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FASCIST ITALY



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Did Mussolini succeed in imposing Fascist values on women?

FOCUS ROUTE

As you work through this chapter, complete a chart like the one below analysing Fascist policies towards women.

Aims	Methods	Successes	Failures

- CHART 9A CHAPTER OVERVIEW**
- 9 Did Mussolini succeed in imposing Fascist values on women?
- A How did Fascists see the role of women? (p. 165)
 - B How did the regime treat women? (pp. 166–68)
 - C Did Italy's women deliver? (pp. 169–70)
 - D Review: Did Mussolini succeed in imposing Fascist values on women? (pp. 171–73)

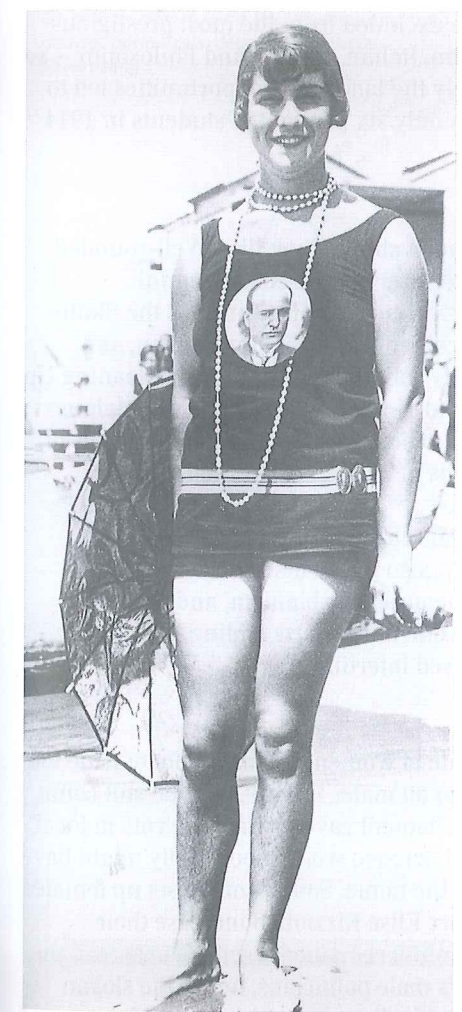
SOURCE 9.1 Schoolgirls in 1941. The text on the back wall reads, 'Woman should always be a decisive influence in determining the destiny of human society'



Activity

What do Sources 9.2–4 suggest about the role of women in Fascist Italy?

SOURCE 9.2 An Italian woman displaying a portrait of Mussolini on her swimsuit



A How did Fascists see the role of women?

'DUCE, do you want to increase the number of suicides, prostitutes, and emigrations?' Thus wrote a 40-year-old Turinese spinster to Mussolini in October 1938. She was protesting at the latest government DECREE that laid down a limit of ten per cent on offices' employment of women. If she lost her job, her parents and nephews whom she supported would have to fall back on government welfare.

This decree illustrates one aspect of the regime's twenty years of discriminatory policies towards women. Women had a clearly specified role to play within Fascist doctrine. It was their task to run the home and maximise their child bearing so that the regime's DEMOGRAPHIC ambitions could be achieved. This chapter explores what actual effect this had on women's lives at the time.



SOURCE 9.3 An image of motherhood: 'The destiny of nations is linked to their demographic power'

SOURCE 9.4 Fascist sayings
*War is to the man what motherhood is to women.
 Wives and sardines keep best in sealed tins.*

- SOURCE 9.5** Mussolini's views
- a) From a late 1920s interview with a female journalist
Women's place in the present as in the past is in the home . . . Women are the tender, gentle influence that represents a pleasant parenthesis [interlude] in a man's life, the influence that often helps a man to forget his trials and his fatigue, but that leaves no lasting trace . . . Women are a charming pastime, when a man has time to pass . . . but they should never be taken seriously, for they themselves are rarely serious . . . My wife and family are my dearest possessions, but so greatly do I treasure them that I keep them apart from my duty.
 - b) Various statements from the 1930s
 - *Women must obey . . . In our state, she does not count.*
 - *Intellectual women are a monstrosity.*
 - *Higher education for women should just cover what the female brain can cope with, i.e. household management.*
 - *Child bearing is women's natural and fundamental mission in life.*
 - *Women should be exemplary wives and mothers, guardians of the hearth, and subject to the legitimate authority of the husband.*
 - *[Women's work] distracts from reproduction, if it does not directly impede it, and foments independence and the accompanying physical-moral styles contrary to giving birth.*

B How did the regime treat women?

