English Corner

Traduzioni in inglese
a cura di Barbara Del Mercato

Women & Institutions

Laura Cortellazzo
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in conversation with
Tiziana Lippiello
Rector, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

As the first female Rector of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, you naturally gained significant visibility and carry unique responsibilities. Can you recall when you most strongly felt the impact and significance of this exposure?
Being the first female Rector of Ca' Foscari gave me a deep sense of responsibility. I found myself amidst significant attention, including from the media. Sometimes I also felt overexposed; in some instances, I chose to decline invitations when I sensed that the focus was more on the spectacle of a woman's presence than on genuine discussion of the conference topics.
For this very reason, from the beginning, I felt a duty to take tangible steps on certain issues, such as staff work-life balance; as a woman, I felt personally compelled. I aimed to promote initiatives and measures that could support this balance, although it was not always possible to achieve everything I had envisaged because regulatory and legislative constraints can sometimes limit action.

During your term, you had to manage unprecedented complex situations, such as the pandemic. How did your leadership style help you in facing these challenges?
As soon as I took office, the first major challenge was managing the Covid and post-Covid period. In that very delicate situation, I felt the need to listen extensively and to synthesise different needs – a demanding task that requires patience, attentiveness, and generosity towards others, but also the ability to draw conclusions and make decisions.
My leadership style, which I would describe as relational, proved very helpful. The pandemic was a challenge none of us knew how to resolve: we faced a profound sense of disorientation regarding life, daily routines, and the future. For example, when we developed the University's strategic plan, it was very challenging to set objectives amid complete uncertainty. Luckily, we eventually managed to create the conditions for its implementation, but we did so in a general climate of deep concern, which still partly persists today due to the serious international situation. At that stage, the issue of my gender took a back seat: the difficulty was primarily linked to the extraordinary circumstances we were experiencing. In such times, it is difficult to work with people who are unsettled or discouraged, or to find within ourselves the positive energy to pass on to others. I had to rely on all my resources to face those moments, aiming to stay calm and level-headed.

Research on gender and leadership often compares agentic leadership styles with those more focused on the relational aspect. How do you interpret this difference, and how is it reflected in your experience as a leader?
During my term, I had the chance to take part in various meetings in Italy and abroad focused on leadership. In many of these instances, it became clear that, on one hand, a leadership style associated with a more traditionally masculine dimension is becoming established, and on the other, a more 'feminine' leadership style linked to relational aspects. Personally, I identify more closely with the latter. I believe one should never assume that others have fully understood what we are saying, nor that we have fully grasped their positions. For this reason, dialogue, persistence in listening, and ongoing exchange are essential. One of the benefits of relational leadership is the ability to uncover new aspects of situations and individuals. I firmly believe that more minds think better than one: when you listen to others, you are the first to learn.
In this regard, I like to quote a passage from the *Analects* of Confucius: when you walk with two other people, you can learn from both – from the one you consider better than yourself, because they can teach you something, and from the one you consider inferior, because they can teach you what to avoid.[1] Exchange, therefore, is always an opportunity for learning. I do not view relationships as strictly hierarchical. I see myself more as a *primus inter pares*: I held this role for six years, but I never once felt superior to my colleagues. This experience enabled me to grow significantly through interaction with others and to recognise the strong sense of dedication to the university, both among faculty and technical-administrative staff. More broadly, I believe certain qualities are especially important for those in positions of responsibility: assertiveness, creativity, and a certain capacity for detachment. This detachment, along with a form of lightness understood as the ability to put difficulties into perspective, helps maintain clarity and focus on issues even under pressure. One more fundamental aspect must be added: self-awareness. Being authentic, expressing what one truly thinks, and remaining consistent with one's values are essential elements for exercising credible leadership.

1 Confucius, *Analects*, 7.23: "When walking in a group of three, my teachers are always present".

For a leader, it is crucial to gain legitimacy, which does not come solely from formal authority but from social recognition established through symbolic, relational, and cultural processes. Based on your experience, do you believe that within academic institutions women in leadership roles need to establish their legitimacy differently from men?
More than having to build their legitimacy differently, women often find themselves having to work harder to achieve it. This is also linked to deeply rooted cultural legacies. That said, within academia, we are in a relatively privileged position. However, in certain situations, I did perceive attitudes that might have been different had I been a man. I believe it is important to maintain a leadership style that is open and receptive to differences. Sometimes, I get the impression that, perhaps as a response to ongoing social changes, some women adopt very aggressive attitudes, but I do not think this is necessarily the best approach. The risk is creating a rigid opposition that benefits no one. Instead, I believe it is crucial to nurture one's own nature and way of being, without feeling pressured to adopt more aggressive behavioural models to seem more effective. In my view, authenticity and dialogue are still more effective tools for exercising strong and constructive leadership.

