Feminism in transit

A study of the transnational feminist movement

Non Una Di Meno

By

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Abstract

Lidia Salvatori – Feminism in transit: a study of the transnational feminist movement *Non Una Di Meno*

Drawing from a digitally mediated autoethnographic study within the Italian feminist movement *Non Una Di Meno,*[1] inspired by the Argentinian anti-femicide collective *Ni Una Menos,* this thesis asks: how can we conceptualise feminist activism as a process of transit and transformation? In doing so, it provides a nuanced analysis of contemporary feminist activism in Italy, as part of a transnational *feminist tide.*

The thesis considers how this movement transformed and grew over three years (2016-2019) and contributes to growing debates in feminist and social movement studies on the development of mobilisation in exceptional times (Della Porta, 2017). Building on recent scholarship conceptualising the emergence of a wave of digitally mediated feminism (Mendes et al., 2019), the thesis explores the role of internet-based communication for feminist theorising and grassroots mobilisation.

Contrary to scholarly expectations of reduced mobilisation in times of crisis, in recent years, Italy saw the emergence of gender and anti-austerity protest (Chironi, 2019). This thesis points to the feminist movement analysed as a distinctive actor within such context, able to propose alternative ways of 'doing politics', aimed at systemic change.

Feminists in different localities contribute to form a new political subject and construct transnational cognitive frames (Monforte, 2014). Drawing from previous experiences, feminists create horizontal organisational forms while carrying out unobtrusive, 'unglamorous' (Davis, 2008) actions aimed at local transformations, that call for an expansion of the notion of activism. This emerging form of 'locally rooted feminist internationalism' is made possible by digital connectivity and by a shared sense of *affective dissonance* (Hemmings, 2012), *joy* and *rage* (Ahmed, 2017).

Centering the analysis on feminists' perceptions and experiences, the thesis explores how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized towards organizing activism. The thesis also fills a gap in literature on the invisible emotional and unrecognized labour of feminist activism and on the experience of receiving online abuse.

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[1] This translates in English as *Not one less* or *Not one woman less*. Throughout the thesis I use the abbreviation NUDM.

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NUDM: Non Una Di Meno

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and any other gender identities

MRA: Men's Rights Activists

TERF: Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist

Published work

I have incorporated material from two journal articles that have been published during the period of my registration. The sections in which the material has been used contain a reference to this work.

I am the only author of the following article, parts of which have been reworked and incorporated in the thesis (mainly in chapter 2):

Salvatori, L. (2018) *'Lost Between the Waves' or Riding a New Tide? Drawing Connections Between Italian and Polish Digitally Mediated Feminism,* Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media (digitalicons.org), No 19 (2018): 73–91.

I am one of three authors of the following article, written collaboratively with other two PhD students and without a lead author. This work has informed my methodology (chapter 4):

Deschner, C. J.; Dorion, L.; Salvatori, L. (2020): *Prefiguring a feminist academia: a multi-vocal autoethnography on the creation of a feminist space in a neoliberal university.* Society and Business Review, Volume 15 Issue 4.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On the 26th November 2016, 200 000 women marched through the streets of Rome to the cry of *Non Una di Meno* (Not One Less). Inspired by their Argentinian sisters from *Ni Una Menos,* who were mobilising against the rising number of femicides, rapes and disappearances, Italian feminists launched a new movement.

On the day after the demonstration, the first *NUDM* national assembly took place. This was the first of many local and national deliberative assemblies through which a new political subject emerged*,* starting a process of collective analysis and writing that lead to the publication of the *Feminist Plan To Combat Male Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence* (Montella et al., 2019; NUDM, 2017; Pavan and Mainardi, 2018). This process of *feminist diagnosis* (Gago, 2020) of the structural roots and manifestations of gender-based violence in Italy however, was made possible by the encounter between activists relying on pre-existing relations of trust or forming new political friendships. Activists already involved in feminist and transfeminist[2] collectives and laboratories, LGBTQ+[3] associations, social centres, women's centres and shelters, and individuals who were new to feminism, all merged into *NUDM*. This process of analysis was further enabled by activists' ability to draw from the legacy of previous feminist waves, as well as from processes of theorisation happening elsewhere. A fundamental process contributing to the construction of this new movement in fact has been the organisation of the first *International Women Strike* on the 8th March 2017, which involved feminists in more than 50 countries. Appropriating the tool of the strike, usually employed by workers movements, feminists in different countries, connected mainly through a Facebook group *(Paro Internacional de Mujeres/ International Women Strike),* contributed to the rise of a new *feminist international* (Gago, 2020). The strike was central for the movement's theorisation, as it helped drawing connections between gender-based violence and

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[2] Transfeminism is both a movement and a theoretical approach. Close to queer theory, it opposes essentialisms and argues that gender is a social construct used to control human bodies to conform to the heterosexual, patriarchal, capitalist social order. As a movement it is driven by the experiences of transgenders, feminists and queers.

[3] Throughout the thesis I adopt this abbreviation for its inclusivity of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and any other gender identities.

economic violence. This mobilisation in fact is able to bridge or transit through contributions from second wave feminism (e.g. Wages for housework) and tactics from fourth wave feminism (i.e. skilful use of social media) and bring the attention to a very urgent analysis that, starting from everyday experiences and material conditions, brings into question the neoliberal division of labour, based on the devaluation of reproductive work carried out mostly by women (Federici, 2018) and *dissident identities* (Mason-Deese, 2020). Similarly to other recent experience such as the *forum* or the *camp* (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) this transnational feminist mobilisation aims at contrasting the effects of late neoliberalism with the creation of communal forms of living. Challenging *lean in* and neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018), and connecting critiques of patriarchy, neoliberalism and the nation state (Gago, 2019; 2020) it proposes a *feminism for the 99%* (Arruzza et al., 2019; Emejulu, 2018).

This thesis provides a nuanced analysis of contemporary feminist activism in Italy, focusing on the case of *NUDM,* while framing it as part of this new transnational mobilisation. Italian feminists defined this new 'sweeping' transnational feminist force as a *tide (la marea femminista),* a metaphor which circulated quickly, together with the desire to radically transform everything, expressed by the Argentinian feminists' slogan: *Queremos cambiarlo todo! (We want to change it all!)* or the more recent Chilean call to mobilise against capitalist exploitation *Hasta que valga la pena vivir! (Until life is worth living!).* This is exemplary of the centrality of a collective work of *political translation* (Doerr, 2018; Palmeiro, 2020) for this movement, with feminists in different localities contributing to construct transnational cognitive frames (Monforte, 2014). As Monforte (2014: 132) argues in his study on European social movements, processes of frame bridging are central for the construction of *'new forms of identities, through the definition of common claims'.* For *NUDM,* as well as for other 'branches' of *Ni Una Menos*, the sharing of slogans, hashtags and songs centred on similar demands, contributed to the formation of a new political subject: one that has a transnational identity but not a hierarchical transnational structure. The movement in fact is transnational in its conceptualisation and in the ability to develop and reproduce a specific language across borders. As Cecilia Palmeiro (2020), one of *Ni Una Menos* founders explains, a "spontaneous and collective translation flow between different national and regional languages, between visual and verbal languages, between different levels of a language (from everyday to

theoretical language, and vice-versa), including poetry and the languages of social media, public discourse and the bodily languages of social protest […] can describe the logics of our activist network".

Adopting the name and organisational style from *Ni Una Menos* (Sabsay, 2020), *NUDM* participates in shaping a new, international form of intersectional feminism. As a popular, grassroots, radical feminist movement, participants take to the streets to combine mass demonstrations, direct actions, digital activism, with the organisation of assemblies: spaces dedicated to discussion, horizontal deliberation, knowledge production (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) but also places where to form affectionate bonds and prefigure a feminist society. Feminist assemblies in fact, become generative spaces where to prefigure a feminist world without borders, not free from conflict but rich in possibilities and imaginaries, where to reorganise life and labour in non-exploitative and participatory ways (Federici, 2018).

In this thesis, I therefore seek to contribute to growing debates in feminist and social movement studies on the development of feminist mobilisation in exceptional times (Della Porta, 2017; Della Porta and Pavan, 2017), and reach a deeper understanding of what pushes women, other marginalised groups and *dissident identities* (Mason-Deese, 2020) to mobilise under the cry of *Not one less*. Specifically, this thesis contributes to the growing number of studies attempting to conceptualise the transnational mobilisation started with *Ni Una Menos* (Chironi, 2019; Della Porta, 2019; Federici, 2018; Gago, 2019; López, 2020; Palmeiro, 2020) while highlighting the specificities of contemporary Italian feminism and the significance of this new political subject in the Italian context.

This study therefore, contributes to recent literature in feminist and social movement studies seeking to explain the 'resurgence' (Dean and Aune, 2015) and risen relevance and visibility of feminism since 2010 (Mendes et al., 2019) facilitated or made visible by the use of the digital technologies and social media in particular (Cochrane, 2013; Dean, 2010; Dean and Aune, 2015; Long, 2012; Mendes, 2015; Motta et al., 2011; O'Keefe, 2014; Munro, 2013; Scharff, 2010). What appears evident from these studies as well as from the present research is that post-feminist claims articulating feminism as a declining movement do not reflect the grassroots activation and digitally mediated engagement of feminist and women's movements in various corners of the world. In the last decade in fact, we have witnessed women

taking part in protests during the Arab spring (Newsom and Lenge, 2012), the emergence of anti-rape protests in India (Dey, 2018), the creation of the global anti-rape movement Slutwalk (Mendes, 2015) and the organization of Women's Marches following Trump's election in the United States in 2017 (Emejulu, 2018). Moreover, an unexpected wave of feminist mobilization has been recorded in Eastern Europe (Grabowska, 2009; Graff, 2003) with PussyRiot in Russia, FEMEN in Ukraine, the Polish Women Strike (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Salvatori, 2018) and, more recently, the anti-government feminist mobilisations in Belarus. Several contributions highlight that many women continue to engage with feminism, from a younger age and particlarly online (Chidgey, Gunnarsson and Zobl, 2009; Mendes, 2015; Redfern and Aune, 2013). The appearance and wide resonance of the #MeToo campaign since 2017 (Mendes, 2018), with all the controversies that followed (Valenti, 2018), also signal a renewed interest in the wider public for women's issues. While the scholarly attention towards feminist protest and digital feminism is increasing, we still know very little about how digital tools are being used by feminists (Mendes et al., 2019) and what is the role of internet-based communication and new media for feminist theorising and grassroots mobilisation, a gap that the current study contributes to fill.

Moreover, the present study contextualises the resurgence of feminist mobilisation within the re-activation of social movements at the global level that followed the 2008 financial and democratic crisis (Della Porta and Pavan, 2017). Della Porta (2017) highlights how new collective identities emerged in recent years in countries suffering in various ways from the effects of late neoliberalism. Italy, as one of the European countries hit hardest by austerity policies, is a 'privileged' viewpoint to analyse how these recent mobilisations emerge and are able to bridge different frames (Monforte, 2014). The rise of a populist far-right, the presence of neo-fascist and ultra-conservative religious groups within institutions, allows an analysis of how threats to women and LGBTQ+ rights are brought about and resisted, at a time when similar political configurations are increasingly present transnationally.

Over the past decade in fact, Italy saw the emergence of anti-austerity protest also aimed at denouncing a corrupt and inefficient political system. Gender movements have been among the most active actors denouncing the harsh material consequences of neoliberal policies on disadvantaged categories such as women,

LGBTQ+ individuals, migrants and precarious workers (Chironi, 2019). The economic and democratic crisis was accompanied by a shift to the right: first, with a right-wing coalition supporting traditionalist visions of sexuality, gender roles and family, while normalising the sexual objectification of women and the abuse of minors, embodied in the figure of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi; afterwards, with the gradual rise of the populist far-right culminating in the entry of the Salvini-Di Maio government in 2018, expanding xenophobic, anti-migrant rhetoric and policies. Additionally, a constant barrier towards the advancement of women and civil rights in Italy has been the interference of ultraconservative catholic groups in political and legal matters, often with the quiescence of the centre-left Democratic Party. In recent years, the strengthening of anti-genderism[4] and the threat of ultraconservative policies, hindering already achieved sexual and reproductive rights or preventing their expansion, encouraged feminist and queer mobilisation (Bernini, 2017; Datta, 2018; Garbagnoli, 2017; Korolczuk, 2014; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Saraceno, 2010). In this context, different generations of activists with varied backgrounds converged into *NUDM* in 2016, constructing an agenda that attempts to surpass political differences and make sense of the intersection between these various issues (Non Una Di Meno, 2017). The active participation of large numbers of young women is particularly striking given that scholars usually predict youth apathy in times of crisis (Chironi, 2019).

The emergence of *NUDM* in Italy also confirms a tendency in much contemporary Italian feminism to detach from the *feminism of difference,* which had traditionally prevailed in the country, and to favour intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), queer theory (Butler, 1994) and transfeminism (Baldo, 2019; Carrera-Fernandez and De Palma, 2020). Transfeminism proposes that gender is a social construct used to control and restrict human bodies to conform to the heterosexual, patriarchal social order within a capitalist system. In this view, the lives and experiences of transgender people, feminists and queer people are central in the struggle against these interconnected systems of oppression.

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[4] Anti-genderism is an ultraconservative political movement, which is diffusing transnationally, and gaining increasing attention from scholars. Anti-gender activists warn the public against the risks of 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory': a rhetorical device invented by the Vatican to refer to the challenges to traditional gender roles supposedly carried out by feminist and LGBTQ+ lobbies to destroy the traditional family and the Christian idea of society (Salvatori, 2018).

Consequently, the prefix *trans** is fundamental in order to understand this mobilization which is at once transfeminist, transnational and enabled by collective processes of *political translation*. Firstly, because it helps making sense of how this movement's theorisation expands the subject of feminism, surpassing essentialist notions of gender. As López (2020: 2) explains in reference to the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos*, womanhood is understood not as "a biological trait but a site of political articulation: a name given to a multitude of existences that go beyond the traditional construction of the gender called woman to construct themselves as lesbians, travestis, transsexuals, transgender or more broadly trans*". Secondly, as *NUDM* defines itself a movement of *people in transit* between genders and across borders (NUDM, 11/2018), moved by the desire[5] to *transform the existing* (Dillon, 2017).

Drawing from a digitally mediated autoethnography carried out over three years (2016-2019), the thesis therefore asks: how can we conceptualise feminist activism as a process of transit and transformation?

I develop my analysis around these broad questions:

- How did the *NUDM* movement transform during the period analysed?
- How did feminist activists perceive their practices of activism as transformative at the local level?
- How and why did feminist activists perceive their experience of activism within this movement as transformative on the individual level?

The analysis I present in this thesis results from three years of involvement within the *NUDM* movement, with a period of fieldwork that lasted between February 2018 and June 2019. This included 14 in depth interviews with feminists active in different cities (11 with organisers participating to *NUDM* local assemblies in Milan, Padua, La Spezia, Pisa, Bologna, Rome, Rimini, Brindisi, Reggio Calabria; 3 with women belonging to other organisations; 7 of these interviews were conducted face to face, 5 on Skype and 1 through WhatsApp audio recordings), the attendance to 8 assemblies in various cities (Rome, Milan, Bologna, Pisa, La Spezia, Verona, Imperia), 5 demonstrations (Rome, Ventimiglia, Pisa, Reggio Calabria), 1

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[5] A central slogan utilized by *Ni Una Menos* to then be translated and circulated in Italy was: *We are moved by desire!* (*Nos mueve el deseo!*)

flashmob (Bologna) and a variety of events organised at the local, national and international level (i.e. seminars, book launches, exhibitions). Furthermore, what I discuss in this thesis results from the analysis of the main document produced by *NUDM* (the *Feminist plan* mentioned above), observation and involvement in social media discussions, mailing lists and chat groups.

I first examine how *NUDM* developed, expanded and transformed over three years: from its unexpected birth in November 2016 to the end of the period dedicated to my fieldwork in June 2019. I analyse the process of collective deliberation and writing that lead to the elaboration of the *Feminist plan* and the organisation of the *International Women Strike* through the lens of *eventful protest* (Della Porta, 2008). I demonstrate how both these processes had a transformative effect and were fundamental for the emergence and development of a new political subject and for the definition of the movement's organisational form, identity frames and mobilising strategies (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Afterwards, I demonstrate how activists from *NUDM* were able to intensify their action after the entry of a far-right populist government and how, during this period, mobilisation efforts had to concentrate on contrasting the rising neoconservative and xenophobic rhetoric and resisting repressive policies. While scholarship usually predicts less-mobilisation in times of crisis, feminists in this phase continued working and diffusing across the territory. I argue that the possibility to rely on a network of digitally connected assemblies (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) spread through the country and the feeling of being part of a *global feminist tide,* empowered a response.

Secondly, I consider how the movement's theoretical elaboration contributed to inform digital and localised grassroots practices. I examine a variety of unobtrusive, 'unglamorous' (Davis, 2008) actions performed by feminist activists with the aim of achieving transformations at the local level. I point out how these activities usually escape scholarly attention (Mendes et al., 2019) and signal the need to expand the notion of activism.

Thirdly, I consider activists' experiences through the lens of *transit* in an effort to highlight how ideologies travel both through a work of translation, dissemination on social media platforms and through actual experiences of travelling and migration by feminist activists. Centering the analysis on feminists' perceptions

and experiences, the thesis demonstrates the ways in which individual resources and affective connections are mobilized towards organizing activism and how internal tensions arise, particularly online, despite attempts to work beyond differences.

The thesis argues that the feminist movement emerging in Italy, like this transnational mobilisation more broadly, goes beyond reactive trends (Della Porta, 2017: 12). Far from simply reacting to the neoliberal crisis or the anti-gender backlash, this emerging feminist mobilisation proposes alternative ways of 'doing politics' with the aim of producing radical and systemic change (Federici, 2018). Furthermore, this thesis points to some distinctive characteristics of this transnational mobilisation: the convergence of digital feminist activist practices with street demonstrations, direct actions, and deliberative assemblies (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018); the ability to connect contributions from second wave feminism (e.g. Wages for Housework) and strategies from fourth wave feminism (i.e. diversified use of social media and digital technologies); the emergence of a theoretical elaboration bridging feminist, LGBTQ+, workers and antiracist struggles.

This thesis provides theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions to the fields of feminist and social movement studies. A conceptual contribution lies in the interpretation of feminist research and activism as well as of activists' experiences through the lens of *transit*. This notion enables to tell the story of feminism as a continuum rather than a succession of waves in contrast with one another (Harvey, 2020) and to analyse how a social movement transforms over time in a specific socio-political context and media landscape. Building on work on *political translation* (Doerr, 2018), and digital feminist praxis (Mendes et al., 2019), the notion of transit allows to further highlight the ways feminist movements within this transnational mobilisation contaminate each other. Furthermore, refraining from the urge to assess feminist activism and organising in terms of success or failure, the notion of transit emphasizes the political importance of the process itself, in any effort aimed at transforming reality (Deschner, Dorion and Salvatori, 2020). Finally, it allows moving beyond essentialist notions of *womanhood* and identity as a drive to mobilise and encourages focusing instead on the sharing of experiences and emotions such as *affective dissonance* (Hemmings, 2012) and *rage* (Ahmed, 2017).

This study also provides an empirical contribution to knowledge by formulating a novel account of the phenomenon of Italian contemporary feminist activism through the case of *NUDM*. The thesis argues that *NUDM* contributed to shape the feminist discourse in the Italian context and sheds light on the depth of theoretical elaboration within this movement, which does not easily transpire through social media communication. The thesis demonstrates how, despite the adversity of the political context, the feminist movement managed to affirm itself, diffuse over the territory and grow in visibility: an unexpected development contradicting scholars prediction of less mobilisation in times of crisis and repression.

The thesis provides an in-depth understanding of how tensions and conflicts arise within contemporary feminist movements and the role digital technology plays in amplifying these conflicts. It first examines what are the sources of dissonance and disagreement within Italian feminism and demonstrates how these are accentuated in online discussions (Kumar et al., 2018). Moreover, it contributes to knowledge about the phenomenon of trolling (Cole, 2015; Herring et al., 2002) and specifically the targeted attacks to feminist social media pages carried out by Men's Rights Activists, a phenomenon on the rise globally (Siapera, 2019). The study gives an insight into what these attacks look like, how the movement responds and how individual activists perceive them (Lewis, 2017).

Building on work by Mendes et al. (2019: p.177) who challenge the idea that social media does not encourage material transformation, this research demonstrate how there is continuity between online and offline engagements and reveals their transformative potential. For example, the thesis shows how some participants who first encountered feminism online, then sought moments of encounter such as demonstrations and assemblies. Through moments of knowledge exchange such as assemblies, participants with different levels of digital literacy or familiarity with feminism could come together and learn from each other (Gago and Mason-Deese, 2019a). Conversely, in some instances, individual activists or collectives develop practices on the ground, which were then transformed into online content, communicated on social media, ultimately increasing the movement's visibility. The study documents a variety of small-scale unobtrusive actions and practices aimed at achieving tangible transformations at the local level which easily escape media visibility and scholarly attention (Mendes et al., 2019). It demonstrated how these

lead to an expansion of the notion of activism while responding the frequent question received by feminist activists regarding: "what do these contemporary feminist movements actually do?".

This contributes also to make visible the labour of activism (Mendes et al., 2019: p. 179). While activists enthusiastically contribute their resources to the organisation of activism in fact, this engagement often has great costs. The study contributes to fill the gap in literature on the implications of doing activism in terms of time, unpaid and invisible labour and the emotional and mental charge of receiving online abuse. It does so by illustrating how activists balance feminist activism with their daily lives.

Lastly, the study provides a methodological contribution as it makes visible the opportunities and challenges associated with carrying out digitally mediated feminist ethnographic research. Adding to a growing corpus of work on digital media research (Mendes et al., 2019) and approaching it through a feminist lens, the study highlights the value of autoethnographic work despite the criticisms this approach often received (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012; Ellis, 2009; Gago and Mason-Deese, 2019a). It is through a combination of interviews, online observations, participation to assembly and events, informal chats in fact, that I was able to obtain a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the movement's internal dynamics and activists perceptions. And it is only thanks to activists' generosity, sharing their experiences and at times intimate accounts, dedicating time and attention to my project that I fully appreciated what feminist research offers. While this approach, focused on mutualism and consent, is more participatory than other methods of data harnessing, it is very labour intensive. Immersing oneself in the research field, delving into sometimes traumatising topics for a very long time can be triggering and emotionally draining (Mendes et al., 2019; Reyes and Lester, 2019). Having a support network and periodically stepping out of the field are necessary strategies.

The thesis is structured as follows.

In chapter 2, I present an historical overview of Italian feminism in order to identify how contemporary feminist mobilisations draw from previous feminist waves. In particular, I point attention to the legacy of anti-fascism and internationalism and show how ideas and repertoires of action transited between

different countries and how feminists contributed to create alternative and independent media well before digitisation. Moreover, I illustrate the strongly anti-capitalist and workerist legacy of Italian feminism (Kaplan, 2012; Malagreca, 2006). Furthermore, outlining the different priorities of the Catholic and the Socialist strands of feminism helps to understand some of today's sources of dissonance and misunderstanding (Doerr, 2018). I illustrate how *NUDM* emerged and developed, producing an articulation that merges contributions from various genealogies.

In this chapter, I also provide an analysis of the socio-political and media context where activists from *NUDM* operate. This offers the opportunity to analyse the influence of the specific political culture on collective action (Flesher Fominaya, 2016) and reach a more nuanced understanding of the strategies, ideologies, imaginaries and tensions characteristic of the movement analysed. In particular, it allows me to highlight how despite its risks, social media remains necessary for Italian feminists as an alternative platform for discussion on gender related issues, the reframing of media discourse on femicide and gender-based violence and the advertising of events and initiatives.

In chapter 3, I develop the conceptual framework that informed my analysis, connecting insights from feminist theory, feminist media studies and contributions from social movement studies, in order to conceptualise the phenomenon of rising transnational feminist mobilisation in times of crisis. This choice was also determined by the realisation that until fairly recently, the majority of social movement theories did not take gender into account as an important factor for mobilisation (Ferree and McClurg, 2004; Taylor, 1999) while much research on feminist organising and mobilisation, rarely incorporated social movement theory (Motta et al., 2011).

The framework of intersectionality, the view that various sources of oppression and inequality are interconnected and cannot be studied separately (Crenshaw, 1989), guides this research and translates in attention to the ways various systems of oppression such as sexism and racism interlock in the context analysed (Lorde, 1984). I employ intersectionality as an approach to empirical research that incorporates historical and social context into the analysis of how power relations operate (Hankock, 2007a), encourages to validate the knowledge emerging within a social movement and bring attention to activists' lived experience and their attempts to identify unbalanced power dynamics (Liu, 2018). I highlight therefore how the

feminist movement's practices of organisation and mobilisation facilitate the emergence of a specific *feminist epistemology* and the development of forms of *collective intelligence* (Mason-Deese, 2020; Palmeiro, 2020) through which, I developed a fuller understanding of feminist theory and practice, and to which I wish to contribute with this research.

In chapter 4, I illustrate my methodological choices. Due to the exploratory nature of this project, I conducted what I define a *digitally mediated autoethnographic study*. As this project focuses on the continuity between online and offline spaces and on the convergence between different modes of activism and engagement, the methodology chosen brings together different elements of feminist autoethnography (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012) and online ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012).

In chapter 5, while tracing the evolution of the *NUDM* movement from its inception, I demonstrate the role of the *Feminist plan* and the *International Women Strike* in the development of a new political subject and for the definition of the movement's organisational form, identity frames and mobilising strategies (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). I illustrate how this movement was able to sustain itself and grow and how activists made sense of their mobilising efforts during exceptional political times. I argue that the intensification many perceived can be understood as the result of various interlocking factors: a changing political landscape; the availability of digital media facilitating organising and mobilising efforts; the possibility to rely on a network of digitally connected feminist assemblies; processes of *political translation* and contamination between movements at the transnational level; the emergence of frames regarding the movement's identity as a *global feminist tide* and the only movement capable of contrasting a regressive global backlash and building an alternative to the neoliberal system.

In chapter 6, I examine how the movement diffused throughout the Italian territory, forming a network of digitally connected assemblies and focus on the extent to which feminist activists perceive their practices as effective to contribute to transformations on their local territories. I demonstrate how, combining a transnational framing with the attention for the local dimension and valorizing the legacy of previous feminist waves, contemporary activists are carrying out a variety of actions aimed at transformations on the territory. I argue that documenting these unobtrusive, 'unglamorous' (Davis, 2008) actions, happening behind the scenes and

often remaining unexplored (Mendes et al., 2019), leads to expand the notion of activism.

In chapter 7, I further my analysis by focusing on the extent to which feminists perceive their activism as transformative and I conceptualize connections between personal and collective processes of transformation. Centering the analysis on activists' own interpretations of their engagements, I rely on their voices to narrate how many experienced the birth of this movement as a 'breakthrough'. I then offer a glimpse of the heterogeneity of this movement through the varied stories narrated to me by activists, who shared their 'processes of becoming' feminists or joining this movement. Furthermore, I explore how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized to contribute to the collective process of organizing feminist activism and what are the challenges that activists experience while doing their work (e.g. fatigue, misunderstandings, online abuse).

I conclude the thesis, highlighting the space for future research on discussions that opened up with feminists and that concern feminist researchers and activists around the world, particularly in times of crisis: *how to make feminist activism compatible with life* and create more sustainable digital practices as well as more hospitable, horizontal and safe spaces of encounter.

Chapter 2 - Setting the scene: the research context

In this chapter I provide a comprehensive overview to set the scene in which contemporary Italian feminists operate. I first present an historical overview of Italian feminism, reflecting on the relevance of the 'waves' metaphor in the Italian context. This serves to underline how feminism, intended not only as a set of ideas but a commitment to action, transformation and change, is shaped by historical and geographical location (Harvey, 2020: 11). Italian feminism has been defined as the longest revolution in post-war Italy and an example of an effective grassroots movement, able to challenge powerful political elites in order to obtain legislative reforms and shift cultural perceptions (Kaplan, 2012: 230). My aim in this chapter therefore is not only to contribute to reconstruct the still very fragmented and too little known history of feminist struggles in Italy but also to identify which lessons can be useful for contemporary feminist activists.

As introduced, this study focuses on the contemporary Italian feminist movement *NUDM*, forming part of a recent global feminist mobilisation. In this chapter, I wish to unpack the contextual variability of Italian feminism and identify ways in which the legacy of women's transnational engagements in revolutionary movements reflects on today's mobilisations (Bonfiglioli, 2011). Firstly, I point the attention to the important antifascist roots and internationalist outlook of post-war feminism and its critique towards global economic and political power structures (De Haan, 2010; Salvatori, 2018). This reveals feminists' ability to construct transnational alliances despite hardships, and shows how ideas and repertoires of action transited between feminist circles through alternative and independent media outlets, before the advent of digital communication. Secondly, I illustrate the strongly anti-capitalist and workerist legacy of Italian feminism. This is crucial to understand attempts by contemporary feminists to construct an intersectional feminist agenda and affirm a *feminism of the 99%* (Arruzza et al., 2019) in contrast with neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018). Understanding how Italian feminism developed also helps capture some of the sources of conflict, dissonance and misunderstandings resonating within activism today. Finally, I illustrate how *NUDM* emerged and developed, producing an articulation that merges contributions from various genealogies. I illustrate the chronology of the movement's development, including the process of collective writing that lead to the publication of the *Feminist Plan To*

Combat Male Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence and the participation to the *International Women Strike*, two central moments in order to understand the movement's elaboration, strategies of activism and agenda, which will then be analysed in depth in the analysis chapters.

Subsequently, I provide an overview of the Italian socio-political and media context. This sheds light on the influence of the specific political culture on collective action (Flesher Fominaya, 2016) and ultimately helps reaching a nuanced understanding of how and why the *NUDM* movement developed its repertoires of action, ideologies and imaginaries. The case of contemporary Italian feminism in fact is significant not only due to the characteristics that the *NUDM* movement displays but due to the specificities of the social, political and media context in which it developed: the lack of diffused literacy of gender related issues[6], the presence of a highly politicised mainstream media (Ginsborg, 2013), often obscuring or misrepresenting feminist mobilisation and debate, thus contributing to make social media central for feminists.

I then consider specifically how recent political developments had an impact on feminist and queer activism in Italy: the rise of a populist far-right, the augmented visibility of neofascist formations, the strengthening of ultra conservative anti-abortion lobby groups and the diffusion of anti-genderism, an ultraconservative political movement, warning the public against the risks of 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory': a rhetorical device invented by the Vatican (Garbagnoli, 2016) to refer to challenges to traditional gender roles. Anti-gender activists seek to contrast any attempt supposedly carried out by feminists and 'gay lobbies' to destroy the traditional family and the Christian idea of society (Bernini, 2017; Datta, 2018; Korolczuk, 2014; Saraceno, 2010). The protection of the traditional Christian family proposed by anti-gender advocates is in continuity with far-right ideologies centred on the preservation of an Italian people (Salvatori, 2018). I draw on Farris (2017) concept of *femonationalism* to illustrate how an alliance between right-wing

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[6] The first detailed research on the status of gender studies in Italy, produced by the *Associazione Italiana Sociologia* in May 2013 highlighted the very limited spread of gender studies throughout the country and a status of 'illiteracy' for what concerns gender related issues: the inability of the university system to offer a gender sensitive culture to new generations and to form professional figures in various fields who are familiar with issues related to gender.

nationalist, anti-gender pressure groups, neoliberal parties, policy makers and some feminist voices can be observed in countries such as Italy in recent years. This will serve to better understand how the movement at the centre of this study develops its identity as main counter-power towards these forces.

2.1 Italian feminism: an historical overview

Relevance of the 'waves' metaphor in the Italian context

The history of feminism in the West is usually illustrated through the metaphor of waves. A First Wave between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, mainly concerned with women's suffrage and workers' rights, is followed by a Second Wave during the 1960s and 70s where feminist theorisation and activism expands, arguing that sexism and misogyny affect every aspect of women's existence and that change must start from the personal sphere. It is in this period that black feminists start to point out how 'women' are not a homogeneous group as they experience oppression in various ways and various degrees, depending on their 'race' and class (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2003). A Third Wave, starting in the 90s, is strongly influenced by the academic exploration of queer theory and the understanding of gender as fluid and non-binary (Butler, 1994). The main critique to this wave paradigm is that it tends to focus on the individual and can lead to the depoliticisation of feminism (Harvey, 2020). Some argue that we have recently entered a Fourth Wave (Cochrane, 2013; Munro, 2013), characterised by the use of the Internet for feminist activism, drawing attention to intersectionality and creating of a call-out culture that serves to challenge sexism and misogyny online (Salvatori, 2018).

While the wave metaphor can be useful in order to synthetically analyse certain differences within feminist discourse and to indicate the central role of media for feminism (Harvey, 2020), waves cannot be seen as fixed categories. Furthermore, the consideration that feminist movements developed at different times outside the UK and US, calls into question the applicability of the notion of waves in other contexts. When analysing Polish feminism for example, Graff (2003, 2007) talks about its paradoxical chronology that does not fit the wave metaphor and calls for a new analytical framework "tuned into local specificity and political context, as well

as the dynamics of cultural borrowing" (Graff, 2003). Similarly, in an effort to map contemporary feminist activism, Dean and Aune (2015) highlight how feminism followed different paths in post-fascist contexts such as Italy.

Broadly, the history of Italian feminism can be divided in three phases, partly mirroring the feminist waves in the UK and US context: a first wave at the beginning of the 20th century focused on suffrage and women's rights; a second wave starting in the 1960s and advancing demands on sexual freedom, reproductive rights and reforms of family law; a third wave starting in the 90s and concerned with the obtainment of equal rights and equal pay but also engaging in a critique towards second wave feminism. The focus of third wave feminist critiques is on the necessity to change language and the media portrayal of women, to celebrate diverse identities and abandon the "victim feminism" ideology. Magaraggia (2015) claims that Italian feminism has entered a fourth wave, characterised by the presence of social media changing the way people interact, leading to #activism and the possibility to translate individual practices into global actions. The fourth wave carries forward themes already developed in the third wave such as the interest for intersectionality, a postcolonial and queer approach and a reflection on the transformation of labour, however, it also engages in themes such as masculinity, sex workers rights, the abandonment of victim feminism and trans rights.

Telling the story of feminism through the notion of waves however, encourages us to build narratives that look predominantly at moments when the feminist movement was particularly visible or successful in a certain context and to pay less attention to phases in which women's engagement continued in more submerged ways. It can also tend to reproduce hierarchical ways of thinking, establishing the main protagonists in a certain generation of feminists, rather than nurturing the view of knowledge as a collective endeavor. Moreover, waves and their thinkers and questions are often understood as in conflict: with younger generations of feminists rejecting the achievements of previous waves (Harvey, 2020). Rather than trying to fit the history of the women's movement developing in Italy into the wave paradigm therefore, in the following section, I present the history of women's struggles as one of *transit*, where various phases overlap and where perspectives and approaches contaminate each other, at times through generative conflict and

divergence and at times through agreement and the sharing of content, experiences and practices. I will draw the attention to the contextual specificities of Italian feminism, the heterogeneity of voices it contains, the specific structures of inequality and oppression that feminists have resisted (i.e. fascism, Catholic Church, Mafia system) while paying particular attention to the ways in which the movement has been influenced by how feminist thought travelled across Europe (Cerwonka, 2008) and beyond. This will help better understand how the movement at the centre of this study developed.

Women in transit through history

Feminists engagement in labour movements

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Italian feminism was a suffragette and rights movement, which created women's *leghe*[7], female workers organisations aimed at demanding improvements in working conditions and wages[8]. The feminist journal dedicated to working women's issues was founded in this period: *The Defence of the Working Woman (La Difesa della lavoratrice)*, founded in 1912 in Milan (Kaplan, 2012: 233). Despite Italy's internal fractures and lack of cohesion between a rural South and an industrialised North and the high level of illiteracy, workers responded to labour movements developing across Europe. Women had a central role in the development of the workers movement and of a leftist workers culture led by Antonio Gramsci (Slaughter, 2011). Italian feminism in this phase was strongly influenced by socialist theorists and activists (E.g. Aleksandra Kollontai and Klara Zetkin), arguing that women's subordination would have only ended in a socialist society. A fundamental figure in Italian feminism at that time was Anna Kuliscioff, who contributed to the formation of the Socialist Party in Italy and made sure it included the legal and political equality between men and women in its program (Bassnett, 1986; Kaplan, 2012).

