

Maria Cleofe Pellegrini:
woman, teacher and activist in the History of education

Maria Cleofe Pellegrini:
donna, insegnante e attivista nella Storia dell'educazione

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ABSTRACT

The studies conducted and promoted by Giorgio Chiosso have brought to light previously overlooked figures in the history of education, schooling and academic institution (1997; Chiosso, Sani, 2013). Maria Cleofe Pellegrini (1854-1936) played a significant role in advancing children's and women's rights, yet her bio-bibliographical profile remains under-investigated. A teacher in Normal Schools and later a director and inspector at the Ministry of Public Education, she wrote educational texts and school manuals. She was actively engaged in women's and professional teaching associations and supported women's suffrage. Through historiographical analysis and a systematic review of the periodicals with which she collaborated, this contribution aims to reconstruct her "history within History".

KEYWORDS

**Maria Cleofe Pellegrini, women's associations, women's history, history of education, early childhood education.
Maria Cleofe Pellegrini, associazionismo femminile, storia delle donne, storia dell'educazione, educazione infantile.**

Gli studi condotti e promossi da Giorgio Chiosso hanno portato alla luce figure nascoste nella storia dell'educazione, della scuola e dell'università (1997; Chiosso, Sani, 2013). Maria Cleofe Pellegrini (1854-1936) ha avuto un ruolo significativo per la promozione dei diritti dell'infanzia e delle donne, eppure il suo profilo bio-bibliografico è stato scarsamente indagato. Insegnante nelle Scuole Normali, poi direttrice e ispettrice presso il Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, fu autrice di testi educativi e manuali scolastici. Partecipò a varie associazioni femminili e magistrali, e sostenne il diritto di voto alle donne. Grazie all'analisi storiografica e allo spoglio dei periodici con i quali ha collaborato, il contributo intende ricostruire la sua "storia nella Storia".

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1. Women, education and emancipation

Women's emancipation through education and teaching is a complex journey, evolving between demands for equality and the rediscovery of gender-specific characteristics. For centuries, women's education was controlled by a male-dominated cultural power that promoted a "pedagogy of ignorance" (Ulivieri, 1992, p. 35), aimed at keeping them in a state of subordination and confining them to domestic roles. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, economic and social changes facilitated women's entry into new spheres of education and work. In Italy, the Casati Law of 1859 established compulsory primary education for girls as well; however, it remained largely unenforced due to poverty and prevalent family prejudice. In 1875, women were legally granted access to university, while secondary school became accessible in 1883. A career in teaching represented the first real prospect of economic independence and social participation, as well as a turning point, with women demanding to be educated so that they, in turn, could educate others (Musiani, 2024).

The Normal School¹, established to prepare future teachers, saw a clear predominance of women from the outset, as this profession was considered a natural extension of the "maternal role". Studies conducted and promoted by Giorgio Chiosso on educational journals and publications have brought to light historical personalities previously obscured in educational and academic history (1997; Chiosso, Sani, 2013). This research has highlighted the emergence of female figures alongside their male counterparts, thereby unveiling and affirming a proactive and militant "feminine pedagogy". The rediscovery of many women who actively contributed to the educational and schooling sectors – living in and for the school, and engaged in the training of future teachers – contributes to overcoming the stereotype of "female silence" in history, highlighting their role in the construction of cultural memory and in the development of new educational practices.

Among intellectual women who were the first to occupy prominent roles in secondary education and school management, the bio-bibliographical profile of Maria Cleofe Pellegrini (1854-1936) has been scarcely investigated (Mazzella, 2013). She was a central figure in the Italian pedagogical and emancipationist landscape. She distinguished herself as a teacher, headmistress, ministerial inspector and fervent activist for rights of children, women and the teaching profession. Her "history within History" can be reconstructed through articles in educational and pedagogical journals, as well as other publications, and through her numerous works.

The historiographical analysis examined archival materials held at the Unione Femminile Nazionale in Milan, including texts of several of Pellegrini's lectures and obituaries published in various periodicals following her death, as well as a systematic review of the journals to which she contributed, such as *Unione Femminile* (1901-1905) and *Rivista pedagogica* (1908-1939)².