Which internal and external resources were crucial in supporting you in your leadership role?
Certain personal traits, like sensitivity, listening skills, patience, and attentiveness to relationships, certainly helped me a great deal, even when I first began running for Rector. Before the elections, I devoted a great deal of time to listening: I studied the departments in depth, seeking to understand people's expectations and needs, rather than simply imposing my own vision. This approach is natural to me and was also influenced by my studies at Ca' Foscari and in China. Externally, the support of those around me, trust, and a climate of confidence and loyalty were undoubtedly crucial. With my team and colleagues, I consistently aim to discuss even the most complex issues – not because I lack a clear opinion, but because I believe that examining challenging matters from multiple perspectives is beneficial. Many such issues emerge within a university. One thing I have always felt strongly is that I truly take to heart every situation I have to deal with. Beyond the outcomes, this quality has been recognised even by those who disagreed with my decisions – the commitment and dedication I brought to this role. I do not see myself as exceptional, but I strongly believe in approaching situations with humbleness, without presuming I always have the answer. In my view, this is a trait particularly associated with women: approaching situations selflessly, with dedication and humility, placing oneself at the service of others.
Men sometimes show a level of arrogance or greater confidence, which can also cause them to make mistakes – often because they come with preconceptions or fixed ideas. By contrast, the beauty of this work lies precisely in being surrounded by many people: each of them can offer you something.

How do you think gender influences the way authority is recognised, challenged, or negotiated within universities, which are traditionally hierarchical yet intellectually egalitarian environments?

The university is a peculiar environment: on the one hand, it is strongly hierarchical – just consider the structure of academic careers – yet on the other, it is founded on a principle of intellectual equality among scholars. In my experience, I have primarily sought to value this aspect of equal dignity among individuals. One thing I have never shared, for example, is the idea of a hierarchy between academic staff and technical-administrative staff: both are vital to the functioning of the university; we work towards a common goal. Much also depends on an individual's personal leadership style. When someone is aware of their own expertise and role, this confidence is perceived by others and helps to foster a natural recognition of authority.

What structural changes do you think are needed to ensure female leadership in universities becomes standard rather than rare?
The simplest answer is: more women in top positions. In recent years, the number of female Rectors has risen, but this progress is not consistently linear.
Women sometimes hesitate to put themselves forward because they tend to be highly self-critical. This self-criticism can limit initiative, whereas men are often more willing to step forward. In my case, for example, it was not an initiative that arose spontaneously: some colleagues encouraged me to stand, pointing out that I had the necessary experience and skills. I believe that what often prevents women from putting themselves forward for positions of responsibility is precisely this strong self-criticism, which stems partly from cultural legacy and partly from the belief that family responsibilities still largely fall on women. If you asked me whether I would undertake this experience again, my answer is yes. It was a profoundly transformative and enriching experience. I learned a great deal, both at the university through constant interaction with colleagues and in my external relations. At the end of my term, I also received an important recognition, the prestigious *Donna Venezia 2026 Award*, which acknowledged the contribution of my mandate to the promotion of culture and education, as well as to strengthening Ca' Foscari's role as a bridge between East and West. The event was organised with great care and also involved local schools. It was a very meaningful moment and, at the end of my term, a great source of satisfaction.

If a young researcher, observing you as Rector, were to think, "perhaps I too could aspire to a position like this", what would you want her to know?
That all of us can succeed. That it is essential to cultivate our abilities with conviction and perseverance. With determination, each of us can achieve our goals

Tiziana Lippiello
Tiziana Lippiello was born in San Vito al Tagliamento. She graduated in 1986 in Oriental Languages and Literatures from Ca' Foscari University of Venice and studied at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, at the Faculty of Philosophy of Fudan University in Shanghai (1985–1987), and at the Faculty of Humanities of Leiden University (1989–1993), where she earned her PhD. She began her career as a researcher at the University of Trieste and joined Ca' Foscari in 2000, where she teaches Classical Chinese. Within the university, she has served as a Senator, Director of the Department of Asian and North African Studies, and Vice-Rector for International Relations. Since October 1, 2020, she has been the Rector of Ca' Foscari University of Venice and a member of the board of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI), with responsibility for international affairs. From 2022 to 2023, she was President of the Univeneto Foundation, and from 2022 to 2024, she served as President of the Eutopia European University alliance.

