



# The Lost Wave: Women and Democracy in Postwar Italy

*Molly Tambor*

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As Italy emerged from World War II, the first women entered the national government. The 45 women who became parliamentarians when Italian women were first entitled to vote in 1946 represented a "lost wave" of feminist action, argues Molly Tambor.

In this work, Tambor reconstructs the role that these female politicians played in Italy's new democratic Republic. They proved critical in ensuring that the new Constitution formally guaranteed the equality of all citizens regardless of sex, translating the general constitutional guarantees into direct legislative rights and protections. They used a specific electoral and legislative strategy, "constitutional rights feminism," to construct an image of the female citizen as a bulwark of democracy. Mining existing tropes of femininity such as the Resistance heroine, the working mother, the sacrificial Catholic, and the "mamma Italiana," they searched for social consensus for women's equality that could reach across religious, ideological, and gender divides. The political biographies of woman politicians are intertwined with the history of the laws they created and helped pass, including paid maternity leave, the closing of state-run brothels, and women's right to become judges.

Women politicians navigated gendered political identity as they picked and chose among competing models of femininity in Cold War Italy. In so doing, *The Lost Wave* shows, they forged a political legacy that affected the rights and opportunities of all Italian citizens.

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