

**WorldViews**

# Italy's proposed new divorce law would 'turn back the clock 50 years on women's rights,' critics say

By [Anna Momigliano](#)

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MILAN — Italy's government is pushing draft legislation that would revolutionize the country's divorce laws, abolishing child support and taking custody away from parents who bad-mouth their exes or try to otherwise harm their relationships with their children.

The idea behind the bill, which is supported by Italy's governing coalition and has a good chance of becoming law, is to enforce what it describes as "perfect co-parenting." Children of divorced couples would spend the exact same amount of time living with each parent — young children currently tend to live with their mothers — and each parent would pay for the children's needs when taking care of them. If one parent were unable to pay, the wealthier parent would pay for those needs directly rather than writing a check to his or her ex-spouse.

[The bill's supporters contend](#) that this would make child support obsolete, but the left-leaning opposition and women's groups fear that the bill would harm women.

Nadia Somma, a representative of Demetra, an anti-domestic-violence center in Turin, [wrote for the newspaper Il Fatto Quotidiano](#) that the proposed law would "turn back the clock 50 years on women's rights." Sen. Valeria Valente of the center-left Democratic Party said it would make "[life impossible for mothers.](#)"

In Italy's conservative society, [less than 50 percent of women](#) work outside of the home, and most of the burden of child-rearing falls upon mothers. Because women with children struggle to find stable employment, critics argue that the abolition of child support would raise the poverty rate among divorced mothers and could make them unable to provide for their children. Critics fear that the bill could encourage women to stay in abusive marriages rather than opting for a divorce with no child support.

The proposed law also endorses the disputed notion of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), a term first coined in the 1980s by American psychiatrist Richard Gardner. PAS holds that a parent can belittle or bad-mouth the other parent to the point that their child becomes hostile and no longer wants to spend time with them. But PAS is not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and the American Psychological Association has "[no official position](#)" on whether the syndrome is real, citing a lack of evidence that supports its existence.

Critics worry that claims of PAS could be used to strip custody from mothers or even be used in court to deflect attention from abusive parents. Evidence from the United States also suggests that

PAS has been disproportionately used against women: According to a [2017 examination](#) of 238 U.S. court cases involving alienation claims, fathers not only made the vast majority of alienation claims but also won their cases at a much higher rate than women making claims against men.

“Fathers who alleged alienation were more than twice as likely to receive a custody outcome in their favor as mothers who alleged alienation,” read the paper, which was published in [Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice](#), a law journal at the University of Minnesota Law School.

The bill's main sponsor, Sen. Simone Pillon of the far-right League party, is well known for his hard-line conservatism on social and gender issues. He is one of the organizers of “Family Day,” a yearly anti-gay-marriage event, and [often campaigns against](#) what he describes as the “gay lobby.” In a recent interview with Vanity Fair Italy, he said his next step will be proposing a law that would punish women who accuse their husbands of domestic violence if the husbands are not convicted. Pillon has also [vowed to make abortion illegal](#).

Pillon, who is a [lawyer by profession](#) and a registered family mediator, has also been accused of pursuing the changes for his own professional gain: His bill would introduce mandatory family mediation for couples considering divorce. Pillon declined to comment to The Washington Post.

To become law, the bill needs to be approved by both houses of Italy's Parliament. Although government support means the bill is likely to pass, it will probably take a while: Italy's notoriously slow political system means that approving a law usually takes [from six to 17 months](#).

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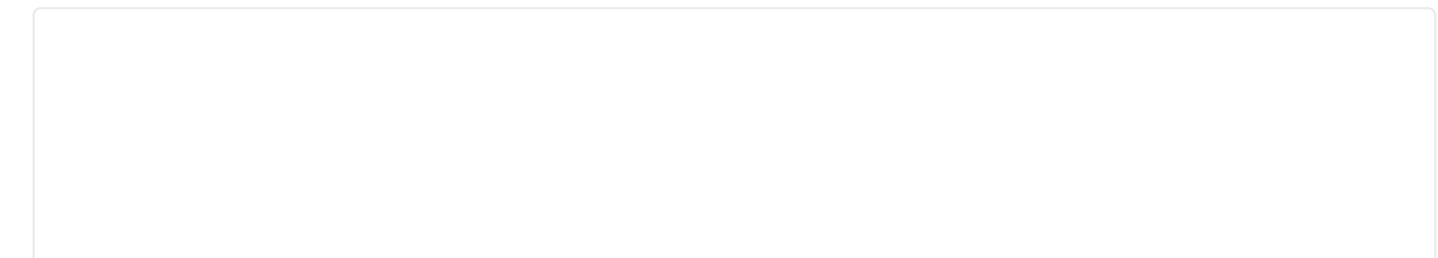
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