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[7] In this period Italy saw the formation of the first *League for the Promotion of Women's Interests*, advocating also the right to divorce, the *National Women's Union* (1897), the *National Women Association* (1899), the *National Council of Italian Women* (1903) and the *National Committee for Women's Suffrage* (1910).
[8] A particularly dramatic example of was the struggle carried out by rice pickers in the Emilia region, living in desperate conditions, as portrayed in the neorealist movie *Bitter Rice,* and often losing their lives when confronting the police.

The years of fascism (1922 to 1946) were central for the development of the Italian women's movement and are helpful to understand the resurgence of an alliance between far-right and ultraconservative formations throughout Europe. During fascism in fact "the female body was imagined as the main instrument to achieve the Fascist dream of a new Italian nation" (Malagreca, 2006: 75) and the role of the woman was that of the wife and mother. With Mussolini, the Catholic Church was given the power to decide on issues such as divorce, marriage, abortion and reproductive rights. With the Lateran Concordat in 1929 the Vatican was reinstated as a political power, the indissolubility of the family and Pope Leo XIII dictum stating that "a man rules a woman as Christ rules his church" was reaffirmed (Kaplan, 2012: 234). Mussolini promoted the ideal of the Italian family, made up of two parents and twelve children and declared any form of birth control illegal and unpatriotic. Abortion was severely punished unless a husband or male relative insisted on its necessity. The new penal code introduced with fascism (Codice Rocco, still regulating many aspects of criminal law) stipulated women's inferiority: adultery was punishable only if carried out by women; physical chastisement of women and children was encouraged as behavioural 'correction'; women had to seek their husbands' permission before leaving their homes and were not allowed to refuse intercourse with their husbands; the rape of female prisoners by officers was classified as misconduct and treated as an administrative issue (Kaplan, 2012: 235). Mussolini's policies on work, forbidding for example the promotion of women from teachers to principals, contributed to discourage women from working. Despite these positions, many considered Mussolini a liberating force.

In this period, the main counter powers to combat fascism were the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and Communist Party (PCI). These were also the only spheres where women's issues started to be discussed, despite the inherently patriarchal structures of the parties. This was mainly due to the presence of promoters of equality like Camilla Ravera (editor of the paper *Tribuna delle donne*) and Antonio Gramsci (editor of *L'Ordine nuovo*) (Kaplan, 2012). In response to Mussolini's dictatorship and the advancement of laws against women's rights however, an important underground resistance movement (*partigiani*) was formed. The underground activities coordinated by the *partigiani* managed to limit the damage

caused by fascist racial laws, with Italian families helping Jews escaping and hiding them in their houses and cellars (Zuccotti, 1987). Women's role in the resistance was vital. While there is disagreement on the numbers of partisans, it is estimated that there were about 200 000 partisans throughout Italy, 70 000 of which were women. Women often worked as *staffetta*, messengers in charge of facilitating communication between different brigades or as nurses taking care of the fighters. Apart from supporting partisans by providing them with food and temporary shelter, as detailed in many narrative accounts by war survivors, women organised antifascist war groups (e.g. *Gruppi Femminili di Assistenza ai Combattenti della Liberazione* and *Gruppi Femminili Antifascisti, Gruppi di Difesa della Donna)*. Those women who had replaced men as factory workers during the war, also organised protests and strikes against Nazi-Fascism and in 1943 their protests became more visible as they started demanding to end deportations and Nazi Fascist massacres. Sharing the goal of liberation from fascism united women of various social classes, religious or political beliefs. Antifascism remained a shared value within progressive Italian activism for long after the war and this still resonates within contemporary feminist mobilisations.

The post-war years and feminist internationalism

After the war, in 1946, a committee that for the first time included 21 women from various parties introduced a new constitution. The new Constitution included for the first time the notion of equality between genders and the right to vote for women. In this phase, the Communist Party, wishing to reduce the risk for suffrage to lead to the resurgence of fascism, created the *Unione Donne Italiane* (UDI, Italian Women's Union). This was the Italian branch of the *Women's International Democratic Federation* (WIDF), which brought together antifascist, communist and socialist women's organizations all over the world (De Haan, 2010) and is one of the founders of the *NUDM* movement.

Feeling close to Russian women's engagement since the beginning of the Russian revolution on March 8, 1917, Italian women started celebrating *International Women's Day*. After the war, UDI kept attracting large numbers of women and organising debates and events through its popular magazine *Noi Donne (We Women)*. It is through this magazine that, during the 1950s, the ideal of the 'emancipated Soviet woman' started to be proposed as an important role model for

Italian women. In 1957 *Noi Donne*, for example covered the story of the Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova who soon became an important symbol of emancipation and progress as opposed to Italian backwardness (Bonfiglioli 2011).

Many women however, who were supporting the more traditional beliefs carried forward by the Christian Democrats (DC) founded the *Centro Italiano Femminile* (CIF), a conservative catholic women's centre focusing the attention on women's place in family life. As I will illustrate in the analysis, the split between socialist and catholic influences still resonates within contemporary Italian feminism.

In a period of capitalist expansion, during the 50s and 60s, women's participation and interest for the activities carried out by UDI started to decline. Unexpectedly high levels of unemployment followed the 'economic miracle' and by the end of the 60s a variety of movements including squatters, students and workers, started forming to demand better housing, services, schools and working conditions (Kaplan, 2012: 241). In connection with protests in other countries, and particularly with the May movement revolt in France in 1968, Italy saw the rise of militant working class and student movements advancing new social demands. Feminists were heavily involved in these movements however, they soon learned that their participation in class based workers or students' protests often meant that there was not a lot of space left to debate gender related issues.

The risen visibility and success of Italian feminism in its second wave

It is in the 60s and 70s that the Italian feminist movement reached its higher visibility. Feminists adopted various strategies in order to make their views and initiatives known: opened publishing houses, started magazines, pamphlets, journals, television and radio programmes and created cultural associations, art exhibitions, bookshops and theatre collectives (Hajek, 2016; 2018). New feminist collectives and consciousness-raising groups were born and the most influential theorisations, often resonating with international debates, started to be composed. In 1970, a *Manifesto of Female Revolt* appeared on the walls of Rome to then be published in a text that became central for Italian feminism: *We spit on Hegel* (*Sputiamo su Hegel)*. This manifesto contained many of the central issues that still animate Italian feminism: the affirmation of sexual difference, the refusal of the role of women as complementary, a critical approach to marriage, the importance for women to gain recognition for domestic work, the centrality of the body and independent sexuality. This group

affirmed separatism, the practice of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising) and of writing as a form of self-awareness (Lonzi, 1974).

Additionally, in this period, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and others formed the *International Feminist Collective* which then gave rise to the *International Wages for Housework Campaign,* raising awareness on the necessity for women to demand compensation for housework, caring and affective work and importantly, highlighting how in order to thrive, capitalist economies rely on the exploitation of free labour provided by women (Federici, 1975; 2018).

Like the recent mobilisation analysed in this thesis, the Italian feminist movement in the 60s and 70s was very heterogeneous and made up of different voices with some of the women being also active in unions and parties. Various groups joined to form the *Movimento di Liberazione della Donna* (Women's Liberation Movement) while simultaneously other groups emerged: *DEMAU – demistificazione autoritaria* (demystification of authority) originating from worker's groups, *Cerchio spezzato* (Broken circle) created during the students uprising and *Collettivo delle Compagne* (Comrades Collective) formed mainly by members of another new left organisation (*Comunicazioni Rivoluzionarie*). The main groups were formed in major Italian cities like Turin, Rome and Milan, inspired by workers tradition but also influenced by political groups forming in other countries, such as the Black Panthers in the US (Kaplan, 2012; Malagreca, 2006). As I will demonstrate, in these cities *NUDM* could rely on a rich history of feminist mobilisation to develop its articulation and practices.

Through strikes and demonstrations, often violently suppressed, feminists obtained major reforms and attracted the population's attention to gender-related issues. Women mobilised to obtain civil divorce (which became legal in 1974) and reform the abortion law. Antiabortion fascist laws were still in place at the beginning of the 70s and the pope vocally opposed any reform. After hundreds of women were charged for the crime of abortion and clinics were violently shut down, women's outrage and their level of participation grew. Large demonstrations led to the formation of feminist collectives dealing exclusively with the abortion issue. Moreover, concerned to lose the catholic voters, progressive parties were not convincingly supportive of feminist efforts on abortion rights. In 1978, despite the opposition of the Church and of a conservative right to life movement (*Movimento*

per la Vita), the abortion bill passed, marking a major success for the feminist movement and representing a real cultural revolution (Kaplan, 2012: 247).

The Years of Lead and violent attempts to silence feminists

Between 1969 and 1988 Italy lived a very violent phase usually depicted as *Anni di Piombo* (Years of Lead), characterised by high levels of violence, bombings and terrorist activities carried out by neo fascist forces and subversive extra parliamentary left activists. This climate of tension caused many losses in the population and saw high involvement in mass demonstrations and tensions between government and activists. Female terrorists were trained to use shotguns and revolvers to carry out revolutionary struggles, with the aim of maiming their political enemies (Kaplan, 2012: 252). Feminist activists, belonging to extra-parliamentary armed groups like the *Brigate Rosse* or the *Unità Comuniste Combattenti* were arrested. Others were accused of writing subversive material, like Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, one of the theorists who introduced the idea of retribution for caring and domestic work (Dalla Costa, 1972).

Apart from violence carried out by terrorist organisations, feminists were often victims of violence from antifeminist groups or individuals. Some scholars argue that in no other country this wave was characterised by so much violence (Kaplan, 2012: 249). Men shouting verbal abuse, throwing objects and being physically violent towards participants often interrupted conferences and meetings. Peaceful sit-ins, often involving children, were attacked by the police or disrupted by groups of anti-feminists. This violence culminated in the death of the 19-year-old Giorgiana Masi in 1977, killed by the police during a demonstration. The following year several women were beaten, stoned and arrested in Sicily by male bystanders and policemen during a pro-abortion march and in 1980 neo fascist gunmen attacked and wounded several women (Bassnet, 1986: 97).

The attitude towards women was also reflected in the high number of rapes including cases of 'political rapes' used as acts of revenge towards feminists. One famous case is the kidnapping and rape of actress Franca Rame, known for her political engagement, by a group of neofascists. Franca Rame subsequently had the courage to narrate the events through a play (*The rape - Lo Stupro*) in an effort to raise consciousness on the issue. Her story resonated strongly, also within current

mobilisations, with activists from *NUDM* symbolically renaming the main theatre in Bologna in her honour, during an experience of feminist toponymy in 2019.

Feminist action within and outside institutions

As women had not been allowed to enter the legal professions until the 60s, for long Italian women could only use public protests to demand law reforms and cultural change, particularly on the issue of rape. Between the 70s and 80s some cases of rape started to be publicly debated and showed the inability of institutions to protect women. The police could refuse to accept a report from a victim of rape and the victim was often discredited or blamed for the incident. It was only in 1996 that a law against sexual violence was approved affirming for the first time that sexual violence was a crime against the person and no longer a 'crime against morality' (Kaplan, 2012: 251). In a context where social customs dictated that women should not go out or travel alone but should always be accompanied, particularly at night, it was, and often still is, accepted that rape or harassment could happen to women who did not conform to this rule. Feminist protest contributed to raise this issue through actions like *Riprendiamoci la notte* (Reclaim the night).

Towards the end of the 70s the first centre against violence was opened and feminists started organising conventions to discuss these issues. In this context, Italian feminists started opening or getting engaged in a variety of supportive social spaces for women, health centres, refuges for victims of domestic and gender-based violence, rape crisis centres, centres providing advice on contraception, abortion and reproductive matters (*consultori*). Moreover, particularly since the 70s, they created a variety of radio stations, magazines, cultural and political collectives, bookshops (*Le Librerie*) and publishing houses, forming a network of debate where national and international concerns could be discussed (Hajek, 2016). These efforts are an important legacy that contemporary feminists attempt to protect and valorise, despite for example the increasing threats of funding cuts and evictions (as I will explain in chapter 6).

Apart from bringing the issue of inequality and gender violence to the table in a traditionally sexist culture and providing a virtuous example of grassroots activism over the years, feminist protest and engagement in institutions also contributed to push for a range of significant legislative changes concerning various issues: gender imbalance in the punishment of adultery is declared unconstitutional (1968); divorce

becomes legal (1970); a series of reforms to family law start recognising the equality of men and women in marriage and include the institution of family counselling structures (1975); a law for the equality of treatment in the workplace, formally eradicating discriminatory policies on pensions and family allowances is introduced (1977); a law on maternity protection and abortion is approved (1978); the motive of 'honour' is no longer to be considered as extenuating circumstance for homicide (1981); the *Equal Opportunities Commission*[9] is created (1984); a law favouring 'positive actions for the realisation of equal opportunities in the workplace' is approved (1991); a law against sexual violence is approved and for the first time sexual violence is defined as a crime against the person and no longer as a crime against morality (1996) (Kaplan, 2012).

Berlusconism and the birth of a new feminist movement

If during the 80s and 90s Italian feminism concentrated its influence into the institutional sphere (i.e. university, research, policymaking and politics), it became visible as a mass movement again during the administration of former Prime Minister and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. Owning or controlling all major media channels, newspapers and publishers, Berlusconi managed to administer his vision and establish an extremely long lasting political influence (Peroni, 2018). Nearly twenty years of 'Berlusconism' (he was in office with some interruptions from 1994 to 2013) resulted in a further normalisation of sexism in Italian macho culture while contributing to the formation of important counter-movements highlighting his inadequacy to lead the country (Ginsborg, 2013).

The extremely limited space dedicated to gender issues in traditional media contributed to the shift of the feminist debate online. Facebook, the preferred social media platform in Italy, provided a space to start discussions and develop alternative narratives. For example, through the short documentary *Il Corpo delle Donne*, Zanardo (2011) analysed the pervasiveness of sexism in commercial Italian television.

In 2011, following one of Berlusconi's sex scandals, this time involving a minor, one million women and men took to the streets in demonstrations organised

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[9] *Commissione Nazionale per la Realizzazione della Parità e delle Pari Opportunità fra uomo e donna presso la Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.*

online by the newly formed feminist movement *Se non ora quando?*[10] (*If not now when?*) (Ardizzoni, 2016). The movement was founded by fifty Italian women with different professional backgrounds (journalists, writers, filmmakers, economists, politicians) wishing to denounce the "repeated, indecent, flamboyant representation of women as a naked object of sexual trade, produced by newspapers, television, and advertising" (Se Non Ora Quando? 2014 in Ardizzoni, 2016). The movement was very heterogeneous and brought together individuals with various backgrounds, levels of experience in activism or institutional politics as well as those who had never joined a party or movement before. SNOQ then developed as a national and local civic movement and divided into local subcommittees. In early 2014 however, the heterogeneity of the movement contributed to its fragmentation into multiple sub-groups. Furthermore, the presence of female politicians in the founding committee soon started to contribute to disengagement as some feminists lamented the lack of horizontality and independence from political parties.

It is in such context that many feminists were drawn to form the grassroots feminist movement at the centre of this study: *NUDM,* which adopts a critical and conflictual relation with the State (Chironi, 2019) and with institutions.

2.2 Media and socio-political landscape

In order to reach a better understanding of the context in which the *NUDM* movement developed and why a convergence between online and offline strategies of activism was sought, it is crucial to understand the main characteristics of the Italian media and socio-political landscape.

In *Comparing Media Systems,* Hallin and Mancini (2004) offer an analysis of 18 countries from North America and Western Europe, including Italy in the Polarized Pluralistic model. This is characterised by a weak development of the media market, close relationships between media and political parties, a journalism influenced by political, economic and religious interests and an interventionist role of the State when it comes to media regulation.

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[10] The name of the movement is inspired by the title of a novel by Primo Levi, about the Jewish, Russian and Polish partisans who fought against Nazi Germany.

Conflicts of interests and delayed digitization

One of the main characteristics of the Italian media system is the centrality of television use (Cornia, 2016). According to a recent Censis report (Censis, 2020) television is still the most used medium and the main source of information for Italian citizens, followed by Facebook. If the Italian television was initially monopoly of RAI, the 1970s saw the gradual formation of smaller local networks[11]. It is in the early 1980s that the TV market started configuring as a duopoly, with RAI, the public broadcaster and Fininvest, the commercial TV controlled by Berlusconi. The formation of this duopoly can be reconducted to a period of uncontrolled liberalization of the Italian broadcasting sector. While in countries like Britain, France and Germany, policies were put in place to prevent market concentration, in Italy, the entry of private networks occurred within a context of "normative anarchy" (Mazzoleni, 2000: p. 160–162).

Since 1994, when Berlusconi entered the political sphere, the impact of the RAI-Mediaset (previously Fininvest) duopoly became a major democratic concern (Ragnedda, 2014). The main concerns were related to free speech and censorship as well as the influence of politics over TV news coverage and the prevalence of economic interests over political choices in media policies (Cornia, 2015; Hibberd, 2008). In a paradoxical scenario in fact, the commercial television was regulated by legislation drafted by the political majority supporting Berlusconi (Balbi and Prario, 2010). Additionally, the debate over media ownership became a subject of political confrontation instead of a discussion on technical aspects. Some scholars argue that the political instability and the "merry go round nature of governments with divergent views of modernization" (Sorrentino et al., 2016) have delayed the digitisation process, as conflicting mandates and contrasting agendas impacted policies. In 2012, following a programme of gradual 'digitisation' at the regional level, Italy completed the switch to digital television however, the lack of diversity

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[11] While these networks were legally only allowed to transmit at the regional level, Berlusconi, who at the time owned three local networks, started transmitting his programs over the national territory. After a temporary interruption, a decree to allow Berlusconi's channels to transmit on the national level (decreto Berlusconi) was passed by the Parliament with the support of the then prime minister Bettino Craxi (Mazzoleni, 2000).

of content persists (Mazzoleni, 2011) and the problem of ownership has not been solved (Hibberd, 2008)[12].

From newspapers to online newsrooms

Newspapers always had a crucial role in the Italian public sphere and in the formation of public opinion. The readership and sales of traditional newspapers however, dropped dramatically in recent years due to digitalisation and to the economic crisis (Cornia, 2016). If newspapers were affected more dramatically by the crisis compared to broadcasters, they were also faster in reacting[13]. Due to their limited profitability, Italian newspapers have often relied on external funding and public subsidies or support from private businesses. This lack of independency has made them vulnerable to instrumentalisation by political and economic powers (Mazzoleni, 2011). The formation of online newsrooms, blogs and forums, and the use of social networks often includes attempt to produce independent accounts however, leaving less space for verification, can have implications in terms of news quality.

Slow Internet take up and digital divide

If newspaper readership is low, Internet penetration is growing, even though it is still far below average in the EU. Cornia (2016) argues that Internet take up might have been slower than that of the majority of EU countries due to the fact that the Internet was perceived as a competitor of Berlusconi's television business. Furthermore, as the press was not benefiting from digitisation, there was no interest in supporting the construction of a well-functioning broadband infrastructure.

Regular Internet users are now more than half of the population however, there is a distinctive access divide between the North being more connected than the South and there is still a gap between urban and rural areas (OECD, 2017). According to a recent research on digital divide (Sabbadini, 2015) only 63% of the population uses the Internet, compared to 75% in Europe. While younger women are

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[12] In 2006 the European Commission opened an infringement procedure against Italy and in 2008 the European Court of Justice confirmed that the norms regulating the digitisation of broadcasting were preventing the entry of new operators (Mazzoleni et al., 2011). A national plan to allocate digital frequency was then set out and the infringement procedure suspended. The responsibility to allocate digital frequencies was in the hands of the Ministry of Communication of the Berlusconi government.

[13] Major newspapers such as *Il Corriere della Sera, La Stampa* and *La Repubblica*, invested considerably in the development of news websites. Smaller independent newspapers like *Il Manifesto* suffered worst consequences even though they also tried to adapt to the changes in the sector.

digitally literate, there is a strong gender divide affecting women older than 55 years old. Age is the most important variable affecting digital divide, followed by educational qualification, occupational status, professional position, territorial division, economic resources and sex. Very few users have high IT skills (despite educational qualification). Reflecting global tendencies, Facebook is still the most popular social network with slightly more male than female users (Statista, 2017). In Italy Facebook active users are more than 30 million (Infodata, 2017) and there is a constant growth in the consumption of social media content, particularly through smartphones. 52% of the population access social network, compared to a global average of 37%. 74% of Facebook users in Italy, access it every day (against a global average of 55%) (Blogmeter, 2017).

Social media and political communication

As previously introduced, two decades of Berlusconism and political control of the media, gave rise to an impressive strengthening of civil society participation and street protests (Ginsborg, 2013) however, these were often overlooked or misrepresented by traditional media. This is true for the feminist mobilisation analysed, which, especially during the first two years of activity and despite the significance of its mass demonstrations, attracted very little attention. The online space therefore gradually became the alternative sphere where to debate topics and positions which were voluntarily suppressed or not represented by traditional media (Bennato, 2011). For Italian feminists, the diffusion of social media and particularly Facebook provided a space where to challenge the hegemonic gender discourse and develop alternative narratives.

The relation between politics and media in Italy has often been interpreted as an anomaly produced by specific characteristics of the Italian democracy (D'Arma, 2015). However, examples such as the election of the media mogul Donald Trump in the USA in 2017 point to a transformation in the relationship between media and the political sphere (Papalia, 2017) at the global level, to the role of women's and feminist movements as main counter-power (Kauffman, 2017; Levy, 2016) facilitated by the use of digital technologies, making a more detailed exploration of these mobilisations urgent.

Furthermore, the Italian case can be useful in order to understand the relation between the use of social media for political communication and the diffusion of

populist and anti-establishment movements subject of increasing scholarly attention (Bracciale and Martella, 2017). In Italy in fact, the strategic use of the web facilitated the entry of new actors in the political sphere. The *Five Star Movement*, an anti-establishment movement created by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, was formed through a blog in 2005 with the aim of producing counter-information. The blog served as a catalyst for the organisation of street protests and events and for the formation of a movement, which then became a highly popular party. When the movement entered its first election in 2013 winning more than 8 million votes, it recorded an unprecedented electoral performance for a new political actor in the context of Western Europe (Pasquino, 2014).

In a recent study on the state of media and politics in Italy since the 90s, D'Arma (2015) helpfully highlights some similarities between the political context that led to the rise of Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia* in 1994 and to the exceptional success of Beppe Grillo's *Five Star Movement* (*Movimento Cinque Stelle)* in 2013. Both were preceded by major political scandals and periods of economic crisis, which contributed to a widespread sentiment of detachment from established politics and a desire for change. Like Berlusconi was able to fill the void left by the main established parties following the *Tangentopoli* scandal in the 90s (a major political scandal revealing a system of corruption implicating all the governing parties at the time), Grillo was able to propose a democratic alternative to the authoritarian turn of Berlusconism and the protracted inefficiency of the left. Both political subjects also refused to be called parties and they both relied on one specific media: while Berlusconi was confident of the power of his own televisions, Grillo highlighted the democratising potential of the internet and utilised it to reach and organise a wide audience. If, at its birth, many welcomes the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* as an effort to favour democracy from the bottom up (*democrazia dal basso*) and eliminate the dysfunctional characteristics of the Italian system, a dangerous tendency towards populism and authoritarianism around the figure of Beppe Grillo soon became clear. The use of social media as a tool for political communication with an anti-establishment twist was also one of the main strategies used by Matteo Renzi, the Secretary of the centre-left party who was appointed to form a new government in 2014. Renzi was presented as *il rottamatore* (literally 'the scrapper') due to his stated aim of renovating the political establishment and opening more opportunities for young people.

It is in this context, with a widespread disillusion towards a corrupt and inefficient political system and after a long-term period of economic crisis exacerbated by austerity policies, that one can attempt to understand the risen popularity of a populist right-wing discourse, diffused nationalism and anti-migrant sentiment and the recurrence to traditional values characterising ultraconservative rhetoric. In the following section I will analyse these developments in more detail.

2.3 Defining 'exceptional' times: the rise of far-right populism and anti-genderism in Italy

Since the financial and democratic crisis in 2008, gender movements have been among the most active in Italy however, this type of mobilisation has yet to be fully investigated (Chironi, 2019). Neoliberal austerity policies resulting from the crisis, hit disproportionally women and other disadvantaged social categories, brought to the surface structural inequalities and highlighted the consequences of years of mismanagement. The diffused mistrust in traditional parties and institutions that had contributed to the success of the populist Five Star Movement (Della Porta, 2014, 2018) then lead to a shift to the right. This culminated with the entry of a far-right populist government: a coalition between the populist Five Star Movement and the right-wing secessionist party Northern League (June 2018 - September 2019). In this phase, Italy saw an increased visibility and legitimisation of nationalistic and xenophobic discourse, further vehiculated by the Interior Minister Matteo Salvini both through traditional and social media (i.e. Twitter and Facebook). This period also saw the further strengthening of xenophobic and neo-fascist parties (*Fratelli d'Italia* and *Forza Nuova*) and movements (*Casa Pound*) throughout the territory (Padovani, 2008), the strengthening of closed border policies accompanied by a harsh anti-migrant rhetoric and rise in incidents aimed at the migrant population.

This political shift to the right contributed to a further diffusion of anti-gender rhetoric in Italy and the strengthening of ultra conservative anti-abortion lobby groups, already extremely influential in Italy. As introduced, anti-genderism opposes 'gender ideology' or 'gender theory', namely any challenges to traditional gender roles proposed by feminist and LGBTQ+ people (Bernini, 2017; Garbagnoli, 2016;

Saraceno, 2010). The main issues at stake are the introduction of anti-discriminatory sex education in schools, the promotion of gender equality and the defense of sexual minorities, particularly if framed as the individual's right to define their own sexuality (Bernini, 2017; Garbagnoli, 2016; Grabowska, 2014).

Far from being an issue limited to the Italian context however, mobilisations against 'gender ideology' are a transnational trend on the rise (Korolczuk, 2014). Anti-gender organisations assume different forms such as local, national or international NGOs lobbying the EU or UN, parliamentary committees, grassroots groups, online groups and platforms (Datta, 2018; Korolczuk, 2014). These groups have appeared in different countries simultaneously, accommodating their communication strategies and transnational agenda to specific socio-political contexts (Datta, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). Anti-genderism is affirming its agenda as scientifically legitimate, through the dissemination of books, pamphlets and the organisation of seminars, conferences and workshops aimed at the construction of an alternative public sphere as well as an alternative niche in academia: the field of anti-gender studies (Datta, 2018; Garbagnoli, 2016; Korolczuk, 2017)[14]. Feminist research highlighting and resisting these developments therefore is increasingly needed (Ackerly et al., 2019).

Drawing from a project analyzing anti-gender mobilization in 13 European countries, Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), highlight the risk for scholars of conflating "phenomena as diverse as populism, far-right parties, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, racism, neoliberalism or austerity politics. […] gathered under the broad umbrella term of 'Global Right', which identifies right-wing actors in opposition to the advocates of progressive causes" (2018: 7).

In this thesis, I take up the authors' invitation to provide a nuanced and context specific analysis of how these phenomena present themselves and intersect with each other and highlight the oppositional dynamics between various actors in the context of Italy. This ultimately serves to demonstrate how the *NUDM* movement frames these phenomena and positions itself in relation to them. Farris' (2017) work

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[14] Sections of this chapter have been extracted by a journal article I have published in 2018:
https://www.digitalicons.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/DI19_4_Salvatori.pdf
Full details are provided in the bibliography

on *femonationalism* is central to understand the intersection of neoliberalism, nationalism and some feminist voices that can be observed in various countries including Italy. With this concept, Farris (2017) illustrates how an alliance between right wing nationalist, neoliberal parties, policy makers and some feminist theorists contribute to the co-optation of feminist themes such as gender equality, to advance xenophobic (particularly anti-Muslim) campaigns and racist rhetoric. Furthermore, Cirillo (2018), an important voice within Italian feminism active since the 1960s, points to an unexpected alliance between fundamentalisms and the free market where for example, we witness a defense of traditional values from 'gender ideology' merging with a push towards making profit from reproductive technologies. Moreover, we observe States making cuts to welfare provisions as they continue to rely on free domestic and care work provided by women. In order to preserve the existence of an 'exploitable' labour force, which replaces *de facto* the welfare state, we witness the resurfacing of traditional gender norms. This tendency is manifested through attacks towards women on multiple fronts: the right to abortion, the rise of systemic male violence, an unfair penal system not providing sufficient 'compensation' for victims of violence, toxic narratives surrounding femicide and gender-based violence, attacks on places where women self-organize (for example through funding cuts and evictions from women's centres and shelters), and the intertwining of gender-based and racist oppression (Cirillo, 2018). In this context, anti-gender organisations, suggesting that 'gender ideology' will negatively impact individuals, families, the nation and Christian civilization is instrumental, demand funding to "support national pro-family and birth rate policies" (Citizengo.org 05/03/19). This rhetoric is in continuity with the nationalistic discourse fighting for the 'preservation of an Italian people' and the fascist dream of seeing women as wives and mothers. As an example of this rhetoric, the feminine branch of the neofascist party *Forza Nuova* (*Associazione Evita Peron*)[15] proposes a system of benefit for mothers "to contrast the high natality rate of immigrants posing a serious threat to the survival itself of the Italian people".

Finally, reconnecting with Farris (2017) point, in the Italian context, within numerically minoritarian feminist groups, some of the stronger voices expressing criticism towards intersectional feminism and multiculturalism participate in the

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[15] Source: http://www.forzanuova.eu/reddito-alle-madri/

depiction of the 'foreign invader' to be stopped in the name of women's rights (Farris, 2017). Furthermore, certain feminist voices within radical feminist groups do not simply advocate for the centrality of sexual difference but ridicule or discount the significance of gender identity, assuming positions that are in continuity with the ultraconservative discourse against 'gender ideology' (Saraceno, 2010). Conversely, *NUDM* includes a variety of approaches but broadly proposes transfeminism, queer theory, intersectionality and bridges feminist and anti-racist demands (Chironi, 2019). These different approaches within Italian feminism, give rise to heated exchanges and conflict, particularly on social media, as I will explain in more details throughout the analysis.

2.4 The significance of feminist mobilization in exceptional times: *NUDM* as a new political subject

It is in such context that the *NUDM* movement emerged in 2016: a new political subject and, simultaneously, a synthesis of a variety of pre-existing experiences, joining a transnational outlook with the attention for the local dimension.

NUDM in fact was inspired by a new *tide* of transnational feminist mobilisation and by two particularly striking examples: the women's movement mobilising against ultraconservative attacks and the ban on abortion in Poland, culminating with the Black Protest (Korolczuk, 2016; Bielska-Brodziak et al. 2020); the Argentinian feminist movement *Ni Una Menos,* denouncing the rising numbers of femicides, kidnappings, rapes and gender-based violence (Palmeiro, 2019). The Italian movement's name is directly translated from the Spanish, signalling the contamination between linguistic and activist practices across borders between *NUDM* and *Ni Una Menos.*

Facilitated by politics of translation (Palmeiro, 2020), this transnational connection is also rooted in the similarity of experience of gender-based violence that feminists living in different territories are determined to denounce. Since 2015 in fact, *Ni Una Menos*, started organising protests to denounce the high number of rapes, kidnappings and femicides. In October 2016, the particularly brutal femicide of Lucia Pérez, a 16-year old girl victim of group rape and torture resulted in

unexpectedly massive demonstrations, contributing to transform *Ni Una Menos* from a small collective of journalists, poets, and academics in Buenos Aires into a global mass feminist movement (Palmeiro, 2019). The cry of *Not One Less* greatly resonated with Italian feminists. While these issues are numerically smaller in Italy, similar cases continued to emerge. During the same period (October 2016) in Melito, a small rural village in the south of Italy, the case of the repeated sexual violence towards a 14 year old girl by a group of young men caught the attention of the media (Musolino, 2016). As one of the perpetrators was linked with the local organised crime (*'ndrangheta*) the girl was discouraged from denouncing the facts, which continued for 2 years. This highlighted a connection between a culture of connivance and victim blaming and led to mobilisations all over the country. As I will explain in more detail in the analysis, what finally motivated the creation of the *NUDM* movement was the brutal femicide in Rome of another young woman, Sara di Pietrantonio, killed and set on fire by her ex partner (Rudan, 2017). Angered by the endless number of femicides in the country (1 every 3 days on average) and by the diffused media narration often justifying perpetrators, Italian feminists launched a new movement.

The *NUDM* movement was launched with a demonstration on the 26th November 2016, just after the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (25th), which brought 200000 people to the streets of Rome.

The movement included a variety of groups and associations, as explained on *NUDM's* main Facebook page[16]:

1) The citizen network *Io Decido* which had been mobilising in the streets, within hospitals and universities, on themes concerning with health, universal rights and against gender violence, since 2014 and included various collectives, laboratories, and individuals (*Cagne Sciolte, Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Casa delle donne Lucha y Siesta, Centro Donna Dalia, Centro Donna Lisa, Chayn Italia, Cobas Policlinico, Cooperativa Sociale Be Free, Csa Astra, Degender Communia, Freedom For Birth, Infosex-Esc, Lab. Puzzle, Sportello Una stanza tutta per se*).

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[16] Source: NUDM movement's Facebook page:
https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/about/?ref=page_internal

2) *UDI, Unione Donne d'Italia*: born in 1944/45 from women's experience of resistance to nazi-fascism. UDI was one of the main protagonists of the struggles for the vote, education, work and social services for women and in the fight for abortion rights, against sexual violence and the creation of women's centres (*consultori*). UDI has 'branches' in various cities.

3) *D.i.Re, Donne In Rete contro la violenza*: the first network in Italy that includes women's centres for survivors of domestic violence, managed by women's associations. It includes 77 centres and houses (*centri antiviolenza* and *case delle donne*), which supported thousands of women over 30 years. Many of these centres and refuges are now under eviction threat or do not receive sufficient funding.

As I will analyse in more detail in chapter 5, during its first year of activity (between November 2016 and November 2017) the *NUDM* movement produced *The Feminist Plan Against Male Violence on Women and Gender Violence* in response to the *Extraordinary Plan Against Gender-Based Violence* proposed by the government at the time and criticized by feminists for its securitarian and repressive approach (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020). On the contrary, the *Feminist plan* was a grassroots and participatory experience where feminists with different backgrounds and experiences had the occasion to discuss gender-based violence as a structural issue to be addressed through cultural, social and educational transformations. This was also a starting point in the process that led to the *International Women Strike (IWS)* on the 8th March 2017 (and in the following years since). The first strike of this kind, IWS was an effort to reclaim a traditionally workerist instrument while adding a specifically feminist lens (Gago, 2020; Rudan, 2017). A feminist strike in fact is at the same time a process of abstention from productive work and consumption, a rejection of traditional gender roles, sexual hierarchies and a refusal of reproductive work (Arruzza et al., 2019; Cavallero and Gago, 2020).

As it appears clear from the overview of the history of Italian feminism, the articulation presented in the *Feminist plan* and the practice of the strike resonate with feminist elaboration advanced in the 1970s, particularly in the tireless work of theorization and campaigning for the recognition and payment for caring work carried out by Silvia Federici, Selma James and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa with *The International Wages for Housework Campaign* (Bracke, 2013; Dalla Costa, 1972; Federici, 1975). In this movement therefore, this 'second wave' theoretical

contribution and the horizontal organisational practices developed by feminists in the 70s, merge with more recent developments in feminism such as the focus on self-determination of all bodies and identities. This is due also to the creation of collaborations and alliances between feminist collectives and LGBTQ+ associations and transfeminist groups since the early 2000s, as I will explain in the analysis.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter I have attempted to set the foundation for an analysis of contemporary feminist activism that is historically grounded (Offen, 1988) and takes into account structural factors related to the socio-political context and media landscape (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). I have also introduced how in recent years, Italian feminism has seen the convergence of anti-austerity claims, themes developed in the 90s within student movements and social centres, antiracist and gender related demands. It is also through these experiences that many contemporary Italian feminists embraced intersectional feminism,[1] aiming to surpass a focus solely on gender equality. As it will appear from the analysis, this movement proposed a view of feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks, 2000) that must analyse all types of oppression (i.e. class, 'race', sexual identity, age, gender, ability) and how they are intertwined. It can be said that *NUDM* taps into these various mobilisations and makes a synthesis of all these various stances, elaborating its own context-specific form of intersectionality while keeping in conversation with feminists across borders. Overall, as I will demonstrate in the analysis, denouncing the alliance between far-right and ultra conservative groups and the transnational dimension of the threats to sexual, reproductive and civil rights have been key drivers for the *NUDM* movement.

