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This article belongs to the debate » **Abusive Feminism**

14 August 2025

Abusive Feminism in Power

Giorgia Meloni and the Rhetoric of Representation

Rosalind Dixon explicitly refers to the Italian case – namely, the Meloni government – as an example of [abusive feminism](#). This reference is particularly noteworthy given the extensive feminist debate that followed Giorgia Meloni’s election and political performance, especially in August 2024. The debate began when Alessandra Bocchetti, a prominent Italian feminist and former member of the Italian Communist Party, published an [article](#) in “Il Foglio” newspaper. In it, she argued that Meloni was by no means a fascist and, setting aside any ideological content, expressed appreciation for her leadership style and communicative approach.

The concept of abusive feminism proves useful in interrogating the true nature of Meloni’s government. Rosalind Dixon defines [abusive feminism](#) as the use of feminist language and symbols by authoritarian or illiberal regimes to legitimize anti-democratic or oppressive practices. These regimes invoke the rhetoric of gender equality and women’s rights, particularly the notion of descriptive representation (i.e., the presence of women in visible leadership roles), while simultaneously undermining substantive feminist values, or what Dixon refers to as feminism’s minimum core. Crucial is the distinction between a “feminine” government and a “feminist” one: as Dixon warns, the mere fact of having a woman serving as Prime Minister does not, in itself, guarantee the pursuit of a genuine gender equality agenda. Meloni is a case in point.

Leveraging motherhood

Even before becoming Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni invoked her womanhood to attack the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. A particularly emblematic episode occurred in 2016 during the so-called “[Family Day](#)”, which, as declared by its organizers, aimed at defending the values of the “traditional family”, meaning one based on the lawful wedding of a man and a woman. The primary objective of the event was to oppose the Bill Cirinnà (later enacted as [Law No. 76 of 20 May 2016](#)), introduced in the Senate two days before the Family Day, which sought to recognize same-sex civil unions for the first time and to provide legal recognition for *de facto* partnership, whether between same-sex or different-sex partners. Giorgia Meloni, already the leader of Brothers of Italy, chose the “Family Day” stage to [announce her pregnancy](#),

leveraging the rhetoric of a concerned mother worried about the wellbeing of children. Already at the time, her message was particularly contradictory, given that the core message of the “Family Day” was the defense of the traditional family based on marriage as the ideal environment for raising children. Meloni herself was not married at the time, an observation offered not to cast judgment on social arrangements, but to underscore how her motherhood was immediately exploited as a rhetorical device to support repressive policy positions.

This approach has remained a constant thread in her political narrative, epitomized by her self-presentation as a “woman, mother, and Christian”. Meloni’s rhetoric proved particularly effective when one considers that her 2022 electoral success was significantly bolstered by the [female vote](#). Nonetheless, her landslide victory must be contextualized within a broader democratic malaise: voter turnout reached a historic low of just [63.8%](#), a sharp decline compared to previous years.

Breaking the glass ceiling to reinforce inequalities

From the outset of her term, Meloni offered clear indications of what may be interpreted as a form of abusive feminism: a strategic use of feminine symbolism to legitimize traditional power structures. Her decision to be referred to as “[IL Presidente](#)” (using the masculine form) was justified in terms of individual freedom, even invoking the rhetoric of identity recognition. However, as several [observers have noted](#), this masculinization is not extended to her personal identity, which she continues to frame as “woman, Christian, mother”. This masculinization applies selectively: precisely where power is concentrated. Thus, the first woman to head an Italian government declines the opportunity to symbolically reshape the political imaginary, thereby reinforcing the notion that authority remains intrinsically tied to the male gender.

Even though, as seen, the mere presence of women does not equal having a substantive feminist agenda, it is worth mentioning that the composition of the Council of Ministers under Meloni’s government reveals a markedly [low presence of women](#): only 6 out of 24 ministers, a decrease compared to previous administrations. Particularly significant is the renaming of

the former “Ministry for Equal Opportunities and the Family” to the “Ministry for Family, Birthrate, and Equal Opportunities”, once again underlining a conception of women’s roles as primarily maternal.

Restricting free reproductive choices

Even more importantly, in terms of reproductive and sexual rights, [Italy’s Law No. 194 of 1978](#) guarantees access to voluntary termination of pregnancy. The law already allowed for third-sector associations to participate in counseling centers for different purposes. However, on 16 April 2024, during proceedings to convert a decree-law implementing Italy’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Brothers of Italy, under Meloni’s leadership, introduced an amendment and asked a confidence vote to it. The amendment allows regional administrations, when organizing counseling center services, to “make use, without additional public expense, of third-sector organizations with qualified experience in supporting motherhood”.

[As feminist groups and opposition parties highlighted](#), this provision opens the door to pro-life organizations operating within public counseling centers, thereby undermining the fundamental mission of these services: the protection of women’s health and their right to self-determination. The amendment was incorporated into [Law No. 56/2024](#) and represents a further attack on women’s sexual and reproductive rights. Those rights are already under threat in Italy, due to the widespread and often strategic use of conscientious objection – which disproportionately affects the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as migrant women. In response to this growing threat to reproductive rights, I was actively involved in drafting a [guide](#) aimed at supporting women in making free and informed choices concerning abortion: a resource whose necessity we acutely felt considering the increasing encroachments on women’s rights.

