

Preface

by Lia Quartapelle

There is only one revolution that had positive effects in the twentieth century: the feminine and feminist one. It is a sweet, slow, and inexorable revolution. It is not yet complete – according to the most recent estimates, an entire generation will not be enough to achieve full equality between women and men – but the condition of women has greatly improved not only in the developed world but also in the vast majority of the so-called developing countries.

The main progress achieved by women has been the overcoming of female illiteracy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, slightly over 20% of the world population did know how to read and write and, obviously, the percentage was much lower for women than for men. After the Second World War and with decolonization, the literacy rate for women began to rise, albeit at a slower rate than for men.

In 1995, when the Beijing declaration was signed, there were only 90 girls enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys. In 2018, the female enrollment rate matched that of men. Obviously, the aggregate data conceals huge differences, and the greatest progress has been recorded in India and in China, while in many other countries parity has not yet been reached. Even today, there are 129 million girls and young women who are supposed to go to school and stay at home instead. However, for all the girls and young women who have learned to read and write and have attended school, education meant an extraordinary improvement in the quality of their life and those of their families, and it has given them a greater ability to decide for themselves about their own lives.

With women's literacy, the official excuse used in many countries to avoid giving women the right to vote has also disappeared. This is how the improvement of the condition of women, starting with education, has gone hand in hand forward, also with the increase in the presence of women in institutions. More women in institutions meant

the adoption of measures aimed at improving the condition of women. Many laws for women were thought up, written, wanted by women. The adoption of the Equal Pay Act in the UK in 1970 by Barbara Castle, the law on equal pay wanted by the first Italian woman to be appointed minister, Tina Anselmi, the laws to favor the reconciliation between working life and family choices desired by the minister of the German Family Ursula von der Leyen in the early 2000s, are just some of the examples of laws for women made by women of the institutions. The legislative production for women concerned both 99% feminism laws – in the happy definition of Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser are those laws concerning the material condition of women – and feminism of 1% – that is the laws relating to quotas of female representation, in institutions or on company boards.

At the same time, polls in many European countries show that women do not always vote for women, and that almost 80 years after the introduction of the right to vote for women in most European countries, political commitment is still more difficult for a woman than for men.

The research collected in this volume aims to study the multiple levels of causality that link the presence of women in institutions and the consequence in terms of the adoption of laws for women, with a scientific approach that will help understand the phenomenon and strengthen the bond between women-citizens with their female representatives.

Moreover, it is a useful book in itself, but it becomes especially so now, because COVID-19 has significantly slowed the progress of the female condition. In the first year of the pandemic, 54 million women worldwide lost their jobs, while 11 million girls and young women never returned to class after their schools reopened. In European countries, the pandemic has affected women with many care tasks provided by closed services due to lockdowns and has exposed the condition of relative fragility of women in the labor market. In Europe and in the United States, for the same jobs, women are paid worse and have contracts that are more precarious. In 2020, three quarters of the unemployed in Italy were women. COVID-19 has set the equality agenda at a crossroads: women have been faced with the choice between their job and the need to take care of their families. In the effort that we are called to make to rebuild our societies after the pandemic, it will be crucial to ensure that the gender dimension is not overlooked, in order to rebuild fairer and more inclusive societies. Women in institutions can, indeed must, play a leading role. The book helps to understand how to do this, and how to avoid the mistakes of the past.