Lei & The World

Maria Rita Consolaro
Adjunct Professor of Spanish-American Language, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

in conversation with
Jimena Néspolo
Author

Speaking about your latest book, the novel *Cuando florezcan los agapantos*, it is evident that we are dealing with intricate and carefully crafted narrative strategies. For instance, the various notebooks that compose the work are presented in reverse chronological order. This choice also fosters an association with the diary genre without fully embracing it. There is, therefore, an undeniable ambiguity in your writing. What lies behind this? How was this creative process conceived and executed?
Diaries presuppose that there is an author writing, and that there is something worthy of being recorded and noted down. This is not the case with Leonarda, who is an entirely minor character. Moreover, her final notebook – the first to have been written and likely dating from 1944 – is poorly written. It is untranslatable in the sense that it cannot be translated by Artificial Intelligence, because it is a constantly alienating writing. This narrator is not aware that she is writing a diary; she is simply trying to learn a language and record her lived experience. The notebooks we have, therefore, are attempts at decision-making within a language.
Contemporary literature is too codified. Literary genres are overly defined, and just by looking at a book cover, we can tell whether it is a crime novel or a horror story; we already know what to expect. From a reader's perspective, I find this very disappointing.
I had to study extensively to develop a voice that narrates historical events from a marginalized perspective.
I am referring to Liberation theology, a movement that appeared in Latin America in the 1960s and promoted a more engaged and political role for the Church. Casimiro, Leonarda's brother, is linked to this ideological line that challenges Catholicism. This militancy originates from an outsider position, as Leonarda endured a very difficult childhood due to Nazi persecution in Poland. As a result, her experience of the Argentinian dictatorship is filtered through other dangers she has already faced. I found it stimulating to explore how these characters might sense a change when Argentinians perhaps had not yet fully recognised it.
Perhaps a foreign perspective could reveal more than the typical novel about the *desaparecidos*.

Many Latin American scholars, including Walter Mignolo, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Ángel Rama, and Martin Lienhard, have studied how writing relates to colonisation, emphasising the dominance of alphabetic writing in mainly oral indigenous societies.
In your book, it appears that Leonarda inverts this dynamic by developing a form of writing originating from her marginalised position.
Presenting the various stages of language acquisition from a female and marginalised perspective – one that constantly shapes itself through its connection to domestic space and Church discourse – holds undeniable importance. In this sense, linguistic acquisition becomes decolonised through writing.
This was one of the reasons I chose to write the notebooks from Leonarda's perspective, as the sister of the male protagonist, Casimiro. In a traditional novel, particularly within canonical Latin American literature, writers are often men with a highly centralised, androcentric worldview who also exercise a discourse of power: I do not know to what extent these writers can decolonise discourse or offer an alternative vision. Leonarda's writing, by contrast, enabled me to do exactly that: to craft the narrative of this perspective. At the same time, however, there is a macro-history that underpins the notebooks – that of the historian who receives and transcribes them.
Initially, I had only considered Leonarda's notebooks, but later I felt it necessary to introduce an alternative voice that would bring tension and resistance. In fact, I must confess that I had attempted, unsuccessfully, to publish the notebooks without this

framing voice. Over the years, I realised that there was something intolerable in Leonarda's voice that no one could accept, not even independent publishers. Not only because it is a writing of error; there was something truly unbearable for the kind of functional discourse expected. I therefore introduced the historian's voice, capable of addressing and disapproving of Leonarda's writing. What captivates me is the story of this entirely minor woman, who develops all the strategies of the marginal – the strategies of the weak – to survive, in her relationship with her brother and with the discourse of the Church. And for the historian who receives these notebooks in the 1990s, all this is disturbing. At that time, there was a surge of transgressive, dissenting literature. After all, in the literature of the second half of the twentieth century, even literature has its own 'ought to be'; Bolaño already existed, and there was already a space for women.

It has been observed that a key feature of this novel is its structure. In the book, we encounter a historian who collects, organises, and transcribes Leonarda's notebooks. According to the French philosopher Derrida, the archive conveys both preservation and loss, even destruction. In some ways, this reflects what occurs in *Cuando florezcan los agapantos*. On one hand, there are Leonarda's notebooks; on the other, we understand that Leonarda ultimately disappears. Her archive is significant not only in terms of memory and emancipation but also in terms of death and erasure.

