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**Life Arts**

## **What's in a Name? Sexism. Chauvinism. Discrimination.**

By *Meryl Ann Butler*

An Italian Facebook group dedicated to discovering street and place names in Italy which honor women has expanded its search to the entire globe. The number of streets named for women is discouragingly out of proportion, but this group is making an heroic (or, perhaps, heroine-ic) effort to change that.

[Toponomastica Femminile](#) member Daniela Domenici, is an educator, author of ten books, an Italian/English translator, and grandmother living in Tuscany, Italy, near Florence. Her group has also researched women who were "firsts" and have collected one thousand of them in a book, "Le mille. I primati delle donne" ("The Thousands. The Records of the Women.") Daniela is one of the primary co-authors. She graciously agreed to be interviewed by OpEdNews.



*Le mille*

([Image](#) by [Daniela Domenici](#)) [Permission](#) [Details](#) [DMCA](#)

**Meryl Ann Butler:** Thank you for visiting with us, Daniela. You belong to a fascinating group, *Toponomastica Femminile*. Can you tell us what it is and how it began?

toponymy:

the place-names of a region or language or especially the etymological study of them.

International Scientific Vocabulary, from *top-* + Greek *onyma*, *onoma* name

[-Merriam-Webster](#)

**Daniela Domenici:** *Toponomastica Femminile*, to which I am happy and honored to belong since its beginning, is a group which was born in January 2012 on Facebook, an idea of Maria Pia Ercolini, a teacher living in Rome.



Daniela Domenici

Maria Pia wanted to find how many streets, gardens and squares are named for women in every small and big town of Italy. We have checked and listed them and have discovered that they are very few.



Maria Pia Ercolini

(Image by [Maria Pia Ercolini](#))

In these years more and more people, women and men, all over the world, have joined our search and the results are, unfortunately, very similar in every other country. That's why our group, headed by Maria Pia, puts continuous pressure on every local town government in order to entitle streets, squares, gardens and urban places in a broad sense to women to fill the gap, to compensate the sexism which characterizes the current situation.

**MAB:** *Of course I am not surprised that women are not very well represented in street and place names. I bet you have some interesting stories, though, about some of the ones you have found. Can you share a couple with us?*

**DD:** Great, groundbreaking women who are completely absent in the names of Italian streets, squares and parks are so many that it is really difficult to choose a couple of them to share with you.

But recently there was a particular event of entitlement I have chosen as an example.

Franca Rame was a great theatre actress from Milan who died four years ago. She is also famous because she was the wife of Dario Fo, one of the greatest Italian playwrights, and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.

Franca has always been a paladin of women's rights also, because she was the victim of an abduction during which she was raped. When she came back home she decided not to be silent about her rape but to talk and write about it as a stimulus for other women who have suffered the same violence.



*Franca Rame 1962 (cropped)*

On 12nd March, at Alcatraz, near Perugia, in Umbria, in the heart of Italy, where Franca and Dario's son Jacopo Fo lives and works, "il viale delle Giuste," the "Avenue of the Right Women" was dedicated to Franca Rame. She famously said, "what I would like to go on telling women, even after my death, is that they must never lose the respect for themselves and have dignity. Always."

**MAB:** *What a lovely honor. When you say there are very few streets or other places named for women, what is that percentage in Italy?*

**DD:** In the male/female ratio there are about 8 streets in Italy dedicated to women out of 100.

The other 92 honor men.

**MAB:** Are there some places named for famous women who we might know, in Italy? I am wondering about some of my favorite women artists, like Sofonisba Anguissola, Artemisia Gentileschi, Elisabetta Sirani, Rosalba Carriera, Lavinia Fontana -- are there places named after any of them?

**DD:** Yes, luckily there are, but not so many. As regards the great women artists you have mentioned Artemisia Gentileschi is at the top of the range of dedications: one bridge in Rome, two gardens in Varese and in Milan and one library in Bresso near Milan.



Self-portrait (1638-9) Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-16365, street sign, Rome, photo credit Rosangela Petillo

To Sofonisba Anguissola are entitled four streets: one at Vigliano d'Asti in Piemonte, one in Milan, one in Cremona near Milan and one in Genova.



