



# Transfeminist politics and populist counterattacks in Italy

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## ABSTRACT

The article examines the Italian political sphere in order to highlight how populist discourses are, among other things, a reaction to feminist and transfeminist practices and theories. The article begins by examining the emergence of right-wing populist discourses and their link to the reproduction of a hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal family. Then it analyses several discourses promoted by transfeminist movements – especially Non Una Di Meno [Not One Less] – focusing in particular on the emergence of the term “transfeminism” in Italy and its use in political practices. Ultimately, the article questions the possibility of building alliances and collective political subjects, starting from the challenge to the female subject brought about by transfeminism. The article claims that populist policies in defence of the traditional family do nothing but co-opt the language of liberation movements while demanding adherence to the status quo, and that transfeminist theories are the clearest response to these same populist politics. Indeed, feminism and transfeminism dispute the rhetoric of a unitary and coherent people, starting by their questioning universality in the name of partiality.

## KEYWORDS

Transfeminism; feminism;  
Italy; political movements;  
populism

## Introduction

In this article, I analyse a fiercely contested area of Italian political discourse in order to highlight how feminist and transfeminist actions and politics constitute affirmative policies. On the contrary, conservative and right-wing populist policies can be understood as a reaction to a set of feminist discourses, which are capable of questioning social structures, by criticising the distinction between public and private in order to analyse intimate relationships and processes of subjectification. To examine populism and conservative policies enacted as a backlash to feminist discourse, means decentring the perspective in which they are usually studied. I highlight how contemporary right-wing populist discourses in Italy have constructed a hegemonic masculinity, based on defence of the traditional family-model and of the child as representatives of a natural order (Edelman 2004), to protect against attacks by feminists and LGBTQI+ movements. Then, I show how the responses enacted by feminist movements, in particular Non Una Di Meno

(NUDM), to these speeches not only carry on the tradition of feminism but are also capable of relaunching battles and liberation movements due to their choice to define themselves as transfeminist.

By “transfeminism”, I mean a trans inclusive feminism that adopts this stance as a specific political perspective. This choice is particularly significant in relation to a debate within feminism, which is divided between, on the one hand, trans-exclusionary positions and, on the other hand, alliances between trans\* (by which I mean both transsexual and transgender) people and cisgender feminists.

Finally, I retrace transfeminist genealogies to show how the issues addressed by transfeminists question precisely the supposed “natural order” that populist discourses advocate. Feminism and transfeminism, in fact, put in crisis the rhetoric of a unitary and coherent people, starting from questioning the universality in the name of partiality. Moreover, they consider collective subjects as being alliances of differences. Indeed, collective subjects are created by taking into account each one’s situation and, therefore, by recognising that each one’s knowledge and point of view are situated. It is precisely from this situatedness that bonds of solidarity can be created.

Tracing this genealogy of the term “transfeminism” and its use in political movements and actions also serves to account for the reason why I use “transfeminism” – a single word, rather than “trans-feminism” or “trans feminism”. On the one hand, this choice connects to the origins of the term – both in English and in Spanish, the languages in which activists and thinkers write and speak about transfeminism (Koyama 2003; Sentamans, Solá, and Urko 2013). On the other hand, using the term “transfeminism” allows us to consider it as an organic body of thought and practice and not just the juxtaposition of trans\* and feminist instances.

### **Populist politics and anti-gender discourses**

Italy presents an interesting case study because it can be considered a “laboratory of populism” (Tarchi 2018, 46–56). Marco Tarchi uses this concept to underline a specific characteristic of Italian politics as compared to other European countries: in Italy, populists have been in power for many years. Indeed, for the last 25 years the Italian political landscape has been dominated, first, by Silvio Berlusconi, second, by the Five Stars Movement and, for a long time after that, by the Northern League, which has recently assumed a dominant position in the right-wing field. All of these political formations have promoted populist discourses in different ways. Analysing these discourses to detect their constructions of gender allows us to see both the differences between these populist styles and the crucial position that the notion of gender itself has played.