Chapter 3 - Intersecting research on feminist activism with the study of social movements in exceptional times

In this chapter, I connect empirical research and theoretical concepts deriving from feminist theory, feminist media studies and social movement studies, in order to conceptualise the phenomenon of rising transnational feminist mobilisation in times of crisis (Della Porta, 2017) and analyse feminists' digitally mediated practices (Mendes et al., 2019). This thesis provides a nuanced analysis of contemporary feminist activism in Italy, focusing on the case of *NUDM* as part of a new transnational mobilisation started with the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos,* which is gaining increasing scholarly interest (Chironi, 2019; Pavan and Mainardi, 2018).

In order to understand this mobilisation it is necessary to make sense of how feminism has changed in recent years as a result of the possibilities granted by digital media and concomitantly with the crisis of representative democracy. Building on chapter 2, where I have provided an historically grounded analysis of Italian feminism and an analysis of the socio-political and media context where activists from *NUDM* operate, I start this chapter by exploring recent contributions in feminist and social movement studies seeking to explain the significance of the recent 'resurgence' of feminism in recent years (Dean and Aune, 2015) and of the activation of social movements following the financial crisis in 2008 (Della Porta, 2017).

I then outline the conceptual framework guiding this thesis. I adopt intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) as a theoretical framework that encourages validating the knowledge emerging from women's lived experience and as an *analytical sensibility* that allows "conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing" (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013: 795).

Firstly, this leads me to highlight and attempt to contribute to new forms of theorisation developed by researchers who are also active participants within this mobilisation (Gago and Mason-Deese, 2019; 19a; 2020; López, 2020; Palmeiro, 2018, 2019, 2020; Peroni, 2018; Rudan, 2017; Sabsay, 2020). A unique characteristic of *Ni Una Menos* in fact, as Mason-Deese (2020) interestingly points

out, is how the movement's organisational forms and practices favour the emergence of a specific form of knowledge and of forms of *militant research*: "extending the practice of research beyond academia, and developing forms of *collective intelligence*. This involves combining theoretical concepts with women's everyday life experiences, mapping chains of violence and strategies of survival and transformation" (Palmeiro, 2020).

Secondly, starting from the consideration that, until recently, the major social movement theories have approached male-lead movements as the norm (Ferree and McClurg, 2004) and that much research on feminist organising and mobilisation has rarely incorporated social movement theory (Motta et al., 2011), I attempt to integrate contributions from feminist and social movement theory. I first briefly review how the main social movement theories have explained movements' emergence and development: first through rationalistic explanations and then gradually by taking into account social, psychological, emotional and cultural factors to explain mobilisation. I then suggest how incorporating elements of feminist theory into the analysis of social movements can be fruitful, particularly to explore the role of emotions and affect (Ahmed, 2017; Hemmings, 2012) in mobilisation.

I outline which key theories and concepts emerging from social movement and feminist studies underpin the analysis presented in this thesis. In particular, I connect Della Porta's (2008) concept of *eventful protest* pointing at the cognitive, affective and relational impact of protest events, Gould's (2002) contribution on the role of *emotion work* as central for mobilisation's sustainability and Hemming's' (2012) concepts of *affective solidarity* and *affective dissonance* as motor for feminist mobilisation.

3.1 Resurgence of feminism and reactivation of social movements in times of crisis

Various contributions in recent years have pointed to the 'resurgence' of feminism (Dean and Aune, 2015), its continued relevance and risen visibility since 2010 (Mendes et al. 2019) in contrast with claims that we are living in a postfeminist phase (Ferber, 2012; Gill et al. 2011; Gill, 2016; Halle et al., 2003; Mendes, 2011; Walby, 2011). The present research contributes to studies that challenge

post,feminist claims framing feminism as a declining movement, which, I argue, do not reflect the grassroots activation, and digitally mediated engagements of feminist, transfeminist and women's movements in various countries. In the last decade, we have witnessed women taking part in protests during the Arab spring (Newsom and Lenge, 2012), the emergence of anti-rape protests in India (Dey, 2018), the creation of the global anti-rape movement Slutwalk (Mendes, 2015) and the organization of Women's Marches following Trump's election in the United States in 2017 (Emejulu, 2018). Moreover, an unexpected wave of feminist mobilization has been recorded in Eastern Europe (Fuszara, 2005; Grabowska, 2012; Graff, 2003 and 2007) with PussyRiot in Russia, FEMEN in Ukraine, the Polish Women Strike (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Salvatori, 2018) and, more recently, the anti-government feminist mobilisations in Belarus. Several contributions highlight that many women continue to engage with feminism, from a younger age and particularly online (Chidgey, Gunnarsson and Zobl, 2009; Mendes, 2015; Redfern and Aune, 2013). The appearance and wide resonance of the #MeToo campaign since 2017 (Mendes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019), with all the controversies that followed (Valenti, 2018), also signal a renewed interest in the wider public for women's issues.

Scholars have highlighted in particular the important role of digital technologies and social media for feminism (Baer, 2016; Dean and Aune, 2015; Dey, 2018; Mendes, 2015; Mendes et al., 2019; Motta et al., 2011; O'Keefe, 2014; Scharff, 2010; Thelandersson, 2014; Verma, 2018) with some arguing that we have recently entered a Fourth Wave (Cochrane, 2013; Magaraggia, 2015; Munro, 2013). Recent contributions have also highlighted the increasingly transnational character and agenda of feminist mobilisations (Hawkesworth, 2006; Mohanty, 2003), with digital media allowing the formation of ties beyond geographical distance or generational differences (Humphreys, 2013; Keller, 2012).

Out of all these contributions, in *Digital Feminist Activism,* Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2019) provide an extensive analysis of feminist mobilisation and what are the opportunities and challenges of using digital media technologies to contrast sexism, misogyny and rape culture. The authors claim that, while the attention towards digital feminism has certainly increased in recent years, we still know little about the nuanced ways digital tools are being used by feminists (Mendes et al., 2019) and what is the role of internet-based communication and new media for feminist

theorising and grassroots mobilisation. In this research, I make wide reference to this resource (Mendes et al., 2019) in order to investigate how these tools and platforms are used by contemporary Italian feminists while pointing out to the convergence between activists online and offline practices in the Italian case. As I demonstrate in this thesis in fact, in the case of contemporary Italian feminism, feminist practices usually associated with fourth wave feminism (Munro, 2013) such as the use of digital platforms for the dissemination of content and the use of digital tools to organise protest, are combined with direct action, demonstrations, assemblies, squats and a variety of other less visible practices and actions which I document in the analysis. By doing so, I contribute to the still limited but growing literature attempting to document and make visible the labour of activism (Mendes et al., 2019: 179; Jarrett, 2014) and start filling the gap in literature on the implications of receiving online abuse (Lewis, 2017).

As introduced in chapter 2, I contextualise the emergence and development of *NUDM* within a variety of social movements that emerged since the financial crisis in 2008 denouncing the effects of late neoliberalism (Della Porta, 2017). I turned therefore to contributions in social movement studies, which focus on the analysis of recent social movement experiences and their innovative practices.

Della Porta and Doerr (2018), explain that with neoliberal reforms weakening trade unions and other democratic institutions, new organizational models and alternative ideas of democracy 'from below' started to emerge and diffuse globally. Within a crisis of representative democracy, these emerging mobilizations started scrutinizing and denouncing the increasing power of global financial institutions (e.g. World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization). In such changing context, we witnessed the emergence of new social movements' experiments in deliberation such as the *Forum* and the *Camp* (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018). A common trait between diverse experiences (i.e. Zapatistas in Mexico, Sem Terra in Brasil, Piqueteros in Argentina, indigenous mobilisations in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador) is that they all "promoted participatory and deliberative formulas, with an emphasis on the equal role of all citizens, of consensus building though argumentation, in recognition of differences but also of the common aim of constructing the commons" (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018: 396).

In the *World Social Forum*, which saw the encounter of activists from different backgrounds and locations, the mediation and the acknowledgement of differences, disagreements and inequality was fundamental (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018; Doerr, 2018). Practices aimed at opening up discursive spaces were central for example, in order to facilitate the emergence of the voices of LGBTQ+ individuals or people of colour. In her comparative study of deliberation in multilingual social movements, such as the *World Social Forum* and the *European Social Forum,* Doerr (2018) demonstrates how members of marginalised groups developed disruptive practices in order to have their voices heard. Translators, as not neutral intermediaries, mediated between those who tended to dominate the process of deliberation and those who remained at the margins, by disrupting the assemblies in order to highlight and address this imbalance. A collective work of *political translation* managed to reveal and solve *positional misunderstandings* (Doerr, 2018). In the analysis (chapter 7), I employ these concepts in order to explain dynamics of dissonance within Italian feminism and the often-unintended marginalisation of certain voices.

Della Porta and Doerr (2018) analyse another innovative organisational forms emerging from the 2011 movements: the camp (*acampada*), developed in the protests in Tahir Square, Gezi Park or Zuccotti Park. *Camps* were experiments of new models of deliberation and ways to denounce the failures of representative democracy (Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014). The experience of the *camp* had some unique characteristics that reflect its values: *camps* were set in open public spaces to favour transparency, inclusivity and equality, occupying the public space was considered a way of breaking with the closed organisational forms of previous mobilisations and open up places of encounter between citizens (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018). In this view, assemblies became central to facilitate transparent and horizontal processes of decision-making and prefigure a different society. Citing Gitlin (2012: 29) Della Porta and Doerr (2018) illustrate how in the U.S., "the encampments were consistently unwilling to make the effort to coalesce around what would conventionally be called demands and programs. Instead, what they seemed to relish most was themselves: their community and esprit, their direct democracy, the joy of becoming transformed into a movement, a presence, a phenomenon that was known to strangers, and discovering with delight just how much energy they had liberated. For indeed, in a matter of days, their sparks had ignited a fire".

As it will emerge from this thesis, many of the characteristics of these experiences resonate with those of the transnational feminist mobilisation started with *Ni Una Menos*: great emphasis is placed on the value of occupying space together, and developing horizontal and participatory methods. Sometimes borrowing strategies from the 15M mobilisations in Spain (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) and similarly perceiving assemblies not only as horizontal spaces for deliberation but for the prefiguration of a feminist society (Maeckelberg, 2009). This feminist mobilisation however, displays some unique characteristics. Assemblies are imagined as laboratories of knowledge production, where a specific epistemology can emerge through forms of collective intelligence (Palmeiro, 2020). This facilitates the development of processes of analysis and plans of action. In the next section I explain how the articulations developed through these processes inform this work.

3.2 Intersecting feminist theory and social movement studies

In this thesis, I employ intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991), as an approach to empirical research that incorporates historical and social context into the analysis of how power relations operate (Hankock, 2007) and attempts to make women's experiences and histories visible. It is with this intention that I have provided an extensive analysis of the history of Italian feminism and the political context and media landscape in which contemporary feminists operate. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality translates in attention to the ways various systems of oppression such as sexism and racism interlock in the context analysed (Lorde, 1984), and also bring attention to activists' lived experience and their attempts to identify unbalanced power dynamics. In the case of this project, this leads me to try to bring to light the knowledge and interpretations emerging from the transnational feminist mobilisation *NUDM* is part of and from activists' lived experience.

I am aware however, that since it was first developed, intersectionality has been at the centre of various interpretations and critiques. Mügge et al. (2018) investigate how this framework has been used within neoliberal academia in ways that can undermine its original political aim and erase the labour of black feminist thinkers. In particular, the authors point to the tendency in the context of Europe to de-emphasise race when utilising intersectionality, continuing to ignore the legacy of

colonialism. Aware of the risk of disregarding the political project at the roots of intersectionality, centred on black women's lives, throughout this research, I attempt to point the attention to the ways intersectionality has been understood and 'practiced' within this feminist mobilization. In the analysis (chapter 6), I illustrate for example how contemporary Italian feminists attempt to take action in relation to the 'whiteness' of the *NUDM* movement, reach out to the migrant population and start an overdue debate with each other and with the public on the legacy of Italian colonialism.

Another diffused critique towards intersectionality concerns its lack of attention to the materiality of gender relations. Mitchell (2013) for example, points to the framework's excessive reliance on identity politics, defining this a bourgeois approach that risks undermining class struggles. In response to this critique, Salem (2013) interestingly calls for a Gramscian approach to feminism, which would encourage the exploration of historical and contextual specificity and include a view of gender as one of many societal structures hegemony filters through. Conceptualising intersectionality as a travelling theory, Salem (2018) reflects on the many trajectories the concept has taken and argues that Marxist feminism can help recover the concept's critical potential and expand its usefulness for transnational feminism.

The articulation developed within *Ni Una Menos* closely resonates with Salem's (2013) call. The work of Marxists feminist Silvia Federici (2004, 2018) is a major point of reference for this transnational feminist mobilisation as it is able to interpret the complex intersections between capitalism, gender, race and colonialism.

Starting from the insight that violence against women increases in times of capital accumulation, introduced in the *Caliban and the witch* (2004), in the more recent book *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018), Federici reconstructs how communal and self-sufficient forms of living, were extinguished with the birth of capitalism. Drawing on her extensive historical research and Marxian analysis, Federici (2018) argues that similarly, the present phase of global capitalist accumulation requires a destruction of the commons. The current neoliberal system, privileging the free market, and building hierarchies between lives which have value and those that can be sacrificed, heavily relies on reproductive work. Carried out mostly by women and even more by migrant women and women of colour (Emejulu, 2018), reproductive work replaces welfare and state

provisions and it is therefore necessary for the survival of neoliberalism. This analysis therefore combines a critique towards global financial institutions with one towards the State, seen as an accomplice to this destructive division of labour. Enriched by communitarian experiences of activism such as *Occupy*, Federici proposes a feminist view of the commons as autonomous spaces that are not free from difficulties and conflict but allow the possibility to reorganise life and labour in less exploitative ways, recover women's knowledge, relationships between people and with nature (Federici, 2018).

Embracing this view and challenging *lean in* and neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018), *Ni Una Menos'* articulation connects the critiques of patriarchy, neoliberalism and the nation state (Gago, 2020) and proposes a *feminism for the 99%* (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser, 2019; Davis et al., 2017): transnational, grassroots, committed to anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist solidarity politics (Emejulu, 2018). Starting from everyday experiences and material conditions, particularly those of the most precarious workers (women of colour in the Global South and North) it proposes a radical transformation of society.

Lastly, having outlined how intersectionality is helpful to validate and amplify the articulations emerging from this mobilisation, I now refer to Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) definition, to explain how I employ it also as an *analytic sensibility*:

> "what makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power— emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is" (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013: 795).

In the next section I adopt this lens to briefly review how the main social movement theories have attempted to explain social movements' emergence and development and point out how these approaches, often assumed gender neutrality. I then outline which contributions from social movement studies are helpful for the

study of feminist mobilisations and how they can benefit from the integration of theoretical concepts deriving from feminist theory and the study of feminist activism. I conclude outlining specifically which theoretical concepts from both fields underpin this analysis.

Social movement studies and research on feminist activism

Ferree and McClurg (2004: 597) argue that: "formal and informal political opportunities, organizational structures and strategies, and frames and feelings carry gender meanings that have often been disregarded by purportedly general theories that have in practice studied men". In turns much research on feminist organising/mobilisation has rarely incorporated social movement theory (Motta et al. 2011). Ferree and McClurg (2004) invite therefore social movement theory to pay attention to the ways gender dynamics shape mobilisation and refrain from considering 'gender-specific' relations and repertoires to be something stable.

The major social movement theories that developed from the end the 19th century until the 1960s in fact did not take gender into account as one of the factors possibly contributing to the formation and development of a social movement (Taylor, 1999; Dey, 2018).

The *Mass society theory* claimed that people who are socially isolated are vulnerable to the appeals of social movements (Snow et al., 1998). Developed at the beginning of the 20th century and resonating with the fears of fascist and communist movements (Buechler, 2013) this theory lays on Durkheim's analysis of modern society as one where, social integration is weakened by risen individualism, anomie and egoism (Durkheim, 1897 cited in Buechler, 2013). Taking inspiration also from the work of the Chicago School of Sociology (Blumer, 1951 cited in Buechler, 2013), characterising the mass as a large, anonymous collectivity, easy to manipulate and control, this theory points to isolated individuals being more likely to engage in extremist movements. This theory has been subject of numerous critiques, with scholars arguing for example that those who are socially isolated might be actually less likely to engage in mobilisation.

Relative deprivation theory, developed by the American sociologist Samuel Stouffer after the Second World War, claims that individuals engage in action for social change when they feel deprived in relation to the position of others (Smith and

Pettigrew, 2015). One of the critiques to this approach is that it does not explain why individuals would join movements, which are not directly addressing aspects that are relevant for them.

The *structural strain theory,* developed by Merton (1938 cited in Featherstone & Deflem, 2003), claims that social structures, with the pressure that society puts on lower economic classes, push individuals to engage in deviant behaviour. The *value added theory* or *social strain theory*, developed by Smelser (1963, cited in Weeber and Rodeheaver, 2003) claims that individuals experiencing social strain, join radical social movements because belonging to these groups reassures them that some sort of action is being taken in order to address the problem (Weeber and Rodeheaver, 2003). In this view, collective behaviour and social movements result from the deprivation caused by the domination of one culture over another. The main critiques to the structural and to the social strain theories focused on the idea itself of what can be defined 'deviant', on the excessive emphasis on social class (particularly lower class) as a determinant for crime and deviance and on the inability to explain gender violence.

A paradigm shift

The 1960s, a period of great global transformations, corresponding with a paradigm shift within the social sciences, led to the reformulation of theories and approaches with social movement theories starting to consider how various factors could have an impact on the passage from a condition of suffering to collective action (Canel, 1997). The two main theoretical frameworks emerging out of this period of transformation were the *New Social Movement Theory* and the *Resource Mobilisation Theory*. Various theorists have contributed to the development of these frameworks, more recently focusing on the relationship between social movement and digital technologies.

The *New Social Movement Theory* emerged in Europe after the 60s and highlighted the inadequacy of classical Marxism to analyse collective action mainly due to its economic and class reductionism (Canel, 1992). These theories have instead focused on explanations that take into account factors related to politics, ideology and culture as sources of collective action and sources of identity such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity as definers of collective identity.

An important contribution emerging from this framework and relevant for the study of contemporary feminist mobilisations derives from Melucci's (1995) comprehensive theory on collective identity as a process of constructing an action system. A social movement is formed not by isolated individuals but by members who share common definitions regarding its end, means and field of action. These shared definitions are elaborated in a common language and incorporated in rituals and practices (Melucci, 1995). Culture is central in the formation of collective identity as it is by affirming a relation between 'us' and 'them' with the rest of society, that social movements simultaneously establish their separate cultural identity and claim the need to be recognised as social actors. A social movement grows by developing an awareness of the opportunities, constraints and conflicts that form part of it. For Melucci (1995), collective identity is a result of all these dynamics within a group and not a given characteristic of social movements therefore it is important to analyse how the social movement has actually formed. Melucci also recognises the importance of the emotional involvement of social movements' members in order to develop relations and collective identity. As it will appear from the analysis chapters, the construction of a movement's identity and the activation of emotions (Gould, 2002) had a central role in the expansion of NUDM.

Another contribution emerging from this framework, which I turned to in order to understand how social movements utilise digital technologies, is the work of Castells. In *Networks of outrage and hope (2012)*, Castells argues that throughout history, social movements have been the producers of new values and goals around which institutions have been transformed. As I have introduced, drawing from the rich legacy of Italian feminism, the feminist movement analysed positions itself in stark contrast with institutional approaches to the problem of gender-based violence, acting therefore as a counter-power. Furthermore, Castells (2012) focuses the attention on the individual motivation, asking why and how individuals decide to do something they are warned against for example fighting some form of inequality or entering a social movement. Introducing the *theory of affective intelligence*, Castells (2012) argues that fear and enthusiasm are the most relevant emotions at the basis of social mobilisation. Emotions play an important role in the formation of social movements, where the emotional activation of an individual connects with the one of others. Castells famously introduced the concept of *networked society'* (Castells,

2004, 2011), a society with a social structure made of networks powered by information and communication technologies. The networked society is made of nodes with varying degrees of importance resulting from their ability to assimilate information. This type of society has no centres and is held together by technology. Digital mobilisation can contribute to the elimination of boundaries between global and local and create a new space for action (Castells, 2007). The use of the Internet allows a level of autonomy, which can contribute to the creation of communities and allow individuals to organise and mobilise.

Similarly, Wellman (2001) introduced the concept of *personal community networks*, communities formed online by individuals who might be geographically distant but are connected by shared interests. Through their strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1983) individuals form specialised networks which allow them to obtain information, support and a sense of belonging. These communities consist in a space for socialisation, collaboration and collective action. As in 'real-life' communities, individuals play various roles in online communities. Kozinets (2010) recognises four ideal member types of online communities (newbies, minglers, devotees and insiders). In online communities two actors can maintain single or multiple relationships, the former being often more supportive, long-lasting, voluntary and intimate. Online communities can help transform weak ties into strong ones and create strong ties between people who don't know each other (Kozinets, 2010).

The literature on digital feminist activism, documenting activists' lived experience of 'inhabiting' the digital sphere, problematizes and adds nuance to these contributions. For example, if the use of the internet does contribute to the creation of communities and networks across borders, as in the case of the *International Women's Strike* that I analyse in chapter 5, and grants visibility to feminist mobilisation, gendered imbalances and inequalities must be considered. Mendes et al. (2019) document various examples of the innovative ways in which girls and women use digital media to discuss, organise and network. The authors document how through digital media, girls and women elaborate their experiences of harassment, sexual violence and sexism and often attempt to educate the public on these issues. While engaging with digital feminist activism might generate networks of solidarity, participation to these networks is shaped by various factors: gender, class, age, ability, confidence, technological savviness, emotional resilience, social

status (Fotopoulou, 2016; Mendes et al. 2019: 5). Furthermore, scholarship on digital feminist activism reveals how gendered power relations shape the digital sphere, for example through the many attempts of silencing, trolling and abuse received by feminists on digital media platforms (Mendes et al. 2019; Lewis, 2017; Siapera, 2019). In my analysis of contemporary feminist activism in Italy therefore, I demonstrate how the use of the Internet and digital technologies were instrumental for the development of this mobilisation, contributing to generate a sense of connection between feminists across borders, while also documenting the challenges experienced by activists (e.g. online abuse, fatigue resulting from invisible labour).

The other framework emerging in the 1960s in North America is the *Resource Mobilisation Theory*. As I will illustrate below, according to Ferree and McClurg (2004) this framework also initially lacked to consider the role of gender in mobilisation. This framework challenged the view of collective action as a dysfunctional outcome of a society lacking integration and questioned the assumption of a direct relation between perceived deprivation and collective action (Canel, 1997). The novelty of this framework consisted in the introduction of an analysis of which resources must be mobilised, how social movements are linked to other groups, how much they depend on external support and what are the tactics that authorities use to control or incorporate them (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

In the analysis of how *NUDM* transformed over time (chapter 5) I consider McAdam's (1999) suggestion to move away from deterministic explanations of social movements and their dynamics and search for more nuanced understanding of how and why social movements originate and develop, through analyses that account for three broad sets of factors: "1) the political opportunities and constraints confronting a given challenger; 2) the forms of organization (informal as well as formal) available to insurgents as sites for initial mobilization, and; 3) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action" (McAdam, 1999: 2).

According to this view, during cycles of protest, a movement forms because its members believe the time and political climate is right to raise a particular issue (Staggenborg, 1998). Mobilisation structures then allow individuals and groups to organise and engage in collective action (McCarthy, 1996). Framing processes, provide keys for the interpretation of the movement identity itself, of other collective actors, the role of the media and the cultural impact of a movement (McAdam,

1996). The importance of framing is due in particular to its impact on the development of a social movement and its effectiveness. Collective identity and culture also have a central role in the emergence and development of protests as McAdam (1995) argues that certain movements do not originate out of political opportunity but take inspiration from a previously successful movement.

I consider Ferree and McClurg (2004) critique however, pointing out how mobilisation structures, opportunity structures and framing processes are also assumed to be gender neutral and arguing that research on women's and feminist movements can provide evidence of the contrary. According to the authors, women's movements might have access to political opportunities that are not open to men as they are perceived as less threatening. Mobilisation structures might differ when movements are organised by women or men, with women's movements historically less inclined towards violence and often in conflict with the state and institutions rather than seeking to control these (Ferree and McClurg, 2004). Through the study of *NUDM* I highlight some of these aspects, pointing out for example at how the movement has been ignored by the media despite the organisation of numerically significant mass demonstrations. Some activists claim that they are unable to achieve visibility unless they employ some particularly striking form of direct action. Additionally, due the challenge this mobilisation poses to essentialist notions of womanhood (López, 2020) and gender binarism, I believe it raises new questions on how to define the specific characteristics and organisational forms of feminist and women's movements, opening new avenues for research.

Collective identity

Since the late 1990s, with the 'cultural turn', social movement scholars have started paying increasing attention to the creation of collective identities as one of the aims of social movements and on the role of emotions for protest and mobilisation (Goodwin et al., 2000). Ferree and McKlurg (2004) point out how the role of emotions for mobilisation has been recognised for long by feminists and women's mobilisations while being sidelined by social movement studies. The author also argue that while the 'cultural turn' in social movement studies has rightly pointed attention to how ideas, beliefs, frames are produced, there is still a necessity to unveil the gendered dimension of these levels. In this section therefore, I illustrate how in this study, I attempt to integrate contributions from social movement studies

regarding the formation of collective identity with insights from feminist theory and the study of digital feminist activism.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) argue that sociologists of social movement have often used collective identity in order to fill the gaps in resource mobilisation theory and theories focusing on political process. These models looked at the structural changes that provided the resources to act collectively. By doing so they challenged previous assumptions by collective behaviourist seeing protest as an irrational response to some kind of strain or grievance however, by focusing on exclusively rationalistic explanations they sidelined certain aspects. Polletta and Jasper (2001: 285) encourage therefore producing research that "avoids a priori assumptions about causal mechanisms and allows for a number of different relationships between cultural and discursive practices on the one hand, and legal, political, economic, and social structures on the other".

Polletta and Jasper (2001) suggest that collective identity has been used to describe various dimension and dynamics of protest but certain questions remained unexplored. These would focus for example on the ways collective identities might be constructed through protest instead or preceding protest, ask whether the identity projected by a specific group or movement is the same as that experienced by its members (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285): "we have defined collective identity as an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity. A collective identity may have been first constructed by outsiders (…), who may still enforce it, but it depends on some acceptance by those to whom it is applied. Collective identities are expressed in cultural materials—names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing, and so on—but not all cultural materials express collective identities. Collective identity does not imply the rational calculus for evaluating choices that 'interest' does. And unlike ideology, collective identity carries with it positive feelings for other members of the group".

In order to address previously unexplored aspects, scholars focused on collective identity, to respond to questions broadly related to four aspects: 1) why do movement emerge when they do? 2) what motivates people to mobilise? 3) how and

why do activists chose their strategies, targets, forms of organisation? 4) what are the effects of social movements? (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

In relation to the first aspect, movement's emergence, new social movement scholars challenged models advanced by resource mobilization and political process scholars, based on the assumption of the existence of a collective actor prepared to recognize political opportunities and mobilise resources. They demonstrated how participants in peace protests, feminist or LGBTQ+ movements were not looking to achieve political or economic benefits from institutions, but were instead seeking recognition of their identity and lifestyle (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 286).

In relation to the motivation to mobilise, Polletta and Jasper (2001), argue that shared interests are not sufficient to motivate an individual to mobilise without some type of reward. The pre-existence of relations, can have an impact on individuals' motivation to commit to a mobilization. In the analysis of individual experiences of activism within *NUDM* (chapter 7) I highlight how, if the pre-existence of relations motivated some, other activists found in the movement their first political experience. I make reference to Jasper and Poulsen (1995) contribution, to analyse the processes through which the Italian feminist movement developed: activating an existing network and relying on *moral shocks*: "when an event or situation raises such sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action" (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995: 498). In the case of feminism, I argue that the lived experience of gender-based violence might go further than a *moral shock* and analyse the role of strong emotions and affect (Ahmed, 2017; Hemmings, 2012) in the motivation to mobilise. I draw parallels between the Italian feminist movement and ACT UP, making reference to Gould's work (2002), which has shown the fundamental role of emotions for social movements development and sustainability over time. Gould (2002) argues that social movements' *emotion work*, consisting in a variety of actions – more or less intentional – contributed to nourish an *emotional common sense* within ACT UP. I find some similarities with *NUDM* in her description of how the strong emotion and the sense of connection felt by activists towards one another, contributed to the movement sustainability and expansion. I offer an analysis of the ways Italian feminists use *condensing symbols* (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995) to convey such emotions, contributing to the expansion of the movement beyond a pre-existing network (chapter 7).

According to Polletta and Jasper (2001) in fact, the creation of frames related to identity is central in order to recruit participants, particularly when they do not share a pre-existing collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Frames (Snow et al., 1986) are 'interpretive packages' that can be used by organisers to signal a particular condition that needs to be addressed, for example a form of injustice, perpetrated by a specific antagonistic force that needs to be denounced and/or challenged through a particular form of mobilization. The analysis of frames has been utilized to investigate the cognitive dimension of activism. Monforte (2014) for example, researched the framing processes developed by pro-asylum social movement organisations in different contexts in Europe and analysed how they construct collective action master frames and how they bridge different frames. The Europeanisation of frames is defined as: "a specific 'interpretation of reality'. It can be defined as the process through which cross-national solidarities among activists, European policy-making and institutions, and, more generally, the European dimension of public policies and debates become salient in the discourses of social movements. In other words, the Europeanization of frames relates to the construction of common references and perceptions across national boundaries" (Monforte, 2014: 3). Monforte (2014) shows that pro-asylum SMOs in different countries develop distinct frames reflecting their strategies of protest and relation with EU institutions. What is particularly relevant for the current study on transnational feminist mobilisation is Monforte's argument in relation to the importance of frame bridging for recent mobilisations: "SMOs that construct European social movements participate in the construction of new forms of identities, through the definition of common claims at that level. It shows thus that the construction of protest at the EU level leads to a cognitive evolution through the creation of linkages with other movements" (Monforte, 2014: 14). In the analysis of how the *NUDM* developed (chapter 5) I consider how the participation to the *International Women Strike*, with mobilizing strategies, slogans, hashtags and songs, transiting through borders favoured similar processes of frame bridging that were central for the construction of a new transnational feminist subject. Furthermore, I highlight how, by creating opportunities for open dialogue and occasion for mutual learning, activists construct frames related to the movement's identity collectively as they interact with each other (Jasper, 1997).

While resource mobilization and political process scholars initially explained activists choices in terms of "strategies, tactics, targets, organizational forms, and deliberative styles" (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: p.292) through processes of rational decision making, these are more recently understood as something that develops in action and expresses a movement's identity. A certain 'taste' for the type of tactic to be privileged can develop in pre-existing or alternative collective identities that activists belong to (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). In the case of *NUDM*, the variety of voices and experiences of activism reflects in the tactics used: I observed for example, the coexistence of 'antagonistic' strategies of direct action developed within social centres and the sharing of petitions developed by women's centres. Furthermore, as I explain in the analysis, the movement's tactics and repertoires are certainly inspired by the ones developed by feminists in other contexts, circulating through digital means thanks to processes of *political translation* (Palmeiro, 2018).

Polletta and Jasper (2001) also talk about how activists might define their identity differently depending on the situation or audience. This is due to strategic considerations that activists make that are linked to recruiting and communicating. What I illustrate in the analysis chapters is that activists from *NUDM* in various ways stress the importance of the movement to define itself and its agenda independently from any external pressure, including to a certain extent the desire to be liked or understood. I analyse however, what are the ways in which activists do present themselves through social media (chapter 7).

Another point raised by Polletta and Jasper (2001) concerns how scholars have focused on the impact of movements in terms of cultural change, push for change at the institutional level and the effects in terms of personal transformation. Mansbridge (1995 cited in Polletta and Jasper, 2001) talks about the experience of being a feminist as one that provides a sense of accountability to an ideal. Rather than a membership to a specific organization, being a feminist means feeling in connection to a collective identity, an experience that can have an impact on one's sense of self. In the analysis (chapter 7) I explore this aspect in depth and point to activists' perception of their engagement within *NUDM* as transformative at the individual level.

Lastly, one of the effects that can result from the creation of a

collective identity is the emergence of a backlash for example, from those whose reputation is 'harmed' by a movement (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). This has historically been the case for feminist mobilization, which radically challenges power relations between genders and norms. As Mendes et al. (2019) document, whenever feminist activism became more visible it was followed by a backlash (see also Mendes, 2011). Contemporary feminist activism, encounters a backlash particularly online, in the form of what Banet-Weiser (2018) defines 'popular misogyny' and what Siapera (2019) calls a new form of 'witch hunt'. With the significant and diffused phenomenon of online harassment and attempts of intimidation towards feminists and the rise of Men's Rights Activist groups, a growing scholarship is seeking to conceptualise these forms of mediated misogyny (Mendes et al. 2019). In chapter 2, I have started illustrating how feminist and queer mobilization encounter a backlash from those who oppose 'gender ideology' (Bernini, 2017; Datta, 2018; Garbagnoli, 2016; Korolczuk, 2014; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Saraceno, 2010). In the analysis (chapter 5 and 7) I demonstrate how online harassment towards feminist social media pages takes places, what are the strategies experimented by activists to counter such attacks and how individual activists experience these episodes. Additionally, as evidenced by Pearce et al. (2020) in a recent article, the issue of trans rights and trans-exclusionary rhetoric is provoking a backlash within and outside feminist circles, needing to be investigated. In this study, I attempt to contribute to this discussion by documenting how conflict around trans-rights plays out within Italian digital feminist activism.

Conclusion

Building on the reflections presented so far therefore, in this research, I focus on the relationship between individual and collective processes of transformation by taking into consideration how emotions emerge and accompany mobilization, how activists develop affectionate relationships and how these contribute to the emergence and circulation of cognitive frames.

The concept of *eventful protest* developed by Della Porta (2008), is particularly helpful throughout this research to investigate how cognitive, affective and relational aspects are intertwined in feminist protest and can have transformative effects. With the idea of *eventful protest,* Della Porta (2008) analyses how certain

protest events have transformative effects: "Especially during cycles of protest, some contingent events tend to affect the given structures by fuelling mechanisms of social change: organizational networks develop; frames are bridged; personal links foster reciprocal trust" (Della Porta (2011: 29).

Through this concept, Della Porta (2011: 31) distinguishes "*cognitive* mechanisms, with protest as an arena of debates; *relational* mechanisms, that brings about protest network; and *emotional* mechanisms, with the development of feelings of solidarity 'in action'". Looking at a broad range of events, Della Porta (2011) claims that actions or campaigns which have a high degree of *eventfulness* are for example the ones through which new tactics emerge, where there is a creation of feelings of solidarity and the strengthening of networks. Similarly to what Della Porta (2011) describes when analyzing social justice and alter-mondialist movements, within *NUDM*, interactions between feminists developed and strengthened during preparation of events such as the *International Women Strike*, as I demonstrate in chapter 5. I show how, within *NUDM*, an element that contributed to the formation of a community is not only the organization of big events but also a continued engagement through mailing lists, social media platforms and chats and the participation to assemblies, where to develop a common language and attitude, where to express solidarity with each other and where affectionate relationships can flourish.

In the analysis therefore, I investigate how various feelings and emotions might have contributed to the emergence and development of this movement. I make reference to Sarah Ahmed's work on affect (2017) to explain how feminism is experienced. In *Living a feminist life,* Ahmed explores how feminists negotiate their feminism in everyday life. I utilise Ahmed's concept of *feminist snaps* to illustrate how some of the activists I interviewed describe their processes of becoming feminists. I explain how during feminist assemblies, feminists within *NUDM* engaged in a generative process of collective analysis and writing that helped them make sense together of the ways violence against women and gender-based violence manifests in our social system. A process aimed at "making sense of what does not make sense" (Ahmed, 2017) which culminated with the publication of a *Feminist plan for the elimination of violence against women and gender violence,* which I detail in chapter 5. Lastly I make reference to Ahmed's (1999) conceptualisation of migration as a process of estrangement in order to explain the experiences of those

activists who transit through different territories and find themselves having to learn new registers in order to have their voices heard (chapter 7).

I then also turn to Hemmings' (2012) concept of *affective solidarity* to consider the transformative potential of feminist activism. In particular I refer to the concept of *affective dissonance*, which is defined as the "feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued" (Hemmings, 2012: 150). This feeling can be an important element pushing feminists to mobilise and particularly in a context, which presents the challenges I have described in chapter 2. Furthermore having illustrated the heterogeneity of this movement in terms of gender identities and experiences, and the challenges this movement poses to essentialist understandings of gender, considering *affective dissonance,* allows paying attention to what 'moves' someone to act and seek connections, rather than on a shared identity between women or feminists.

