

# Sex and the City

Women's movements, architectures, and sex work in Milan  
(1900-1939)

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## ABSTRACT

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*Le strade libere le fanno le donne che le attraversano.* [Eng. “The free roads are made by the women who cross them”. From Italian women association Non una di meno, 2017].

Advanced research carried out by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime published in 2018 found that women and girls consistently accounted for most of the reported cases of trafficking and sexual exploitation. In Milan, the National Union of Women (Unione femminile Nazionale in Italian) was founded in 1899 to defend women’s rights. Their archive, preserved in Corso di Porta Nuova 32, contains documents and materials such as magazines, images, posters, and minutes that prove their work on the territory starting from the foundation of a Committee within the association, which listens and welcomes victims of trafficking. Together with it, the foundation of the Mariuccia Asylum in 1902 contributed to the fight against the phenomenon of trafficking in women in the city.

Particularly books and articles such as *Esistere come donna* by Maura Palazzi and the book *Il dilemma della cittadinanza. Diritti e doveri delle donne* by Gabriella Bonacchi published in 1993. Complementary, the research collects and analyses the Periodicals published over the years by the UFN, concerning the trafficking in women in Milanese spaces after the regulation of the prostitution in Italy in 1860.

This thesis aims to explore the architectures around sex work and women’s movements from 1900 to 1939 in the city of Milan. Specifically, the building of the association, a brothel in a famous neighbourhood in the city and the Mariuccia Asylum.

Overall, the thesis sheds light into the spaces related to the work of the association UFN and sex workers at the beginning of the 1900 to finally contribute to document the history of women in architecture in Milan.

Keywords: Women – Milan – Prostitution – Trafficking – Spaces

## INTRODUCTION

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Violence against women comprises a wide range of abuses and discrimination that ultimately shapes their everyday lives. The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons released in 2020 revealed that in 2018, out of every 10 trafficking victims, five were adult women and two were young girls. During the period between 2017 and 2018, over 110 countries identified 74,514 victims of trafficking. Of these, about 70% were women, mostly adult, but the number of trafficked girls continued to increase. Among the identified victims, 77% were trafficked for sexual exploitation, while 14% were forced into labour, and the rest were subjected to forced marriages, domestic servitude, and forced impregnation.

The UFN, *Unione femminile Nazionale* has an historical and active approach in relation to women's rights in the city of Milan. However, its work in relation to the National Committee against trafficking in women and its connection to the famous Mariuccia Asylum remains underexplored<sup>1</sup>. In fact, what is missing from previous research is the link between the association and the Mariuccia Asylum.

The aim of this thesis explores the architectures around sex work and women's movements struggles against trafficking in women from 1900 to 1939. The phenomenon concerned mainly white Italian women who, because of poverty, moved from southern Italy to northern Italy. Finally, the aim of the thesis is to shed light on the relevant city architectural spaces involved. It is necessary, in this phase of the research, to assume the difference that exists in the use of the words. The word *prostitution* is used for the most part in this research. Contemporary readers might be more familiar with the term *sex work*, which in this research does not come. The term sex work was coined in 1978 by an activist Carol Leigh. This investigation focuses on the historical study of a period long before the 70s<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, it is significant to specify that the perspective from the 1990s is different than today concerning the topic covered in the research. There is a historical lens to be adopted to better comprehend the work done on the territory of the city of Milan by the association analyzed. One of the first considerable issues to understand was that, in those years, there was an apparent conflict between some sex trade workers and many feminists about the acceptability of prostitution being identified only as a problem to be

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<sup>1</sup> Annarita Buttafuoco, *Le Mariuccine: Storia Di Un'istituzione Laica, l'Asilo Mariuccia* [Le Mariuccine. History of a secular institution, the Mariuccia asylum], (Milan: F. Angeli, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Hope Ditmore, *Historical Guides to controversial issues in America: Prostitution and Sex work*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011).

fought. A woman who worked in the sex industry felt condemned and rejected her ideas and principles by many feminist women<sup>3</sup>.

To understand this divergence of female opinion about sex work and prostitution, it is relevant to immediately recognize that this originated from a long history of feminist work and struggle regarding the problem of prostitution and sexuality. This division among women can also be seen today as a case of patriarchal division that keeps women discussing among themselves benefiting from this. 4.

To this end, this architectural history thesis gathers primary and secondary sources of information. The primary resources include the consultation of documents preserved at the archives of the associations, such as those produced by the *Comitato Italiano contro la tratta delle bianche*, Italian Committee against the trafficking in women, stored at the UFN Archive in Milan, and amounted to seventy-seven archival units contained in sixty-seven envelopes. An in-depth analysis of the archives of the Milanese association. The archive of the institution and the section of the archive of the Majno family and in particular the section produced by activist Ersilia Majno Bronzini (1859-1933), which includes personal correspondence, the maps relating to its activities within the UFN and the Committee against trafficking in women during the presidency of Ersilia Majno, from 1901 to 1915.

In relation to secondary sources of information, the book by feminist historian and an important woman for the association, leader of the UFN from 1993 to 1999 Annarita Buttafuoco *Mariuccine*, which is useful to fully understand the role that the building of the association in the city has and had over the years, from 1900 to 1939. Moreover, the book *Attraverso il tempo, cento venti anni dell'Unione femminile nazionale* [Crossing time, one hundred and twenty years of the National Women's Union], by researcher Stefania Bartoloni, traces and tells, in general, the history of the UFN, its battles and main characters from the foundation of the association to the actual period 5.

The research findings are presented in three chapters. Through the description of three specific buildings in the three chapters of this research are analyzed the spaces of the buildings and the role that these have assumed in period studied (1899-1939). The first chapter presents the history of the association and the people contributed to the feminist debate from 1899, as well as the spaces of the building itself, especially as these have changed from foundation to the period of World War II. The second chapter concerns trafficking in women and children to be reduced to slavery and used for prostitution, the theme is deepened through the analysis of one of the brothels used in that period in the city of Milan. The third chapter tells the story of one of the architectural spaces for fighting

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<sup>3</sup> Peggy Morgan, "Living on the Edge", in *Sex work: writings by women in the sex industry*, ed. Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (San Francisco, Calif.: Cleis Press, c1998), 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> Overall, Christine. "What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work." *Signs* 17, no. 4 (July 1, 1992): 705-24. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494761>.

<sup>5</sup> Stefania Bartoloni, *Attraversando il tempo, cento venti anni dell'Unione femminile Nazionale* [Crossing time, one hundred and twenty years of the National Women's Union] (Rome: Viella, 2019).

against trafficking in: the Mariuccia Asylum, built in 1902, had space for what was at the time considered a “rehabilitation” and at the same time space for medical care of young women victims of trafficking and “potential” victims.

Through the exploration of architectural spaces in the three chapters and the analysis of the historical archives of the associations, this thesis sheds light on the untold stories of women's actions against violence and trafficking in Milan and for the first time combines matters that were never been addressed together before.



Figure 1: Photographic portrait portraying Ersilia Majno Bronzini (1859-1933) with his beloved children beside. She was an Italian activist, emancipatory, founder of the Mariuccia Asylum and the UFN. Ersilia Majno Bronzini was one of the most important people in those years, leader of the association UFN and of the Committee against the trafficking of women in Milan from 1899 to 1920.

## **The Unione femminile Nazionale (UFN) and its spaces**

When the UFN was born in Milan in 1899, the Italian woman lived in a traditional family, subject to her husband or father, and, if working, exploited and without rights. As their manifesto printed in a poster in 1889 explains:

*The Women's Union  
was formed  
for the elevation and education of women,  
for the defense of childhood and motherhood,  
to give studies and work to the various institutions of  
social utility,  
to bring together in one place the Associations and  
Institutions of Women, with the advantage for members:  
a) to have a decent space;  
b) a shared library;  
c) a reading room.  
d) lectures, lectures, entertainments <sup>6</sup>.*

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<sup>6</sup> “L'Unione delle donne è stata costituita per l'elevazione e l'educazione delle donne, per la difesa dell'infanzia e della maternità, per dare studi e lavoro alle varie istituzioni di utilità sociale, per riunire in un unico luogo le Associazioni e le Istituzioni delle donne, con il vantaggio per i soci: a) avere un posto decente; b) una biblioteca comune; c) una sala di lettura. d) conferenze, conferenze, spettacoli”. Translated by the author. Archive Manifesto, Unione femminile nazionale (1899).