Ernesto Laclau’s work provides a useful tool to understand the intertwining of gender and populist discourses (Laclau 2005). He analyses how social agents totalise the ensemble of their political experience and become exactly

that unified “people” to which populism appeals. According to Laclau, populist leaders can articulate different social demands and transform them into populist demands through their discourse. This implies that Laclau does not see populism as a type of organisation or ideology that can be compared with other types, such as liberalism, communism, conservatism, or socialism. He understands it as a dimension of political culture that is present in quite different ideologies. It is a discursive technique that allows for articulating different political claims within popular claims (Laclau 2005). Furthermore, the works of Rosanvallon (2011) and Mouffe (2018) underline that populism creates cohesion through motions of rejection rather than through adherence, and through the construction of enemies and oppositions rather than stressing internal similarities among the people it aims to mobilise.

To build internal cohesion in “right wing populisms, nationalism becomes a recurrent discourse which aims to create a unity around an imaginary community that is male, white and Christian” (Braidotti and Griffin 2002, 233). This imaginary community is consolidated through the opposition to other subjectivities and groups that are considered dangerous because of the disorder and division they supposedly bring to the society. Moreover, in the populist discourses of the Italian Right, the ideal of the “strong man” is constantly reinforced. This trait links contemporary populist experiences to fascism, as Camoletto and Bertone (2010) note. On the one hand, fascism, in alliance with the Catholic Church, had constructed a traditional family ideal on the basis of a rigid division between the sexes and a hierarchical relationship functional to procreation. On the other hand,

Fascism’s forebears in the radical movements of the early twentieth century had bequeathed it another, anthropological goal: an anti-bourgeois, anti-feminist revolution that was part of an effort to promote the virility of the Italians and construct “a new man” for whom activism and aggressiveness were more highly prized than self-control. (Camoletto and Bertone 2010, 238)

The ambivalence characterising the model of the fascist man – both a family man and an aggressive player – is recurrent throughout the political construction of hegemonic masculinity in Italy (Bellassai 2011). The same ideals of masculinity can be found, often reciprocally intertwined, in the populist discourses of the Right (but not exclusively) with some transformations over time. Indeed, the Berlusconi era was dominated by an imaginary of extreme virility, which emphasised a goliardic and blatantly sexist masculinity with strong references to an explosive and irrepressible male sexuality (Chirco 2011). Subsequently, the Northern League used the same sexist vocabulary and discourse. For instance, during a political meeting in Vicenza in 2006, Umberto Bossi said to Berlusconi: “Silvio, te lo avevo detto che ce l’abbiamo duro, ed è per questo che qui oggi è pieno di donne” [Silvio, I told you that we have a stiff cock; for this reason, today, there are many women here] (*Ansa*, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2006).

This speech represents women simply as objects who desire the virility of their (male) leaders. Virility prevails on the political stage and the “stiff cock” becomes the master symbol that, for Bossi, should activate a libidinal connection between the male leader and female cohorts.

By contrast, after Matteo Salvini took over the leadership of the Northern League in 2013, the party underwent a deep ideological transformation to adapt its agenda and discourse to the changing circumstances of Italian (and European) politics. “[T]his led to a shift from the ethno-regionalism of the early years to the current right-wing nationalism based on the defence of the Italian nation, Christian identity and the traditional family” (Donà 2020, 162). Thus, it is noteworthy that the party recently changed its name to the League to build a consensus in southern Italy and to express a sense of national unity.

As part of this transformation, Salvini has modified the image of masculinity that his party embodies. From the “stiff cock”, he shifted to the image of the good family man. As Bernini (2020, 15) points out, “Salvini has abandoned the role of the secessionist agitator to wear more relaxed clothes” and he “‘speaks as a dad’, ‘says it as a dad’. [. . .] Now he is a dad worried about his children’s future”. Therefore, the party’s speeches no longer revolve around a sexually active male that other males can admire and want to emulate but rather around a more reassuring father figure, who has shifted the focus to the intimate dimension of the family and the child, as a subject of protection. Moreover, this representation of the father figure suggests a leader who takes care of the people in a benevolent, paternal way. Yet, as Bernini (2020, 29) highlights, “if the liturgy of Daddy Matteo is a faded copy of the Fascist cult of the trinity God, Nation and Family, what remains unchanged is the charge of hatred, although disguised as love, which the ritual feeds on”. The kind of father Salvini represents, therefore, is a father who makes a clear distinction between friends – to whom he dispenses love – and enemies – who are the targets of his hatred, which serves to protect his friends.

