

BRINGING MASCULINITY INTO THE PICTURE: UNDERSTANDING  
THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF (HETERO)SEXUALITY IN ITALY

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## ABSTRACT

*A gendered perspective, with considerations on male sexuality in particular, is fundamental when it comes to understanding the long-term and recent changes in the meanings and experiences of sexuality in Italy. In support of this argument, the article points to the limited attention devoted to intersections between sexuality and gender in the construction of heterosexuality in Italian research, looks at the specific features of these intersections in the Italian context, and discusses data on sexual behaviour and attitudes from a recent national survey. The crucial issue that emerges from the discussion is the enduring power of the social processes that naturalise male sexuality, despite the challenges from women's emerging aspirations to more egalitarian relations, and their growing resources for negotiating them. The strength of recent biologising tendencies – as a global trend but also in their specific local version (building in Italy upon the well-rooted script of the predatory male) shows that looking at constructions of masculinity can help us find the global – and local – reasons why the linear progression towards greater gender symmetry that the notion of plastic sexuality seemed to promise has failed to materialise.*

**Key words:** masculinity, sexuality, naturalisation, heterosexuality, Italy

LO SGUARDO SULLA MASCHILITÀ: COMPRENDERE LE DIMENSIONI DI GENERE  
DELL'(ETERO)SESSUALITÀ IN ITALIA

## SINTESI

*L'attenzione alla prospettiva di genere, e in particolare alla sessualità maschile, è una condizione necessaria per capire i cambiamenti recenti e di lungo periodo nei significati e nelle esperienze della sessualità in Italia. Nel sostenere questa tesi, l'articolo rileva la limitata attenzione riservata dalla ricerca italiana alle intersezioni tra sessualità e genere nella costruzione dell'eterosessualità, mette in luce le caratteristiche specifiche di queste intersezioni nel contesto italiano e discute i dati di una recente ricerca sul comportamento e sugli atteggiamenti degli italiani riguardo alla sessualità. Ne emerge una questione cruciale, ossia la persistenza dei processi sociali di naturalizzazione della sessualità maschile, che mantengono la loro forza nonostante le sfide provenienti dalle aspirazioni delle donne a relazioni più egualitarie e dalle loro crescenti risorse nel negoziarle. La recente rinnovata forza delle interpretazioni biologistiche, come tendenza globale ma anche nella loro specifica versione locale (che in Italia si fonda sul ben radicato script dell'uomo cacciatore), mostra che guardare alle costruzioni della maschilità può aiutarci a trovare le ragioni globali, e locali, per cui non si può parlare di quella progressione lineare verso una maggiore simmetria di genere che la nozione di sessualità plastica sembrava promettere.*

**Parole chiave:** maschilità, sessualità, naturalizzazione, eterosessualità, Italia

## INTRODUCTION

In this article we will explore some of the ways in which a relational perspective on gender, looking at the changing construction of gender differences, can help us understand the features and specificities of heterosexual sexuality in Italy. In particular, we will focus on the importance of bringing male sexuality into the picture.

What Wanrooij (2005, 277) wrote on the state of historical studies in Italy can in fact also be applied to sexuality studies: »The lack of studies specifically dealing with the construction of masculinity has created a distorted image in which the condition of females is interpreted as the result of specific historical developments, while masculinity has remained an a-historical category«.<sup>1</sup>

While this situation has changed in some areas of research in recent years, with the development of a growing body of masculinity studies in Italy, when it comes to heterosexual masculinity, some fundamental assumptions about male sexuality are still largely unexplored and unchallenged.

We will therefore argue for the need to engage in an exploration of constructions of masculinity in and through sexuality, as fundamental in terms of understanding long-term and recent changes in sexual meanings and experiences in Italy. In order to illustrate our point, we will explore interpretations of the gender construction of heterosexual sexuality and refer to some insights arising from recent data on sexual behaviour and attitudes in this country.

#### GENDER AND SEXUALITY: LOOKING FOR CONNECTIONS IN ITALIAN RESEARCH

Italy can rightly be considered a latecomer to the development of a mainstream sociology of sexuality. While important research on the sexual behaviour of the national population has been carried out in many Western countries in recent decades, it was not until 2006 that a comprehensive study took place in Italy, almost 30 years after the first national survey (Fabris, Davis, 1978).

In the meantime, studies focusing upon specific aspects of sexuality, or specific groups, have been carried out. Some of these investigate perceived 'others', like gay and lesbian people (Barbagli, Colombo, 2001; Saraceno, 2003) or groups socially perceived to be more 'at risk', like young people (Buzzi, 1998; Garelli, 2000; Dalla Zuanna, Crisafulli, 2004). The need to understand Italy's extremely low fertility rate has prompted the

demographic studies mainly concerned with women and their reproductive careers, and contraceptive behaviour as related to this issue (Signorelli et al., 1996; Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, 1997). More general attempts to grasp social changes in sexuality have been made on the basis of limited samples (Vaccaro, 2000).

The recent survey on a national sample (Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, Garelli, 2010), carried out in 2006, attempted to remedy the lack of large surveys on the sexual behaviour and attitudes of the whole population, taking inspiration from those carried out in other countries (Laumann et al., 1994; Wellings et al., 1994; Bajos, Bozon, 2008).

