is, of course, the opposite of what would take place in another country, as is clear when one looks to the example of President of the United States Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, where Clinton stepped down as President as soon as it was learned that he had been having sexual relations with a young woman that was not his wife. The situation with Berlusconi and his solicitation of prostitutes has a very clear meaning for women in Italy. Women are viewed as the causes of any problems that occur both politically and socially and whenever possible, the woman will always be blamed. Berlusconi has been able to garner support from the Italian public because many men want to be like him (powerful, sexually attractive to young women, wealthy), and because he has made the woman's place in society perfectly clear, women follow the man's lead when it comes to making political decisions. Berlusconi has managed to find support from both men and women in this way, continuously giving him the majority vote through three separate elections over the course of almost twenty years.

The image that Berlusconi broadcasts through television and politics of women as prostitutes is not one that all women shy away from. Many women have realized that embracing an image based on their looks and their sex appeal will get them further in the Italian market:

“The body is the new capital for adolescents in Italy,” said Cristina

Sivieri Tagliabue, the author of ‘Appena ho 18 anni mi rifaccio’ (As Soon

as I'm 18 I'm Getting a Makeover), which recounts case studies of image-obsessed teens. In carrying out dozens of interviews, the author concluded that what drives the young women in the book to undergo painful plastic surgery is not merely physical improvement, 'but an awareness of what they can achieve afterward,' she said. 'In Italy what dominates is the cult of the body, people believe it's what you need to get ahead.'" (Povoledo Dec. 14, 2012, 2).

The fact that some women take a different view of their portrayals on television is one that has appeared that we explored when discussing Gramsci's "unhealthy characteristics" and the fact that women can approach those characteristics in a different way. Lorella Zanardo is a female Italian author who wrote a book as well as made a documentary about women on Italian television, some of which embrace the image of themselves as sexual objects. It is necessary to explore a couple of her examples and thoughts and how they make Italian women appear to people from other countries before we can address the question of what women can do to improve their image and whether embracing or discarding their sexuality will help them in the end.

4 - Lorella Zanardo: Women on Television

Zanardo is a modern Italian woman. She works outside of her home despite the fact that she is a mother and she does not sit around doing domestic work with the television blaring in the next room. In 2007, Zanardo went to see an exhibition of photos and films from the seventies that represented the city of Milan. When she arrived she found that the exhibition was deserted, but a huge line of people were waiting to see relics and meet cast members from an Italian game show that was taking place in the same building. Zanardo rarely watched television, and the idea that so many people had turned out to this event was very surprising to her. She began to take a new interest in television, watching to see how it could have such an impact on people's lives, and noticing through the process that the most popular programs were the ones that involved women used for entertainment. These women were often dressed in very little clothing and usually put in humiliating positions.

After months of watching and collecting data, Zanardo and two colleagues put together a short documentary and wrote a detailed book on what they had witnessed and of the image of Italian women that became apparent to them. In *Il Corpo delle Donne* Zanardo brings up several specific examples of women in these degrading roles, including being under a Plexiglas table, being poked and prodded to determine if breast implants were needed, and swinging on a swing trying to catch a strawberry hanging from a fishing rod. Zanardo describes women on television as "grechine" or pretty little borders. She sees them as mere accessories or decorations dolled up and used to frame

the men that are the real hosts of the show. This is a very interesting analogy, because it is clear that the women are just being used to make the men look good in order to attract viewers to the show (Zanardo: YouTube 18:50 min).

An interesting example that Zanardo gives is that of *La Gatta Nera*, or The Black Cat. The Black Cat is the assistant on the quiz show *Il Mercante in Fiera*. She wears a black spandex cat suit that barely covers her breasts and leather gloves with diamond studded claws at the end of each finger. She never speaks on the show and never smiles. Instead, she struts around the stage, bringing necessary things to the show's hosts or contestants or drapes herself across any available surface so that the audience can admire how she looks.



Screen grab Zanardo documentary 7:55 min

She is the embodiment of the silent border figure; the unintelligent decoration that is the perfect example of Berlusconi's portrayal of women. What makes her appearance so significant is the fact that she appears on a program on public television that airs from 8 o'clock to 9 o'clock at night and is therefore watched by families, including children. She

is dressed in a manner fitting a pornography program, and no one questions what she is doing there because they enjoy watching her (Zanardo 78-9).

