

The Guardian

I've been called a whore for my part in the #MeToo campaign. It won't stop me

Asia Argento

Since accusing Harvey Weinstein of rape, I have been vilified in Italy. But I've got a message for these predatory enablers

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Whore. Liar. Traitor. Opportunist.

I have been called all of these things and more since I first began to speak out last October about being raped in 1997, when I was 21 years old, by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. For speaking my truth, I have been slut-shamed, victim-blamed, bullied, and threatened on a daily basis. And I am not alone.

Women everywhere, emboldened by the #MeToo movement, have had the courage to share their most painful private traumas in public, only to face blanket denials and further assaults, this time on their character, their credibility, their dignity.

Six months after the Weinstein story broke in the New York Times and the New Yorker, more and more high-profile establishment figures, from motivational speaker Tony Robbins to Vladimir Putin's spokesman, are also feeling emboldened - not to confess their cowardice as

shameless spectators but to denounce the #MeToo movement. It's open season on survivors. The larger our number, and the more outspoken we are, it seems, the greater the ferocity and frequency of attacks. The most brutal and vicious response to this flowering of female political thought and action is taking place in my home country, Italy, but the poison seeps out.

That is why I spoke last week alongside two formidable and outspoken Italian women: Laura Boldrini and Ambra Battilana Gutierrez at the Women in the World summit in New York.

For defending women's rights in Italy, Boldrini has been subjected to outrageous and at times violent intimidation. Her effigy has been burned in the street. One small-town rightwing mayor suggested that she should be raped by migrants. Matteo Salvini, the extreme rightwing leader of the Northern League, brought an inflatable sex doll that he referred to as "Boldrini" to a political rally. This scurrilous defamer may yet become Italy's next prime minister. Another member of the Northern League called for her "physical elimination". Beppe Grillo, founder of the Five Star Movement, is barred from running for election himself because of a manslaughter conviction. But his party won the largest share of the vote in Italy's recent election, and he asked his two million Facebook followers: "What would you do if you found Boldrini in a car?"

Gutierrez is the fearless young model who went up against Silvio Berlusconi and Weinstein. She testified about what she saw and experienced at Berlusconi's "bunga bunga" parties during the infamous "prostitution trial" in 2011. Two years later, the NYPD asked Gutierrez to wear a wire during an encounter with Weinstein. She recorded what turned out to be an explosive piece of audio. For this, the tabloids smeared her as a prostitute and blackmailer.

We have a message for these predatory enablers.

What began in Italy is now manifest in the US and beyond, public discourse degraded into a sick tabloid fantasy, of sex, corruption, violence and lies. What began with Berlusconi continues with Trump and Weinstein. All are men in positions of power and of a now all-too-familiar type, who view women as chattels to serve their sexual lust and to puff up their fragile egos, and who then, later, try to cover up their crimes with bribery, threats and intimidation. The exploitation of women has been central to each of their paths to power. Weinstein used his company to hunt for prey. Trump used the Miss USA Pageant to gain power and influence in the business and media world.

Berlusconi showed them both the way. He corrupted Italy by degrees through a vast media empire that includes three national TV channels, Italy's largest book and magazine publisher, Mondadori, and a daily newspaper, Il Giornale. Striscia la Notizia, a weekly TV show on Berlusconi's Canale 5 featuring half-naked showgirls, makes a mockery of the news, yet it has been the highest-rated and most-watched TV show in Italy since the late 1980s.

Over time, the exploitation of women as mindless, unspeaking, submissive sex objects has proliferated across Italian TV. These images of women insinuated themselves into the subconscious of the nation, colonising the culture like a fungus and distorting the ambitions of young Italian women.

This, they were told, was how to be admired and to succeed: play dumb, be silent, act sexy. An object of desire without a voice. And Berlusconi was able to achieve this because, in Italy, women were already worth less than nothing, forced into one of two roles: the mother or the whore. Italy has long been sexist to the bone. Misogyny, it seems, is the rule of law, femicide a fact of life. In Italy, one woman is killed by a man every 60 hours. One out of every three women has been subjected in their lifetimes to some form of sexual violence. One in three!

