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Editors

Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response

Productive Resistance

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ISSN 2946-6016 ISSN 2946-6024 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology
ISBN 978-3-031-87692-9 ISBN 978-3-031-87693-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6

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Acknowledgments

Declaration

This publication has been conducted in the context of the FIERCE project. FIERCE has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 101061748. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor European Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.

Praise for *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*

"This book brings a new innovative and democratically important twist to the discussions about anti-gender mobilization. The contributions do not only state the consequences of this culture war that are damaging to democracy, but also show how feminist and LGBT movements actively mobilize against it and thus make an important contribution to saving democracy, indeed to democratizing liberal democracies."

—Professor Dr. Birgit Sauer, *Institute of Political Science, University of Vienna, Universitätsring, Austria*

"This is an important and timely book analyzing the cultural and political battle fields across Europe and the EU premised on eight national case-studies. The book convincingly demonstrates that one of the crucial elements in productive feminist resistance to anti-gender mobilizations across Europe would be to engage knowledge-based activism premised on alliances between scholars and activists."

—Birte Siim, *Professor Emerita, Aalborg University, Denmark*

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Contentious Gender Politics in Italy: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilizations

Anna Lavizzari, Anastasia Barone, and Giada Bonu Rosenkranz

Introduction

This chapter examines the responses of feminist movements to the growing strength of anti-gender politics in Italy. Anti-gender movements in the country have increasingly expanded starting from the 2010s. While this process of growth and consolidation has initially taken the shape of grassroots mobilizations, it has recently culminated in the establishment of anti-gender influence in parliamentary politics, especially thanks to their

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R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_2

alliance with populist right-wing parties such as the League and Brothers of Italy. As has been widely argued, the strengthening of anti-gender politics has often resulted in attacks on women's and LGBT+ rights, as well as in the promotion of conservative ideas about gender roles. The Italian context is no exception: the institutionalization of anti-gender activism has given a significant impulse to the contraction of rights, especially in the realm of LGBT+ and reproductive rights. At the same time, the last decades have seen the resurgence of a strong and massive feminist movement in Italy. This new phase of mobilization was triggered by the increasing number of femicides and the emergence of a new transnational feminist wave, but it was also partly prompted by the threats that anti-gender groups and right-wing actors have enacted on previously established achievements and more generally on women's and LGBT+ rights. Although the feminist movement in Italy cannot be reduced to a reaction to a backlash, the role of anti-gender actors should not be underestimated when examining the specific strategies that have been increasingly adopted by the movement. Indeed, as a significant body of scholarly work has highlighted, within the intricate dynamics of sexual and gender politics, the interplay between pro-life, pro-family, religious, and conservative movements, and LGBT+, pro-choice, and progressive movements has a significant impact on the strategies adopted by feminist movements. Scholars in the field of social movement studies have developed concepts like spillover (Whittier, 2013), diffusion (McAdam & Rucht, 1993), and spin-off movements (McAdam, 1996) to understand the evolving interactions between different social movements. Furthermore, scholars have addressed movements' interaction through the analysis of movement and countermovement dynamics (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). This approach allows for an understanding of how antagonist movements may influence one another. Scholars working in this field have underscored the impact of conservative movements on the political strategies and framing tactics employed by LGBT+ activists, as well as feminists and pro-choice advocates (for a review see Stone, 2016). Indeed, as opposing movements enter the public sphere, activists must navigate shifting political landscapes, introduce new frames, and manage the dynamics of contention. The clashes surrounding gender and sexual equality are therefore encapsulated within the framework of "contentious gender politics," defined as the ongoing contestation between movements representing opposing views on the institutional organization and discursive construction of gender (Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023).

To describe the contemporary political context, scholars have introduced the concept of backlash against gender politics (Faludi, 1991; Köttig et al., 2017). In Italy, this involves conservative and traditionalist actors, including religious movements, pro-life and anti-gender groups, as well as political parties and entities under the umbrella of the far-right, aligning on one side to oppose progressive gender policies. In particular, they target reproductive rights and bodily integrity, LGBT+ rights, kinship structures, sexual morality, and gender equality institutionalization. On the other side, they aim to advance a political, social, and economic agenda that is not only reactionary but actively seeks to reinforce the rights and privileges of those conforming to a cis-heteropatriarchal model, while punishing dissenters. Understanding the active agenda of anti-gender actors, as emphasized by Paternotte (2023), is crucial in grasping the nature of a political project grounded in gender ideology, akin to a creature with its own life—a Frankenstein's monster—around which political positions, claims, and policy proposals are articulated beyond their reactionary nature. The concept of backlash, in this sense, along with the directionality of interactions between movements and counter-movements, needs to be contextualized within a framework of broader dynamics. It is not always possible to categorize the actions of anti-gender actors as solely reactionary, nor is it always feasible to consider progressive action as preceding.

Together with the rise and diffusion of anti-gender mobilizations, the literature addresses the increasing mobilizations of feminist movements in the wake of anti-austerity protests and the economic crisis (Bereni, 2016; Crossley & Hurwitz, 2013; Eschle & Bartlett, 2023). The critical juncture of 2015, marked by massive mobilizations in Latin America against gender-based violence and increasing social inequalities, spurred the transnational diffusion and global resurgence of feminist movements (Eschle, 2018; Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018; Gago, 2020; Daby & Moseley, 2022). Mostly concerned with the rates of femicide and rape culture, these movements also engage with neoliberalism and the consequences of colonialism, extractivism, and multiple crises, such as the economic crisis and the pandemic (Gago, 2020; Weldon et al., 2023). Unlike before, the feminist movements adopted an intersectional perspective, disentangling the different axes of oppression that produce inequalities (Lépinard, 2020). In Italy, there was continuity between previous loose networks of groups and collectives and the mass mobilizations that started in 2016 with the feminist movement Non Una di Meno (Not One (Woman) Less, NUDM).

