A Woman at the Quirinal? Thanks, But No Thanks

The Social Construction of Women's Political Agenda in the 1999 Italian Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT The need for the political empowerment of women, and the role played by the media in both promoting and hindering it are well-known problems. A new opportunity to consider these problems as regards the Italian case was afforded by the 1999 presidential election. During that selection process, the proposal to appoint a woman as head of the nation was, for the first time, brought into the arena for debate. Neither of the two women who were candidates – European Commissioner Emma Bonino and Minister of the Interior Rosa Russo Jervolino – were elected. Using the 'public arenas model' and the concept of 'framing', the article explores the rise and fall of the two female candidatures by highlighting the limits in the social construction of the women's agenda. Considered from this point of view, the campaign offers an interesting case study in order to better understand the mechanisms of gender exclusion.

KEY WORDS Italy ◆ newspapers ◆ presidential election ◆ public opinion ◆ women's empowerment

INTRODUCTION

In September 1998 an Italian politician, Giuliano Amato, put forward the idea of appointing a woman as tenth president of the republic. In the following spring, for the first time, two women were considered potential candidates for the Italian presidency. One, the exponent of the Radical Party, Emma Bonino, chose to break the rules of a game reserved for top politicians and openly ran for the office,[1] with the support of her well-organized electoral committee. The other, the former

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Christian Democrat, Rosa Russo Jervolino, was proposed by the secretary of her political party, the Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI), and, according to the traditional procedures of presidential selection, persistently avoided looking too involved in the political race for the Quirinal.[2] Both of them obtained a good personal and political consensus, and were both competent politicians with important institutional roles. The expert politician Rosa Russo Jervolino was Minister of the Interior in the government led by Massimo D'Alema, while Emma Bonino was the European Commissioner who in Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia had flamboyantly aired the plight of refugees, realizing her own philosophy that 'it is a European tradition to offer help'.[3] Yet, neither one was elected. On 13 May, politicians from the left and right met to appoint the Italian president and in the first round of voting they chose Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the 78-year-old Treasury Minister who had brought Italy into the Euro.[4]

As the winner was highly regarded internationally and supported both by the majority of the Italian political parties and by a good proportion of people in the polls, there is no need to explain why he was successful.[5] However, the dynamics that led to the rise and fall of the two female candidates deserves better analysis. This article tries to offer a first contribution in this direction by using the 'public arenas model' (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988) and the concept of 'framing' (Gitlin, 1980).

The interpretative hypothesis suggested here is that the proposal of 'a woman at the Quirinal' contributed to temporarily putting the empowerment of women on to the agenda, but it was framed in a reductive way and was consequently not strong enough to drive the campaign.[6] From this point of view, an important factor contributing to the weakening of the issue of women's roles in politics was that the two female candidatures were not perceived – or actually proposed – as specific candidatures representing women.[7] As a matter of fact, the issue of gender was not really associated with the campaigns of Bonino or Russo Jervolino at all, in spite of the emergence of a more favourable climate of opinion regarding the empowerment of women. Indeed, some politicians occasionally, and instrumentally, mentioned the issue. Nevertheless, albeit with different styles, both women distanced themselves from this interpretation. Rosa Russo Jervolino opted for the neutral profile of politician, while Bonino went as far as to present herself as 'the right man' for the Italian presidency. It must be noted that, generally speaking, only a few other women are involved in Italian politics and no organization involved in these issues wanted to ride this wave in order to strengthen public reflection on gender and politics. So, in the pages of the newspapers any reflection on the empowerment of women and the debate about 'a woman at the Quirinal' alternated without generating a strong mutual synergy. Finally, the coverage of the two female candidatures

went on according to the inevitable formats and principles of the media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979, 1991).

GENDER AND POLITICS IN ITALIAN SOCIETY: SOME GENERAL REMARKS

Before embarking on our main analysis, it is useful to bear in mind some general remarks about the specific relationship between gender and politics in Italy.

The presence of women in Italian politics has always been a problem. Of course, there have been important differences according to the parties and their different models of political culture and various patterns of internal organization.[8] However, all in all, the underrepresentation of women has remained a serious phenomenon, as documented by previous research and analysis (Guadagnini, 1993, 1997; Zincone, 1988, 1993).

As Paul Ginsborg recently noted:

> In the history of the Italian Republic, there have only been 26 women ministers compared to 1425 men ministers. According to the statistical data presented last month by Istat and the Ministry of Equal Opportunities, the positions of real power are held almost exclusively by men: 93.6 percent of the mayors are men . . . as are 100 percent of the presidents of regions and 94.6 percent of the prefects.[9]

Things are no better when we consider the parliament. During the last 50 years the number of women elected to the Chamber of Deputies has varied according to a discontinuous trend,[10] from the minimum in 1968, when the percentage fell to 2.8 percent, to the maximum in 1994, when it increased to 15.1 percent before going down to 11.4 percent. The reason for the downward turn in the last few years is clear. In 1994, when the new electoral system inspired by the majoritarian model[11] was first adopted, a system of quotas that provided for a partial alternation of men and women in the lists of candidates was introduced by law.[12] The subsequent abolition of this system made political selection even more difficult for women. In the 1996 election the proportion of female candidates in the electoral lists dropped from 17.5 percent to 11.9 percent and the number of women elected decreased to a point that – after the vote in the Italian parliament – there were 23 women fewer than in the previous legislature (Guadagnini, 1997). Of course, we do not know how many of these 'missing' women were driven out by the rules of a game which penalizes those who lack adequate 'personal political capital'. Nor do we know how many of them just waived their right to participate because of fatigue, mistrust or as a protest against a model of democracy in which they did not yet have a share.[13] But we must take into account that while some women were discussing the problems of 'engendering democracy'

(Phillips, 1991), others were leaving the traditional forms of political participation behind.[14] Furthermore, it is curious to note that in Italy the issue of gender and politics was brought up on the agenda just when politics was becoming less important to a large number of women, both because they were involved in other struggles[15] and because of a disaffection towards politics in general.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ISSUE 'A WOMAN AT THE QUIRINAL'