Zanardo also gives many examples of shows that center on plastic surgery and have male doctors examining women's bodies on television and telling them what work they need to get done, usually breast implants. There are also some examples of shows in which women are actually the hosts, but it is obvious that these women are attempting to conform to a standard of beauty that has been determined by Berlusconi and the other television network owners, and clearly have had a lot of cosmetic surgery done on themselves.

Another very interesting example Zanardo gives is of a show about a girl, Raffaella, who constantly goes up and down different flights of stairs. The point of this being that the camera can get the angle down her shirt and up her skirt while she does this. The show does not have a premise other than being a kind of peeping tom invading the privacy of a woman who enjoys showing off her body to viewers (Zanardo 79).



Screen grab Zanardo documentary 6:38 min and 2:49

A final, and terrible case that Zanardo offers is one in which a girl is on candid camera and is strung up next to a ham. Both she and the ham are wearing black underwear and the point is to demonstrate the similarity between the woman and the ham. She is viewed as nothing more than a piece of meat; as something to be strung up and admired as well as ridiculed. The objectification and commodification of women is incredibly strong in this example. The male gaze is viewing the girl as something that can be bought and consumed at leisure. The girl did not know when she came to the studio that she would be put in this humiliating position, but rather believed that she was auditioning for a part in a show. While she swings helplessly in mid-air, a male grocer jokingly compares her to the ham, and other men watch and laugh from a hidden camera room.

Zanardo uses these examples to show that both men and other women view these women poorly. Other women see *Veline* and most women on television as vulgar and never as victims of violence or of exploitation (Zanardo 90). However, Zanardo does give one example of a woman who has learned to take advantage of her sexuality and the opportunities it presents to her. This woman is Cristina, a star of the television show *Big Brother*, who has learned that showing off her body will give her many opportunities. She believes that both men and women will like to look at her and see a courageous woman that is using her experience of being exploited on television to her advantage (Zanardo: YouTube 9:45 min).

In her book, *Italian TV Drama and Beyond*, Milly Buonanno brings up another interesting point about women on television shows when she discusses what happens when women are cast in more serious roles than those of *Veline*. Female police officers are very popular in Italy because they show women in more strong and masculine roles, but also because they sexualize something that is generally not very interesting to viewers. However, Buonanno points out that even in these roles women cannot be seen to solve problems on their own. There must always be a male that comes in to save the female. The fact that a woman is playing such a strong role must not be seen to detract from her femininity. Television stations do not want to broadcast the wrong role model for young women watching their shows, and having a woman who is able to solve her own problems without any male help is not the image women should be using as an example. When they don't have help from men, women in these masculine roles are often softened by having love stories or becoming pregnant, re-emphasizing the importance of the feminine or maternal figure (Buonanno 129-133).

4.1 - Foreign Perceptions of Italian Women

Looking at the role of women as either mother or prostitute through Zanardo and Buonanno's examples brings up an interesting question. It is generally believed that Italian women have come to view themselves in one of the two afore-mentioned roles because that is what is presented to them through the only female role models they have: television stars. However, how do people from other countries view them?

Zanardo explores this question by imagining what her friends in other countries would do if normal Italian television were suddenly being broadcast into their homes. She discusses the fact that they would be horrified by the imagery and would automatically assume that a pornography channel was being broadcast on public television by mistake. They would absolutely refuse to allow their children to watch the shows. Zanardo imagines them calling each other and calling the news and television stations in search of a reason why something that vulgar would be appearing on their screens and how soon they could expect it to disappear; making television safe for their children to watch once again.

In short, Zanardo knows that in any other country the imagery of women as it appears in Italy would not be tolerated (Zanardo 43-44). Other sources agree that foreigners are surprised and often disgusted by the images of women that they see when they visit Italy. Due to the imagery, Italian women generally appear unintelligent and only interested in how they look to others. There are few, if any, strong female role models for women to follow, and it is because of this that they get trapped within the male gaze and lose any sense of neutrality or self-respect (Pritchard 113-117).