Yes, the notion of the archive implies that we are dealing with a document, evidence of something that is missing. There is an aporia there, as the text highlights everything that is absent. Moreover, it is filled with gaps and questions. Perhaps our only response is reflection, which is where the critic – or the narrator – plays a role: in storytelling. The historian is urging someone to gather those documents and turn them into a story.

It is as if the only way societies can survive is by creating, in each new era, their own narrative of past experiences. At least, that is how I see it. This is an experience that concerns every generation. Critical discourse on literature becomes pointless if we, as critics or readers, cannot articulate our own narrative of existence in the present. In archival work, organising what has been collected is itself a way of constructing a narrative. Montage, too, is a method of building stories, and literature, at least the literature I have practised in recent years, works with archives as a means of constructing narratives. We live in an age of constant contamination of stories, of signs across social networks, across different platforms, in life itself, in the excitement we feel when, in the street, we encounter a multitude of signs. It seems to me that contemporary literature must make more coded use of this multitude of narratives in constructing its stories. Today's reader already uses these narratives in everyday life, in WhatsApp communication, in memes. Literature, therefore, should absorb these narrative devices. That is what I attempted to do in *El pozo y las ruinas* (Libros de Lince, 2011), where there is a wealth of technological devices and speed. Leonarda did not allow me to do this because of the historical setting, but when I write, I enjoy playing with these elements. Narrative devices must remain within literature, otherwise a book can only aspire to become territory plundered by Netflix or other platforms. Many writers aspire above all to have their books adapted for film.

That is not my case; it does not interest me. I feel that it would never be possible for me. For me, literature is a kind of 'ought to be' that fulfils me, but we have become too accustomed, too comfortable, with a literature that tends to turn into television series. There is a sense of calm, of false tranquillity, in literature, in literary festivals, which I believe is connected to all this. What is literature? I think new generations must ask themselves this question.

What is your view of contemporary Argentinian literature, both in Argentina and in Europe?

In Europe, Argentinian literature is shaped by power that is, by publishing houses. And what can you tell us about Batata Libros, the publisher with which you released *Cuando florezcan los agapantos*?

Power determines what we are expected to consider literature. That is why I am committed to the cultural project of the journal *Boca de Sapo*. Batata Libros is a very small publishing house that was recently founded in the city where I live, Pilar (Argentina). I find it wonderful that my wish to publish the novel became a reality with Batata Libros, where many young people work. It may seem trivial, but when you are fifty, the fact that someone twenty years younger reads you – and does not reject your book – is very important. If a book is not deemed meaningful by someone two decades younger than you, perhaps it is not worth publishing. When the book was published by this small press, I was utterly delighted.

Jimena Néspolo

Jimena Néspolo (Buenos Aires, 1973) is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Argentinian literature. She holds a PhD in Literature from the University of Buenos Aires and currently balances her time between research at CONICET (National Scientific and Technical Research Council) and her work as a poet and fiction author. She is also editor of the journal Boca de Sapo, which fosters critical and cultural debate worldwide. I interviewed Jimena Néspolo at Ca' Foscari on 14 October 2025, on the occasion of the presentation of her latest novel *Cuando florezcan los agapantos* (Batata Libros, 2025). The event was organised by the Archive of Migrant Women Writers and the Lei Project. *Cuando florezcan los agapantos* tells the story of Leonarda, who emigrates from Poland to the Argentinian countryside escaping Nazi persecution. Leonarda's story intersects with many other personal narratives and, above all, intertwines with history itself, from Nazism to the early signs of the Argentinian dictatorship. It is, above all, the story of a woman on society's margins who defies the limits set upon her in daily life.

Caterina Petroselli
Master's graduate in Languages and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

in conversation with
Zhang Li
Professor and Vice Dean of the School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University

In your opinion, which aspects of contemporary Chinese women's writing could potentially reshape the overall literary landscape?

A female perspective is essential in all aspects of Chinese women's literature, from writing to research. Over the past four or five years, I have observed with great satisfaction that many authors, regardless of gender, have developed a strong awareness of their own identity through reflection and self-criticism. Women writers make a vital contribution to the literary landscape through writing that champions a female perspective, position, and spirit. For instance, [Margaret Atwood's] *The Handmaid's Tale* has issued an important warning to anyone reflecting on the human condition. This has been achieved through an expressive approach rooted in female experience, perspective, and standpoint.

Similarly, in *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, the vegetarian wife, through her sacrifices, determination, and the form of resistance she embodies, demonstrates that her rebellion is not solely a matter for women but relates to the human condition as a whole.