NUDM developed through significant protests—on 25 November, the International Day against Gender-Based Violence, and the global feminist strike on 8 March—and direct social action (Barone & Bonu, 2022). Given the increasing threats posed by anti-gender actors in the sphere of gender politics, and in particular concerning reproductive rights, health, LGBT+ rights, education, gender identity, and gender norms, feminist groups have frequently adopted responsive actions. Yet, the literature has not adequately investigated these responses, apart from some cases, such as the World Congress of Families in Verona (Cossutta & Habed, 2021). In addition, the scenario of feminist responses to anti-gender mobilizations is complicated by the presence of gender-critical feminists, whose positions on gender identity, surrogacy, and sex work have often produced unintended convergences with far-right, populist, and anti-gender groups (Gusmeroli, 2023).

Drawing on these considerations, the chapter explores the strategies that the feminist movement in Italy has adopted to counter anti-gender attacks. Firstly, our analysis acknowledges the gendered nature of opposing movements' interactions, as argued by scholars like Roggeband (2018) and Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012). Secondly, it recognizes that such interactions involve a diverse array of actors, both formal and informal, within networks, coalitions, or alliances (Whittier, 1995). Thirdly, it emphasizes the interdependent nature of these interactions, where the tactical gains or losses of one movement can influence the strategic goals of another (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Lastly, it highlights the fluidity of movement dynamics, where a reacting movement may itself become a countermovement, illustrating the complex and co-dependent nature of these interactions over time.

Based on these premises, we outline certain aspects that can help us contextualize the dynamics between the opposing movements analyzed in this study. Indeed, as mentioned, the ability of each movement to act within a political framework, as well as the opportunity to confront its opponents, also depends on the nature, strategies employed, and resources available to each movement. Primarily, as discussed in the following sections, in the Italian context, the anti-gender movement and the feminist movement maintain very different relationships and positions concerning institutions. For example, the anti-gender movement has consistently focused on developing a political strategy aimed at engaging with major government institutions, through agenda-setting activities and lobbying, as well as forming alliances and influencing far-right political parties

through campaigns and electoral tools (Lavizzari, 2025). This aspect is followed by a varying degree of policy engagement, whereby the anti-gender movement has been able to carve out space for its actors and objectives within state institutions, universities, hospitals, etc., attaining positions of power and proposing public policies and laws. Conversely, from a historical perspective, the Italian movement has always refused to interact directly with institutions (Alonso et al., 2023). Compared to other countries, it is not possible to detect state feminism in Italy (Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007). This strategic choice has, on the one hand, allowed the preservation of a radical political culture and, on the other hand, prevented substantial improvements in terms of progressive gender policies.[1]

Through our analysis, we detect two main types of protest strategies: confrontational and non-confrontational. Confrontational strategies are those through which the movement directly targets anti-gender actors, such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of street protest. Among these, we distinguish between loose, medium, and strong tactics. Non-confrontational strategies include direct social action, cultural initiatives, and camouflage within institutional channels. Throughout our examination, we also highlight the disparity in terms of resources that characterizes

[1] The chapter is based on 20 interviews with Italian feminist activists and on data collected during co-creation labs with feminist associations. The age of the interviewees ranges from 27 to 74 years old. Concerning the sample of activists, most of them are part of Non Una di Meno (NUDM), which as of 2016 is the biggest and widespread feminist movement network in Italy. Among them, we aimed to cover various generations of activists as well as an adequate geographical spectrum, including Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. In the sample, we also included feminist collectives that are not necessarily part of NUDM, such as Cagne Sciolte, Consultoria Fam, the women's house Lucha Y Siesta, Laboratorio Smaschieramenti, Obiezione Respinta, Cà Nisciun È Fessa, and Radio Onda Rossa, depending on their expertise and themes and on the historical role in the Italian context. All of them work through horizontal structures, without formal hierarchies and division of roles. Thus, the interviewees define themselves as just activists of the movement/collective/group. Interviews have been anonymized. The interviewees are identified with the label FA (feminist activist), the name of the group, and the age of the interviewee. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024.

Activists were asked about *their groups' organizational structures, the main issues they tackle, and the repertoires and strategies they adopt. Furthermore, we conducted two co-creation labs in July and December 2023 with feminists from associations active in the field of education. The labs aimed to produce a collectively written self-defense guide for teachers and educators active in the field of sexual education, as a way to counter and avoid the attacks and threats they face from anti-gender actors.*

the confrontation between the feminist and anti-gender movements. Indeed, feminist movements in Italy are essentially grassroots and have not established relationships with political parties or established a presence within institutions, while anti-gender movements have been able to benefit from both political and economic backing from institutional actors and political parties.

The first section of this chapter situates our research within theoretical developments about opposing movement dynamics to highlight the specific character of Italy's contentious gender politics. It also offers an overview of the Italian context, highlighting the contentious confrontation between anti-gender and feminist movements in the country. The second section delves into the examination of the evolution of anti-gender politics in Italy, showing the trajectory that the movement has followed during the last decade. The third section examines feminist responses to anti-gender movements.

