

From Italy with Rage: Feminists Striking in Uncertain Times

by Lidia Salvatori

Abstract: In this contribution, I reflect on the significance of the *Paro Internacional de Mujeres* (International Women's Strike) for contemporary Italian feminism. I draw from autoethnographic research within the feminist movement *Non Una di Meno* (Not One Less) to explore how the organization of the strike on March 8, 2017, contributed to the development of the movement's theorization and mobilization strategies. In this piece, I illustrate how digital connectivity had a central role in facilitating the expression of solidarity and processes of exchange and 'contamination' (Salvatori 2021) between movements across borders. I describe how the sharing of materials, slogans, hashtags, and songs centred on similar claims contributed to the construction of a transnational political subject. Through the strike, feminists analyzed and denounced how economic and patriarchal violence play out in the context of Italy, while highlighting the systemic and non-exceptional character of these forces within neoliberal societies more broadly.

Keywords: economic violence; feminism; social movements; strike; transnationalism

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Introduction

On November 26, 2016, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, approximately two hundred thousand people gathered in Rome, marching to the cry of "Non Una di Meno" (Not One Less). The demonstration was held in response to a femicide in Rome, where a young woman named Sara di Pietrantonio was burned to death by her ex-partner. Feminists marched to link this murder to the broader and more structural problem of femicide in Italy and to rise up in opposition to violence against women and gender-based violence in all its manifestations. A new mobilization was rising, strengthened by the legacy of feminist and queer movements in Italy and by transnational influences, such as the emergence of *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina, the Polish Women's Strikes, and pro-choice protests in Ireland.

Following the demonstration, an assembly took place, gathering feminists from different regions who were reconnecting or creating new friendships, bringing to the table a variety of themes which then found their place in the *Feminist Plan to Combat Male Violence against Women and Gender-Based Violence* (NUDM 2017). The plan resulted from a process of collaborative writing over the course of a year. This process was generative and transformative in itself since, through the regular participation in local and national deliberative assemblies and the continued engagement in mailing lists, social media discussions and chat groups, feminists developed a common language while cultivating affectionate relationships.

Shortly after its emergence, *Non Una Di Meno* (NUDM) responded to the call for a transnational day of strike on March 8, 2017, launched by Argentinian

feminists inspired by the Polish Women's Strike. Gradually, activists in more than 50 countries, connecting digitally through the Facebook group *Paro Internacional de Mujeres/International Women Strike (IWS)*, adhered to the call, organizing different actions depending on the affordances and limitations of their context.

“Solidarity is our weapon”: A Radical Refusal of Patriarchal and Economic Violence

Participation in the IWS since 2017 was central to the Italian movement's theorization and mobilization strategies. The IWS added a feminist lens to the strike, a traditionally workerist instrument of class-based struggle. By appropriating the strike as a tool of feminist struggles, the IWS highlighted the interconnection between patriarchal violence and economic violence, manifesting differently depending on the locality (such as the Italian socio-political context), yet having a transnational dimension. Starting from everyday experiences and material conditions of oppression and marginalization, a feminist strike brings into question the neoliberal division of labour, based on the devaluation of care and reproductive work carried out mostly by women (Federici 2018), particularly migrant women, women of colour (Emejulu 2018) and *dissident identities* (Mason-Deese 2020). It is simultaneously a process of abstention from productive work and consumption, a rejection of traditional gender roles, sexual hierarchies, and a refusal of reproductive work (Arruzza et al. 2019; Cavallero and Gago 2020, Salvatori 2021).

The transformative impact of the organization of the IWS, can be better understood through the concept of *eventful protest*: "Especially during cycles of protest, some contingent events tend to affect the given structures by fuelling mechanisms of social change: organizational networks develop; frames are bridged; personal links foster reciprocal trust" (Della Porta 2011, 135). Actions or campaigns which have a high degree of *eventfulness* are ones through which new tactics emerge, where there is a creation of feelings of solidarity and the strengthening of networks.

The IWS was highly *eventful* as it facilitated the development or strengthening of interactions and the expression of solidarity. It contributed to processes of contamination, an expression used by activists within NUDM to define how practices are borrowed across borders and

how the sharing of materials, slogans, hashtags, and songs help create common ideas and a new transnational political subject without a hierarchical structure (Monforte 2014; Rudan 2018). Digital connectivity had an important role in facilitating these processes of exchange, highlighting the similarities of experience of gender-based and economic violence across different geographical contexts, and the transnational extent of the neoconservative backlash. Meeting in person and occupying spaces together through assemblies and demonstrations however, remains central also as a way to reach out to parts of the population who might be digitally excluded or less confident with digital tools (Sabbadini 2015), such as older or migrant women.