Feminist research has explored how a variety of emotions such as anger (Lorde, 1984), rage (Ahmed, 2017) or *feminist respair* (Kay and Banet-Wiser 2019) are mobilised and nourished within feminist mobilisation. These can serve at once as mobilizing emotions and empowering outlets for the elaboration of individual and collective trauma. Della Porta (2011) explains how social movement research has also focused on different emotions that can be distinguished as *good emotions* (e.g. hope, pride, indignation), *potentially dangerous emotions* (e.g. fear, shame), *reciprocal emotions* (e.g. love, loyalty, jealousy, rivalry resentment) (Della Porta 2011: 43) and have various effects on a movements dynamics.

In this research I also consider Flesher Fominaya's (2007) argument, that positive emotional experiences can allow the formation of collective identity and keep members motivated. I point to a range of positive emotions that are generated and experienced by activists collectively as they attend demonstrations and assemblies. These in fact, in my experience, can be exhilarating experiences transmitting a sense of joy (Ahmed, 2017; Mendes et al. 2019) enthusiasm, purpose and connection (Gould, 2002).

Overall therefore, in the analysis, I attempt to draw connections between social movement and feminist studies in order to conceptualise the emergence and development of *NUDM*, its transformations over time, the transformations acted or

experienced by feminist activists, in a way that takes into account the intertwining of emotional, cognitive, affective and relational factors.

In the following chapter I illustrate how the theoretical considerations expressed here have reflected in my methodological choices.

Chapter 4 - Digitally mediated feminist autoethnography

This project aims to investigate the significance of contemporary feminist activism in the context of Italy, as part of a transnational mobilisation. This project provides an analysis of how digitally mediated practices and offline grassroots activist practices are in continuity and shape each other. Building on the previous chapter, where I have outlined the conceptual tools necessary to analyse the contemporary Italian feminist movement *NUDM,* I now illustrate the range of methodological tools I employed to do so.

Due to the exploratory nature of this project, I conducted what I define a *digitally mediated autoethnographic study*. As this project focuses on the continuity between online and offline spaces and on the convergence between digital and grassroots feminist practices of activism, this approach brings together elements of feminist autoethnography (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012) and online ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012).

The analysis I present in this thesis in fact, results from three years of involvement within the *NUDM* movement (November 2016 - June 2019), with a period of fieldwork that lasted between February 2018 and June 2019. This included keeping reflexive notes, carrying out 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews, participating to 8 assemblies, 5 demonstrations, a variety of events, observing social media pages, joining mailing lists and chat groups. I then conducted a thematic analysis of social media content, interview transcripts, and the main document produced by the *NUDM* (the *Feminist plan* mentioned in chapter 2). In the next section, I explore in more detail why I have chosen this case, how I developed this approach and illustrate which opportunities and challenges it presents.

4.1 Why study contemporary Italian feminism

The case of the feminist movement *NUDM* has been chosen due to the unique characteristics of Italian feminism and of the media and political context previously outlined in more detail.

One of the reasons why the case of *NUDM* deserves attention is certainly its transnational character (Mohanty, 2003) combined with an attention for the local dimension and the diversified and reflexive use of digital technologies and media. The case of contemporary Italian feminism provides the possibility to analyse how digitally mediated practices and offline grassroots activist practices shape each other.

The case is interesting also due to Italian feminism's historical engagement with practices and ideologies drawn from other contexts and facilitated by Italy's history of migration and its long-term interest in creating a "feminism of the internet" (Hajek, 2016). In fact, if during the 60s and 70s the Italian women's movement reached its higher visibility as one of the largest women's movement in Europe, since the 80s it continued to operate through the creation of feminist bookshops, publishing companies, women's archives and centres (Kaplan, 2012), while engaging with practices, ideologies and texts that were circulating at the global level. It is since the early 90s that Italian feminist groups started engaging with digital technologies and trying to create new virtual spaces of dialogue for women, for example through the creation of *Server Donne*, an autonomous internet service provider, or *Cercatrice*, an alternative search engine (Hajek, 2016). Additionally, through digital literacy programmes and practical laboratories, Italian feminist groups have attempted to bridge gender divides and narrow the gap that usually characterises the relationship between generations of feminists due to different levels of confidence and skills.

Another reason why the case is significant is linked to the characteristics of the political context I have explained in chapter 2. Italy, as one of the European countries hit hardest by austerity policies, witnessing the rise of a populist far-right, the presence of neo-fascist and ultra-conservative religious groups within institutions, and the emergence of mobilisations that are able to connect different struggles, is a privileged viewpoint to observe how threats to women and LGBTQ+ people are

brought about and resisted, at a time when similar political configurations are increasingly present transnationally.

4.2 Researching digitally mediated practices

The intention to explore the multi-causality of feminists' participation suggested the use of an ethnographic approach to research (Corbetta, 2003: p.236). As this project focuses on the continuity between online and offline spaces and on the convergence between feminist digital and grassroots practices, a suitable methodology needs to bring together aspects of different approaches to ethnography and online ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012).

There have been various attempts to devise methodologies for the study of online behaviour and social media dynamics testified by a varied nomenclature: virtual ethnography, online ethnography, social media ethnography, netnography and digital ethnography. If previously, ethnographic studies of online environments focused on achieving an understanding of online behaviours in their own right, recent studies tend to pay attention to the ways people blend their online and offline interactions (Hine, 2008). Mosca (2014) argues that a distinction between existing studies can be made between those considering the Internet as a source of information or as an object of study and classifies recent publications on social movements, activism and protests into three groups, depending on their research focus: identity/attitudes/values; behaviour/action; organisational process.

Pink et al. (2016) propose a useful model of digital ethnography that includes the main principles informing many of the existing ethnographic studies of the digital sphere. The authors identify five principles to form this model which can be adapted according to the research design: multiplicity (there are many ways to engage with the digital); non-digital-centricness (the digital media is not the main focus); openness (digital ethnography is an open event); reflexivity (digital ethnography involves reflective practice); unorthodox (digital ethnography requires attention to alternative forms of communicating) (Pink et al., 2016, pp. 8-13).

Kozinets' (2010) work on netnography raises important considerations on how to conduct ethical and accurate research online that have been useful when approaching this study. As netnography has been specifically designed to study

communities online however, it was not suitable for the current study without being integrated with an approach that allowed investigating offline practices.

In their study on *Digital Feminist Activism,* Mendes et al. (2019) highlighted how scholarship is needed to investigate the specific difficulties of studying and analysing feminist digital practices and devised a pioneering methodology that combines ethnographic methods such as the observation of online communities, surveys, semi-structured interviews to then proceed to a qualitative content and thematic analysis of the data.

Similarly, having reviewed the increasing number of contributions devising methodologies for online research, I still failed to find a method that would allow me to explore how feminist activism takes place in online and offline spaces. The choice to conduct my research both online and face-to-face was originally driven by the intention to overcome issues of digital divide (Ruggeri, 2014). As illustrated previously for example, Internet take up is still quite low in Italy, particularly among older women who might be less confident with social media. In this project therefore I combined the feminist methodology of autoethnography, with the observation of online discussions, participation to assemblies, demonstrations, mailing lists and chat groups, semi-structured interviews and the analysis of the main document produced by the movement. I employed thematic analysis to identify patterns in these various sources of data. In the next section I explain in more detail how I developed this approach, what are the opportunities it offers for the study of social movements and which challenges it presents.

4.3 Developing a digitally mediated autoethnography

The use of ethnography or participant observation is not very common in social movement studies (Balsiger and Lambelet, 2014) while it is a hallmark of feminist studies. Black feminist thinkers have highlighted the importance for intellectual work to reveal the complex intertwining between different axes of domination, with Patricia Collins (1990) stressing the importance for scholarship to make a difference to people's lives. Feminist research has distinguished itself for encouraging the use of a reflexive tone that involves the researcher, with her experiences, into the process of research (Mendes et al., 2019).

Considering these intuitions and sharing the commitment to social transformation, I have attempted to look for methodological tools that reflect the conceptual framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981) guiding this research and allow an exploration of the emotional, relational, cognitive and affective aspect of mobilisation.

I have chosen to approach this research through autoethnography as it facilitates the production of thick descriptions and the exploration of personal and interpersonal experiences, by identifying patterns in experience (Deschner, Dorion, Salvatori, 2020). Drawing from feminist standpoint epistemologies, which challenge the dichotomy between subject and object of knowledge (Olesen, 2011; Harding and Norberg, 2014) and highlight how knowledge is situated in the subject's experience of the world (Harding, 2003; Hill Collins, 1990) autoethnographies are a "valuable resource for exploring, presenting and representing the self, encapsulating a personal, intuitive knowledge deriving from a knowing subject situated in a specific social context" (Haynes, 2011: 134). Gago and Mason Deese (2019) add a valuable perspective for the current study as they rethink the concept of situated knowledge, developing their perspective as participants in the recent feminist mobilisation in Argentina. They argue that situated knowledge is not opposed to objectivity but it is a form of *feminist objectivity*. Researching from their positions of activists within *Ni Una Menos*, Gago and Mason Deese (2019) analyse the Argentinian strike and the generative power of feminist assemblies revealing how feminist thought emerges from the social movement itself and "from the territories and bodies in struggle".

Autoethnography has been criticised for its excessive subjectivity and focus on the researcher (Ellis, 2009). Such critiques however, can be contrasted by pointing at the importance assigned by feminist thinkers to the value of thinking together while *starting with the self*. An autoethnographic approach to research can encourage the researcher to reflect critically on their own interpretation while acknowledging how knowledge emerges from exchanges and experiences with others. Furthermore, autoethnographies can be combined with other methodological tools in order to add other sources of data to self-reflective accounts. In this research, my observations and reflections have been useful in association with the analysis of semi-structured interviews and the participation to collective processes of sense

making during assemblies, I argue therefore that this approach provides the opportunity to explore the emotional, relational, cognitive and affective aspect of mobilisation in more nuanced and participatory ways.

In her recent book *Not one Less: Mourning, Disobedience and Desire,* López (2020), a researcher and founding member of the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos*, declares to provide a partial and embodied perspective on this very heterogeneous movement: "Far from having any illusions of full individual autonomy, my theories are in dialogue with the collective in which I have participated" (López, 2020: 4). López highlights how her writing emerged from exchanges and experiences within the movement, and it is only one of the infinite possibilities of interpretation: "one singular intervention in a land of multiplicities, on a terrain of untested practice and disparate discussions" (López, 2020: 4; Salvatori, forthcoming).

Similarly, the account I provide here does not aim at being representative of the movement or the multitude of voices and experiences it contains. It is necessarily a partial, yet critical, reconstruction emerging out of a variety of informal discussions, my own observations and experiences within *NUDM* over the years (2016-2019) as well as 14 in-depth interviews. The overlapping between my social categories and those of the feminists I interviewed facilitated our communication and the possibility to approach interviews as reflexive dialogues and create relationships of trust. My own experiences of gender-based violence undoubtedly made me more receptive and attuned to the demands of this movement, granted me the possibility to relate to activists' interpretations and hinted to the crucial role of emotion in mobilisation. The relationships I gradually developed and the experiences I had within the feminist movement had an impact on how I approached the research, which questions I asked and where I focused my attention (Blee, 2019).

Participant observation in online and offline spaces

Many of the challenges of participant observation (Bryman, 2016) online or offline are similar as in either contexts the researcher needs to negotiate her presence and find a balance between being too involved in the field to the point of losing her critical voice or too detached risking not to capture subtle spoken or unspoken meanings that are only revealed through empathy and closeness. An ethical approach to research is central therefore, as it is a focus on the research being beneficial for all

parties involved. As it will appear from this chapter, my involvement in the movement gradually increased, my position as researcher transformed: from an outsider looking in, I gradually became more involved in the movement's activities for example by giving my contribution for the translation of the movement's documents, or using social media to amplify feminist protest, blurring the lines between feminist research and activism.

By coincidence, the *NUDM* movement was launched shortly after the start of my PhD (October, 2016) and I was able to attend the first demonstration and assembly in Rome in November 2016, on the occasion of the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. After that, I continued travelling to Italy every few months to participate to national assemblies and demonstrations and maintained a connection from a distance through the movement's mailing lists.

As introduced, the analysis I present in this thesis results from three years of involvement within the *NUDM* movement, with a period of fieldwork that lasted between February 2018 and June 2019. I participated to 8 assemblies in various cities (Rome, Milan, Bologna, Pisa, La Spezia, Verona, Imperia), 2 of these were local assemblies (La Spezia, Imperia) and one was an international assembly in Verona. I attended 5 demonstrations (Rome, Ventimiglia, Pisa, Reggio Calabria), 1 flashmob (Bologna) and a variety of events organised at the local, national and international level (i.e. seminars, book launches, exhibitions). I include a table detailing these events at the end of this section.

I also gradually connected with activists on social media and started following a variety of Facebook pages, from *NUDM*'s official page, to pages administered by *NUDM* local assemblies as they emerged. Finding a representative sampling strategy when doing research online can be problematic (Mosca, 2014). I have adopted a purposive sampling strategy, selecting what I found to be the most relevant pages for the movement: these were either searched, suggested to me by activists directly or through their Facebook activity.

In order to obtain a fuller picture of contemporary Italian feminism and the tensions between different perspectives, I have attempted to cross various forms of observations and interactions (Mosca, 2014). I started for example to follow the Facebook pages of feminist groups that are critical towards the movement. In order to have the possibility to observe the circulation of topics, I also started to follow groups and pages originated in other countries (mainly UK, US, France and Latin America).

This allowed me to make observations on recurring topics in the Italian speaking debate and how they resonated with global conversations. Also, by being connected with these groups via social media, I was able to find information on demonstrations and meetings taking place and to participate to online and offline activities and discussions (Postill and Pink, 2012). Having a social media presence and being connected to activists on Facebook also allows a certain level of transparency in the research process.

When attending the initial assemblies, I introduced myself openly (Corbetta, 2003: p.243) as a postgraduate researcher carrying out a research on Italian speaking feminism with the aim of making the movement more visible and contribute to the formulation of an inclusive discourse. While assemblies strive to be open and horizontal, and allow anyone to speak, at first I perceived a certain level of suspicion towards me from some participants, as I was not affiliated with any feminist collective present. In chapter 7, I investigate in more depth this experience, shared by other participants. After repeated visits, starting to get to know some of the organisers during assemblies I started becoming more involved into the movement's activities. Signing up to one of the movement's mailing lists aimed at connecting with feminists at the transnational level allowed me to communicate and participate in the movement's work despite the impossibility of attending local assemblies as I was based in the UK. I began translating material from time to time or helping in processes of collective writing through the use of collaborative pads on cloud services, sharing content on social media to publicise events or diffuse material. My contribution remained quite limited, as many of the activities organised by the movement require physical presence. This was a surprising finding pointing to the continuity of online and offline engagements (Mendes et al., 2019) and confirming the need to carry out research both online and offline in this case.

A difficulty many experience when carrying out research online concerns archiving online data (Mosca, 2014). Since the start of my fieldwork, I kept fieldnotes of online observations and when attending assemblies which I then stored in a spreadsheet. Assemblies are usually video recorded so I was able to return to the recordings if I needed to confront them with my notes (Hine, 2000: 22, 23). Beyond taking notes of my online and in person observations in written form, I also archived visual material (Pink, 2012) such as photographs of events and demonstrations, leaflets or social media posts. I include some of these in the analysis as they are not

only useful to illustrate the written content but can provide a sense of the materialities and activities that escape descriptions or evoke feelings that are hard to convey.

Overall, approaching social media ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012) from a feminist perspective, led me to a continuous negotiation and problematisation between my role as feminist researcher and my role as feminist activist.

Table 1_Events attended/Key dates

Date	Place	Event
26/11/2016	Rome	*NUDM* launch demonstration
27/11/2016	Rome	*NUDM* national assembly
19/01/2017	London	Women's March
08/03/2017	London	Demonstration in Parliament Square in correspondence with *International Women Strike*
22, 23/04/2017	Rome	*NUDM* national assembly
14, 15/10/2017	Pisa	*NUDM* national assembly
23/11/2017	Rome	Press launch: *Feminist Plan for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Gender Violence*
03, 04/02/18	Milan	*NUDM* national assembly (in streaming)
04/03/2018		General elections
08/03/2018	Pisa	Demonstration in correspondence with *International Women Strike*
09/03/2018	Pisa	Visit to feminist squat *Mala Servanen Jin*
21-27/05/2018	Bologna	*NUDM* pro-choice demonstration and events in correspondence with 40th anniversary of abortion law
04, 05/06/2018	Milan	Book launch event at *Casa delle donne di Milano*
13/07/2018	London	Assembly/Artwork exhibition *Ni Una Menos/Women's Strike UK – High on the feminist tide*
14/07/2018	Ventimiglia	Demonstration: *Ventimiglia città aperta*
15/07/2018	Imperia	*NUDM* local assembly
6,7/10/2018	Bologna	*NUDM* national assembly, flash mob
26/11/2018	Rome	*NUDM* national assembly
29-31/03/2019	Verona	*Verona Città Transfemminista* (Interpreting)
12/04/2019	Reggio Calabria	Demonstration organised by the city council with the participation of *NUDM*
15/04/2019	La Spezia	*NUDM* local assembly (Invited talk)

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews: 11 with feminists active in *NUDM* local assemblies in Milan, Padua, La Spezia, Pisa, Bologna, Rome, Rimini, Brindisi, Reggio Calabria; 3 with feminists belonging to other organisations; 7 of these interviews were carried out face to face, 5 on Skype and 1 through WhatsApp audio recordings.

Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews (Della Porta, 2014) where the respondents are asked a variety of pre-set open questions. Feminist researchers have favoured them as a way to privilege participants' voices (Mendes et al., 2019). Gubrium and Holstein (2002) suggest that the role of the interviewer should be to activate narrative productions. Semi-structured interview were employed as the most suitable method for this research, interested in exploring activists' individual experiences, perceptions and processes of sense making.

My sampling decisions (Bryman, 2012) have been driven by two main factors.

The interest to get a nuanced understanding of the contextual variability of feminist activism in Italy, led me to conduct 11 interviews with *NUDM* organisers with various roles in the movement and active in assemblies in different cities across Italy. The desire to get a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Italian feminism beyond the representation given by *NUDM,* to understand how this movement is perceived, and what are main reasons of conflict within Italian feminism led me to interview three women who are not affiliated to *NUDM.*

I have interviewed therefore a trans woman, active in a radical feminist group, *Arcilesbica Nazionale*, diverging from *NUDM* on the issues of sex-work, surrogacy and trans rights and exposed to high levels of online abuse from trans-exclusive radical feminists as well as from queer and trans rights activists. I have also interviewed a feminist educator and journalist, who is not affiliated with *NUDM* and is critical of the movement's stances on multiculturalism and gender fluidity. Lastly, I have interviewed the MEP Cécile Kashetu Kyenge, the first black female minister in Italy, subject to high levels of online abuse and harassment due to her gender, ethnic background and progressive politics. Beyond expressing solidarity, my choice to interview her was determined by the interest to understand how a current feminist mobilisation such as *NUDM,* is perceived by a woman with an

institutional role and to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the issue of online abuse and harassment. I provide a table of informants at the end of this section.

My sampling choices have also been influenced by the unexpected difficulties recruiting and maintaining in contact with participants willing to be interviewed. While I had not anticipated the need to look for gatekeepers (Bryman, 2012: p.15), recruiting interview participants while I was living in the UK proved to be more challenging than anticipated. When I joined *NUDM*'s mailing lists and declared my willingness to carry out interviews, I received no response. I also tried to get in contact through Facebook but received a response only after a few attempts. I was finally able to set interviews thanks to the help of two activists with whom I established relationship during national assemblies. Beyond the implications of this on my methodological choices, this revealed itself as an entry point to understand the centrality of trust in feminist activism, the necessity felt by activists to protect their space and how digital connectivity is not always sufficient to establish contacts transnationally. Furthermore, on many occasions, activists were too busy to be able to participate in interviews, signalling the need to expand our understanding on the labour of activism, as I explain in the analysis.

After establishing contacts, I agreed individually with the participants on the most convenient time, duration and place for interviews, making sure research participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point (Bryman, 2012). Depending on the questions posed and how they are asked in fact, respondents can be more or less forthcoming in providing information, become defensive or withdraw their interest or participation. Due to the possibility to raise sensitive issues, I asked permission to record and transcribe interviews in order to protect their confidentiality and anonymity (Tilley, 2011).

Mainly due to time constraints and geographical distance 7 of these interviews were carried out face-to-face, 5 on Skype and 1 through WhatsApp audio recordings. Interviews lasted between a minimum of 1 hour and a maximum of 3.

My interview guide included a variety of open questions and themes. The majority of interviews easily became spontaneous conversations where feminists were happy to share the experiences that led them to the movement, their role within it and illustrate the practices of activism they carry out individually and with their local assemblies. In order to encourage the expression of narratives, every care was taken not to interrupt or limit the contributions of the interviewee (Mishler, 1986).

Through interviews I have tried to reconstruct the chronology of the movement and its transformations, the issues considered as most important by participants in different territories, the role of digital technologies and social media as part of activists' practices.

Table 2_List of informants

	Pseudonym used	**Gender[17]**	**Age[18]**	**Summary of political experience/affiliations**	**Interview Date/Location**
#1	Nada	MtF	55/60	Trans woman active in radical feminist organisations (Arcilesbica Nazionale). Arrived at feminist activism through LGBT activism. Target of online abuse as trans woman and radical feminist. Works in the third sector.	May 2018, Modena
#2	No pseudonym used: Cécile Kashetu Kyenge	F	50/55	*MEP Socialisti Democratici Europei* First black female minister in Italy. Target of high levels of online abuse, harassment and spreading of misinformation.	May 2018, Bologna
#3	Miranda	F	40/45	Active in NUDM Bologna. Previously involved in various grassroots mobilisations (i.e. student, housing, migrants movements, sex education, LGBT activism).	May 2018, Bologna

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[17] As identified at the time of the interview

[18] Approximate range if not stated

#4	Margherita	F	55/60	Active in NUDM Milan and then Rome. Founder of subgroup: *Terra Corpi Territori e Spazi Urbani*. Previously involved in Spanish 8M, Forum Social Mundial, various collectives.	June 2018, Milan
#5	Dalila	F	40/45	Active in NUDM Milano. Trade unionist, providing legal support for IWS and other strike actions in the logistic sector and in the fields in the South of Italy.	June 2018, Milan
#6	No pseudonym used. Monica Lanfranco	F	60	Feminist educator and journalist. In contact but not affiliated with NUDM. Critical of multiculturalism within intersectional feminism and insistence to surpass gender binarism.	June 2018, WhatsApp
#7	Gemma	F	25/30	Active in NUDM Padova. Arrived at feminism through LGBT activism. Trained psychologist and self-defined precarious worker.	March 2019, Padova
#8	Alba	F	50/55	Active in NUDM Reggio Calabria, Collettiva AutonoMIA, previously active in various feminist collectives and in *Se Non Ora Quando*. Works in the third sector.	April 2019, Reggio Calabria
#9	Camelia	F	35/40	Active in NUDM Milano, in the movement's communication group. Arrived to NUDM through involvement in other queer and transfeminist collectives. Academic, writer.	April 2019, Skype
#10	Peonia	F	35/40	Previously active in NUDM Brindisi, then Rimini. Works as a teacher.	April 2019, Skype

#11	Stella	F	25/30	One of the founders of NUDM La Spezia. Previously active within radical left party. University student in international political sciences.	May 2019, Skype
#12	Sole	F	25/30	Active in NUDM Milano. Involved in communication/press office/video making for the movement. No previous political experience. PhD student and part time worker.	May 2019, Skype
#13	Allegra	F	25/30	Active in NUDM Roma. One of the movement's founders and main administrators for its Facebook page. Freelance journalist with background in communication.	July 2019, Skype

4.4. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was used in order to identify and analyse patterns and themes emerging from data. Thematic analysis was developed out of other textual methods of analysis such as content analysis. Differently from methods such as content analysis however, used to analyse what is manifest in the content, thematic analysis can be employed to identify latent content (Joffe, 2012; Mendes et al., 2019). This makes it an appropriate tool for this project as it facilitates the interpretation of affective, cognitive and symbolic meaning in data (Joffe, 2012).

Furthermore thematic analysis was a suitable tool as it can be used to analyse a variety of data sources. I have carried out a thematic analysis of the movement's main document (the *Feminist plan*), semi-structured interview transcripts and my own fieldnotes. Additionally one of the reasons for utilising thematic analysis for the analysis of a social movement is that it can be employed in order to let activists own conceptualisations emerge: "Thematic analysis is best suited to elucidating the specific nature of a given group's conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study" (Joffe, 2012).

While thematic analysis is widely employed throughout various disciplines it is interpreted and employed in different ways and according to Bryman (2016) it is still an underdeveloped procedure. More research is needed in order to specify what thematic analysis entails in practice and in particular how it can be employed for the study of digital practices. Bryman (2016) argues that this approach still lacks clarity in relation to what is considered a theme, how to identify it and how to systematically reveal patterns in data. A theme can be defined as "a category identified by the analyst through his/her data that relates to his/her research focus (and quite possibly the research questions); that builds on codes identified in transcripts and/or field notes; and that provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data that can make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus" (Bryman, 2016: 580). While this definition helps defining what a 'theme' is, in order to be applicable for a study that adopts a feminist approach, it should be integrated with a recognition of the collaborative and dialogic character of feminist research having an impact on the development of research questions and themes identified (Blee, 2019; López, 2020).

The analysis of the affective practices of feminist activism therefore offers some methodological challenges that need to be further investigated (Mendes et al. 2019). Furthermore, combining different methods of data collection can result in an overwhelming amount of data to manage and analyse. In order to carry out this analysis systematically in fact, throughout my fieldwork, I have archived social media posts, photos and visual materials by date. I have recorded fieldnotes, extracts from mediated communications (e.g. material being shared in the movement's mailing lists), and noted significant developments (e.g. assembly dates, general election date) in a spreadsheet. The interview transcripts to be analysed were between 20 and 40 pages long as I carried out very long interviews (between 1 hour and a half and 3 hours) in order to facilitate the spontaneous emergence of narratives.

The process of analysis of semi-structured interviews therefore entailed a first phase of manual transcription of interviews. In a second phase of attentive reading and translation of the transcripts from Italian to English, I started identifying the emergence of common expressions and topics. I then re-read each transcript to highlight repeated themes and identify similarities and differences. This entailed for example, exploring whether interviewees discussed a certain topic in different ways (Bryman, 2016). Through this process, I identified patterns of experience of activism, for example with a variety of activists recalling a specific event as significant. Throughout my involvement in the movement I also took a variety of reflexive notes during assemblies and I returned to these while analysing interview transcripts.

Overall, therefore, this type of analysis presented some challenges in the organisation and archiving of large amounts of data and it is also extremely time consuming. Furthermore, as others have found when conducting research on feminist activism (Mendes et al., 2019), given the theme of this research being gender-based violence, the analysis of material can be triggering and require great emotional, mental energy from the researcher. The possibility to rely on a support network and periodically stepping out from the analysis are required strategies. This approach to analysis however, revealed great potential, as I was able to obtain a nuanced understanding of the movement's own conceptualisation, grassroots and digital practices and of activists' individual experiences of activism.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the rationale behind the necessity to develop what I call a digitally mediated feminist autoethnography and made visible the opportunities and challenges associated with this approach.

Overall, it is through a combination of reflexive participation to assemblies, demonstrations and events, in-depth interviews, involvement in online discussions and informal chats, that I was able to obtain a nuanced understanding of the movement's internal dynamics and some of the activists' individual experiences. And it is only thanks to activists' generosity, sharing their experiences and at times intimate accounts, dedicating time and attention to my project that I fully appreciated what feminist research offers. While this approach, is more participatory and possibly emancipatory than other methods of data harnessing, it is very labour intensive and requires emotional resilience.

Chapter 5 - Feminism in transit: tracing the transformations of the *NUDM* movement.

One of the project's contributions is tracing the evolution of the *NUDM* movement from its inception in November 2016 to the end of my fieldwork in June 2019. In this chapter, I examine how *NUDM* developed, expanded and transformed over three years: from its birth in November 2016 to the end of the period dedicated to my fieldwork in June 2019. I demonstrate how *NUDM* was able to sustain itself and diffuse over the country during this period (2016-2019) and how activists intensified their mobilising efforts during an exceptional political phase following the entry of a far-right populist government (June 2018).

The analysis I present in this chapter in fact results from three years of involvement within this very heterogeneous movement. It is therefore a necessarily partial and reflexive account, emerging from my embodied experiences of participation to mass demonstrations, deliberative assemblies and online discussions. While I familiarised myself with the movement and started attending national assemblies and following a variety of feminist social media pages, individual accounts and groups since the movement's launch in November 2016, my fieldwork and interviews were carried out between February 2018 and June 2019. This gradually increasing involvement, albeit from a critical distance, dictated by my role as researcher and my geographical position[19], drives me to identify two phases in the development of this movement for the purpose of this analysis.

During an initial phase, starting with the birth of *NUDM* in November 2016, activists became involved in a process of collective analysis, deliberation and writing that lasted one year and lead to the publication of the *Feminist Plan To Combat Male Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence* in November 2017 (Montella et al., 2019). This participatory process was coordinated through a network of local assemblies spread across the country, keeping in contact through online organisational groups and regular national assemblies. In its first year, *NUDM* also took part in the organisation of the first *International Women Strike* on the 8th March 2017, involving feminists in more than 50 countries. In the first section of this

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[19] I was based in the UK but keeping in contact digitally and travelling to Italy to attend national assemblies and demonstrations.

chapter, therefore, I turn to Della Porta's (2008: 29) concept of *eventful protest,* suggesting that particular protest events affect how "organizational networks develop; frames are bridged; personal links foster reciprocal trust". I analyse the process of collective deliberation and writing that lead to the elaboration of the *Feminist plan* and the organisation of the *International Women Strike* through the lens of *eventful protest* (Della Porta, 2008). I demonstrate how the process leading to the *Feminist plan* had a transformative effect on the movement, as it was fundamental for the definition of its organisational form, the emergence of identity frames and mobilising strategies (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). I then demonstrate the *eventful* character of the *International Women Strike,* contributing to the emergence and development of a new political subject (Gago, 2020) and to the construction of transnational cognitive frames (Monforte, 2014). In an attempt to allow activists' collective voice to emerge in this research, in this section, I focus the analysis on the *plan* itself and point to some passages that are salient to understand the movement's own articulations.

In a second phase, following the election of the far-right populist Salvini-Di Maio government in March 2018 and its entry in June 2018, I observed three main developments, which I explored with organisers during interviews: 1) mobilisation intensified focusing in particular on the issues of abortion, divorce and child custody and freedom of movement; 2) *NUDM* achieved higher media visibility and popularity following the organisation of a three-day event in response to an ultraconservative congress in Verona; 3) the movement's role as critical subject contributed to make it a target of soft repression (Ferree, 2004) with attempts to silence or misrepresent protest through online abuse, ridiculing or the stigmatisation of activists. In the second section of this chapter therefore, I demonstrate how the set of ideological and political shifts previously illustrated in chapter 2 (i.e. diffusion of nationalist and ultraconservative rhetoric and policies), making the period analysed 'exceptional' (Della Porta, 2017), helped open new avenues of protest. My analysis in this section centres on how my feminist participants made sense of their political involvement and how they perceived these shifts.

Overall, during the period of my study (2016-2019) the *NUDM* movement expanded, achieved higher visibility and saw an increase of participation in younger

generations. These findings are significant as they seem to contradict scholarly predictions of fewer mobilisation and youth apathy in times of crisis and repression (Chironi, 2019; Della Porta, 2019). I argue that the possibility of relying on a network of digitally connected assemblies spread through the country, the pre-existence of a shared articulation (the *Feminist plan*) and the feeling of being part of a *global feminist tide,* empowered a response despite the increasingly hostile sphere of action. This allows me to contribute to the literature seeking to analyse the influence of the specific political culture on collective action (Flesher Fominaya, 2016) and explain how collective identities can develop in periods of latency to then explode rapidly in periods of contention (Flesher Fominaya, 2015).

5.1 Conceptualising *NUDM* as a movement in transit

Throughout my analysis, I approach this extremely heterogeneous feminist movement as an entity in continuous transformation, in transit between different perspectives and political phases. Firstly, as part of a transnational feminist mobilisation started with the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos*, *NUDM* participates in a process of contamination between movements, evident in its name as well as its mobilising strategies, organisational practices and articulation. As López (2020) points out in her recent study on *Ni Una Menos:* "The feminist rebellion, like a deep river, does not always surface at the same time in all places. It silently modifies the landscape. What was once naturalized becomes intolerable, the exploitation behind the habit revealed" (p. 148). The image of a *deep river* is useful to understand how feminism transits through different territories, emerging often at unpredictable times in unexpected places, creating bonds of trust and shared desire across borders (Salvatori, forthcoming).

Secondly, refraining from the urge to assess feminist activism and organising in terms of success or failure, with the notion of transit, I wish to emphasize the political importance of the process itself, in any effort aimed at transforming reality (Deschner, Dorion, Salvatori 2020). While tracing the developments of the *NUDM* movement between 2016-2019, I consider the transformative potential of processes leading to specific protest events (Della Porta, 2011). This also allows me to demonstrate how the movement's main articulations and frames (Snow et al., 1986) related to the movement's identity emerged from a fluid process of encounter

between different voices and ideological perspectives, simultaneously constructed *in action* during deliberative assemblies (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) and drawing from pre-existing feminist theorisations and experiences. Furthermore, I consider how the participation to the *International Women Strike*, with mobilizing strategies, slogans, hashtags and songs, transiting through borders, favoured processes of frame bridging (Monforte, 2014) that were central for the construction of a new transnational feminist subject.

Moreover, when demonstrating the transformations I observed during the 'exceptional times' I refer to, I do not wish to imply a direct causal relation between the rise of a populist far-right and the diffusion of the movement over the territory, its intensified mobilisation and enhanced visibility. When studying the emergence and development of social movements in fact, one should refrain from "a priori assumptions about causal mechanisms and allow for a number of different relationships between cultural and discursive practices on the one hand, and legal, political, economic, and social structures on the other" (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). I intend therefore, to root my arguments into the analysis I provided in chapter 2, taking into account the Italian media and socio-political context and the more recent shift in the political landscape, which I believe have reflected on the mobilising efforts of *NUDM.*

Behind this reasoning are two considerations. First of all, the necessity to point out how activists themselves perceive this movement as always *in transit*: continuously evaluating and transforming itself and its practices and strategies, negotiating and incorporating different perspectives. On this point, Miranda, an organiser from *NUDM* Bologna explains:

> *"Since it was born, since it has been constituted, NUDM is continuously changing on a certain level".*

Miranda's point here is illustrative of the data on which I draw my arguments. In particular, a theme that emerged from interviews with activists is that of seeing feminist assemblies as laboratories to *think together*, discuss and evaluate the most urgent issues to address in each territory, decide which strategies to adopt through

processes of sense making. This is a central aspect I will investigate as, like McAdam (1999: 16) argues: "continuous processes of sense-making and collective attribution are arguably more important in movements insofar as the latter requires participants to reject institutionalized routines and taken for granted assumptions about the world and to fashion new world views and lines of interaction".

A second consideration concerns the need to reconnect with the history of women's and feminist struggles which provides many examples of how women's rights are never wholly achieved and are always under threat, not just during exceptional times (Kaplan, 2012; Offen, 1988). In an interview that followed the entry of the Salvini-Di Maio government, Monica, a feminist educator and journalist who keeps in contact with and follows the developments of *NUDM* but does not belong to it, expressed this awareness:

> *"I don't feel particularly scared now because even before in a certain way and with previous governments and the previous political climate women's rights were never taken for granted… workers rights […] when they affect men too they are more likely to be taken for granted […] women's rights are a fundamental part of human rights because when women's rights are put in danger, there is where dictatorship starts".*

Similarly, as this chapter clarifies, contemporary feminists found themselves in an ambivalent situation. On one hand, they made clear that, rather than reacting to the specific government in a particular moment, they needed change that is structural and long lasting. The movement's analysis has always included a radical critique towards the State, a detachment from political institutions, the recognition of institutional failings in addressing gender-based violence and the analysis of racism and sexism as interlocked systems of oppression (nonunadimeno, 2017). On various contributions during assemblies activists expressed their awareness of the risk of losing focus from their own aims in order to react to immediate threats or deadlines set by other political actors. On the other hand, as I will illustrate in this chapter, given the harshening of the situation following the entry of the far-right government, activists found themselves concentrating most of their energies on contrasting a set of policies or motions directly threatening their rights.