Therefore, I believe that reflecting on both the female condition and the human condition from women's experience, female embodiment, and a gendered perspective, is one of the most important contributions women writers make to world literature.

When selecting women writers and their works, what criteria or methods do you use to showcase the diversity and complexity of women's experiences?

My research group and I prioritise literary value and then assess the presence

of a female perspective (that is, an analysis of reality based on women's specific experiences). In the selection process, we also consider the plurality of female identities, seeking to include figures such as daughters, wives, mothers, partners, students, young girls and elderly women. We pay particular attention to the diversity of their life and work experiences, as well as to generational differences.
The complexity of women's experience is central: writing should not be confined to describing virtues traditionally associated with women, such as diligence, kindness, simplicity, and resilience, but must also depict women's frailties and contradictions, including jealousy, vulnerability, and the darker sides of their personalities. We embrace both the perfection and imperfection of female characters and their actions; for us, this is a sign of respect.

Do you think that the ways publishing and literary criticism operate have evolved recently?
Compared to when you started your career, do women now receive more recognition for their talent? Specifically, regarding the challenge to the old idea that "a virtuous woman is one without talent", have you noticed an increase in both awards for women and their impact?
Everything is changing: criticism and publishing now give considerable attention to female perspectives and voices. Publications and reading targeted at a female audience today hold a significant share of the Chinese market – both in the literary sector and in the broader book industry – and works addressing women's issues are often particularly well received by readers. This marks a clear shift. Alongside this development, female talent is gaining more recognition and attention. In China, there has been a noticeable increase in awards bestowed upon women. These shifts take time, especially when speaking about changes in literary ideas, which evolve more slowly.

In an interview about Jane Austen, you mentioned Austen's feeling of 'perceiving herself'. In modern literature and publishing, how do you 'perceive yourself'?
And how do you sustain a stable and clear identity in a context where representations of women are often fragmented and subject to labelling?
I perceive myself through writing and my work, through teaching and research. Through classroom teaching and dialogue with young people, I reaffirm and acknowledge my identity. I do not feel alone: I am accompanied by many students and young people, some of whom are more than just students.
As you have observed, images of women are often subject to labelling; I constantly remind myself that these classifications are only temporary. A determined person should not allow their goals to be fragmented or distorted by external interpretations or imposed categories.
What I do is something I love and believe to be right. I have certainly written texts or taken paths that were mistaken, but I continue to explore.
We are all engaged in an ongoing process of searching. I have a clear awareness of myself, and I am willing to commit to pursuing this project. I also believe that promoting greater visibility, knowledge, and understanding of women writers and works of women's literature is a necessary development and an inevitable direction for world literature. It is precisely this conviction that keeps my identity stable and clear.

Finally, considering your experience with annual anthologies and current production trends, where do you see Chinese women's writing heading in the next few years?
What new themes could women writers explore to promote further innovation in criticism and literature?
I believe that Chinese women's writing is poised to develop in an increasingly positive way. This year, I titled the preface to the *Annual Anthology "Creating One's Own Nature"*.
In my view, women writers are no longer confined to themes such as family, love or marriage: many are already moving towards broader horizons – towards nature and even the cosmos – shaping a distinctive universe of their own.
In this sense, attention to fields such as science fiction, environmental writing and maritime literature will significantly contribute to the progress of women's writing; consequently, these developments will increasingly draw the interest of literary criticism. In recent years, I have worked to promote what I call 'new women's writing'. One of its key features is that it no longer views women's conditions through binary oppositions, nor does it see the domestic sphere as the only space for women's writing. Women may write about family, marriage, and love, but they can also explore everything that happens in the world.
The promotion of 'new women's writing' seeks to inject new energy into this literary field. Themes related to nature, the universe, and exploration will all be important in the development of both feminist literary criticism and literary production. Last year, I had the opportunity to visit the University of Rome, where I interacted with Italian writers, scholars, and students. On that occasion, I noticed that many women writers here still do not receive adequate attention and that women's literature and criticism have not yet become a subject of broad social interest. I am therefore glad to have participated in this interview and hope that, in the future, Italy will also develop its own 'new women's writing'.
I also want to emphasise that [Elena Ferrante's] *My Brilliant Friend* is a source of pride for Italian women's writing and has significantly influenced women's literary output in China as well.
I hope that more Italian women writers from the past will be rediscovered, studied, and valued, and that the works of contemporary women will be translated and disseminated in China.
Similarly, I hope more works by young Chinese women writers will be translated and published in Italy.
I am delighted to have participated in this interview and thank you for your insightful and stimulating questions.
I hope we can work together to promote women's literature globally.