The Anti-Gender Mobilization: Consolidation and Institutionalization

The mobilization against "gender ideology" has attracted the interest of several Italian scholars, mostly in the fields of sociology and political science. Since 2010, studies analyzing anti-gender campaigns in Italy have concentrated on three main lines of inquiry. The first focuses on the content of the anti-gender discourse and rhetoric, rooted in the Vatican's "gender ideology" rhetoric developed during the 1990s and subsequently adapted in the Italian national context by conservative religious organizations, as well as right-wing social and political actors (Garbagnoli, 2016; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2018; Spallaccia, 2020; Colella, 2021). A second line of investigation has focused on the emergence and establishment of an anti-gender movement, including empirical findings on the main actors, their relation to the state and religious institutions, and their repertoires of action and claim-making strategies (Lavizzari, 2019; Prearo, 2020; Trappolin, 2022). Finally, later studies have paid increased attention to the alliance between anti-gender actors and Italian populist radical right parties, most notably the League and Brothers of Italy, focusing on the appropriation or instrumentalization of the anti-gender discourse by the parties' leaders and exponents in their attempt to qualify themselves as the political representatives of Italian Catholics (Bellè & Poggio, 2018; Lavizzari &

Prearo, 2019; Prearo, 2020; Serughetti, 2021; Giorgi, 2022; Trappolin, 2022). As Giorgia Serughetti (2020) explains

> [t]he 'gender' favors the alliance between conservative forces also for its ability to bring together under a single label a plurality of controversial issues referable to the opposing camp of progressive forces. As an umbrella term, 'gender' is used with a semantic scope that goes beyond the strict reference to the family and sexual order, evoking a wider threat to the life of individuals and communities, for which responsibility is attributed to democratic-liberal thinking. (p. 121)

In the Italian context, religious authorities and the Vatican have historically played significant roles in deploying their power through Catholic morality and doctrine, intervening in the public debate at multiple levels, and determining a complex dialectic among social and political actors along the spectrum. The Church's positioning in the Italian socio-political context has opened up structural opportunities and repertoires of action appealing not only to public opinion at large but also to decision-makers, resulting from powerful lobbying activities. A distinctive trait of the Italian landscape is the Catholic Church's direct influence in the political activities of right-wing and center-left parties. This influence is the legacy of Christian Democracy, a post-war Christian democratic political party that played a leading role in the first phase of the Italian Republic for 50 years, until its dissolution in 1994 amid corruption scandals. After the party's dissolution, many religious voters felt orphaned without a powerful Catholic party to support. Since then, politically committed Catholics have engaged in defending and promoting religious values in government policies, not as a single Catholic party, but dispersed throughout most of the parties along the political spectrum (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019). In this context, as a consequence of the waning of conventional political influence through a single, hegemonic party, religious issues became highly politicized by different political entrepreneurs, including Catholic movements. The activism of this movement consists precisely in picking up the lines of the discourse elaborated by the Vatican on "gender theory" to make it an extra-ecclesiastical discourse mobilized in the streets and public squares, a discourse that responds to the desire for mobilization of the minoritarian and radical components of the Catholic people (Prearo, 2020, p. 116).

Since the success of the first national March for Life organized by the pro-life movement in 2011 and 2012, a segment of radical Catholics has

progressively coalesced around the anti-gender cause. The emergence of this new militant field unfolds also via the NGO-ization (Vaggione, 2005) of the Catholic movement, which since 2013 has established new satellite organizations, such as La Manif Pour Tous Italy. Moreover, the establishment of the anti-gender movement in the Italian landscape since the early 2010s has been favored by certain political opportunities. In this sense, we can consider the onset of the anti-gender mobilization as part of a political and public debate that has developed around a series of bills aimed at strengthening the institutional recognition of LGBT+ subjectivities through civil unions, the introduction of the crime of homotransphobia, and the introduction of gender and sex education in the national school system. These political circumstances shaped different phases of the anti-gender movement's evolution.

Although historical pro-life and Catholics groups had been active before, starting in 2013, the anti-gender movement entered a phase of expansion and consolidation, by which the newly created organizations such as La Manif Pour Tous Italia – Family Generation and the Committee to Defend Our Children (CDNF) initiated an intense cycle of protest mobilization, often mirroring strategies and argumentative elements of progressive movements. In this period, the Family Day rallies that took place in 2015 and 2016 were critical for the newly established organizations in their attempt to consolidate as key and visible actors in the public debate around gender issues. In May 2016, the Democratic Party, the center-left party in government at the time, approved the Law on Civil Partnership, which legally recognized and regulated same-sex civil unions. This political development sparked public confrontations between anti-gender groups and the progressive civil society, including feminist and LGBT+ groups. In the context of the contentious politics of gender in Italy at the time, the approval of the Law on Civil Partnership was a major political opportunity shift for both conflicting sides (Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023). From the anti-gender perspective, this quickly resulted in the need for a strategic turn toward the institutional arena, notably through lobbying with political parties, "contaminating" them with the movement's discourses, rhetoric, and, ultimately, pro-family and anti-gender programmatic points, and by providing voting guidance to voters. In this process of electoral mobilization, the anti-gender movement expanded the definition of the "fight against gender ideology" to encompass a wider range of issues, including women's rights, abortion, adoption, same-sex marriage,

surrogacy, and educational freedom, while linking these issues to a "decline in family values."

In a subsequent phase between 2016 and 2018, the movement started to focus more consistently on the electoral arena, intensifying its efforts to cooperate with political parties, notably Matteo Salvini's League, Silvio Berlusconi's Go Italy, and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy. Following the 2018 political elections, movement actors successfully infiltrate public offices and the political agenda of the government by leveraging years of lobbying and agenda-setting. Thanks mostly to its alliance with the League, the anti-gender movement was able to strengthen its influence over the agenda-setting process following the center-right coalition's electoral triumph. Indeed, before the Italian elections on 4 March 2018, Massimo Gandolfini, the founder and leader of the CDNF and the major promoter of Family Day, explicitly invited Italian citizens to vote for center-right parties based on their commitment to the anti-gender movement's values and goals—pro-life, pro-family, and freedom of education. Thus, beginning with the 2018 elections, the League facilitated candidates who supported anti-gender stances to run for public office. Among them was Simone Pillon, a well-known ultraconservative, homophobe, and anti-abortionist. In addition to being a prominent supporter of Family Day, he was also a member of the Neocatechumenal Way, a former Forum of the Families member, and the driving force behind the contentious Pillon Bill about joint parental custody. Another ultraconservative and pro-life leader, Lorenzo Fontana, was Minister of Family and Disability from 2018 to 2019 before taking over as President of the Chamber of Deputies in October 2022.