5.2 The *Feminist plan* and the formation of a collective political subject

In this section, I demonstrate how the process of collective deliberation and writing leading to the elaboration of the *plan* was central in the construction of *NUDM's* organisational form, identity frames and mobilising strategies (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). I illustrate how feminists placed great emphasis on choosing horizontal and inclusive methods of organization and deliberation in writing the *plan*, showing similarities with other recent mobilisations such as Occupy and 15M (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018). I demonstrate the *eventfulness* (Della Porta, 2011) of this process of elaboration as it contributed to form a network of digitally connected assemblies, where activists established tight bonds, came to co-construct frames regarding the movement's identity (Snow et al., 1986) and agree on mobilisation tactics.

The Feminist Plan: a participatory experience of deliberation

NUDM shares many traits of other recent social movements' experiences such as the *Forum* and the *Camp* documented by Della Porta and Doerr (2018), aimed at favouring inclusion, equal participation and horizontal decision making processes. Similarly to the Occupy movement in the US, Italian feminists join small local assemblies, which joined together every few months in a national assembly.

During *NUDM'*s first year (November 2016-November 2017) a network of local assemblies emerged across the country to coordinate the participatory experience of deliberation and writing that lead to the elaboration of the *Feminist plan for the elimination of violence against women and gender violence.* This document was written as an alternative response to the *Extraordinary Plan Against Gender-Based Violence* proposed by the government at the time, criticized by feminists for its top-down character as well as for its securitarian and repressive approach (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020).

The process of elaboration of the *plan* formally started on the first *NUDM* national assembly on the 27th November 2016 at the Università La Sapienza in Rome. This assembly was open to all and saw participants of all genders and from various backgrounds, some new to feminism or activism in general and many already active in other entities, connecting with each other. Before attending the assembly, participants had been invited to register, specifying which thematic group they would

have liked to join. Organisers identified eight main themes to be discussed in the assembly: Exit paths from gender violence; Legislative/juridical issues; Employment and welfare; Sexual and reproductive health rights; Education and training; Feminisms and migrations; Media narration of violence; Sexism within movements.

The event included plenary sessions at the beginning and at the end of the day as well as a long period dedicated to discussing these specific themes in a format similar to that of a workshop. At the end of this day, participants signed up to mailing lists set up for each theme to continue working together. This initial assembly in fact was the starting point of a year-long grassroots and participatory experience of deliberation: activists with different backgrounds and experiences working together within specific thematic groups (*tavoli tematici*), meeting in local deliberative assemblies, keeping connected through digital technologies (i.e. mailing lists, Facebook groups and WhatsApp chats) and converging regularly in national assemblies. Through these encounters feminists decided by consensus what to include in the *plan*. Additionally, activists with a variety of professional backgrounds (e.g. journalists, social media professionals) gave their voluntary contributions to form a graphic team, a communication team and a social media team to cover each step of the publication process. A team of voluntary translators, which I joined, emerged later on to coordinate a collective work of translation of the *plan* and various campaigning materials. As Pavan and Mainardi recently pointed out (2018: 401): "the digital connection of these local experiences nourished the construction of a collective political subject able to gather heterogeneous instances and claims under a shared programme of action that fuelled the drafting of the plan".

The significance of the *plan* therefore, resides not only in it being the movement's manifesto but also in the fact that the process leading to it was generative in itself. In a year-long work of analysis, horizontal deliberation and negotiation between different perspectives on complex issues, activists were able to learn together and from each other a new method of 'doing politics'. This process facilitated the creation or strengthening of affectionate and trusting relationships between feminists. For this reasons, the plan is not interpreted by those who participated in its elaboration as simply a document that sets out the movement's stances, demands and objectives, but a foundational process in the construction of *NUDM*.

It is through these various encounters, and transiting through online and offline spaces, through their various activist circles and everyday experiences that feminists

were able to make sense together of the ways violence against women and gender-based violence manifests in our social system. Or as Sarah Ahmed explains in *Living a feminist life* (2017): "to make sense of what doesn't make sense". As a result of this process in fact, feminists were able to develop a set of demands as well as a vision for a radical transformation of society (Feminist Plan, p.6):

> *"we developed this Feminist Plan To End Violence based on the shared analyses and methods which, as feminists, we implement on a daily basis in the spaces and places we pass through. It begins with the premise that we must overcome the ineffectiveness of political institutions in preventing and combating violence. This is an ambitious challenge, but an extremely important one.* ***It is a plan for a struggle, a plan for action, a plan rooted in the experiences and in the history of feminist movements, of women's shelters and clinics, a plan that identifies methods, tools and demands needed to overcome inadequate approaches*** *[bold mine]. Our plan rejects any interpretation that attempts to neutralise the political dimension of gender-based violence. Such interpretations are actually veiled attempts to keep women in a state of victimhood and dependence, rather than focusing on reasserting their independence and autonomy".*

As it appears from this fragment, the articulation developed in the *plan* was made possible by the convergence of different voices, pre-existing experiences of research and activism as well as by the possibility to draw from feminist theory and practice and from the rich history of feminist movements. The *plan* in fact, merges the concept of *intersectionality* with other fundamental feminist principles:

> *"[the plan] embraces the fundamental principles of feminist theory and practice, such as 'starting with the self' and relations between women… Starting with the self, means recognising differences between us, and thus shedding light on our own privileges (whether as whites, heterosexuals, etc.) in order to deconstruct the current power dynamics. As such, this plan also takes an intersectional approach" (p.6).*

What this fragment reveals is the value recognised by this movement to the practice of *starting with the self* and to the relational dimension of feminism. This brings me to analyse in more detail the significance of the *assembly* for this feminist mobilisation. The assembly in fact is at once the principal form of organisation, a site for deliberation, knowledge production and a place where to prefigure a feminist ideal world: one where to produce social relations that value care, mutualism and that are not based on capitalist or patriarchal divisions and hierarchies. Of course, while these are the aims of the movement, the reality of deliberative spaces offers various tensions (Doerr, 2018).

The cognitive, emotional and relational dimension of feminist assemblies

In the feminist assembly the cognitive, relational and emotional dimensions of protest (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) are intertwined. First of all, as Mason-Deese (2020) and Palmeiro (2020) argue in relation to the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos,* the movement's practices of organisation and mobilisation facilitate the emergence of a specific *feminist epistemology* and enable what they refer to as *militant research.* This type of research exceeds the boundaries of academia and combines theoretical contributions with lived experience, allowing the development of forms of *collective intelligence* (Palmeiro, 2020). This is true also for the case of *NUDM* where activists with varying experiences and backgrounds, came together in assemblies, taking part in critical discussions on various themes. Given the little space dedicated to gender and feminism in mainstream media, and the scarcity of feminist and gender studies programs in Italy, the assembly assumes particular significance. In my experience of participation to *NUDM* national assemblies, participants transit through different forms of knowledge production.

While a national feminist assembly, is not a conference or an academic seminar, for example, there are similarities between these formats. First of all, the national assemblies I attended were held within University buildings except for one, which was held in a school. Due to the large number of participants, the organization of the room during plenary sessions reflects that of a frontal teaching session in a lecture theatre: organisers coordinate the assembly from the main stage and the audience participates from 'university benches'. Similarly to the experience of 15M in Spain (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018), to facilitate the creation of an inclusive space,

organisers agree some guidelines for the smooth running of the assembly. Anyone who would like to intervene is asked to sign their name on a list of speakers and limit their contribution to 6/7 minutes. Participants are asked to speak in the name of their local assembly rather than on an individual basis wherever possible. The national assembly organisers, usually active in the host city, manage the time assigned to each contribution by signaling to the speaker when they are about to exceed their time. Avoiding repetitions throughout the day and using hand gestures instead of applauses to signal consensus, are encouraged practices. After a plenary session, the work is usually split into thematic groups with a format similar to that of a workshop or seminar. Towards the end of the day the assembly reunites again in a plenary session where each group summarises what they have discussed and decided. A report summarising these decision is then read out and later circulated though mailing lists so that anyone has a chance to signal inconsistencies or propose amendments.

The experience of the assembly however, is much more chaotic and emotionally overwhelming than how it would appear from this initial description. The emotional and relational dimensions of protest (Della Porta, 2011; Gould; 2002) in fact are fundamental to understand this mobilization. First of all the organization of national assemblies is centred on care. For example, before the assembly, organisers in the hosting city usually coordinate crowdfunders to organize buses for activists to be able to travel low cost. Activists from the host city open their houses or organize low cost deals with local B&B. Care is taken to provide accessible venues whenever possible and on the day of the assembly some activists volunteer to create a nursery area, so that parents can have support while concentrating on the content of the assembly. Lunches are provided by local independent providers and are usually vegan or vegetarian. More than practical solutions these are intentional political statements: attempts to prefigure an ideal communal form of living. Moreover, activists often organize events in correspondence with the days of the national assembly (often preceded by a national demonstration) such as gigs or parties to create occasions for feminists to get to know each other and spend time together. Assemblies, and all the experiences surrounding them, therefore nurture a strong emotional involvement in participants, who often make this manifest in their contribution and elicit enthusiastic or moved reactions and applauses. The sharing of personal accounts, the calls for action or expressions of solidarity towards struggles carried forward in other localities

as well as all the unexpected moments of playfulness or warmth, create a sense of community.

The importance given to being present with one's body and the generative power of sharing space with others is also reminiscent of recent experiences such as Occupy. The centrality of the encounter between bodies for the sharing of individual experiences and narratives has always been a feature of feminism and it is indeed a common practice in the South American *Ni Una Menos* mobilisations. What López (2020: 102) narrates in her recent book on the *Not One Less* mobilisations, gives a clear sense of the significance of assemblies and the weight assigned by activists to inhabiting space together, even if just for a few hours or a day:

"The truth of the assembly is the truth of the bodies that form part of it. Social networks allow for ubiquity, being present while not, adhesion through a quick opinion; assembly imposes a different temporality, active patience, listening to the point of exhaustion, affirmation of the body's humility, euphoric or exhausted, attentive to the tone of a speech, moved by an idea, restless in the line for the bathroom, uncomfortable in the hard chairs. After so many assemblies, a kind of political friendship keeps difference from creating distrust".

While social networks are used extensively, decisions are very rarely taken online. For *NUDM*, collectively occupying physical spaces is a central means to create more inclusive and horizontal decision methods and mediate tensions. The convergence of voices within a heterogeneous movement such as *NUDM* in fact is not free from dissonance and tensions. Activists have attempted to create horizontal methods, as illustrated in a statement of intents often used: *"we are the method we decide to give ourselves"*. At times however, as already identified in studies on recent social movements (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018), while trying to develop horizontal practices and construct more equal spaces where 'everyone has a voice', power imbalances and internal tensions on who is in fact allowed to speak or participate can arise. For example in three different occasions where I was present, abolitionist feminists signed their names on the list of speakers. When it was their turn to speak they were able to introduce their points however, they very soon challenged from many in the audience (with some activists booing and shouting and others trying to

mediate). To counter abolitionist claims, an intervention from the sex worker collective *Ombre Rosse*[20], which is part of *NUDM*, was encouraged straight after.

Furthermore, while the consensus-based model of deliberation is aimed at inclusivity for example, it can result in very long processes of decision making during assemblies, with the exclusion of those who have other engagements. According to interviewees, it is common that, while local assemblies are attended by a large number of people, those who stay until the end to come to a conclusion are a limited number of organisers: a 'backbone' of the local assembly. Furthermore, following each national assembly a report is co-written to summarise the content discussed and any agreed action. Understandably, given the variety of voices and issues at stake, creating a summary that pleases everyone is not always easy. There is a difficulty to remain within the time frame given and tension can arise on certain aspects.

Moreover, to contrast power imbalances, rather than distributing tasks hierarchically, anyone can volunteer to join the movement's 'communication group' to create campaigning materials (e.g. slogans, visuals and banners) which then get circulated through the movement's channels (e.g. Facebook groups, mailing lists and chat groups). In practice however, as I will explain in more detail in chapter 7, some activists lament feeling left out while others have to take on too much work or responsibility.

Additionally, while *NUDM* strives to build an intersectional movement where the voices of migrant women, women of colour, trans and non-binary individuals are heard, it struggles in practice to achieve this objective consistently. On various occasions, during assemblies, activists reflected on the *whiteness* of contemporary Italian feminism and the necessity to reach out in particular to migrant women. Lastly, similarly to what Doerr (2018) finds in her study of the *Italian Social Forum,* the existence of personal relationships can sometimes result in unintended marginalisation within movements. I will analyse these tensions in more detail on chapter 6 and 7. For the purpose of this chapter however, I will demonstrate below

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[20] The contribution was then uploaded on the movement's blog:
https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2017/04/27/intervento-in-plenaria-23-aprile-del-collettivo-ombre-rosse/?fbclid=IwAR3uEGvnSaZ2ZGRXpnls88QXrawt7BkjIRvm-jinTFnFu2Ld_7-FRkZSdQA

how the emergence of a disruptive subject had a transformative effect in the development of the movement.

An eventful disruption

Towards the end of the year dedicated to the elaboration of the *plan* a new thematic group called *Earth, bodies, territories and urban spaces* manifested itself during a national assembly (Pisa, October 2017). With their first intervention, two activists proposed a variety of themes they believed needed to be incorporated in the movement's articulation. First of all, the need for an anticapitalist feminist movement such as *NUDM* to contrast gender-based violence and sexism but also speciesism[21], the exploitation of natural resources and the earth. Furthermore, one of the two activists, a trans woman, shared her experience of transition and activism and her desire for the *NUDM* movement to define itself *transfeminist*. The assembly welcomed the proposal with a long and enthusiastic applause. The term transfeminism had been circulating in Italy for a while, at least since 2009 with the translation into Italian of the Spanish manifesto *Para la insurreccion transfeminista* (For a transfeminist insurrection) (Baldo, 2019). It is therefore a transfeminism of Spanish inspiration, diffused in Italy through a variety of collectives developed in recent years, which mostly converged into the *NUDM* movement. A definition of transfeminism was included in the plan (p.2) as:

> *"both a resistance movement and a theory that gender, arbitrarily assigned at birth, is a social construct used as a means of controlling and restricting human bodies to conform to the heterosexual, patriarchal social order. Driven by the lives and experiences of transgender people, feminists and queer people, as well as by the complex, multifaceted possible positions vis-à-vis gender and sexuality, transfeminism sees the connection between the patriarchal order and the oppressive capitalist system, which harm all individuals who are not heterosexual white males".*

Given the heterogeneity of experiences within the movement however, not everyone was familiar with this term at the time of the assembly, making this intervention

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[21] The consideration that human animals have greater moral rights than non-human animals.

particularly significant as a moment of knowledge exchange between activists and for the definition of the *NUDM*'s movement identity (Jasper, 1997).

Furthermore, after the feminist *plan* had been completed in November 2017, a decision was taken to disband the thematic working groups as activists could continue to work within their local assemblies. This decision however, was perceived as arbitrary and problematic by some as it could lead to a dispersal of energies. The *Earth, bodies, territories and urban spaces* thematic group, refused to disperse and kept working collectively across different territories. Since the start, this small group placed great emphasis on the importance of developing truly horizontal and inclusive methods of deliberation, also in order to nurture trans-territorial ties between activists, build transnational connections with feminist, indigenous and revolutionary movements across borders (e.g. the Mapuche in Argentina, Kurdish and Palestinian revolutionaries). This meant first of all, coordinating through a mailing list and a Telegram chat group and attempting to implement horizontal processes of consensus based decision making also online. Borrowing practices learned in the 15M protests in Spain for example, one of the group founders proposed the use of the open source software Etherpad[1], in order for activists to deliberate and write collaboratively regardless of their location. This group also placed emphasis on the more consistent adoption of a gender inclusive language in digital communication (e.g. in the group's mailing list), a practice already present in Italian feminism and particularly within *NUDM* (Pusterla, 2019). While the decision to continue working as a thematic group and to implement independent methods, was resisted by some, it allowed the participation and continued engagement of those activists who could not participate to a specific local assembly. For example it greatly facilitated my efforts to keep up to date and give my contribution to the activities of the movement while living in the UK. This 'atypical' and disruptive presence therefore has been responsible for some important transformations within *NUDM*. Overall, this example also serves to demonstrate how in the case of *NUDM,* the movement's identity was constructed through a variety of deliberative assemblies during the process of elaboration of the *plan*.

The elaboration of the plan and the construction of NUDM as a distinct subject

Polletta and Jasper (2001) suggest that questions concerning the ways collective

identities might be constructed through protest instead of preceding protest remain unexplored. While, as explained, *NUDM* is a collection of previous experiences, the process of elaboration of the *plan* sanctioned its construction as a distinct subject. Concluding the year of collective work in November 2017 in fact, activists launched the publication of the *Feminist plan*, declaring its relevance in the formation of a new collective subject, considering it the basis of future mobilisation and stating the intention to continue diffusing its content. This is explained in the *Feminist plan* (p.27) where we can read:

> *"This Feminist Plan To Combat Gender-Based Violence is [...] an open, multifaceted field of resources put together from the intersections of many individual women, collectives, groups, local assemblies, CAV [1] s and associations.*
>
> *Still a work in progress, it is given shape by a collective body that contains all of our anger and all of our love for the world. It arose from a desire to dream and conceive of another life, another set of human relations, societies free of male and gender-based violence, and free of the power structures, both economic and cultural, that sustain this violence.*
>
> ***From this point forward, this plan will be a foundation for our mobilisation and struggle. We will relaunch it in the many Not One Less committees that have formed over the course of this year and that, we hope, will form in the future, everywhere we live and pass by – at home, at school, in universities, in workplaces, in public spaces*** [bold mine] *– with a consciousness that male violence and gender-based violence concern all of us, and that eliminating them will entail profoundly transforming the status quo. [...] This plan is a summary of complex analyses and proposals that have grown out of this movement over the course of the long year that has just passed. It is an important opportunity that helps us to more clearly see the lines of oppression that surround us, and the lines of resistance that can break them.*
>
> ***We have found a collective voice and we will not stop using it*** *"*[bold mine]***.***

As it appears from this passage, the participatory experience of consensus-based deliberation and collective writing, ultimately contributed to the creation of a community sharing a 'collective voice'. Providing occasions to strengthen existing

bonds between activists and form new ones, this year long experience also had a role in the gradual formation of a network of digitally connected assemblies or committees. As I will illustrate in more detail in chapter 6, during the time of my involvement, I have observed the gradual emergence or consolidation of such local assemblies over the country. In cities such as Rome, Milan, Bologna, Turin and others, with long histories of feminist and queer organising, these assemblies easily tapped into pre-existing experiences and networks. Interestingly though, local assemblies kept emerging also in areas that were previously 'dormant' for example in small villages or peripheries without a significant history of feminist or LGBTQ+ mobilisation or grassroots participation. If the diffusion of *NUDM* across the country started while elaborating the *plan*, it continued afterwards and at the time of this writing (July 2020) there are 98 local assemblies, each with their own Facebook page[1] and coordinating with each other through mailing lists, Facebook groups and chat services.

Importantly, by tapping into a variety of experiences, generations and perspectives through these encounters, activists learned together and from each other and participated in the construction of frames related to the movement's identity. Frames (Snow et al., 1986) are defined as 'interpretive packages' used by movement's organisers to signal a condition that needs to be addressed, such as a form of injustice, perpetrated by a specific antagonistic force that needs to be denounced and/or challenged through a particular form of mobilization. In the case of *NUDM* what I have demonstrated through the analysis presented here is that, rather than being produced by a few organisers, frames were continuously co-constructed by activists as they interacted with one another in deliberative assemblies and online. To illustrate this further, in the next section, I will analyse another important step in the development of the movement's identity and its frames: the participation to the *International Women Strike*.

5.3 The *International Women Strike* and the development of a transnational identity

Another significant participatory experience shaping the *NUDM* movement and its articulation has been taking part in the organisation of the *International Women Strike* on the 8th March 2017. I argue that the organization of the *International*

Women Strike, had a high level of *eventfulness* as it facilitated the development or strengthening of interactions, the creation of feelings of solidarity across borders and contributed to processes of mutual contamination and networking 'in action' (Della Porta, 2011: 34). Furthermore, for *NUDM,* as well as for other 'branches' of *Ni Una Menos*, the sharing of materials, slogans, hashtags and songs centred on similar demands and claims, contributed to construct transnational cognitive frames (Monforte, 2014) and form a new political subject (Gago, 2020): one that has a transnational identity but not a hierarchical transnational structure (Rudan, 2017).

Digital connectivity had a central role in this process as, through the Facebook group *International Women's Strike/Paro Internacional de Mujeres,* activists in more than 50 countries established or strengthened political friendships and were able to circulate content, strategies and display solidarity to one another[22]. These digitally mediated connections granted the possibility to draw connections between similar experiences of gender-based and economic violence in different geographical contexts and make sense of the effects of late neoliberalism and of the transnational character of the neoconservative backlash underway.

Similarly to the recent experiences documented by Della Porta and Doerr (2018) (i.e. Zapatistas in Mexico, Sem Terra in Brasil, Piqueteros in Argentina, indigenous mobilisations in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador), this transnational feminist mobilisation shares the aim of contrasting the effects of late neoliberalism with the creation of communal forms of living. In this sense, assemblies assume a new light, beyond their role as organisational and deliberative spaces I have previously analysed, they become generative spaces where to prefigure a feminist world without borders, not free from difficulties and conflict but a space where to reorganise life and labour in non exploitative and participatory ways (Federici, 2018). Through the *Strike*, feminists articulated a critique towards patriarchy, neoliberalism and the State as interconnected systems of oppression and transited through contributions from second wave feminism (e.g. Wages for housework) and tactics from fourth wave feminism (i.e. skilful use of social media). In this way, this mobilisation brings attention to a very urgent analysis that, starting from everyday experiences and material conditions, brings into question the capitalist, and specifically neoliberal

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[22] Strike organizing group on Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/InternationalWomansStike

division of labour, based on the devaluation of reproductive work carried out mostly by women (Federici, 2018). While this might not sound like a new insight, what is novel about this analysis is that it emerges from the lived experience of a heterogeneous network of women and *dissident identities* (Mason-Deese, 2020) in very different conditions and locations and it adds a focus on gender to a usually class based analysis (Arruzza et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the experience of organisation and participation to the *International Women Strike* was significant for the construction of the movement's transnational identity. Activists in fact, came to define this feminist movement as a *sweeping* force, the only mobilisation capable of building a radical alternative to the neoliberal system and, as Federici recently argued: the "spearhead of an international insurgency" (Furtado et al. 2020). This was conveyed for example through the circulation of metaphors. Italian feminists in fact, conveyed the revolutionary aims of this mobilisation through the metaphor of an unstoppable *feminist tide*, capable of invading every street and square and exceed every border. Initially used by the 15M mobilisations in Spain, the metaphor of the *tide* was adapted through a feminist lens by Italian feminists and then adopted also by *Ni Una Menos* in Latin America. As Cecilia Palmeiro (2020), one of the organisers and militant researchers within *Ni Una Menos* explains: "The feminist adaptation of the concept mobilised the idea of a massive tide of feminised bodies, albeit without invoking an essential biological identity: the tide crosses borders, languages, identities, generations, ethnicities, and social classes – transversally, horizontally, intersectionally, and in solidarity".

The metaphor of the *tide* itself can be adapted and transformed depending on the context and used for example to explain the ways feminism develops outside the Global North, to document experiences of communitarian or indigenous feminism. The image of the *tide* signals the convergence of heterogeneous voices, meeting in numerous and diverse assemblies, in various localities. It can also explain therefore how activists came to construct *NUDM* as a movement of *people in transit*, to convey the aim of surpassing any type of binarism.

In this process of mutual contamination between movements, tactics are borrowed and content circulated through dynamics of *political translation,* central to understand the movement's logic and including a "spontaneous and collective

translation flow between different national and regional languages, between visual and verbal languages, between different levels of a language (from everyday to theoretical language, and vice-versa), including poetry and the languages of social media, public discourse and the bodily languages of social protest" (Palmeiro, 2020).

Importantly, while the process leading to the *Strike* contributed to the formation of the movement transnational identity, this does not correspond to a hierarchical transnational structure. On this point, Allegra, an organiser and one of the founders of *NUDM* in Rome, explains that while the movement is not part of an actual transnational organisation, it benefits from mechanisms of 'spontaneous contamination' between movements:

> *"so the problem is there are no transnational connections at the organisational level [...] maybe you have the contact with comrade X who tells you something and therefore maybe there is also a bit ... they borrow some practices [...] so at the level of content, on the level of the imaginary level yes, there is a spontaneous contamination [...]but it would be useful actually... this should be let's say the next step also of NUDM ... to insert itself in a global transnational dynamic".*

Like other activists I interviewed, Allegra narrates how exciting it is to see mobilisation happening around the world through social media and expresses the desire to consolidate stronger connections. There are attempts to connect transnationally for example by inviting guests from other movements (e.g. *Ni Una Menos, Black Lives Matter*) to speak in Italian assemblies however these exchanges are perceived as too sporadic:

> *"it's interesting but it is clear: a person comes and tells you, another person comes and tells you [...] however it would be good to create a place, let's say, a hub where we can, I mean, we can see each other and talk".*

If dynamics of *political translation* and the use of digital technologies in preparation to the *Strike* and beyond, have contributed to the formation of a transnational identity, they also inspired mobilization strategies. Polletta and Jasper

(2001) argue that activists can develop a certain 'taste' for the type of tactic to be privileged in pre-existing or alternative collective identities that they belong to. In the case of *NUDM*, the different voices reflected in the variety of tactics used: I observed for example, the coexistence of 'antagonistic' strategies of direct action developed within social centres and the sharing of petitions developed by women's centres. The movement's tactics and imageries were also greatly inspired by the ones developed by feminists in Latin America such as for example the use of the pañuelo. Argentinian feminists from *Ni Una Menos* have been carrying a green square handkerchief as a symbol of their struggle for a free, safe and legal abortion, giving rise to the image of a *green tide* that forms during their huge mass demonstrations (Palmeiro, 2018). In support of their Argentinian sisters and as a way to signal the struggle for sexual and reproductive rights, Italian feminists have been carrying a dark pink pañuelo (the colour adopted by *NUDM*). A more recent example of the circulation of tactics developed in Latin America is the dramatic performance of the song *"The rapist in your path",* ideated by the Chilean group Las Tesis and being staged by feminist around the world, including Italy.

In the following section, I demonstrate how the possibility to rely on a network of digitally connected feminist assemblies and a shared articulation while feeling part of a *global feminist tide* contributed to Italian activists' ability to intensify their action during a particularly challenging time.

5.4 Intensification of feminist mobilisation in exceptional times

As illustrated in chapter 2, since the financial and democratic crisis in 2008, gender movements have been among the most active in Italy (Chironi, 2019). Neoliberal austerity policies, hitting disproportionally women and other disadvantaged social categories, brought structural inequalities to the surface while highlighting the consequences of years of mismanagement. The diffused mistrust in traditional parties and institutions contributed to the success of the populist Five Star Movement first (Della Porta, 2014, 2018) to then lead to a shift to the right. This culminated with the entry of a far-right populist government: a coalition between the populist Five Star Movement and the right-wing secessionist party Northern League (June 2018 - September 2019).

Some key drivers for feminist mobilization in Italy in this phase, have been analyzing and denouncing the consequences of an alliance between far-right and ultra conservative pro-life groups and contrasting the emergence of policies threatening sexual, reproductive, civil rights and freedom of movement. As introduced in fact, in this period, Italy saw an increased visibility and legitimisation of nationalistic and xenophobic discourse vehiculated by the Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (Northern League) both through traditional and social media (Albertazzi et al., 2018); the harshening of closed borders policies with the criminalisation of solidarity and a rise in incidents aimed at the migrant population; attempts to repress protest through the drafting of new 'security decrees'; the strengthening of neo-fascist parties (*Fratelli d'Italia* and *Forza Nuova*) and movements (*Casa Pound*) throughout the territory (Padovani, 2008); the further diffusion of anti-gender and ultra conservative anti-abortion rhetoric and influence within institutions. On this last point, Graff & Korolczuk (2018) find that in Italy anti-gender actors are connected with the political parties in power and as a consequence the fight against 'gender ideology' influences state policy. This was evidenced for example by the creation by the Salvini-Di Maio government of a *Ministry of the family and disability* with the nomination of the ultra-conservative Minister Lorenzo Fontana, known for opposing abortion and LGBTQ+ rights (Salvatori, 2018).

In this section, I demonstrate how the set of ideological and political shifts illustrated here and making the period analysed exceptional (Della Porta, 2017); have contributed to open new avenues of protest. My analysis here centred on how feminists interviewed made sense of their political involvement and how they perceived these shifts. As previously explained, while this movements makes clear that its struggle is against structures of oppression and that the situation was only worsened by recent political shifts, with the entry of the new government, activists had in fact to concentrate their action of some very contingent threats.

Right to abortion and self-determination - #moltopiudi194

As I have documented in a recent article (Salvatori, 2018), the right to abortion has been a major driver of recent feminist mobilisations in Italy. While abortion in Italy was legalized in 1978 following feminist pressure, the abortion law (Legge 194) includes a *conscience clause*. Due to the extremely high number of doctors refusing to

perform abortions due to their religious beliefs, the right to abortion is in practice not guaranteed (Torrisi, 2017). Italian feminists have responded to this health concern through a variety of activities such as mass demonstrations, flash mobs in front of hospitals and clinics with high numbers of conscience objectors, or in front of pharmacies refusing to sell contraception or emergency contraception. Beyond social media campaigns, an open source digital map providing information of all the doctors and pharmacists who are invoking a conscience clause (obiezionerespinta.info) was put together. These various actions focused on the demand for women's rights to self-determination and connected the attack on reproductive rights in Italy to a broader global backlash on women's rights.

Anti-gender advocacy groups however, have met these mobilizations with strong opposition. One of the major advocacy groups is Citizengo.org, whose website is available on various languages and contains petitions and calls for actions to 'defend and promote life, family and liberty' and influence institutions, governments and organisations in more than 50 countries (Citizengo.org). With persuasive and emotionally charged language, the website is used to mobilise people against the 'threat of gender ideology' (Whyte, 2017). The group uses social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) as well as on the ground campaigns such as the #FreeSpeechBus to diffuse its message (Citizengo.org). Anti-abortion posters have recently appeared in various Italian cities. An example can be found in a recent Facebook post from the Italian feminist movement *NUDM* protesting its appearance[23]. The post made by CitizenGo states: *'Abortion is the first cause of femicide in the world #StopAbortion'*, highlighting the ability of this group to use the same language of their opponents as a weapon against them (Datta, 2018). In response to this provocation, feminists have responded with a similar strategy, using Photoshop to modify the picture of the original poster and distributing it through Facebook. The poster now says: '*Violence against women is the first cause of femicide in the world'* #StopConscienceObjection or *'Patriarchy is the first cause of femicide in the world'* #StopMiddleAges[24] (Salvatori, 2018).

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[23] Link to the post on Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/photos/a.1873992449487638.1073741828.1863649617188588/2162972520589628/?type=3&theater
[24] Link to the post on Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/photos/pcb.2163070063913207/2163068597246687/?type=3&theater

During demonstrations as well as through its social media channels, *NUDM*, showed support to the feminist struggles for the right to abortion in Poland, Argentina and Ireland. The effort to connect to a transnational feminist community was symbolised for example by celebrating the success of the Irish referendum on abortion, during a demonstration I attended in Bologna in May 2018. Drawing similarities between the Catholic Ireland and Italy, Italian activists challenged the intrusion of the Vatican in political decisions, that concern women's reproductive right with slogans such as *'Fuori i preti dalle nostre mutande!' (We want priests out of our knickers!)*. The demonstration in Bologna was part of a national campaign corresponding with the 40th year anniversary of the abortion law. *NUDM* did not simply demand the right to abortion to be respected but also an expansion of the abortion law. Using the slogan and hashtag *#moltopiudi194* (much more than the 194/78 law) feminists demanded the removal of the *conscience clause* and the provision of gender and sexual education in schools and free contraception.

In this exceptional phase various cities throughout Italy started filing anti-abortion motions, the most visible being Verona declaring itself *"Città a favore della Vita"* (City in Favour of Life) and promising funding for pro-life organisations. Feminists from *NUDM* mobilized strongly in response to this proposed motion and ultimately succeeded in it being put aside. To protest the motion, feminists entered in the Town Hall while the motion was being discussed. Like they did in various other occasions, activists organised a performance, making reference to the dystopian novel and popular series *The Handmaid Tale*[25]. Wearing the Handmaids costume, a red and white cloak and bonnet, activists protested the requisitioning of women's bodies by the State and attacks to self-determination. This performance has been circulating globally in recent feminist mobilisations.

Freedom of movement – Ventimiglia città aperta

Another key driver for feminist mobilisation, have been freedom of movement and anti-racism, following the harshening of migration policies and a further normalisation of racism, also embodied in the figure of the interior minister Matteo Salvini. As anticipated, rather than simply reacting to the political shift, *NUDM* had

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[25] Link to article describing the use of this performance in different countries:
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/03/how-the-handmaids-tale-dressed-protests-across-the-world

already elaborated a deep critique of the border system and a call for freedom of movement and autonomy in the *Feminist plan* (p.17):

> *"Our demands are framed within a critique of, and opposition to, the global system of borders, as a function of the struggles and methods of resistance adopted by migrants. We demand that freedom of movement and unconditional permission to reside should be granted anywhere in or outside of Europe. For this reason, we are critical of the institutional migrant 'welcome' system and reject the emergency-style rationale applied to the issue of immigration: this rationale renders women migrants invisible in the name of urban decorum and militarises everyone's lives. We condemn the victimisation of migrant women because we acknowledge their daily struggles both inside and outside of our borders.*
>
> *We oppose deportations, detention, blackmailing migrants for residence permits, institutional racism that destabilises life for everyone, and repressive policies that marginalise trans and other non-conformist individuals.*
>
> *One goal of ours is to abolish Italian and European laws that limit freedom of movement, starting with the Minniti-Orlando and Bossi-Fini laws, and moving up to international border control outsourcing deals included in the Dublin system and the 'migration compact' as well as Italy's bilateral agreements (e.g. with Libya and Turkey). Another goal is to abolish administrative detention in Europe and in countries to which migrant detention is outsourced; to shut down the detention and deportation centres and any other structure that limits freedom of movement or the right to autonomy. We therefore call for the repeal of all legislation that criminalises migration and solidarity between migrant networks, beginning with the 'crime' of illegal entry and settling, as well as laws against aiding and abetting migrants".*

As this fragment shows, activists were very aware that the entry of the far-right government was worsening an already inhumane approach to migration. The characterisation of migrant males as dangerous and migrant women as victims had been used to justify 'closed borders' policies, leading to hundreds of migrants and refugees being stranded in the Mediterranean while activists, volunteers and NGOs

rescue ships were increasingly criminalised for offering solidarity. Racial discrimination was being practiced in 'the name of women's rights' (Farris, 2017). As Farris (2017) documents, far from being unique to the Italian context, a similar dynamic has been observed in other countries such as France or the Netherlands in recent years. Specifically however, feminists from *NUDM* pointed out how a securitarian and discriminating approach to migration, does not prevent or address the exploitation of migrant women being trafficked, employed in slave-like conditions in the fields in the south of Italy (Prandi, 2018) or carrying out the majority of care and domestic work.

A gradual rise in anti-migrant and racist sentiment, perceived online, manifested more concretely in February 2018 when Italy witnessed the deliberate killing of a group of African migrant workers in the streets of Macerata[26]. Miranda, one of the organisers in *NUDM* Bologna explains:

> *"there was this... er... this attempted mass murder by a neo-fascist in Macerata who shot indiscriminately on a group of people identified as 'niggers' [...] with the instrumentalisation, amongst other things, of a heinous femicide that had taken place shortly before... this girl Pamela who had been found, she had been chopped into pieces and left on the street… [...] this was connected to a Nigerian boy who had been initially indicted, it seemed he was a heroin trafficker... the girl had left a community, escaped from a community for drug addicts...".*

As it appears from Miranda's recollection, a brutal femicide had been explained by making reference to the perpetrator's origin. The attempted mass murder Miranda refers to, lead to the organisation of antiracist and antifascist demonstrations in Macerata and in other cities. Participation from *NUDM* however, attracted online attacks and abuse towards one of the movement's Facebook page.

