Beginning in 1958, Maria Luisa DeMarchi began visiting women living in the borgate—poor areas on the outskirts of Rome—educating them about birth control and providing them with vaginal suppository contraceptives, which had been supplied free of charge by a manufacturer in Great Britain. She continued these visits for the next two decades, making weekly visits to over 550 clients annually—a total of over 7,000 visits.

“Whoever publicly incites to practices against procreation or makes propaganda in their favor is punishable by detention of one year.”—Article 533 of the 1930 Italian Fascist Penal Code

In the late 1940s, Italy was rebuilding itself from the destruction of World War II. With a 1947 peace treaty that reestablished its borders and a new constitution in 1948, Italy began to affirm its identity with the West, joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, the United Nations in 1955, and the European Economic Community (precursor to the European Union) in 1958.

Social change was also moving forward. Workers began demanding higher wages and better social services. And they were sorely needed: one out of four people lived in poverty, and half of the poor had families of five children or more. More than 300,000 families lived in cellars, caves, or shacks. The population was rapidly expanding, reaching 45 million after the war. And with the collusion of both Italian law and the Vatican, which both had strict prohibitions against birth control, the trend seemed destined to continue.

When we started our fight for planned parenthood, in 1953, Italian laws (introduced by the fascist dictatorship but renewed by the Catholic Church and Communist Party in 1945) forbade all information and assistance about contraception. We were acutely aware of the
Could we get this information to the people who needed it most, those eight months. Most clients were educated and relatively affluent. The first person to arrive at the center was a policeman who had been educated and had a strong international resonance (“Sensation à Rome” was a headline in the French daily, L’Express). We were denounced by the police, but the government authorities preferred to avoid an open political battle, and dismissed the denunciation. A few months later, the Vatican daily newspaper, Osservatore Romano, called for Luigi’s arrest. But once again, the authorities ignored them.

We decided that Maria Luisa should begin door-to-door visits to the borgheti, the tenements and tin shacks clustered on the outskirts of Rome, continuing her visits even through her first pregnancy. After following her first child, Maria Luisa renewed her visits with vigor in the spring of 1959.

MEETING THE WOMEN OF THE BORGATE

The families in the borghi livelihood, often brutal, brief. Most of the men worked as manual laborers. The macho ethic was strong: many men felt that sex on demand was a right of every married man, and they would often resort to physical violence to keep control of their wives and children. Alcohol abuse made their behavior worse.

These women worked as maids during the day, so Maria Luisa timed her arrivals for Sundays or evenings. The first visit was always “Why do you need [birth control] so much, something that takes away this worry.”

TANGLING WITH THE VATICAN

In the end, the authorities interfered very little with Maria Luisa’s work. We suspected that they left her alone because they wanted to avoid any more awkward publicity about contraception. The Vatican, however, had a different approach. About five years after she had begun her routine of home visits, neighbors alerted Maria Luisa to a mysterious man who parked daily outside her home, taking pictures. We learned that this was consistent with Dr. Gamble’s pattern of providing small initial donations to assist, but not overwhelmed, grassroots initiatives. However, Dr. Gamble’s involvement went well beyond writing checks. In the summer of 1955, we began a correspondence with Dr. Clarence Gamble. He sent a start-up donation of $300 (which he later increased to $800) for the first year, and $1,000 annually thereafter. We learned from Dr. Gamble’s involvement went well beyond writing checks. In the summer of 1955, we began a correspondence with Dr. Clarence Gamble. He sent a start-up donation of $300 (which he later increased to $800) for the first year, and $1,000 annually thereafter. We learned that the doctors would do everything to maintain the pregnancy. Many women died. No one would ever admit that the deaths were from abortion—never. Here are just a few of their stories:

Maria Luisa DeMarchi was called “an unsung heroine” in the Italian birth control movement for her remarkable skill and sensitivity in working with “submerged” people.

Dr. Clarence Gamble and Maria Luisa with Luigi’s brother and their children.
by the Pontificia Opera de Assistenza, the charity office of the Vatican. The photo he took of Maria Luisa were distributed to priests, who circulated them to women in their parishes. “This woman will approach you about birth control,” they warned. “What she will give you is dangerous to your health, and can give you cancer.”