That being said, one would wonder how the proposal to appoint a woman as president of the Italian republic ever came up in the first place. Yet in autumn 1998, Italy contemplated breaking for the first time the unwritten rule according to which the leader of the nation must be a man. Paradoxically, the person who posed the problem was a man: the former Socialist prime minister and vice-president of the Antitrust Commission, Giuliano Amato. On 6 September, during a meeting of politicians and top international economists, Amato launched the idea by saying: 'It's time to do something in order to produce a concrete change in the culture of the country.'[16] The reaction was swift and twofold. On the one hand, the proposal was seriously taken as provocatively highlighting the unequal presence of women in Italian politics by the age-old strategy of announcing publicly a truth not generally admitted. On the other hand, almost all the people agreed that as a provocation it was hard to ignore. Not surprisingly, the more general reaction was, therefore, formal assent.[17]

At first, of course, there was some embarrassment among women due to this extemporary proposal being thrown like a stone into the political waters. It was a highly symbolical, evocative proposal, far removed from the reality of political inequality, and made even more ambiguous by the features of an institution itself in the throes of polemical debate.[18] Some contested the inadequacy of the proposal,[19] and some women protested against the paternalistic nature of the offer.[20] But on the whole, particularly at the beginning, these positions were marginal. Above all, the emergence of more critical voices did not lead to any real reflection on the issue of the poor representation of women in politics. Or at least, in the eyes of the wider public, the debate surrounding Amato's proposal was not connected to the more general thoughts on women's inequality that were developing around that time. For example, an important meeting on the problems of female political participation organized by Emily in Italy[21] just six weeks after Amato's proposal, gave no room to it[22] and (consequently) was in no way connected to the issue of 'a woman at the Quirinal' in the newspapers. Almost the same happened when the

National Commission for Equal Opportunities met in Todi at the beginning of November 1998 asking for a process of real empowerment of women in politics.[23]

However, we could say that, during the months between September 1998 and May 1999, Amato's proposal did indirectly contribute to putting the empowerment of women onto the media's and the public's agenda, creating the conditions for a more favourable climate of opinion. As regards this, it was probably not by chance that during this time two important steps were taken relating to the women's agenda. First, was the doubling of the number of female ministers and the appointment of a woman by the new president of the Council Massimo D'Alema to a traditionally male ministry like the Ministry of the Interior.[24] And second was the proposal to include within the Italian Constitution the principle according to which 'the law promotes the balance of electoral representation between genders'.[25] Of course, the proximity – in time and in semantic space – of the debate about 'a woman at the Quirinal' and the empowerment of women created a certain mutual synergy between the issues. Nevertheless, on the whole, the political and journalistic debate did not frame Amato's proposal or the process of presidential selection as regards the more general problem. So, after a short period of mutual reinforcement, the roads of the two issues separated. The idea of 'a woman at the Quirinal' became the journalistic story of Emma Bonino's and Rosa Russo Jervolino's candidatures. And, once more, the problem of empowerment dropped off the agenda.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE WOMEN'S AGENDA AND THE DEBATE IN PUBLIC ARENAS

The dynamics of the process summarized in the previous paragraphs can be analysed in more detail using the 'public arenas model' proposed by Hilgartner and Bosk (1988). Starting with the consideration that there is a 'huge population' of potential problems competing for attention in public arenas and that the 'carrying capacities' of these arenas are limited, the two authors highlight the major factors of selection. On the basis of their thesis, we can say that in order to be selected as a social problem,[26] an issue must:

1. Satisfy the need for drama imposed by the media logic;
2. Answer the need for novelty by avoiding the danger of saturation;
3. Fit closely with broad political and cultural concerns;
4. Be suitable to the organizational characteristics and necessities of each arena.

During the selection process, every potential problem can be amplified or, alternatively, dampened down by the feedback produced in the interactions among the different arenas. The synergistic or negative effects of the feedback are connected to the role played by the operatives who populate the institutions and variously try both to influence the process of selection and to 'surf (Nolan, 1985) on the shifting waves of social problems' (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988: 67).

If we apply the 'public arenas model' to our case, we can better understand why the proposal of 'a woman at the Quirinal' was reduced to a problem of quotas and, in the end, rejected as spurious because 'what really matters are the personal qualities of a candidate, not her or his gender'. In other words, we can try to explain why and how Amato's definition of the problem in terms of a strategy aimed to highlight the need for a more equal representation was defeated in the public arenas involved in this process. These arenas were the media, particularly the press,[27] and the political parties. In contrast, in this specific case women's organizations cannot be considered a public arena because of their limited, or non-existent, participation in the debate about Amato's proposal.[28] As far as the public is concerned, we can assume it to be an external variable influencing the definitions of problems in the arenas of media and politics.

The whole process can now be considered again from the point of view of the selection principles that operated within it.

Drama

There may be little doubt that the idea of 'a woman at the Quirinal' was a really great story for the media. It was exciting and easy to cover, in an appealing way, respecting few conditions. First of all, it need give little room to thorough examination or overly serious political debate on the problems of empowerment. Second, it need pay little attention to differences of opinion, debate or controversy. And finally, it could cover the process of the presidential selection as a particular kind of campaign, that is by applying the 'game scheme' (Patterson, 1993) to it. If Amato's proposal is considered in this light and under these conditions, the presence of two female candidates transformed the very boring process of a self-referential selection into a potentially interesting game, full of prediction, bets and suspense. In fact, just one day after the proposal of a woman at the Quirinal was made, the polls started to test public opinion for the favourite and the journalists embarked on the game of 'who is the favourite candidate?', going around and exploring politicians' own preferences.

Debate around the definition of the problem was sharper in the arena of politics. On the one hand, Amato, who had been awarded the nickname of

'Dottor Sottile' ('Doctor Subtle') because of his incisive intelligence, very often used the weapons of rhetoric in order to stress the importance of the problem and define it as a problem of empowerment. Furthermore, some women involved in politics took up position near him by dramatizing the issue, as Tina Anselmi did by affirming: 'If women do not participate in political life, democracy in Italy is at risk.'[29] Lacking the support of a broader front, the strategies of dramatization did not work effectively, and soon showed themselves as being defenceless against the criticism of those who considered the proposal of 'a woman at the Quirinal' as an inappropriate problem to do with quotas. Above all, they were defeated by the tactics of those who formally agreed with Amato's proposal, and then variously dominated it by 'surfing' on the waves of the debate.