Defined as a specific field of sociological investigation, however, the study of sexuality continues to be basically separated from studies on families and intimate relations, with the exception of (women's) reproductive behaviour linked to the social issue of fertility. The arena of intersections between sexuality and gender in the construction of heterosexuality is therefore as yet largely unexplored.

In Italian sociology critical perspectives on heterosexuality actually developed at the intersection between feminist and family studies, led by a generation of feminist scholars (many of them related to the GRIFF research group) who developed theoretical and empirical research in the Seventies and Eighties. This research, however, mainly focused upon other dimensions of heterosexuality, such as the gender division of paid work and care-giving (Saraceno, 1992; Balbo, 1987), while there was little empirical work that related these issues to women's understandings and experiences of sexuality in their everyday lives (Piccone Stella, 1979; Siebert, 1991).

On the contrary, radical feminism's critical approach to sexuality, and its thematising of heterosexual sexuality as a form of gender hierarchy, was taken up in studies on public debates, feminist activism and institutional responses, in particular on the issues of abortion and gender violence (Eckmann Pisciotta, 1996).

In reviewing critical studies that investigate the intersections between gender and sexuality in Italy, Ross (2010) rightly turns to other areas and contexts of research production, moving across disciplines, across the boundaries between academia and social movements, and across national borders. Stemming from feminist thought and, more recently, from queer studies (Bellagamba, Di Cori, Pustianaz, 2000; Rizzo, 2006; Trappolin, 2008), theoretical reflections and – to a lesser extent – empirical research have focused on femininity and dissident sexualities. As a result, Ross (2010, 165) argues

1 This quotation was taken up by Ross (2010) in her recent contribution to critical studies on gender and sexuality in Italy, in order to illustrate the same point.

that, »Although critical attention has increased, its focus has tended to remain on the perceived 'others' (for example, women and gay men), rather than turning its deconstructing gaze on normative gendered and sexual identities (hegemonic masculinity, heterosexual sex)«.

Within these critical perspectives, heterosexual sexuality actually tends to be thematised as compulsory heterosexuality or heteronormativity, referring to its function of defining a gender hierarchy and the boundaries between legitimate and deviant sexualities, with the result of constructing a rather monolithic notion of heterosexual sex, and in particular of male (hetero)sexual desires and behaviour.

The recent development of masculinity studies in Italy has actually challenged a-historical views and investigated change and diversity in social constructions of masculinity (Bellassai, 2004; Dell'Agnese, Ruspini, 2007; 2009). However, the reproduction of and changes in constructions of masculinity through everyday sexual practices continue to be largely overlooked (Bertone, Ferrero Camoletto, 2009; Ferrero Camoletto, Bertone, 2010).

On the basis of available data from the recent national survey and other related research, in the following paragraph we will discuss how exploring representations and experiences of male heterosexual sexuality can contribute to making sense of the changes and of the persisting traits in heterosexual gender arrangements in Italy.<sup>2</sup>

### CHANGES IN HETEROSEXUALITY, CHANGES IN GENDER RELATIONS

Studies exploring the relationship between sexual and intimate relations and constructions of gender have referred to notions of compulsory or institutionalised heterosexuality as a form of social organisation, based on a complementary and hierarchical construction of gender differences (Rich, 1980; Richardson, 1996; Jackson, 2006; Hockey, Meah, Robinson, 2007; Holland et al., 1998).

Albeit variously defined, the institutionalised model of heterosexuality that spread in European societies, with the hegemony of bourgeois culture and the importance it attached to respectability (Skeggs, 1997), can be outlined. It is based upon attributing to men a natural sexual instinct that seeks release, represented by male orgasm (Plummer, 2005; Weeks, 1985). In the construction of respectable bourgeois masculinity, men's self-

containment, with its capacity to dominate expressions of this instinct by self-control and respect for women is valued, but with the understanding that male sexual instinct cannot always be controlled, and that once aroused it is difficult to check. Women's sexuality is assigned the function of containing and managing male sexuality, setting it within a loving and procreative relationship, anchoring men to their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. This model entails strong social control over women, aimed at preserving their virginity so that they can be initiated and guided in their experience of sexuality by men willing to take on these responsibilities. Respectable women are expected to respond to men's sexual desires but not to be interested in sexuality per se: showing their own sexual desires and acting to fulfil them would damage their reputations. They would become »easy women«, tempting sexual objects for men and therefore a threat to the stability of respectable couples. This representation of differences between male and female sexuality corresponds to a double standard in the judgment of their behaviour, with men's sexual experiences outside the stable couple being considered more legitimate than women's.

After the conservative Fifties, when this model of sexuality still held sway, the so-called sexual revolution of the Sixties and Seventies is usually referred to as a time of radical changes in the cultural construction of gender differences regarding sexuality. These changes concerned women's sexuality and were linked to more general transformations in women's lives and identities, as they acquired greater economic, psychological and sexual autonomy. Previously strictly regulated within marriage, women's sexuality opened up to greater experimentation in terms of contexts and practices, with women claiming the right to acknowledge and express their own desires.