Employment

During the late nineteenth century, as in other industrialising nations, some mainly middle-class women had begun to organise to advance their political and economic rights. The First World War had increased women's employment opportunities, but afterwards measures were taken to restrict their employment, especially after the rise in unemployment from 1927. The main target was women in 'unnatural' occupations (such as school teachers, office workers and professionals). From the mid-1920s women were excluded from certain teaching jobs. In 1933 the state imposed a limit of ten per cent on state jobs for women; in 1938 this was extended to many private firms, though it was reversed during the war. The Fascists did not, however, challenge women's traditional importance in agriculture, and had to accept that millions worked in industry. Indeed, to help women combine this with their chief child-rearing function, several laws were passed protecting women at work.

Education

Education for women was seen as training to stay at home, to be effective housekeepers and mothers. Women were excluded from the most prestigious posts in secondary schools – teaching Latin, Italian, History and Philosophy – so more taught Maths and Science. Perversely the lack of job opportunities led to an increase in women at university (from only six per cent of students in 1914 to fifteen per cent in 1938).

Personal life

The Fascists held firm views on what women should look like. Well-rounded and sturdy rather than thin, elegant women were required. Salvemini sardonically described Fascist pressure on women's appearance as the 'Battle for Fat'. The state criticised cosmetics, high heels, trousers for women, and Negro and rhythm dancing. Yet though the National Committee for Cleaning Up Fashion might campaign against the 'horrid vice' of indecent and scandalous dress, millions of Italians went to cinemas where they could catch glimpses of American actresses' breasts, and thousands of women performed scantily dressed in athletic parades.

Fascists had a confused attitude to female sport; it could promote health, vigour, discipline and national pride, but it also might distract women from their main job of child production, and encourage lesbianism, and female liberation. Mussolini feared female involvement in sports (riding, skiing, cycling) because it was believed they caused infertility!

Politics

The Fascists also had an ambivalent attitude to women's involvement outside the family. When the franchise was extended to all males in 1919, women still could not vote. In 1925 the Fascist-dominated Parliament gave women the vote in local elections; but then ended such elections! MOBILISING women politically might have distracted them from their primary role in the home. Some women set up female Fascist groups. An attempt by their secretary Elisa Rizzoli to increase their influence was blocked, and the Fasci Femminili remained a vehicle to spread the socially REACTIONARY policies of the regime's male politicians, under the slogan 'Woman into the home'. This was reinforced by Pope Pius XI in his 1930 ENCYCLICAL Casti Conubi. He criticised the decline in paternal authority, and stressed the role of women as obedient wives and caring mothers.

There were still opportunities for women to broaden their involvement, however. Women served on committees of ONMI, a state organisation designed to help mothers, particularly disadvantaged ones. They were encouraged to engage in charity work, and to run home economics courses for women workers. Women were enlisted in the campaign against the League of Nations' sanctions (1935), culminating in exchanging their gold wedding rings for tin bands (see Source 14.12). Women were encouraged to attend rallies, and help in

Talking point

Your attitudes to the position of women in society are probably very different to those held by Mussolini and most others in the 1930s. Does this make it hard for you to make an objective assessment of Fascist policies?

Activity

- 1 Study Chart 9B. Were Fascist policies the only major influence on women's position in society?
- 2 Were the other influences assisting or hindering Fascist policies?

propaganda and social work, but were not expected to campaign for their own policies. There was only one female member of the Council of Corporations – from the Midwives Corporation!