Until 1981, charges of rape could be dropped by Italian legal authorities if a rape victim agreed to marry her rapist. That horrendous practice was known as “reparatory marriage”. Until the same year, a husband could kill his wife if he believed she had committed adultery and receive only a minor sentence. Until 1996, rape was not even considered a crime against a person, only a crime against the “public morals”.

Think about that. And even after the law was changed, the statute of limitations for reporting a rape runs out after six months. After that, it's not possible to secure justice. It's as if the law was enacted to prevent the reporting and prosecution of rape. To pretend it is not even happening. A law written by men, for men. A law designed to protect the rapist.

And so, not surprisingly, when I spoke out about Weinstein, Italy was the only place where my story was not accepted or believed. Instead, my reputation was traduced, my story distorted, my credibility made hostage to smears.

Almost daily, Italian television featured a discussion panel made up of people who did not know me, people I had never met, who felt qualified to argue whether I had been raped or not; dissecting my story, my life, as if they were detectives at a scene that existed only in their salacious imaginations. And the conclusion these great detectives came to was that not only was I asking for it, but I wanted it and benefited from it. What happened to me was not rape, they said, it was prostitution. In their eyes, I was not even worthy of being a victim of this monstrous crime. In their eyes, I was not even good enough to be raped. This relentless dehumanisation in the Italian media eventually gave others beyond Italy the idea they could vilify and slander me with impunity also.

Some of the cruellest and most hurtful comments came from those I do happen to have known. The director Catherine Breillat calls herself a feminist but puts her own interests above those of women. In a recent interview she mourned the loss of Harvey Weinstein for European cinema and said not a word in support of the scores of women he raped, assaulted and harassed. By launching a truly vicious character assassination of me, she tried to tarnish the credibility of all Weinstein accusers.

Then consider the actor and male model Vincent Gallo. To promote himself and the men's fashion line he was paid to wear, he used the pages of a British fashion magazine, Another Man, to make a malicious, unprovoked attack on me and Rose McGowan. (I hardly know Gallo, and was only briefly acquainted with him almost two decades ago.) He brought shame on Yves Saint Laurent and its creative director Anthony Vaccarello, who allowed its model to sell its clothes while doing a hatchet job on two survivors of sexual assault. Yves Saint Laurent and Another Man publisher Jefferson Hack shamed themselves by allowing Gallo to do this in their name without censure, or question or qualification, and silently profiting from the publicity. And they call us prostitutes? I will not allow these squalid gaslighters to go unchecked in their character assassinations. Of me, of #MeToo, of anybody. None of us should tolerate them.

By contrast, we might all celebrate Nanine McCool. This brave woman stood up in a packed arena before tens of thousands people and faced down the self-styled self-help guru Tony Robbins. This man, a ludicrous, Ken doll manbot stereotype of strutting male machismo, towered over her and attempted to use his physical presence to intimidate her. McCool stood her ground, and did not back down. She won the argument, and unmasked this giant as a naked pygmy. This he clearly regretted only when a video of their interaction went viral online, threatening to hit him where it hurt - his bottom line. It forced him to issue a PR-scripted “apology”.

We are all Nanine McCool. I stand with her and all survivors. Their pain is my pain. Their trauma, my trauma. Their fight is my fight. Their voice, my voice. My own experience, my own pain, turned me into an activist, and gave me a calling, a mission and a message, something far more valuable for my self-respect than any career in movies. Six months ago, the world changed, definitively and irrevocably. The balance of power tipped, at last, in favour of the survivors who have been given a voice and platform to speak their truths to the world. If we remain strong, determined, vigilant - if we support each other - the intimidators will fail.

What has been done cannot be undone. What has been revealed can no longer be hidden. What has been said can no longer be unspoken. For speaking truth to power, I have been called a whore, a liar, a traitor and an opportunist. The one thing I will not be though, the one thing none us will be, is silenced.

. Asia Argento is an Italian actor, director and activist

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