News



Ambra Battilana Gutierrez speaks at a press conference in New York with other Model Alliance models and activists in September 2022. The organization lobbied for the Fashion Workers Act, which the N.Y. legislature passed in June. (Courtesy of Reed Young)



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Italian-Filipina model Ambra Battilana Gutierrez was only 18 years old when one night in August 2010 she was taken from her home in Turin, Italy, to what her manager said would be a dinner party. In reality, their destination was the private residence of then-Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in Arcore, near Milan. Gutierrez was participating in the finals of the Miss Italy beauty pageant, and after being noticed together with another Miss Italy finalist by a Berlusconi aide, she had been invited to the gathering.

Once inside Berlusconi's residence, Gutierrez was confronted with a scene that, she told NCR, she will never be able to forget because of the shock. As was later reported in more than a decade of court proceedings in Milan, Gutierrez had been invited to one of the notorious "bunga-bunga" sex parties that Berlusconi held at his mansion. These events began to be investigated by Milan prosecutors after the media reported in December 2010 that an Egyptian female minor attended one of them.

Five years after that event, which forced her to testify several times in court against Berlusconi and his aides, Gutierrez found herself in March 2015 at the center of another international sex scandal when she became one of the first women to report to New York City police her attempted rape by Harvey Weinstein. Thanks to her subsequent testimonies, along with those of more than 80 models and actresses across the United States, between 2018 and 2022 Weinstein was arrested and convicted in two criminal trials in Los Angeles and New York.

In the darkest moments of her struggles to expose the truth, Gutierrez said her faith sustained and "saved" her. For the first time since she shared her story with the international press and in the Italian and American courts, Gutierrez agreed to be interviewed by NCR about the role her Catholic faith played during the most dramatic years of her life — those after the first Berlusconi trial in 2011, and then between 2015 and 2017 when she left New York to live in the Philippines because she had depression.



Ambra Battilana Gutierrez, seen in an undated professional photo, was 18 when she was taken to one of then-Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's notorious "bunga-bunga" sex parties. (Courtesy of Ambra Battilana Gutierrez)

Born to an Italian father and Filipina mother, Gutierrez was raised in Italy by her single mother, who worked as an office secretary during weekdays and as a caregiver on weekends. "I grew up thinking I was almost an atheist. When I would see my mother praying, it was something I couldn't imagine possible for me," Gutierrez said. The idea of modeling as a teenager originated as a financial

"necessity" to support her family.

Making it to the finals of Miss Italy — a popular beauty pageant at the time, after which many contestants debuted as nationally known actresses and models — represented a unique opportunity for Gutierrez. What happened that August 2010 night, however, marked a watershed moment in her life.

As Gutierrez witnessed Berlusconi surrounded by women undressing, singing and dancing in sexually explicit fashion, she says she repeatedly asked in vain to leave. Gutierrez recalled that a personal assistant to Berlusconi named Emilio Fede — who was also a highly popular television journalist on one of the channels owned by Berlusconi — asked her, "What do you think you will get if you go away?" She interpreted that as a warning that she would not get any jobs after Miss Italy if she reported what she saw.

In the months that followed, Gutierrez did not tell anyone about that night for fear of not being believed, or of Italian public opinion turning against her, she said. At the time, the public was overwhelmingly in favor of Berlusconi and his conservative policies. Then on a morning in January 2011, a picture of her appeared in a Turin newspaper, which headlined that three girls who had participated in Miss Italy in 2010 had taken part in orgies organized at Berlusconi's mansion.



Model Ambra Battilana Gutierrez testified in court cases against former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and former American film producer Harvey Weinstein. She told NCR about the role her Catholic faith played during that time. (Courtesy of Ambra Battilana Gutierrez)

Gutierrez, who at the time was a senior in high school and a student representative, explained to her classmates what had happened, but within a few days found herself abandoned by friends and chased by paparazzi. "I stopped going to school for several weeks. The paparazzi followed me everywhere, all the way to my doorstep. I felt that everyone took me for a crazy person when I tried to recount. My biggest fear was that I would not be believed and would come across as a profiteer," she told NCR.

In April 2011, two months before her graduation, Gutierrez testified in court against Berlusconi, sharing her version of the events of that night. It was difficult for her to find work as a model in Italy after that, so she moved to London "with 600 euros in my pocket and without knowing a single word of English," she said.

She stopped calling herself "Ambra Battilana," but instead "Ambra Gutierrez," to try to change her identity and start over. "It was like I was living two lives. One was Ambra Gutierrez, the model who sent money home from London, and the other was Ambra Battilana, who every other Friday had to return to Milan to testify in court," she said.

During those years, Gutierrez had depression, leading her to "one of the lowest moments of [her] life." She said she slept more than 16 hours a day and could not leave her house. When she received a job offer from a modeling agency in Manila, Philippines, she thought it might be a chance to detach herself from everything that had happened. So she agreed to move there for two months, despite her family's opposition.

> 'I was helped to recognize the ways God had been close to me in other hard times in my life.'
> —Ambra Battilana Gutierrez
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"I didn't know anyone in the Philippines. I didn't trust anyone. I was scared, and my mother kept telling me she was afraid they would kidnap or hurt me, but I was already dead inside. I had no desire to live anymore. That was my last chance," she said. "Even though they were in the fashion world, I met people who were very religious, and everything they did was almost exclusively in the name of their Catholic faith."

One day, a Catholic hairstylist took Gutierrez to a Bible study in a private apartment. At the end of that meeting, a lay catechist who had led the prayer and study approached Gutierrez, who opened up to her, telling her about her childhood and recent life events. "I began to cry so much, as if I had a lot to get out from inside me. I was helped to recognize the ways God had been close to me in other hard times in my life," she said.