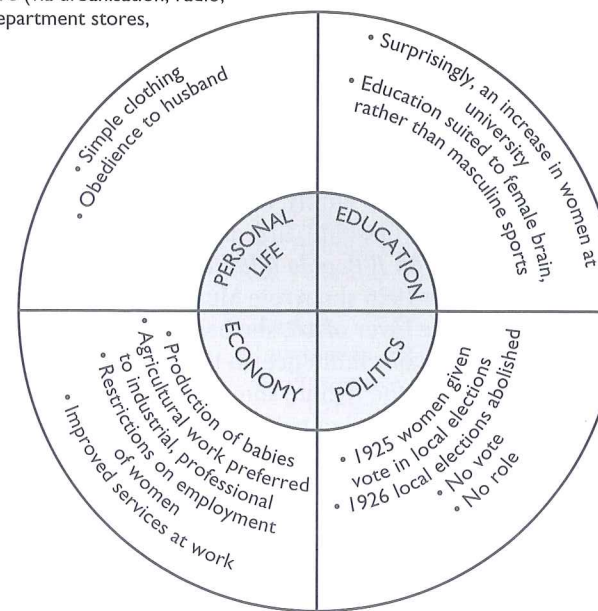
In the 1930s the PNF tried to 'reach out to the people', and in an effort to fascistise the nation hoped to involve groups as yet uncommitted. In 1935 they set up the Massaie Rurali (rural housewives) for peasant women, and in 1938 the Section for Factory and Homeworkers (SOLD). Thus alongside a conservative stress on women staying at home to raise children, the regime did, in its TOTALITARIAN quest for mass involvement, try to involve millions of women in wider affairs.

CHART 9B Women in Fascist Italy: influences and policies

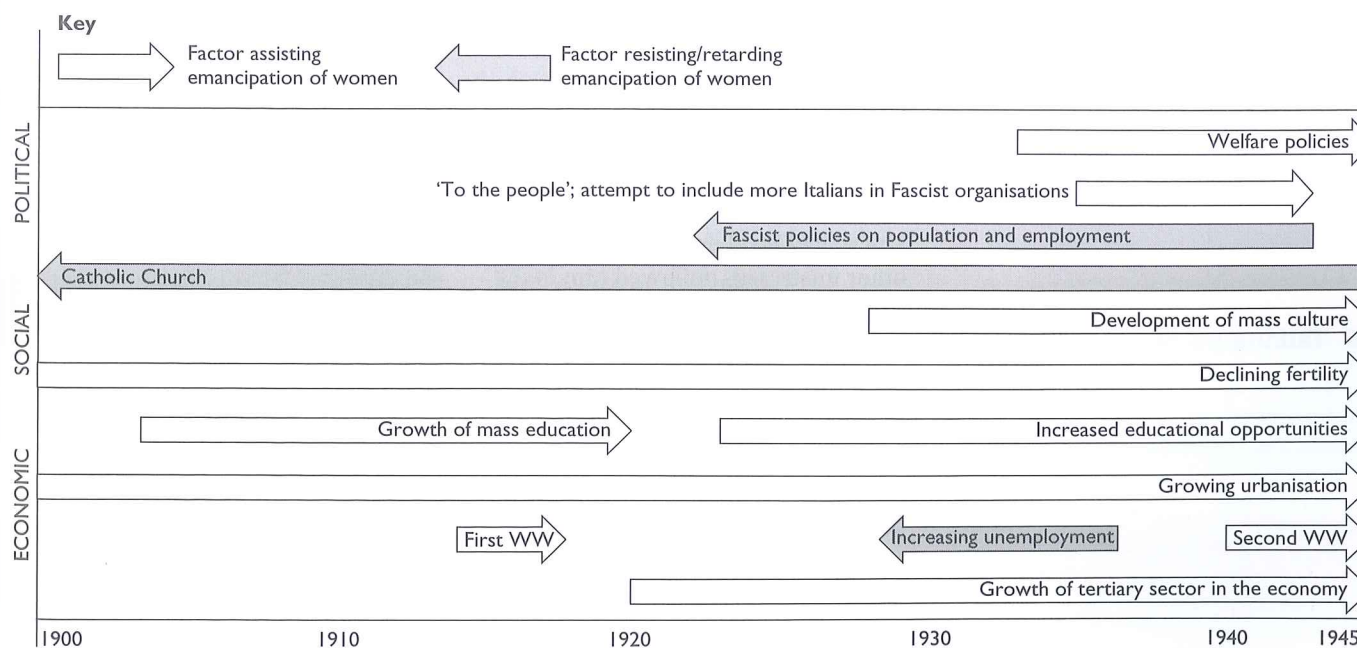
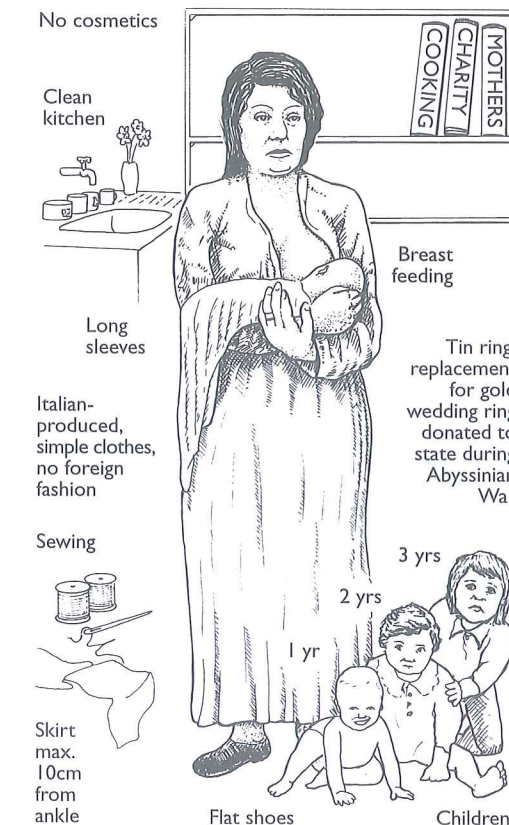
The position of women in Fascist Italy: the broader context