2. A woman's growth, education and teaching career

Born in Milan on 3 December 1854 to Luigi Pellegrini and Felicita Bisesti, Pellegrini remained tied to her family's place of origin, Caprezzo. There, during frequent official leaves, she served on community committees and spearheaded local initiatives (Garlandini, 2022). Notable among these was the Floreale festival, where a prize was awarded for the most beautifully decorated house. This initiative was later expanded to include poultry farming. Furthermore, Pellegrini, a committee member, established a Cleanliness Prize for pupils who demonstrated exceptional personal hygiene and neatness of attire (*Verbania*, Oct. 1912; *La Vedetta*, 3 Sept. 1912). Additionally, there is evidence of her involvement in 1915 in opening the local post office (*La Vedetta*, 20 July 1915) as well as her chairmanship of the committee to erect the War Memorial in 1924 (*L'Unione*, 1924).

A lively and rebellious child, she was self-taught. After obtaining her teaching qualification, she was appointed to work in southern Italy, where she instructed in Pedagogy and Literature. She initially served as headmistress of Benevento's Female Normal School from its establishment in 1871, before being transferred to Potenza, where she taught Italian. This change caused discontent in Benevento, to the extent that the prefect and the provincial school board unsuccessfully requested the revocation of the decree so that she might resume her directorship of the institute (Covato, Sorge, 1994). In 1891, she served as headmistress of the "Pietro Siciliani" Female Normal School in Lecce (Garlandini, 2022).

On her return to Milan, from September 1891 until 1907, Pellegrini taught Pedagogy and directed the "Maria Gaetana Agnesi"³ Female Normal School, where she founded the society *Amiche della scuola*, comprising teachers and former students of the Normal School. The society organised Sunday lectures, readings and discussions on

1 The *Scuola Normale* was a 19th-century Italian teacher training institution, rendered here as "Normal School".

2 Grateful acknowledgment is extended to the team at the Archive and Library of the Unione Femminile Nazionale in Milan and Dr. Antonio Garlandini, author of *Cenni storici di Caprezzo 2.0*, for their support with bio-bibliographical research.

3 Maria Gaetana Agnesi (1718 -1799) was the first woman to hold the chair of Mathematics at the University of Bologna.

pedagogy, science and literature, and during the warmer months, excursions to the countryside, lakes and hills (*il Corriere delle Maestre*, 1936). Furthermore, every year two scholarships were awarded to girls who had successfully completed three-year teacher training course: one scholarship was offered by the Italian Committee for the Centenary Honours to Maria Gaetana Agnesi, of which Pellegrini herself was secretary; another scholarship was funded by Duchess Melzi d'Eril (*Unione Femminile*, Jan. 1903). At the “Maria Gaetana Agnesi”, under Pellegrini’s direction, prominent figures such as Ada Negri, Regina Terruzzi and Aurelia Jozs taught (Dedola, 2013; Falchi, 2009; Seveso, 2023).

Having been appointed to ministerial posts, Pellegrini moved to Rome, where she taught Pedagogy at the “Vittoria Colonna” Female Normal School (*Gazzetta di Biella*, 1910; *il Corriere delle Maestre*, 1936).

3. Commitment to education and rights of children, women, and teachers

Pellegrini played an active role in the vibrant climate of educational innovation and feminist movement that emerged between the 19th and 20th centuries. She was an active participant and leading figure in various women’s and professional teaching associations. She was one of the founders of Milan’s Circolo Filologico Femminile (1896). She took part in Unione Magistrale Nazionale initiatives, founded by Luigi Credaro (1901), pedagogist, politician, and Minister of Public Education from 1910 to 1914. She was involved in the Lega per la tutela degli interessi femminili and the Unione Femminile Nazionale (1899), where she gave lectures and talks and came into contact with leading Lombard women’s movement figures, such as Linda Malnati and Ersilia Bronzini Majno. As a socialist and suffragist, she campaigned for women’s right to vote and worked tirelessly for their “economic, moral and intellectual advancement” (*Unione Femminile*, Jan. 1903, p. 10). In 1903, with the support of Luigi Friso and Pietro Pasquali, she promoted the founding of the Unione Nazionale Educatrici d’Infanzia, whose official publication was the journal *La Voce delle Maestre d’Asilo* (Gabusi, 2021). She was also honorary president of the women’s physical education society, established in conjunction with the “Confalonieri” Female Technical School, *La Insubria*, which organised weekly sessions of gymnastic games, excursions and walks for girls and young women upon payment of annual subscription (*Unione Femminile*, Jan. 1903).

