

# Diversity in Italy

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Growing up, Italy was a place of dreams. I thought of rolling hills, unfathomably good food, breathtaking red wine, and gorgeous people. I dreamt of getting swept off my feet by a Giuseppe or an Alessandro and growing old together in Tuscany. I fantasized about places like Venice, trying to imagine how a city could really be on the water. All of it seemed far off, almost impossible, much more so a fantasy world of perfection and euphoria, rather than simply another country across the Atlantic.

As I matured, Italy transformed from a land of fantasy to a distinct possibility. I learned of family that still lives in Italy, I understood the potential of study abroad, and I realized that personal travel was also possible with the right budgeting and planning. However, even as a journey to Italy became more likely, my critical thinking and my efforts to understand the country more holistically remained stagnant. I know now that I, like so many other American tourists, was completely entranced by a “romantic myth of Italy.”

In the fall of 2018, I committed to spending the following semester, the spring of 2019, studying in Florence. During that same fall semester, I had the immense privilege of taking a course entitled “Italy on Screen: Sex, Gender and Racial Identities in the Glocal Context,” taught by Francesca Calamita at the University of Virginia, which allowed me to begin unpacking the romantic myth of Italy. Professor Calamita’s course opened my eyes in a plethora of ways. I had never stopped to consider how issues relating to diversity and identity may manifest in the fantasy land that I had contrived in my head. Through thorough investigations of media created by Italians and/or set in Italy, the course illuminated the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, immigrants, women, and other minority communities across Italy. Films such as *Passo a due*, *Viola di mare*, *Le fate ignoranti*, *Bianco e nero*, *Fuocoammare*, and *La pazza gioia* taught us

that while, sure, there are dominant ideas and sweeping generalizations about a “true Italy,” the country is much, much more complicated and multi-faceted than its olive oil, wine, and beautiful people. We used these films and the discussions they catalyzed to reflect on topics of diversity and inclusion and grapple with realities of racism, sexism, corruption, and homophobia in Italy and across the globe. Ultimately, I ended the course so immensely appreciative of the opportunity to challenge my stereotypes of Italy.

As that fall semester finished up and my semester in Florence approached, questions began swirling around in my mind. How would all of these diversity related issues impact my experience in Italy? Would I get to meet people from diverse walks of life, or would Florence be more homogenous? What would life be like for me, a queer woman from outside of the country? How did attitudes towards diversity manifest in Florence, in contrast with the rest of the country?

Thankfully, when I arrived in Florence, I had the pleasure of taking a class called “Diversity in Italy,” taught by Federico Damonte at ISI Florence, that served as a fitting accompaniment to the knowledge I had begun to develop in Professor Calamita’s class and provided a perfect space to work through all of the questions I had brought with me to Italy. It was in this course that Professor Damonte provided us with the language to refer to the “romantic myth of Italy” and directly tasked us with challenging our preconceptions. Like in Professor Calamita’s class, we interacted with media created by Italians and/ or based in Italy, and engaged in discussion regarding the manifestation of issues related to diversity. In Professor Damonte’s class, these discussions became all the more poignant as they related to the events of our daily lives in Florence. And truly, from very early on in my stay, it was evident that the learning opportunities in Professor Damonte’s class would be essential, as observations related to diversity were abundant during my trip.

The first instance related to diversity that really stuck out to me occurred within days of arriving in Florence. We had been informed by our school, ISI Florence, that a group of women were putting on a “Florence



From mid-January, 2019 – Florence Women’s March.

Women’s March” in honor of the two-year anniversary of the Women’s March on Washington that attracted the participation of millions following the inauguration of Donald Trump. While I certainly wasn’t expecting millions of people, I figured there would be a sizable crowd gathered to honor such a monumental event. To my utter shock, there was a group of less than ten activists filling a square, waving flags calling for peace and an end to gender-based violence.

Now, in my communities in the U.S. – from school, to work, to family, to friends – an event related to the Women’s March and women’s rights in general would be immensely popular. I would expect huge crowds of people to come out, and the space we were occupying to be dedicated to the activism related efforts. With this background in mind, processing the reality of this iteration of a women’s march proved to be all the more complex. Nevertheless, after a fair bit of analysis, it became clear to me that the smaller size of this march did not make it any less powerful and important. Activism and diversity manifest in different ways depending on context, so the context of a country like Italy that is rooted in traditional gender roles and stereotypes inevitably impacts activist efforts. Observ-

ing this march proved to be an awesome introduction to my everyday observations of activism and social justice work in Florence.

Near the end of the semester, Professor Damonte took us on an outing that continued to highlight the uniqueness of the work for women's rights and feminist efforts in Florence. As a class, we took an afternoon trip to an organization located right outside of Florence called "Centro Uomini Maltrattanti." At the center, we had the incredible opportunity of speaking with two women who dedicate their lives to ending gender-based violence through their work. One extremely interesting element of the shelter was the fact that it is focused on treating men who have abused their partners, rather than providing a shelter for survivors of abuse. I was super interested in this model, as I have volunteered at a domestic violence shelter in Charlottesville, Virginia throughout undergrad which instead provides housing and support for women who have survived abuse. Through interacting with these women, I learned that while their methods may be different, these women are fighting the same fight as the individuals I've worked with in the U.S. Gender-based violence is a worldwide issue, and it was extremely empowering and inspiring to learn about these women fighting the problem through counseling and reforming troubled men.

In expanding our understandings of a more diverse Florence, Professor Damonte also took us on a fascinating tour of places of worship around the city. I found this tour to be absolutely unforgettable. One of our first stops on the tour was the Lutheran church in Florence, which is a small building right on the stunning Arno river. After Professor Damonte explained a little bit about the history of the church, I promptly asked him where the other Lutheran churches were in the city. He replied with: "That is such an American question. This is the *only* Lutheran church in the city." I was so immensely appreciative of his response, as it set the tone for a tour full of learning in an entirely new context. Faith is inevitably variable across locations and cultures, and Florence is no exception.

The rest of the tour took us all over the city, and step-by-step we unpacked the stereotype of Italy as an entirely Catholic country. While Catholi-



From early-January, 2019 – The Lutheran Church in Florence.

cism is certainly the dominant religion of the country, experiences of faith range vastly. Among the magnificent Catholic churches that create such a picturesque city, Florence is home to other places of worship as well. The city hosts a breathtakingly beautiful Jewish temple, which is located in a neighborhood that hosts members of the Jewish population. The city also has a developing Muslim population, and a permanent mosque is in the works that will be located near the airport. While Catholic spaces like the Duomo and Santa Croce are crucial parts of the city, I will be forever thankful for the

opportunity to learn about a faith experience in Florence that is more diverse than I previously imagined.

Ultimately, there are a number of truths about Italy that are undeniable. It *is* breathtakingly beautiful. Its food and wine *are* phenomenal. It *is* dominantly Catholic, white, and straight. However, these realities do not negate the existence of diverse communities and experiences in Italy that stray from the stereotypical mold. I am so immensely thankful for my semester in Florence and the courses I have taken with both Professor Calamita and Professor Damonte and the ways in which my experiences have taught me to challenge my preconceived stereotypes in all situations. Ultimately, my time in Italy *was* a fairytale in a magical land, but for so many more reasons than I ever could have anticipated.