**L'UNIONE FEMMINILE**

S. Tomaso. 6    **si è costituita**    S. Tomaso. 3

Per l'elevazione ed istruzione della donna  
 Per la difesa dell'infanzia e della maternità  
 Per dare studi ed opera alle varie Istituzioni  
 di utilità sociale

Per riunire in una sola sede le Associazioni  
 ed Istituzioni Femminili

col vantaggio per le Socie:

a) di avere una Sede decorosa:  
 b) una Biblioteca in comune:  
 c) una Sala di lettura con giornali e riviste:  
 d) Conferenze, Corsi di lezioni, Trattenimenti.

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Vi sono tre categorie di Socie, con uguali diritti:

CATEGORIA	<b>A</b>	L.	<b>10</b>	annue	)	con impegno triennale.
»	<b>B</b>	»	<b>5</b>	»		
»	<b>C</b>	»	<b>2</b>	»		

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**L'UNIONE FEMMINILE** accoglie pure come **Soci aderenti** le Associazioni, Istituzioni e le persone tutte che coll'opera, con un'elargizione qualsiasi, coopereranno alla fondazione e allo sviluppo della Casa dell'Unione.

Figure 2: Poster showing the birth of the Union and the manifesto. Source: UFN Archives, 1899.

This was the manifesto of the association founded on 28 December 1899, in Milan, by a group of middle- and upper-class women: Ersilia Majno Bronzini (1859-1933), Nina Rignano Sullam (1871-1945), Ada Garlanda Negri (1870-1945), Edvige Vonwiller Gessner (1856-1898), Adele Riva (1863-1932), Antonietta Pisa Rizzi (1871-1955), Jole Bersellini Bellini (1872 – 1964), Rebecca Calderini (1847-1926) and Anna Fraentzel Celli (1878-1958). Mainly the women who were part of the association were women who belonged to a well-off social class, with a strong Catholic religious education behind them. Some are part of

the Milanese bourgeoisie, educated, secular and progressive, while others are militants or sympathizers of the Italian Socialist Party <sup>7</sup>.



Figure 3: Photograph showing Ersilia Majno Bronzini, Anna Fraentzel Celli, Elisa Boschetti and Pellegrina Pirani. Source: UFN Archives, 1899.

The Union arises with the intent to gather in one place the women's organizations already present in Milan. The project of a house of the UFN was realized in 1910. Thanks to the use of fundraising, it was possible to find the financial cover necessary to open a loan to buy and renovate the building in Corso di Porta Nuova, 20, suitable for the union and its many activities (Figure 4).

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<sup>7</sup> Stefania Bartolini, "L'unione femminile tra politica, memoria e fondi archivistici.", *Attraversando il tempo. Centoventi anni dell'unione femminile nazionale* ["The union of women between politics, memory and archives. Introduction." *Crossing the Time. One hundred and twenty years of the national women's union*], ed. Stefania Bronzini (Rome: Viella, 2019): 1-35.

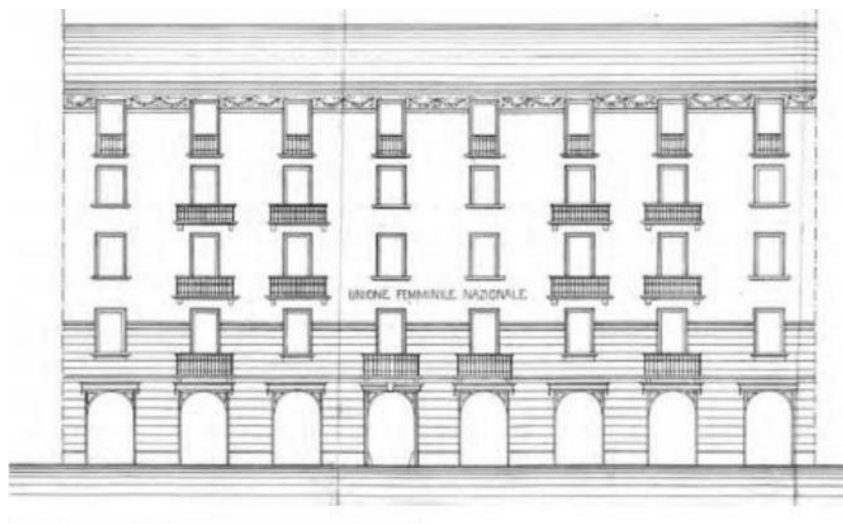


Figure 4: *La casa per l'Unione*, the house for the association. Pictures taken from the periodical "Unione femminile" of 1910, n.4, p 170.

The redevelopment project of the building contains a detailed description of the works to be carried out:

The house is currently in poor condition of hygiene, without sewage with latrines apprentice in the premises of the house, with rooms all engaged, with terracotta floors very absorbent. The rearrangement of the house consists essentially in raising the court wall above the factory line and being able to obtain the longitudinal corridor of complete disengagement of all the premises. At the head of the corridor on one side (right) the existing latrines are reorganized, on the other side there is a cavedium to ventilate the new latrines. [...] The forehead will be decorated in a simple but decorous way as shown in the attached drawing, leaving intact the current organism. [...]. For the UFN President Bianca Arbib <sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Unione Femminile Nazionale, "La Casa Dell'Unione femm. Nazionale" [The house of the Union] *Unione Femminile* n.4 (December 1910): 178–79.

LA VITA AL CIRCOLO DELL'U. F. N.

E tra i miei ricordi lontani la richiesta fattami da un'indimenticabile: Perché non entra nell'U. F. N. e la coesistenza del concepimento auto-essente? « Che c'è dentro a fare? A mostrare la mia incompetenza, o a rimettermi in lavori per i quali mi manca il tempo? » Sì, sì che il tempo, amministrato infatti, disimpegnato, manca, secondo l'uso che ne fa l'individuo. — Ora, a pensarla preva' poco così (senza dubbio un minore diritto di noi suoi assistenti, di donne, che sottopongono al viaggio comune energie molteplici e diverse. — L'U. F. N. con il suo lavoro d'attività così variata, benefica, saggia, evoluta è da gran parte delle signore riguardata come un'istituzione che è orgoglio del proprio sesso, ma che è privilegio di un gruppo di donne, le quali per intelligenza, sapere e qualità morali non comuni possono procurarsi la soddisfazione non solo di spesso superare l'uomo nella lotta contro l'ignoranza, il vizio, la miseria; ma di rivenderla anche, oltre che con i salari, con i nuovi occupati motivi. Il diritto di essere la compagna dell'uomo, nel senso vero della parola.