Stemming from these changes in women's self-representation and behaviour, a new model of heterosexuality took up a prominent position in the cultural scenario: namely the model based on intimacy, entailing greater gender symmetry, with couple relations conceived as an ongoing construction requiring communication and negotiation between partners. Uncoupled from reproduction, sexuality became the symbol of the authentic expression of the self and deep communication within the couple (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998). There was therefore a shift from the marking of differences that characterised the complementary nature of gender roles in the respectable couple, to expectations

2 The data come from the Survey of Italians' Sexuality (ISI), carried out in 2006 on a sample of 3058 Italian residents aged between 18 and 70. The survey was accompanied by 120 semi-structured biographical interviews with women and men of the same age. The results of the research were published in Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, Garelli (2010): for the methodological aspects of the research, see the appendix of that book.

of convergence in the ways men and women experience their sexuality. On the one hand, women were expected to become more similar to men in their level of sexual experimentation, while on the other men were expected to become more similar to women, by meeting their demands for a sexual relationship negotiated within a dimension of intimacy and communication.

Some scholars, however, have criticised this description of recent changes in heterosexuality, proposing less optimistic interpretations of gender relations and arguing that the seemingly more symmetrical expectations of having, and accumulating, sexual experiences may conceal new forms of the old double standard (Crawford, Popp, 2003). The new hedonistic model of sexuality does in fact seem to retain gendered connotations: following one's sexual desires also outside an affective relationship is perceived as an appropriate expression of masculinity, while for women it still represents a possible risk for their reputation.

These setbacks in the move towards gender symmetry have been mainly connected to the tension between the substantial changes in women's sexuality and the »slow motion« of men's sexuality (Segal, 1990). Men, it has been argued, embraced the sexual revolution in its quantitative dimension: the increase in the number of women who became sexually available and willing to experiment with a wider variety of practices. Yet on the other hand, in heterosexual relations, and especially in the homosocial contexts in which the cultural construction of masculinity takes place (Flood, 2008), they resisted the qualitative dimension of that revolution, failing to meet women's demands to be agents of their pleasure and to redefine their sexual repertoire, with less emphasis on penetration (Ehrenreich, Hess, Jacobs, 1986).

In the case of Italy, we will argue that there are many elements supporting these interpretations; at the same time, we will point out some context-specific features of the social arrangements of sexuality, gender and heterosexuality in that country.

#### THE LOCAL CONTEXT: INTIMATE AND GENDER RELATIONS IN ITALY

The post-war decades, the period when the oldest cohorts of today were growing up, were characterised by strong cultural and institutional continuities with Fascism in terms of models of family and gender relations, as well as sexual norms. These continuities are evident in legal regulation. The Fascist family law, which aimed to preserve marriage stability, reinforce patriarchal power within the family and impose a procreative notion of sexuality, remained largely unchanged until the Seventies.

In the Fifties, family stability, guaranteed by the complementary nature of gender roles, remained a key goal, and was an assumption shared by the two main

Italian political subcultures, the Catholic and Communist currents (Bellassai, 2000).

The great social, cultural and legislative changes regarding gender and family relations took place in Italy in the 60s and 70s. Women were at the centre of these changes, which saw a shift from the »golden age« of the housewife model, as a legitimate expectation, if not achievable reality for many of them, to a model of stable presence on the labour market also after marriage and childbirth (Saraceno, 1992). The heated public debate around the referendum of 1974, which confirmed the law on divorce, heralded an era of public discourse questioning family relations and women's roles. The Italian feminist movement became the main mass movement during the Seventies, taking up issues regarding women's sexuality, and claiming entitlement to pleasure and control over reproduction, in particular with regard to the struggle to legalise abortion. This movement had a deep cultural impact on public discourse and women's identities.

Family law underwent radical changes in that period: divorce was introduced in 1970, and parity for spouses in 1975; in 1968 the differential treatment of extramarital relations (if these involved men they were considered as legitimate cause for separation only if they caused public scandal) was abolished. Fascist criminal law punished any diffusion of information on contraception and abortion as crimes against the race: the former was de-criminalised in 1971, and abortion was legalised in 1978. Honour crime was only completely abolished in 1981 (Pocar, Ronfani, 2003).

These changes, however, have not yet aligned Italy with other Western (Central and Northern) European countries. The present situation is interpreted partly in terms of a delay compared to those countries, and partly in terms of enduring specificities (Therborn, 2004; Zanatta, 2008). In some respects the normative timings regulating relational life courses show greater stability, due to the continuing strong institutionalisation of marriage, with relatively low, albeit fast growing, levels of cohabitation, marital instability and of out-of-wedlock births (Barbagli, Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, 2003).

The strength of intergenerational ties has also been identified as a key feature of family relations in Italy and other Southern European countries. The tendency of leaving the parental home relatively late and mainly for marriage, and the importance of intergenerational relations, with residential proximity after the period of cohabitation with the family of origin, have time-honoured historical roots as well as economic causes, due to the growing dependence of young people on their families of origin (Barbagli, Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, 2003). This situation is reinforced by the fact that in Italy social and labour policies are based on the assumption that individual welfare should primarily spring from the support of family and kin (Saraceno, 1994; Naldini, 2003).

