

International Women's Day: Gender Equality Takes More Than a Bunch of Mimosas

Francesca Giuliani (March 08, 2012)



An analysis of the history behind and the contemporary meaning of the International Women's Day, with a special focus on Italy and on how it is still very hard to be a woman in the post-Bunga Bunga era.

Since the early 1900s, the International Women's Day is observed annually on March 8.

The date is now an official holiday in over 25 countries around the world, from Afghanistan to China, from Eritrea to Russia, from Uganda to Vietnam.

The activities and unrest of labor movements in North America and Europe at the turn of the twentieth century were the propelling forces that contributed to the establishment of the International Women's Day.



In 1908, 15,000 women garment workers marched through New York City demanding better working conditions such as better remunerations and shorter hours, as well as advocating for their voting rights.

The first National Women's Day was celebrated in the United States on February 28, 1909, a date designated by the Socialist Party of America, which intended to raise more public awareness of women's oppression, and to encourage women to fuel that critical debate on inequality that had pushed them to rally in the streets of New York City just a year before, campaigning for social change.

The anniversary became an international celebration in 1910, when the Socialist International Meeting in Copenhagen established it, although without a fixed date for its observance, to build international support to the women's rights movement.

In 1911, International Women's Day was then celebrated in Austria, Germany, Denmark and Switzerland on March 19: women and men rallied for women's voting and working rights, for their right to hold public office and to put an end to gender discrimination and inequality.

The celebration was observed just a few days before the tragic fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City, that on March 25, 2011 killed 146 women workers, mostly immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, in just 20 minutes.

The impact of this event on the public awareness of the terrible working conditions of women workers in the United States drew the attention to the need for a reform of labor legislations in the country, and it deeply influenced the cornerstone ideals of the International Labor Organization, founded in 1919, as well as it made the International Women's Day an even more relevant commemoration.

In the United States, since 1978 the entire month of March is "Women's History Month," and it is dedicated to the celebration of women's achievements and contributions to history and contemporary society.

During World War I, International Women's Day offered Russian women an occasion to raise their voice for peace: on March 8, 1917 (which fell on February 23 on the Julian calendar that Russia abandoned for the Gregorian in 1918) the women of St. Petersburg rallied in the so-called "Bread and Peace" strike to protest against the dead of over 2 million Russian soldiers in war.

The unrest, later known as the February Revolution, extended throughout the city and merged with other riots, forcing Czar Nicholas II to abdicate and to grant voting rights for women. The February Revolution marked the end of the czarist power in Russia, and paved the way for the Communist Revolution, achieved later that year in November (October on the Julian Calendar).

Italy observes the International Women's Day as well, and women in the country are usually gifted mimosa flowers, symbols of the celebration since 1946, when they were first introduced by Resistance fighters Teresa Mattei, Rita Montagnana and Teresa Noce for their cheap price, their bright color and their high availability in Spring.

While this year's unusually cold winter in Italy reduced the availability of mimosa flowers by 30% and the Italian Farmers Association ([Coldiretti](#) [2]) is incentivizing the use of narcissus flowers to replace them, there are more substantial matters affecting the lives of Italian women that are worth shedding a light on in this day of international celebration of women's social importance, which needs to be strengthened and encouraged.

Although women rights have been championed internationally for almost 100 years, being a woman in Italy is still tough, even if the Bunga Bunga craze seems to have been archived and experienced women professionals have been appointed in key governance roles by the new government, including the Ministry of Labor, Social Policies and Equal Opportunities, lead by Elsa Fornero.

Italy ranks 74th on 135 countries in the [Global Gender Gap 2011 Report](#) [3] by the World Economic



Forum. The ranking is determined by analyzing the equitability in the division of national resources between men and women, providing a comprehensive framework for benchmarking disparities between the sexes on a global scale.

The report considers four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Italy ranks 90th on 135 in the Economic Participation and Opportunity category, considering wage equality for similar works (125th place) and labor force participation (88th place).

The percentage of employed women in Italy is 46%, whereas the average figure estimated in the EU is 65%.

The global financial crisis has worsened the unemployment rate of women in Italy. The Italian National Institute for Statistics ([ISTAT](#) [4]) reports that in the last three months of 2011 it reached 9.9%, and that it has grown of +5.2% per year, whereas the male unemployment rate is stable at 7.6% and the percentage of employed man is 67.6%.

Wage inequality between Italian men and women represents another serious issue to tackle. The average net wages of Italian women amount in fact to €1,096 a month, whereas male employees earn €1,377 a month. In sectors such as real estate, informatics and business service providing, a woman's stipend is 30% lower than a man's. Female money brokers have lower stipends by 18% or 20%, and female public sector employees earn 6.7% less than their male coworkers.

The lack of supporting measures and financial aids for families and the lack of career opportunities for women have a significant impact on the low Italian total fertility rate, amounting to 1.41 children per woman in 2011. One in three women in Italy quits her job when she becomes a mother.

The Italian institutions, which will be promoting cultural initiatives such as free museum admissions, book presentations, movie screenings and special events all over Italy, are not champions of gender equality when it comes to women empowerment and women participation in the governance.

In the Political Empowerment category of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap 2011 Report in fact, Italy ranks 55th: it is 48th as far as the presence of women in parliament is concerned, and 46th for women in ministerial positions.

The emphasis on the importance of celebrating International Women's Day in Italy is seen as excessive and worrisome by Minister Elsa Fornero, who declared this morning that "Italy is not a mature country on gender issues," and that "women should not be claiming their rights, and we should be at a stage where women are working, even flexibly, because that is what adults do." According to an estimate of Italy's central bank, Banca d'Italia, if 60% of Italian women were employed, Italy's GDP would be 7% higher.

Fornero also elaborated on the issue of domestic violence, which still affects Italian women inside and outside their families. According to the Minister, "the lack of opportunities and the low growth rates" in Italy's present times represent a trigger to violence.

The Italian volunteer association [Telefono Rosa](#) [5], providing counseling and assistance to women victims, reports that on in the first 67 days of 2012, 31 women were killed in Italy.

"We have no reason to celebrate," is Telefono Rosa's motto for today, and the association's volunteers will be meeting Italian students in the City Hall of Rome, to raise awareness on the problem among the younger generations.

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- [2] <http://www.coldiretti.it>
- [3] <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2011>
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