per ora, con lo scopo di fortificare, disciplinare i loro muscoli con un esercizio razionale, perché senza la sanità del corpo, né la vita del pensiero, né quella degli affetti possono svolgersi, ed anche il sentimento sublime, la gioia della nostra vita muliebile, la solidarietà che è del lavoro associato. La sua realizzazione prima. Le mamme sciolgono e vigilano e nutrono viene lo scorbuto di idee su l'educazione dei figli; ognuna ha un'esperienza fatta o fatta, una cura, un aiuto, un indimento, un libro da consigliare; — e tutte vedono nella piccola fanciulla la propria creatura non come si è avvezzo a considerarla la casa, ma come un essere collettivo, nel confronto con le altre, e balzano difese e virtù non osservate prima. Nessuna mamma profita la queste ore della buona ballata del Circolo: per la lettura trova il tempo poi. Infatti l'esistere a queste lezioni di ginnastica da un godimento che non si dice: so di una signora (che l'attende come una piccola piovra essere le feste di gioia) che entrò nel Circolo per vedere quelle persone che imparano a camminare. Le lezioni sono date dalla signora Ida Zucchi che sa accettare l'ordine murale con tale dolcezza da ottenere un massimo di profitto col minimo sforzo. Finiti gli esercizi ginnastici il « gineceo sciamano » delle signorine prepara e distribuisce il the alle signorine e ai piccoli offrendo un simpatico saggio di dietetica domestica. Il ballo segue poi come studio e per solito a titolo di modello ritmato. Le mamme sciolgono alla sana allegria del giro, e solo, di volta in volta, le tarlo forte il pensiero dei molti bambini non fortunati suoi. Infatti ho visto il contento generale, quando, il 2° dicembre 1910, in un brillante servizio, Gemma Magagnoli disse, a proposito del III comma del programma del Circolo: « A curare la diffusione, specialmente nelle scuole e fra il popolo, di tutto quanto può ridare il culto del bello e lo scopo di elevazione morale. » Vi sono alle porte di Milano nuovi quartieri popolari che ospitano migliaia di famiglie, quanti centinaia di bambini, sono tra voi, potenti signorine, ottime dilettanti di musica, di recitazione. Daroci il contributo del vostro ingegno, del vostro studio, del vostro sentimento, per offrire, in forma di piccolo concerto a quei cari bambini... « Vidi poi queste famiglie e questo giovanotto (un gruppo deliziosamente bello, al quale si unirono con tanta cortesia i signori Aldo Pannaggi ed Emilio Riguzzi) uscire dal teatro di Milano per recarsi nei quartieri dell'Assinaria, in via Solari e via Bottole, e nelle case popolari di via Mac-Mahon. Furono giocolieri, core della fidelissima umana. Le popolone affollavano il loro salone, con la loro coscienza di essere la casa propria a ricevere degli ospiti. Nelle prime file erano i loro piccoli zocci e finiti, seduti nelle Case dei bambini, con tutti, per la logica, inconsapevole veggono infantile, fatta di nulla e di tutto, che nel il assieme, perché sono i

fatelli dei bimbi nati da noi, i loro futuri compagni di lavoro, e (perché no?) di ascensione morale. Oh, la poesia e l'attità di questo passo verso la dannata del popolo, grandi della grandezza nostra nel sacrificio e nella materità! « Sì, durante lo spettacolo d'arte », dei vivi invitati, udì dei battimani sponzani, perché quello « deve avere ascoltato nell'animo dei piccoli spettatori e delle spettatrici il bisogno elevatore dei godimenti dello spirito », come è detto nella lettera di ringraziamento dell'Assinaria al Circolo. E a questo, e ai volenti impetosi del programma, veda collettiva la lode autorevole che Massimo Gorki direbbe alla bambina Gina Mascardi, pianista decora di straordinario temperamento artistico: « ... e ancora di più sono contento di sapere che tu vuoi fare godere della tua bell'arte il popolo. « Quest'è magnifico! Sono sicuro, il popolo, che fa la vita così dura e penosa, si sarà grato per i miei atti di gioia che la gli darai. Se tutti facessero come te, se vedessi spesso dare ad altri ciò che ti esse di buono, noi tutti avremmo la vita più felice e bella, e nel mondo vi sarebbe molto meno della tristezza, infanzia e del dolore... »

« Queste bimbe, questo giovanotto che oggi profugano per l'educazione del popolo ciò che di meglio potremmo, che sviluppiamo, nutriamo, e coltiva, in un ambiente di pensiero e di lavoro, saranno le donne concienti di domani. Come, appena scese da le giacchiere materne, tutte sanno di avere per le elevazioni dello spirito d'infiniti spettacoli naturali, o le severe avate dei monumentali tempi, e per appagare il bisogno di sapere, di godere, le pulchre biblioteche, le gallerie e i musei d'arte, con le nostre figlie, nei futuri climi della vita sociale, quando le affligge un'ingenuità, o le sposti un desiderio di bontà, non avranno dubbio ove posare un'idea, perché generi altre idee, e fecero le azioni giovevoli. « Ne potremo i compagni di ginnastica e di ballo d'oggi, essere mai i denigratori di queste lavoratrici sociali, apostoli di un ideale di fratellanza, perché vedranno in esse, che conobbero semplici di atti, vive di corpo e di spirito, e donna che saprà ardentemente amare, potentemente volere. T. S. M. Milano, 15 gennaio 1911.

La casa dell'Unione Femm. Nazionale.



L'appello lanciato nell'ultimo numero non è rimasto inascoltato: la Casa dell'Unione fu acquistata nel Settembre scorso grazie al capitale già esistente, al concorso dell'Associazione Generale delle Operate e della Cassa di Risparmio, sotto forma di mutui, e a nuove azioni sottoscritte per la somma di L. 27.500. La Casa dev'essere però restaurata e adattata ai bisogni dell'Unione e dei vari Uffici che vi verranno trasportati nel venturo settembre. E per questi indispensabili restauri e adattamenti occorrono altre sottoscrizioni. Ci aiutino perciò le socie a completare l'opera, a dare questo bell'esempio di audacia, di dignità e di forza. (1) Pubblichiamo in altra parte del giornale i nomi dei sottoscrittori.

Figure 5: La casa dell'Unione, the house of the association. Scanning of the periodical containing the information relating to the construction of the site for the UFN. "Unione femminile" of 1910, n.4, 169-170.

In 1911 also presented the project for the construction of a Conference Hall, which specified that:

The hall built on a part of the courtyard area will be a masonry roof with large air chambers directly covered by a semi-flat roof. The large and frequent openings, in addition to illuminating the room, can be of great advantage for the evacuation of the same, and therefore for the safety of operation in case of fires.

In 1924 a further development was carried out with the addition of a floor above the existing Hall, later to be called Theatre. The building would have been of civil habitation and would have to rise inside the house of Corso di Porta Nuova 20, partly above an already existing hall for shows, and partly above an area now occupied by an old building that must be demolished in advance. The facade of the new building will conform to the one of the present house facing the court.



Figure 6: The Union theatre after the First World War. UFN Archives, 1924

In addition to the Circle of the Women's Union, the theatre, the library, the house of the Union welcomed the General Association of Mutual Aid for Women Workers in Milan, the Committee against the *tratta delle bianche*, the trafficking in white women, the administration of the *Asilo Mariuccia*, Mariuccia Asylum, the Fraternal Society with the Recreation Centre for the swimming pools, the School of Professional Design for Young Women Workers, the Children's Committee, the Employment Office for Maids, the administration of the Information and Assistance Offices, the Society for the Defence of Hygiene of Early Childhood, the Patronage of Minors sentenced conditionally and the Dormitory-Female Pension.

In 1939 a decree passed by the Prefect of the Province of Milan imposed the dissolution of the Union and the liquidation of all its assets. The fascist regime had imposed on all progressive associations like the UFN to close all activities, including of course the building of Corso di Porta Nuova. In the following years, however, the councillors managed not to cede the seat and finally to win the appeal against confiscation, retaining the property.

In August 1943 the building, which was located near the Tobacco Factory, was severely damaged by bombing. In particular, the south wing was demolished, but will be entirely rebuilt later. The rehabilitation was completed only in 1950 and again with considerable financial commitment. In the following decades, significant and continuous consolidation of the common parts and the premises took place. The most recent renovation project was carried out in the second half of the nineties, with the recovery of new spaces and the arrangement of the salon <sup>9</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Bartolini, *Attraversando il tempo. Centoventi anni dell'unione femminile nazionale* [*Crossing the Time. One hundred and twenty years of the national women's union*].

In the first decade of the twentieth century the women's movement was very lively. At the first National Congress of Italian women, about a thousand women participated: an impressive number for the time. The event was held in Rome from 23 to 30 April 1908 and was a moment of unprecedented public visibility. For the first time, Italian women meet to discuss the female question, that is, the subordination of women in the family and society. All the women's movements of the early twentieth century (suffragists, socialists, Catholics) were represented, but not merged. Topics like divorce and the teaching of religion in public schools were a source of division. Yet, between 23 and 28 May 1908, the UFN organized the First National Congress of Women's Practical Activity in Milan, also attended by prominent Catholic activists.