Factors influencing the position of women

- Fascist views and policies
- Mussolini
- Economic developments, especially Depression, decline of textile industry, growth in retail trade
- Wars
- Catholic Church
- Traditions
- Growth of mass culture (via urbanisation, radio, cinema, periodicals, department stores, advertising)



The ideal Fascist woman



The women in Mussolini's life

Mussolini had a voracious sexual appetite, and had a string of mistresses whom he dominated. The following three women, however, he treated rather better.

Rachele Mussolini (1892–1979)

She came from a peasant family. From 1910 she lived with Mussolini, whom she married in 1915 in a civil ceremony, and in 1925 in a religious one. She was poorly educated, and unconcerned about politics. She bore Mussolini five children, and was extolled as the model Fascist housewife and mother. She concentrated on running the household, ignoring Mussolini's mistresses. She stayed loyal to him till the end. In 1945 she was arrested, but released after several months. She later ran a restaurant, and received a government pension until her death.



Margherita Sarfatti (1883–1961)

She came from a rich Jewish family, and became a RADICAL SOCIALIST and feminist. She supported Mussolini, first as a radical socialist, then as a Fascist. From 1915 she worked on *Il Popolo d'Italia* and other Fascist publications. She became his mistress. In 1926 she wrote Mussolini's biography which became a best seller. A passionate lover of art, she became an influential supporter of modernism, having a major influence on the government's cultural policy. For the first thirteen years of the regime she had a major moderating influence on Mussolini's domestic and foreign policy. Her biographer Cannistraro has called her 'the uncrowned Queen of Italy'. However, from 1935 her relationship with Mussolini and her influence were over. Her articles were suppressed after the 1938 ANTI-SEMITIC legislation. In 1938 she left Italy, only returning after the war.



Clara Petacci (1912–45)

She came from a rich family, and developed a schoolgirl crush on Mussolini. She became his mistress in 1936, and devoted her life to him. Their relationship was not widely known about, helped by the fact that Clara used a secret staircase in the Palazzo Venezia. In contrast to Sarfatti, she was unintelligent and pro-Nazi. She stayed loyal despite Mussolini's other mistresses, followed him to the Salo Republic and was with him when he was captured by partisans. Her wish to be shot with him was granted.



SOURCE 9.6 Whittam, p. 72

The two women ... who wielded most influence, Margherita Sarfatti and Clara Petacci, also happened to be mistresses of Mussolini, a final sad commentary on male domination in all its aspects.

Talking point

Should the sexual behaviour of rulers and politicians affect the way historians assess their reputations?