Despite the law and the Vatican’s opposition, Maria Luisa continued her work, funded by Pathfinder, for the next two decades. Ultimately, she made weekly visits to over 350 clinics annually—a total of 7,000 visits. We were convinced that these women really needed help—and that we could provide it. Maria Luisa provided the women with education and information about birth control, as well as vaginal suppository contraceptives, which had been provided free of charge by a manufacturer in Great Britain.

Maria Luisa kept careful records, including extraordinary case histories of the women she served. Dr. Gamble had trained her in statistical survey methods, and she sent him detailed reports of her work, including quarterly reports on the efficacy of different contraceptives. In 1965, she published her data and case histories in a groundbreaking survey, and she sent him detailed reports of her work, including quarterly reports on the efficacy of different contraceptives. In 1969, she published her data and case histories in a groundbreaking book, Inumane Vite (The title (which means “Inhuman Lives”) was a response to the Pope’s condemnation of contraception the previous year in his eloquent Humanae Vitae.

In 1964, the Pill came to Italy, but it was not authorized for sale by pharmacists. We organized a demonstration of family planning supporters in St. Peter’s Square during the Pope’s Easter address. Featuring gigantic banners proclaiming, “This is to the Papal Throne!” and “No to the Population Bomb!” the event was given first-page prominence in many newspapers—including The New York Times.

We finally succeeded in challenging the prevailing law against contraception, which dated back to the fascist era. In 1965, we put on trial for a lecture he gave in Florence on “Social and Health Harms of Unplanned Fertility,” and his case went to the Supreme Court. The court rejected his position on the grounds that providing information about contraception was a violation of public morals. For the next six years, we and our legal team continued to appeal the ruling.

In 1970, we again defined the law in our efforts to make affordable contraception accessible to all Italians. With the help of a progressive minister of health and Pathfinder funding, we opened birth control clinics, first in Rome and then Milan. This brought another trial in the Supreme Court—but this time, we won.

In an historic ruling, the court reversed the longstanding prohibition on disseminating contraceptive information. The court noted that the law had been created under fascist rule, at a time when the government wanted to increase population. Acknowledging that times had changed, the court held that it was now more important to limit births, and overturned its previous ruling.

Although Pathfinder did not provide direct financial support for the court case, it supported us and maintained close contact with us throughout the proceedings. When the Supreme Court knocked down its ruling, Dr. Gamble’s wife, Sarah, wrote us, “We are all of us full of joy over your magnificent victory. When the world seems so full of difficulties and disappointments, this has been a glorious success to think about.”

MOVING FORWARD

We continued to work with Pathfinder in family planning issues for 15 years after this hard-fought legal victory. With Pathfinder’s help, we were able to find innovative ways to promote contraception and engage people on the personal and political level. One of the most interesting projects we worked on, developed with Pathfinder funding, was the introduction of “photo stories” and animation, similar to soap operas, which appeared weekly on television in these cities.

Using well-known Italian actors, and drawing on motivational psychology, the series presented birth control as an effective way to satisfy deep emotional needs. New husbands could start married life unencumbered by worries about accidental pregnancy, 30-year-old fencers, such as being expliided by a boss because of financial strain due to an ever-growing family. The series was the first of its kind in the world, and was highly successful. The sale of contraceptives in the area covered by the broadcasts increased by 34 percent.

Popular mores and mores are much more independent from religious and political intimations than political scientists usually think. With perseverance and companionship, and financial and technical assistance from progressive organizations such as Pathfinder, people can control their family size, leading to healthier, more productive lives.

Luigi Demarchi and Maria Luisa Zardini (formerly Demarchi) were groundbreaking leaders of Italy’s contraceptive movement. The couple engaged and communicated the Association Italiana per l’Educazione Demografica (AIED), established in 1953, with the purpose to publicize birth control and abolish prohibitive reproductive health laws. While struggling to get the movement, Mr. Demarchi worked as cultural advisor for the United States Information Service and Mrs. DeMarchi worked as a telephone operator at the U.S. Embassy in 1953, they opened the Rome Consultation Office for Birth Control, which provided referrals to doctors willing to provide birth control. Support from Clarence Gamble and Pathfinder enabled AIED to flourish and the DeMarchis turned their mission to legalize birth control into their permanent employment.