Zhang Li
Zhang Li, born in Baoding, is a lecturer and Vice Dean of the School of Chinese Language and Literature at Beijing Normal University. She is Deputy Director of the Beijing Writers Association, of the Prose Committee of the Chinese Writers Association, and of the Women's Literature Committee of the China Association for Research on Contemporary Literature. She has served on the jury of the ninth and tenth Mao Dun Literary Prize and of the National Children's Literature Award. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary Chinese literature and culture, a field to which she has dedicated eight books and numerous edited anthologies. Among her many recognitions, special mention should be made of *Xiaoshuo fengjing* (The Landscape of the Novel), which received the eighth Lu Xun Literary Prize for Literary Theory and Criticism. In this interview, Professor Zhang Li explains how she amplifies the voices of Chinese women writers through her role as a literary critic and editor of annual anthologies.

Lei & Science
This interview was originally conducted in English

Michela Signoretto
Full Professor of Industrial Chemistry and Rector's Delegate for Scientific Research at Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Federica Menegazzo
Associate Professor of Industrial Chemistry at Ca' Foscari University of Venice

in conversation with
Mojgan Zendehdel
Full Professor of Inorganic Chemistry at Arak University, Iran

This interview took place before the war in Iran broke out. Given the reality we are now facing, the insights shared by these Iranian women scientists—and their pursuit of freedom and knowledge—feel more vital than ever

To begin, we would like you to introduce yourself to our readers: who is Mojgan today, and how has your identity as an Iranian woman, raised in an ancient yet complex culture, influenced your determination to become a leading scientist in the field of sustainable chemistry?
If I were to describe myself simply, I would say that today Mojgan is, above all, an academic striving to balance scientific curiosity, social responsibility, and her lived experience as an Iranian woman. I grew up in a culture where knowledge and wisdom have always been deeply valued – from the philosophical and scientific traditions of ancient Persia to the strong emphasis families place on education. At the same time, this culture is complex, offering both opportunities and constraints, particularly for women. Rather than becoming an obstacle, this duality became a driving force for me. I chose science not merely as a profession, but as a meaningful tool for sustainable impact. My interest in chemistry emerged precisely from this perspective. Its breadth allowed me to focus on materials whose elegant and intricate structures enable a more intelligent use of resources and provide scientific responses to environmental challenges responses that seek to balance technological progress with ethical and environmental responsibility.

Your bond with our country is solid and long-lasting. What prompted you to choose Italian research groups as partners for your work, and how would you describe the synergy between the Iranian and Italian schools of chemistry?
While my bond with Iran has always been deep and conscious, I firmly believe that science transcends borders and cannot progress without international cooperation. My collaboration with Italian research groups grew out of shared scientific interests, particularly in porous materials such as zeolites and their environmental and catalytic applications.
I would like to acknowledge, in particular, Professor Giuseppe Cruciani at the University of Ferrara, who hosted me during my sabbatical in 2009 and played a key role in introducing me to the Italian scientific environment.
This collaboration later expanded with Professor Michela Signoretto at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. What made these partnerships enduring was not only access to advanced facilities, but a genuine intellectual synergy between two scientific traditions resulting in projects that are both scientifically rigorous and socially meaningful.

Your research focuses on materials such as zeolites for purification processes. Do you believe that science can serve as a universal language capable of transcending borders and political tensions that often isolate Iran from the rest of the world?
My personal experience gives a clear answer: Yes. When researchers discuss the structure of a zeolite or the mechanism of pollutant removal, political differences fade and the shared human challenge becomes central. This does not mean ignoring political realities but recognizing that science – through what I would call quiet diplomacy – can remain a stable channel for connection, even when other forms of communication are limited.

Iranian women hold a remarkable record: the percentage of girls attending scientific and STEM faculties is among the highest in the world. Where does this strong female vocation for the 'hard sciences' come from?
This phenomenon arises from a combination of cultural, social, and historical factors. Education particularly in the basic sciences has long carried strong social value in Iran, and many families view it as a long-term investment, even under difficult economic conditions. For many young women, science also represents a relatively merit-based space, where competence and effort are the primary measures of success. Alongside personal perseverance and the presence of female academic role models, this has contributed to the strong representation of women in STEM, even though professional paths remain challenging.