C Did Italy's women deliver?

'I'll do it again.' Thus responded a forty-year-old mother of thirteen, returning home from a prize ceremony in Rome for prolific mothers, when asked about her future plans. Her Duce would have been delighted with her response, but did most Italian women fulfil their leader's wishes of having large families?

In our age, when so many countries are concerned about the problem of over-population, and the need to control birth rates, it's hard to understand a government committed to massive population increase. However, this was the case with Mussolini's Italy. He once remarked that reaching his target of 60 million Italians would be the real test of his Fascist revolution. Mussolini wanted a larger population for reasons of national power. He wanted more soldiers to fight his wars, and more Italians to populate his expanding EMPIRE. In 1927 Mussolini proclaimed the great battle which was to achieve this aim, the Battle for Births. He told delegates from a Fascist women's organisation, 'Go back home and tell the women I need births, many births.'

Mussolini's Battle for Births was an extreme form of a policy other states adopted, and it had the support of the Catholic Church which saw women and marriage as rightfully preoccupied with procreation (reproduction). Both state and Church adopted a reactionary policy, attempting to reverse general trends they saw as corrupting women. They blamed the declining birth rate on female vanity, individualism, pleasure-seeking, godlessness, and a corrupting desire to be modern.

CHART 9C The Battle for Births

Aims

- To increase Italy's population from 37 million in 1920 to 60 million by 1950
- To make Italy great
- To provide soldiers

Actions

Launched in 1927; measures intensified from 1936 as methods below had limited impact

- Propaganda
 - Campaign stressing importance of marriage
- Improved services
 - Better health care
- Financial rewards
 - Marriage loans (repayments cancelled if mother bore four children)
 - Tax relief, e.g. no income tax if ten children
- Ceremonies/prizes
 - Annual ceremony honouring the most prolific mothers (93 families in 1933 had a total of 1300 children)
 - 1939 medal with silver bar per child
- Pressure and prohibition
 - Increased taxation of bachelors
 - Divorce remained illegal
 - Abortion banned, and distribution of contraceptives limited
 - In 1931 Penal Code included 'crimes against the wholeness and health of the race'
 - Civil service jobs and promotion reserved for fathers

Results

- Birth rate continued to decline
- Population rose to 45 million in 1940, and 47.5m in 1950 (short of the 60 million target)
- Average age of marriage rose, and marriage rate fell

Talking point

Why do you think the average age of marriage varies considerably over time? Why might women have delayed marriage at this time? Would the same reasons apply today?

SOURCE 9.7 A salute from prizewinning mothers, Rome 1930



SOURCE 9.8 A 1930s Turin paediatrician (children's doctor) reports some responses from her working-class clients

- a) *The government is not going to get anything from us... Let the government go ahead and talk about the ever bigger need to make the country greater, with an ever higher birth rate, to keep the stock healthy; in my opinion, it's all yack.*
- b) *Let the priest feed the kid, if he's so keen on making babies.*
- c) *Mussolini's not the one to raise it.*

SOURCE 9.9 Scorza, the RAS of Lucca

Society today despises deserters, pimps, homosexuals, thieves. Those who can but do not perform their duty to the nation must be put in the same category. We must despise them. We must make the bachelors and those who desert the nuptial bed ashamed of their power to have children. It is necessary to make them bow their foreheads in the dust.

SOURCE 9.10 Birth rates by region per 1000 inhabitants, 1921–45

Dates	Italy overall	North	South
1921–25	29.9	26.6	36.3
1931–35	24.0	20.3	30.8
1941–45	19.9	17.5	25.3

SOURCE 9.11 Infant mortality rates. There was a tendency for doctors, midwives and parents to report babies' deaths during and just after birth as still births (i.e. dead when born) rather than as infant deaths. However, the two groups of figures indicate the trend

a) Deaths of infants under one year per 1000 live births		b) Still births in relation to live births	
1914	130	1922	45%
1918	196	1926	39%
1922	128	1930	35%
1926	127	1934	33%
1930	106	1938	32%
		1942	28%

Activity

- 1 How might each of following have affected the birth rate?
 - a) The First World War
 - b) The Depression
 - c) The Catholic Church
 - d) The continued drift from the countryside to cities
- 2 What two other factors apart from the birth rate would determine the size of Italy's population?
- 3 a) Why, given Italy's economic resources, is it surprising that Mussolini tried to increase Italy's population?
b) How might a Fascist argue for an increase in population?
- 4 What do the pictorial and statistical sources, and contemporary comments, suggest about the success of the Battle for Births?