Self Portrait (1556) Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625). Street sign photo credit Rossella Sommariva

To Rosalba Carriera are dedicated two streets, one in Milan and one in Chioggia near



Self-portrait, 1715, Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757), street sign Torino, photo credit Loretta Junck

**MAB:** I understand that your group has looked at place names outside of Italy. What is different and what is the same?

**DD:** In France, where we have several correspondents, the percentages are slightly higher but the main difference between Italy and the other European countries is the vast majority of women saints who removes further visibility to the lay women who have given important contributions to our historical and cultural growth. There are few modern female models for our

girls: only saints or victims, there is unfortunately little else to identify with.

**MAB:** *This is such a fascinating project, Daniela. In my geographic area of Tidewater, Virginia, which includes Virginia Beach, we have a few streets names for Grace Sherwood, a woman who was famously tried as a witch in this area, multiple times, in the late 1600s and early 1700s.*



*Statue of Grace Sherwood, the 'Witch of Pungo.' Virginia Beach, VA*

*Her last trial in 1706 went down in history as the very last official witch trial on American soil. One of the things she was accused of -- and found to be guilty of by a jury -- was "spiriting" herself through a keyhole, and once on the other side, transforming herself into a cat and attacking the occupant of the room! It's amazing that she would be found guilty of that! Her actual "crime" may have been that she was a pretty young widow, powerful enough to make it on her own, and was therefore seen as a threat.*

*Grace's many abuses and trials included being stripped naked and prodded with pins, as well as being hogtied and dumped into the Lynnhaven River. (If the accused survived this torture, that "proved" she was a witch, and she would be appropriately punished. If she did not survive, she was rewarded with a "Christian" burial. Not exactly a "win," either way, eh?)*



*Intersecting streets in Virginia Beach, VA, named in honor of Grace Sherwood, the 'Witch of Pungo.'*

*Grace somehow survived, and miraculously went on to live her life in relative peace. She is now honored with a statue, as well as probably at least a dozen place names, such as Witchduck Rd, and Sherwood Lane. And in 2006, she was officially pardoned by the governor of Virginia on the 300th anniversary of her conviction.*

#### **SELECTED PLACE NAMES HONORING WOMEN IN THE US**

Pocahontas Trail, Williamsburg, VA

Virginia Dare Drive, Virginia Beach, VA

Virginia Dare Trail, Nags Head, NC

Martha Washington Street, Alexandria, VA

Mary Washington Street, Highland Springs, VA

Eleanor Roosevelt Drive, Laurel, Montana 59044



*Dolley Madison*

Dolley Madison Boulevard, McLean, VA

Mary Cassatt Drive, Potomac, MD

Babe Zaharias Drive, Beaumont, TX

Pickford Street in West Los Angeles, CA (Mary Pickford)





*Mary Pickford with Camera 2*

Abigail Adams Circle, Weymouth, MA

Talmadge Street, Los Angeles, CA (Norma Talmadge)

Rosa Parks Boulevard, Detroit, MI



*Rosa Parks (cropped)*

Martha Jefferson Place, Herndon, VA

Martha Jefferson Drive, Charlottesville, VA

Dolly Parton Parkway, Sevierville, TN



*Dolly Parton (cropped)*

*So, Daniela, is there anything that our readers can do to contribute to your work, particularly if they know of other place names here in the US or in other countries, which honor women?*

**DD:** Yes, readers can send a message to me here on OpEdNews with the names and the locations of these places they know, and we can correspond by email after that. We would also be very glad to have some photos if they can take them. I will translate contributions into Italian and publish them in our group on Facebook, my site and in *Toponomastica Femminile* site.

**MAB:** *That's great, I hope some of our readers will have information for you! And thank you for visiting with us, and good luck with this project!*

**DD:** Thank you for giving me the chance to talk about this topic which we hope will spread in order to give women their rightful place in history for their achievements!

*Toponomastica Femminile* member and teacher, Maria Grazia Anatra, has written the first children's book which deals with toponomastica femminile. "Una strada per Rita" is about a street named for [Rita Levi-Montalcini](#), an Italian Nobel laureate, honored for her work in neurobiology. The book explains that entitling streets, squares and gardens to women is necessary to let children know history and to shape their culture. "Una strada per Rita" is illustrated by a woman, Viola Gesmundo, and the publisher, Donatella Caione, is also female. The 36-page book will be published in Italy in April.