In 1901 the first Milanese section of the Committee against the trafficking in women, in connection with the Rome section and with the international bureau for the suppression of traffic in women and children, was set up to combat the sexual trafficking of adult and underage women<sup>10</sup>. Ersilia Majno, Nina Rignano Sullam and other, including Alessandrina Ravizza, the Mayor of Milan Ettore Ponti, and Camillo Broglio, were present to promote the work of the Committee against the trafficking in women, and more than a hundred people join the Committee<sup>11</sup>.

While working closely with the public authorities to intercept the need for assistance, the Committee denounced the social causes of "prostitution" through analysis and investigations: "Prostitution is an extreme consequence of the social and sexual oppression suffered by women" wrote Ersilia Maino in a private letter in 1901, stating that: "we should be able to group all the means and the will to radically change the economic forms, the methods of education and the concepts of morality and the rights on which society is based" <sup>12</sup>.

The Union was characterized by its *femminismo pratico*, practical feminism, developing activities rather than theories, often in fields of intervention generally disregarded or ignored:<sup>13</sup>. The Union strongly believed that change would happen through the struggle for emancipation: through the enhancement of the maternal role - understood

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<sup>10</sup> The International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children is a 1901 multilateral treaty of the League of Nations that addressed the problem of international trafficking of women and children.

<sup>11</sup> Graziella Gaballo, "L'Unione Femminile (1901-1905): reti e relazioni internazionali" [The women's Union (1901 - 1905): networks and international relations], *Open Edition journals*, (July 2021) <https://doi.org/10.4000/laboratoireitalien.6910>

<sup>12</sup> The letter is kept in the archives of the Majno family in the headquarters of the Union, in the section of personal correspondence of Ersilia Majno Bronzini.

<sup>13</sup> L. Ferrante, M. Palazzi, G. Pomata, "La Filantropia Come Politica: Esperienze Dell'emancipazionismo Italiano Nel Novecento," *Ragnatele Di Rapporti: Patronage E Reti Di Relazioni Nella Storia Delle Donne* [Philanthropy as Politics: Experiences of Italian Emancipation in the Twentieth Century," *Webs of Relationships: Patronage And Networks Of Relationships In The History Of Women*] (1988): 166-87.

then as a specific element of female identity, regardless of whether it was a matter of real or symbolic motherhood<sup>14</sup>.

The National UFN is concerned and has been involved to give voice to women, focusing on some problems generated by the city: the issue of the trafficking in women, a phenomenon that involved thousands of young girls since the early 1900s and that today corresponds to the phenomenon of prostitution. The Committee against the trafficking in women born in the founding of the association, represented the first step, the first real denunciation of a real and very aggressive phenomenon in Milan: if the emergency is now recognized internationally, it is only thanks to the work of the UFN. Even today the issue of the exploitation of prostitution and trafficking is debated in the Milanese context, combined with the large migratory movements that have occurred in recent years.

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<sup>14</sup> Graziella Gaballo, “L’Unione Femminile (1901-1905): reti e relazioni internazionali” [The women’s Union (1901 – 1905): networks and international relations].

### **The Committee against the trafficking in women.**

The term *Tratta delle Bianche*, trafficking in women, was adopted in the eighties of the nineteenth century to indicate an international crime consisting of trafficking in women and children to be reduced to slavery and exploit them sexually. The most relevant aspect of the phenomenon was its supranational dimension since it was not composed of a single crime, but rather of a chain of crimes perpetrated across the borders of individual countries<sup>15</sup>. Victims were treated like goods: after being persuaded to leave their native countryside and usually from the south of Italy to the north, victims were transported from one place to another without having real knowledge of the events and only later they found themselves living in a foreign land without means of subsistence and sexually exploited<sup>16</sup>. The victims of trafficking entered the prostitution trade mainly due to false offers of job opportunities in a city outside their countryside living places, Milan was in fact a large developing city where sex trafficking proliferated, probably because it represented an ideal of a better future for people who decided to move there with the promise of a job.

The Committee against the trafficking in women of Milan was created in 1900 by a group of intellectuals, emancipationists, and philanthropists from the middle- and upper-classes of people, coordinated by Ersilia Majno Bronzini. The process of creation of the National Committee saw as protagonists the women of the UFN: they had already developed the capacity to be radicalized on the territory of Milan and to maintain good relations with local and municipal institutions <sup>17</sup>. 15

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<sup>15</sup> Mario Pettoello, *La Tratta delle Bianche. Studio giuridico e sociale* [The White Slave Trade. Legal and social study] (Udine: editrice Udinese, 1912); Raniero Paulucci di Calboli, “La tratta delle ragazze italiane”, *Nuova Antologia di scienze, lettere ed arti*, [“The trafficking of Italian girls”, *New Anthology of sciences, letters and arts*] n. 98 (1902): 418-438.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Londres, *Tratta delle Bianche* [White slave trade], (Milano: Sunland) 1929

<sup>17</sup> Annarita Buttafuoco, *Le Mariuccine. Storia di un’istituzione laica, l’asilo Mariuccia* [Le Mariuccine. History of a secular institution, the Mariuccia asylum], (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1998).



Figure 7: *Schiave Bianche, per una santa crociata*, White slaves, for a holy crusade. Scanning of the periodical containing the information relating to the first discussion about women in trafficking. "Unione femminile" of 1910, n.4, 169-170.

Although founded in 1900, the Committee has its origins in the movement of opinion, animated by men and women of the city of Milan engaged in social assistance, which shared the adversity against the Cavour Law that allowed the legalization and regulation of sex work in 1861. The Milanese politician Camillo Benso di Cavour established the law of the so-called *case di tolleranza*, houses of tolerance<sup>18</sup>, thus legalizing for the first time in Italian history sex work in specific places, such as houses and brothels<sup>19</sup>, that offered sexual services under government-appointed compensation. Starting from 1891, compulsory periodic medical examinations for sex workers were made, and, for this purpose, they created a census throughout the national territory. In 1900 it turned out that there were 5,780 *case di*

<sup>18</sup>A tolerance house (also commonly referred to as a pleasure house, dating house, brothel or casino) is an enclosed place where prostitution is practiced legally.

<sup>19</sup>The text will use the word *prostitute* and not the word *sex worker*. The choice is dictated by the fact that historically those who advocate the abolition of the sex trade generally do not use the term "sex worker"; rather the word 'prostitute' or 'prostituted women' is used. The word "sex worker", in fact appears for the first time in the 80s, a period long after the one treated. – "Sex workers or prostitutes? Why words matter", iNews UK, last modified July 17, 2020, <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/columnists/sex-workers-prostitutes-words-matter-95447>.

*appuntamenti*, literally houses for appointments: where men could go to meet prostitutes, and at least 335,817 sex workers, placing Milan between cities with the highest numbers<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 8: *Documento identificativo sostitutivo per la regolare professione del meretricio*, Identification document for the regular profession of meretricium. Identification document that prostitutes were obliged to have. Source: *Il Gazzettino*, 1936.

All female sex workers were required to register on special lists kept by the police; these were then subjected to an intimate inspection that attested to their state of good health, it was only after this that they were allowed to work inside a brothel run by a *maitresse*. The *maitresse* had to register every girl and to collaborate with the police in the fight against illegal prostitution<sup>21</sup>. The *maitresse* should provide sex workers everything they needed, from linen to furniture, by compiling an inventory of what belonged to them. The duty of the *maitresse* was also to provide weekly medical examinations. The prices of each service were set by the regulation, but sex workers were allowed to withhold only a quarter of the amount<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Guido Alfani, *I censimenti nell'Italia unita. Le fonti di stato della popolazione tra il XIX e il XXI secolo* [Censuses in United Italy. Sources of state of the population between the 19th and 21st centuries] (Rome: Istat, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> A. Morale, *Studio della prostituzione nella storia del diritto e nella legislazione vigente* [Study of prostitution in the history of law and current legislation], p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Houses were divided into two categories whose rates ranged from 2 liras for council houses to 5 liras for luxury houses.