However, the male gaze has also led to a new kind of feminine power. Women are beginning to understand that they can take advantage of their sexuality. Zanardo discusses the idea of the authenticity of femininity, and the question of how we know what femininity truly is. For Zanardo, authentic femininity can be defined through the example of Anna Magnani. In her documentary she states that before the make-up artist

tried to cover up her wrinkles, Magnani would say: “Leave them alone, don’t you dare touch a single one of them, it has taken me a lifetime to get them...” (Zanardo: Youtube 12:25). It seems that by embracing her femininity and all that comes with it throughout the years, Magnani is portraying Zanardo’s ideal of authenticity. However, most women do not embrace this authentic femininity, and there are many different approaches to the fight to gain respect for women in Italy and elsewhere, but it is impossible to know which approach is correct and which approach will work. Should women continue to fight against the male gaze that has come to determine their sexuality? Or should they embrace that view of themselves and use it to their advantage?

5 – Conclusions

5.1 - A Better Future?

Throughout this discussion of feminism in Italy and the portrayal of women in the two categories of mother and prostitute it has come to be understood that Italian men control the images of women that are presented to the public as models of what Italian women should strive to be. This also means that men control the way in which women view themselves. Men define women's sexuality in Italy, and none have more control in this aspect than Silvio Berlusconi. Throughout his years as a media tycoon and as Prime Minister, he has had an incredible influence over the minds and the bodies of Italian women. Through the images on his television stations he has defined feminine beauty. Today, Italian women do not feel beautiful unless they are conforming to a standard set by men. As noted above, they are having plastic surgery at incredibly young ages and wearing less and less clothing. This image has spread from television into most aspects of Italian society, where women can almost always gain success in the workplace if they allow themselves to be exploited.

However, if he were to be charged with exploiting women, Berlusconi would most likely say that Italian women are freer than women in other countries. They are allowed to have jobs that are very much within the public eye and freely show off their bodies to a public that admires them for it. However, what is the alternative? Without allowing themselves to be exploited in the workplace or choosing to marry young, women have very few options. Men have traditionally made it clear that women need to

remain within their domestic sphere, so any kind of job that can break them out of this cage appears to women as a kind of liberation. But how can this level of exploitation and humiliation be liberating? How can women put up with it? Unfortunately, through careful tactics, women have been trained to view themselves as objects of sexual desire from a very young age, and so see women on television as liberated because they appear to be free from domesticity.

In her book, Zanardo discusses a moment when she witnessed an older man stop and eye a 14-year-old girl up and down as she waited for the bus to take her to school. The girl, embarrassed, looked down shyly and avoided eye contact (Zanardo 31). However, the damage had been done. It is to be assumed that most young Italian girls have had similar experiences and those experiences, combined with what they see on television and what they often witness within their own homes, have led them to believe that they are meant to be exploited and viewed by men as objects of the male gaze. Women cannot escape this image, and even now that Berlusconi is no longer Prime Minister, very few changes have been made.

The new Italian Prime Minister, Mario Monti has made some progress in the political world. Where Berlusconi appointed women such as Mara Carfagna, a former topless model, to an office post, Monti prefers role models like Elsa Fornero, a former professor of economics, to be within his political sphere. He has appointed more women to cabinet posts in general and gained support in his first speech by promising to increase

the number of women within the workforce. Italy has the lowest rate of female workers within the European Union, except for Malta (Chu 2, Duff 1). While Monti has made some progress within the political sphere, the world of television is slow to change. The fact that Berlusconi is no longer in office does not mean that he has relinquished control of his media empire, and the truth is that with or without Berlusconi, the presence of women in advertisements and in television shows continues and will continue to sell more products and attract more viewers.

5.2 – An Answer from the Past?

In searching for a method in which women could break free of male domination, I came across Carlo Levi's book Christ Stopped at Eboli, in which he reminisces on the time that he spent in political exile in the small southern village of Aliano, Italy. Within this story, Levi articulates several female characters with very strong identities. This village, as many parts of southern Italy (even today) was very removed from the industrialized north. The southerners did not believe in the centralized state or in organized religion. They had no influence from modernization other than the imposition of taxes and the exploitation of their labor. However, the women in this society had a much stronger identity than the women living in the modernized world of the north, which consisted of capitalist exploitation as well as corporeal exploitation.

