

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS PROJECT
PODCAST SERIES:
CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINIST VOICES**

SITE: ITALY

**Transcript of Lauren Duncan
Interviewer: Abby Stewart**

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**University of Michigan
Institute for Research on Women and Gender
1136 Lane Hall Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290
Tel: (734) 764-9537**

**E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu
Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem>**

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Intro: This podcast series, *Contextualizing Feminist Voices*, is designed to provide background information for people using the Global Feminisms Project website. The podcasts aim to provide users with a well-informed perspective on interesting aspects of the interviews from a particular country. For each episode one of the project staff interviews an expert on that country site.

Abby Stewart: Welcome to this episode of contextualizing feminist voices. My name is Abby Stewart and in this episode I am talking with my long term colleague in psychology at Smith College, Professor Lauren Duncan. I'm delighted that Lauren can provide a perspective on the interviews from Italy, but because we have limited time, we'll get right to the point. So my first question, Lauren, is: what are one or two themes that come up in the interviews that listeners should pay close attention to, because those themes are particularly important in Italy's women's movement scholarship or activism.

Lauren Duncan: Well, I'm going to talk mostly about the feminist LGBTQ+ activists in Bologna, because that's the larger sample, and a theme that came up with that group quite often, because we asked about it, was language. Because Italian is a gendered language, we were interested in understanding how these activists deal with the fact that the generic form of most nouns and many of their verbs is masculine. They had many different ways that they handled it, and they used different methods for the written language, versus their spoken language. So for the written language they would use an asterisk at the end of their words instead of an O or an A (where an O would be masculine and A would be feminine). Some would use the letter U, but most ended up using both the feminine and masculine forms of the words. That worked well for their spoken language especially, because most of them believe that the Italian language sounds nice, and that using a U would disrupt the musicality of the language, and they were very adamant about that. They had very strong opinions about that.

It's very interesting to me because research in the United States on school, and gendered school environments, by Barrie Thorne showed that teachers inadvertently contribute to gender segregation in their classrooms by distinguishing by gender, when it was unnecessary. For example, teachers would say things like, "Good morning, boys and girls," instead of "good morning, children." And so there was a move in the United States to have teachers use more the gender-neutral term if possible.

In Italy, of course, there's no gender neutral word. So instead of trying to come up with a gender-neutral word, these activists would use both the masculine and feminine version so they would say "ragazzi and ragazza," which is the plural form of boys, and the plural form of girls, when normally in the language they would just say, use the masculine plural. So I thought that was really interesting and they're still struggling with it; they haven't quite figured it all out.

But I thought that's an interesting little bit that you see in these in these countries that have gendered language.

And then the other interesting point, I think, that came through a lot in these interviews was how important the family context was to their activism. So in Italy families are very close and they are intergenerational and so on, and maybe the sample we had was self selected, but when I'm talking about the LGBTQ people—you know, these are people who have chosen to stay in the country. There are some Italian gay people who have left the

country because the environment was so hostile to them, so so the ones we talked to had felt comfortable enough to stay in the country, but they all had to figure out how to negotiate a relationship with their often very conservative parents. So I think the other thing about this particular sample is that it's a group of lesbian, and there's one transgender person in the sample and that's a little different from most of the other samples [in the Global Feminisms Project].

AS: Thank you. That's extremely interesting. I wonder if you could characterize just in a moment or in a sentence or two, what the other interviews—how they differ, the interviewees— from the Bologna ones.

LD: The Roman interviews were identified as feminist activists. Most of them were more on the public intellectual side— they were writers, they had organized festivals, they had a big social media presence in general, or they had been active in the 70s women's movement in Italy, and they maybe worked for the government or in academia. So there were: in Rome I had some younger ones, and a couple of older ones. And the ones in Bologna were all associated with local organizations that worked on feminist and LGBTQ issues, so they tend to be younger, and they didn't have as large of a social media presence or a public presence. In the Rome sample there are some fairly known activists and writers, some that have won prizes— literature prizes—published books, who were pretty popular in social media, and also regular media.

AS: Thank you. That's very helpful, I think, for users to have a sense of the two. is really helpful. My other question for you, Lauren is what are one or two things about feminist activism in Italy generally that you think people ought to keep in mind and might not be aware of.

LD: Okay, I think the first thing to be aware of is that Italy was not even unified as a country until 1861. So Italy has this very long history of small, little centers where you might get regional dialects, regional customs, foods, etc and they still are very wedded to their regional identity.

So when you talk to an Italian the first thing I want to know is which part of Italy you're from, assuming you're Italian. So the other thing that's related to that is that, gender equality is actually written into the Italian Constitution; and the Italian constitution was enacted in 1947,

So it's very recent. Also, Italy operates on a parliamentary system, so that means that there are many different political parties, and there's a lot of room to work on feminist issues within the party system. It's not like in the United States, where there are only two [parties].

There is also some government support for feminist and LGBTQ organizations that are nonprofits, not that they get a lot of money, but there is some support.

Also feminism in Italy in the 1970s, which is the contemporary movement, arose out of the labor movement, in contrast to the US, where it arose out of the civil rights movement, so it's very different routes.

Today it seems that the movement consists of public intellectuals, like some of the activists, we have—Micaela Murgia, Maddalena Vianello, and Giulia Blasi—who are also writers active on social media. It seems very different, as opposed to kind of the grassroots movements that we have, where we do lots of marching in the streets, and things like that.

So that's the first thing. And then the other thing that I would say's very important to understand about feminist activism in Italy, is that you can't discount the role of the Catholic Church in Italy.

For example, although most young people today in Italy are not deeply religious, the Church seems to impact the policy positions related to women and gender. So there, for example, there's no gay marriage in Italy, even though there is in the European Union. But not in Italy. Just civil partnerships in Italy. You can't have a surrogate pregnancy in Italy. And in fact, earlier last year the church publicly expressed concern over a bill against homo/transphobia that was being discussed in Parliament. And this is the first time the Church ever went against matters of state since 1929, when the two were recognized as separate entities. So, the bill, in the end, was rejected and didn't pass. We don't know exactly what the role of the Church's opposition was. But, but the Church does seem to have a very strong role, even though modern Italians are— are not very religious.

AS: Thank you, that's wonderful context for our users. Thank you very much for your contribution to the Global Feminisms Project.

Outro: Thank you for listening to this episode of *Contextualizing Feminist Voices* created by the Global Feminisms Project. The entire podcast team hopes it will help you understand and enjoy the materials on the website. If you liked this episode, check out the other podcasts in this series, as well as materials about countries, teaching resources, and interviews.