D Review: Did Mussolini succeed in imposing Fascist values on women?

Study the following sources to help draw some conclusions as to the success of Fascist policies.

Activity

- 1 What are the main trends in women's employment that emerge from Source 9.12? What other factors besides government policies might help explain these developments?
- 2 Complete your own version of the following chart on the treatment of women:
How were women
 - a) discriminated against
 - b) assisted?

	in childbirth and in the family	in employment	in education	in politics
a) discriminated against				
b) assisted				

- 3 a) Draw up a chart of the attitudes of the girls in Source 9.14:

What they wanted	What they disliked

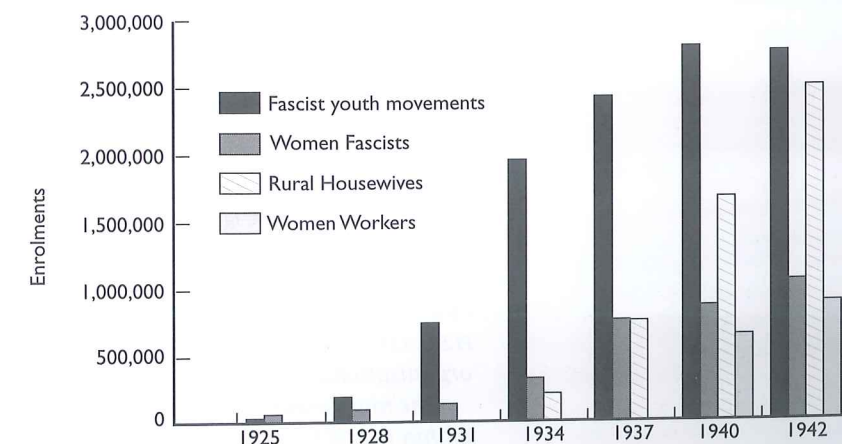
- b) From this evidence, how successful do Fascist policies seem to have been?
- c) Why must you be wary in drawing too many conclusions from this survey?
- 4 What limitations do the historians in Sources 9.16–18 identify in Fascist policies towards women?

SOURCE 9.12 Women in the labour force

Year	% of all working women employed in			Women as % of total labour force		
	Agric	Indust	*Other	Agric	Indust	*Other
1911	58.8	24.2	17.0	43.2	43.9	39.5
1921	52.2	23.6	18.2	44.7	39.0	38.5
1936	51.1	24.1	24.8	41.3	33.1	42.8
1951	41.4	28.0	30.6	32.6	28.0	42.7

* Clerical, professional, retail, etc.

SOURCE 9.13 Enrolment in Fascist women's organisations



SOURCE 9.14 Attitudes and actions of young women in Fascist Italy: points made in a 1937 official survey of 1000 Roman girls aged 14–18, mainly from the professional classes

- ‘Extraordinarily vague’ ideas about having families
- Regarded babies as burdensome
- Considered one or two children best
- Studied in order to qualify for a job
- Housework seen as tedious
- Didn’t expect husband to support them
- Most uninterested in traditional female handicrafts like knitting and sewing
- Favourite pastime movies; half went to movies at least once a week
- Favourite reading novels, especially romances and adventures
- Preferred dancing to singing and painting
- Preferred company of peers [friends of the same age] to that of younger brothers/sisters
- Prized self-confidence
- Wanted to command more than obey
- Described as ‘healthy, vivacious but not turbulent’

Talking point

Do you think that a modern survey of young women’s attitudes would produce similar results?