Figure 9: *Spettanze della stimata casa*, Claims of the esteemed house. Plaque at the entrance of one of the brothels of the city with indicated prices of each performance and times. During the fascist regime, 1939.

One of the places in the city that still today is known for its ten-year history is placed in one of the so-called *vicoli del piacere*, alleys of pleasure. In via Fiori Chiari 17 stood the brothel of the highest class of Milan of a time, no longer accessible to the public, was one of the most luxurious and well-known houses. In the atrium, there was a staircase in art nouveau style, while the bedrooms, complete with sink, bidet, soaps, cologne, and linen towels (with extra payments), were located on the first floor. The shutters had to remain strictly closed: it is said that the presence of women disturbed the employees who worked in the building opposite.



Figure 10: Photography showing the building in one of the *vicoli del piacere*, alleys of pleasure in Milan, in Via Fiori Chiari. Source: Brera Design District website, 1900.

Interestingly, every activity had precise rules that girls had to follow. At number 3 of the same street there was a *casa chiusa*, closed house, where it was forbidden to attract customers, at number 5 women danced and were uninhibited in costumes, with skirts open at the front to show the legs. The clothes had to be showy and provocative, but also easy to take off. Each house then aimed at a different audience: the young were easily lured by the provocative dancers of the number 5, while the men more confident preferred the shy and submissive women of the number 3 <sup>23</sup>.



Figure 11: Photography of the most famous brothel in Milan, in the photograph you can also see the madam behind a desk that directs appointments. Source: <https://www.frammentirivista.it/milano-brera-case-chiuse-storia/>

<sup>23</sup> “Milano che non conosciamo: nella Brera delle case chiuse”, Frammenti Rivista il mondo con gli occhi della cultura, last modified 12 June, 2016. <https://www.frammentirivista.it/milano-brera-case-chiuse-storia/>

Possible disputes between the maitresse and prostitutes were directed to the Health Office, section of the Security Police; the police had to be informed even if a woman wanted to leave prostitution. In reality, a woman who wanted to abandon prostitution found serious difficulties at the time of the cancellation that came in a few specific cases (marriage, beginning of honest employment), and in the event of obtaining the woman underwent a further period of control. It was also difficult for the woman to get out of the status of being considered a prostitute: stop working on it did not always implied stop being named in that way<sup>24</sup>.

The Trafficking in women has been interpreted by the UFN as the harshest aspect of the closed system of state-controlled housing, not only because it provided weekly checks on working women, but also for the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, such as syphilis. Ersilia Majno Bronzini and her colleagues of the UFN, through local initiatives and individual personal relationships, formed a series of relationships with most important associations in the territory of Milan and personalities interested in the subject, such as various associations in defence of women and religious associations Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish: at that time is relevant to notice that religions played a crucial role for the feminist associations in the city. From the close relations between Ersilia Majno and Rodolfo Bettazzi developed a series of initiatives on the country such as conferences, study days on trafficking, publications, and cooperation in assistance<sup>25</sup>.

10 Giugno 1904. UNIONE FEMMINILE N. 5.

**SCHIAVE BIANCHE**  
*Bollettino pubblicato a cura del Comitato di Milano contro la tratta delle Bianche*

**RIUNIONE NAZIONALE del Comitato contro la Tratta delle Bianche**  
 Il 14 Maggio, presso l'Associazione della Stampa periodica, fu tenuta la prima Riunione Nazionale dei Comitati contro la Tratta delle Bianche.

Intervenero circa cinquanta persone fra le quali notammo gli organizzatori della Riunione: On. Alfredo Bacelli, Dott. A. Garofalo, Sig. Turin, altri membri del Comitato di Roma On. Socci, Sig. Ernesto Nathan, Dott. Prochet, Cammea Faselli, signora Mingarini, Celli, Nathan, Turin, consigliere Mortara, ecc. ecc.

Il Comitato di Milano aveva mandato come rappresentanti la Presidente Ersilia Majno Bronzini e la signorina Bice Cammea, il Comitato di Napoli l'Avv. Paolo Tucci.

L'assemblea nominò presidente l'On. Bacelli, Vice presidenti E. Majno, On. Socci, E. Nathan, Segretari Dott. Garofalo, B. Cammea, Avv. Tucci, Mandarono l'adesione personale gli On. Giolitti, Tittoni, Luzzati, il Sindaco di Roma, i deputati Tonfola, Arzuffa, ecc. Adesero molte istituzioni: l'Associazione per la Donna di Roma, l'Unione Femminile di Milano, la Vice della Donna di Bari, ecc.; ma importantissima per l'alto significato morale e per l'auspicio di una gioventù più pura e cosciente fu l'adesione della Costa Fratta rappresentata dal signor Levi.

La circolare diramata fino dal mese di Marzo dal Comitato di Roma ai Comitati locali ed alle istituzioni pubbliche e private che hanno lo scopo di proteggere le giovani donne, riassunse gli oggetti della riunione e i temi da discutere nei tre paragrafi seguenti:

1° Fixare le basi di un'azione uniforme e concertata per tutta l'Italia per combattere il terrore commercio compiuto con inganni e con frodi ai danni di povere fanciulle ignoranti, rese deboli ed innocenti dalla miseria, le quali sono adatte al vizio col miraggio di false promesse.

2° Favorire la fondazione di comitati regionali in tutte le regioni d'Italia.

3° Stabilire i rapporti fra il Comitato Nazionale Italiano e i Comitati regionali. Non fu quindi senza grande meraviglia che gli interessati si trovarono, impreparati, di fronte alla discussione di un ordine del giorno molto diverso da quello adottato nella prima circolare.

Ecco comprendeva i sei temi:

1° Relazione sull'opera del Comitato italiano contro la Tratta delle Bianche (Presidenza del Comitato).

2° Sull'adesione dell'Italia alle deliberazioni della Conferenza internazionale contro la Tratta delle Bianche radunata a Parigi nel 1902 (On. A. Bacelli).

3° Discuzione dello Schema di Statuto del Comitato Italiano (Presidenza del Comitato).

4° Provvedimenti per la cura morale delle fanciulle del popolo (Associazione per la donna di Roma, relatrice signora Adele Albani Tondi).

5° Il contributo delle Associazioni di protezione delle giovani (Pec. Rodolfo Bettazzi di Torino).

6° Le abitudini del popolo in rapporto alla morale della donna (signora Cecilia Meyer di Roma).

La relazione del Comitato italiano letta dal Dott. Garofalo, disse il lavoro compiuto in quattro anni di esistenza, che si può riassumere nella creazione delle Sezioni di Milano, Napoli, Genova e di una nuova Sezione a Messina, nell'intervento alla Conferenza di Parigi e al Congresso internazionale di Francoforte, nella diramazione di circolari ai Sindaci, Parroci, Vescovi per interessarli all'opera e invitarli a riferire sulle condizioni del loro paese la rapporto alla Tratta delle Bianche ed in genere alla corruzione di minorenni - nella diramazione di questionari ai medici di bordo per notizie sulle giovani emigranti, e sul traffico internazionale - nella cooperazione alla fondazione di un dormitorio in Roma a L. 0,10 per sera promosso dall'Associazione per la Donna.

Ersilia Majno lesse poi quella parte della relazione intorno all'opera del Comitato Milanese

NUMERO UNICO Cent. 10

**SCHIAVE BIANCHE**

**IL NOSTRO PROGRAMMA**

**U**n problema doloroso della prostituzione è strettamente collegato ai vasti problemi economici e sociali che agitano tanto efficacemente l'epoca nostra e alla cui soluzione dovranno concorrere elementi diversi, e soprattutto una più elevata coscienza individuale e collettiva.

