When Italy underwent immense social, economic and political transformations in the early part of the twentieth century, the material rewards of the modernization process were unevenly distributed, just as the unification of Italy previously had brought very few benefits, if any, to the majority of the population. The one group which, in particular, saw no improvement to its condition was women, as they continued to be discriminated against by limited access to education and employment, unequal treatment under the law and disenfranchisement. The Catholic Church, the only truly unifying element of the country at the time of Unification, had become a bitter enemy of the Italian State after losing its temporal power. In these circumstances, women and their organizations proved crucial to the Church in dealing with its perceived adversaries: the State, the political left and modern society. To appreciate fully the social and political role which the Catholic women’s movements played in this period, it is necessary to examine their contemporary context. With this objective, Section I explores the broad setting of post-Unification Italy and the troubled path of Church–State relations, and Section II looks more specifically at women’s position in Italian society from the Risorgimento to World War II.

Section I: The Italian State and the Catholic Church

The Italian State

Modern Italy has its roots in the nineteenth-century Risorgimento, which aimed at liberating Italy from foreign domination and unifying the various political entities on the Italian peninsula under one government. Unification was preceded by decades of either overt or clandestine revolutionary activity against the Austrians in the north, the Bourbon
dynasty in the south and the administrative system of the Papal States. It involved three wars of independence against Austria (in 1848–1849, 1859 and 1866) under the political and military leadership of Piedmont, and the expedition of Giuseppe Garibaldi and his “Thousand” to Sicily in 1860. A united kingdom, headed by the Piedmontese monarch, was formally established in March 1861. The process of Unification continued with the acquisition of the Veneto in 1866 and Rome in 1870, and with further territorial additions, including Alto-Adige, Trentino, Trieste and Istria, after World War I. The loss of the pope’s temporal power through the annexation of Rome and the Papal States created among the higher echelons of the Church an aura of almost visceral animosity towards the State.

None of the heroes of the Risorgimento – neither its theoretical champion, Giuseppe Mazzini, nor its revolutionary activist, Giuseppe Garibaldi, nor its political tactician, Count Camillo Benso di Cavour – envisaged the Catholic Church as playing an important part in a unified Italy. The principal forces behind the thrust for Unification had been the members of the modernizing agricultural and industrial bourgeoisie and aristocracy in the north, who saw in the existence of trade barriers between the states on the peninsula a hindrance to further economic development.¹ This new ruling élite of unified Italy failed to address, through the subsequent Liberal governments, the inherent social and economic problems of the country. Its administration was hampered by the absence of a common language, and communication was rendered difficult by the high illiteracy rate. Although schooling was made compulsory, the law was not strictly enforced, so illiteracy and dialects persisted to underline class and regional differences.²  

For the most part, the country was economically backward, possessing relatively few natural resources, and for the majority of people the only route to escape from poverty, or to improve their station in life, was by way of emigration. New infrastructure and industrial projects tended to benefit northerners while, with the removal of internal tariffs, the southern markets were suddenly flooded with imports, to the detriment of local industry. For many southerners, crippled by new heavy taxes, the Risorgimento represented another form of colonization rather than deliverance from foreign domination. Owing to the lack of resources and foresight, the central government failed to commit sufficient funds for the maintenance of law and order in the south, which in turn led to brigandage and the emergence of the criminal mafia organization. The Risorgimento would not bring emancipation to Italian women, who, on the contrary, “in Lombardy, Venetia, and Tuscany