This hatred is typical of the populist structure and, in this case, it targets the typical enemy of populist discourses: those who threaten the “natural order” (Rydgren 2003). In Salvini’s speeches, the natural order is the heterosexual Italian family with children. This family is threatened not only by the immigration of new subjects but also by the so-called gender ideology, which, according to the League, aims at spreading homosexuality and transsexuality – in a word, *disorder*. This is also the result of anti-gender groups’ strategy of infiltrating or, in their own words, “contaminating” and “fertilising” local and national politics (Prearo 2019). This strategy proved so fruitful that Massimo Gandolfini – the Neocatechumenal, neuropsychiatrist founder of the Family Day – entered the parliamentary intergroup called *Vita, Famiglia e Libertà* [Life, Family and Freedom], while his fellow activist Lorenzo Fontana, former vice-mayor of Verona, became Minister for Family and Disability in 2018–2019. This new intertwining of one Catholic movement and secular politics is what Prearo

(2020) calls a “neo-Catholic” project – a new secular alignment of fundamentalist religious actors with populist and nationalist parties to push forward their political demands. Anti-gender actors, far from cultivating their condition of marginality, do not fear seizing institutions to change politics from within.

Anti-gender movements have a long history. Paternotte and Kuhar (2017) recount the Vatican’s construction of the signifier “gender” as something evil, starting from Cardinal Ratzinger’s and Pope John Paul II’s texts on the status of men and women in the 1980s, moving through the positions that Vatican delegates held at the United Nations conferences on Population and Development (Cairo) and on Women (Beijing) in the mid-1990s, and ending with the publication of *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* (Pontifical Council for the Family 2003). This glossary marks a milestone in the production of a militant vocabulary of anti-gender actors during the 2010s, for it provides an extensive discussion – and mystification – of terms such as abortion, bioethics, reproductive rights, “homoparenting”, homosexual “marriage”, traditional family, patriarchy, safe sex and “gender” (all quotation marks appear in the original Italian). As Garbagnoli and Prearo (2017) argue, while waging this war on gender, in particular, and on feminism and LGBTQI+ constituencies, in general, the Vatican set out to revise its own position concerning women and sexuality. Without explicitly relegating women to the home or conceiving of them as inferior, the Church’s new doctrine began to praise them in their role as mothers – that is, in their difference-yet-complementarity with respect to men.

This brief reconstruction shows how the speeches defending children and the natural order proposed by Salvini are the continuation of a counterattack, promoted by the Church and reactionary populisms, against the achievements of feminism and LGBTQI+ movements. This counterattack has taken on massive dimensions in recent years through the mobilisation of a nationalistic sense of a unified people, but it has been evident in Italy since the 1970s. Feminist struggles for self-determination in the areas of sexuality and reproductive rights proved highly problematic and, as Bracke (2014) argues, too much of a challenge to patriarchy. As Zambelli, Mainardi, and Hajek (2018, 132) highlight, “consequently, the state tried to regain control over women’s bodies, a process which started in the same years that some of the most important feminist battles for self-determination were won”.

Alongside this counterattack, a backlash similar to that described by McRobbie (2007) has occurred. Specifically, McRobbie questions the process by which a feminist political discourse has been co-opted and absorbed by the neoliberal agenda, where concepts such as choice, voice and empowerment have been emptied of their political dimension and assimilated into a neoliberal vision of the subject. Additionally, in Italy, both the Church and reactionary populist movements have recovered some keywords of feminism, such as self-determination, to propose the ideal of a submissive woman, who chooses and

finds satisfaction in submission, and have used discourses about sexual difference to promote complementary subjectivities. In his examination of the Italian context, Zappino (2016) underlines the element of ambivalence – namely, the entwinement of choice and diversity and multiple subjectivities with renewed conservative values linked to sexuality and family – such as the presence in Italy of the Catholic anti-gender movement (Bellé, Peroni, and Rapetti 2016).

In this context, it is unsurprising that the initial support for the anti-gender campaign in Italy came not only from the political Right but also from segments of the Left. As Bernini (2016) recalls, this included such figures as president of the Gramsci Foundation Giuseppe Vacca, who stood against stepchild adoption by same-sex couples, and feminist philosopher Muraro (2015), a theorist of sexual difference, who repeatedly accused gender theory of being “aberrant” in denying the “natural fact [of] sexual difference”. Muraro is among the founders of Diotima, the major Italian community of sexual difference feminist philosophers. Her intervention – in line with Diotima’s overall position – is interesting because it exhibits an ambiguity among Italian feminists that is rooted in the long-standing intellectual dissatisfaction of sexual difference feminism with the category of gender, which is more visible in Italian feminism than in other national feminisms. In the early 1990s, Rosi Braidotti adamantly expressed such dissatisfaction in an interview with Judith Butler:

[T]he notion of “gender” is a vicissitude of the English language, one which bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages. [. . .] The imported nature of the notion of gender also means that the sex/gender distinction [. . .] makes neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, western European contexts, where the notions of “sexuality” and “sexual difference” are currently used instead. (Braidotti and Butler 1994, 37–8)

All of these discourses have found tangible expression in legislative proposals in recent years. Among the most relevant ones, there is the reform of family legislation discussed during the League–5 Stars Movement government: the so-called Pillon decree (from the name of its proponent). As Pavan (2019) states, this bill is a clear example of the connection between anti-gender movements and the Parliament, as it shows how the demands of the former are translated into legislative measures. Indeed, in August 2018 the League Senator Simone Pillon proposed a draft law entitled “Norme in materia di affido condiviso, mantenimento diretto e garanzia di bigenitorialità” [Rules on shared custody, direct maintenance and guarantee of double parenting]. The decree aimed to promote the so-called “natural family” and make divorce more complicated for parents of minor children. Three of its declared objectives were (a) the compulsory civil mediation in matters involving minor children; (b) a balance between parental figures and equal time in shared custody; and (c) a countering so-called parental alienation syndrome (PAS). These points clarify that the intent of the law was to intervene in matters of family legislation in order to oppose women’s

rights. It is no coincidence that the bill was strongly advocated by groups like the Association of Separated Fathers. Since 1991, they have been denouncing the courts' decision to grant women child support and custody allowances in cases of divorce as a form of discrimination. Such groups combine their claims with a rhetoric in which women appear guilty of wielding excessive power and with a critique of feminism as the main cause of inequality (Deriu 2007). This rhetoric is the same as that used by the League and the 5 Stars Movement in presenting the Pillon decree as a measure of social justice.

The dark side of this bill becomes more blatant upon closer examination of each point. The first one (a) aims to make family mediation – enacted by a mediator whose name is listed in a special register – mandatory for a period of six months in all cases involving minor children, even when divorce is due to domestic violence and abuse. Besides the fact that Pillon himself owns a mediation agency (and that his decree stipulates that family mediation should be paid for by the divorcing couple), this point openly contradicts the Istanbul Convention, ratified by Italy in 2013, yet never fully applied. Article 48 of the Convention states that “parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to prohibit mandatory alternative dispute resolution processes, including mediation and conciliation” (Council of Europe 2011), as mediation processes endanger female and child victims of abuse, lengthen separation processes, and do not sanction violence. Therefore, the Pillon decree considers the heterosexual family as an institution to be protected even when the father is abusive. In 2014, the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) estimated that 2,800,000 women across the country had suffered physical, psychological or sexual violence enacted by their partners. However, the rhetoric of both the League and anti-gender movements casts women as perpetrators rather than victims of injustices.

Yet the most problematic point is perhaps (c), the introduction of PAS into the text of the proposed law. This syndrome, outlined in the 1980s (Gardner 1987) and heavily criticised by subsequent scholarship (e.g. Bond 2008), advances the idea that a child's refusal to see one parent must be due to pressure exerted on her/him by the other parent. The underlying assumption is that the child's accounts of abuse are nothing but a product of one parent's – usually the mother's – irritation and anger. Although PAS had already been used in the Italian courts (Pignotti 2013), Pillon inserted it in parliamentary discussions. Article 17 of the decree introduces a new and *sui generis* procedure according to which it is possible to forcibly separate a child from the allegedly alienating parent “even when – in the absence of obvious conduct of one parent – the minor child manifests refusal, alienation or estrangement towards one of them” (Senato della Repubblica 2018, 28). In other words, without the slightest evidence and without the obligation to listen to the child, the child can be taken away from the parent with whom s/he lives and be placed either with the parent causing distress or in a foster home. This entails the child's separation

not only from her/his parents but also from her/his whole family, relationships, and world.