“Solidarity is our weapon” was the slogan of the first IWS and the movement began to configure feminism as a sweeping force, the only mobilization capable of building a radical alternative to the neoliberal system, as the “spearhead of an international insurgency” (Furtado et al. 2020). This was conveyed for example through the circulation of metaphors. Italian feminists used the metaphor of an unstoppable feminist tide, capable of invading every street and square and exceeding every border. Initially used by the 15M mobilizations in Spain, the metaphor of the tide was adapted through a feminist lens by Italian feminists and then adopted by *Ni Una Menos*. As Cecilia Palmeiro (2020) explains, “The feminist adaptation of the concept mobilised the idea of a massive tide of feminised bodies, albeit without invoking an essential biological identity: the tide crosses borders, languages, identities, generations, ethnicities, and social classes—transversally, horizontally, intersectionally, and in solidarity.” In this process, content is borrowed and circulated through practices of political translation (Doerr 2018; Palmeiro 2020). The tactics and images used by NUDM during strikes and demonstrations are influenced by a range of collective practices and shared imaginaries, including direct action, activism, and petition sharing. They also draw inspiration from those developed by *Ni Una Menos*.

An example is the use of the *pañuelo*: while Argentinian feminists carry a green square handkerchief as a symbol of their struggle for free, safe, and legal abortion, forming a green tide during their mass demonstrations (Palmeiro 2018), Italian feminists carry a dark pink *pañuelo* (the colour adopted by NUDM). The staging of a dramatic performance of the song by the Chilean feminist collective *Las Tesis*, “The rapist in your path,” by feminists around the world is another significant example of

the circulation of content between movements. In 2020, with the pandemic signalling the critical role of reproductive and care work, the title of the song was changed by Italian feminists into “The exploiter is you” and used to launch a safely distanced flashmob on March 8.

Conclusion

I have argued here that the process of collective deliberation and writing that lead to the elaboration of the Feminist plan and the participation in the IWS since 2017, were fundamental steps in the development of NUDM’s theorization, mobilization strategies and in the formation of a transnational political subject. The strike served to highlight how economic and patriarchal violence co-exist and reinforce each other, and to expose how multi-layered interconnected issues play out at the transnational level and in the Italian context. In particular the IWS brought to the surface a deep critique of the neoliberal system which heavily relies on care and reproductive work carried out mostly by women and particularly migrant women and women of colour (Emejulu 2018). On this point, activists in this movement acknowledge the need to reach out to the migrant population, often employed in precarious conditions as domestic, care, factory or sex workers, or working as pickers in the fields (Prandi 2018). With this intent, the IWS communiqué was translated in different languages and feminists engaged in direct actions and supported women organizing protests and strikes in factories. While NUDM strives to build an intersectional movement where the voices of migrant women, women of colour, trans and non-binary individuals are heard, it struggles to achieve this objective consistently. It diffuses, however, an important problematization of the ‘whiteness’ of Italian feminism and started a long overdue discussion on the legacy of Italian colonialism (Salvatori 2021).

If the IWS exemplifies the transnational reach and potential impact of grassroots feminist activism and feminists’ ability to utilize digital connectivity strategically, this form of mobilization presents great challenges. In Italy, feminists had to navigate a hostile and complex political landscape marked by political polarization and resistance from conservative and anti-feminist groups who sought to undermine their goals and disrupt their activities. Particularly in its first years, the strike encountered criticism and lack of support from most trade unions, a nearly complete lack of media coverage and resistance from other feminist groups who considered it a disruptive and counter-productive action.

In recent years, while the pandemic interrupted the organization of the strike, it also revealed the relevance of its message. The effects of late neoliberalism and of the shortsighted policies on healthcare and social services came to the surface with catastrophic consequences. The critical role of care and reproductive work became evident to many, as well as the vulnerability of women and LGBTQ+ people who were exposed to domestic violence, overwork, online abuse, or further marginalization during lockdowns.

In a world of continuous crises, systemic failures and unsustainable inequities, an intersectional analysis such as the one articulated by this transnational mobilization needs close attention. As we observe the diffusion of protest movements worldwide (Della Porta, 2017), as well as heated backlashes and repression, it is crucial for feminists to resist polarization, divisions and political instrumentalization.

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