Together with the influence of the Catholic Church, this situation has also been indicated as a key factor in the »delay« in the pluralisation of family policies (the absence of legal recognition for same-sex couples, adoption reserved to married couples, criminalisation of donor insemination) and social behaviour, with the relatively slow diffusion of couple cohabitation before or as an alternative to marriage (Rosina, Fraboni, 2004).

#### INTERPRETATIONS OF CHANGES IN SEXUALITY IN ITALY: GENDER SPECIFICITIES AS WOMEN'S SPECIFICITIES

In making sense of changes in sexuality, gender specificities are usually thematised by discussing women's experiences. The social and cultural changes of the Seventies brought women increased opportunities for independence and the possibility to envisage and construct more selective and symmetrical relations with men. The major changes in women's behaviour can be seen in the data from the recent survey, as regards the age for first intercourse, for instance, which is becoming increasingly similar for women and men. The gender difference in the age at first intercourse has gone down from four years among the oldest cohort to one year among the youngest,<sup>3</sup> and virginity before marriage, which was still preserved by the majority of women from the 1937-46 cohort, has virtually disappeared among the young women of today (Caltabiano, 2010).

At the same time, research on sexual behaviour has indicated that women embody the Italian delay in moving towards a more secularised and pluralistic sexual lifestyle, as well as relationships based on greater gender symmetry, represented by the European standard set by Western Central and Northern countries. Looking at the number of partners, which is considered as a key indicator in this process, the recent data show that the younger cohorts of Italian men have become more similar to their counterparts in other countries in the diffusion of a more experimental sexual lifestyle, with a decline in monogamous life courses and an increase in the number of men with six or more sexual partners. Despite the great changes that have occurred in women's

sexuality, the differences between Italian women and those of other countries appears more persistent (Castiglioni, Dalla Zuanna, 2010).

Women's sexual behaviour therefore seems to point both to great changes across cohorts and to Italian women still lagging behind in the diffusion of the new sexual lifestyles, implying that women's propensity for experimentation converges with men's.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at changes in the meanings attached to both women's and men's sexuality can help us to problematise this interpretation, which tends to focus upon women and their vulnerability to social control, drawing on the notion of women's greater sexual plasticity or fluidity (Baumeister, 2000), rather than focusing on how this social control embodies a male gaze and produces gendered sexualities.

#### NOTIONS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SEXUALITY

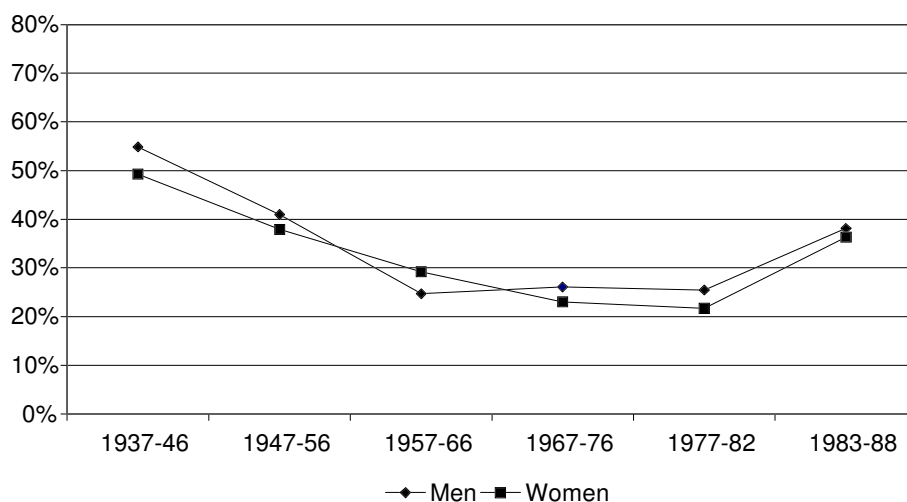
##### Women's sexuality: how far beyond respectability?

The recent survey data on sexual attitudes show a substantial change in visions of women's sexuality, in the form of a marked move away from the model of the respectable woman. The notion that a respectable woman does not openly show interest in sex is still shared by a large majority of men over 60, and by almost the majority of women of the same age, but it has lost much of its popularity among the younger cohorts, with supporters limited to around one fifth of men and women aged 24-29. This is not, however, a linear change. Among the youngest women in the sample, aged 18-23, we can observe a stronger reproduction of the image of the respectable woman than among adult women, pointing to the enduring nature of this notion in the cultural repertoires these women refer to when learning how to deal with sexuality.

There is a similar pattern when it comes to women's virginity before marriage, showing an even more dramatic change but also the persistence of the cultural model of the double standard that seems to retain appeal for the younger cohorts, and men in particular.