Novelty

Whatever the definition of the problem, the principle of novelty was not a source of difficulty as far as the media were concerned. As a matter of fact, in Italy not only has no woman ever been president of the republic, but also there has never been a woman appointed as prime minister or secretary of a party. Since it was the first time that the possibility of appointing a woman to head of state was debated, there was little danger of saturation.

Other considerations must be introduced if we consider the principle of novelty and the risk of saturation in the political arena. Here, in fact, the slogan 'a woman at the Quirinal' brings us back to the much criticized issue of quotas in 1994 and produces negative effects.

Cultural and Political Concerns

In order to understand the initial good fortune of the issues of 'a woman at the Quirinal' and of empowerment throughout public discourse, we must bear in mind that both benefited from favourable conditions. In Italy, as in many other countries, during the 1990s the international dimension of the debate helped to focus public attention on women's issues.[30] More precisely, the problem of empowerment was echoed throughout the media thanks to world events like the Cairo and Beijing Conferences, but also as a consequence of European integration.

We can therefore say that both from the media and from the political point of view – however defined – the problem of engendering the political system was appropriate as regards the cultural and political principles of selection. Yet, we must note that one definition of the problem was more broadly appropriate than others: the definition that stressed novelty and diversity, in the belief that such features were typical of female candidates. Standing in front of a self-referential political

system and of a political class that showed itself unable to fulfil the promise of reforms, women benefited from having always been out of the palace of politics. This definition was mainly espoused by Emma Bonino and was shared by noteworthy segments of the public. As a consequence, it obtained great visibility in the media. This idea reversed the definition of 'a woman at the Quirinal' as a strategy of empowerment to: 'women must go to the Quirinal, not to balance widespread inequality, but because they are better than men and are able to revolutionize institutional politics'. It was this anti-political mood associated to the first candidature of a woman (Bonino's candidature) which made the idea of accepting Amato's proposal more controversial.

Organizational Necessities

As regards the fourth set of selection principles, it is easy to recognize that the issues labelled 'a woman at the Quirinal' and 'empowerment of women' were well suited to the requirements both of the media and political arenas. On the political side, we must note that in the stalemate of never-ending Italian transition, new resources of legitimization were needed and the proposal to appoint a woman as president looked to be a very appropriate strategy. Furthermore the presidency of the republic was surely very important on symbolic grounds, although still lacking real power.[31]

Indeed, it is particularly interesting to consider how the different definitions of the problem suited the timing of each arena and the electoral campaign. The idea proposed by Amato was the first to answer the emerging need to set the presidential selection, and it initially benefited from that by shaping the debate and giving way to a broader, autonomous reflection on the problems of political representation. Yet, as days went by and the criticism of some women increased, the idea of 'a woman at the Quirinal' disappeared. It re-emerged – but under a new label – in February when Emma Bonino's electoral committee ('Emma for President') officially opened the campaign announcing that, according to a poll, 78 percent of Italians would like a woman in the presidency and that 42 percent wanted Emma Bonino.[32]

The announcement of her candidature by Emma Bonino's committee on 4 March gave rhythm to the starting campaign. Bonino's presidential campaign breached all the rules of a selection process normally shrouded in mystery and threw the second stone into the campaign pool. She challenged the whole Italian political class with the demand 'Show the Names for the Quirinal' and provoked the public by announcing that 'Finally the Right Man Was Found': the slogan, written on T-shirts, printed on posters and broadcast by television, affirmed that *she* was the right man. It is not surprising that this strategy captured the media's

attention. However, it is also interesting to note that this attention was quickly shared with an alternative definition of the problem, one more to do with empowerment and less focused on the specific issue of 'a woman at the Quirinal'.

Some of the most important supporters of this definition, Prime Minister D'Alema and the six women in his government, showed in fact that the lesson about the importance of timing had been also learnt in Italy. Therefore, they seized the opportunity given on 8 March – namely International Women's Day – to publicly announce a new proposal for women's interests: the earlier mentioned proposal to promote a more equal political representation of women by a change in the constitutional text. The proposal was important, presented with a careful news management strategy and sufficiently controversial to secure journalistic attention. Consequently, at least for a couple of days, all the newspapers gave some room to the strategies and the problems of empowerment.

More or less at this point of the selection process, the final shift from a problem defined as 'a woman at the Quirinal' to stories labelled as 'women running in the presidential race' occurred. On 12 and 22 March two new events met the media's need for stories, which kept the theme alive and the timing right. Both events were meetings. At the first, the Women of the DS (Democratici di Sinistra)[33] once again stressed the problem of inequality, but also the limitations of the system of quotas and criticized the idea of a woman 'at any cost' at the Quirinal.[34] At the second meeting, organized by Emily in Italy, the opposition to Bonino's candidature was even more fervent. 'We don't say, ''We want a woman at the Quirinal'' ', they stressed. 'We firstly want a woman or a man with particular features. So . . . between Ciampi and Bonino, just for political reasons, we prefer Ciampi.'[35] With the shifting of the problem, the kind of empathy between newspapers and politics which had characterized the start of the campaign came to an end. Journalists loved the idea of 'a woman at the Quirinal' even if they did not believe, any more than politicians did, that it was realizable. They just would have liked there to have been a real battle and for a woman to really challenge a male competitor. Bonino would have been perfect if she had insisted on the issue of her being a woman – but in any case she fitted well enough with media preferences. Yet, the other women should have recognized her candidature as representative of their cause. Without this legitimization, she was just a candidate like anyone else. As women supported none of the other female candidatures, the selection process initiated with the proposal 'a woman at the Quirinal' ended. Though unwillingly, journalists took note of it, admitting:

> By a funny paradox, those who underline the value of a female candidature are men. The men who are always more worried about the separation of politics from the so-called 'people'. And now they address women,

> perceived as a new sap able to give new life to the still sclerotic parties . . . more a calculation of mere convenience than an opening to equality.[36]

The idea of 'a woman at the Quirinal' emerged once more during the campaign, but by then the tone was different, as we can see in an article published on 21 March:

> It's not so important to know whether they [the women] will make it: whether one of them will make it. Let us suppose they don't, as is quite possible and as the majority seems to believe. The fact is that they are competing and this never happened before. . . . Even if no woman wins, they have already won: until yesterday it was unthinkable, starting from tomorrow other women will come.[37]

FRAMES OF THE PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN IT

Focusing on the main media frames (Iyengar et al., 1997; Kahn, 1994a, 1994b) used to cover women's participation in the presidential selection, it is now possible to better explore the process of sense-making that operated in the Italian 1999 presidential election.