At the peak of this phase of consolidating movement and parties' relations, at the 2019 World Congress of Families in Verona, Giorgia Meloni openly backed her party's cooperation with the movement. According to several scholars, the World Congress of Families in Verona is the League's and Brothers of Italy's most visible endeavor supporting the anti-gender movement (Pavan, 2020; Cossutta & Habed, 2021; Trappolin, 2022). In the end, the outcomes of the September 2022 political elections, in which Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy prevailed, represent a continuation of the preceding phase but also a definite demonstration of the movement's institutionalization and the successful integration of the anti-gender agenda into the platforms of the ruling parties. Under Meloni's government, the presence of anti-gender exponents in public offices is consolidated through the appointment of key positions: Eugenia Roccella,

spokesperson and supporter of the Family Day staunchly opposed to abortion and LGBT+ rights, as Minister for Family, Natality, and Equal Opportunities; Alfredo Mantovano, an active member of the Committee to Defend Our Children and President of the Catholic jurists' network Livatino Studies Centre, as undersecretary to the Prime Minister's office; Lorenzo Fontana as President of the Chamber of Deputies; and Massimo Gandolfini, although not directly running in the elections, as a consultant for Anti-Drug Policies at the Prime Minister's office.

Feminist Movements' Responses to Anti-Gender Politics

From a global perspective, the reaction to gender backlash and anti-gender mobilizations can be considered one of the components that triggered the resurgence of feminist movements. The re-emergence of massive feminist mobilizations over the last decade was often prompted by growing attacks on women's and LGBT+ rights. For example, feminist movements mobilized in Poland against attacks on abortion rights, and mobilizations in Argentina and Brazil targeted the reactionary backlash against women and LGBT+ people (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Corrêa, 2021). The latest wave of massive feminist mobilizations in Italy, starting in 2016, was strongly influenced by these developments unfolding around the globe:

> The Argentine movement provided significant impetus. In Argentina, there was the issue of the abortion law and the referendum; in Poland, there was an attack on freedom of choice; in Spain, there was the Green Wave, along with various other feminist social movements. Thus, 2016 was a year when the stars aligned, and we decided to take a chance and organize a national assembly and protest in Rome to bring together feminist activists. (FA9, NUDM, 32)

The reaction against anti-gender movements is therefore part of the impulse from which the new feminist wave arises. As we previously highlighted, anti-gender actors succeeded in gaining access to institutional settings, achieving positive cultural and political outcomes, and actively infiltrating key public institutions, such as public schools and the national healthcare system. In this section, we discuss the different strategies that the feminist movement has adopted in Italy in reaction to anti-gender attacks. We identify two main types of strategies: confrontational and

non-confrontational tactics. The choice of strategy depends on the type of attack, the networks involved, the context, and the goal of the mobilization (Tarrow, 1993; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Jasper, 2004; McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). Due to the increasing level of diffusion of anti-gender groups, feminist movements have had to adopt and adapt their strategies depending on the expected goal and the tactical evaluation of the situation.

Confrontational Tactics: Public Protests and Counter-Actions

Confrontational tactics are actions oriented to directly address, denounce, and attack claims, events, and protests of the anti-gender movement. Confrontational tactics can take several forms: calling a protest in response to an event; going directly to the venue of an event, e.g., a book presentation, and disrupting it with banners, choirs, and interventions; or staging creative performances to denounce actions of anti-gender movements. In some cases, these actions take place through direct interaction, i.e., actors from both sides arguing with or confronting each other, while in others, the action may take place at a distance, without direct interaction.

To disentangle these strategies, we can differentiate between *loose confrontational action*, *medium-intensity confrontational action*, and *strong confrontational action*. This categorization depends on the time and space of mobilizations. The dimension of time refers to actions that occur with short notice or are planned over a long period. Space, on the other hand, concerns the setting where actions take place, which also shapes the form of the action and the interactions between movements. In the case of loose confrontational action, the choice to intervene by feminist groups can happen at any moment, as a reaction to relevant news in the media, or because activists learn through informal channels of an anti-gender initiative taking place. The response is therefore not structured and organized but takes the form of an immediate intervention with few resources (e.g., a few flyers and a megaphone). As one activist explains:

> We went to annoy a group linked to the churches that we knew would be collecting signatures for the law for listening to the fetal heartbeat, because a girl from that neighborhood wrote to us saying: 'I come from a super-Catholic family, I can't take it, my parents told me that there is this collection of signatures, so please we have to react'. So, we went to annoy them with a banner, leaflets, and papering the area a bit. (FA15, CNF, 27)

This type of reaction is often linked to territorial contexts and thus to the daily politics of feminist groups, which monitor and intervene in the dynamics of their neighborhoods. *Loose confrontational actions* can occur on the spot, without prior structured organization, e.g., through writing on walls or shutters or disruptive actions circumspect in time and space: "I remember this moment during the first demonstration on 8 March when we wrote with pink paint on the objector pharmacy [pharmacy refusing to supply the morning-after contraceptive pill] in the center of Pisa" (FA5, NUDM, 31). As another interviewee says, already in the early 2000s there were widespread actions in front of hospitals for the induction of the RU486 (abortion pill), which often took place in a form that was not entirely organized and planned but equally confrontational:

> Pillolissima [big abortion pill], in 2009 had started right in front of the hospitals, so in the same night we went to make the writings, to attach the banners, to throw leaflets in front of all the hospitals in Rome. That was a lot of fun. Those years we did a lot of things all over the city. (FA7, ROR, 43)

More recently, during the demonstration on 25 November, a spontaneous action attacked with smoke bombs the headquarters of the Pro Life and Family group, the largest anti-gender association active in Italy, while also writing on the shutter. In explaining the action, one of the interviewees reports that within the mass context of the demonstration, there were actions of pure and spontaneous rage, such as the attack on Pro Life and Family, which were not necessarily planned but escalated in conflict at the moment:

> NUDM is the movement that has comrades who rightly want to break down the portcullis of the ProLife headquarter. The portcullis is not the main point, and it's not always the movement's most representative practice, but that's also an option. (FA18, NUDM, 33)

In this set of tactics, we can also include cultural subversion, which means the creative, ironic, and debunking creation of performances and actions toward ridiculing the claims and actions of anti-gender movements. A recurring practice of anti-gender movements is the posting of huge posters on city street bulletin boards attacking abortion: "Though their posters are increasingly present around the city, the anti-gender movement is not readily apparent – that is, they don't occupy the streets

or engage in other similar activities" (FA18, NUDM, 29). Indeed, although anti-gender movements are less often directly present and visible through public events in the streets, they nevertheless manage to be strongly present in the public space through the massive use of posters on walls. Very often, feminist groups have responded to the hanging of posters by ironically altering them, for example through the practice of lettering, as happened recently in Pisa. On a poster with a picture of a fetus that says "9 out of 10 biologists recognize me as a human being, how about you?" activists affixed lettering that says "10 out of 10 women must have the right to choose."

Medium-intensity confrontational actions require higher organizational structure; they often imply coalition-building, an already existing repertoire of action, and resources. They can take place as a reaction to a specific type of anti-gender action—as we will see with the case of the Standing Sentinels—or they can happen through the creation of a campaign that regularly takes place as a response to anti-gender politics. As an example, an interviewee mentions the case of the Tuscany region that voted to finance on a regular basis anti-gender associations to get into hospitals and public health clinics. The practice of allowing anti-gender and anti-choice associations to access public institutions and public funding has been increasingly implemented in Italy. To react to this public funding expenditure, local feminist movements went to every session of the regional council where the allocation of funds was discussed, ridiculing the claims and actions of anti-gender movements:

> Our experience concerns Tuscany, where we identified the Region as the counterpart. A few years ago, we found out that the then president of the region, Rossi (of the Democratic Party), was going to finance the Forum of Families, which is this association of anti-abortion associations, with 195 thousand euros of public money for three years. This resolution was about to pass, which would have given 200,000 Euros of public money to anti-abortion associations to get in through the window, to allow them to increase their economic and political power in the region. In response, we formed a coalition comprising all the various Tuscan nodes [of Non Una Di Meno]. It was one of the first instances that we all took coordinated action, preventing the municipal councils from discussing this financing at meetings. (FA5, NUDM, 31)

Medium-intensity confrontational tactics are planned over a period of time, and involve a certain level of organization, the creation of networks

and alliances (e.g., between feminist groups in the Tuscany region), as well as repertoires of actions (such as creative performances with which to interrupt regional council meetings). Another example of medium-intensity tactics has been the response to the action of the Standing Sentinels, a campaign carried out by anti-gender groups that between 2014 and 2015 gathered in the squares of cities in Italy, standing at a regular distance from each other, reading a book for an hour in silence, in the name of freedom of thought and expression against the spread of gender ideology. Feminist groups reacted by often organizing noisy and ironic mobilizations at the same time in adjacent squares, with the aim of disrupting and denouncing the anti-gender action. Again, actions were organized over a period of time, through coalition-building between feminist and LGBT+ actors and a shared repertoire of actions.

Strong confrontational actions, on the other hand, are prepared over a longer time frame, and involve coalition-building at local, national, and transnational levels, a structured communication campaign, adequate resources for public protest preparation, and a clear, vocal, and confrontational public demonstration. In Italy, this was the case, for example, from 29–31 March2019, when, on the occasion of the World Congress of Families, an international network of anti-gender and anti-feminist movements, feminist movements organized a public counter-protest called "Verona Transfeminist City." Over the three days, the feminist movement organized art exhibitions, book presentations, events, a demonstration that brought together more than 100,000 people, and a transnational assembly with participants from Latin America, Poland, Kurdistan, Turkey, Switzerland, Spain, and Andorra (Cossutta & Habed, 2021). "The International Congress of Families in Verona had to face a very strong response with a national demonstration of hundreds of thousands of people from all over Italy" (FA5, NUDM, 31). The choice of strong confrontational tactics brings in a symbolic level—responding to the display of strength by showing the feminist movement's strength; a political dimension—representing the opposition to anti-gender policies and the existence of different ways of life and perspectives on social justice; and a strategic element—the creation of an emblematic case for shedding light on the transnational connections between right-wing and religiously inspired movements in the field of gender politics.

> There, the movement had a significant impact. The movement succeeded in bringing a genuine uprising against everything that was stated there to

> Veronese streets. It was crucial to something that went beyond simply being a congress held in Italy; it was also the dissemination of papers and arguments concerning the common theme that brought together all of these right-wing, anti-choice, and gender-repositioning movements abroad. I mean, it raised awareness of the ways in which these things will converge. (FA2, NUDM, 62)

Yet, successful strong confrontational tactics also require continuity of framing and actions, as one interviewee explains in the case of Verona. Opposition to religiously inspired movements has always been part of the history of feminist and LGBT+ movements, so it is from that history that it was possible to build a highly confrontational and successful moment in 2019:

> The pro-life movement and clericalism are inextricably linked, that is, this interdependence between church and right. A very pertinent demonstration to the LGBT+ cause took place in Verona in 1995. It was the only event that I can remember from the 1990s that was not a Pride. It is the sole event that did not originate from large organizations, and it did so directly against the powerful Catholic fundamentalist groups that operate in that region. In actuality, they created the World Family Conference 25 years later. There, the topics are identical. The passage of twenty-five years made them old or transformed persons. Therefore, I thought it was crucial that the feminist movement respond, and I think that this contentious attitude against pro-life groups has always been a part of feminist movements. (FA8, ROR, 54)