Nearly all the activists I interviewed in fact remembered a particularly violent, 'militarised' attack to *NUDM Milano*'s Facebook page, on the day after the antifascist demonstrations. Miranda continues:

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[26] An article (in Italian) illustrating the events: https://www.dinamopress.it/news/macerata-trentamila-al-corteo-antifascista-movimenti-vincono-la-scommessa/

"so, many of us from NUDM went to Macerata and there was a mass demonstration [...] we were 35,000 [...] and on the same day of Macerata there was also a concurrent manifestation in Milan [...] the day after, Sunday, under an article by Lea Melandri, a Milanese feminist historian [...] there was a so called 'monstrous shitbombing'... that is, in the arc of a few hours there were thousands of comments [...] there was a comrade from Milan that I was online to do other things with... at the beginning she would point me to these groups that I already knew and then she told me 'no but...'... I said 'stop bothering the chat with this.. (she laughs), with this crap, I already know them'... then I said 'no but look at the page for Milan, I said: 'oh holy shit' ... I mean, in the space of two hours they had multiplied".

The page received a continuous flow and huge amount of racist and sexist insults and threats. Activists from *NUDM* Milano responded to the first few comments to then decide to close the page for two days and reopen with the announcement of a new policy where any racist and sexist comment would be deleted and perpetrators banned after one warning. This is just one example of how, during this phase, feminist activists perceived, and paid the consequences of a further legitimisation and normalisation of racism and hate speech online.

Beyond this brutal incident in Macerata, another signal was the murder of Malian migrant trade unionist Soumaila Sacko in June 2018. This event contributed to various mobilisations alongside or in solidarity with migrants, during the summer of 2018. A numerically significant antiracist demonstration was organized in Ventimiglia in July 2018, by a no-border collective (*Progetto 20K*) supporting refugees on the border between Italy and France, with the support of *NUDM Genova* and *Bologna*. The demonstration attracted various organisations including institutional actors and public figures. While the event was launched and documented on social media, mainstream media coverage gave it visibility while also contributing to create tension and discourage participation due to the possibility of violence erupting. *NUDM* organised an assembly in Imperia on the following day. This became an occasion to take stock of the absence of large numbers of migrants and refugees, particularly women. This event therefore raised important questions on inclusivity in the feminist movement and made visible the difficulties of putting intersectionality in practice.

Mobilising against a nationalist and neoconservative twist: A state of 'Permanent unrest'

On the first national assembly organised in Bologna (October, 2018) following the entry of the far-right populist government (June, 2018), through the sharing of experiences of activism in their various localities, activists came to provide a collective account of how the situation had deteriorated over the summer. Reiterating *NUDM*'s aim to liberate all oppressed subjectivities, activists reflected on how migrants, even more so if women, lesbians, trans and queer, were the most affected by these political shifts.

On various occasions during the assembly, activists expressed the desire and the necessity to mobilise and proclaimed *NUDM* as the only movement in Italy in the position to mobilise hundreds of people to contrast the authoritarian and conservative drift and prefigure an alternative. During the assembly in fact, one of the organisers declared how *NUDM* was now a mature movement, able to recognize male violence as structural and trace the links between various forms of exploitation, sexism and racism.

With this shared sense of urgency to mobilise (Gould, 2002), the assembly launched the campaign *Agitazione permanente (Permanent Unrest)*. What followed were a variety of online and 'on the ground' activities aimed to address threats deriving from interlocked systems of oppression (Lorde, 1984) and particularly racism and sexism. This campaign included demonstrations, flash mobs and various direct actions continuously being documented by the various *NUDM* Facebook pages. Social media was used as a mobilising tool (e.g. inviting people to participate to a particular event or demonstration) but also served as a platform for the dissemination of informative content on the policies proposed by the government. Through a mix of direct action and skilful use of social media, *NUDM* gradually gained more visibility. One of the major campaigns organized by feminists revolved around a threat to the divorce law.

Divorce and children custody - #NOPILLON

Another major campaign emerging during this period, concerned a decree on divorce and children custody policy, advanced by ultra-conservative Northern League Senator

Simone Pillon (DDL Pillon). The decree was controversial as it included changes related to children custody that reinforced a patriarchal view of the family and would have made divorce nearly impossible. Even in case of domestic violence the act would have forced women and children who witnessed it to maintain dependency to the perpetrator. Beyond *NUDM*, the Pillon decree was cause for concern for other feminist associations, women centres, children welfare association as well as for the UN rapporteurs on violence against women[27], as the proposed changes were going against the *Istanbul Convention* and potentially provoking a regression in terms of gender equality. Pressure from the feminist movement in the form of a multilingual online campaign, a petition[28] and a variety of mobilisations at the local and national level, culminating in a mass mobilisation throughout the country on the 10th November 2018 contributed to this decree being ultimately rejected.

Contrasting anti-gender rhetoric: Verona Città Transfemminista

Beyond the attacks to abortion and divorce rights, the increased relevance of anti-gender and ultra-conservative groups was testified by the organisation of the *World Congress of Families* in Verona in March 2019, hosted by Italian Ministers from the Northern League (Torrisi, 2019). The *World Congress of Families* is an international meeting between far-right and ultra conservative anti-abortion and anti-gender activists and their political allies.

Feminists responded with the organisation of a three-day event: *Verona Città Transfemminista* (Verona Trasfeminist City[1]) during the same days of the congress (on March 29th, 30th, 31st 2019). *Verona Città Transfemminista* was the first international event organised by *NUDM*. The preparation for the event lasted three months and saw activists from different localities coordinating various activities through local assemblies, mailing lists, WhatsApp and Telegram groups, and advertising the event through social media.

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[27] Link to UN rapporteurs declaration:
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/Communications/OL_ITA_5_2018.pdf
[28] Link to petition against DDL Pillon: https://www.change.org/p/il-ddl-pillon-su-separazione-e-affido-va-ritirato-giuseppeconteit-luigidimaio-alfonsobonafede-matteosalvinimi

An extract from the political document[29] that was produced and translated for the launch of the three-day event in Verona is useful to understand the logic behind this event:

*"In the patriarchal family, based on heteronormative principles, a sexist and hierarchical social model is constantly produced and reproduced. Most gender violence occurs within the family, the vehicle that reproduces sexual divisions at work as well as other forms of oppression. Moreover, **the family is ideologically instrumental in the pursuit of racist goals, for instance when it is used to support the reproduction of a white national identity. For this reason, we claim that women and LGBTQ+*QI+ subjectivities' right to self-determination cannot be achieved without freedom of movement for migrants** [bold mine]. The violence inherent in all kinds of borders affects places and the bodies of the people who cross them.*

This idea of family is at the core of the World Congress of Families (WCF), which will take place in Verona on the 29th, 30th and 31st March 2019. This is why, in those days, trans-feminists from NUDM, along with other Italian and international movements, will occupy the city with rage, determination and wonder".

What emerges from this text illustrates how *NUDM* bridged two issues: the right to self-determination and freedom of movement. Furthermore with this call, the movement projected its identity as the resistance to the alliance between far-right and ultraconservative forces.

This text is also a call for future action, making reference once again to the *Feminist plan* and reconnecting with the meaning of the *International Women Strike*:

"With our struggle, we showed how sexism, exploitation, racism, colonialism, political and religious fundamentalism, homo-lesbo-transphobia and fascism are connected and reinforce each other.

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[29] Link to post on NUDM's Blog: https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2019/03/29/verona-trans-feminist-city/

The feminism and transfeminism of our movement originate in the freedom and self-determination of all subjectivities in order to build processes of collective struggle and liberation, which invest the whole society and its reproduction.

Right now all the rights women have obtained by fighting so hard are under attack: divorce, abortion and various reforms in family law. We respond to this reactionary wave with the strength of our demands, which we elaborated in our feminist plan against male violence and against all forms of gender violence.

We are the feminist, transfeminist, anti-racist, antifascist tide that will take over Verona, opening up liberating spaces which were born from the global power of the International Women Strike"[bold mine].

The articulations previously developed, as well as the connections established online for the organisation of the *International Women Strike* in fact, facilitated the process of organisation of this event and its outcome. With great organisational effort, the three-day event became an occasion for feminists from different countries to finally meet in person and strengthen their ties. It culminated with an international assembly where activists from various countries (e.g. Belarus, Poland, Kurdistan, Argentina, Andorra) were invited to share their experience of mobilising against conservative forces. Through a work of *political translation* and interpreting I participated in, activists were able to draw lines between threats and strategies for resistance, setting the base for the consolidation of a much needed and desired transnational organisation.

As introduced, this event also became an occasion for the movement to finally achieve media visibility and express its identity to a broader audience (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Sole, an activist from *NUDM* Milano, explains:

"it was the first occasion in which the movement certainly popped at the level of the media [...] because we never had the first pages except in that context, with the demonstration in Verona [...] but also at the level of opinion, how can I say, at the level of diffusion of the movement's name... we were, we were already quite known in Italy but certainly the demonstration in Verona has seen a truly wide participation".

On a similar point, Camelia, an organiser from Milan, highlights how *NUDM* achieved the role of critical subject against the government and this made the movement more popular:

> *"it seems to me that there is more mobilization […] Milan has seen a series of demonstrations that from various points of view 'were taking it out on the government' […]and all with a big turn up, including those of NUDM, but not only... uh... it also seems to me that even online there is perhaps more attention to critical voices and therefore NUDM is, let's say, more saught after... on this I believe that Verona has really marked a passage.."*

The increased popularity of *NUDM*, and its achieved role as critical political subject however, further contributed to make the movement and individual activists, targets of soft repression (Ferree, 2004) such as attempts to silence or misrepresent protest through online abuse, ridiculing or stigmatisation of activists, as discussed below.

5.5 Online abuse and the stigmatisation of feminist activists

As previously outlined, with the case of *NUDM Milano*'s Facebook page, the movement stances sometimes made it a target for a variety of attacks and criticisms. For example Miranda, involved in the administration of Facebook pages, explained how *NUDM Trento's* page, and Bologna to a smaller extent, had a similar experience to the one of Milan:

> *"two weeks ago there was the meeting of the Alpine troops, National Alpine Troops in Trento during which a series of episodes of harassment, appreciations, various degrees of harassment were reported by NUDM Trento and by the Arcigay […] after denouncing this harassment publicly, NUDM Trento's page was targeted by attacks: 'sluts' and whatever... they had to close the page too and then reopen it two days later also with a post at the top, set at the top as relevant: comments of this and this other kind are*

not accepted here... stay away, we ban easily..' [...] then we had a small attempt on 8 March in Bologna in the morning…".

All the activists I interviewed talked about these attacks, mostly referring to them as 'militarised' or 'orchestrated' and pointing out how they often correspond to important dates of mobilisation. After the incident with the page of *NUDM* Milano, organisers tried to map where the attacks came from. Miranda explains:

"I am not technically capable, however, I asked to do an analysis and…. a map, let's say, of the connections and it had emerged that the bulk of the attacks came from this MRA[30] page, this page for the rights of males [...] there was this map made quickly but what 'already' emerged were some big groups [...] there were a page of 'separated fathers' who, as we know, are a somewhat anti-feminist organization OK? [...] They have actual organisations… so this page of separated fathers emerged, it seems to me Canadian or North American with Italian links with a series of branches to pages that are clickbait or support pages etc. [...] and this big junction... in Italy one of the big junctions was MRA, among which they have a page called Antisessismo [31] which therefore has an ambivalent name and also an ambivalent banner. So much so that I saw that some of my friends on Facebook or people I know had put the like without investigating too much [...] maybe someone did it to keep them under control but you can keep them under control with an alias or by looking at the page, you don't have to receive notifications, to check a page with public posts [...] and it had emerged, which I had already seen, however, that a secret group was linked to these MRA with about 2000 members at the time and within these secret groups... while we use them to debate, discuss, exchange materials, they instead say: 'throw shit here' and there is no articulated reasoning, there is just an execution: 'now we basically hit this'".

The online practices identified here can be read as ongoing attempts to invade collective spaces, be it social media pages or physical spaces. Beyond the online

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[30] Abbreviation for Men's Right Activists

[31] Link to Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/Antisessismo/

sphere, in some cases feminists narrated of the appearance of neofascist activists during feminist demonstrations, individual threats to activists, break-ins into women's shelters, as I will illustrate in more detail in chapter 7.

Overall, with the movement gradually achieving more visibility and assuming the role of anti-government actor after the event in Verona, insults and attacks on social media seemed to intensify. As Camelia explains:

"I mean, that NUDM has become one of the critical actors towards the government and this triggered an even bigger mechanism of searching and sharing our posts, our contents […] at the same time it seems to me that on certain occasions a series of attacks have become more legitimate […] and also a little bit of insults on social media".

Concerningly, in the case of Italy, political figures are sometimes the ones inciting or contributing to the spread of racist and sexist insults online for example towards their female colleagues. This is the case for example of Laura Boldrini and Cecile Kyenge, the first black African female cabinet minister, who I have interviewed. Both contrasting openly discriminating or ridiculing attacks from other members of Parliament as well as waves of online abuse including rape or death threats and the circulation of fake news. While this is not a new problem, with the use of social media, the issue is assuming different shapes and a wider resonance. For example, feminist activists are being targeted directly by institutional figures and their followers. During a few of my interviews in fact, many recalled an episode of violent online abuse received by a *NUDM* activist who participated to an anti-government demonstration in Milan. After carrying a provocative sign stating: *'migrants, do not leave us alone with fascists',* the interior minister Salvini had posted her image on Twitter, exposing her to a wave of insults. The event, and its repetition on another occasion, is summarised here by Camelia:

"last year we had done something to support that girl, Giulia, who had come to the square with a sign saying 'migrants do not leave us alone with the

Italians' and that had generated a huge flame[32] *[…] this year on March 8 she came to the square with us and spoke from our truck, she proposed another facebook post which was again taken up by Salvini in a loop that didn't […] that never ends however, it was significant that if on one side there were many attacks on the other there were also a lot of support […] so in my opinion there are positive signs here …".*

Beyond attacks and attempts to silence feminist voices however, as Camelia pointed out here, there are also various expressions of support towards the movement.

Conclusion

To summarise, in this chapter I have illustrated how, despite the exceptional political times described, Italian feminists have shown the ability to respond and mobilise. I have examined how *NUDM* developed, expanded and transformed over three years. In particular, I have demonstrated how the process of deliberation through *assemblies* leading to the elaboration of the *Feminist plan* had a transformative effect, as it was fundamental for the emergence and definition of the movement's organisational form, identity frames and mobilising strategies. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how the process leading to the organisation of the *International Women Strike* contributed the emergence of a transnational subject.

Second, I have demonstrated how activists from *NUDM* were able to intensify their action after the entry of a far-right populist government focusing specifically on the need to contrast the rising neoconservative and xenophobic rhetoric and resist repressive policies. While scholarship usually predicts less-mobilisation in times of crisis (Della Porta, 2019), feminists in this phase continued working and diffusing across the territory. I argue that the possibility to rely on a network of digitally connected assemblies spread through the country, to make reference to a shared articulation (the *plan*) and to feel part of a *global feminist tide,* empowered a response.

In the following chapter, I examine in more detail how the movement diffused across the country. Through in depth conversations, with feminists active in different

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[32] A 'flame' or 'flame war' is intended as an exchange of abusive messages between users of an online forum, social network or other online discussion platform.

local assemblies throughout Italy, I document a variety of actions aimed at transformations on the territory. I demonstrate how documenting these unobtrusive, 'unglamorous' (Davis, 2008) actions, happening behind the scenes and often remaining unexplored (Mendes et al., 2019), leads to expand the notion of activism.

Chapter 6 - "Mobilising *everywhere we live and pass by*": practices and actions aimed towards transformation

After tracing the evolution of *NUDM* from its inception, in chapter 5, I have illustrated how this movement was able to sustain itself and grow and how, contradicting predictions of less-mobilisation in times of crisis (Della Porta, 2019), feminists have intensified their action during exceptional political times (Della Porta, 2017).

I have argued that when explaining the emergence and diffusion of *NUDM* over the years (2016-2019) and the perceived intensification of feminist mobilisation following the entry of a far-right populist government (2018-2019) it is important to refrain from assumptions on causal mechanisms (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). I have therefore identified a variety of interlocking factors influencing feminist mobilisation: a changing political landscape directly threatening already achieved rights or preventing their advancement; the availability of digital media facilitating organising and mobilising efforts; the possibility to rely on a network of digitally connected feminist assemblies and a shared articulation (the *Feminist plan*); processes of *political translation* and contamination between movements; the framing of feminism as a transnational feminist *tide* and the only movement capable of contrasting a regressive 'global backlash'; the ability of organisers to bridge various themes and connect feminism with LGBTQ+, class based and antiracist struggles.

Furthermore, similar to other recent mobilisations, the feminist one emerging in Italy goes beyond reactive trends (Della Porta, 2017: 12). Far from simply being a reaction to the neoliberal crisis and to the neoconservative anti-gender, xenophobic backlash, the feminist movement analysed here proposes alternative ways of 'doing politics' and of relating to each other and the environment in less exploitative ways, with the aim of producing systemic change (Gago et al., 2019). For this reason, I have demonstrated the *eventful* (Della Porta, 2011) and transformative nature of the process of deliberation leading to the *Feminist plan* and of the process of organisation of the *International Women Strike* and analysed in depth the significance of the *assembly* as a generative space for deliberation, knowledge production and exchange and simultaneously a place where to experiment communal forms of living (Federici, 2018).

In this chapter, I deepen my analysis by focusing specifically on the actions and practices developed by feminists active within these assemblies aimed at contributing to transformations starting from the local level. I chose this focus, as what emerged from my study is the construction of a movement that combines a transnational identity with attention for the local dimension.

As introduced, *NUDM,* like other recent social movements such as *Occupy* (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) or the Spanish autonomous movement *15M* (Flesher Fominaya, 2015) and other Latin American popular and communitarian feminist experiences (López, 2020; Palmeiro, 2020), favours horizontal organisational forms that facilitate inclusion and participatory processes. Feminists meet in small local assemblies, and remain digitally connected with each other through organisational mailing lists, Facebook groups, chat and voice call services. Within this gradually expanding network of assemblies, feminists discuss and strategise on the most urgent issues to be addressed in their localities, and then converge in national assemblies every few months[33]. As anticipated, contemporary Italian feminists often draw from a variety of pre-existing experiences of activism and from methods established by previous feminist waves, converging in their collective articulation: the *Feminist plan.* This is defined as *"an open, multifaceted field of resources put together from the intersections of many individual women, collectives, groups, local assemblies, CAVs[34] and associations"* (Feminist plan, p.27).

In this chapter, I first consider how, through this articulation, Italian feminists have at once attempted to make gender-based violence visible, highlighted the inadequacy of institutional responses and signalled the desire to engage in a continuous effort to radically transform the *status quo*. When launching the *Feminist plan* in November 2017, activists declared the intention to use it as a foundation for future mobilisation and relaunch it *"everywhere we live and pass by – at home, at school, in universities, in workplaces, in public spaces"* (p.27).

Abandoning 'victim feminism' (Magaraggia, 2015) activists identified themselves as agents (Polletta, 1999) of such radical transformation. In this chapter, therefore I consider two questions: *How did activists attempt to achieve transformations on*

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[33] These are not regular occurrences but roughly take place every 3, 4 months. They vary depending on activists schedule (for example whether there is a specific event to organize such as the Strike) and on the availability of a space where to host the assembly.

[34] This is an abbreviation for anti-violence centres/shelters: *Centri Anti Violenza*

their local territories? To what extent did feminist activists perceive their practices of activism as transformative?

The analysis I offer in this chapter results from in-depth interviews with 10 feminists active in eight different local assemblies spread throughout Italy (Milan, Padova, La Spezia, Bologna, Rome, Rimini, Brindisi, Reggio Calabria). Having participated to assemblies, events and demonstrations in various cities[35], followed the Facebook pages of these and other local assemblies and been active in mailing lists, WhatsApp and Telegram organising groups, allowed me to get a deeper insight into the movement's organisational dynamics and direct my interview questions on specific issues I found salient.

In their study on *Digital Feminist Activism,* Mendes et al. (2019) highlight the importance of studying what goes on 'under the radar' of mainstream media and attend to experiences of grassroots feminist activism, paying particular attention to the nuanced ways people engage with feminism through digital technologies. Building on this work, one of the contributions of this chapter is to glance into and document the reality of practices of contemporary feminist activism in Italy, with a particular attention for digitally mediated practices. I first demonstrate how activists in various localities have attempted to construct inclusive spaces and participatory grassroots and digital practices. I then point to some of the challenges they identified while doing so. Furthermore, building on work by Mendes et al. (2019: p.177) who challenges the idea that social media activism does not encourage material transformation, I demonstrate how there is continuity between online and offline engagements and reveal their transformative potential.

Through interviewee's accounts, I demonstrate how feminists have attempted to transport the movements' shared articulation (the *plan*) in their practices and actions and to what extent they perceive these as effective. Rather than establishing a causal relation between the launch of a *feminist plan* of action and a variety of practices being developed or actions being implemented, I am interested in providing an account of the ways feminists' engagements have been informed by the shared reflections on various themes which converged on this document, without discounting previous or concomitant personal and political experiences.

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[35] As detailed in chapter 4, I attended demonstrations in Rome, Bologna, Pisa, Ventimiglia and Reggio Calabria. I participated to national assemblies in Rome, Bologna and Pisa, a local assembly in Imperia and I helped in the organisation of the first international assembly in Verona acting as translator and interpreter.

I document a variety of small-scale actions through which feminist contents and articulations transited between the realm of feminist assemblies to various settings such as schools or factories. Such actions do not often transpire from the narration that the movement gives of itself via social media, escape mainstream media narration and scholarly attention and are either unrecognised or openly ostracised by institutions. While I do not aim to quantify the impact of *NUDM,* something that can only become evident in the long term (if at all!), I argue that documenting these small-scale, unobtrusive, 'unglamorous' (Davis, 2008) actions, happening behind the scenes and often remaining unexplored (Mendes et al., 2019), leads to expand the notion of activism.

While the imagery associated with activism in fact, usually includes participating in demonstrations, flashmobs and hashtag campaigns, scant attention is paid to small-scale localised activities, which too have the potential to create transformative effects. In the case of contemporary Italian feminists, these include: informally introducing gender education in schools; assisting violence survivors through social media; creating free women's clinics; producing accessible and informative content (such as open source maps of abortion services and conscious objectors); organising public thematic assemblies; supporting migrant women's' protests; conducting inquests on harassment or poor working conditions.

Documenting digital and grassroots practices and actions aimed at transformation ultimately allows us to start responding to the frequent question we receive as feminists: "what do these contemporary feminist movements actually 'do'?"

6.1 Launching a plan for action and a feminist diagnosis: between #NonUnaDiMeno, #MeToo and #WeTogether

As I have demonstrated in this thesis so far, *NUDM* made a concerted effort to start a process of analysis of how gender-based violence plays out in various spheres, in order to demand and start implementing radical transformative actions. As introduced in the previous chapter, this analysis or, this process of *feminist diagnosis* (Gago, 2020)*,* is contained in the *Feminist plan for the elimination of violence against women and gender violence*[36].

The launch of this *plan* was accompanied by a mass demonstration in Rome on the 25th November 2017, marking one year since the birth of the movement. As it can be read in a note from *NUDM Milano*'s Facebook page[37]:

> *"after a year that saw dozens of local assemblies, 5 national assemblies and 9 thematic groups at work, the political and strategic platform built from below by the NUDM movement will be presented in several cities".*

The plan was launched at the same time in various cities and for the main launch event, activists chose the *Casa Internazionale delle Donne* in Rome: an historical space for Italian feminism, now at risk of eviction. With this move, feminists wanted to *"emphasize the importance of feminist spaces"* at a time when these are increasingly at risk of funding cuts and evictions, and signal the need to valorize the experiences of existing anti-violence centres, shelters, secular and feminist spaces.

Through a press release[38], translated in various languages, feminists highlighted how the *plan,* makes a synthesis of experiences, practices and methods, developed within the feminist movement. *NUDM* in fact draws inspiration and builds upon the work carried out by feminists in previous waves:

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[36] Link to an article presenting the plan:
https://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/feministsatlaw/article/view/840
[37] Link to NUDM Facebook post regarding the launch of the plan:
https://www.facebook.com/notes/non-una-di-meno-milano/non-una-di-meno-presenta-il-piano-femminista-contro-la-violenza-maschile-sulle-d/515834315443208/
[38] Link to NUDM Facebook post launching demonstration:
https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/national-demonstration-in-rome-we-have-a-plan/

*"These experiences include secular, feminist clinics and women's shelters, which arose along with the women's rights movement; they were the first real response to the problem of male violence. **Run by and for women who invested their hopes, deep desires and professional skills, these spaces helped to generate a continuum of theories and practices to produce change and to reveal once and for all the widespread and structural nature of patriarchal violence** [bold mine]"* (Feminist plan, p. 5).

As a participatory tool, the *plan* is therefore considered as better suited than top-down institutional emergency-based approaches to contrast male and gender-based violence in their complexity:

*"To fight against male and gender violence means to challenge the culture and the social relations that sustain it. **We don't need tutors or guardians, we are not victims and we have not been asking for it. We fight for a structural change, starting from schools, work, health, administration of justice and the media, we demand for respect of our paths of freedom and self-determination and of our independence** [bold mine]. For this reason we demand for means and resources for our self-determination and in order to choose for our own lives"*[39].

As it appears from this passage, feminists from *NUDM* reject the role of victims, simultaneously denouncing the diffused victim-blaming (Mendes, 2015; Rentschler, 2015) and detaching from victim feminism (Magaraggia, 2015). While highlighting the necessity to radically transform gender relations, feminists claim the role of agents of this transformation (Polletta, 1999). To better illustrate this aspect, the following extract from the *plan* is salient:

*"[this] is only the first step on a long journey to transform the world around us, because there is no sphere or aspect of society immune to the many forms of gender-based violence. **Change must therefore be radical, and must start from within ourselves: we need to create new ways to engage in politics, new ways to be together"*** (Feminist plan p. 5, bold mine).

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[39] https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/national-demonstration-in-rome-we-have-a-plan/

The *plan* is therefore defined as a first step in this process of radical transformation of gender relations and society more broadly. As a start, while experimenting horizontal practices of deliberation (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) as described in the previous chapter, *NUDM* has engaged in making systemic gender-based violence visible, explaining the ways in which it is embedded in various spheres, while highlighting the inadequacy of institutional responses and proposing new ones. In the introduction of the *plan* we read:

> *"Institutional measures to combat violence, both in Italy and abroad, are often adopted in the context of emergency safety and security measures. In Italy, measures that have been implemented up to now have been inconsistent and partial. They have in fact focused only on certain expressions [...] of the phenomenon, such as stalking and femicide. Institutions continue to treat gender-based violence as individual acts, while at the same time they exploit it time and time again in their rhetoric to create an external enemy"* (Feminist plan, p. 2).

By developing a plan for action that rejects emergency-based solutions or attempts to neutralize the political character of gender-based violence, *NUDM* becomes a political subject in charge of overcoming inadequate and ineffective approaches and proposing new ones. Eradicating systemic gender-based violence from every sphere of societies is an ambitious task and one that requires the capacity to *"dream and conceive of another life, another set of human relations, societies free of male and gender-based violence, and free of the power structures, both economic and cultural, that sustain this violence"* (nonunadimeno, 2019).

This extract is significant as it points to a central aspect in *NUDM*'s articulation: connecting freedom from gender-based violence with freedom from economic violence. This is an important point of encounter between anti-austerity and gender movements (Chironi, 2019) and a way for *NUDM* to apply a feminist lens to anti-austerity claims:

> *"We shall not stop until we obtain freedom from the sexist violence we live in our workplaces, from harassment, from discrimination and abuse of power, but also from the daily one of exploitation and precariousness [...]*

until we are free from the violence we live when budget cuts made by the national and European governments impoverish our lives and attack anti-violence centres and our autonomy".

Overall, as it will become evident in this chapter, many of the issues highlighted by activists within the spheres of action identified in the *plan* are understood as interconnected within a frame of neoliberal and patriarchal violence and strongly dependent on the organisation of labour and reproductive work.

As the launch of the *plan* took place just one month after the *#MeToo* campaign erupted globally (October, 2017), feminists took the opportunity to point out the role of the media in reproducing, if not amplifying, gender-based violence and rape culture (Mendes et al., 2019). The highly politicised media system and the impact of twenty years of Berlusconism that I have illustrated in chapter 2, often sees the media complicit in the reproduction of a culture and a system of power based on sexism. Italian feminists for example, routinely highlight news stories concerning femicides or rapes, which provide victim-blaming explanations or attempts to 'save' the perpetrator's reputation. Through social media they rewrite these accounts through a feminist lens and circumvent attempts to silence their voices (Kay, 2020).

The role of the media in amplifying gender-based violence was also evidenced in the reactions to the *#MeToo* campaign in Italy. As Peroni (2018), points out, while *#MeToo* raised debates on consent, sexuality, power and gender relations, and opened up new interpretations in relation to women's protagonism and self-determination all over the world, Italy reacted with an immediate backlash against the perceived expansion of women's rights, against the legitimacy of survivors' claims or the possibility itself to tell their story. Similarly to France, where the actress Catherine De Neuve and others signed an open letter in defense of men excessively damaged by 'puritanical' campaigns such as *#MeToo*, in Italy a group of intellectuals, journalists and think tanks coordinated a counter-offensive against this campaign. This involved processes of individualization and blaming, focusing aggressively on the figure of Asia Argento, one of the first actresses to denounce Harvey Weinstein (Peroni, 2018; O'Rawe and Hipkins, 2018). After the wave of attacks received by the actress (who ultimately had to leave Italy) on traditional media and online, *NUDM* wrote an open letter to support the actress publicly. On this

occasion, Italian feminists affirmed the necessity to transform this campaign from an individual cry to a collective one:

"We shall flood public space to state the determination of our claims, of our daily practice of change, mutualism and solidarity: the strength of thousands of women, trans and queer united that recognize themselves in #MeToo, in order to transform it into #WeTogether"[40].

Overall, on the occasion of the launch of the *plan* and during various other events since, feminists from *NUDM*, declared the intention to use this comprehensive and participatory collection of resources as a foundation for future mobilisation:

"We will relaunch it in the many Not One Less committees that have formed over the course of this year and that, we hope, will form in the future, everywhere we live and pass by – at home, at school, in universities, in workplaces, in public spaces" (Feminist plan, p.27).

In this chapter then, I first demonstrate how the movement diffused over the country though these various assemblies (or committees) and attempted to implement grassroots and digital practices aimed at inclusion and participation. I then demonstrate how a variety of small-scale actions carried out by feminists active in these assemblies lead to expand the notion of activism.

6.2 Diffusion of *NUDM* across the territory

As introduced, the preference for horizontal organisational forms and participatory methods (Doerr and Della Porta, 2018) resulted in the diffusion of the movement throughout the Italian territory in the form of a network of local assemblies or committees connected with each other through organisational mailing lists, Facebook groups, chat and voice call services.

In this section, I demonstrate how the diffusion of *NUDM* was not homogeneous and how interlocking geographical, socio-economic and demographic

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[40] https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/national-demonstration-in-rome-we-have-a-plan/

factors, influencing the movement's emergence, composition and priorities in different localities, need to be considered. Regarding this point, Miranda, a key organizer from *NUDM Bologna,* who I interviewed twice (in May 2018 and June 2019), explains:

"Let's keep in mind that there are strong variations on a geographic basis in Italy as far as NUDM is concerned but also as far as social stratification, access to work, the demographic composition are concerned [...] Italy is an extremely heterogeneous country and not only in its North-South dimension but also between medium, large and small centers".

The heterogeneity Miranda talks about here refers to some obvious differences in the development of *NUDM,* that can be reconducted to the role of large cities in the history of Italian feminism: for example with Milan being one of the first cities to publish translations of foreign feminist texts and the site of the earliest feminist theoretical production in Italy (Hajek, 2018), or Bologna having a long history of feminist and queer activism and hosting for example the first Movement for Transsexual Identity (MIT)[41]. In large cities such as Rome, Milan, Bologna, Turin and others, with long histories of feminist and queer organising, *NUDM* assemblies therefore, could easily tap into pre-existing experiences and networks. Interestingly though, new local assemblies kept emerging also in areas that activists described as marginalised, previously not very active politically or without a strong history of feminist, queer or other grassroots participation. If feminist assemblies started emerging gradually while elaborating the *plan*, the network continued to expand across the country afterwards, with new formations being warmly welcomed into the movement during the various national assemblies I attended.

In chapter 2 I have also briefly described historical difficulties connecting between North and South which still reflect for example in the level of digital access. I pointed to a distinctive access divide between the industrialised North, still being more connected than the South, a gap between urban and rural areas (OECD, 2017) and age still being the most important variable concerning digital divide (with women older than 55 years old being more affected) (Sabbadini, 2015). For this reason it is

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[41] Link to Movement for Transsexual Identity's website: https://mit-italia.it/chi-siamo/

salient to start by outlining some elements related to the age composition and generational dimension of *NUDM* to then analyse how they are interlocked with other elements ultimately contributing to the heterogeneity of this movement across the territory.

Age composition and generational dimension

In a recent study on *NUDM,* Chironi (2019) finds that, contrary to scholarly expectation of growing youth apathy in democracies this movement sees a great level of participation of the younger population, particularly of 'millennials' (this usually refers to the population between 24 and 39 years). While I also found that the key organisers and a great number of participants can be gathered under this age range, there is a growing presence of even younger individuals in their early twenties and, in some cases, late teens. On this aspect, Miranda, who within *NUDM,* has kept an 'observatory' of the movement's development since its launch, explained that she has recorded some changes in the composition of the movement, with younger women (under 25 years old) increasingly becoming active:

> *"participation in the demonstration on November 25, 2018 has been explosive whereas last year there was a bit of a decline [...] and this was a very strong signal... this data resulted from self-inquiry but also from mainstream articles… there is [...] a further generational connotation that is an increase of, say, under 25 [...] this generational aspect from my point of view is absolutely confirmed… at the same time I also confirm the participation of many single women, their request for participation, curiosity, 'getting back into the game', making themselves available [...] also of an older age mh? [...] not only feminists or of feminist training, who however show more and more curiosity… I see it in the assemblies in Bologna and also in other cities...".*

Interestingly, Miranda points also to the participation of women who are not attached to other feminist entities, political parties or other experiences and discover themselves 'feminists' with *NUDM*. I will expand on similar experiences in chapter 7.

Overall, my interviews revealed significant differences in the age composition of assemblies and in the level of participation from young people. Organisers in Milan, Bologna, Padova, La Spezia and Rome talked about holding very heterogeneous assemblies with participants of various age ranges and an increasing presence of young people. In Calabria, in the South of Italy, Alba, one of the founders of the autonomous group *Collettiva AutonoMIA* and then of *NUDM Reggio Calabria*, explained how their group is formed of middle-aged women who ironically define themselves 'differently young'. Alba, found great difficulties getting in contact with younger people in the city of Reggio Calabria while she observed some more interest towards feminist themes within very young people in small villages. Similarly Peonia, who was active in Brindisi, in the Puglia region, explains how the number of young people there is extremely low, with many having migrated to the North of Italy for work. Having recently moved to Rimini (in Emilia Romagna) herself, she reports that her group is mainly composed of young activists in their 20s and early 30s.

Furthermore, as documented by other studies (Di Cori, 2007; MacKay, 2015), the encounter between generations of feminist activists can generate fruitful exchanges as well as tensions. In her recent work, Chironi (2019) suggests there are some intergenerational disagreements within the *NUDM* movement: "Millennials embrace intersectional feminism and queer theory; opt for grassroots, horizontal organizing; adopt a conflictual attitude towards the state, and dialogical, introspective dynamics within the movement. Intergenerational disagreements especially relate to sex work, and surrogate motherhood" (Chironi, 2019).

While my study broadly confirms these findings, I argue that disagreements, particularly in relation to the strongly divisive topics of sex work and surrogate motherhood, cannot be fully ascribed to a generational element. For example, as Sole, an organiser from Milan outlined in an interview, the possibility of a clear demarcation between generations of feminists is put into question by the presence within *NUDM Milano* of historical figures of Italian feminism such as Lea Melandri or Lidia Cirillo (now in their 80s), who contribute to a more nuanced understanding of divisive topics such as sex work and surrogacy. Furthermore, according to an organiser from Reggio Calabria, now in her 50s, feminists' division on these topics in her city appear to be ascribed to previous affiliations and experiences of feminism more than on a demographic element. Within the same generation in fact, the founders of *NUDM Reggio Calabria* hold opposite stances on sex work and

surrogate motherhood, than feminists active in institutional entities such as the *Union of Italian Women UDI.* These two formations also frequently diverge on mobilisation strategies.