To cite Gitlin, 'media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse' (Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1989; Gitlin, 1980: 7; Iyengar, 1991).

The deepest level of media frame in the coverage of the 1999 Italian presidential campaign was the frame that assumed the unbalanced relationship between women and men as unchangeable, or at least not yet changeable. This frame operated in two major ways. The first was related to the persistent notion that no woman could actually win. Bonino could not win because people, and not politicians, supported her candidature. For example, at the beginning of the campaign, Leo Valiani wrote:

> The only candidature that has been proposed so far is that of European Commissioner Emma Bonino. I agree that it is excellent. Certainly, if the most important parties – whose vote will be decisive – decide to support her, her election is going to be favourably received by public opinion. Yet, it is more probable that we'll have other candidates.[38]

The popular opinion-maker Enzo Biagi confirmed:

> Mrs Bonino did well in Brussels. . . . But I think that her candidature has few possibilities of reaching the winning post. Not because of reservations about her person, or anti-feminism, but because there are other programmes and other names.[39]

One month later, one read:

> Bonino is the first. The strongest. The most loved by Italian people. After a

> shower of ads, gadgets and testimonials, people want her. . . . Unfortunately there is a blemish on the map of overwhelming consensus for Emma . . . the Palazzo Montecitorio. None of its 1010 tenants voted for Emma in the polls, and above all, they have no intention of voting for her in the poll from which the tenth president of the republic will be selected.[40]

A different tone, but the same conclusions can be seen in De Bortolo's article:

> [The president] must be a personality of such high intelligence, and morality too, so the Italian people can identify with them. . . . If I may mention a name, instinctively and affectionately, I would mention the name of Emma Bonino. Because of her courage, her humanitarian battles, her European prestige. . . . It is unbearable that her candidature is invisible. . . . That being stated, I'd like to mention . . . two men . . . Ciampi and Amato.[41]

One could say that any doubts about the real chances of success of Bonino's candidature depended on particular characteristics of her candidature, but the more institutional candidature of Rosa Russo Jervolino suffered the same fate. Actually, the coverage dedicated to her in the newspapers was no more optimistic, if perhaps more possible. According to the leader of Forza, Italia's parliamentary group: 'In order to elect: Jervolino the machine to lift the Santa Rosa [statue] and the hundred porters to carry it on their shoulders would be necessary.'[42] A little less poetic, but in line with this opinion, was the statement of another politician: 'I'll support Jervolino, but I think that in the end Marini will be the one to make it.'[43]

Under the guise of realistic evaluation, the cognitive frame according to which in the end only a man can be the head of the nation was operating. Of course, underlying many people's doubts were real and authentic obstacles to Bonino's or Jervolino's election. Among other problems, Bonino's profile as a pugnacious supporter of civil rights was rather far removed from what was expected of an institutional figure supposed to maintain a lofty presidential image and to represent the country's unity both in the domestic and the international arenas. On the other hand, the widespread political opposition to the idea of another Catholic president after Scalfaro's seven-year mandate significantly handicapped Rosa Russo Jervolino's chances. Yet, is there perhaps not a structural bias in the question: 'how many political chances did the two candidates have?' The point is that they had no chance whatsoever, because the possibility of the gender of the president not being male had simply not been considered within the (unwritten) rules of the game. As Pateman (1989) incisively suggested, our democracies rest on a 'fraternal social contract' which shapes the whole sphere of politics.

> In the story of the creation of civil society through an original agreement, women are brought into the new social order as inhabitants of a private sphere that is part of civil society and yet is separated from the public

> world. . . . Women have never been completely excluded from participation in the institutions of public world, but women have been incorporated into public life in a different manner from men. . . . Women have been included as 'women'; that is as beings whose sexual embodiment prevents them from enjoying the same political standing as men. (Pateman, 1989: 4)

It does not mean to say that just because the unbalanced relationship between men and women implied by the 'fraternal social contract' is neither natural nor unchangeable, the issue of 'a woman at the Quirinal' could not have been conceptualized in a different way, obtaining different solutions. But in order to do so, the problem should have been recognized and openly faced through a process of deep cultural debate. And, as we have seen in this article, this is very far from what happened in the Italian public arenas during the months of the presidential selection process. As a consequence, the frame of the predisposition of men winning operated successfully together with a second, correlated frame. We could define it as the frame of women's predisposition to be fellows more than leaders and use it in order to understand the media's tendency to stress their connection with the male world.

It is hard to believe that two women with a long political history and huge responsibilities like Rosa Russo Jervolino and Emma Bonino could ever be described only in relation to the personalities of their male political colleagues, alongside whom they worked and fought. Nonetheless, it is unfortunately true. Once more, the phenomenon is more visible in the case of the less institutionalized candidature of Emma Bonino. A few examples will suffice. At the meeting of the Radical Party that officially presented her candidature, the first words in the newspaper articles were for a man who was not even there: the old, unwell – but always pugnacious – former leader of the party, Marco Pannella.