Ma non è vano intanto iniziare, per quanto ce lo consentono le nostre forze e le attuali condizioni sociali, una campagna contro la tratta delle bianche, perché non si stenda e venga punito come si merita, con una conforme legislazione internazionale, questo mercato cinico e ignominioso che esseri infami compiono. Approfittando delle tristi condizioni in cui si svolge comunemente la vita del proletariato



Figure 12: *Schiave Bianche*, white slaves. "Women's Union" which explains the Committee's work about trafficking in women. Source: "Unione femminile", 1902, n. 23-24, 189 - 196

<sup>24</sup> A. Morale, *Studio della prostituzione nella storia del diritto e nella legislazione vigente* [Study of prostitution in the history of law and current legislation], 1998, p.173.

<sup>25</sup> Unione femminile Nazionale, "Comitato italiano contro la tratta delle bianche", *Unione Femminile*, n.5-6 (1902): 17

The Milanese Committee proposed itself, as a statute:

to direct one's action to prevent the girls from being led into evil by deceit or coercion; to carry out an act of moral and material assistance to help those who, to return to honest life and educational action to spread the knowledge of the fatal consequences of this painful social plague; to collect all those news, facts, statistics, that can contribute to the studies being carried out in all nations to obtain international legislation. Among the activities proposed in addition to those of awareness and study, it is planned to establish kindergartens in which dangerous or dangerous girls can be temporarily accepted immediately; to make agreements with existing institutions that are already carrying out work that could subsidize those of the Committee<sup>26</sup>.

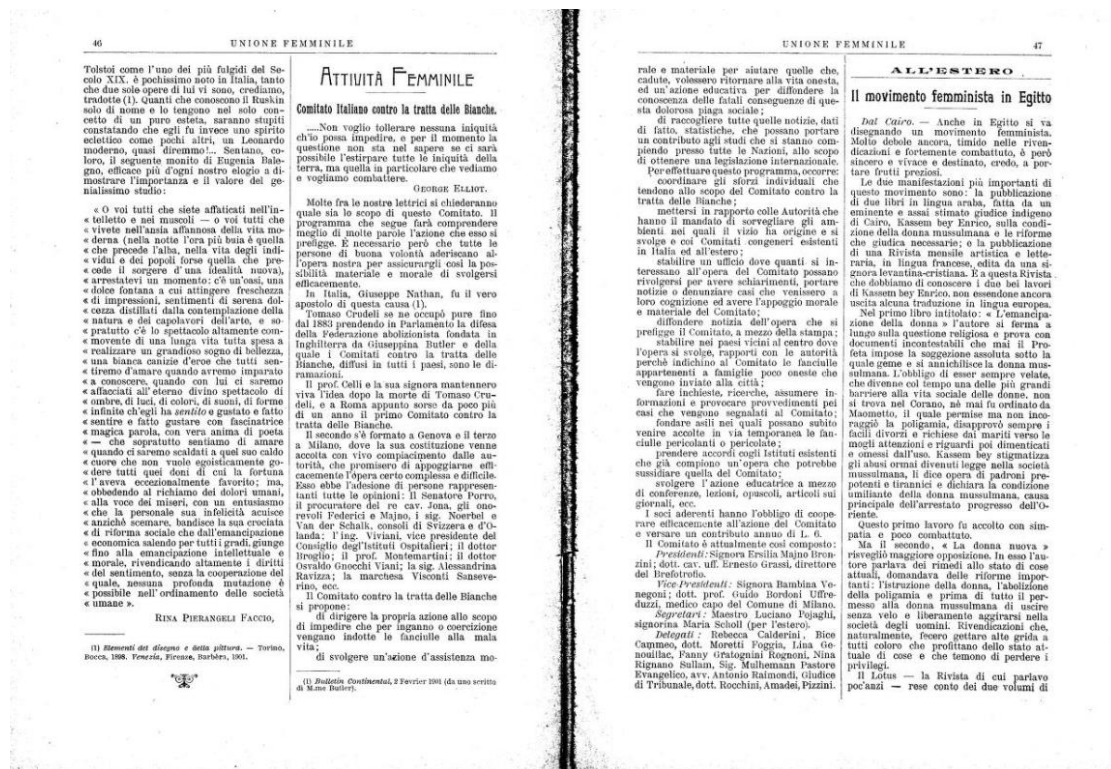


Figure 13: *Attività femminile, Comitato Italiano contro la tratta delle Bianche*, Women's Activity, Italian Committee against trafficking in women. "Women's Union" which explains the Committee's statute. Source: "Unione femminile", 1902, n. 5-6, 46-47.

<sup>26</sup> *Di dirigere la propria azione allo scopo di impedire che per inganno o coercizione vengano indotte le fanciulle alla mala vita; di svolgere un'azione di assistenza morale e materiale per aiutare quelle che, cadute, volessero ritornare alla vita onesta e un'azione educativa per diffondere la conoscenza delle fatali conseguenze di questa dolorosa piaga sociale; di raccogliere tutte quelle notizie, dati di fatto, statistiche, che possano portare un contributo agli studi che si stanno compiendo presso tutte le nazioni, allo scopo di ottenere una legislazione internazionale. Fra le attività proposte oltre a quelle di sensibilizzazione e di studio si prevede quella di fondare asili nei quali possano subito venire accolte in via temporanea le fanciulle pericolanti o percolate; prendere accordi cogli Istituti esistenti che già compiono un'opera che potrebbe sussidiare quelle del Comitato.* Translated by the author.

Unione femminile Nazionale, "Comitato italiano contro la tratta delle bianche" [Italian Committee against the White Trade], *Unione Femminile*, n.5-6 (1902): 46-47.

A part of the UFN gave the Committee its interpretation through which to look at the crime. The emancipationists of the Committee identified poverty as the main cause of the sex trade and conceived the phenomenon of prostitution as the extreme consequence of the social oppression to which women were subjected. Members of the headquarters identified that recruited sex workers were girls from the most vulnerable families. In fact, it was believed that <sup>27</sup>.

The economic imbalance [...] produces evil: the misery that exacerbates in the poor the desire to obtain what is necessary to survive by any means even illicit<sup>28</sup>.

Since its inception, therefore, the Committee had insisted that the social dimension of trafficking should be considered rather than its moral implications. In the first years of the National Committee's activity, it carried out important work of census and recognition to obtain reliable news and numbers about trafficking in women. The Committee, through the Union Periodic, informed the Municipality of Milan of the issue and allowed the beginning of the first initiatives at institutional and international levels for abolitionism <sup>29</sup>.



Figure 14: Photograph showing Ersilia Majno Bronzini working for the committee in the UFN office. Source: UFN Archives, 1901.

<sup>27</sup> Alfani, *I censimenti nell'Italia unita. Le fonti di stato della popolazione tra il XIX e il XXI secolo* [Study of prostitution in the history of law and current legislation].

<sup>28</sup> *lo squilibrio economico [...] produce il male: la miseria che acuisce nel povero il desiderio di procurarsi ciò che gli è necessario per sopravvivere con qualsiasi mezzo anche illecito*. Translated by the author.

Unione femminile Nazionale, "Come si fa la tratta delle bianche", *Schiave Bianche*, n. 8 (November 1902): 32

<sup>29</sup> Bartolini, *Attraversando il tempo. Centoventi anni dell'unione femminile nazionale* ["Crossing the Time. One hundred and twenty years of the national women's union].

Despite the efforts of the Milanese Committee against trafficking in women, the scope of the problem was too large for the association to handle alone. Adding to the challenge was the fact that, at that time, UFN was the only organization in the entire country dedicated to tackling the scourge of trafficking in women. At The UFN at a national level, was not able to develop committees equally well organized such as the Milanese one<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Ersilia Majno Bronzini, “Per intenderci” [To be clear], *Unione Femminile*, (1901): 1-2.

## The Mariuccia Asylum (1902-present)

This new work will not be a superimposition of the various institutes existing in Milan to hospitalize the young unsafe or dangerous; but a kind of link to them, a house of the deposit that accepts immediately, the poor young girls, especially minors, placed on the verge of perdition by unconscious and infamous parents or vile intermediaries<sup>31</sup>.