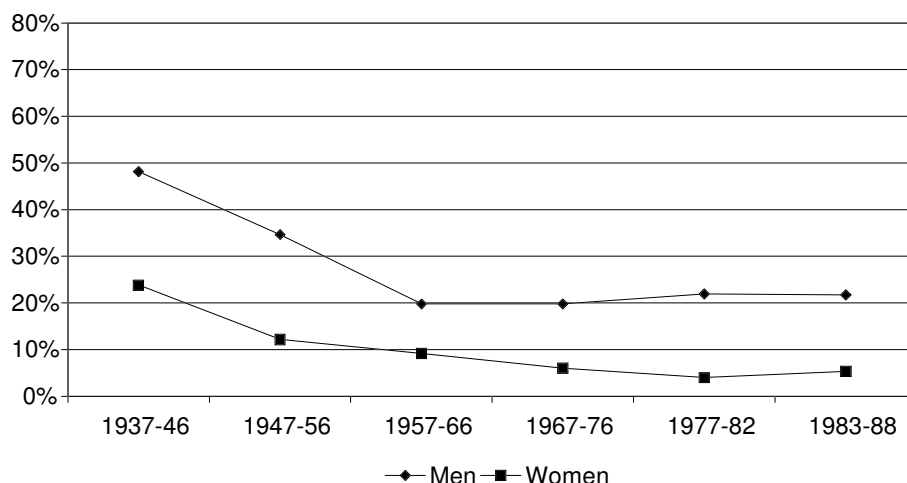
3 We refer here to the difference between median age at first intercourse. In the 1913-22 cohort the median age was 17.8 for men and 22 for women; in the 1983-89 cohort, the median age was 17.4 for men and 18.5 for women (Caltabiano, 2010).

4 Research in other countries has thematised another process of convergence of gender models, with men increasingly taking up typically feminine scripts, such as romantic or intimate ones, when making sense of their sexuality (Redman, 2001; Maxwell, 2007; Allen, 2003; 2007; Korobov, 2008).



**Fig. 1: A respectable woman does not show interest in sex: percentage of consensus among women and men, by birth cohort (ISI – Italian survey, 2006).**

**Sl. 1: Spoštovanja vredne ženske seks ne zanima: strinjanje med moškimi in ženskami iz različnih starostnih skupin v odstotkih (ISI – Italijanska raziskava, 2006).**



**Fig. 2: The woman's virginity is desirable: percentage of consensus among women and men, by birth cohort (ISI – Italian survey, 2006).**

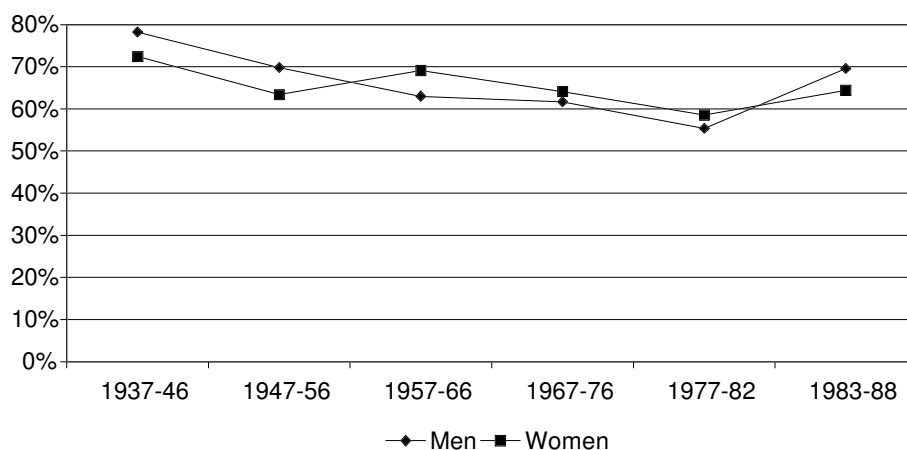
**Sl. 2: Zaželeno je, da je ženska še nedolžna: strinjanje med moškimi in ženskami iz različnih starostnih skupin v odstotkih (ISI – Italijanska raziskava, 2006).**

Due to these enduring constraints on the female 'reputation', with the distinction between respectable and loose women not dissipating but acquiring new, more subtle forms, men's sexuality is consequently defined as the arena for a desire that is so natural and taken for granted that it remains invisible.

#### The persistence of the predatory male gaze

As research from other countries has shown – we can mention the French national survey on sexuality in par-

ticular – the belief that men's sexual desire is naturally stronger than women's is very widespread: in France it is shared by 73% of women and 59% of men, and the majority of women and men of all age cohorts. As French researchers argue, this vision also ascribes meaning to women's sexuality and legitimates the double standard: women's sexual experiences outside the couple cannot be justified as easily as men's, for whom they are perceived as an expression of natural needs (Bajos, Ferrand, Andro 2008).



**Fig. 3: Men have stronger sexual needs than women: percentage of consensus among women and men, by birth cohort (ISI – Italian survey, 2006).**

**Sl. 3: Moški imajo močnejšo potrebo po spolnosti kakor ženske: strinjanje med moškimi in ženskami iz različnih starostnih skupin v odstotkih (ISI – Italijanska raziskava, 2006).**

Support for a similar statement about men having stronger sexual needs than women proves to be very widespread in Italy as well, to the same extent (66%) among women and men.