After the fall of the League–5 Stars Movement government, this bill was shelved, but the issues addressed therein had entered public debate, making it legitimate to discuss civil mediation in cases of violence, to minimise abuse as manipulation by the mother or to consider PAS as a recognised syndrome. At the same time, the idea that the heterosexual nuclear family must be protected and valued had been reconfirmed. It should not be forgotten that the League and the 5 Stars Movement are not the only ones who have mobilised the family for nationalist purposes. During the Democratic Party's government (2013–8), the Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin proposed a National Fertility Plan in 2015 and launched Fertility Day in 2016, thus leveraging the proverbial “biological clock” in order to invite women to have more children to feel accomplished in life. The National Fertility Plan refers to the present as “a period of politically correct communication” and urges that “it is necessary to explain, to inform in a capillary and continuous way, to make women and men aware that fertility is a Gaussian curve that begins to fall long before the woman considers the opportunity [to breed]” (Ministero della Salute 2015, 38). Once again, the only family referenced is the heterosexual one (Balzano and Zappino 2016). Moreover, through this plan, women are reduced to their reproductive capacity, which is seen as the only contribution they can offer to society. In this sense, therefore, fertility is seen as being an indispensable value to a woman, so much so that her status declines as she becomes older. According to this rhetoric, therefore, women are only instrumental in reproducing and caring for children, who are then placed at the centre of the scene.

Rhetoric resembling that in the Pillon decree, based on the need to protect children, was similarly deployed in a proposed municipal law. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the Verona City Council approved motion 434, entitled “Iniziativa per la prevenzione dell’aborto e il sostegno alla maternità nel 40° anniversario della Legge n. 194/1978” [Initiatives for the prevention of abortion and the support of motherhood on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Law 194/1978]. State Law 194/1978 regulates abortion and access to it. With reference to the first article of the law, which asserts “the social value of maternity” and protects “human life from the very beginning”, City Councillor Alberto Zelger from the League party proposed a motion meant not only to declare Verona a “pro-life city” but also to include in the city budget substantial funding for anti-abortion counselling centres, allowed by law in clinics and hospitals. Zelger’s motion 434 has since been copied and proposed in many Italian municipalities (Rome, Milan, Alessandria, Ferrara, and others), not always successfully.

These two legislative examples show a pattern of actions taken not only to dismantle rights obtained through social struggles but also to re-propose a social order based on the heterosexual family and a rigid division of gender roles.



## Transfeminist actions as attacks

When the public debate has been conditioned by anti-gender discourses, one of the main risks is that reactions to that discourses will be on the defensive, thereby accepting its agenda and terms as baseline assumptions. Fortunately, this risk has been recently reduced, thanks to the transfeminist movement Non Una Di Meno (NUDM). NUDM emerged in Italy in 2016 in the wake of Argentinian grassroots demonstrations by Ni Una Menos. NUDM activists began protesting against gender violence after the femicide of Sara Di Pietrantonio that happened on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Rome (cf. Pavan and Mainardi 2018; Zambelli, Mainardi, and Hajek 2018; Montella, Picchi, and Fiorletta 2019). In 2017, NUDM published a feminist plan aimed at countering male violence against women and other forms of gender violence. The plan analyses how such violence is structural and posits that, therefore, the responses to it should not just follow a logic of emergency but also be structural. Every year since 2016, NUDM has brought hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets on November 25<sup>th</sup>, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, as well as on March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day, a date when, each year, a feminist strike takes place.<sup>1</sup>

NUDM is organised into local chapters, and the Verona chapter was able to fiercely oppose the discussion of motion 434. In October 2019, NUDM activists silently entered the city council chambers, dressed as handmaids, thus evoking the TV show *The Handmaid's Tale*. The activists complied with the rules of accession, but their silence marked their presence even more strongly. The handmaid costume had been used before to defend the right to abortion (Cossutta 2019), but since this action in Verona, it has become the hallmark of all mobilisations against similar motions throughout the country and beyond (Boyle 2020). The figure of the handmaid not only signals a possible dystopia but also highlights the dystopian elements already present in the society, functioning as a warning and an admonition at once. Moreover, against the attacks on Law 194/1978 regulating access to abortion, NUDM mobilisations launched the slogan #moltopiùdi194 [#muchmorethan194], suggesting the will to defend existing rights *vis-à-vis* the current backlash and, furthermore, to reimagine new struggles, strategies, and objectives.