Those types of experiences in Manila changed her life profoundly, she said, allowing her to regain a sense of direction. "From then on, I found a purpose in my life again," she said. Participating in Bible studies and religious services, along with volunteering for charities that supported orphan children, showed her a "simplicity of

living" that she needed, she said.

At the end of her two months in the Philippines, Gutierrez said she felt completely different, with a renewed appreciation for people over material things. "I was less angry, I had a clear meaning of what was important in life," she said, describing a feeling of rebirth and a new zest for life that prompted her to explore a career in the United States.



A vendor sells #MeToo badges Nov. 12, 2017, during a protest march for survivors of sexual assault in Los Angeles. (CNS/Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

She remembered the catechist telling her during a Bible study, "I see in you a difficult path that you will have to take. Don't be afraid to walk this path, because there is someone who is protecting you. Go ahead." Gutierrez thinks those words foreshadowed what would happen in March 2015, After she moved to New York for a job offer, she said, Harvey Weinstein tried to rape her during a casting scheduled by her manager. Gutierrez said Weinstein grabbed her breast forcefully, and pushed her hard so that he could kiss her.

"I managed to push him and he pulled away. I went out of the office distraught and totally immobilized. I could feel my legs shaking. The only thing I thought at that moment was that I wanted to go to the police," she said. "When I walked into the police station, I said that Harvey Weinstein had grabbed my breast. The policeman looked at me and said, 'Again?' I didn't understand what he meant. I don't know how, but it's as if that word then kept booming in my head incessantly," she said. "I put it in my head that I should stop him."

The next day, under police request, Gutierrez returned to the hotel in Tribeca where Weinstein was staying, with a recorder hidden in her clothes. Thanks to this operation, the police officers were able to hear Weinstein admit that he had tried to rape Gutierrez the day before, and repeatedly invite Gutierrez to his private room, which she refused.

Gutierrez thought that recorded confession would prove Weinstein guilty. However, then-New York District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. did not press charges against Weinstein due to lack of evidence. It was not until after the bombshell #MeToo journalistic investigations in 2017 — in which Gutierrez also participated — that Weinstein was arrested in 2018 and later convicted.

Within days of the incident, Gutierrez was in the tabloids again and did not feel believed. She said she lost multiple modeling contracts, and venues that were controlled or sponsored by Weinstein stopped calling her for castings.

She still possessed the recordings in which Weinstein admitted to assaulting her. Out of fear that someone might hurt her family, she decided to sign a non-disclosure agreement with Weinstein's lawyers, in which she agreed that she would destroy the recordings and not release them to the press.

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"One day my brother called me from Italy and told me that people had gone looking for him outside his office asking about me. My blood froze there, because I realized that my family too was involved in this situation," she said. "I used to walk in those days with the thought that someone might shoot me in the head at any moment to silence me, but when I felt this visceral instinct of fear in knowing that my family might be in danger, I decided to sign the NDA."

Gutierrez said her reputation was destroyed, and she lost nearly all the contacts she had built in New York. She experienced a more severe depression than in 2011, and also had an eating disorder. "It was like I was trying to punish myself for not being able to get the truth out. I felt worthless for not helping women who needed to be helped," she said.

After being hosted at her only remaining friend's apartment in New York — also a practicing Catholic — Gutierrez moved back to the Philippines with the help of her brother, where she said she could practice her faith and regain hope in justice. "There was a voice inside me telling me that everything would be all right," she said.

Gutierrez stayed in the Philippines for two years this time. She recalls feeling immediately welcomed and understood, and that much of her healing process from depression and eating disorders was spiritual. "In my prayers I always asked for guidance and signs that what I was doing, the goal I had, was the right thing to do," she said. "I always got answers through the people I met who supported me."



Ambra Battilana Gutierrez and other Model Alliance activists campaign in New York City for the Fashion Workers Act in May. (Courtesy of Reed Young)

In 2017, two years after Gutierrez had signed the NDA, she received a call from her lawyer during a two-week visit to New York to visit a friend. "There is someone who wants to see you," Gutierrez recalled the lawyer telling her, also reminding her she could not share certain things with the press because she was under an NDA.

She went to the meeting and found herself standing in front of Ronan Farrow, one of the authors of the 2017 journalistic investigations that collected interviews of the women and models abused by Weinstein and that started the #MeToo movement. "I saw him, blond with blue eyes, and I thought 'This is an angel who fell from heaven,' which in the end was what I was praying for every day to happen, that is, a person to come and help me and use my recordings with Weinstein."

After eight months of working with Farrow, Gutierrez decided to break the NDA and authorize the release of the recordings in which Weinstein admitted to attempting to rape her. Gutierrez said that after Weinstein's convictions, she was welcomed back into the fashion world, where she still works today, though with different agencies than the ones that launched her.

Gutierrez also began activist work at Model Alliance, a nonprofit organization that fights abuses against workers' rights in the fashion industry, such as debt bondage, sexual abuse and human trafficking. As one of the group's leading activists, Gutierrez sits on the board of directors.

After Model Alliance's intense lobbying, the New York State Legislature in June passed the first-ever legislation in the U.S. to strongly regulate modeling agencies. The Fashion Workers Act, which awaits Gov. Kathy Hochul's signature, aims to protect models working in New York from potential abuse by the agencies that represent them. This is an accomplishment of which Gutierrez is extremely proud, even as her activism has caused her to lose collaborations with prominent modeling agencies, she said.

"Through my story I would like to show that even on a difficult path like mine, that can seem like a giant wall of steel, doing the right thing can get you even further than when you take shortcuts," she said. "Sometimes the hardest things, just with

faith, are actually the right paths to choose to take."