Support for this representation of gender differences in sexuality is stable across age cohorts. It only decreases, as in France, among young adults aged 24–29, an age when most people have already experienced sexual and affective relations. It gets much broader support among younger people, who may refer to prevailing cultural scripts rather than personal experience when shaping their visions of gender differences in sexuality. This belief has also a strikingly homogeneous diffusion across social classes, religious orientation and geo-

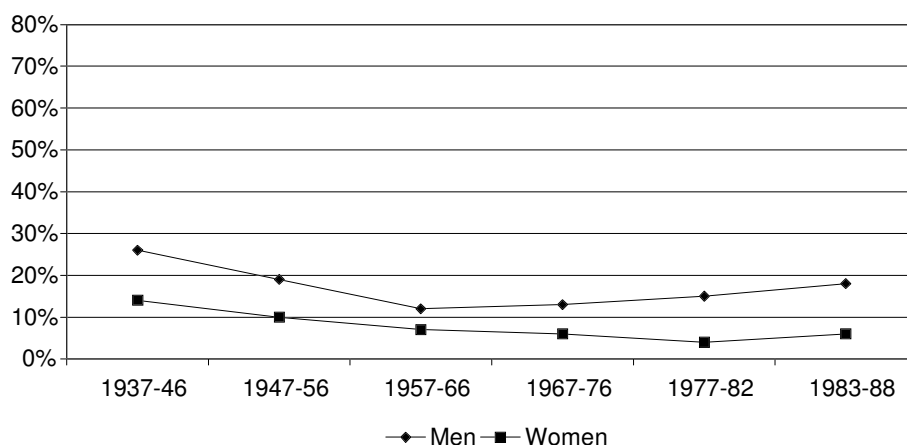
graphical areas. The level of education is one of the few features that influences the level of consensus with this statement: a greater proportion, albeit still a minority, of male and female graduates question it.

Derived from the vision of male sexuality as a natural instinct that seeks release is also the belief that this instinct, once released from the control exercised by women, and aroused by their provocative attitudes, cannot be held in check. This conviction is held by almost half of the Italian population, and again to an equal extent by men and women. It is prevalent among people over sixty, but also among the youngest cohort, showing its persistence as a cultural model.



**Fig. 4: Once provoked, a man can hardly stop: percentage of consensus among women and men, by birth cohort (ISI – Italian survey, 2006).**

**Sl. 4: Moški se težko ustavi, ko se ga sprovcira: strinjanje med moškimi in ženskami iz različnih starostnih skupin v odstotkih (ISI – Italijanska raziskava, 2006).**



**Fig. 5: If a woman gets raped, it's because she was asking for it: percentage of consensus among women and men, by birth cohort (ISI – Italian survey, 2006).**

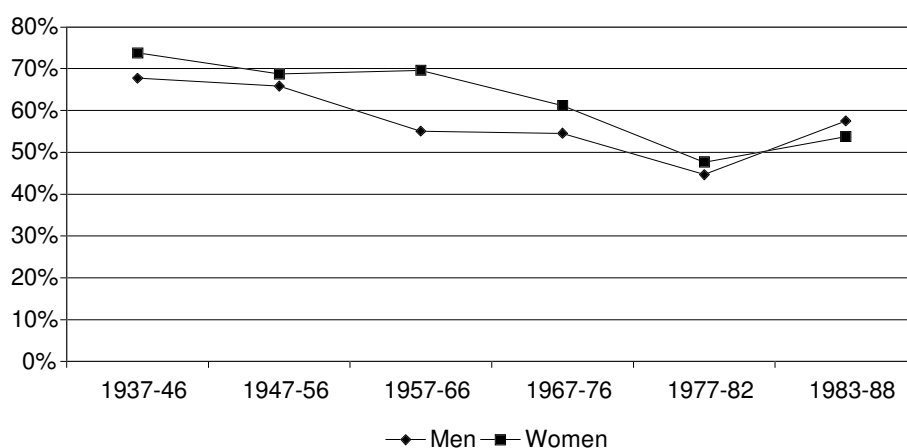
**Sl. 5: Če je bila ženska posiljena, se je to zgodilo, ker je to sama prosila: strinjanje med moškimi in ženskami iz različnih starostnih skupin v odstotkih (ISI – Italijanska raziskava, 2006).**

A corresponding idea, underpinned by this vision but focusing on its implications for women, received very marginal support, especially among younger cohorts: few people agree with the statement that if a woman is raped, it is often because she provoked it. The difference in support for these two statements shows that changes in women's sexuality, moving away from the narrow pathway of the respectable model, have seemingly gained widespread legitimacy but are at the same time jeopardized by the largely unchallenged view of the unavoidably predatory nature of male sexuality.

The diffusion of a complementary view of gender differences in heterosexuality also emerges from the widespread support for the statement »in sexuality, feelings are more important for women, and physical

pleasure is more important for men«, which was shared by 65% of women and 58% of men. This support, however, shows greater variation across cohorts, finding less consensus among young adults aged 24–29, but reflecting the same pattern as the previous one when it comes to greater consensus among the youngest cohort.