Once again, NUDM demonstrated the ability to be both on the defensive and on the attack in order to challenge the 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Families (WCF), held in Verona on March 29<sup>th</sup>–31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. The WCF emerged in the mid-1990s from the encounter between American and Russian conservatives committed to defending the traditional family as the cell of society and to guiding political figures to achieve this goal (De Guerre 2019). Despite bringing together exponents of different faiths, the WCF has a strong Christian matrix, both Catholic and Orthodox (Moss 2017). Since its inauguration in Prague in 1997, many venues have hosted the WCF, but it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> session

that the gathering took place in a Western European country. Verona was not chosen by accident but because of the city's affinity to the political views promoted by the organisers as well as, within the government itself, by the League. The 13<sup>th</sup> WCF hosted some of the most vocal actors of the so-called war on gender in Italy and internationally, including the National Organization for Marriage, the platform CitizenGo, the "Difendiamo i nostri figli" [Let's Defend Our Children] Committee, the associations Pro Vita Onlus, La Manif Pour Tous Italia [demonstration for all – Italy], and the Family Day, to name a few. The WCF depicts itself as a gathering for families, in the plural, but its goal is clearly to support only one model of family, namely the heterosexual and married couple with children. Marriage is presented once again as the only possible form of union, and the role of women as wives and mothers goes uncontested. The final text of the Verona Declaration, adopted at the 13<sup>th</sup> WCF on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, presented common features between the anti-gender movement's demands and League's populist 2018 electoral manifesto.

It is interesting to note the vocabulary that the 13<sup>th</sup> WCF and its organisers borrowed (and twisted) from feminism. In particular, they overturned the idea of self-determination by advancing the argument that the real ambition of women, who are considered to be naturally inclined to care work, is to take care of their children, as Maria Rachele Ruiu said on the congress floor. According to Ruiu, this high, noble and desirable task has been denied to women by feminism, the rhetoric of equal opportunities, and a lack of support that forces them to work outside the home. Such rhetoric, significantly, does not use feminist texts but resonates with a trivialised version of sexual difference feminism. Difference, in the view of the 13<sup>th</sup> WCF, is a biological given that structures social hierarchies and promotes the status quo (Prearo 2020).

NUDM responded to this massive propaganda by launching a mobilisation on the days of the WCF under the slogan "Verona città transfemminista" [Verona transfeminist city]. It comprised three days of meetings, debates, and public assemblies attended by both Italian and international activists, culminating in a demonstration on the streets of Verona on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This parade, whose opening banner read "Transfemministe rovinafamiglie" [Transfeminists ruin families], gathered more than 100,000 people – something exceptional in such a conservative location. Both the street demonstration and indoor events organised by the Verona chapter of NUDM with all national chapters expressed, in an unprecedented way, the idea that either a feminist mobilisation is transfeminist or it means nothing at all. This does not mean that all feminist actions that do not call themselves transfeminist are irrelevant, but that the task of building alliances, crossing borders, and questioning binaries can be performed only by questioning feminism itself and by adopting a transfeminist perspective. As Koyama (2003) points out,

transfeminism is primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. Transfeminism is not about taking over existing feminist institutions. Instead, it extends and advances feminism as a whole through our own liberation and coalition work with all others. [...] Transfeminism embodies feminist coalition politics in which women from different backgrounds stand up for each other, because if we do not stand for each other, nobody will.

Therefore, embracing transfeminism to oppose the 13<sup>th</sup> WCF was not only a defensive reaction to rhetoric and policies against women's self-determination and LGBTQI+ subjectivities but also an affirmative gesture aimed at redefining the struggle and transforming the present. As Montalbano (2019) argues, the concomitant events in Verona – the WCF and “Verona città transfemminista” – showed two opposite modes of activism: “one that seeks alliances with governments and politicians to create legislations and regulations in accordance with religious views; and one that aims to radically transform society through a permanent state of mobilisation and by awakening public opinion”. In this sense, NUDM offered an alternative mode of action to the single vision of society promoted by the WCF organisers. For transfeminist activists, political action is nourished by plurality and grounded in intersectionality. The idea of intersectionality, famously coined by Crenshaw (1989) to designate overlapping forms of exclusion along racial, gendered, and classed lines, particularly in legal cases of discrimination, has travelled to the Italian context both in its original meaning and, oftentimes, in the sense of a political stance aimed at fighting against racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and other systems of oppression at once. It is called “intersezionalità delle lotte” [intersectionality of struggles] and Non Una Di Meno (2017) has taken up and reworked both meanings of the word.