Together with Luigi Credaro, she helped establish *Corso di perfezionamento per i licenziati dalle Scuole normali* at “La Sapienza” University in Rome. This course was the first two-year university programme for teachers wishing to become headteachers and school inspectors, and was known as the *Scuola pedagogica* (1904). At the latter and at the University of Rome, Pellegrini served as voluntary assistant to the chair of Pedagogy, held by Credaro. From 1906 onwards, she was involved in establishing the Museo pedagogico annexed to the Scuola pedagogica, conducting practical sessions in Pedagogy and lectures on teaching and the head teacher social role (*Annuario* 1908; 1909; 1911; 1913; Zeno, 1910).

Both in Italian capital and beyond, Pellegrini’s commitment to the recognition of women’s rights and working-class emancipation was militant. In 1906, she denounced the exploitation of very young female workers, the so-called “piccinine” or “midinettes”, in her report to the Fourth International Congress of Public and Private Welfare. She was member of the organising committee for the International Congress on Popular Education, held under the auspices of the Società Umanitaria in Milan from 15 to 17 September 1906.

She was board member of the Associazione Nazionale per gli Studi pedagogici (1907), founded by Credaro (D’Arcangeli, 2012), and contributor to its journal, the *Rivista Pedagogica* (1908-1939). Furthermore, to mark the journal’s first issue, she attended a dinner organised by Credaro’s collaborators at Rome’s *Ristorante dell’Orologio* (Agenzia Italiana – Rome, 6 Feb. 1908).

During the First National Congress of Italian Women (Rome, 1908), Pellegrini denounced nursery school teachers’ precarious conditions, called for nursery schools to be brought under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, and demanded their professional emancipation through adequate pay, career prospects and a decent pension.

She was member of the Associazione per la Donna, participating in the committee for four competitions organised for lectures reserved for young women, held in Rome as part of the 1911 celebrations marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Italian Unification (*la donna*, 1910).

In 1910 she was appointed Temporary Inspector of Secondary Schools (*Gazzetta di Biella*, 1910) and, in 1912, became Italy’s first female Central Inspector at the Ministry of Public Education (*il Corriere delle Maestre*, 1936; Zago, 2026). One of the most frequently cited reports concerns Giuseppina Pizzigoni’s *Scuola Rinnovata* (Natalini, 2021).

From 1910 to 1911, Pellegrini served on Minister Credaro’s commission to reform early childhood education, alongside Camillo Corradini, Pietro Gavazzuti, Luigi Friso, Maria Pia d’Ormea, and Modestino Petrozziello, focusing on: relationship between state administration and bodies responsible for early childhood education; nursery schools’ pedagogical organisation (including furnishings, materials, timetables, and guidelines); organisation of

nursery schools attached to Female Normal Schools; and theoretical and practical training courses for staff (Gabusi, 2021). The commission's work culminated in 1914 in the document *Istruzioni, programmi e orari per gli asili infantili e i giardini d'infanzia* (R.D. 4 Jan., No. 27).

Pellegrini was also honorary committee member of the Comitato Nazionale Femminile per gli Aiuti alla Patria (1914), aiming to prepare women for public and private roles in event of war and to collect hygiene items, medicines, clothes, and food for both soldiers and the civilian population (Gaballo, 2015). In 1915, she joined the Commission for the *Scuole Festive superiori* led by Pier Francesco Nicoli, teacher of Pedagogy at the "Carlo Tenca" Normal School (Ghizzoni, 2016).

Pellegrini continued her fight for education and rights of children, women and teachers in post-war years. When Unione Femminile Nazionale faced crisis and low participation, she urged women to rediscover unity, determination, and sense of responsibility, calling for active support for the association (Gaballo, 2015).

Having retired from ministerial office due to age, Pellegrini moved to Naples, where she lived with her sister at a family friends's home (*il Corriere delle Maestre*, 1936). There, she wrote her final autobiographical work, published under the pseudonym Tecla Ruelli: *La giornata di una donna* (1920). She died in Naples' Vomero district on 3 January 1936 (*I Diritti della Scuola*, 1 Feb. 1936).

4. Author of educational, didactic and pedagogical texts

Throughout her life, Pellegrini combined teaching with writing. She was author of theoretical and popular works, school textbooks on pedagogy and didactics, as well as history books co-authored with Corrado Barbagallo. In 1889, she published *Profili muliebri*, a collection of exemplary biographies of illustrious women designed for the instruction of young women. In *I lunedì nella scuola* (1891), Pellegrini traces a citizen's social development from family bonds to the state, concluding with the *Statuto Fondamentale del Regno d'Italia*. She defines emancipation as the "freedom to discharge one's duty" and education as the path to female self-mastery.