Some members of the Committee, including Ersilia Majno Bronzini, had the idea of creating a shelter that could accommodate, without any bureaucratic formality, without distinction of religion or nationality, young girls exposed to the danger of being recruited for sex work. Such as the daughters of prostitutes or prisoners, girls abandoned by their families and without assistance or victims of ill-treatment, violence, incest. In general, all those girls who found themselves living in “morally” and “physically” unhealthy environments and exposed to the risk of being recruited<sup>32</sup>.



Figure 15: Photography representing the first girls' guests of the Mariuccia Asylum. It is possible to notice that they are all females, very young, some of them had already been victims of trafficking, others were only considered “potential victims”. Source: image from the book *Le Mariuccine*, by Annarita Buttafuoco, 1988.

<sup>31</sup> “Questa nuova opera non sarà una sovrapposizione ai vari istituti esistenti in Milano allo scopo di ricoverare le giovanette pericolanti o pericoliate; ma una specie di anello di congiunzione ad esse, una casa di deposito che accetti immediatamente, le povere giovinette, in ispecie minorenni, poste sull'orlo della perdizione da genitori incoscienti ed infami o da vili intermediari. Translated by the author. Alfredo De Meuren, “L'asilo Mariuccia”, *Unione femminile*, n. 23-24 (1902): 195.

<sup>32</sup> Annarita Buttafuoco, *Le Mariuccine. Storia di un'istituzione laica, l'asilo Mariuccia* [Le Mariuccine. History of a secular institution, the Mariuccia asylum].

In Milan, therefore, an important and active cultural and assistance centre was consolidated around the UFN, pushing for the improvement of women's conditions. The documents analysed in the Archives of the National UFN of Milan proved how the office of the Committee assisted every year about two hundred girls<sup>33</sup>.

The fundamental turning point of the UFN in the field of assistance to the needy was the foundation of the Mariuccia Asylum, a non-denominational institution, fundamentally an organization that is not affiliated with any particular religious denomination or belief system directed by Ersilia Majno Bronzini. Inaugurated in 1902 by Ada Negri (1870-1945), who was an Italian poet and writer known also for her socially conscious works. The Mariuccia Asylum was born as a refuge for potential victims of sexual exploitation, still "pure" girl, without distinction of nationality or religion, and was intended to lay the foundations for an effective recovery of the hospitalized. The aim was to make available to the girls the possibility of building a different future.

The same year, the Office of the Committee in 1902, set up in the headquarters of the UFN of women than in via Monte di Pietà, 9 in Milan - a different building from the UFN. It was conceived as a real information point to which women could denounce and free themselves from trafficking because they were working in brothels against their will, open every afternoon:

In recourse to the office was issued 1902 to the mayors and masters of the province a notice indicating the purposes of the Committee, a circular calling for the Committee to be informed of the cases of women or girls who are forced to leave the countryside and go to the city<sup>34</sup>.



<sup>33</sup> Reference is made to the annual reports of the Comitato italiano contro la tratta delle Bianche per gli anni 1902-1903; 1904-1905; 1906-1907; 1908-1909; 1910-1911; 1912-1913 (Milano: Tipografia Nazionale di Ramperti).

<sup>34</sup> "In ricorso all'ufficio fu diramato fin dal 1902 ai sindaci e ai maestri della Provincia un avviso recante l'indicazione degli scopi del Comitato, con una circolare per invitare ad informare il comitato stesso dei casi di donne o di fanciulle indotte a lasciare il paese e recarsi in città." Translated by the author. Comitato Italiano contro la tratta delle donne e dei fanciulli [Italian Committee against Trafficking in Women and Children], report for the years 1902-1922 (Milano: tipografia Pirola, 1923), p. 8.

Figure 16: Photo showing the main door for listening to women victims of trafficking in the UFN building. Source: UFN Archives, 1903.

The center was based on an organizational system that focused on the promotion of women and put forward proposals for the protection of women and young girls, not only those who were victims of trafficking but also those considered “potential” victims. The association concentrated its efforts on trying to meet not only the natural and physiological needs of girls but also the affective ones<sup>35</sup>.

The hospitalization services did not end with the guarantee of a seat at the table in the refectory and a bed in the dormitory, but also included a specific clothing, a rich and varied diet and, above all, an image «of good, order, cleanliness [which] must destroy in the unfortunate even the memory of the ignoble, dirty environments where their miserable life took place». Hosting and feeding the girls was not enough, according to the Committee, it was necessary to make them independent both economically and culturally.



Figure 17: Archive image showing the conference room of the Mariuccia Asylum, where girls could follow debates on the question of women. Source: Sommariva Emilio Archives, Milano, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, SOM. D. nt. III. 9.

On 14 December 1902, after a large donation of ten thousand lire ordered by Nina Rignano Sullam (1871-1945) in anonymous form in July 1902, the Asylum in Viale Monterosa 6 in Milan opened its doors, named after Mariuccia, daughter of the spouses

<sup>35</sup> Bartolini, *Attraversando il tempo. Centoventi anni dell'unione femminile nazionale* [*Crossing the Time. One hundred and twenty years of the national women's union*].

Ersilia and Luigi Majno, who died suddenly of diphtheria in June 1902 at the age of 13. The inauguration ceremony was simple but solemn with a speech by Ada Negri, a close friend of the Majno Family, who underlined that the Mariuccia Asylum was only "the foundation stone of a work of regeneration, far away and different from the ancient manifestations of superficial charity"<sup>36</sup>.



Figure 18: *Per l'inaugurazione dell'Asilo Mariuccia*, For the inauguration of the Mariuccia Asylum. Scanning of the periodical containing the information relating to the first discussion about women in trafficking. "Unione femminile" of 1903, n.1, 1.

The erection of the Mariuccia Asylum took place with the Decreto Regio on 8 December 1908, which came into force in January 1909, changing the administrative order of the work<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Ada Negri, "Per l'inaugurazione dell'Asilo Mariuccia" [For the inauguration of the Mariuccia Asylum], *Unione femminile*, n. 1 (January 1903): 3-5.

<sup>37</sup> "La raccolta ufficiale delle leggi e dei decreti del Regno" [The official collection of the laws and decrees of the Kingdom], *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 15 (January 19, 1909): 287.

N.DXXVII (Given in Rome on 6 December 1908), with which the Asylum "Mariuccia" of Milan is erected in moral body and the relative organic statute is approved<sup>38</sup>.



N. DXXVII (Dato a Roma, il 6 dicembre 1908), col quale l'asilo « Mariuccia » di Milano, è eretto in ente morale ed è approvato lo statuto organico relativo.

Figure 19: Scan of the document called: *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno di Italia*, regarding the building permits of the Mariuccia Asylum. Source: Gazzetta Ufficiale Archives, 1908.

In 1912 the Propaganda Committee was founded, with the task of organizing events such as conferences, concerts, and theatrical performances whose proceeds could be received by the Asylum and which at the same time spread information about the institution.



Figure 20 and Figure 21: Pictures showing the Mariuccia Asylum building itself, viale Monterosa 6, in 1902. Source: UFN Archives, 1902.

<sup>38</sup> N.DXXVII (Dato a Roma il 6 dicembre 1908), col quale l'asilo "Mariuccia" di Milano è eretto in ente morale ed è approvato lo statuto organico relativo. Translated by the author.



Figure 22: Photo showing the inner courtyard of the building dedicated to the play and recreation of the girls' guests of the Mariuccia Asylum. Source: Mariuccia Asylum Archives, 1930.

Figure 23: Picture of the building of the Mariuccia Asylum, portrait in a postcard of 1950s. Source: Mariuccia Asylum Archives, 1952.

At the end of 1916, the Asylum stretched over a large three-story building consisting of two bodies joined by a vast hall erected on a part of the garden. Thus expanded, the Asylum could have rooms for 90 or 100 girls, adequate toilets including hot water showers, large work and study rooms, a recreation room, kitchen, wardrobe, laundry, and ironing, both for your own needs, both as laboratories for teaching domestic work<sup>39</sup>.