Women in Levi's portrayal of the south are seen as representative of the life force that drives their society. Women in this society that is removed from religion and

commodity culture have a freedom rarely seen in today's modernized world. They are allowed to be free with their sexuality, and can have relationships and children without conforming to societal and religious norms. Because they can be free with their sexuality they are able to avoid the male domination that is so prevalent in the north. Southern women do not have to allow exploitation of their bodies because they have the same status as men in this society. There are no advertisements for them to be in and no feminine jobs only reserved for women. They work outside as well as in the home and they are as important as men in the cycle of their community. Women in the south represent everything that sustains life. They represent nature and the cyclical presence of their procreation is equated with the seasonal changes in nature that affect agriculture. As representations of nature, women hold a very important place in the south. Their ability to procreate is something that garners respect because it is seen as a magical power, and they have an almost supernatural place in the community. Women in the south are able to represent authentic femininity by accepting their natural aging and respecting it as they respect the earth. They do not try to make themselves appear younger or sexier with any material products.

While it is a ridiculous idea today to return to a primitive life without any modernized technology, Levi does give us a glimpse into a new kind of world that could counter the feminine exploitation in Italy. A society less dominated by

materialism and religion might allow women to regain a strong identity. This, admittedly utopian idea, would not come easily as the commodity culture continues to dominate. However, there are those that question capitalism and call for a return to the earth and to a more primitive and sustainable way of life. The church, especially in Italy, holds much less power than it once did. These two points demonstrate that primitive past could become an essential part of the path towards feminine liberation. For now, however, the fight against female exploitation in the media needs to be examined in a new light if there is to be a chance of success.

5.3 - A Middle Ground for the Present

Because women are central to the entertainment industry in Italy, television continues to valorize the physical female form and ignore any kind of female intellectual power. However, does the valorization of the female form have to be negative? Do women have to deny their sexuality in order to escape from the power of men? Gramsci said that women needed to take control of their sexuality in order to gain any power within an exploitative capitalist system, and it seems that the same can be said today. By gaining power within the system, women then have not only a chance to gain dominance over men, but also the possibility of fighting that system with more chance of success. The humiliation and degradation that takes place on Italian television is, of course, going several steps too far. Women should not put up with any of the roles that they have to play on television. However, they can still embrace their sexuality in a new and powerful

way. Many feminist groups believe that for women to be considered equal to men they must be thought of as the same as men with no gender difference. The truth remains, however, that it is impossible to disregard gender difference. Can there instead be a middle ground where women can empower themselves by realizing that their sexuality gives them power over men? Can women take advantage of their oppression?

The unfortunate truth is that women will continue to be oppressed in the foreseeable future, but how they react to that oppression can change. The unhealthy characteristics of the sexual question that Gramsci mentions will remain prevalent, so instead of trying to change the way that they are viewed, women seem to be agreeing to being oppressed or exploited in return for power that they can then use to fight the oppression. While it is a vicious and very gradual cycle, this use (even if not autonomous) of the exploitation of their image as a sexual commodity can be interpreted as a symptom. In a very contorted way, women are affirming their desire for autonomy and equality through their sexuality.

Whether it is a positive or negative truth, the fact remains that women were only ever able to break out of their domestic roles and into the professional world because of their sexuality. Women play the most important role in the capitalist system, that of the reproduction of children, simply by being women. What seems to be happening is that women are embracing their femininity and using it as a means to succeed in the limited conditions offered by contemporary capitalist society.

Of course, in Italy, women have become over-sexualized. They need to take a few steps back in order to gain respect, and they cannot do it alone. Feminism will never be authenticated when it remains to the male mind a “woman’s problem.” Men need to recognize that many of these issues are also their own and they also must affect change if feminism is ever going to gain a foothold in Italy. However, it is difficult to see what is going to inspire men, especially men so wrapped up in the influence of power and sex, to understand this. The influence of international opinions and the change of government from Berlusconi to Monti are the first steps in the process of gradual change that must take place. Whether it will be enough to make a significant difference is unfortunately a question that will only be answerable in the future, but if these small but significant steps continue, helped along by the influence of Italian feminist groups and the, maybe harsh, realization by women that the sexuality of femininity is a necessary evil that can be seen in a positive light, Italy may be looking towards a future of that includes a powerful and liberated female population.

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