As it will become clear in the following sections, the age composition and generational dimension of assemblies interlock with other elements, making the movement extremely heterogeneous.

Mapping the geography of NUDM

Interested in tracing these contextual nuances and differences, Allegra, one of the movement founders active in *NUDM Roma,* together with other feminists, contributed to map the various local assemblies that formed over the years. At the time of our interview (May 2019) these were 72 and they have grown to 98 as of November 2020. Allegra comments:

> *"I have seen many cities, many, many realities that were literally born in places where there was nothing... I speak for example of places near Rome, like Acilia [...] a place where there really is no... I mean guys and girls who, spend their days there, where there is practically nothing [...] and there a small collective was born [...] they made a very nice mural on the municipal library [...] street art sought to enliven a little those places that are abandoned from all points of view".*

What the 'mapping exercise' Allegra and others carried out reveals is that small collectives seem to emerge in unexpected places. Social movement scholars warn against the tendency to explain the emergence of movements as spontaneous or unexpected (Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Polletta, 2009). Similarly, further investigation would be needed in order to fully explain why and how assemblies emerged 'unexpectedly' in villages and peripheries. The possibility for social media users anywhere to access the movement's cognitive cultural messages and symbols (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995) vehiculated online or for individuals to form a *NUDM* local assembly with the support of nearby assemblies and other political entities however, seem to be contributing factors as I will illustrate below.

What the mapping revealed is that the composition of assemblies is very heterogeneous: in some cases assemblies are formed by groups of students, in others they include exponents from the left, trade unions, or bring together pre-existing feminist collectives, LGBTQ+ associations:

"you see really heterogeneous realities, but in all these places there is a NUDM [...] each of these has its own assembly, its financing events [...] everywhere there is a NUDM! [...] and the smaller cities are also more active because maybe being small they can also coordinate better".

Additionally, each assembly has a Facebook page through which to disseminate their content. Allegra explains how this can provide an insight into the different shape of these assemblies and the variety of activities carried out in their territories:

"they are small tools which, however, tell what happens at a territorial level [...] I think also about small cities [...] these small pages are channels in which it is possible to tell a little about the mobilizations [...] for example against the issue of the interference of pro-lifers in hospitals and so on...".

Through their Facebook pages, local assemblies advertise their events and demonstration, post pictures of direct actions taken or broadcast their assemblies. This can give a sense of the main issues activists are focusing on in a specific area but also help drawing connections between similar issues being experienced across different territories. Particularly since *NUDM* self-funds its activities, the possibility to take mobilisations happening in other localities 'as example', share resources with nearby assemblies and circulate materials online has a role in the formation of assemblies.

On a similar point, various activists explained how they attempt to work together across different localities or at the regional level. Gemma, active in *NUDM* Padova for example, explains how their assembly is attempting to coordinate activities, organise actions, share resources and costs (e.g. ordering merchandise or printing campaigning materials together) with other small cities in the region of Veneto as they all have limited resources and face very similar issues (e.g. interference of anti-abortion conservative groups and very vocal presence of

neofascist formations). Allegra explains that the necessity to create organisation at the regional level is being debated within *NUDM*:

"we are also planning to hold a regional assembly and [...] a bit of an attempt not to leave all the various territorial realities to themselves but also to seek regional coordination by territorial proximity...".

As it appears from this quote, organisers try to evaluate the efficacy of their practices and identify obstacles. Considerations regarding the lack of resources and particularly, the lack of space, its impact in the development of *NUDM* but also its political significance, emerged in various interviews and encounters, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

6.3 Reclaiming feminist spaces

As I have started to demonstrate in chapter 5, similarly to other recent mobilisations (Della Porta, 2017; Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) contemporary Italian feminists aim to create horizontal, inclusive and participatory spaces of encounter both online and offline. In particular, strong of the legacy of previous experiences (such as anti-violence centres, shelters, feminist clinics), they reiterate the importance of protecting and creating *feminist spaces*:

"we need to find our collective voice, free up spaces where we can begin from the ground up, practising forms of resistance and self-management [...] settings where we can deconstruct power relations and inequities, places where our anti-authoritarian practices and models of social relations free of violence can be priorities, where we can experiment with new ways of relating to and taking care of one another (Feminist plan p.5).

As we can see from this extract, feminists search for participatory spaces where to self-manage and relate to each other in less exploitative ways. In the *"long journey to transform the world"* (Feminist plan p.5) acting on the local territory is a way to start constructing a feminist 'realisable utopia' inspired by reflections on the commons (Federici, 2018). Rather than aiming at the construction of idealised

conflict-free spaces within an otherwise hostile world however, feminists attempt to contribute to create spaces where to form non-hierarchical relations that favour mutualism and care, challenge the ways lives and labour are organised within capitalist societies, are independent from the State, parties and institutions.

This desire however, often clashes with a series of material circumstances. The case of a local assembly emerging in the small town of La Spezia, in the North West of Italy can be exemplary of this. A few young women formed the *NUDM La Spezia* assembly in 2018, two years after the movement's launch. Stella, one of the founders I interviewed, relied on personal contacts and on the support of feminists in the nearby Pisa in order to start the assembly. While the movement strives to be independent from party politics, in this context, the radical left party *Rifondazione Comunista* was instrumental for the creation of the group. Stella, had been active within the party and, while this meant that she could rely on an established network of contacts to organise the initial meetings, this also created some tensions:

> *"so let's say that at the beginning there was a bit of a clash because if on our side we asked to open up to more people [...] on the other side there were seriously like the '1968 inspired activists' who looked at you with wide eyes [...] who started by saying things like 'we must first start with a group of women to foster the self-awareness of being a woman' and then open up to all the others so let's say that at the beginning there was this encounter/clash [...] this was certainly not helped by the fact that we met inside the spaces of Rifondazione [...] the fact of not having neutral spaces [...]".*

As it appears from this extract, when trying to introduce *NUDM*'s intersectional agenda and inclusive methods, organisers found resistance from an older generation of feminists, proposing a more 'traditional' approach to feminism. What is interesting here, is that, according to Stella, the impossibility to enter a neutral space at first, influenced the possibility to create an independent collective subject and exacerbated existing ideological differences between feminist entities:

> *"Then, fortunately, by creating a strong group of young women, we managed to disengage from the party and affirm our standards on participation within NUDM. So this has opened up the doors, doors have been opened much more*

[…] to all interested parties and at the same time coincided with the decision to meet in places that were different from party headquarters".

A significant aspect emerging from Stella's account is therefore the importance of finding a physical space that is conducive of the development of horizontal and inclusive forms of communication (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) and at the same time a space that allows feminists to affirm their own 'standards'. This reconnects to the great emphasis placed by *NUDM* on the necessity to reclaim space as an act of self-determination, stated in the *plan*:

"To the cry of 'Not One [Woman] Less!' coined by our Argentinian sisters, a new global feminist movement has been booming […]. Not one more woman should be killed or abused – that much is obvious, but it is not enough! We want to reclaim public spaces, make our own decisions about our bodies and our lives, and reaffirm the political force of women" (Feminist plan, p.2).

While the call to reclaim public spaces and oppose neoliberal expropriation is a common trait of recent *protest cascades* (Della Porta, 2017), feminists add new layers to this demand. Spaces are not to be reclaimed only from privatisation and commercialisation in order to protect democracy but are also to be occupied by female and 'feminised' or *dissident bodies* (Mason-Deese, 2020) to affirm their political force, to decide on their lives and to prefigure alternative ways of moving and living, free from gender-based violence.

For this reason, using their bodies as tools of protest, contemporary Italian feminists experiment on ways to reappropriate spaces and keep each other safe from gender-based violence. Drawing from the second wave radical feminist marches to *reclaim the night* for example, but also from international contemporary movements such as Slutwalk (Mendes, 2015) Italian feminists in various locations, organise *passeggiate* (walks): by walking together at night they denounce the painfully common issue of sexual violence and street harassment. These walks are ways to show support to survivors of sexual violence and at the same time a political statement on women's right to walk freely without being verbally abused, accosted or assaulted. What is most important here is that by addressing gender-based violence not as victims but as self-determined bodies, feminist activists show that, while being

oppressed by gender-based violence, "they are not without resources to combat their oppression" (Polletta, 1999: p.3). Claiming their agency on this issue, during these walks, feminists often use the saying: *'Free streets are made by women crossing them'*.

Overall, by occupying and freeing up spaces with their bodies, during demonstrations and assemblies, feminists also become able to "voice their complaints and openly discuss alternatives" (Polletta, 1999: p.6).

The use of social media can be instrumental to achieve these aims. In Stella's account for example, opening a Facebook page sanctioned the development of an independent assembly able to affirm its identity and claims and open up free (Polletta, 1999) and participatory spaces (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018):

"Until NUDM had a Facebook page the group was somehow linked to these personal contacts [...] after the Facebook page and after the first launch initiatives [...] many people started to write to us, interested to know what NUDM was and how to participate in assemblies [...] because simply put what people told us was revolutionary in La Spezia was having the possibility

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[42] Link to Casa Delle Donne Alessandria's website: https://casadelledonnealessandria.it/

to see each other systematically, to hold public assemblies where everyone could participate [...] so having a Facebook event where you have a place and a time and it is a neutral place and they are assemblies where anyone can participate freely was one of the choices we took that worked to reach a wider audience".

The format of the open participatory assembly, where citizens (and non-citizens) can meet to discuss outside rigid party dynamics, is perceived as revolutionary in the context of La Spezia. Similarly to what organisers in other localities explained, Stella illustrates how there is a 'core' group (usually 5 to 15 people) meeting consistently and carrying out the majority of the organising work, a variable number of people orbiting around the assembly and participating to some of the activities and an even larger number of those who only attend demonstrations and follow social media pages:

"So, in the original group, counting young and less young people, we were around ten [...] then after the Facebook page, after the first informal meetings in preparation for the public assembly about twenty people... all of this between the days before March 8 and after March 8... and after March 8 many more people [...] So let's say there has been a fairly steady increase in assembly attendees".

What appears from this fragment is that opening a Facebook page clearly contributed to attract more attendees. Confirming what other organisers have observed, request for participation both online and in person increases greatly in connection to particularly important dates for the movement or large events. In this case the increase seems to have continued after the important date of the *International Women's Strike* on March 8[th.]

Overall, combining open weekly assemblies, with the use of social media, this local group continued to expand. This leads me, in the next section, to analyse how activists negotiate and reflect on their use of social media for activism and demonstrate how they diversify their use of media to reach a wider audience.

6.4 Diversifying use of media and reclaiming digital spaces

As I will demonstrate, the intention to reclaim space and the search for inclusivity reflects also in the way activists diversify their use of media and relate to social media tools. Organisers in fact approach these tools reflectively, they routinely analyse collectively which content is more effective or gains more visibility and they experiment ways to produce accessible content in a participatory way, opening up more inclusive digital spaces.

First of all, in an effort to reach as many people as possible, feminists multiply their tools. Camelia, a key organiser from *NUDM Milano*, for example, explains how the assembly thinks it's important to:

> *"multiply the tools to try to **keep everyone inside as much as possible […] then knowing that we may not be able to include everyone but understanding what type of things we can try to do in order not to exclude anyone** [bold mine] […] so we keep an archive of the material and then link it to the various social media […] at least we try to keep a few things together... then we **try very much to give ourselves shifts in managing things** [bold mine] […] so that it is not always one of us always doing everything... a lot depends also on the people who manage the Facebook page or the blog from time to time, from the sensitivity and the time they have so it varies over time […] but **we try to have as many places as possible".**[bold mine]*

While content is communicated through various media, Facebook remains the platform where most of the communication and discussion happen. This is partly due to the fact that Facebook is still the most used social media platform in Italy (Censis, 2020) as outlined previously. Facebook can be particularly conducive for activism due to the site's main features: as it does not set a character limit for posts, the site allows discursive negotiations to take place. Furthermore, it allows users to create a public profile where to share pictures and links to external sites, write posts, create and/or RSVP events, message other users, comment, 'like' or 'react' to other users posts. Facebook users can also join as well as create secret, closed or open groups, between users with similar interests. Group members can then post updates, start online discussions or poll the group (Mendes, 2015). In order to participate to an

open discussion or view what's being posted users can also 'like' or 'follow' a Facebook page. Facebook has recently introduced 'community pages' which are dedicated to a particular topic or shared experience that can be discussed by a particular community of individuals with similar interests.

NUDM uses organising Facebook groups to coordinate what to share and to discuss communication strategies. Local assemblies have community pages where to post updates on their activities, launch events and share political documents. Mendes (2015), found similar practices amongst Slutwalk organisers who consider Facebook as an important 'repository' where to keep and share resources. As Camelia explains, Facebook is not used only to disseminate content and the re-sharing of posts is also a way to show support and creating connections between assemblies in different territories. Similarly, Stella, explains:

"Facebook tends to be (the place) where we concentrate many of the political documents [...] where we also try to support all the other pages of the other nodes of NUDM".

Realising that most young people no longer use Facebook however, various local assemblies have started using Instagram. They often find it difficult however, to convey political content through an image-based platform. Stella, explains for example:

"we have seen that many of the high school students [...] don't use Facebook but they use Instagram [...] however, we noticed that the political part is missing [...] we are trying to understand what is the best way to transmit more political contents through Instagram to make them accessible, to make them reach out to to the youngest [...] to the very young".

Scholarship focusing on the uses of Instagram for feminist activism is gaining momentum. Mahoney (2020) for example investigates its potential in facilitating the 'performance' of feminist politics and the limits of this platform. While an in depth analysis of Instagram use is beyond the scope of this project, I have discussed with activists whether and how they use it. The main issue that activists reported is the difficulty summarising complex political information. Additionally, because of

Instagram's features it is impossible to tell whether the viewer is engaging with the textual content itself, the image or short video. What activists have found is that generally, both on Facebook and Instagram, visual content tends to gain more attention than news and political documents. Stella explains:

> *"one thing I noticed that is very strange is that the photos of the assemblies, of the people who get together to do NUDM... (there are) incredible peaks both on Facebook and on Instagram".*

This is an interesting finding, which however, remains open to many possible interpretations, from the curiosity to observe how a feminist assembly looks like before joining one to interest for or suspicion towards this new political subject.

The considerations presented so far, reflect the way activists use and relate to social media tools. All the organisers I interviewed narrated how with their assembly, they regularly engage in processes of analysis of their social media accounts, to see how many people engage with the page, which content is more effective or gains more visibility. Practices developed by activists at the local level, both online and offline therefore, are continuously being debated, constructed, tried out in what can be characterised as a *process of becoming* (Della Porta, 2017). Camelia, belonging to a transfeminist collective active in *NUDM Milano* explains:

> *"over the years we have tried to analyze which contents reach more shares or more diffusion and for example then try to understand what to aim for next time [...] then we have established rules [...] which are, for example, not to make posts too close together... this year we understood that perhaps we have to limit the posts we do every day a little because otherwise there are too many things that get lost [...] we understand that the videos work quite well while maybe other forms do not but then at the same time [...] we realized that on Twitter the videos work much worse than other content".*

What emerges from Camelia's account here, as well as from other interviews I held with activists in Bologna, Milan and Rome, is the ability to analyse and pay attention to the type and quantity of content posted, apart from the creative skills necessary to create such content. In her research on Slutwalk, Mendes (2015) found

that feminist organizers were aware that sharing 'affective' media coverage (such as sharing new stories which highlight the prevalence of rape culture) would generate a lot of debate. The sophisticated levels of reflexivity and analysis shown by feminist activists, as in the example of *NUDM*, however, have yet to be extensively investigated by scholars.

Organisers also reflect on the problematic aspects of relying on Facebook for activism. Camelia expresses some criticisms here:

"For its 'archive' character we often put materials there which then, due to the way Facebook is made, disappear and are very difficult to find, so documents, texts, [...] the images you post on Facebook become Facebook property [...] the images produced by us who knows where they end up... on the one hand this is potentially a bit paranoid but I certainly think it is interesting to be able to observe these technologies with a feminist gaze and therefore ask ourselves how we inhabit the public space but also how we live in these spaces which are a little public and a little private, which are social networks...".

Camelia expresses the need to observe social media critically, through a feminist lens, reflecting on the contradictions of using a tool of digital capitalism and surveillance (Schwartz, 2019), to diffuse and develop an anti-capitalist feminist agenda. In our interview Camelia reflected on the fact that the level of criticism towards platforms such as Facebook, seems to be extremely variable within each assembly. It appears to depend on levels of digital skills, activists' background, generational factors as well as on the availability of occasions to reflect together on these issues. Regarding the *NUDM* assembly in Milan, Camelia explains:

"at the beginning it was really interesting because there were people for whom being on Facebook was not in the least problematic [...](it was considered) just an opportunity and a resource so we needed a few moments of adjustment to understand what we are doing, where are we doing it, how we are doing it [...]not all territorial nodes have a blog, we wanted to have it precisely for this dimension of having a place where we can deposit things

and keep [...] trace of what we were doing and to have a place that is also
accessible.

What emerges from this extract, and from various other accounts is that despite its critical points, Facebook is still used widely due to its accessible features. The movement also has a blog, which is used as a more stable archive. Some assemblies, such as *NUDM Milano* have their own blog as a way to archive materials and keep track of the assembly's activities outside Facebook's platform. Moreover there are attempts by single collectives and assemblies to start utilising alternative platforms. Camelia explains for example how her collective in Milan made a concerted decision to abandon Google and WhatsApp to move their mailing lists on Autistici and their chats on Signal and Telegram. This however is not easily achievable for the *NUDM* movement in its entirety, as it would result in less inclusivity and visibility:

"*to abandon Google [...] and then put all our mails back on Autistici [...] we*
had a chat on WhatsApp, now we have it on Signal and... so we did this
migration and for a while now we try to publish our contents on the blog and
from there on Facebook... we did a series of events this year so we didn't do
the Facebook event [...] NUDM obviously then it's a completely different
thing so I don't think this choice would even make sense [...] now we have
moved to Telegram, we have migrated from Whatsapp [...] on Telegram... we
take some small steps".

Such decisions are not simple organisational issues as they concern accessibility, digital inclusion and therefore social justice. In her study on London based women's organisations, Fotopoulou (2016) in fact found that the imaginary of 'digital sisterhood' could often hide new types of exclusion linked to women's material reality (e.g. age, lack of resources or media literacy). Organisers from *NUDM* show an awareness of these risks, which leads them to interrogate their digital practices and diversify their use of media.

As I have introduced in the previous chapter for example, activists use a variety of mailing lists. These can present some issues in relation to inclusivity. While they seem to be favoured by older participants who do not use social media,

they are not an agile or effective tool to communicate with young girls. As Camelia explains:

"on the one hand it is true that the mailing list for very very young girls [...] is a bit problematic [...] but the NUDM Milano assembly also really has a very significant variety of ages and there are a number of much older women who say 'but I don't have Facebook, how do I know...".

Beyond the varied levels of feminist criticism towards platform capitalism (Banet-Weiser et al. 2019) and issues of digital inclusion (Fotopoulou, 2016), the effort to open up digital spaces brings with it some additional difficulties. Particularly through its Facebook presence in fact, *NUDM* becomes a visible political subject and point of reference for many women needing help, escaping from domestic violence or looking for a place where to share their experience. Allegra, explains:

"on the national Facebook page there are many messages of all kinds from women who [...] really have the need to tell their experience of violent relationships, girls who maybe, I don't know, ran away from home and... they are people who write to this medium, without even knowing who they will have in front of them but they write, yes, they tell their 'metoo' [...] they don't know who will answer to them but every time you answer to them they are very... very happy [...] these people are waiting for a response from NUDM, because it is something that has a certain authority".

This excerpt is particularly significant as it reveals both that *NUDM* gradually became a point of reference for many but also, more importantly, it gives an idea of the lack of support for women and others experiencing gender-based violence. While funding is being cut and women's centres and shelters face eviction, the need for support remains and it is somehow, in a very frail way, addressed by feminists administering a Facebook page. Sharing accounts of violence on a platform like Facebook however, raises many problems. First of all, it raises a question of privacy as survivors share their most intimate stories, sometimes including evidence such as pictures related to their experience of violence, through a platform which is not

necessarily protecting this data and which will then retain it. Secondly, it can add pressure to those who administer the page and are not necessarily prepared to respond or provide qualified counsel or advice. The same problem is experienced in other contexts of activism. Mendes et al. (2019) narrate a similar experience of activists being unsure what to do when someone reaches out for help, for example sharing their suicide plans. Allegra explains:

> *"on the other hand [...] this fact that many people, in our era feel the need to write to a facebook page, tell very personal things... there is also a question of privacy so if people send you photos of bruises.... it is not even easy to follow [...] for example, I do not have training, I have never managed an anti-violence center etc. so when I read these messages I write in private to some comrades who have anti-violence centres [...] or are support workers there because [...] these are small interventions of mutual... of self-help, I don't know how to say...".*

As we can see from this extract, activists like Allegra do what they can to find the resources to help, for example contacting support workers and others working in women's centres. This shows how what happens behind the scenes, and behind a 'Facebook wall', can make a difference to women and gender-based violence survivors in need of help. Organisers however, lament the difficulty of managing a very large quantity of emails, messages, notifications in a small number of people. Allegra feels that she is often unable to respond to the great demand of help, for lack of time or preparation and she struggles to find moments where to discuss these issues in order to be able to respond promptly and help those who contact the movement:

> *"I don't... even if I read the messages, I answer etc. but not... I do not feel capable of answering at times or I would need to discuss things with someone else... and this is something that however, cannot be done for example in the assembly and therefore this is also an important theme, in my opinion right? that these are forms of communication that get silenced, they are messages arriving on the page and, if you do not answer, you know that maybe people in that moment may need a word of help, of comfort and they don't have it".*

What emerges here is the need for more moments of encounter where to discuss particularly delicate matters such as how to help someone who might have experienced something traumatic. It is also for this reason that Italian feminists defend spaces such as the feminist clinics and shelters, run by women who have experience providing 'non-judgemental' support to gender-based violence survivors. It is also why making themselves visible through actions on the territory is considered central by Italian feminists.

Beyond social media platforms and mailing lists, feminists sometimes try to make their work known also through local newspapers and radio programs. Stella for example explains that the local assembly in La Spezia at times engages with local newspapers through personal contacts however, organisers often find that their activities are either not documented or misrepresented:

"so basically we have always tried to tell our own story because the level of journalism in this province is very very very very low and the main problem is that we have not been understood by local newspapers ... they have misrepresented the name, they have misrepresented the symbols, everything [...] and therefore we have always relied on individual contacts we have with specific journalists to whom we have said 'we send you our press release, can you publish it for us us please? thanks bye!'".

Media representation is thought to play a crucial role in the formation of public opinion on feminism. Baker Beck (1998) argues that many of the challenges the women's movement faces can be traced back to how it has been portrayed. Studies focusing on the framing and representation of feminism in British and American newspapers have shown the nuances of media coverage: from supporting frames to opposition frames (Mendes, 2011). More recently Ureta (2017), in her analysis of media representation of Second Wave Spanish feminism, finds that this presented some ambiguity: feminism was given visibility while hiding its revolutionary claims. In her notable study, Van Zoonen (1992) finds a tendency in the media to divide between legitimate and illegitimate forms of struggle and points out how the relationship between the women's movement and news media has rarely been analysed systematically. While a systematic study on the representation of feminism in Italian media is certainly needed, what contemporary feminists

denounce, is a consistent lack of coverage of the feminist movement, the distortion of their claims both through TV and newspapers, continuous efforts to shift the attention from the topic to the way the activist presents herself, her clothes, her tone of voice[43]. The continuous attempts to silence or misrepresent feminist protest, the ridiculing or the stigmatisation of activists can be defined as soft repression (Ferree, 2004).

At the local, as well as at the national level, the *NUDM* movement tends to achieve some visibility in the media close to institutionalised dates of women's mobilisation such as the 25th November or the 8th March or in connection to particular events or particularly striking organised actions:

"basically if we are not doing something a little striking or so we are not considered, in fact we are not really understood".

In an effort to circumvent the attempts of silencing just pointed out and to widen their audience, feminists from *NUDM* have started local radio programs or podcasts. Regarding the experience in La Spezia, Stella explains:

"they offered us to do a weekly broadcast on their radio as NUDM [...] but it's a beautiful thing because you can participate live, you can listen to it at home and they make podcasts to listen to [...]we have to study huh? we have to choose a theme every time and we have to study because we can't give a bad impression (we laugh) because then these are podcasts so people can even listen to you again!".

As it appears from Stella's account, and from our interview more broadly, a traditional media like the radio offers unexpected opportunities. A radio program in fact is for activists an occasion to reach out to those who do not use social media. Furthermore activists can prepare their contribution in advance, and these can be then archived as podcasts.

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[43] Link to article (in Italian) detailing the problem of sexism in the media:
https://www.dinamopress.it/news/comunicazione-femminista-decostruire-sessismo-nei-media/

What I have demonstrated in this section is how activists approached their use of media reflectively and attempted to use as many tools as possible to reach out to various parts of the population. The articulation contained in the *plan* was utilised as a collection of resources and reflections, that transpire through feminists accounts. In the next section, I will continue the analysis by focusing in particular on a variety of actions feminists carry out drawing from these shared reflections, as well as from a variety of previous or concomitant personal and political experiences.

6.5 Documenting unobrtusive actions on the territory

The analysis presented so far has shown how contemporary Italian feminists have started a process of diagnosis of how systemic gender-based violence manifests itself. While elaborating the *plan* they have identified various 'spheres of action' requiring radical transformation. As stated previously, rather than simply denouncing 'wrongs', feminists propose alternatives. In what follows, I bring together the analysis of extracts from the *plan* where activists identify a need for intervention and illuminate it through activists' own accounts.

Education and training

The first sphere being scrutinized by *NUDM* is that of education. Feminists challenge discriminatory approaches to favour more inclusive ones:

> *"Our plan confronts the sexist, discriminatory methods of imparting knowledge built into our current system of education and training [...] We [...] believe that if education on differences is going to work in the struggle against gender-based violence, then it must be based on the assumption of gender complexities and value the many inevitable differences between individuals and communities, so as to steer society in the direction of equality, justice and diversity" (Feminist plan p.4).*

As this extract reveals, *education on differences* is considered central in order to eradicate gender-based violence and contribute to more equal, just and diverse societies. This approach however, is not yet present in Italian school curricula and teachers often have to find unofficial ways to apply a 'gender sensitive' approach in

their teaching methods. Peonia, a teacher and one of the organisers in *NUDM Rimini*, explains how the theme of gender education, or what in Italian is described as *education to affectivity* or *education on differences* often encounters resistance:

"you cannot enter schools officially [...] you have to enter with projects but the discourse on 'education to affectivity' has never entered in schools [...] there is education for citizenship, there is the fight against bullying, however, are very very generic courses... and clearly everyone declines them as they want [...] However these children/guys have a great hunger for information".

As Peonia explains here, despite students interest to discuss themes related to gender or sex, there are no formalised attempts to facilitate this in schools. Some teachers attempt to open up discussions on gender with students simply by using one's own body and experience. Peonia for example explains:

"There is a comrade in Bologna [...] he is a non-binary FtoM person, [...] not medicalized... and he is a teacher ... clearly he has a woman's documents, at school he is not 'out' [...] and he works as replacement teacher on purpose when needed... so that he can go to as many classes as possible".

In her teaching, Peonia, tries to use an inclusive language (Pusterla, 2019) instead of using the 'masculine universal' and takes time to explain to students the gendered nuances of everyday language or how to express in ways that are not discriminatory:

"a girl uses 'slut' as an insult, a boy uses 'gay' as an insult and you go there and take that half hour to explain".

Even though these themes are not included in the curriculum, she attempts to employ the *didactic of differences* to her everyday teaching practice for example, by trying to find ways to teach students the meaning of consent:

"one thing for example that I teach every day is consent ... you teach consent on many small things... you do not take the gum from the desk of your class mate, you ask them; you do not touch other people's things, you don't touch other people's bodies, you don't act on others [...] you don't say jokes that

only make you laugh...".

Similarly Alba, one of the founders of *NUDM Reggio Calabria*, explains how, with her collective and the support of a local association, she tries to do some work in schools:

"we build projects together, we work together in schools [...] we organise meetings".

She finds difficulties however, in openly carrying out 'gender education projects'. In contexts where anti-gender (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018), rhetoric is particularly diffused, feminists have to find 'ploys' in order to talk about gender education in schools. Alba, explains:

"then you also have to get smart (farti furba), right? [...] this is something we always told one another [...] you need to circumvent the rule/steer around the obstacle... so you don't talk about for example, you don't write 'gender education, blah, blah, blah... but if you write 'violence against women, stereotypes etc.' [...] you enter in a different way, you see? Because then you have those who attack you, who tell you you want to 'homosexualize' children [...] they don't even know what they are talking about [...] so this is the situation in Reggio Calabria, it's not a rosy situation, unfortunately we must say it, but we 'clench our teeth' (we resist)".

What Alba talks about here, is described by Butler (2019) who argues that the pedagogy in gender diversity is seen by its opponents as a dogmatic and prescriptive exercise. Those opposing 'gender ideology' often misconstrue it as an attempt to induce students to become homosexuals. On the contrary, teaching gender equality and sexual diversity would actually question any repressive dogma (Butler, 2019). This description is extremely fitting for the Italian context even though the level of opposition towards gender education seems to vary a lot depending on the single school director and on the locality. As a substitute teacher, Peonia worked in different schools throughout the country and highlights that while teachers often have to devise ways to discuss gender related topics with student without help from the school, Catholic organisations enter Italian public schools with no obstacles.

Furthermore, some schools which try to support students and answer their questions signpost them to the school's psychology:

"the Curia[44] rules [...] I have been in schools where you've got the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation[45] [...] it is terrifying [...] so it is not easy for this reason, maybe some schools use the psychologist [...] since luckily it is still compulsory in schools, you know maybe they use the excuse of the parents, for the boys and girls who have divorced parents and want to talk to someone and so [...] I was in a school where the psychologist was specifically chosen as a sexologist [...] and he enters like this [...] but, fuck, the John XXIII community[46] always enters everywhere (laughs)".

What these experiences reveal is a less than ideal scenario, where the interference of conservative rhetoric delays gender and sexual education in public schools and where individual teacher/activists have to devise strategies to provide it.

Some teachers react by sharing resources and forming communities such as *Cattive Maestre* (Bad teachers), born to oppose reforms that attempt to privatise public schools or limit teaching freedom. Feeling the need to educate each other on how to talk about gender and sex, they organise autonomously and create materials for educators to contribute to an educational environment free from gender stereotypes. For example, *NUDM Bologna* created a brochure called *Scuola DeGenere[47]* encouraging teachers to reflect on what *education to differences* means in practice. This tool is designed to help teachers and educators think about whether they have witnessed discrimination against students or fellow colleagues or whether the disciplines they teach is a vehicle to reproduce discrimination.

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[44] The Curia is the official body that governs Churches in the Catholic Church
[45] A conservative catholic missionary movement
[46] A Catholic association
[47] Leaflet for teachers:
https://nonunadimeno.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/vademecum_scuola_nudm.pdf

Figure 2 - Facebook profile of *Cattive Maestre*: teachers' collective opposing reforms attempting to privatise public schools and limiting teaching freedom.

The work done by feminist teachers to learn from each other how to practice an *education to differences* serves also to exemplify the importance of moments of self-directed learning for this movement, as I will analyse in the following section.

Self-directed learning

A recurrent theme emerging from interviews is the perception of feminist assemblies as laboratories where each individual brings what they can offer, for example making their professional skills available (e.g. video making, design, social media or language skills, translating).

In such a heterogeneous movement, the encounter between people with different backgrounds and skills creates tensions as well as occasions to learn from each other. Sole, an organizer from *NUDM Milano*, noted how having very different levels of knowledge can present some difficulties. In particular for example, there is a need to address a gap in knowledge between those who participated in the elaboration of the *plan* and those who arrived after it was completed:

> *"we wrote the plan a year ago and only a part of today's movement participated in its construction [...] and the Plan today must be brought to life because the new people who enter find themselves stuck with one demonstration after another... I don't say that they have not read the plan, however, reading it is different from having participated in a year of discussions [...] So in my opinion there is a great need to go back to the issues, to return to discuss a bit, to deepen our knowledge but also to divulge what has been done... a bit to recompose the hiatus between those who know and those who don't know".*

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What Sole refers to here is also how, during the period of intensified mobilization I discussed in chapter 5, urgent mobilisations took away time from moments of collective reflection. This, in her opinion, can contribute to misunderstandings, tensions and it is a problem to be addressed by creating more moments of discussion. Similarly, Gemma, from *NUDM Padova* describes how, due to the pressure of having to mobilise in response to specific threats, there is often not enough time to analyse certain topics more in depth as activists would like:

"as we all have precarious lives, messes, etc., we would like to do a lot of things, for example we would like to do a little more systematic work on the femicide issue, do a more systematic communicative work for example through social media with respect to health, work etc. but we actually find ourselves in this period very often chasing deadlines [...] of other things...the anti-abortionists in Padua, the neofascist procession from Forza Nuova [...] and then Verona transfeminist city in the middle of it all [...] we have March 8, which is a date we set, so in short [...] you don't have a breather".

Furthermore, Camelia, active in the group in charge of communication within *NUDM Milano,* explains how there are very different levels of digital skills and, while this creates occasions for learning from each other while practicing, it can also create some difficulties:

"it started out a bit as a group of people who already dealt with communication so, how can I say, maybe they provided knowledge, skills... now it has become much more mixed so… it is also interesting because there are people who just may not know how to use the basic functions of Facebook, they learn it by joining the communication group so [...] when we had this last round of online attacks there was a girl who said 'ah but I, it would be my turn to manage the page and manage these attacks but I don't know how to block people' [...] so then we took screenshots of where she needeed to click to block people...".

While creating occasion for learning new skills therefore, the participatory approach might result in delays or extra work for more experienced activists. It is

also for these reasons that some organisers expressed the desire to learn more about how to best use digital technologies for activism and how to analyse digital media.

Beyond the experiences illustrated above, activists in various regions have organised events dedicated to the collective analysis of particular topics. One of the themes is that of the legacy of Italian colonialism. Sole, an activist from *NUDM Milano* explains:

"an assembly will be dedicated precisely [...] to colonialism [...] to retrace Italian colonialism in gender perspective [...] the origin of this is that the strongest political action we took on March 8th has been [...] to cast pink paint on the statue of Indro Montanelli[48] *[...] and this thing became viral [...] in a crazy way that we did not even expect... both on social media and then in terms of mainstream media".*

Figure 3 A statue of Indro Montanelli. Feminists casted pink paint on the statue to bring attention to the issue of Italian colonialism

Casting pink paint on Montanelli's statue in Milan, feminists aimed to point at the unspoken and unexplored history of Italian colonialism and start a critical discussion on this topic. This also brought renewed awareness on the need to confront any exclusionary politics inherent in white feminism (Emejulu, 2019).

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[48] Indro Montanelli was an Italian journalist who came under scrutiny of feminist and antiracist campaigners due to his racist views, support of colonialism and participation in the last fascist colonial campaign. With the diffused colonial practice of *madamato* (a 'marriage' between an Italian citizen and a woman native of the colonized lands), he bought and married a 12 year old Eritrean girl.

Despite its aim of constructing an intersectional feminist movement, *NUDM* is still mostly made up of white women, as Sole explains:

> *"we know the story of Indro Montanelli but not even among us we have come to terms with the Italian history of colonialism [...] we have decided to dedicate an assembly to these issues and involve associations and collectives in the area that are either just made up of migrants or work with migrants with two objectives: a broad objective of political discussion on this theme in order [...] to give more body to this intersectional feminism that in reality is often made up of... I mean, NUDM is mostly made up of white people, we know that... white women [...] but also because on May 10 we will have a meeting with a [...] woman who is part of Black Lives Matter [...] we have a meeting in which we will basically interview her, we will ask her some questions so we are preparing for this meeting [...] this discussion [...] aiming to build an informative meeting open to all".*

On the occasion of this encounter[49] with Karlene Griffiths Sekou from *Black Lives Matter,* who did a tour meeting feminists across the country, activists reflected on how to join the two struggles. As we can see from this account this moment of learning also coincided with an open public meeting to encourage participation on a wider level.

Similar activities are organised on topics concerning reproductive rights. As I have introduced in chapter 5, the theme of self-determination in relation to sexual and reproductive health has been at the centre of much mobilization. In the next section I will demonstrate further how the analysis of these issues has been articulated in the *plan* and what are the type of initiatives feminists implemented.