Subsidizing marginalization

Another symptom of abusive feminism is revealed through an analysis of the [budget law](#) passed on 26 January 2024. This law, introduced by the Meloni government, presents itself as neutral and family-friendly, yet a closer reading exposes a framework that is [deeply exclusionary](#) for most Italian women. The law indeed privileges, through economic benefits, a very specific model of womanhood: a mother of at least two children, with stable employment, economic security and higher education. The instrumental use of gender equality discourse tries to justify policies that reinforce social hierarchies and marginalize vulnerable women. Even access to childcare is subject to the number of children, thus excluding first-time mothers who are often most at risk of exiting the workforce. Additionally, symbolic signals reinforce a hierarchy of female needs: VAT is reinstated on sanitary napkins and child necessities, while cosmetic surgery and dietary supplements, whose consumption is associated with a wealthy, slim, youthful, and performance-driven ideal of femininity, are

subsidized.

Manipulating historical memory

Under Meloni's government, it is not only women's rights that are at stake, but, more broadly, civil liberties. A particularly significant episode occurred on [25 March 2025](#), during a session of the Chamber of Deputies convened to vote on the ReArm Europe program ahead of talks in Brussels the following day. On that occasion, Meloni attacked the [Ventotene Manifesto](#), a political manifesto from 1941 which proposed the establishment of a European federation with a democratic government in order to overcome conflicts among nations and promote

peace and cooperation. She selectively quoted and decontextualized phrases from a text written during World War II under conditions of dictatorship, describing the Manifesto as ideological, outdated, and incompatible with the current European context. This gesture was widely [interpreted](#) by analysts not merely as an outrage to a document of extraordinary symbolic and historical value, considered an integral part of Italy's democratic heritage, but as a broader repudiation of the intellectual and anti-fascist legacy that underpins the very idea of a united Europe.

The manipulation of historical memory appears to be a recurring feature of Meloni's government. For instance, Meloni consistently downplays the significance of *Festa della Liberazione* (a national holiday commemorating Italy's liberation from fascism) by referring to it instead as a generic "[celebration of freedom](#)". Notably, the symbol of her party still incorporates elements associated with fascist ideology, such as the [tricolor flame](#). Despite repeated public calls to do so, Meloni has yet to make a clear statement affirming an anti-fascist stance.

Even more importantly, the constitutional reform proposed by the government – commonly referred to as the "[Premierato Reform](#)" – exhibits certain features reminiscent of Italy's authoritarian past, raising significant concerns about the integrity of the country's democratic framework. The main feature of the proposed constitutional amendment is the revision of Articles 92 and 94 of the Constitution to allow for the direct election of the Prime Minister. In its original form, the reform also included the constitutionalization of a majority bonus, initially set at 55% of the seats to be awarded on a national basis to the lists affiliated with the most-voted Prime Ministerial candidate. This provision, strongly reminiscent of the fascist-era [Acerbo Law](#), was ultimately removed in subsequent revisions. Nevertheless, the Bill remains under parliamentary discussion and, even in its current form, reflects a broader political project aimed at concentrating executive power.

Last but not least, Meloni's rhetoric and policy [choices regarding the LGBTQIA+ community](#) closely mirror – albeit with national specificities – the illiberal strategies adopted by other right-wing leaders, such as Orbán and Trump. Her government has repeatedly portrayed queer

individuals as a societal threat, [often setting them in opposition to women's rights](#). It has also [resisted efforts](#) to incorporate related themes into educational curricula and [has opposed](#) gender recognition policies in schools. Furthermore, Italy, under Meloni's leadership, is [among the nine EU member states](#) that declined to sign the recent European declaration promoting inclusive policies in support of sexual and gender minorities.

Conclusions

Men in political institutions are capable of representing women's interests; however, they often do not. Yet women, too, can fail to represent other women. If the latter is done

intentionally to attack the feminist minimum core, it constitutes a form abusive feminism – one in which means are mistaken for ends, where the mere presence of women in positions of institutional power is regarded as an achievement in itself rather than as a tool to pursue substantive reforms and to advance not only women's rights but also new and alternative models of leadership.

The fact that voters view Meloni's political style positively is precisely due to patriarchal structures in which people tend to associate power with masculine traits. Tellingly, people often compliment her political attitude by saying she is “a woman with balls”. The divisions her leadership has provoked within Italian feminism are closely tied to the contradictions she embodies: on the one hand, she emphasizes her role as Italy's first female Prime Minister and claims a form of “matriarchy” – rooted in her personal experience of being raised by a single mother and raising a daughter on her own –, with a rhetoric that appears aligned with gender equality; on the other hand, she openly defends traditional, patriarchal gender roles, thereby undermining the very ideals she claims to represent.

In this context, I fully endorse Dixon's call to name and resist the appropriation of feminist discourse by illiberal actors. A different model of leadership is not only possible but already present in Italy. Elly Schlein, leader of the opposition Democratic Party, offers a striking contrast, not only in style, but also in substance. She has [explicitly acknowledged](#) that descriptive representation is insufficient without policies that concretely support women's rights. Her approach directly responds to Dixon's appeal for a critically engaged, anti-essentialist, and grounded conception of human rights – one that resists the instrumentalization of feminism and remains committed to democratic and egalitarian values.

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SUGGESTED CITATION Lemme, Virginia: *Abusive Feminism in Power: Giorgia Meloni and the Rhetoric of Representation*, *VerfBlog*, 2025/8/14, <https://verfassungsblog.de/abusive-feminism-italy/>, DOI: [10.59704/3565955728c669dd](https://doi.org/10.59704/3565955728c669dd).

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