How can we explain this enduring consensus, among both men and women, for a differential vision of sexual needs, in a society where the ideal of the egalitarian couple has become hegemonic? The French researchers have proposed an interpretation: »It seems that support for a gender differentiated vision of sexuality, while revealing the persistence of an asymmetrical vision of the positions of women and men in society as a whole, contributes to solving the tension women must



**Fig. 6: In sexuality, feelings are more important for women, and physical pleasure is more important for men: percentage of consensus among women and men, by birth cohort (ISI – Italian survey, 2006).**

**Sl. 6: Na področju spolnosti so za ženske pomembnejša čustva in za moške fizični užitek: strinjanje med moškimi in ženskami iz različnih starostnih skupin v odstotkih (ISI – Italijanska raziskava, 2006).**



face that stems from a distortion between egalitarian representations and practices which are much less so» (Bajos, Ferrand, Andro, 2008, 559).

Looking at the question more broadly, it is by understanding the overall construction of gender relations in heterosexuality that we can find the reasons for the persistence, albeit under new forms, of a double standard, according to which women are supposed to anchor the emerging meanings of sexuality and the valuing of sexual experimentation to a relational context, implying some form of emotional involvement. With regard to men, a purely hedonistic notion of sexuality builds on the historically established model of the sexual conquest as a natural, and therefore legitimate way of satisfying their instincts, while for women this notion continues to be perceived as incompatible with their 'true', natural desires, and their reputation.

### ANOTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

In order to grasp the specific configuration of heterosexual sexuality in Italy, the data discussed above point to the need to integrate current stories on the recent changes in sexuality with a story on the construction of masculinity and male sexuality in this country. This can be sketched around the growing body of historical and social research on masculinity in Italy.

Italian historians have pointed to the legacy of Fascism to explain the power of the predatory model. Fascism engaged in a programme of »virilisation« of Italian men, which aimed to construct a »new man«, valuing activism and aggressiveness over self-control, a construction that was played in anti-bourgeois and anti-feminist terms (Benadusi, 2005). This model, which the Fascist elite, starting from Mussolini, was supposed to embody, implied an open legitimisation of the sexual double standard. In this respect, some argue that it differed from the Catholic model of respectability, which the regime deployed for the social control of the masses.

»Of course the double standard, which was a general feature of Western countries in the 19th and 20th centuries, was not specific to Fascist Italy. Here however the class-specific features of the moral system emerged more clearly; it was a system that praised the 'virile' licence while imposing puritanism on the masses [...] Besides proudly claiming sexual rights for men belonging to the élite, the regime showed [...] great tolerance towards the 'vices' – going to brothels; extramarital relations – that were a traditional prerogative of male chauvinism. It does not seem wrong to presume that the regime, if it

had been left free to act according to its intentions, would have left greater space to male sexuality« (Wan-rooij, 1990, 130)

In the post-war years, the stability of the family and the male power within it continued to establish restrictions which proved impossible to overcome, despite the changes in gender relations triggered by the growing presence of women on the public scene (Bellassai, 2000). The persistence of the double standard can be seen in state regulation of prostitution, which was compulsorily organised in brothels until 1958 (Bellassai, 2006).

The social and economic changes of the Sixties corresponded to the stabilisation and homogenisation of men's life courses. The prevailing family model, partly corresponding to contemporary practices, and partly remaining an aspirational model, became that of the bourgeois nuclear family, with the man taking up the role of sole breadwinner.

It was above all in the Seventies that men's power in the family was most strongly challenged, by changes in public discourse on women's desires and by women's demands in interpersonal heterosexual relationships, where men increasingly found themselves head-to-head with women who refused to follow the established sexual scripts of institutionalised heterosexuality (Bellassai, 2004).

However in the ways men have faced these challenges we can see important elements of resistance, not only concerning sexuality. Besides the great resistance to women's presence in political leadership, with regard to gender relations in the family there is men's very limited participation in domestic work, something that has been indicated as an outstanding Italian specificity in comparative analyses of European countries (Schizzerotto, 2007).

Interpreted by some scholars as part of this resistance to change, there is also a global trend which has been making strong headway in the Italian media and public discourse in recent years, namely the medicalisation of male sexuality (Marshall, Katz, 2002). Italy has been witnessing a proliferation of campaigns on male sexual health that pathologise men's failure to be ever-ready as sign of erectile dysfunction, to be treated with the available pharmaceutical devices.<sup>5</sup> Initially targeted at middle aged and older men, these campaigns are increasingly being extended to younger men, defining men's performance failures throughout their life course as a medical problem.

5 See, for instance, the campaign »Amare senza pensieri« ([www.amaresenzapensieri.it](http://www.amaresenzapensieri.it)), and the recent initiative of the Minister of Health, »Amico andrologo« ([www.amicoandrologo.it](http://www.amicoandrologo.it)).

This is actually part of a more general trend towards the medicalisation of the male body (Boni, 2004) which is taking hold in Italian culture, in specific forms. Boni (2008) has described, for instance, the spectacularisation of the body performed by the Italian »mass superleader« Berlusconi, which combines narratives of the therapeutic culture, with representations of a medicalised body, with virilising Latin macho imagery, in narrations about intense (hetero)sexual activity.<sup>6</sup>

### CONCLUSION: NATURALISATION IN PROGRESS

In this article we have drawn attention to the need for a gendered perspective, including a focus on masculinity, when it comes to understanding the features and local specificities of sexuality in Italy.