## Transfeminist discourses in the background

We call for a transfeminist insurrection: We come from radical feminism; we are the dykes, the whores, the trans, the immigrants, the blacks, the hetero dissidents . . . we are the rage of the feminist revolution and we want to bear our teeth [. . .]. Let's smash the sex and gender binaries as a political practice. Let's follow the path that we began: “One is not born a woman but becomes one.” Let's continue unmasking the power structure, the division and hierarchy. If we can't learn that the man/woman difference is a cultural product, just as the hierarchal structure that oppresses us, we reinforce the structure that tyrannises us: the “man/woman” borders. Everyone produces gender; we produce freedom. [. . .] let's not defend ourselves; make them fear us! (WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network 2011)

On New Year's Eve 2010, the WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network in Spain published the *Manifesto for a Transfeminist Insurgency*. The quotation above highlights a few fundamental and exciting lines calling for building alliances, dismantling genders, crossing borders, and becoming fearsome. This text is one

of the first ones in which a political movement describes itself as transfeminist, importing the term from the original English to Italian through a Spanish mediation. It is no coincidence that the emergence and diffusion of this term occurs in contexts in which feminism itself is being questioned with a gesture of self-consciousness that started with the reflections of Stone (1987), Preciado (2000), Stryker (2008) and the practices – the counter-conduct, one might say – of the Spanish porn-terrorist scene.

Italy presents a fundamental context for transfeminism as well, with echoes in the feminist, queer and LGBTQI+ movements, which in 2010s interwove plots of resistance and subversion, giving substance to heretical trajectories even for feminist canons. Thus, the WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network (2011) text marks the powerful entrance of the term transfeminism into the Italian feminist political scene,<sup>2</sup> even though this was not, of course, the beginning of the history of collaboration between the trans\* and feminist movements and the struggles for gender subversion. Within this history, one can find an explanation of NUDM's choice to call for a transfeminist mobilisation.

Voli (2016) clarifies that “transsexuality began to gain public visibility in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s”, but it was initially characterised as a “marginal and private matter, [and] by the end of the 1960s there emerged a nascent transgender community, and by the early 1970s, it became a subject of political and social concern” until 1982, when a law was enacted allowing the modification of one's own documents according to one's gender identity (see also Marcasciano 2015; Arietti et al. 2010). These are the same years in which the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements gained traction in Italy and often shared common references and struggles. Yet, especially for transgender women, the relationship with feminism has not been easy. In fact, some feminists look with suspicion at trans\* experience, and many transgender women, despite recognising the common struggle, feel excluded not so much by feminist theories as by feminist practices and collectives. Italian trans\* activism pioneer Marcasciano (2006) has stated the following:

I've always enjoyed taking part in women's issues, but I've always tip-toed in among the feminists, out of respect, out of modesty, but also out of fear! Many trans people are seeking a passport, a tourist visa, or a residence permit for feminist territory [...] because the transsexual or transgender territory lies alongside, very close to it (38).

It is relevant to note that “the construction of the ‘trans’ subject has been a fundamental issue also in feminist debates about the meaning of gender difference” (Primo, Zamperini, and Testoni 2020, 591). This is even more accurate today, where a segment of Italian feminism (as well as other feminisms) sees the participation of trans\* people as a threat to women (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020) either in an extremely physical sense, as in the controversy over the possibility of trans\* women using women's bathrooms, or in a symbolic sense, as in the case of pink quotas open to trans\* women. In Italy, for example, ArciLesbica, Italy's largest

lesbian association, has often complained that the appearance of trans\* and queer subjects marks the start of a process that leads to the “disappearance” of women. Trans\* identity, in these discourses, becomes an identity that renders female difference impossible. Moreover, the participation of trans\* women in feminist movements is considered to be a patriarchal invasion of women’s spaces, because trans\* women are depicted as “transvestite men”, aiming at replacing “authentic” womanhood with a submissive depiction of femininity (Hines 2019). In the Italian context, biological arguments are still used by trans-exclusionary feminists, neo-fascists and Christian conservative movements in order to depict transness as a dangerous gender fraud. And mental health professionals still maintain a gatekeeping role in access to gender-affirming procedures.

However, it is precisely due to the contributions of trans\* women since the 1980s that many feminist reflections have developed, including a questioning of the category of woman and a search for other ways to name feminsim that allow different forms of inclusion and complicity: the *inappropriate/d other* of Minh and Trinh (1989), the *mestiza* of Anzaldúa (1987), and the *cyborg* of Haraway (1990), to name a few. Haraway (1990, 149) specifically questions the category of experience that makes it possible to constitute a collective subject:

[T]he international women’s movements have constructed “women’s experience”, as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility.

