

Laura Boldrini: the Italian politician rising above the rape threats

Laura Boldrini, speaker of Italy's Chamber of Deputies, on reversing women's losses under Berlusconi

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Laura Boldrini: 'It's unbelievable you know. It is hard' Photograph: AGF srl/REX

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Laura Boldrini had not led a sheltered life prior to her election as an MP last year. As spokesperson for the United Nations Refugee Agency in southern Europe, she had been on missions to countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq and documented the Mediterranean's transformation into a frequently fatal route for asylum seekers.

Even so, aspects of her new career have been eye-opening. In more than 20 years at the UN, for instance, she never once had to deal with being sent photos of her face superimposed on to the body of a woman being raped. Now she has reached the heights of the Italian state, however, it is a regular occurrence.

"[This is] something that really affects me a lot," she says. "It's absolutely terrible. Sometimes they also say, 'We know where your apartment [is], we know your address'. I have a daughter. She's studying in the UK; she is 20. And when she is here I am always very anxious. Because I don't want her to have a problem because of me."

Boldrini has received thousands of misogynistic insults, threats and debasing images since deciding to stand as a candidate for the small Left Ecology Freedom (SEL) party. In February last year, she was elected an MP and the following month she was made speaker of the lower house of parliament – or Chamber of Deputies.

The position is, according to the constitution, the third most senior in the country, behind only the president and the speaker of the Senate. Yet the (exclusively male) deputies in the rightwing Northern League persist in jibing her with an honorific she finds irritating and offensive. "They keep calling me 'Signor Presidente'. It's done on purpose, of course."

In the past fortnight, matters have reached a new level of intensity following [Boldrini's unprecedented decision to cut short a filibuster by Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement \(M5S\)](#). She has been assailed with insults and violent threats in the comment section of Grillo's blog, some of which called for her assault, sexual or otherwise (these were later deleted by moderators). Grillo had posted a video with the title "What would you do alone in a car with Boldrini?", which showed a man driving and talking to a cut-out of her.



Laura Boldrini in her office, January 2014. Photograph: Courtesy Laura Boldrini

Not one to be cowed, Boldrini went on a high-profile talk show to denounce those who she said were instigating gender-based violence and were "almost potential rapists". In response, she received a tweet from the M5S's communications man in the Senate: "Dear Laura, I wanted to reassure you. Even if we from Grillo's blog were all potential rapists, you'd be in no danger!"

But there have been positive advances. Following last February's inconclusive elections, which eventually produced an awkward left-right coalition government, the proportion of female MPs in the lower house increased from 21% to 31%. Prime minister [Enrico Letta appointed seven women](#) to his 22-member cabinet. One of them, [Cécile Kyenge, Italy's first black minister, faces a regular barrage of racist](#) as well as sexist abuse.

"The change is there," says Boldrini, sitting in her grand office in Palazzo Montecitorio, days before the M5S blog row exploded. "Although I was not here before, I think there is more attention to certain issues."

She was particularly proud when, under her guidance, [the chamber voted unanimously to ratify the Istanbul Convention](#), a Council of Europe treaty aimed at fighting violence against women.

Less so when, at a recent meeting of the heads of the chamber's 14 sub-committees, she saw 13 men and one woman. "I thought, wow, this is not possible. Coming from the UN system, having very clearly in mind the gender issues, I'm sometimes very surprised that here it is not yet something they keep in mind – something you have to stick to."

The 52-year-old, equipped with her new institutional clout, is determined to force gender-based issues on to Italy's agenda. Perhaps most vocally, she has decried the famously outdated way in which Italian women are depicted on screen, both in television programmes and advertisements, industries closely associated with the former prime minister [Silvio Berlusconi](#).

Boldrini is scathing about the culture that has flourished in [Italy](#) during the last two decades, when, she says, women "lost a lot of terrain" they had fought for in the 60s and 70s. "This trend [of accruing rights] was slowed down by the kind of approach that some politicians – including Berlusconi – had towards women. This also passed through society," she says. During Berlusconi's twilight years as prime minister, his equal opportunities minister was a former topless model and Berlusconi's dental hygienist, a former showgirl, suddenly became a regional

councillor in Lombardy. The impact on the reputation of Italy's female politicians has not been good.

But, in general, Boldrini thinks things are changing. "It takes time, but this idea that women are appreciated because they are nice looking belongs to an old culture, which was successful at a time when you had people – high-ranking officials and politicians – following that trend. But now I think this is over."

That is not to say her stand on all issues has been welcomed. When last year she applauded the decision of the [state broadcaster, Rai, to stop showing Miss Italia](#), the annual beauty pageant, she was labelled a humourless prude incapable of appreciating a quintessential part of her own culture, one, for that matter, that had produced Sophia Loren! She gives these critics short shrift. "Give me a break," she sighs. "This is something [that is] unacceptable."

She meted out similar treatment to the chairman of [the world's largest pasta maker, Guido Barilla](#), after he patronisingly dismissed her criticisms of the way in which the Italian advertising sector tended to always depict women as homemakers and caregivers. "Advertising is a very serious matter and should be handled by people who understand it," he told a radio station. Boldrini, he explained, did not "have the skills" to comprehend it.

Boldrini is not discouraged this kind of criticism. Instead, she sees it as a chance to prove a point. "I am convinced I am doing the right thing because I receive so many emails from women, saying, 'Go ahead; you represent us'," she says. "This is quite new because in the past it was not easy to find a woman whom women wanted to be represented by. So this gives me the energy to go ahead. But it's unbelievable, you know. It is hard."