

Women Demand Voice in Italy Virus Response Dominated by Men

By The Associated Press

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ROME — Every evening when health experts updated anxious Italians in televised briefings about their nation’s devastating coronavirus outbreak, the lineup of authoritative figures included only one woman: the sign-language interpreter.

And not a single woman was among the 20-member commission appointed to advise the government on how and when Italy could safely re-open its factories, stores, schools and parks — a disparity all the more glaring because more than half the country’s doctors and three-quarters of its nurses are women, many on the heroic front lines of the pandemic.

Not to mention that the three researchers who isolated the coronavirus in the first days of Italy’s outbreak were women.

Indignation over the gender inequality has now exploded into the open, with some 70 female researchers and scientists signing a petition demanding the government include women in virus decision-making bodies as a matter of “democracy and civilization.”

Backing them is a grass-roots movement on social media dubbed "give us voice" — a riff on the token presence of the silent female sign-language interpreter at the news conferences.

A motion has also been lodged in the Senate by 16 female lawmakers calling on the government to remedy the imbalance. Dozens of women in Parliament’s lower Chamber of Deputies backed a similar motion, behind slogans like, “Let’s make ourselves heard.”

This week Premier Giuseppe Conte acknowledged the appeals, calling on the head of the commission of scientific and technical experts advising the government on reopening to enlist women into their ranks. He urged his Cabinet ministers to “keep gender equilibrium in mind” in setting up task forces.

“We’re happy to have contributed to repairing a glaring error,” said Sen. Emma Bonino, who has battled for decades in Italy for women’s rights.

But Italian women’s concerns are looking beyond pandemic panels. Women are worried that the closure of schools until at least September, coupled with cultural attitudes stacked in favor of men, will set them even farther behind in the workforce.

According to 2018 European Union figures, 53% of Italian women were in their nation’s workforce, compared with 73% for men. Only Greece ranked lower among EU nations: 49% for women and 70% for men.

Scarcity of affordable day care and men’s rejection of domestic roles including housework have been blamed for decades for Italian women’s inability or reluctance to join the workforce.

When Conte explained to the nation how Italy would gradually emerge from lockdown, “he never said the words, ‘family, children, school,’ until a journalist asked him,” noted Irene

Fellin, a senior researcher on gender and security at the International Affairs Institute, a Rome-based think tank.

Conte's lack of focus on the childcare burden posed for women in the months ahead is "one of the reasons it was so important to have a woman on the commission" advising the government on reopening, said Dr. Paola Romagnani, a kidney specialist who signed the petition calling for women's inclusion and spoke with the international media in Rome on Tuesday.

In some European countries, like Sweden, middle and elementary schools as well as nursery schools have remained open during the pandemic. In France, heavily stricken by COVID-19, the government is preparing for a staggered reopening of schools starting next week, when the country's lockdown starts being eased.

"I'm sadly sure that in the short term there will be damage" to women's slow progress in the Italian labor market, said Valeria Poli, a molecular biologist at the University of Turin, who also signed the petition. She expressed dismay that in 25 years the female presence in the Italian workforce has grown only 8%.

"If couples have to decide who goes back to work when they reopen the offices, it will be the women who won't go back," since many women work part-time or are paid less than men, said Fellin, who also heads the Italian branch of Women in International Security.

As to why women were snubbed for visible roles during the pandemic, Romagnani pointed to the country's centuries-old culture that attributes authoritativeness to men. As part of this legacy, until the early 1960s, women in Italy weren't allowed to hold top positions at public companies, she noted.

Fellin agreed. "I don't think that they think women aren't competent. They just don't see them," she said.

Associated Press writers John Leicester in Paris and Karl Ritter in Rome contributed to this report.