> He isn't there. Marco Pannella gives up, deserts. . . . Pannella left a party near to death, almost zero political visibility, depressing visibility on TV, to Emma Bonino, the comrade of a life spent on Italy's pavements, the best in the troop.[44]

Miriam Mafai, a woman involved both in politics and journalism, wrote about Emma Bonino as follows in an article:

> I don't know if Pannella realistically believes he is able to bring about success for Bonino's candidature, or if he is thinking that this canditure can be used as an obstacle against a possible agreement between the majority and the opposition in parliament. . . . According to Pannella and his ilk, it is the poor state of politics that must once more be emphasized. . . . To this end, Emma Bonino is the right character.[45]

The former director of the newspaper *La Repubblica*, Eugenio Scalfari, who in the past had supported the Radical Party in various battles, was more explicit. 'I like Bonino and I respect her', he said, 'but I'm not going

to support her candidature because she would be a ''president driven by Pannella'' '.[46] It was a mystery, somebody noted, 'why the same risk of an inappropriate influence wasn't felt when Pannella invented the candidature of Scalfaro for the Quirinal'.[47]

Even when the political autonomy of the candidate could not be doubted, as was the case of Minister of the Interior Rosa Russo Jervolino, the logic of political relations between women and men was always to some degree to do with rank. It does not matter how strong a woman is: she accepts and needs men to help her. So, for example, Jervolino's journalistic biography stated that:

> She made her debut in politics in 1974, furious about the divorce law, on the side of Fanfani, who was smaller than her but persisted in calling her 'little one' and forced her to come to meetings wearing low-heeled shoes. . . . You can describe Rosetta as a party animal which smells out career wherever it may be and always allies with the winner; or maybe you could say her political biography when Bernabei hired her as programme director . . . or then again maybe it all started with the 1985 tragedy, when her husband fell ill and died leaving her a widow with three children, powerless and grief stricken. . . . She was also in league with Donat Cattin and whereas she has been called a comrade of Forlani, she was also a great friend of De Mita.[48]

Given these frames, it is easy to imagine which public images – and stereotypes – the newspapers perpetuated with regard to these two candidates, called in familiar terms by their first name (or diminutive name) almost in order to exorcise their power and pull them back into the private sphere.[49] We have already considered numerous images of Emma Bonino, the 'little rascal'[50] who always dominated the polls, but never came near enough to the appointment to even be remembered as someone who truly could have been president. Now it is time to focus on the images of the Minister of the Interior who, on the contrary, did for at least a while, really seem to be a potential candidate.

First of all, Rosa Russo Jervolino – 'Rosetta' to the entire Italian newspaper readership – was identified as a virtuous 'Lady': 'Napolitano [the Interior Minister in Prodi's government] was called King Giorgio, at the Viminale. She is called the Lady.'[51] According to one journalist, her first political teacher, Fanfani, said of her, in a private letter: 'She is a thoughtful mother, devoted wife, and daughter who is very tied to the party.' And about her expertise, the same journalist noted 'Her true specialization . . . is the 19th-century virtue of assistance and charity. . . . Alms, mercy and prayer unite the possible-president Rosetta to another woman of the Second Republic, the daughter of the current president.'[52] More acerbic was the version of this virtuous image proposed in another article, which defined Jervolino as

> . . . a mix of reliability and modesty. . . . Rosa is a woman used to working as a Russian housewife. . . . She is a swot . . . got her training in technical,

> legislative and parliamentary committees that leave little room for fantasy, by asking for the mentality of a teacher, or – better – of a headmaster.[53]

After the image of the pious woman and the swot, could a more domestic image be wanting? But, of course, the domestic virtues of Jervolino are paraded: 'kind mother', 'able cook', 'housewife'. And even if the article that enumerated these virtues did not forget to describe her evolution 'from thoughtful mother to important person, first woman at the Rai or in the presidency of a party', it failed to note that Rosetta was never aggressive in the pursuit of her career.[54]

It is safe to say that none of these images was that of a president to be. First of all, her Catholicism and long political career both called to mind the image of the highly criticized former president Scalfaro.

> It would be difficult to imagine a woman who was more Christian Democrat than she was – commented one of her portraitists. And in order to find the same fundamentalism, the same idea of the world, the same whispering of prayers and the same propensity to give sermons, we have only to look to Oscar Luigi Scalfaro.[55]

Yet, neither was the third, domestic, image really suitable for a president, being too minimalist and informal. What a difference in comparison to the images of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. As one journalist reminded the readers in a flattering article:

> If Italy calls, Carlo Azeglio answers. And that's all that is needed, from a man who belongs to the institutions who have no membership card, who has no affiliation, no party. And above all who has no chairs to obtain.[56]

Even the journalists who wrote the most censorious article about him, had to admit 'He is reliable and reassuring.'[57] The author of the leading article that first announced his candidature from the pages of the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, declared: 'we need a man from the majority who represents everybody, the opposition also, a man that criminals also recognize as the president'.[58] There was no need to say any more: Ciampi was *the right man.*

Moreover, behind him, as with every great man, there was a woman; 'Mrs Franca, a small, strong-willed woman and, legendarily, the only woman in his life. She was the person who advised him to try for the Bank of Italy.'[59] And on the day of the election she was at his side, a smart, kind woman embodying the symbol of 'First Lady'.

As it happened, she was not the only woman who arrived at the Quirinal. Unexpectedly, and for the first time in the history of the Quirinal, Ciampi included a woman in the presidential staff, appointing Marina Decaro, an executive of the Chamber, as the general vice-secretary (a new role created on purpose).

In the end, if the proposal for a woman as president did not work, the debate on empowerment brought initial results. At any rate, there is still a

huge distance to cover and the silence greeting the women's agenda after the campaign is indicative.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of female candidacies in the 1999 Italian presidential campaign led us to focus on the debate that developed in the public arenas, by considering both the definitions of the problem competing in those arenas and the framing offered by the media. We reached two main conclusions.

The first confirms the ambiguity of the role played by the media as regards empowerment of women and stresses the limits of strategies that are mainly based on political marketing and communication. As a matter of fact, the media are primarily interested in women's candidatures because they are good news stories. The media also offer very important resources such as visibility, easy access to public opinion and popularity. On the other hand, this can entail undesirable consequences. In framing the news on the basis of their productive logic, they generally reproduce gender stereotypes and favour sense-making processes that reinforce the limited inclusion of women in the public sphere. Moreover, the media are just one of the public arenas, where different definitions of social problems compete. Their influence can partially affect, but not really shape the political agenda. More precisely, one could say that the logic of politics and the strength of interests are still pre-eminent in the political process. And this is particularly true in a system like the Italian one, where until now the space for journalistic and citizens' influence has always been very limited. So, as the case of Emma Bonino's candidature has shown, the strategic choice to mainly count on the favour of public opinion can prove to be inappropriate.