SOURCE 9.15 An account of the housework of a working-class woman who in 1930 spent an estimated 1500 hours working at home in addition to agricultural work

Household chores were a major undertaking given the lack of electricity and indoor plumbing. To prepare meals meant first cleaning out the hearth and drawing the fire, preceded by hauling water from the well or spring, and gathering kindling. Laundry was a twice-monthly enterprise which took days by the time heavy linen sheets had been lugged to the water source, ash applied several times, and the whole lot pressed with stove-heated irons. In addition to laying away lentils, tomatoes, capers and other stores, caring for chickens, and tending the orchard garden, at harvest time the women served the men in the fields and often laboured there themselves.

Finally, read the following analyses from historians.

Historians’ assessments

SOURCE 9.16 A. J. Gregor, *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship*, 1979, p. 290

The demographic program, the ruralisation of the peninsula, and the effort to revive the traditional female virtues . . . all appear to have been unsuccessful . . . Fascism may have been instrumental in removing women from the job market, but the statistics are not unequivocal [don’t prove it conclusively] . . . Fascist anti-feminism was not particularly successful and/or may not have been pursued with any special application. In any event, Fascist anti-feminism was, at best, a subsidiary concern of Fascist social policy, and made its appearance largely as a consequence of concerns with a declining birth rate and rising unemployment.

SOURCE 9.17 De Grazia, in *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 1992, pp. 269–70

Fascism’s organisation of women rested on a fundamental paradox, one that can be traced back to Fascism’s own contradictory definitions of female citizenship. Women’s duty was maternity; their primary vocation was to procreate, nurture and manage family functions. Yet to perform this duty, they needed to be responsive to public well-being; they needed to be conscious of society’s expectations and the effects of their essentially individual acts on the collectivity. This need required that women be engaged outside the household. Moreover, the PNF, mobilising ever-larger crowds to demonstrate public support, became obsessed with numbers. Women, though excluded from consultation in the PLEBISCITES of 1929 and 1934, could be tallied up to display totalitarianism’s organisational might.

The mass organisations of women ultimately reflected unresolved tensions within the DICTATORSHIP over how to define women in the Italian state.

Activity

As a ‘true believer’, speak to the rest of the class **either** on your role as a woman in Fascist Italy, **or** as an emancipated woman criticise Fascist policies towards women.

SOURCE 9.18 P. Willson, ‘Women in Fascist Italy’, in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, ed. R. Bessel, 1996, pp. 92–93

The female experience of the Fascist period was marked by its sheer diversity . . . When they tried to intervene most explicitly to mould gender roles, in their bid to stem or even reverse trends towards female emancipation through highly misogynous [anti-female] rhetoric and policy, they were far from successful. Although they preached, and wherever practical, legislated for female subordination, they were doomed ultimately to fail in their declared ambition to make women into ‘angels of the hearth’. There were simply too many constraints on policy makers for legislation to have much impact, and despite the enormous amount of attention paid to gender roles in Fascist rhetoric, it seems that particular patterns of industrialisation, commercialisation, and urbanisation had more power to shape female experiences in this period than the crude tools of Fascist IDEOLOGY and policy.

Statistical and anecdotal evidence (from stories or by word of mouth) suggests the regime failed to implant its reactionary attitudes widely amongst women, partly as the growth of mass culture broadened attitudes and aspirations. Thus despite the chauvinist attitudes of Italy’s leaders, and policies geared to restricting the role of women, many Italian women maintained their traditional role in the economy, and some even found their opportunities increased. At the most crucial level neither of the two key policies of the regime in relation to women – a great increase in the birth rate, and a reduction in paid employment – were achieved.

Key points from Chapter 9

- 1 Mussolini had traditional attitudes to the role of women, many of which he shared with the Church.
- 2 Broader social changes were challenging such ideas.
- 3 Mussolini believed women should stay at home and concentrate on child rearing.
- 4 The Fascists launched a Battle for Births, and encouraged women to have babies through pressure and incentives.
- 5 The birth rate continued to decline, and the regime failed to reach its target population figure of 60 million.
- 6 The Fascists discriminated against women in education and in ‘unnatural’ occupations.
- 7 The Fascists provided a range of welfare facilities for women.
- 8 Women were expected to maintain a traditional and unglamorous lifestyle, but the growth of mass culture broadened their horizons.
- 9 Although women were not given the vote, they were encouraged to join Fascist women’s organisations.
- 10 Evidence suggests that the Fascists failed to implant their reactionary views in many women.