Figure 24 and 25: Images that portray the spaces of the Mariuccia Asylum where girls were made practical workshops and taught domestic work. Source: Emilio Sommariva Archives, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, fondo Sommariva, SOM. D. nt. III. 11.

In the early 1900s, domestic work was a highly gendered occupation and was often seen as the most suitable profession for women. With institutions like the Asylum placing a strong emphasis on providing vocational training in domestic work to prepare girls for their future roles as homemakers and wives, strong gender stereotypes in that historical

<sup>39</sup> Annarita Buttafuoco, *Le Mariuccine. Storia di un'istituzione laica, l'asilo Mariuccia* [Le Mariuccine. History of a secular institution, the Mariuccia Asylum].

period. The model promoted was principally the Angel of the House. The girls were expected to be pure, submissive, and nurturing, devoting herself entirely to her husband and children<sup>40</sup>. This model was promoted by the dominant patriarchal society of the time. Especially since the 1930s with the advent of fascism in Italy, which viewed women as inferior and in need of male guidance and protection<sup>41</sup>.



Figure 26: Photo showing the dining room space where young women could eat together and spend their free time. Source: Emilio Sommariva Archives, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, SOM. E. ls. III. 687

Figure 27: Photo showing the space for teaching housework, in this case sewing. Source: UFN Archives, 1904.

In the second half of the 1960s, the municipality of Milan offered Mariuccia Asylum the opportunity to buy the ex-Rocchetti Villa of Porto Valtravaglia, on Lake Maggiore, in the province of Varese, with the adjoining large park. Various structural interventions were carried out, including the construction of a new building, a gym, and classrooms to be used as after-school and laboratories. In 1972, the Porto Valtravaglia Institute obtained from the Ministry of Health the recognition of a medical-psycho-pedagogical institute<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> Kühn, Sarah. "The angel in the house and fallen women: Assigning women their places in Victorian society." *Open Educational Resources*, University of Oxford 4 (2016): 171-78.

<sup>41</sup> Victoria, De Grazia. *How fascism ruled women: Italy, 1922-1945*. (California: Univ of California Press, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Annarita Buttafuoco, *Le Mariuccine. Storia di un'istituzione laica, l'asilo Mariuccia* [Le Mariuccine. History of a secular institution, the Mariuccia asylum].



Figure 28: Photo of the interior space of the Porto Valtravaglia office transformed after 1972 into medical-psycho-pedagogical institute. Source: Mariuccia Asylum Archives, 1972.

In 1986, Mariuccia Asylum acquired the library of the UIPE, which was based in Geneva<sup>43</sup>. 4000 works, especially in French and English, that encloses the history of the problems related to children over twenty years in the world: studies, projects, reports, statistics, and debates on children published between the late fifties and early eighties of the twentieth century. The documentary material has been aggregated to the documentation owned by the Mariuccia Asylum consisting of a historical archive relating to the activity of the institution and a library specialized in the history of the family, childhood, and childcare of the twentieth century<sup>44</sup>.

At present times, The Mariuccia Asylum has five communities and twenty-two *case per l'autonomia*, housing that try to teach how to learn a personal autonomy in Milan, Sesto San Giovanni and Porto Valtravaglia (VA). It deals with mothers with children. Its mission is to promote through training and work the growth and physical and psychological well-being of marginalized children and mothers, aiming at their social integration and employment. Since 2004, Asilo Mariuccia is a Foundation and a non-profit organization<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Union Internationale pour la Protection de l'Enfance.

<sup>44</sup> "Fondazione Asilo Mariuccia".

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

## CONCLUSION

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In 1865 sex work was legalised in Italy starting a discussion about trafficking in women. Beyond city streets, sex workers also work in many other places, including saunas, massage salons, private clubs, hotels, bars, cafes and, increasingly, in their own homes, in areas that are often not recognized as “sexual work centers”<sup>46</sup>. Such as the place still today partly known as the *vicoli del piacere*, alleys of pleasure, where in 1900 stood the most important brothel of the city of Milan in via Fiori Chiari 17. The Committee and the UFN led the discussion against trafficking in women. They gave place to conferences on the theme in the space of the theatre and talked about it through the publication of the Periodical of the association. The foundation of this body projected the battle against the trafficking in women and girls on the international level, involving other associations and governmental institutions. In 1902, to prevent marginalized young girls from being driven into traffic for the purpose of prostitution, the UFN created a specific architectural facility: the Mariuccia Asylum.

The Mariuccia Asylum intended to host women and young girls offering what was considered at that time a “socio-educational” assistance. The female model that the Mariuccia Asylum proposed to the girls who arrived was that of the mother and wife of the family, this is the model to which they must aspire. As a result, the spaces within the Asylum played a crucial role in enabling sharing and “re-education” including laboratories to teach domestic work, not only for being “good wife” but also for “professional domestic workers”, to get employment in upper class homes. Even if envisioned as a safe space to improve future women’s chances for the future, the Mariuccia Asylum did not escape of gender stereotypes from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: since her birth, the girls hosted at the Mariuccia Asylum were educated into religious values and domestic work. This proves once again that the Asylum was not immune to gender stereotypes in 1900. Today the idea of this precise new woman is an idea completely superseded by the concept of emancipation and self-determination, very far from the idea that was held in those days of women.

It is crucial to consider that Italian women, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were orientated to carrying out domestic tasks and taking care of others. The Italian patriarchal tradition proposed a model of family based on the authority of the father, to whose figure was subordinated both his wife and children, taking up, albeit with due distinctions, the model of the *pater familias*. Since the 1930, the rhetoric of the Fascist regime contributed to designating the female figure as the *angelo del focolare*, angel of the house, seeing in the woman a figure aimed at procreation and care-work.

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<sup>46</sup> In reference to the note n. 19, about the choice of the word.

According to Buttafuoco, the Mariuccia Asylum “is considered as a part of an expression of practical feminism wants to fight for women’s rights while helping women concretely, and in this case, it means helping children in difficulty and therefore removing them from an uncomfortable situation, allowing changing and starting a new life”<sup>47</sup>. It is necessary, however, to consider that these ideas around the “re-education” through the domestic work correspond to the first wave of feminism that involves the historical period analyzed (1900 - 1930). This wave of feminism aimed to address in those years the “woman question” proposing a new model of woman through the ideologies of domesticity were used to support the claim of equality<sup>48</sup>.

This research, with its complexity, brought together pieces that were previously separate: the phenomenon of prostitution in Milan and Italy, the work of the association, and the response to what was considered one of the central problems in that historical period. Through the exercise of a historical filter, it was possible to understand the progress and the starting points of discussions that still divide the feminist world between abolitionist and regulatory arguments. It was relevant to take the accurate distances from an old worldview that was believed in that period to be modern and advanced but that perhaps today certainly appears distant and sometimes conservative, closely linking femininity, domestic work, and religion.

After extensive historical-architectural research and analysis, the intricate link between the Mariuccia Asylum, the UFN association, and the phenomenon of prostitution in Milan emerged. All these elements represent different facets of the same complex social issue. The historical context and architectural design of these bodies provided valuable insight into the social and cultural attitudes of the time towards women and their place in society. By examining these issues through a historical lens, is gained a better understanding of the origins of the ongoing debates surrounding feminism and sex work. From my personal perspective, it has been fascinating to examine the spaces that had been conceived in the design of the Asylum, the association UFN and one of the most known brothels in Milan in via Fiori Chiari 17, thanks to the investigation of photographs and documents that have been preserved in the archive of the UFN. The architecture and the study of space, in its historical and conceptual complexity, prove once again a pivotal point to understanding historical society and the beginnings of discussions that still involve the contemporary world.

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<sup>47</sup> Annarita Buttafuoco, *Le Mariuccine. Storia di un’istituzione laica, l’asilo Mariuccia* [Le Mariuccine. History of a secular institution, the Mariuccia asylum].

<sup>48</sup> Hagar Kotef, “First Wave Liberal Feminism and the Construction of the Abstract Woman, Feminist Studies”, *The Politics of Embodiment*, No. 3, Vol. 35, (Fall 2009). 495-522.

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