The second conclusion concerns the mistakes in the social construction of the women's agenda. It is undoubtedly true that the defeat of the two female candidatures was first of all caused by political reasons weakly linked to gender issues. But it is also true that the 1999 presidential campaign could have been an important opportunity both to promote the general issue of the empowerment of women in politics and to pursue a deeper reflection on the problems of gender in politics. Despite the favourable climate of opinion, for the most part, the opportunity was missed. Two of the main reasons were that neither of the two women candidates associated the issue of gender with their own candidatures, nor did the other women involved in politics really take the opportunity to stress the need for a more appropriate inclusion of women in political life. Saying that no woman candidate can be supported just because she is a woman eliminates any chance of using the campaign as a starting point

to highlight both the distortions in the coverage and the social mechanisms of the exclusion of women. The consequence to bear in mind for the future is that once again the problem was relegated down the political agenda.

NOTES

A first version of this article was discussed during the WINGS conference on 'Gender and the Media' organized, by Cekvina, Aarhus 4 June 1999.

1. According to the Italian Constitution, the president of the republic is appointed by an electoral college consisting of both houses of parliament and 58 regional representatives (see Article 83). In line with the general spirit of the Constitition of 1948, the rules for the election of the head of the nation highlight the need for consensus among all the parties and stress the importance of reaching as broad a political agreement as possible. But in the Italian system, fragmented by numerous interests and plagued by deep cleavages, the search for political majorities always implied a complex process of bargaining; a bargaining developed at various negotiating tables and kept far away from the media floodlights. As an obvious consequence, even if there was no rule forbidding campaigning for the Italian presidency, until the last election there had never been formal candidatures or programmes openly presented in the media to the people. In 1999, two factors made it possible for the choice of Bonino as candidate to breach this long-standing tradition. One was the move to achieve more transparent and direct relationships between leaders and the people, which derived from the political crisis and the 'anti-parties' mood caused by the Tangentopoli (Bribesville) scandal. The other factor lies in the political culture of the Radical Party (Marletti, 1985), a party whose leaders have always considered public opinion as an important resource of influence and were used to the practice of 'going public' (Kernell, 1986), even in the years of consociationalism, when the Italian political system was diffident towards the media (Marletti and Roncarolo, forthcoming).
2. Quirinal is the name of the hill (and of the palace) where the Italian president works and generally lives. In other words, references to it have the same meaning as references to the White House in the USA.
3. See 'Emma's Recipe? Strong and Simple Just Like Mama Used to Make', *The Bulletin*, 10 April 1997. Bonino's responsibilities as European Commissioner included humanitarian aid and consumer affairs. But in summer 1999 the Italian government did not reappoint her as European Commissioner; having to choose between her and Monti (owing to Prodi's election as president of the European Commission), they chose Monti.
4. With regard to the role played by Ciampi in supporting the entry of Italy to the European Community and favouring the admission of the country into the single European currency see 'A Maestro Takes the Stage', *Financial Times*, 14 May 1999. Introducing Ciampi to an international readership, the newspaper reminded us that: 'As governor of the Bank of Italy in 1991, it was Mr Ciampi who persuaded the government of Giulio Andreotti to sign the Maastricht treaty. And later, as Italy's Treasury Minister for the last

three years, it was the Germanophile Mr Ciampi who convinced Italy's European partners that it would stick to its debt reduction plans.'

5. Actually, besides the personal qualities of Ciampi, at the base of his election there was a long and very complex political negotiation that should be subjected to deeper and more detailed research.
6. Strictly speaking, the political process designed to appoint the president of the republic cannot be defined as a campaign because – as stated in note 1 – by tradition there are no candidates or any public form of campaigning. To quote a seasoned European diplomat in a *Financial Times* article, the election was: 'like the conclave to elect the Pope. The white smoke goes up over Rome, but nobody knows why one particular candidate happens to get elected' ('Election of President Looms', *Financial Times*, 11 May 1999). Even if with some caution, in the case of the 1999 Italian presidential election it is still reasonable to speak about a 'campaign' for at least two reasons. The first reason is that Emma Bonino effectively organized an American-style campaign: there was a true flood of political ads supporting her candidacy and before the end of April the fund-raising efforts of the 'Emma for President' committee had provided more than 1500 million lire, that is around 750 million Euros (see, for example, the articles 'Comitato Bonino: già raccolti 1,5 miliardi di finanziamenti ''senza segreti'' ' ['Bonino's Committee: 1500 million Have Already Been Raised, Without Secrets'], *Corriere della Sera*, 25 April 1999 and 'Emma for president a colpi di sponsor' ['Emma for President Using the Sponsor'], *La Repubblica*, 9 March 1999). The second reason is that the choice of Bonino got the media to cover the presidential selection as a real race.
7. See the article written by Lucia Annunziata, 'E al Quirinale anche stavolta non è salita Lei' ['Neither This Time Did She Arrive at the Quirinal'], *Corriere della Sera*, 20 May 1999.
8. 'A highly institutionalized bureaucratic party favours the election of women to decision-making bodies in several ways; such a model can guarantee training and preparation within the party organization which compensates for the initial lack of ''personal political capital'' of women. . . . On the other hand, the fictionalized party of the ''notable'' model is less favourable to the election of women because the higher level of internal competition places a premium on ''personal capital'' ' (Guadagnini, 1993: 199).
9. P. Ginsborg, 'La democrazia misogina' ['The Misogynous Democracy'], *La Repubblica*, 9 March 1999.
10. **Percentage of Women in the Chamber of Deputies for Each Parliamentary Period**

1948	1953	1958	1963	1968	1972	1976	1979	1983	1987	1992	1994	1996
7.8	5.7	4.1	4.6	2.8	4.1	8.5	8.2	7.9	12.9	8.0	15.1	11.4

Source: Guadagnini (1993: 189; 1997: 135).