The interplay between loose, medium-intensity, and strong confrontational tactics has often represented an overall key strategy to obtain fundamental outcomes. This was the case, for instance, for the proposed amendment to the Family Code by Senator Simone Pillon, an exponent of the anti-gender movements, aimed at introducing Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) as a tool for disempowering women with children during the process of separation or divorce from violent husbands. PAS, indeed, is often used to discredit women who press charges against their partner for domestic violence, with the accusation of alienating their children's relationship with the father (Abrahams, 2021). As much as the response was a medium-term campaign—at the time of the debate in the courtroom—often actions were organized with very little notice, on the spot, to react to last-minute events, such as when Senator Pillon spoke at a public meeting or presentation. Furthermore, the fight against Pillon's proposed

amendment was one of the key claims of the campaign that led to the "Verona Transfeminist City" demonstration that we just mentioned as an example of strong confrontational tactics. This mix of strategies, loose, medium-intensity, and strong, has brought about the withdrawal of the proposal by the senator. This was a key outcome for the feminist movement, which provided it with the perception of a growing climate of consensus around their proposals and the need to adapt strategies to the context, as in this case through more direct confrontation with institutions:

> Things were saved. The previous minister Pillon, who introduced PAS, attempted to pass it into law at one point, but this was stopped [by NUDM]. These things did not exist seven years ago, and since we now have such a strong political influence, we are really considering whether to implement our reactions to threats and attacks systemically. Maybe we should try to engage with the opposing side more on some matters, like PAS, or the whole problem of secondary victimization in the legal system. Of course, by violence I mean courts, magistrates, judges, police officers, and all other perpetrators of violence. (FA5, NUDM, 31)

As the analysis has shown, in some cases, feminist responses to anti-gender actors have been able to counter and stop key attempts at the level of policies and laws. More broadly, these different strategies have resulted in increased awareness of several issues, such as reproductive rights and women's and LGBT+ rights in general. Furthermore, responses to anti-gender actors have fostered and strengthened coalition-building and facilitated the establishment of transnational networks among feminist actors worldwide.

Non-Confrontational Tactics: Direct Social Action, Culture, Institutions

While confrontation and public protest have been among the main strategies adopted by the feminist and LGBT+ movements in the country, activists have also often resorted to *direct social action* (DSA) as a strategy (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015; Zamponi, 2019). With this term, we refer to those initiatives aimed at providing peer-to-peer and mutualistic support. The adoption of DSA has been particularly relevant in the field of health. As mentioned earlier, the health issue has been a key site of contention for the feminist movement in Italy. The increased strength of anti-choice actors

has threatened the right to abortion by infiltrating public hospitals and clinics and by promoting public campaigns blaming women who interrupt their pregnancies. Together with the growing presence of conscientious objectors within hospitals and clinics, the presence of anti-choice actors within health facilities and the proliferation of so-called centers supporting life have contributed to hindering the right to abortion in the country. In response to this situation, the movement has developed different forms of DSA aiming at providing peer-to-peer support to users to obtain safe access to abortion.

Among the initiatives adopted in this context, the practice of *monitoring and filtering* has been of particular significance. The movement has engaged in extensive activities with the aim of gathering information about healthcare facilities and constructing autonomous maps that could act as a filter preventing other users from undergoing negative experiences. For example, feminist activists have started to systematically monitor the presence of conscientious objectors through the bottom-up creation of virtual maps. In fact, in Italy, conscientious objectors are not officially listed by the government or by public hospitals. Consequently, one of the key challenges in accessing abortion services concerns the lack of information about the location of non-conscientious objectors. The *Obiezione Respinta* (Objection Rejected) collective started creating a digital and bottom-up map in 2016, as a reaction to the negative experience activists themselves had undergone:

> *Obiezione Respinta* is a project of mapping conscientious objection in Italy, born in Pisa from embodied experiences, in the sense that it emerged from a group of students who, in one of these moments, let's say of self-consciousness related to health, realized…we realized, that it had happened to several of us not to receive the morning-after pill at the pharmacy, or to have had bad experiences concerning voluntary termination of pregnancy. (FA9, OR, 33)

The map consists of green and red pins that identify the facilities where abortion is granted and easily accessible as well as those where conscientious objectors are present. The pins are created based on users' experiences, collected via anonymous testimonies. This self-organized map represents a technological tool to avoid and circumvent the obstacles that users may encounter when aiming to interrupt a pregnancy. The map originated as a local initiative but has since become a national point of

reference and a fundamental tool in the procedure for accessing abortion in the country.

Furthermore, forms of monitoring have also proliferated thanks to the autonomous activation of professionals and users who have increasingly reached out to local feminist collectives to signal the presence of conscientious objectors or anti-choice actors within health facilities. In response, feminist activists have often reacted by entering hospitals as a means to display their presence while at the same time verifying the actions of anti-choice actors within the facility:

> For example, this morning we went to this hospital that had been reported to us for the second time, there were doctors, social workers, the person who had reported it to us explained how the dynamic had been the other time, we stayed there a while because it seemed that these people were going back and forth through the corridor. (FA15, CNF, 27)

Hence, activists physically monitor public hospitals to assess and prevent the presence of anti-choice actors. In other instances, activists monitor access to abortion by assuming the role of users in need and inquiring with medical professionals at various hospitals or clinics. This allows them to gain insights on how the procedure works and assess the safety of the facility. The information gathered through monitoring provides activists with comprehensive knowledge about the functioning of health facilities, as well as about the reliability of doctors and professionals. This knowledge is later used to filter and facilitate access to abortion for other users.