Following the advice of Clarence Gamble, Mrs. DeMarchi began regular visits to Rome’s shantytowns, the squatter zones in the outskirt of the city of Rome, and she gave them international assistance. From generous donor organizations such as Pathfinder, people can control their family size, leading to healthier, more productive lives. Popular mores and mores are much more independent from religious and political intimations than political scientists usually think. With perseverance and companionship, and financial and technical assistance from progressive organizations such as Pathfinder, people can control their family size. Leading to healthier, more productive lives.

Luigi Demarchi and Maria Luisa Zardini (formerly Demarchi) were groundbreaking leaders of Italy’s contraceptive movement. The couple engaged and communicated the Association Italiana per l’Educazione Demografica (AIED), established in 1953, with the purpose to publicize birth control and abolish prohibitive reproductive health laws. While struggling to get the movement, Mr. DeMarchi worked as cultural advisor for the United States Information Service and Mrs. DeMarchi worked as a telephone operator at the U.S. Embassy in 1953, they opened the Rome Consultation Office for Birth Control, which provided referrals to doctors willing to provide birth control. Support from Clarence Gamble and Pathfinder enabled AIED to flourish and the DeMarchis turned their mission to legalize birth control into their permanent employment.

Following the advice of Clarence Gamble, Mrs. DeMarchi began regular visits to Rome’s squatter zones. The squatter settlements in the outskirt of the city of Rome, and Mrs. DeMarchi gave them international assistance. From generous donor organizations such as Pathfinder, people can control their family size, leading to healthier, more productive lives. Popular mores and mores are much more independent from religious and political intimations than political scientists usually think. With perseverance and companionship, and financial and technical assistance from progressive organizations such as Pathfinder, people can control their family size. Leading to healthier, more productive lives.

Luigi Demarchi and Maria Luisa Zardini (formerly Demarchi) were groundbreaking leaders of Italy’s contraceptive movement. The couple engaged and communicated the Association Italiana per l’Educazione Demografica (AIED), established in 1953, with the purpose to publicize birth control and abolish prohibitive reproductive health laws. While struggling to get the movement, Mr. DeMarchi worked as cultural advisor for the United States Information Service and Mrs. DeMarchi worked as a telephone operator at the U.S. Embassy in 1953, they opened the Rome Consultation Office for Birth Control, which provided referrals to doctors willing to provide birth control. Support from Clarence Gamble and Pathfinder enabled AIED to flourish and the DeMarchis turned their mission to legalize birth control into their permanent employment.

Following the advice of Clarence Gamble, Mrs. DeMarchi began regular visits to Rome’s squatter zones. The squatter settlements in the outskirt of the city of Rome, and Mrs. DeMarchi gave these organizing and oversaw the Associazione Italiana per l’Educazione Demografica (AIED), which provided referrals to doctors willing to provide birth control. Support from Clarence Gamble and Pathfinder enabled AIED to flourish and the DeMarchis turned their mission to legalize birth control into their permanent employment.

Following the advice of Clarence Gamble, Mrs. DeMarchi began regular visits to Rome’s squatter zones. The squatter settlements in the outskirt of the city of Rome, and Mrs. DeMarchi gave these organizing and oversaw the Associazione Italiana per l’Educazione Demografica (AIED), which provided referrals to doctors willing to provide birth control. Support from Clarence Gamble and Pathfinder enabled AIED to flourish and the DeMarchis turned their mission to legalize birth control into their permanent employment.

Following the advice of Clarence Gamble, Mrs. DeMarchi began regular visits to Rome’s squatter zones. The squatter settlements in the outskirt of the city of Rome, and Mrs. DeMarchi gave these organizing and oversaw the Associazione Italiana per l’Educazione Demografica (AIED), which provided referrals to doctors willing to provide birth control. Support from Clarence Gamble and Pathfinder enabled AIED to flourish and the DeMarchis turned their mission to legalize birth control into their permanent employment.