11. As various observers noted, the 'law was . . . a hybrid which provided for the election of three-quarters of the Senate and Camera on a simple majority constituency basis, and one-quarter on a proportional basis' (Parker, 1996: 46).
12. The alternation regarded only the lists of candidates competing for one-quarter of the seats given on a proportional basis (Parker, 1996: 46) and was cancelled in 1995 by decree of the Constitutional Court. In order to have

some idea of the system of quotas in other contexts, see, for example, Squires (1996) who discusses the Labour Party's experience.

13. 'The problem', according to Zincone at the beginning of the 1990s, 'is that women are self-discriminating: there is a short supply of qualified female candidates. . . . The supply of qualified female candidates is strictly linked to the real possibility of simultaneously being involved in politics on the one hand, and still leading a fulfilling private life' (Zincone, 1993: 38). If this is true, the problem is more complex, as Maria Luisa Boccia (1997) observed in developing Zincone's thesis but with more radical consequences. What we must recognize, she noted, is first of all, that the strategies of empowerment risk becoming a kind of blind doggedness in favour of politics on equal terms. Consequently, the whole paradigm of female political discrimination must be rethought.
14. Needless to say, as politics is changing, the categories of political participation need to be adjusted. See, for example, Siim (1994), who underlines the possibility of broadening this concept as regards forms of the so-called 'small democracy' (i.e. the democracy connected to the activities and institutions of daily life: school, caring services, etc.).
15. One of the critical aspects regarding the presence of women in Italian society is the difference between their presence and the formal role that they play. At present, girls make up the majority of students at secondary level and the majority of graduates over the last few years. Not only has the participation of women in the labour market grown remarkably in spite of the particularly unfavourable conditions (Villa, 1996), but the number of women is also increasing in a lot of traditionally male professions (from magistracy to journalism). In spite of all that, women are still virtually excluded from the top positions, as is well documented in the report on 'The Female Presence in Decisional Positions' edited in 1998 by a permanent workshop on 'Women and Development' at the Italian National Council of Economy and Labour.
16. See 'Una donna al Quirinale. L'ex presidente del Consiglio lancia la sfida a Cernobbio dinanzi al Gotha dell'economia' ['A Women at the Quirinal. The Former President of the Council Challenges the Gotha of the Economist'] *La Stampa*, 7 September 1998.
17. 'Amato's provocation is obtaining consent without distinction of gender or political idea', *La Stampa* noted on 7 September 1998.
18. Starting in the 1980s Italian presidents tried to exceed the limited power of their office and play a more central role in the political life of the country. In the last few years both Cossiga and Scalfaro have been accused of sliding towards a presidential-style system.
19. See G. E. Rusconi, 'Al Quirinale non basta una donna. Il dopo Scalfaro' ['At the Quirinal a Woman is not Enough. Post Scalfaro'], *La Stampa*, 9 September 1998: 'The edifying chorus of consent in favour of a woman as the president of the republic is a dilatory manoeuvre. The men who applauded Amato's provocative little suggestion know this very well. The few women who have a political career in our country know it very well. They know better than anyone else the immaturity of our political class with regard to this theme. The idea of an innovative, even revolutionary, role . . . of a woman who arrives at the top of the state because she is a woman is a clumsy variation of old male gallantry. The problem of the scarcity of women in Italian politics is too serious and challenging a problem to be resolved by looking for some presidential candidate.'

20. See F. Nirenstein, 'Al potere arriviamo da sole' ['We'll Get to Power by Ourselves'], *La Stampa*, 2 November 1998.
21. Emily is an Italian organization aimed at the empowerment of women in politics and inspired by Emily's Lists. Emily's Lists are women's political action committees (PACs) (Nelson, 1994) first created in the USA in 1985 with the objective of financially contributing to pro-choice Democratic women, and then exported to Great Britain and Australia in order to support female candidates, above all in terms of financial needs (Emily is an acronym of the sentence 'Early Money Is Like Yeast. It makes the dough rise').
22. The meeting was held in Rome, 24 October 1998, and was titled 'Emily's Roads. Rules and Transparency: The Political Selection of Candidatures in the English and Italian Experience' (Bianchi, 1998). Starting with the experience of the Labour Party, whose 1997 election saw 101 women elected, the meeting outlined the absence of formal norms in the selection of the candidates by the Italian parties and denounced it as one of the major factors weakening the political representation of women.
23. See 'Più donne al tavolo delle riforme' ['More Women at the Reforms Table'], *La Stampa*, 9 November 1998.
24. In October 1998, as the political majority of the Ulivo came to an end, Prime Minister Prodi resigned and the former Communist leader D'Alema was charged to create a new government.
25. 'Più donne nella politica, per legge' ['More Women in Politics, by Law'], *La Stampa*, 9 March 1999. It is interesting to note that all the most important national newspapers stessed the constrictive feature of the affirmation, as we can see from the titles of *Corriere della Sera*, 'Donne in politica, parità per legge' [Women in Politics, Equality by Law'] and of *La Repubblica* 'Donne, potere per legge ['Women, Power by Law']. One of the numerous critical reactions can be found in Giuliano Zincone's article, 'Come sono buoni i maschi' ['Aren't the Guys Clever?'], in *Corriere della Sera*, 10 March 1999.
26. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988: 53) define social problems as 'a putative condition or situation that is labelled a problem in the arenas of public discourse and action'.
27. Whereas the Italian newspapers gave a certain amount of space first to the issue of 'a woman at the Quirinal' and then to the two female candidates, television afforded them little attention. This was probably because the greater part of their time was occupied by coverage of the war in the former Yugoslavia.
28. Of course one could ask if it would not be more correct to consider women's organizations as an arena where the potential problem failed to be identified as a social problem. Yet, in order to do so, an apposite research should be done testing if the issues actually were or were not seriously taken into account.
29. See the interview titled 'La Anselmi: una di noi sul Colle o sarà persa un'occasione' ['Anselmi: A Woman at the Quirinal or a Chance Will be Missed'], *Corriere della Sera*, 10 March 1999. Tina Anselmi was the former president of the parliamentary commission that investigated the subversive freemason lodge P2. Her candidature was suggested on more than one occasion during the campaign, but it never gathered enough support.
30. Of course, the higher visibility of some women's issues and the growing formal consent generally expressed in the idea of a society made by women and men who participate more equally in rights and duties does not mean a

change of the symbolic and material bases of gender inequality. By the way, it is indicative also that when Italy was involved in the debate about 'a woman at the Quirinal' various incidents against women occurred in different spheres of society (from the judicial sphere, where rape and sexual harassment were either not taken seriously, or punished by very lenient sentences, to the sphere of daily relationships between the genders).

