

From Showbiz to Parliament. Is this the Italian Women's dream?

Maria Rita Latta (June 05, 2009)



The dream of many Italian girls is to appear on TV, have five minutes of celebrity and become a velina. It's the first step to a career that in the Belpaese could take you straight to Parliament....

Recently, the Italian media's attention has been focused on issues that have little to do with politics and the upcoming European elections on June 7 and 8. Various words have reverberated throughout the country lately - velina, letterina, meteorina, and letteronza - words that vaguely mean starlet or showgirl and refer to the tall, thin, beautiful, and scantily-clad young women who appear on Italian television usually dancing, helping to present the show, and sometimes saying a few lines, all while looking provocative but not really doing anything at all. And these words, it seems, have very little to do with such an important political event.

Since the first phase of candidate selection, news has surfaced of the peculiar way in which some parties have chosen potential candidates, namely Silvio Berlusconi's party. In the premier's mind, they should all, both males and females alike, be good-looking, young, and tanned. If they are also



qualified for the position, well...so much the better! This criterion has characterized Silvio Berlusconi's party since his first appearance on the Italian political scene almost two decades ago, and it has since been his

"signature" on the types of candidates nominated. Year after year, his inclination towards a "physically perfect candidate" has increased, bringing with it the novelty of female officials and undersecretaries who could easily compete in beauty pageants. Stefania Prestigiacomo and [Mara Carfagna](#) [2] are the best example of this.

The now notorious "Noemigate" has prompted many to reflect on how Italy has been and still is changing politically. Noemi Letizia, whose photos can be seen everywhere in the media, recently admitted her ambition of becoming a *velina* and her hope to use it as a stepping stone to bigger things, thanks to Papì aka Berlusconi. She is, in fact, merely following in the steps of many other representatives in Berlusconi's party.

Previous generations of Italians grew up with the myth of the diploma, that a college degree was synonymous with success and would be met with envy and admiration. Up until the 1990s, most average Italian parents supported their children in their studies and intellectual pursuits. The goal for them was to get a good job and steady employment, the so-called "posto fisso" in a government office. In the last twenty years, we have witnessed a new wave of television programs that are more focused on the "physical" rather than the "intellectual." Television since then has influenced the behavior and shaped the expectations of everyday Italians, and it has become an attractive industry in which to work because of the desire to "appear," to become famous, and, of course, because of the high earnings regardless of the quality or difficulty of the work.

Many young Italian women dream of becoming a *velina* or appearing on the Italian version of Big Brother ([Grande Fratello](#) [3]) or other reality shows and, eventually, marrying a soccer player.

My daughter, who is in her last year of high school at the Liceo Classico, told me that she has two friends in her class who put their photos online and have rather unrealistic expectations about imminent careers in showbiz. I went to her school on the last day of classes and asked them to tell me about their average day. Serena, a nice-looking brunette wearing fashionable clothes, starts laughing: "Well, in the morning there is the 'torture' that is school. Some days, though, there are casting calls or screen tests, so I'd rather miss a day of school. It's so important - everything could happen on that day, it could be THE day, and I don't want to lose out!"

Sara, the second girl aspiring to be a *velina* adds: "The days are almost all the same, school in the morning and in the afternoon there's homework, as well as the gym, casting calls, screen tests, photo sessions, beauty contests. We often go there together. It could happen that one of us, or both, who knows, could be noticed and hired by some director or agent to appear in a commercial, on a quiz show, or on some other kind of show. It would also be good to be on a local television show starting out, just to be seen and recognized."

Claudia, 15, is listening and says: "There are so many showgirls who started out by getting a small part on a TV program. Just think of [Simona Ventura](#) [4], [Alessia Marcuzzi](#) [5], [Elisabetta Canalis](#) [6]. Ilary Blasi had incredible luck and I want to be like her. Imagine - she started as a letterina on a show on channel five and now she presents the program *Le Iene* and...she's married to my idol, [Francesco Totti](#) [7]! Forza Roma!"

Barbara, 18, attends the Liceo Linguistico that's in the same building. She was left back one year but she's continuing with school even if her dream is to be in showbiz. "In elementary school I already knew that I liked to be the center of attention. Every Saturday afternoon I asked my mom to take me to the [Gilda](#) [8] [a famous Roman disco] for Baby Gilda afternoons. I was eleven and I was dancing on the cube. I felt very comfortable, recognized, admired. I have my photos online and I really hope I get noticed. Dancing is my specialty, even though I think I'm probably going to try the screen tests for the next season of the Big Brother. Right now I'm working part time as a ragazza imagine in a disco."



Laura, 17, listens and is horrified: "How can a mother take an eleven year-old girl to a disco and let her dance on a cube? Unbelievable!"

Ludovica, 19, has a clear idea about her future: "I'm going to keep studying and eventually get a degree in music and the visual and performing arts. I'll continue with the screen tests, beauty contests, and all that stuff to help pay for college. Last year I was hired by a local television station. It was a program on soccer, with debates and quarrels about the Roman soccer teams, Roma and Lazio. I had to sit on a high stool wearing a mini dress that had a deep, plunging neckline, while listening to everything without saying a word. My moment [in the spotlight] came when I had to read a commercial from a local business that sold bathroom fixtures. It wasn't a great job, and had nothing to do with being a velina at all. Thanks to the income, though, I was able to buy my first car, even though it was a used one. It's better than nothing, anyway..."

Better than nothing, anyway...the important thing is to appear on TV, to have even five minutes of celebrity while dreaming of becoming a velina. It's the first step to a career that in the Belpaese could take you straight to Parliament....

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