

Italian fertility campaign recalled for treatment

September 2 2016

An Italian government campaign urging young couples to "get on with it" to boost the country's flagging birthrate has been pulled after a furious backlash on social media.

Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin said Friday she had ordered changes to the online campaign after a series of captioned images intended to promote an upcoming Fertility Day were slammed as patronising, sexist and hectoring.

The biggest outcry was over an image of a fraught-looking young woman touching her stomach with one hand and holding an egg-timer in the other, with the sand running away.

"Beauty has no age. But fertility does," said the caption, widely criticised for implying women delaying pregnancy had only themselves to blame if they ended up childless.

Men were not treated any more sensitively. A picture of rotting banana skin was deployed to make the point that: "Male fertility is much more vulnerable than you might think."

That was making a similar point to a picture of a man holding a cigarette with the warning: "Don't let your sperm go up in smoke."

Another image shows a wading bird on the edge of a nest, imploring surfers to: "Get a move on! Don't wait for the stork."

The tweets, released to promote a Fertility Day planned for September 23, quickly went viral—the initial incredulous reaction being amplified by a swell of support for Lorenzin from pro-family groups.

'Demographic suicide'

Criticism of the campaign focused on the numerous obstacles to having children in Italy, including high unemployment, low wages, weak maternity rights and inadequate childcare provision.

One of the most popular tweets was a cartoon by Virgilio Natola showing a female hand holding up a pregnancy test kit bearing the result: "Go abroad and find yourself a job."

Others cited Italy's falling birthrate as a serious problem.

"The criticisms of #fertilityday are ridiculous," tweeted Comitato Articolo 26, one of the groups involved in organising recent "Family Days" in opposition to legislation on gay civil unions.

"In the country of demographic suicide, a lot, lot more should be done."

Announcing a review of the campaign, Lorenzin said: "We did not intend to offend or provoke anyone. If the message has not gone across as we we would have liked, we will change it."

Lorenzin, a practising Catholic, was left looking isolated after Prime Minister Matteo Renzi appeared to criticise the campaign.

"As far as I know, none of my friends had their kids after seeing an advert," he said in a radio interview on Thursday.

Italy has the lowest birthrate in the European Union and one of the

lowest in the world, with only eight babies born for every 1,000 residents in 2015, according to EU figures released in July.

A total of 485,000 babies were born in the country last year, a record low and less than half the level of the 1960s.

Lorenzin warned earlier this year that the current "catastrophic decline" would reduce the number of newborns to 350,000 within a decade unless action is taken to reverse the trend.

She has proposed doubling "baby bonus" child benefits to encourage more couples to start families and existing parents to expand theirs.

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