

Italian women take legal action over fetus graves marked with mothers' names

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More than 100 women launch action as activists say practice is serious violation of human rights and privacy

A group of more than 100 Italian women have asked prosecutors to investigate who is behind the burial for nearly a decade of fetuses in graves marked with the names of their mothers in a cemetery in Rome.

The practice only came to light last week after one of the women, whose curiosity was sparked after reading about the so-called “fields of angels” in local newspapers, discovered a plot with a wooden cross bearing her name and the date on which the fetus was buried at Prima Porta cemetery. She subsequently posted about her experience on Facebook.

More than 100 women have since come together for a potential class action in a scandal that has also reignited the debate in [Italy](#) over the difficulties women have in obtaining safe abortions despite the procedure being legalised in 1978.

Differenza Donna, an activist group that filed the complaint to Rome prosecutors, said the women's human rights and privacy had been seriously violated.

There are two sections that contain hundreds of graves containing fetus remains, some dating to 2012, at Prima Porta. Some older wooden crosses are piled up on the ground, an indication that the graves have been refilled.

Francesca, 36, said she almost fainted after discovering a plot containing the remains of her unborn daughter with her name on it. She ended the pregnancy at six months after being told the fetus was malformed and unlikely to survive the full term. It took 10 days before a hospital agreed to carry out the procedure in September 2019.

As with all the other women, Francesca did not consent to a burial. In Italy, the fetuses of pregnancies terminated after three months in hospitals can be buried, but only with the mother's permission.

“After the immense pain of losing my daughter, to discover this beastly act was awful,” Francesca, who asked for her surname not to be published, told the Guardian.

The date on the grave was in December 2019, three months after the abortion.

“I repeatedly asked the hospital what happened to the fetus and they made me believe it had been thrown away,” Francesca added. “So where was it for three months? Then for it to be buried with the symbol of a cross, which I don't adhere to, and with my name on it – it felt like a punishment.”

ASL, the local health authority, is yet to comment, but Rome's San Camillo hospital, where the woman who first exposed the issue had an abortion, has denied responsibility.

The hospital said in a statement that the remains of fetuses were identified with the mother's name only for the purposes of drafting transport and burial permits. These details were then given to Ama, the public services firm that manages Rome's cemeteries.

"The subsequent activities relating to the transport, management and burial of the fetus are the complete and exclusive competence of Ama," the statement reads. "The hospital and ASL in no way contribute to any choice regarding the burial activities."

Ama also denied responsibility, saying it carries out burials upon the instruction of the health authority. The women were able to locate the plots thanks to a database kept by the cemetery.

Livia Turco, a former health minister, believes anti-abortion groups are behind the practice of exposing the mother's names on the graves.

The burials are permitted because of a law updated in 1990 from one that was created more than 50 years earlier by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. Anti-abortion, Catholic and far-right groups have for years pushed for the creation of "fields of angels", often finding support among local politicians or those working within public institutions.

But Turco, who was health minister between 2006 and 2008, activists and gynaecologists say they were not aware of the practice of naming mothers on the graves until now.

"The question of privacy is serious and we need to find out who's responsible," Turco said. "But it's obvious that this initiative is the fruit of a mobilisation brought forward by Catholic groups that we perhaps underestimated – not just in Rome, but across Italy. They probably constructed relationships within the institutions and so found complicity."

As they await clarity, activists are calling for the intervention of Rome's city hall and the health minister, Roberto Speranza.

Elisa Ercoli, the president of Differenza Donna, said the group was continuing to receive dozens of calls a day from across Italy.

"We've found crosses dating from 2012 until 2020, but there are women giving references as far back as 2005," she said. "There must be a procedure that was systemised by agreements, but with what motive? Who made these decisions and in the interests of who?"

[Women](#) in Italy struggle to access safe abortions due to the high number of gynaecologists who still refuse to terminate pregnancies for moral reasons. Seven out of 10 doctors in Italy are "moral objectors".

Silvana Agatone, one of the few gynaecologists who carried out abortions in Rome before her retirement, said she knew burial grounds for fetuses existed but nothing like the one found at Prima Porta cemetery.

"Cemeteries like this have been in place since 1937, and at the time the law was made, what did women count for?" she said. "Then the rightwing groups came along and exploited it with their 'fields of angels'. Nobody went to check whose names were on the graves – I would never have imagined something like this."

Women can access abortions at just five hospitals in Rome and none in the wider Lazio region, due to the lack of medics who perform them.

“I was in so much pain after my abortion, I screamed and shouted for seven hours, but nobody came into the room to help as they were all moral objectors,” said Francesca. “In Italy you can’t abort in a civilised way despite the law being there – and this is what we need to be discussing more.”

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