



Imperfect Democracies. Why the Margins Matter

by Costanza Montanari

The issue of suspended rights must be addressed by questioning the certainties we hold about our system. Therefore, I have chosen three areas that we often take for granted, but which are in fact far from being fully realized.

When I take part in *Pride* and *Non Una di Meno* marches, I always get the same comment: that there is nothing left to protest for, that we have reached the highest possible peak of equality, freedom, and humanity.

But then why do women, who are “perfect students” at school, later find themselves facing strong segregation in the workplace¹?

Why is the right to Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy, achieved with overwhelming support, gradually consuming, becoming less and less accessible and guaranteed?

And why do Italian prisons continue to be bubbles impermeable to democracy and the rule of law—principles we take for granted outside?

1. *How is a culture based on inequality created?*

On average, at least two people out of ten do not completely support the principles of gender equality².

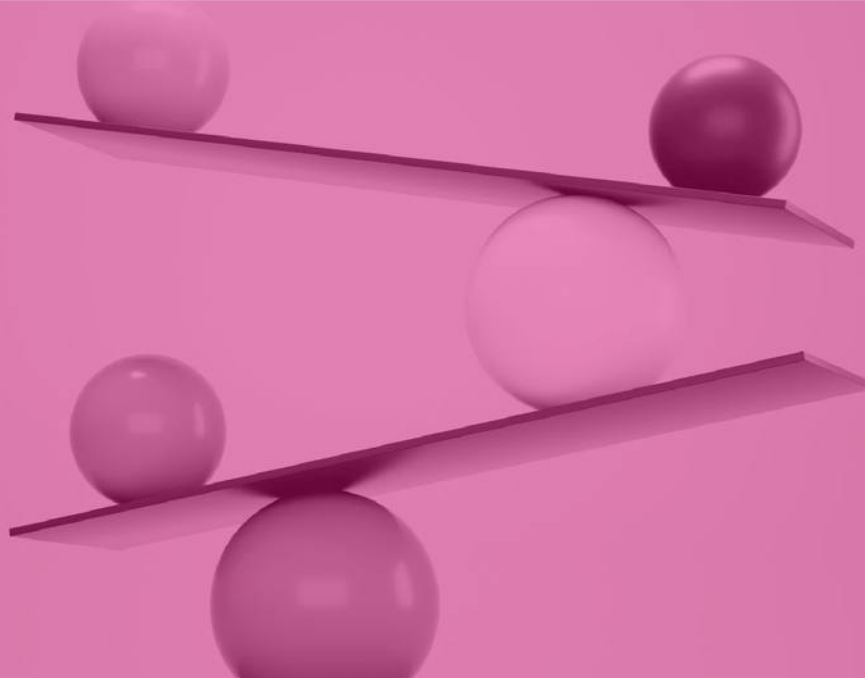
All too often, as a “well-behaved child” and a “responsible girl,” I was assigned the task of monitoring and managing my more troublesome male classmates.

Like many others, I learned very early on to be patient, to endure; and then I learned to measure my abilities against a society that presumes what I can and cannot do. And it calls it *biology*.

The most insidious form of violence begins with microaggressions. Minimized, brushed aside.

They are the sexual jokes at school and later at work, the more or less subtle forms of discrimination.

Microaggressions reinforce the stereotype of unreliability and incompetence; they limit women’s access to positions of authority and leadership, leaving decision-making to only one segment of the population.



They instill diligence and obedience in girls, making them more vulnerable to violence, often without the tools to react.

Instead of denying the existence of a phenomenon, we must go deeper. Recognizing the cracks at its root is the way to counter its most serious consequences.

2. How is a recognized right suspended?

In 2023, 57.1% of Italian gynecologists declared themselves conscientious objectors³.

Despite its legalization, Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy remains the subject of a controversial *moral question*.

But I believe that what makes this right fundamental is not victory in the moral debate, subject as it is to the volatility of politics and public sentiment.

It is necessity. This is why I believe that conscientious objection is a risky freedom. Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy is an **essential service** to guarantee women's physical and mental health and to protect their dignity and autonomy⁴. In the absence of safe choices, we know that people resort to clandestine abortions, with very serious consequences: in Italy, more than 10,000 illegal abortions are estimated each year⁵.

Even though Law 194 has not substantially changed since 1978, the conditions for its implementation have deteriorated over time. Access is uncertain and, in several regions, dependent on forced mobility⁶.

This right, obtained more than 50 years ago, **has still not been fully achieved**. Guaranteeing all women the protection and safety provided by law is a priority, not a debate.

3. Rights suffocate in prison. Breathing in a system tailored to someone else.

Punishments must not consist of treatment contrary to the sense of humanity and must aim at the rehabilitation of the convicted person⁷.

Work, mental health care, art and theater, sports activities, support and closeness with one's family. All of this is what makes us human in our daily lives.

Why then are these aspects often privileges that are inaccessible in prison? In this bubble, reality is reversed. Rights that are guaranteed outside become **concessions** inside. The democratic and egalitarian structure is replaced by a punitive and reward-based hierarchy.



The right to rehabilitation, in the form of programs and work opportunities, remains largely inaccessible, especially for foreigners and women.

Bureaucracy is an obstacle to reintegration for the former; instead of helping, it pushes them away.⁸ Due to their smaller numbers, the latter remain on the margins, in conditions of greater isolation and neglect. It strikes me—but does not surprise me—that once again it is the most vulnerable groups who suffer most from the deterioration of the system.

4. Why suspended rights?

This article stems from the belief that it is a mistake to be satisfied with appearances without examining reality, simply because it seems not to affect us. But a right is not truly a right as long as it remains conditional. And a democracy is not complete until it protects every one of its citizens.

Note

1. In Italian couples, employed women's median annual earnings amount to just over half those of their partner (53%). [European Index for Gender Equality, money](#)
2. Depending on the context, between 16% and 20% of the population adopts neutral positions, while explicit disagreement ranges from 3% to 5%. Data from the 2023 [European Social Survey](#)
3. [Report on Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy \(IVG\), March 2026, Italian Ministry of Health](#)
4. World Health Organization (WHO), [Abortion Care Guidelines](#)
5. Estimate based on mathematical models developed by the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) and the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). Estimating [Illegal Abortion in Italy](#), 2025 Conference Proceedings
6. The regions most affected are Basilicata, Sardinia and Molise, where reported abortion rates are close to zero. [Report on Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy \(IVG\), March 2026, Italian Ministry of Health](#)
7. [Constitution of the Italian Republic](#), Article 27, paragraph 3
8. [Without Breath](#) (Senza Respiro), 2025 Report by the Antigone Association