31. As is known, after the crisis of the so-called First Republic a lively debate about institutional reforms commenced, but no real agreement was found among the parties. Consequently, nothing changed as regards the Italian president of the republic who, according to the Constitution, is mainly a super-partes arbiter.
32. See 'Fuori i nomi per il Quirinale. La campagna Bonino for President' ['Show the Names for the Quirinal. The Bonino-for-President Campaign'], *La Stampa*, 5 February 1999. With the data of the poll, the Committee announced an electoral event for the coming 4 March.
33. DS, Democratici di Sinistra (Democratics of the Left) is the new name adopted by the PDS (Democratic Party of the Left), that is, the former Italian Communist Party. Women involved in DS have their own organization within the party, which promotes the inclusion of differences in politics.
34. See 'DS, il mal di pancia della donne' ['Democratics of the Left, A Pain in the Stomach For Women'], *La Stampa*, 14 March 1999.
35. See 'Le donne di sinistra: Bonino? Meglio Ciampi' ['The Women of the Left: Bonino? Ciampi is Better'] *La Stampa*, 23 March 1999 and, on the same day, 'Emily boccia la Bonino' ['Emily Rejects Bonino'].
36. Maria Grazia Brazzone, 'Le donne di sinistra: Bonino? Meglio Ciampi' ['The Women of the Left Say: Bonino? Ciampi is Better'], *La Stampa*, 23 March 1999.
37. Concita De Gregorio, 'Care candidate, non mollate. Noi ce l'abbiamo fatta così ['Dear Candidates, Don't Give Up. We Made It in This Way'], *La Repubblica*, 21 March 1999.
38. Leo Valliani, 'Bonino e la altre. Quirinale. E adesso fuori i nomi' ['Bonino and the Others. Quirinal. And Now Show the Names'], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 March 1999.
39. Enzo Biagi, 'Le donne, il potere e il razzismo' ['Women, Power and Racism'], *Corriere della Sera*, 11 March 1999.
40. Sebastiano Messina, 'Emma, mistero buffo del candidato virtuale' ['Emma, Comic Mystery of the Virtual Candidate'], *La Repubblica*, 8 May 1999.
41. Ferruccio De Bortoli, 'Ciampi al primo scrutinio. E Amato . . . Una scelta alta per il Quirinale' ['Ciampi at the First Poll. And Amato . . . A High Choice for the Quirinal'], *Corriere della Sera*, 9 May 1999.
42. 'Quirinale, ecco le condizioni di D'Alema' ['Quirinal. Here are D'Alema's Conditions'], *La Stampa*, 4 May 1999.
43. 'Jervolino: io presidente? L'ipotesi non esiste' ['Jervolino: Me as the President? The Hypothesis Doesn't Exist'], *La Stampa*, 5 May 1999.
44. 'Emma guastafeste nella corsa al Quirinale' ['Emma the Wet Blanket in the Race to the Quirinal'], *La Repubblica*, 6 March 1999.
45. Miriam Mafai, 'La candidata antipalazzo' ['The Anti-Political Candidate'], *La Repubblica*, 8 March 1999.
46. Cited in Mario Pirani, 'Ciampi e Bonino for President', *La Repubblica*, 29 March 1999.

47. Cited in Mario Pirani, 'Ciampi e Bonino for President', *La Repubblica*, 29 March 1999.
48. Francesco Merlo, 'Jervolino: tutta Chiesa, Dc e famiglia' ['Jervolino: Church, Christian Democrat Party and Family'], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1999.
49. On the strategy of calling public women by their first name, see Sreberny-Mohammadi and Rossi (1996).
50. 'Parte in piazza la scalata al Colle' ['Climbing to the Hill Starts from the Square'], *La Stampa*, 9 March 1999.
51. 'Concita De Gregorio, Rosa, signora dei prefetti: faccio quel che c'è da fare' ['Rosa, the Lady of Prefects: I'm Doing What Must Be Done'], *La Repubblica*, 5 May 1999. Viminale is the name of the parliamentary palace.
52. Francesco Merlo, 'Jervolino: tutta Chiesa, Dc e famiglia' ['Jervolino: Church, Christian Democrat Party and Family'], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1999.
53. Paolo Guzzanti, 'Un Quirinale in ''rosa democristiano''. Rosa Jervolino e Tina Anselmi. La secchiona e la partigiana' ['A Pink and Christian Democrat Quirinal. Rosa Jervolino and Tina Anselmi: The Swot and the Partisan'], *La Stampa*, 22 March 1999.
54. Antonello Caporale, 'La giornata romana di Rosetta-candidata tra emergenze e segnali romani' ['Rosetta the Candidate's Day between Emergencies and Rome's Political Signals'], *La Repubblica*, 4 May 1999.
55. Francesco Merlo, 'Jervolino: tutta Chiesa, Dc e famiglia' ['Jervolino: Church, Christian Democrat Party and Family'], *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1999.
56. Maffimo Giannini, 'Ciampi: è sufficiente che abbiano pensato a me' ['Ciampi: It's Enough that They Thought of Me'], *La Repubblica*, 5 May 1999.
57. Francesco Merlo, 'E il tecnico sposò la politica. Ciampi: da Bankitalia a Palazzo Chigi, ora ''l'uomo dei numeri'' corre per il Quirinale' ['The Technician who Married Politics. Ciampi: From Bankitalia to Palazzo Chigi, Now the ''Man of Numbers'' Runs for the Quirinal'], *Corriere della Sera*, 6 May 1999.
58. Francesco Merlo, 'Il presidente pacificatore' ['The Reconciliatory President'], *Corriere della Sera*, 30 April 1999. Note that in the article the name of Ciampi was never explicitly mentioned.
59. Francesco Merlo, 'E il tecnico sposò la politica' ['The Technician Marries Politics'], *Corriere della Sera*, 6 May 1999.

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