

Women could decide Italy's election, but they feel invisible ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

ROME — Like many working mothers in Italy, Francesca Roncetti constructed her life around a frantic, daily juggle that became more frenzied after her second child was born.

On weekdays, Ms. Roncetti, a client adviser for a multinational car rental company, took her oldest child to kindergarten and then dropped her toddler at day care. With child care costs piling up, Ms. Roncetti asked to work part time in order to care for her daughters. Her company said no, so she quit, thinking she could find work with more flexible hours.

She was told at one interview that such an arrangement might be possible — “on another planet.”

But Ms. Roncetti lives on planet Italy, where working women receive little support from the government or from many public or private employers.

[The photographer for this article had to bring her daughter with her on the assignment. Read her story [here](#).]

They also receive relatively little attention: National elections are Sunday, but the issues that Italian women struggle with every day — like employment support, child care and equal pay — rarely enter the national political discussion.

Ms. Roncetti and others like her say they might as well be invisible, even though many of the election’s undecided voters are women — and their votes could be critical.

“This campaign is a perfect mirror image,” said Ms. Roncetti, who now cares for her two daughters and works as a freelancer. “Politicians ignore our daily lives.”

Italy has the second-lowest female employment rate in the European Union, according to Eurostat, ahead of only Greece. One in four Italian women do not return to work after giving birth. Those who keep working often see earnings drop more than 35 percent, according to INPS, Italy’s social security institute, mostly because mothers have to reduce working hours since child care and other support is so limited.

Other than Greece, Italy also has the lowest percentage of working mothers in the European Union. In Germany, 75 percent of women with two children work. In Italy, the figure is 54 percent. Yet the leading parties in the election have hardly broached these issues, instead fanning anger over immigration and security. The #MeToo movement is a distant concept.

Italy has plenty of powerful interest groups. But for the most part, women are not organized to push for changes on workplace issues. “That penalizes them,” said Paola Profeta, a public policy expert at Bocconi University in Milan. “Working women would need investments in day care or paternal leave, but that would imply taking resources away from another group.”

She added: “Some politicians would want to make reforms — but without increasing spending, which is impossible.”

During the campaign, right-wing parties have praised mothers, but otherwise barely mentioned women. Late last month, Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the center-right party Forza Italia and a likely power broker after the elections, proposed a minimum pension for mothers, once they reach the retirement age of 67.

The anti-establishment Five Star Movement offered bonuses to pay for diapers and day care. Left-wing parties devoted a few lines in their programs to proposals to lower the gender pay gap and to allow smoother reconciliation between work and family life.

Meanwhile, the problems only deepen.

Enrica Maria Martino, who conducted a study for the social security institute, cited “the rigidity of working hours, the scarcity of part-time opportunities and the inadequacy of child care provisions, together with a strong role division between men and women that still attributes women all family responsibilities” as obstacles to keeping mothers in the work force.

Italy does offer generous maternity leave policies, but there are few safety nets once that leave is over. In the past, networks of relatives, especially grandmothers and aunts, often provided child care support.

But now younger generations are moving away from their families to pursue work — often leaving them dependent on inadequate public institutions for support. Few employers subsidize child care, and assistance is particularly rare for women on temporary contracts.

“Public kindergartens are few and badly distributed all over the country — they are very few in southern Italy,” said Linda Laura Sabbadini, a social statistician and columnist at the Turin daily La Stampa. “The private ones are expensive.”

Italy has one of the lowest birthrates in Europe, and it hit a new low last year, less than half what it was during a baby boom in the 1960s.

The few facilities that do exist are often operated by women facing such predicaments themselves. One is L’Alveare (The Beehive), the only shared work space in Rome with day care in a working-class neighborhood. The Beehive also helps mothers return to the work force. One is Lucia Roca, a 39-year old freelance movie translator and mother of two, who lives hundreds of miles from her parents.

“Until my daughter was little, I worked from home with no problem, but as she was growing up, it was impossible,” she said as she held her 1-year-old. “I felt so isolated and lonely.”

The Beehive offers workstations in rooms with spacious windows overlooking a garden and a nursery next door. For a couple of months, a group of 25 mothers met there for a course on how to recalibrate their professional goals when balanced with motherhood.

“I try to explain that we may as well skip a step in Italy, as we are so behind,” said Riccarda Zezza, one of the course’s speakers. Ms. Zezza, a former multinational manager, founded the country’s first shared work space with day care. A few years ago, Ms. Zezza presented an 83-page paper to the government, explaining what the country could do to help women. Not much happened.

“Politicians know what is needed, but at best give bonuses for kindergartens or to buy diapers, abdicating to their role to find long-term solutions,” Ms. Zezza said.

The problem is largely cultural, many observers say. Italy did not pass laws granting paternity leave until 2012, and those leaves are shorter and less generous than in other European countries. Not many men take advantage of them, statistics show.

“I am on a long-term contract, and that of course helped me a lot,” said Francesca, a designer at a large Italian company, who preferred not to use her last name. “But my partner, who works in my same company and had my same position, became a manager while I had three kids.”

“Men are praised for raising a family,” she added. “Women are punished.”

Monica Mastroianni, a 36-year old radio journalist turned into press officer, faced the ultimate problem for any worker: the economic crisis. Two months into her maternity leave in 2013, the radio station where she and her husband were employed folded. She found herself jobless and with a toddler, while he hunted for a job. She later opted for two freelance jobs that allowed her to take care of her family.

When she got pregnant again, she was told that women were “done” once they had two children because working is impossible.

Ms. Mastroianni rejected that notion.

“I will make it,” she said. “I don’t want my daughters to feel my same pain, or be forced to emigrate.”

-reprinted from the New York Times

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