She adds that “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (155). This question about what constitutes being a woman and how to build collective subjects that include different stories and experiences is one of the foundations of transfeminism.

The debate on experience extends to considerations about bodies, which are also understood as social constructs – not so much that there is no material bodily dimension but that social meanings are inscribed on bodies. In this sense, Sandy Stone’s *The Empire Strikes Back* (1987) constitutes another fundamental contribution. The text, translated into Italian in 2012 and published within an anthology entitled *Canone Inverso* [Inverted Canon] (Arfini and Lo Iacono 2012), significantly marked the previous debate. In the text, Stone writes the following:

[B]odies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities. These struggles play themselves out in arenas far removed from the body. [. . .] The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves. As with males theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency (1987, 11).

Thinking of bodies as constructions whose boundaries are established by social roles and positions of power means uniting the experiences of women and transgender people, who see themselves reduced to the same position of passivity with respect to the meanings of their bodies. This is precisely the reason why Stone concludes with the following exhortation: “I ask all of us to use the strength which brought us through the effort of restructuring identity, and which has also helped us to live in silence and denial, for a revisioning of our lives” (1987, 14). Reviewing one’s own life means, in this case, questioning the category of passing to propose a trans-subjectivity that undoes gender binarism in its roots.

This radical questioning of binarism is also Stryker’s (1994, 240–1) call to all people, not just trans\* people, to build forms of complicity that we might call transfeminist:

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures [ . . . ], I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.

This series of discussions of bodies, genders, technologies, nature, and assemblages gave rise to contemporary transfeminist practices and subsequent radical struggles and transformations in the last thirty years. Therefore, in Italy the term transfeminism allows us to simultaneously identify a feminist genealogy (much more than the term “queer”, which remains without a translation) and a radical form of criticism of gender binarism. In this context, we can perhaps also adopt Ziga’s (2013, 82–3) words in reference to Spain:

To call oneself a transfeminist cannot be an excuse to erase all the wonderful genealogies of radical feminisms that nourish us [ . . . ]. I prefer to formulate transfeminism as one more actualization, here and now, of the radicality of feminism. An effervescent, boisterous, promising, exciting updating that is happening and, therefore, we can witness and live.

As Ziga points out, claiming to be transfeminist does not mean putting feminism at a distance, but recognising it as a collection of different forces, in which different drives and perspectives coexist, and taking a position capable of expanding this field to include emerging subjectivities.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of NUDM’s discourses and actions, it emerges that a gender construction based on hegemonic masculinity is, on one hand, always present in right-wing populism, but, on the other hand, the form that this masculinity takes is also a reaction to feminist and LGBTQI+ discourses and achievements. The

force of a collective such as NUDM to offer a powerful alternative to the anti-gender campaign shows that the Right is now reacting to (if not retracting) the freedoms that have been achieved by feminist and LGBTQI+ subjects, not the other way around. Moreover, the adoption of the term transfeminism and of the theories that accompany it to define their political practice, allows feminists and LGBTQI+ people to not have to defend themselves but to attack detractors, who accuse them of threatening the alleged natural order. In fact, the choice of using the term transfeminism represents a rhetorical strategy that allows activists to distance themselves from instrumental uses of feminism that aim to defend the complementarity of the sexes by emphasising the maternal role of women as the only possible and acceptable one.

Furthermore, the destruction of the natural order is claimed as to be a space for freedom and liberation. In this sense, destroying the natural order is not only a reaction to that same order, but is also intended to create a space for political action and subjectivation.<sup>3</sup> Finally, criticising gender binarism in its roots allows transfeminist movements to attack precisely the heterosexual white and reproductive family that populists (and others) defend.

## Notes

1. A notable exception is March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020 due to Covid-19.
2. In Spain, the term “transfeminism” appeared for the first time at the Jornadas Feministas Estatales in 2000 in Córdoba in two papers: “El vestido nuevo de la emperatriz” by the Grup de Lesbianes Feministes de Barcelona and “Mujer o trans? La inserción de las transsexuales en el movimiento feminista,” by Pérez (2000).
3. According to Foucault, subjectivation is “the procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, or more precisely, of a subjectivity” (Foucault 1988, 253).

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