Conducting scientific research in Iran today involves unique challenges, from sanctions to visa restrictions. How do you maintain academic excellence in a context sometimes described as 'scientific resistance'?
One of the most significant difficulties in my own scientific career has been collaboration with colleagues abroad. However, I prefer not to frame this context in terms of pressure or hardship, but rather as a series of demanding professional choices. For me, what is sometimes called 'scientific resistance' is not about isolation or endurance; it is an active commitment to quality, ethical standards, and meaningful engagement with global science. This path requires creativity in research design, intelligent use of available resources, and strong reliance on both formal and informal scientific networks. Even when financial or visa constraints limited my international travel which was personally painful, I never compromised my scientific trajectory or standards. Maintaining quality in science, even under complex conditions, is a conscious and principled choice.

As a professor at Arak University, you are training the scientists of tomorrow. What is the greatest challenge your female students share with you regarding the reconciliation of professional ambition and social reality?
The most common concern is how to sustain long-term scientific ambition while navigating social expectations, family responsibilities, and limited structural support. Many of my female students are deeply motivated, but they seek realistic pathways ones that allow them to remain scientifically active without abandoning personal or social commitments.

In recent years, Iran has drawn global attention due to women-led demands for freedom. What role do you believe female academics and scientists play in processes of change and modernization?
I believe female academics and scientists play a quiet yet profound role not only in Iran, but globally. Through knowledge production, education, mentorship, and professional presence in decision making spaces, they gradually reshape cultural narratives. This is not necessarily direct political action, but a sustained form of cultural and intellectual transformation that unfolds over time.

You have worked extensively abroad. What is the most precious thing you bring from Iran to Europe, and what do you try to convey back to your Iranian colleagues from Western academic culture?
From Iran, I bring adaptability, creativity under constraints, and a deep analytical approach to scientific problems qualities often appreciated by European colleagues. In return, I try to bring back a culture of international teamwork, long-term research planning, and stronger links between academia and industry.

Beyond political barriers, what prejudices have you had to dismantle as a woman scientist from the Middle East?
Some stem from stereotypical views of Middle Eastern women assumptions about limited autonomy or surprise at a high level of scientific expertise. Changing these perceptions requires deeper relationships between people from the West and the Middle East. My response has always been professional dialogue, invitations to visit my country, and consistent, rigorous scientific work. Ultimately, science itself remains the most effective tool for dismantling misconceptions.
I hope for a world in which scientists are not judged by headlines, politics, or the place where they live, but by the integrity of their work, their ideas, and their contribution to knowledge.

Finally, what advice would you give to a young female researcher beginning her career in a context where freedom to conduct science is not always guaranteed?
Define your path consciously and realistically within your own context, while keeping your horizon global. Invest in strong

scientific foundations, plan carefully, and avoid constant comparison with others. Above all, believe that science is not limited to ideal conditions. It is a meaningful choice for growth and impact even when the path is difficult. And finally, be kind.
The world needs kindness.