In addition to monitoring and filtering, feminist activists also actively support individuals in need of abortion by practicing *accompaniment*. This involves physically accompanying others to the hospital, staying by their side to address any potential difficulties they may encounter, as well as more generally providing social and moral support. This accompaniment serves as a safe and welcoming point of reference during the entire process, offering care and reassurance to ensure that the persons do not feel isolated. Indeed, beyond the tangible obstacles posed by hostile doctors or conscientious objectors, one of the primary challenges individuals face when accessing abortion is the pervasive judgmental climate they encounter. This atmosphere often makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to have a positive experience with the procedure. Thus, activists have expanded their focus beyond merely publicly denouncing inefficiencies and obstacles to include "accompanying people who find themselves in

need of abortion or need of contraceptives and who find themselves in a situation of difficulty" (FA5, NUDM, 37).

As the following quote shows, accompaniment is a key part of activists' repertoires that aim at facilitating access to abortion, while supporting through care:

> The idea was also to give space to people who might need to be accompanied. When we say accompaniment, we don't mean just physical accompaniment, like accompanying someone to the counselling center or the hospital, but we mean a more comprehensive approach. In many cases we don't even meet people before their abortion, we meet them afterward, at some point we always meet them, but many of them…we meet them when it's all done, just for the pleasure of seeing each other in person…but there is this whole part of the support that we do that is at a distance. It is related to giving clear information, helping people contact healthcare providers, and making appointments. (FA15, CNF, 27)

Hence, the adoption of direct social action has been particularly relevant in the health field as a means to circumvent the obstacles that anti-choice actors and policies pose to those who require an interruption of pregnancy. It has also represented a tool for empowering users in front of the medical authority. Although these strategies cannot be directly related to the consolidation of anti-gender actors in the country, their increased strength has certainly worsened the conditions for access to abortion and given a strong impulse to the presence of anti-choice actors within healthcare institutions. Consequently, the role of these platforms of peer-to-peer support has become increasingly central during the last decade.

Another significant strategy employed by activists involves promoting grassroots campaigns aimed at disseminating information and *sharing knowledge and expertise* to counter anti-gender narratives. In this regard, the cultural arena has become a focal point of contention for the movement. Once more, the health sector emerges as a pivotal example of this dynamic. The feminist movement actively disseminates information and knowledge about abortion, as well as women's rights in healthcare, in response to the campaigns and narratives propagated by anti-choice actors. Thus, for example, several online projects have emerged recently such as *IVG Ho Abortito e Sto Benissimo* (VIP [voluntary interruption of pregnancy] I had an abortion and feel perfectly fine) and *Libera di Abortire* (Free to abort), aiming at deconstructing stigmatizing narratives about

abortion and fostering positive accounts of women's self-determination. These campaigns have sought to promote alternative narratives about abortion that challenge the notion that it is inherently traumatic, violent, and painful. Activists emphasize that such initiatives, which aim to influence the cultural sphere, have been effective in spreading awareness and providing support:

> In general, the work we have conducted on the narrative around abortion, although we keep hearing on TV that abortion is a painful thing, at the general level there has been a clear change. It is evident to us from the kind of testimonies that we receive, concerning abortion and how people perceive their abortions, the recognition of the abuses they go through, and so on. (FA9, OR, 33)

Besides DSAs and cultural-oriented initiatives, in some cases, institutional channels have been relevant as well. Both in the fields of education and health, for example, activists have started reflecting on adopting strategies based on *camouflage* to get access to institutional channels. In the field of education, for example, given the particularly contentious dynamics that have emerged in the country concerning sexual education in schools, feminist associations tend to downplay their identity to be accepted as external providers. This strategy emerged prominently during our co-creation labs. Associations and individual teachers have emphasized the importance of subtly integrating sexual education without explicitly labeling it as such. This approach aims to circumvent opposition from school directors, anti-gender associations in the community, and organized groups of parents. Similarly, in the health field, the strategy of camouflage is increasingly gaining relevance for feminist actors as a way to counter the presence of pro-life actors within healthcare facilities. Indeed, in certain cities, the presence of anti-choice actors within public hospitals and clinics has been facilitated by regional governments financing such associations under the guise of supporting motherhood. As previously discussed, the feminist movement has primarily responded to this through protest. However, some activists are beginning to contemplate the potential of adopting camouflage as a strategy. This involves applying for funds and gaining access to public hospitals through this channel while simultaneously subverting it to advance feminist agendas. While the feminist movement is essentially grassroots and self-organized, activists reflect upon the possibility of strategically using more structured associative

forms to gain access to those funds that the regional government makes available for anti-choice actors. Their goal is "to participate in the call and take the money away from them, as much as possible, to try to get around it from the inside and do a work of this kind for stated political purposes" (NUDM). Thus, camouflage is thought of as a strategy that aims to disempower anti-choice associations by subverting the channels that have been structured to maintain an anti-abortion presence within healthcare facilities.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the movement has also at times adopted "avoidance" as a strategy to disempower anti-gender actors by withdrawing from the confrontational field. While at times this has been an openly articulated strategy, at other times, as one activist reported to us, this has resulted from what could be seen as an underestimation of the broader dynamics (and their power) underpinning the most visible local manifestation of anti-gender activism:

> And then we have the Vatican in the house, and that obviously obstacles a lot of issues even at the cultural level. On that, in my opinion we left a little bit [...] it's not that it's our fault, but in front of the rise of the various movements, associations, pro-life organizations, the congress of families in Verona, and the sacred heart of Mary brought forward by Salvini, we remained somewhat silent. We preferred more to see how ridiculous certain things were, instead of looking at the structural issues that were being brought forward, the Atlantic alliances with respect to funding, and to certain political movements far beyond us, and yet then governing us. So, we kind of gave up from this point of view. (FA9, NUDM, 32)

As we have discussed so far, feminist actors adopt different strategies to react to anti-gender threats. It is worth noting, however, that, as many interviewees stressed, this reaction is based upon a disparity in terms of resources. The confrontation between feminist actors and anti-gender movements, thus, cannot be considered as based on equal premises. While anti-gender movements may enjoy a network of local and international funding, feminist groups are often totally grassroots, do not access public funding, and therefore do not have the same resources for their political organization, which also significantly influences the type of outcome they may achieve. Again, the health field represents a key example of such a disparity:

> Of course, at the city level there are certainly pharmacies, hospitals and aid-for-life centers, big ones that we have not talked about but which are systemically and endemically present in Italy. So the fact is that in Italy, especially in northern Italy, the aid-for-life centers, which are these centers run by anti-abortion associations, particularly Casini's *Movimento per la Vita* (Movement for Life), have gigantic economic and political power that has grown in recent years and they run these centers where you are directed if you are unlucky, when you make the certificate of voluntary interruption of pregnancy and you meet an objector doctor, who understands that you have economic problems, if you are unlucky they may send you to these centers that try to dissuade you from having an abortion by giving you nappies, plasmon and a few hundred euro a month. (FA5, NUDM, 33)
>
> Every time there are anti-abortionist associations that picket, on Tuesdays when there is a day of voluntary termination of pregnancy in front of the hospital, the nurses or the doctors often send us photos…to get us out they call the police, they do things, and let's say that this is clearly not easy because there is a bit of a perception that you can never win. However, this was also a big blow because after years and years of being mobilized only on this thing, to see that whatever you do, even with very transversal alliances, it doesn't go, and in any case, there are legislative instruments to prevent everything passing into a political discussion, everything being questioned in some way. This left us very puzzled and also a little disappointed because it is often not easy when you don't see results to see the sense of political activism, when you lose such structural things and then say that we had done so many demonstrations. (FA16, NUDM, 29)

As we can see from the quotes, the availability of resources also enables pro-life groups to counter abortion with material aid to women, thus encouraging them not to have abortions. In contrast, feminist movements usually have very few financial resources even to organize protests, print leaflets, or buy materials. Moreover, despite the existence of abortion legislation, pro-life movements seem to enjoy a network of protection and complicity involving institutions, hospitals, and law enforcement, in a framework of latent consent to their demands that makes it even more difficult for feminist movements to have an impact.

To conclude, as this paragraph has highlighted, feminist movements in Italy have resorted to different strategies to react to anti-gender and anti-choice actors. Confrontational tactics have coexisted with non-confrontational ones like direct social action, cultural interventions, and institutional channels. Nevertheless, the respondents emphasize that the effectiveness of these strategies depends on the availability of political,

financial, and human resources. While anti-gender movements have access to considerable resources both locally and internationally, often succeeding in achieving positive outcomes, feminist movements, on the other hand, are often much more lacking in resources, and this strongly affects their ability to respond and succeed.

Conclusions

In the last decade, contentious gender politics in Italy has been characterized by the growing involvement of various institutional and movement actors around increasingly polarizing issues, particularly in the fields of education, reproductive rights, and LGBT+ rights. Within this framework, the feminist movement and the anti-gender movement have played primary roles, leading to opposition dynamics characterized by actions and reactions over time. In the initial phase of the emergence and development of the anti-gender movement, characterized by a strong presence in public squares, the feminist movement's responses were timely and consequential, often indicating a co-presence within the public space. It is in this phase that the feminist movement frequently employed confrontational tactics, including public protests and counter-actions, to react to anti-gender actions. These actions, which can be categorized as loose, medium-intensity, and strong, varied depending on the time, space, and resources employed to carry them out. They ranged from quickly organized actions to provide an immediate response—such as cultural subversion and on-the-spot protest actions—to more structured actions involving multiple movement actors through the activation of networks and alliances, up to large events organized on a national and transnational scale, as was the case with the Verona Transfeminist City protest.

On the one hand, therefore, the nature and characteristics of the feminist movement's response strategies have adapted over time, demonstrating the versatility of strategies and the mobilization capacity of the new wave of the feminist movement. On the other hand, the variety of responses and the adaptability of the movement must be seen in continuity with the actions of their opponents. A crucial factor in this context has been the trajectory followed by the anti-gender movement, which has seen its progressive and effective institutionalization within government bodies and public institutions more generally, particularly through the consolidated alliance with populist right-wing parties such as Brothers of Italy and the League. The anti-gender movement has pursued a dual anti-gender

strategy: maintaining a presence in the public space to establish itself as a fundamental and recognizable actor in the gender debate in Italy, while simultaneously focusing on institutional and electoral politics. The shift in the balance of power in government, partially occurring with the 2018 political elections and the rise to power of the League, and subsequently in 2022 with the success of all the center-right forces, particularly Brothers of Italy, has led to a significant change in the movement's strategy. This shift has opened up the opportunity to implement its anti-gender agenda from a position of strength in government. The transition from a mostly reactive position to a proactive one, with the possibility of concretizing policies, proposed laws, and initiatives, indirectly produces effects on opposing movements' dynamics. It is within this framework of dual strategy that we see the deployment of the mentioned confrontational actions and non-confrontational strategies, essentially aimed at containing a proactive agenda capable of producing effects on the ground, such as the right to abortion and the increasing presence of anti-gender actors in public hospitals. These have been countered through monitoring and filtering strategies, accompaniment, and the production and sharing of knowledge and expertise.

At the same time, it is crucial to underline how the contentious gender politics indeed sees the evolution of opposing forces and dynamics, but that these cannot be considered equivalent. The disparity of forces is articulated particularly in terms of resources. The anti-gender movement, which includes among its main actors associations and NGOs with a high level of bureaucratization and professionalization, can easily tap into national and international funds. In contrast, the essentially grassroots nature of the feminist movement greatly limits access to public funds, thus determining the tactical-strategic choices of the movement itself as well as the types of outcomes. Furthermore, the adaptability of the feminist movement is contingent on a different, opposite approach to institutions. Unlike the anti-gender movement, the feminist movement often refuses to engage in dialogue and interact with institutions. This impacts not only strategies but also the potential access to institutional representation, institutional networks, and power.

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