She contributed to Italy's first pedagogical dictionary, *Dizionario illustrato di Pedagogia* edited by Antonio Martinazzoli and Luigi Credaro. Originally published in issues from 1891 by Battezzati, it was later compiled into three volumes by Vallardi in 1900. Pellegrini authored the entries for *Dickens Carlo*, *Donna*, *Maestra*, *Martig E.*, *Pascal Giachelina*, *Porto Reale* (*Piccole Scuole di*).

She contributed to numerous educational and pedagogical periodicals, such as *Il Piccolo Italiano* (from 1892 to 1910), *La Voce delle Maestre d'Asilo*, *il Corriere delle Maestre*, *Unione Femminile* (1901-1905), *Mamma e Bambino*, and *Rivista Pedagogica*. This latter journal features several of her contributions: *Un triennio di esercitazioni pratiche nella scuola di perfezionamento per i licenziati dalle Scuole normali* (Oct. 1909), *Come io insegno la Pedagogia* (Jan. 1910), and *Una nobile figura di educatrice del popolo: Rosa Cavalli Porro* (Oct. 1925).

She delivered and published numerous papers at conferences. Notable examples are *La maestra d'asilo*, presented to the Lega per la tutela degli interessi femminili (1897), and *Per la difesa e la protezione delle piccole operaie apprendiste*, discussed at the Fourth International Congress on Public and Private Welfare (1906).

She contributed to the series *Antologia della letteratura italiana*, edited by Emma Boghen Conigliani between 1906 and 1909 for publishing house R. Bemporad & Figlio. In this series, she published *Il Machiavelli* (1907), a volume of selected and annotated readings for Normal Schools (Magazzeni, 2019).

On behalf of the Lega per la tutela degli interessi femminili, Pellegrini co-authored with Barbagallo *Dolori di donna, di insegnante e di madre* (1907) in defence of socialist teacher Regina Terruzzi. The headteacher of the "Confalonieri" Technical School, where Terruzzi worked, was intolerant of her progressive teaching methods. For this reason, he accused her of immorality by alluding to her private life, notably her status as a single mother. The investigation conducted by the Ministry of Public Education exonerated Terruzzi. The matter also reached Parliament and was closely followed by the feminist press (Bartoloni, 2018).

From the 1910s, Pellegrini collaborated with the young Barbagallo on a series of history textbooks for secondary schools, commissioned by the Dante Alighieri Publishing Society, and their collaboration continued thereafter (Palazzi & Porciani, 2011).

Her final work, *Una giornata di una donna*, is a literary piece with an autobiographical slant. Adopting pseudonym Tecla Ruelli for such a personal work reflects a desire to distinguish her institutional and scholarly output from a more intimate narrative of her experience as a woman and an intellectual.

5. Legacy of a Pioneer

Following death, Pellegrini was remembered in obituaries and articles published in various newspapers, including *Corriere della Sera*, *Secolo e Sera* and *L'Italia*. Contributions by Rosa Errera in *il Corriere delle Maestre*, Erminia

Zanetta in *I Diritti della Scuola* and Maria Bottini in *Bene* and *Scuola Italiana Moderna* are particularly noteworthy, as they highlighted her strength as a teacher, and a life entirely dedicated to education and her family (Franzoni, 1936). Furthermore, a commemorative committee was established at the Unione Femminile Nazionale in Milan, requesting that a primary school and classroom at the “Carlo Tenca” Normal School – with which the Agnesi School merged following R.D. No. 105 of 6 May 1923 – be dedicated to her memory, and that a plaque be affixed at the same institute. It was also decided to establish a “Maria Cleofe Pellegrini” Prize, awarded annually to deserving, underprivileged female students and supported by raised funds.

Historiographical analysis of consulted sources reveals the legacy of Pellegrini: woman, teacher, and activist. A multifaceted figure, she transformed teaching into militant activism, marking a turning point in women’s professionalisation in Italy. While she prioritised a woman’s role as educator and mistress of the home, she recognised the right to instruction. As an early advocate of women’s rights, her vision of emancipation linked freedom to duty; within this framework, universal suffrage was conditional upon the preparation of consciences through education (*Unione Femminile*, Oct. 1903).

Living between the 19th and 20th centuries, Maria Cleofe Pellegrini transformed the ideal of the teacher over the course of her life and work, elevating her from laborer to conscious professional and active citizen. She transcended the dichotomy between the domestic and the public spheres, fighting for children’s and women’s rights and helping to build conscious female citizenship by emphasising the educational and political value of education.

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