Changing Direction

Annalisa Menin
Branding & Communication
Strategist, Writer

It is never too late to start afresh: The Story of a Forever Girl from New York
Do you know that pivotal scene in *The Devil Wears Prada*, when Andy steps out of the car, leaves Miranda and the fashion world behind, and decides not to be ensnared by blind ambition, after Miranda says the line that has become iconic: "Don't be ridiculous, Andrea, everybody wants this. Everybody wants to be us…"?
Well, like Andy, I no longer wanted 'that life'. But let us take a step back.
My name is Annalisa Menin. I was born in the province of Venice and, at twenty-one, I left Italy for what was intended to be a three-month internship in New York organised by my university, Ca' Foscari.
Those three months extended into twenty years – arguably the most formative years in a person's life: their twenties and thirties. They were intense, complex years, at times incredibly challenging, but also deeply exhilarating and enriching.
In true New York style, over that long period I changed direction several times, in life as well as in work: homes and neighbourhoods, relationships and projects, driven by a hunger for experience, for possibility, for the world.
It was in New York that my career began, on one of those paths with no clear destination, where each experience contributes to a larger pattern unknown even to those living it.
That path took me from a financial software start-up – an experience very much comparable to a high-intensity Master's in Business Management – to co-founding a branding and communications agency in SoHo, the vibrant heart of design and fashion Manhattan.
But New York provided me with more than just professional fulfilment; it also offered profound personal growth. No other city presents introspective opportunities as substantial and striking as the majestically brutal New York City.
I would not be the woman I am today without New York. She filled me up and emptied me out time and again, shaping me and teaching me perhaps the most important thing of all: that it is never too late to start afresh.
It's a theme I know very well. Over time, I have had to refine the art of starting anew, changing direction, and navigating life's often choppy waters.
The first time was when I was eighteen. After nearly losing my life in a road accident that left me bed-bound for a year, I had to learn to walk again. In the meantime, I changed degree programme, moving from the humanities to economics, and pulled myself back up through physiotherapy and a great many dreams.
At thirty, it happened again. I lost my husband, Marco Omiccioli, who was taken by cancer in just a few months, only three years after our wedding. His death forced me to rebuild my life from scratch, relying on a few close friends and a city that had so much to offer, yet at the same time felt cold and indifferent to the immense grief I was experiencing.
Ten years later, I found myself once again back at the starting blocks: I woke up one day and everything that had kept me in New York for almost twenty years – my career, my relationships, the intoxicating energy, the endless opportunities, the constant adrenaline – was no longer enough.
All that beauty could no longer satisfy my deep yearning for meaning, peace, and genuine happiness, and that feeling of absence had gradually hollowed out a chasm inside me'
This time, however, it was my decision, not something imposed 'from above'. And since I am not a woman of half measures, I changed course entirely: I left everything behind – my agency, my city, my home, and, above all, a version of myself that no longer felt authentic.
I would love to tell you that, in doing so, I was magnificent, that I acted in exactly the right way, flawlessly, and that I decided to leave New York simply because I had taken everything it had to offer and just needed a breath of fresh air. Instead, I will tell you the truth: I did my best to keep fighting within a context that, little by little, no longer felt like my own. I left New York because, essentially, it was turning me into a poor imitation of the person I once was.
"Hi, Annalisa, how are you? I'm calling to let you know that Antonio C. has passed away. You remember Antonio, don't you? Well, I wanted to tell you that his funeral is in two days and…?".
"Hi, Linda. Yes, I remember. I'm sorry, but I'm really busy… Could you call again in a few days?".
"Oh… okay".
That was what I had become.
Faced with the death of someone I knew, who had even helped me at the beginning of my career, I told a dear friend – Linda – that I was too busy. But that was not who I truly was.
Everything I wanted I got, and it made me sad. "The wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world" that Fitzgerald writes about in *The Great Gatsby* had gradually lost its enchantment for me. Linda's phone call had been my wake-up call.
I was hungry for something else.
For normality.
For simple things.
For real relationships, not filtered through apps and diaries.
For time.
For slowness.
For depth.
For care, for myself and for others.
For a life with meaning, not just pace.
Perhaps because this is where I come from.
The daughter of factory workers who studied only up to primary school, I was the first woman in my family to graduate, to live abroad, to live independently and freely.
The first to break with the past, to break generational cycles. And I am deeply proud of that.
This is how I find myself today, writing this article – the first in the Changing Direction series – and sharing how Italy healed me. Gradually, through its simplicity, its imperfect beauty, its humanity, and its rhythms.
My everyday life, once characterised by relentless pace, the city's constant hum, and ever-changing opportunities, is now marked by the crowing of the cockerel in the morning and by a series of moments I can carve out beyond my demanding but more humane work commitments.
Yes, because after New York City I chose to return and live in Italy, in my beloved Veneto. More specifically, and to my great happiness, I decided to settle in the countryside, although only a few minutes away from one of Italy's most important airports, just one flight away to the next adventure.
With this return, my attempts to escape have finally come to an end. Here, I quote a writer and Nobel laureate who is very dear to me, Naguib Mahfouz: "Your home is not where you were born. Home is where all your attempts to escape cease".
I am deeply grateful for this stage of my life, in which I can work on international projects with my new agency, Menin & Co., continue travelling and discovering the world, and then return to a place that feels like home, surrounded by people I love and by a sense of beauty that often moves me.
It was exactly what I needed: to reclaim simple pleasures, real life. Walks in the countryside. Meals enjoyed sitting down, in company, prepared with wholesome ingredients bought at the last minute according to the culinary whim of the day.
And what about the time I can finally dedicate to my elderly parents, to family, and to lifelong friends?
And then there is her: Venice and its lagoon, a city I have always loved and am now rediscovering slowly, dedicating time and respect to it.
The remarkable thing is that all of this had always been there, within my reach. Yet, I failed to see its value. Clearly, I needed to experience something else to truly appreciate it. It's true what they say: sometimes you have to leave in order to learn how to stay.