A crucial issue emerges from the discussion, namely the enduring power of the social processes that naturalise male sexuality, despite the challenges from women's emerging aspirations to more egalitarian relations, and their growing resources for negotiating them.

In their recent work on sexuality, Jackson and Scott (2010, 135) argue that, together with trends towards

medicalisation, biological explanations of gender differences, which are very widespread in popular culture nowadays, are crucial resources for neutralising the possibility that more egalitarian models of sexuality, like the one based on intimacy, might call male identity into question: »Evolutionary psychology has become a resource for sexual self-making, which may have particular appeal to men. It is, however, a totalizing and universalizing account of how men are, which allows for very little variability among them, minimal complexity in their motivations and limited opportunity for social change except to the degree that men can control their 'primitive biological urges'«.

The growing strength of these biologising tendencies, as a global trend but also in their specific local version (in Italy building on the well-established script of the predatory male) once more shows that looking at constructions of masculinity is crucial when it comes to understanding changes in sexuality: it can help us find the global, and local, reasons why a linear progression towards the greater gender symmetry that the notion of a plastic sexuality seemed to promise has failed to materialise.

## PREUČEVATI JE TREBA TUDI MOŠKOST: RAZUMEVANJE S SPOLOM POVEZANIH DIMENZIJ (HETERO)SEKSUALNOSTI V ITALIJI

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### POVZETEK

Članek se ukvarja z načini preučevanja spreminjajoče se konstrukcije razlik med spoloma, ki nam lahko pomagajo razumeti značilnosti in posebnosti heteroseksualne spolnosti v Italiji. Avtorici trdita, da je treba raziskati konstrukcije moškosti v spolnosti in s spolnostjo. Da bi ponazorili najine trditve, predstaviva interpretacije s spolom povezane konstrukcije heteroseksualne spolnosti, sklicujoč se na spoznanja, pridobljena na podlagi nedavnih podatkov o spolnem vedenju in stališčih o spolnosti v tej deželi.

Pri osmišljanju sprememb v spolnosti se specifičnosti, povezane s spolom, običajno tematizira z razpravljanjem o ženskih izkušnjah. Družbene in kulturološke spremembe v sedemdesetih letih 20. stoletja so ženskam prinesle vse večjo neodvisnost in možnost, da si umislijo in ustvarijo vse bolj selektivne in simetrične odnose z moškimi. Obenem so raziskave o spolnem vedenju pokazale, da je prav z ženskami povezan italijanski zaostanek pri sprejemanju bolj sekulariziranega in pluralističnega seksualnega življenjskega sloga. Preučevanje sprememb v opome-

6 The other side of the virilisation of Italian political and media discourse can be found in the denigratory media campaigns, increasing the stigmatisation of deviant male sexualities. See for instance the insinuations about the homosexuality of the director of an important Catholic newspaper, Boffo, leading to his resignation, and the revelations about the President of the Lazio Region having sex with transsexuals, due to which he too resigned.

njanju tako ženske kot moške spolnosti nam pomaga postaviti pod vprašaj interpretacijo, ki se raje osredotoča na ženske in njihovo izpostavljenost družbenemu nadzoru kakor na načine, kako družbeni nadzor vključuje moški pogled in ustvarja s spolom pogojena pojmovanja spolnosti. Glede na to, da trdoživo vztrajanje pri poudarjanju do-brega imena ženske in razlikovanje med spoštovanja vrednimi in lahkiimi ženskami nista poniknila, marveč le privzela nove, bolj prefinjene oblike, lahko trdimo, da je moška spolnost definirana kot torišče sle, ki je tako naravna in samoumevna, da ostaja nevidna. Dejstvo je, da je prepričanje, da je moška spolna sla že po naravi močnejša od ženske, v enaki meri razširjeno tako med ženskami kot moškimi in se s starostnimi skupinami ne spreminja.

Tovrstni podatki opozarjajo, da je treba trenutno aktualne zgodbe o nedavnih spremembah na področju spolnosti v Italiji povezati z zgodbo o konstrukciji moškosti in moške spolnosti v tej deželi. V grobem jo lahko očrtamo okoli vse večjega števila zgodovinskih in socioloških raziskav o moškosti v Italiji: od zapuščine fašističnega programa »virilizacije« italijanskih moških, s katero lahko pojasnimo uveljavljenost modela, ki moškega pojmuje kot lovca, preko pomembnejših elementov upora, ki se ne nanašajo le na spolnost, vse do nedavnega ženskega prespraševanja moške nadvlade v družini, vključno z zelo omejenim sodelovanjem italijanskih moških v gospodinjstvu. Poleg tega lahko tudi medikalizacijo moške spolnosti interpretiramo kot del upiranja spremembam.

V zaključku poudarjajo, da nam posvečanje več pozornosti trdoživosti družbenih procesov, ki naturalizirajo moško spolnost kljub vse izrazitejšim ženskimi težnjam po enakopravnejših odnosih, lahko pomaga odkriti razlog, zakaj se premočrtno usmerjen razvoj k večji simetriji med spoloma, ki jo je obetal koncept plastične spolnosti, ni uspel uresničiti.

**Ključne besede:** moškost, spolnost, naturalizacija, heteroseksualnost, Italija

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