Healthcare and self-determination

The most urgent issues in relation to self-determination and sexual and reproductive health are stated in the *plan* as follows:

> *"Women's right to autonomy in sexual and reproductive health is constantly*

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[49] The event as made available on NUDM Milano's Facebook page:
https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimenomilano/videos/666441360480822/

under attack, in the form of allowing doctors to 'conscientiously object' to performing abortions, obstetric violence, and making women feel guilty if they choose not to become mothers (as is evident in the recent National Fertility Plan). In order to guarantee autonomy for women and LGBT*QIA+ individuals, the health service provider-patient relationship needs to be viewed as a political issue, so that the concept of healthcare can regain meaning from a women's rights perspective" (p.4).

As previously introduced, recording an increasing ultraconservative interference and threats to the right to abortion, Italian feminists have responded with street protests, sit-ins in front of hospitals and clinics, calls for action on social media and through the creation of an open source digital map of all the doctors and pharmacists who are invoking a 'conscience clause': *Obiezione Respinta*. This attack to abortion does not concern only Italy but also for example the US, Poland, Argentina, Spain, Ireland, Malta and Austria. In Italy, according to data from Obiezione Respinta[50] the percentages of objection exceed 70% and in certain regions objection reaches 90%. Feminists highlight how many gynecologists who object in public hospitals then divert women to their private clinics. This points to an alliance between fundamentalisms and the free market (Cirillo, 2018), where traditional values and the 'defense to life' are used for individual profit.

As the levels of objection varies in each region so does feminist focus for mobilization. Stella explained for example, how in La Spezia this is a central issue:

"we noticed that for the moment La Spezia is quite a happy island in regard to the administration of emergency contraceptive pills [...] in regard to the hospital environment, conscientious objectors are present [...] therefore making known to citizens and non-citizens the problem of conscientious objection and sexual and contraceptive health [...] is one of the macro topics on which we are trying to work, on which we think it is also necessary to commit [...] it is a bit difficult to understand what is the perception of the phenomenon in La Spezia and for this reason that we began to want to talk

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[50] Link to Obiezione Respinta's main manifesto: https://obiezionerespinta.info/manifesto/

about it [...] we do it also to inform people, to give a service that should exist and is not there…".

What emerges from this extract is how feminists try to understand what is the level of awareness on this issue in the population and open up spaces for discussion. The recognition that there are different levels of knowledge on this topic and of how this theme is articulated in the *plan,* lead some activists to organise thematic assemblies. Stella explains:

"we tried to do like thematic assemblies [...]the more we go forward the more we realize that we also need to get some information within our group so for example [...]we have printed the plan [...] we ordered another twenty copies to be given to us participants in order to study the Plan at home [...] and be a little more [...] more informed… we also did a drive with the files that we have prepared [...] a vademecum on emergency contraception [...] with everything: how to behave, what it is that must be guaranteed when you go to ask and you are denied the access to the emergency contraceptive pill ... and then [...]we shared these files with the group through the Drive and the mailing list to do some self-training between us".

Through thematic assemblies, activists managed to learn from each other while also opening up a space for discussion with the public on the theme of reproductive rights. They produced materials and guidelines on how to behave for example, in case a doctor or a pharmacist invokes the 'conscience clause'. Additionally, in various cities, *NUDM* organised informative events called *consultori in piazza*: literally translated as *clinics in the square.* Drawing from the Italian feminist experience of *consultori* (Kaplan, 2012)*,* started in the 1970s, which I illustrated in chapter 2, these feminist *clinics in the square* consist in full day events where activists set stalls in the main square of a city and make themselves available to provide information and guidance on issues related to sexual and reproductive health. The aim of these events is also to reach out to parts of the population who might not be able to access this information or support elsewhere. Alba, an organizer from *NUDM Reggio Calabria,* in the south of Italy, explains:

"we do consultori in piazza [...] they have great... great participation... because there we provide information, counter information, stuff... and we do them periodically [...] we administer questionnaires that we then gather so that we then have a database [...] we organise various activities...".

As we can see from this extract, feminists also gather data to get a better picture of local issues that might need further attention. *Consultori in piazza* are also attempts to reach out to migrant women. Stella for example explains how in *La Spezia* they organized one of these events in a square within the city that is mostly frequented by migrants from the Dominican Republic (the largest migrant community there):

"it is still a bit difficult in fact we have chosen [...] Piazza Brin [...] to be able [...] to meet [...] an old group started by Dominican women [...] in the neighborhood and then meet them and if we fail to establish a relationship immediately, at least we can show ourselves present in the square [...] let's say that in relation to the immigrant population we still have some difficulty in breaking through this wall".

This appears to be a common difficulty across different territories. In the next section, I will explain how organisers attempt to confront and address the clash between the movement's intent to be intersectional and antiracist, its 'whiteness' and its failure to consistently include black and migrant voices and experiences (Emejulu, 2018; Mügge et al., 2018).

Migration and borders

As already illustrated in chapter 3 the concept of intersectionality, the view that various sources of oppression and inequality are interconnected (Crenshaw, 1989) and that systems of oppression such as sexism and racism are interlocked (Lorde, 1984) is central in the theorization of this movement. As for other European movements, for Italian feminists, contrasting racism means taking a stance against violent border policies and challenging the notion of Fortress Europe (Monforte, 2014). Additionally, contemporary feminists recognize how both racism and sexism are forms of violence and control, rooted in a desire for preservation of segregation

and oppressive hierarchies. As such, they can only be deconstructed through a radical transformation of society. A transformation that must be twofold and include *starting with the self* and acknowledging our privileges, while also engaging in a struggle for the redistribution of wealth, welfare and rights:

> *"Our plan confronts the violence of borders, which causes many women to suffer doubly, as women and as migrants, in both the countries they emigrate from and those they migrate to and pass through. This limits their ability to escape and form strategies of resistance. Racism and sexism are in fact interrelated forms of violence and control mechanisms, mechanisms that seek to produce and preserve hierarchies and segregation. Combating racism and sexism requires more than a response based on cultural rhetoric; it requires a radical transformation of society involving the redistribution of wealth, welfare and rights"* (Feminist plan p.4).

Since the movement's birth, during feminist assemblies, activists vocalised the need to reach non-Italian speaking people and particularly the extremely high number of migrant women, often employed in precarious conditions as domestic, caring, factory or sex workers, or working as pickers in the fields (Prandi, 2018). It is also for this reason that a thematic table analysing issues linked to *Feminism and migration* was created in the first and founding assembly. Feminists clarify their aim to mobilise 'alongside' this part of the population rather than simply 'in solidarity' with their struggles. In its articulation, *NUDM* therefore moves beyond a logic of compassion or 'deservingness' (Maestri and Monforte, 2020) with feminists demanding for example a 'self-determination income' for all, independent of citizenship status or 'merit'.

While the movement's intents are clear, in practice, not many migrant women attend *NUDM* assemblies. Allegra, one of the movement 'founders', explains how an initial attempt to better understand why this is, has been made through an inquest in the Marche region. Here, a group of activists visited a variety of small villages around the city of Macerata, where the population is very old and there is a high number of black migrants from Nigeria employed as carers:

"so everyone of them has their story... some were victims of trafficking or in any case coming from trips by sea and from what we know happens unfortunately [...] and they find themselves doing care jobs, sometimes harassed [...] in the places where they work and all this is completely invisible... ".

Organisers are aware of the necessity to bring these 'invisibilised' experiences to light however, they often struggle to find ways to become a point of reference for migrant women who might want to share their stories. While this work of inquest in Macerata is invaluable, a similar effort would be needed across the country. Allegra explains that with the assembly in Rome, they are trying to understand how to get in contact with women who might have lived through experiences such as trafficking or harassment. However, they feel unprepared or unable to communicate and truly empathise:

"because actually [...] we should [...] also understand, how to approach them [...] but this is also another challenge of NUDM... understanding how you can speak and communicate with people who come from... different worlds [...] for example we have not faced a sea crossing, we do not know what it means [...] there are all ideas like this, scattered about, which we occasionally talk about but there's a long way to go".

Another challenge in some localities is reaching out to sex workers, many of whom are migrants. While a sex-workers collective is integral part of *NUDM Bologna*, in other areas, establishing contact and understanding the reality of sex-workers is not straightforward. Stella explains for example how due to the lack of a collective of sex-workers in the territory of La Spezia, understanding and approaching this reality is very difficult:

"it is very very very very difficult because we do not have a project to refer to in the territory [...] the only one I have known [...] which works on the whole Tuscan coast [...] is the Paolo XXIII community [...] where volunteers go out [...] and get to know the experiences of sex workers directly on the streets but I still haven't understood very well [...] what is the perspective they adopt".

Overall, in order to contact migrant communities and to circulate material for non-Italian speakers, activists translate some of their materials. This possibility depends on various factors such as the composition of the group in terms of languages spoken or the possibility to stay connected with activists who moved abroad. This is the case for Milan for example where Camelia tells me:

"we have now translated something into Spanish because a comrade of ours [...] moved to Barcelona [...] more often, we translated things [...] for example articles that seemed significant to us [...] for a while there was among us a girl who... now also lives in England [...] obviously had difficulty to follow us from afar so she said I make myself available doing this job so if you find articles or topics that interest you, I translate them...[...] and then there is a Chinese girl who is here in Milan for Erasmus who occasionally attends our meetings and who therefore also produced a video on March 8 in Chinese that we had reposted on our Facebook page without absolutely understanding what she said about us but hoping that [...] they were good things (we laugh)".

Activists therefore rely on individuals volunteering and their availability. The situation is similar for the case of La Spezia where Stella explains:

"luckily we have almost native Spanish speakers in the group [...] (one of them) made herself available to translate the material surely into Spanish... as for the other languages [...] we had thought of English [...] to at least take a step forward [...] and then entrust ourselves to someone who would do it perhaps in Arabic [...] because now the Arab community is increasing a lot".

While feminists try to provide traslations of articles or materials in other languages to circulate on social media, this is not easily achievable due to limited resources and time constraints. Camelia explains that for example, the group in Milan, often shares content in the original version (mainly English, Spanish and French) with a short "*accompanying text to the link in the post on Facebook that acts*

as a sort of summary [...] of what is written in the article in order to give at least an idea".

Another reason for 'recruiting' volunteer translators is to try and communicate outside the usual activist circles:

"some of us work with migrant people and therefore the idea was to try to be able to produce materials that are even remotely accessible ... in fact this year for example we have decided to open the march on March 8 in Milan by reading the very beginning of the announcement which said three basic things in Italian, English, French, Spanish, Arabic".

Beyond this symbolic action of starting the march on the 8th of March on the occasion of the *International Women Strike*[51] with a communiqué in different languages, organizers from Milan and Bologna also engaged in more direct actions aimed at supporting migrant workers' protests. Miranda for example, explains how *NUDM Bologna* supported women organizing protest and strikes in a factory in Modena:

"we held several meetings in different workplaces [...] flyers in many languages [...]we formed a relationship with the Italpizza workers in Modena [...] these predominantly Maghrebi workers [...] They organised walkouts and pickets outside the factory in Modena in the main plant... they also caught police charges and attacks with stinging gas. Despite this they continued, supported by the union [...] we went, we talked to them, we participated... some of us obviously, not hundreds of people uh? a few dozen [...] but we came out publicly in support, we started relationships".

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[51] Since 2017 every year on the 8th March, feminists organise a variety of activities in connection with the strike, such as demonstrations and public assemblies focusing on issues of productive and reproductive work.

As we can see from this extract, a relationship between a group of migrant workers and feminists from *NUDM Bologna* started to develop through protest. While protests were heavily repressed, workers persisted in their action, with support from the union and *NUDM*. Similarly, *NUDM Bologna* created relationships with migrant women striking in the logistics sector:

"we supported and have been in relationship with the workers from Yoox [...] who also came to the assembly, they are workers who already a year and a half ago had made a very important strike against forms of harassment ... they too are migrants and therefore under a permit regime... a residence permit linked to their employment contract [...] in the logistics sector and have gone on strikes against forms of sexual harassment [...] and therefore they have been an example even if numerically partial, but symbolically and materially, I think, we think, significant".

As Miranda states here, the persistence of migrant workers from Yooks has been an example for *NUDM,* which continues to support their struggle against exploitation and sexual harassment, which unfortunately is still ongoing[52].

Overall, the examples provided on this section, serve to illustrate how the articulation contained in the *plan* started to materialize and what transforming intersectionality into practice looks like in the Italian context. Having illustrated how feminists attempt to analyse sexism and racism as interconnected, in the next section, I demonstrate how they also added a class-based analysis to their articulation, and how this informed their practices.

Labour and welfare

One of the thematic groups set to elaborate the *Feminist plan* was in charge of analyzing issues related to labour and welfare. I interviewed Dalila, a legally trained trade unionist who has been active in *NUDM Milano* and within this thematic group since its start. Feminists started the process of analysis by trying to take an accurate

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[52] Article explaining reasons for the strike and calling for support:
https://www.coordinamentomigranti.org/2020/12/09/donne-che-non-hanno-paura-sostieni-lo-sciopero-delle-operaie-yoox/

picture of specific issues in the city of Milan to then share the results with the rest of the movement at the national level:

> *"we tried to take a sort of photograph of what were the peculiar situations in Milan, therefore gig economy, Milan as a laboratory of exploitation, free work [...]so we brought our absolutely privileged observatory to a national assembly, because Milan is the 'city of the future… for others', for better or for worse…".*

Here Dalila refers to the fact that Milan, branded as the capital of fashion and design, more industrialised and productive than the rest of Italy, ows much of its success to the exploitation of workers: historically for example, of workers migrating from the South of Italy. Milan is now viewed as a laboratory of new forms of precarisation and atomisation of labour characterising for example the gig-economy. As Chesta et al. (2019) point out in a recent study however, new forms of collective action are emerging and mobilising against these forms of labour exploitation and precarisation typical of digital capitalism.

In such context, it is central for a feminism, which defines itself intersectional, to pay attention to class and support worker's struggles. In an attempt to do so, Dalila illustrates how *NUDM* has been providing information and legal advice to workers wishing to engage in strike action as well as showing concrete solidarity by supporting those affected by the disciplinary consequences that followed strikes in various regions (i.e. Electrolux, FCA, Sodexo). What is central in Dalila's account is also the awareness of the risk for feminism to be somehow elitist and self-referential:

> *"our effort has always been also to get out of a purely elitist environment and therefore we also want to return to squares, popular neighborhoods, suburbs, because it is there that you find the greatest contradictions and also because of the importance of not leaving anyone behind [...] from this point of view Milan has a bit of this tendency to be, you know… a bit, how can I say, the city of fashion, of publishing, so it has a tendency to create elitist imaginaries [...] also in the lexicon, in the semantics [...] which can create forms not immediately understandable".*

Recognising this risk, Dalila is determined to challenge these tendencies and with her assembly, she aims to reach out to any part of the population:

"We wanted to remember precisely the importance of never giving up on any section of society... now we have held meetings on income, we have held meetings on the Jobs Act[53], we have prepared a questionnaire on harassment that we would like to disseminate in the workplaces and therefore also perhaps in collaboration with institutions [...]we want to give life to the plan [...] above all else, by coming out of an elitist and intellectual self-referential logic and reaching as many women as possible because in reality that is the real goal... to create networks in terms of content but also in an infrasocial sense... It is not by chance, that NUDM identifies as an intersectional movement that takes up the challenge of creating an analysis on various issues, on various aspects of economic violence, reproductive health, migrants rights...".

The aim expressed here is that of establishing connections broadly, outside 'exclusionary' intellectual and activist circles. By disseminating questionnaires to workers and organising public informative meetings on various issues, feminists try to construct a truly intersectional analysis of the interrelation between economic violence, reproductive health or migrants' rights, combining themes related to work with those related to welfare and specifically on the view of women's work as 'substitute' for welfare provisions:

"the working group [...] tried to combine (the demand of) an unconditional universal income [...] with that of a guaranteed minimum wage... this circumscribes the whole discourse on wage disparity and also the whole issue linked to the welfare state and therefore the state's view of the woman as a zero-cost shock absorber... the Italian state in particular but certainly all of Europe is not in great shape, eh?!".

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[53] A controversial set of reforms proposing forms of flexibilisation of labour.

To summarise, as the analysis presented here has shown, many of the issues highlighted by activists within the spheres of action identified in the *plan* (education, health, migration, work and welfare) are intertwined and strongly dependent on the organisation of labour and reproductive work. Through the plan, the *NUDM* movement has been able to analyse these interconnected issues and understand them within a frame of neoliberal and patriarchal violence:

"Our plan confronts neoliberal violence consisting of social inequalities, exploitation, job insecurity and unwanted unemployment, unpaid or underpaid work, gender wage gaps and workplace segregation: all of these are conditions that materially impinge on women's right to self-sufficiency and make them all the more vulnerable to male violence. Specifically, austerity policies, public spending cuts and the dismantling of the welfare state across Europe (as well as national reforms which follow these lines) only impede women's struggle for self-sufficiency, as the effects of these policies exacerbate social, cultural and sexual discrimination. The subject of reproduction – intended here as all activities devoted to regenerating and taking care of life – is regarded as a central and eminently political issue in our plan, an issue that must involve society as whole, not just women, in contrast with the patriarchal ideology (reiterated by neoliberal ideology) which forcefully asserts that women are 'naturally' predisposed or inclined to handle such reproduction-related activities" (Feminist plan p.4).

Conclusion

What I have demonstrated in this analysis is that activists from *NUDM*, have attempted to bring to life the analysis they have collectively elaborated, through a variety of ordinary practices and interventions that often escape the narration that the movement gives of itself on social media or the attention of mainstream media. With very limited resources and at times encountering resistance they have initiated processes of transformation starting from the local level.

Overall, the women I interviewed were aware of the limits, critical points and difficulties inherent to their activism but also conscious of the contribution and transformative potential of their work. For example Allegra, one of the movement's

founders shows pride in the work done by *NUDM* in disseminating a new language that contrasts with the sexist or violent language used by journalists and institutional figures:

> *"there is really a violent language on the part of politicians, Salvini but not only him... [...] also journalists, sport commentators speaking in hyper sexists terms [...]those institutional point of references, or those from mainstream television etc. are not points of references that can somehow represent what happens in society because then luckily there is a lot more then that...* **so NUDM from that point of view is achieving some small breakthroughs** *[bold mine] [...] and then this is something that you cannot see straightaway, it is something that will settle over the years in the medium, long term...".*

Miranda is moved when remembering an initiative to rename the streets of Bologna (*transfeminist toponymy*) dedicating them to women and trans people who transformed the deep pain resulting from gender-based violence into political energy, including the group of migrant workers from Yooks, fighting against sexual harassment in the logistic sector:

> *"we had done this action, this evening procession [...] renaming many streets. To every street in Bologna that we have renamed,* **we gave the names of women and trans women and also trans people, who not only had suffered forms of violence and abuse but that with this violence, with these very strong forms of suffering had managed to find individual or collective strategies of political energy** *[bold mine] [...] among the various names with very different biographies, the last one was that of Lucia Perez…the young woman who was killed, raped and killed in an atrocious way and that she was, let's say, one of the symbols of violence that triggered the movement of NiUnaMenos [...] in Buenos Aires in Argentina... among these we also renamed a street to the migrants workers at Yoox".*

And Peonia, reflecting on her engagement as teacher and activist, towards the end of our conversation tells me:

"I might be utopian but I keep trying [...] in the end, already living in it, is already realizing something [...] who knows?! [...] I don't know, my goal is to be that little, that little colored dot, right?!

In the following chapter, I further my analysis by focusing on the extent to which feminists perceive their activism as transformative and I conceptualize connections between personal and collective processes of transformation. Centering the analysis on activists' own interpretations of their engagements, I rely on their voices to narrate how the birth of this movement was experienced by many as a 'breakthrough', a transformative moment. I then illustrate the heterogeneity of this movement through the varied stories narrated to me by activists, who shared their 'processes of becoming' feminists or joining this movement. Furthermore, I explore how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized to contribute to the collective process of organizing feminist activism and what are the challenges that activists experience while doing their work (e.g. fatigue, misunderstandings, online abuse). I will illustrate how, while digital technologies are considered fundamental by activists in order to organise mobilisation or disseminate content, their use is not always considered sustainable. Physical presence and proximity is sought in order to create spaces of encounter and care where the fatigue of activism can somehow be compensated by shared enthusiasm and where misunderstandings and dissonance can be more easily mediated.

Chapter 7 - *Si mañana soy yo, si mañana no vuelvo, destrúyelo todo[54]!:* Drawing connections between individual and collective experiences in feminist activism

In the first chapter, I have outlined how *NUDM* transformed and grew during the period of my involvement and, in particular, how feminists perceived an intensification of mobilization during exceptional political times (Della Porta, 2017). I have argued that, rather than being a simple reaction to the neoliberal crisis and to the rise of a populist far-right and ultra conservative anti-gender backlash, this movement is proposing alternative ways of 'doing politics' with the aim of producing radical, systemic change.

In the second chapter, I have analysed how the movement diffused across Italy, forming a network of digitally connected assemblies. I have demonstrated how, combining a transnational framing to the attention for the local dimension, contemporary feminists are experimenting inclusive grassroots and digital practices and carrying out a variety of actions aimed at transformations on the territory. I have argued that documenting these unobtrusive, 'unglamorous' (Davis, 2008) actions, happening behind the scenes and often remaining unexplored (Mendes et al., 2019), leads to expand the notion of activism.

In this chapter, I further my analysis by pointing the attention to feminists' individual experiences of activism and interpretations of their own engagements. I demonstrate how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized towards organizing activism (Hemmings, 2012) and argue that emotions have a crucial role in explaining the development of this feminist mobilization (Gould, 2002). I conceptualise feminist activism through the notion of *transit* to explain individual 'processes of becoming' feminists with *NUDM* or joining this movement after *passing through* other experiences of activism. This serves me also to demonstrate how feminist activism is often perceived as a transformative experience as found by other feminist scholars (Mendes et al., 2019). I then illustrate what are

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[54] This is a powerful slogan used by Ni Una Menos and adopted by *NUDM*: *If tomorrow it's my turn, if tomorrow I don't come back, destroy everything!* It symbolises the affective and emotional dimension of protest and recalls how this mobilisation started as a cry against femicides and disappearances.

some of the challenges that feminists experience while doing their work: unintended marginalisation leaves some feminists feeling estranged; internal tensions and misunderstandings (Doerr, 2018) arise, particularly online, despite attempts to work beyond differences; feminists experience fatigue due to the implications of activism in terms of time and the emotional and mental charge of receiving online abuse (Lewis, 2017). I argue that documenting these challenges also serves to make visible the labour of activism (Mendes et al. 2019: p. 179).

I chose this focus as throughout this thesis, I have employed an intersectional approach to research, which encourages validating the knowledge emerging within a movement, and bring attention to activists' lived experiences. First of all the transfeminist perspective embraced by this movement proposes that the lives and experiences of transgender people, feminists and queer people are central in the struggle against interconnected systems of oppression which it identifies as: the heterosexual, patriarchal social order within a capitalist system (Baldo, 2019; Carrera-Fernandez and De Palma, 2020). Furthermore, *NUDM* defines itself a movement of *'people in transit'* between genders and across borders (NUDM, 11/2018), moved by the desire[55] to *'transform the existing'*:

> *"We are transfeminist and transnational: we are all people in transit over time, between genders, between territories and urban spaces, beyond borders"*[56].

Building on these notions, I conceptualise the experience of feminist activism as one of *transit* and *transformation:* where feminists pass through different experiences of activism, travelling and migration and by doing so they shape and are shaped by collective processes. Specifically, I demonstrate how feminists with a variety of backgrounds and experiences became involved into this mobilization and I investigate the crucial role of emotions in this process (Gould, 2002).

Secondly, as I have introduced in chapter 6, in the *Feminist plan,* contemporary Italian feminists declare the intention to reconnect with the legacy of

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[55] A central slogan utilized by *Ni Una Menos* to then be translated and circulated in Italy was: *We are moved by desire!* (*Nos mueve el deseo!)*

[56] https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2018/11/01/call-seminaria-rigeneriamociliberamente/

the feminist practice of *starting with the self (partire da sé)* in order to achieve radical social transformations. Diffused by feminists in the 1970s, this practice starts from an exploration of *subjectivity* aimed at fuelling a process of liberation from internalized models and finding a new awareness to transform the system. In a recent contribution, Lea Melandri[57], one of the most significant voices in Italian feminism since the 1970s, defines *subjectivity* as "an embodied, sexual, lived singularity, a collection of one's own personal experiences, feelings, affections, unconscious formations" (Melandri, 2019). Melandri, who joined *NUDM* from the start, warns however, on the risk for contemporary feminists to forget about *'the self'*, given the many ambitious and revolutionary aims of this movement: uncovering domination, exploitation and alienation in all its forms; tracing the connections between oppression deriving from class, sex, 'race', gender, environment, etc.; transforming a neoliberal and patriarchal world and fighting against governments legitimising these forces. Considering these insights, having already analysed transformations at the level of the movement (chapter 5) and of the territory (chapter 6) in this chapter, I focus the attention on the individual level and on feminists' own interpretations of their engagements as transformative.

In order to move beyond unfruitful oppositions between accounts that focus excessively on subjective interpretations or on deterministic explanations, Hemmings (2012) developed the concept of *affective solidarity* (Hemmings, 2012). In this chapter therefore, I turn to this concept as "a way of focusing on modes of engagement that start from the *affective dissonance* that feminist politics necessarily begins from" (Hemmings, 2012: 148). *Affective dissonance*, the "feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued" (Hemmings, 2012: 150), can be a significant elements pushing feminists to mobilise. Rather than on a shared identity between women or feminists, a focus on *affective dissonance* allows to pay attention to what 'moves' someone to act and seek connections with others in order to achieve transformation of the social order. I find this concept particularly useful for the analysis of a movement that challenges universalistic notions of 'womanhood' and sexual differences and that contains a multitude of identities. Building on Hemmings'

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[57] An article from Lea Melandri illustrating her relationship with NUDM:
https://www.casadonnemilano.it/lea-melandri-il-mio-incontro-con-NUDM/

work, my contribution in this chapter is therefore to explore how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized to contribute to the collective process of organizing feminist activism.

Furthermore, I explore how a variety of other emotions such as anger (Lorde, 1984), rage (Ahmed, 2017) or *feminist respair* (Kay and Banet-Wiser, 2019) are mobilised and nourished within *NUDM*. After being disregarded for long (Goodwin et al., 2000) social movement scholars interest in the role of emotions for mobilisation increased, demonstrating how emotions do not spontaneously translate into desire for change or necessarily generate action. As Gould (2002) has shown in her study on ACT UP, social movements' *emotion work* is vital for their development and sustainability over time. Through a variety of actions – more or less intentional – movements can nourish an *emotional common sense*. In the case of ACT UP, Gould (2002) explains how the strong emotion generated within this movement and the sense of connection felt by activists towards one another, contributed to its sustainability over time. As Jasper and Poulsen (1995) have argued, individuals can join a movement as they belong to pre-existing networks, have contacts with activists within it or are attracted to it as they share a 'common grievance'. Especially when there are no pre-existing networks, movements can rely on *moral shocks,* which the authors define as: "when an event or situation raises such sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action" (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995: 498). Social movements can use *condensing symbols* such as verbal or visual images, to convey frames and themes in order to generate these *moral shocks* (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995). Drawing from these considerations, in this chapter, I explore the role of emotions in individual experiences of activism and demonstrate how *emotion work* contributed to the development of *NUDM*.

This chapter is structured as follows. I first illustrate how some feminists recall the birth of the movement, experiencing it as an important breakthrough. I demonstrate how, according to organisers, a specific event (a femicide) sparked the need to create a larger movement. I then demonstrate how this movement, which could rely on a pre-existing network, also made efforts to expand (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995) and tapped into a variety of emotions such as the outrage towards

femicides and gendered violence, contributing to transform these into action (Gould, 2002).

I then provide some examples of the variety of individual experiences that converged into the movement, focusing the attention on individual 'processes of becoming' feminists within *NUDM* or joining this movement after *passing through* other experiences of activism. In some cases in fact feminists associated joining *NUDM* to their *feminist awakening* (Mendes et al., 2019). In other cases, joining the movement was a way to re-engage with feminist activism or reconnect with *comrades* [58] they had mobilised with before (for example within LGBTQ+ associations, radical left organisations or autonomous entities). I demonstrate how, *transiting* through different experiences of activism, travelling and migration, feminists shaped and were shaped by collective processes (as for example activists were able to make links between practices and strategies learned in different contexts). This allows me also to investigate the relational aspect of protest (Polletta and Jasper, 2001) with the development or strengthening of affectionate relationships between members. I illustrate how activists attempted to create ways of relating differently with each other, for example by introducing shared 'policies' on how to interact during assemblies, on social media or mailing lists, encouraging the use of inclusive practices and stressing the significance of the 'collective voice of the assembly' over individual protagonism. I provide examples of how activists perceived these as 'learning moments' resulting in personal transformations. This allows me to demonstrate the fluid connection between personal and collective processes of transformation and contribute to scholarship on feminist collective voice and praxis.

I then analyse what are the difficulties feminists identify in their individual experience of activism. I illustrate how they make sense of the tensions emerging within such a heterogeneous movement, while attempting to work beyond differences. Here I explain first of all how feminists make sense of internal tensions such as the unintended marginalisation of certain voices, feelings of *estrangement* experienced by some feminists and *positional misunderstandings* (Doerr, 2018). I

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[58] Italian feminists within these circles tend to refer to each other affectionately as *compagne,* a term historically used within radical left and autonomous circles and a way of acknowledging a shared political identity.

then illustrate how, beyond internal dissonance (often embraced by feminists as generative), activists also experience the challenge of dealing with various types of online abuse (Lewis et al., 2017). Particularly during more intense period of mobilization, the labour required to tend to hateful comments, adds to the strain of organizing activism with very limited resources. This combination of challenges results in fatigue but also gives rise to important reflections on the emotional and unrecognized labour of activism (Federici, 2004; Mendes, 2019). Feminists open up discussions, certainly needing further exploration, on *how to make activism compatible with life* and create more sustainable digital practices as well as more hospitable and safe spaces of encounter.

7.1 Experiencing the birth of *NUDM* as a 'breakthrough'

In order to portray what sparked the formation of *NUDM*, I rely on the voice of Allegra, one of the key organisers who participated in the first small assembly in Rome where the idea of forming the movement first emerged:

> *"I participated from the start... as I was already part of a [feminist] collective in Rome... Infosex: a metropolitan inquest laboratory on bodies, sexuality, etc... and then we did some things with other entities in the city of Rome. There was the femicide of Sara di Pietrantonio... this brutal femicide [...] she was lured by the ex who wanted to see her one last time and then he literally set her car on fire [...] this femicide really got a lot of attention but the media told the story as: 'he killed her because he loved her too much'... 'he was a nice guy' so we... we called an assembly at Lucha Y Siesta[59], we were 10 people, really a few people and we said 'no, we must do something' [...] so we did a sit-in at La Magliana[60] and launched the first national demo from there".*

What emerges from Allegra's recollection is the frustration and outrage she and other feminists experienced when witnessing yet another brutal femicide and the desire to break with the traditional media narration often justifying perpetrators. Ahmed (2017) conceptualises similar moments as *feminist snaps:* critical and

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[59] One of the women's centres/shelter in Rome
[60] The area of Rome where the femicide took place

generative breaking points for feminist protest. Similarly, Jasper and Poulsen (1995: 498) define how the emergence of social movements is sometimes sparked by *moral shocks*: 'when an event or situation raises such sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action, even in the absence of a network of contacts'. In the case of *NUDM,* as Allegra's account reveals, a network of contacts existed: a small assembly, determined to mobilise, expand and 'do something' to transform emotions into action (Gould, 2002).

In order to better understand how this collective grief transformed into action and how emotions were gradually mobilised and cognitive cultural messages transmitted, it is necessary to reiterate the influence *Ni Una Menos* had on the Italian mobilisation from its start. If for Italian feminists, Sara's femicide becomes a point of no return, in the same period, Argentinian feminists from *Ni Una Menos* were mobilising following the rape and femicide of 16 years old Lucia Perez. Moved by their rage and the desire for change, one of their slogans being *Nos mueve el deseo, nos mueve la digna rabia! (We are moved by desire, we are moved by worthy rage!),* Argentinian feminists organised the first women's strike (October 2016). *Affective dissonance* (Hemmings, 2012) understood as a shared sense of injustice and a desire for radical transformation of the existent therefore, appears to be the starting point of a connection between feminists in Italy and Argentina.

It is after this femicide that, as Allegra explains, a small assembly in Rome collectively decided to borrow *Ni Una Menos'* name and launch *NUDM* in Italy. Allegra enthusiastically defines this experience as a 'breakthrough':

> *"let's Italianise it, let's do NUDM… so there: NUDM was born… because then we launched the national demo but it was really a gamble… we wrote this call with D.i.Re, UDI[61] and then there was this explosion of the first demo […] and then the assembly. It was born like that: slowly, slowly […] a few of us said 'ok, let's accept the rituality of the day for the elimination… on violence… launched by the UN[62]… but it's been, it's been really something of a breakthrough!*

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[61] DiRE or Donne in Rete is a network of anti violence centres and UDI or Unione Donne Italiane is an historical women association created after the second world war (chapter 2).

[62] The first demonstration and assembly were launched in correspondence with the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

As it appears from this extract, if a specific event sparked the need to create a movement and launch the first demonstration and assembly, this was made possible by the existence of a network and then gave rise to an unexpectedly 'explosive' first demonstration. As Jasper and Poulsen (1995) argue, recruitment in social movements can focus more on activating existing networks or attracting new members. In the next sections I will demonstrate how both mechanisms were present and how individuals previously active in other groups and those who did not have previous experiences of feminist activism merged into *NUDM*.

7.2 Activating existing networks

As per Allegra's recollection of the first small assembly in Rome where the idea emerged, recruitment started with organisers getting in contact with pre-existing networks of anti-violence centres, women's associations, squats, women centres and queer-trans-feminist collectives, in order to bring together activists in a first organising assembly and launch an initial demonstration.

This also becomes evident in the accounts given by organisers from various cities, with whom I discussed how they arrived to *NUDM* and how their previous affiliations shaped their participation. Miranda, an organiser with a long history of activism now active in *NUDM Bologna*, was not surprised by the emergence of this movement in 2016 as over the past few years she:

> *"kept seeing this proliferation of feminist collectives, which defined themselves feminist, some even practicing autocoscienza[63]… in some cases, closely connected with lesbian and queer movements and individuals… twenty year olds…".*

As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, *NUDM* served as a container of a variety of groups and networks, some of them transitory in their nature (emerging, transforming and finally merging into other entities) some more established. Camelia, an organiser from *NUDM Milano*, for example, explains how she arrived to the movement, as she was *"already included in various networks and collective*

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[63] Autocoscienza, is a feminist practice introduced by the collective Rivolta Femminile in the 70s. It consists in a collective exercise of feminist consciousness-raising based on the belief that women can better understand themselves through being engaged in an open dialogue with other women.

experiences". She is part of *"a tiny transfeminist and queer collective called Ambrosia […] which exists since 7 years ago and originated from the fusion of two groups […] one was called Gruppo G and I was part of it […] that started in 2008 from the Movimento dell'onda, a students movement and a series of squatting experiences in Milan […] we were part of a network […] called Sommovimento Nazionale[64] which brings together various queertransfeminist groups […] now it has flaked a bit maybe because of the presence of NUDM"*.

Some of the activists communicate their enthusiasm at the chance of reconnecting with someone they have mobilised with before. Miranda, for example, explains:

"so I got to NUDM […] when […] an assembly was called in Rome from the IoDecido[65] network which was bringing together various collectives of my generation or a little bit older […] they called this assembly, obviously for this to be possible there had been a lot of connection work […] more than 500 women arrived in Rome and I remember that for a last minute problem I could not go but other comrades from Bologna went and I followed all the assembly with the live streaming, recognising nearly all those who were, let's say, comrades from my generation… there was this launch of a demo for the 26th November".

What emerged from Miranda's recollection is first of all the awareness of the great amount of work needed to connect all these different entities, resulting in an assembly of more than 500 women in Rome. What her account shows is also the feeling of excitement in recognising *comrades* from her generation:

"that year a book from Barbara Romagnoli was being published (which) talked about 'new feminisms' […] and I thought us, 40 somethings are used to be treated as the 'young ones' […]by feminists of a different 'line of thought' or attitudes […] I think NUDM in Italy […] managed to start and take off thanks to this generation […]".

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[64] This translate into National Upheaval

[65] A network of feminist collectives, squats, women's centres in the city of Rome; one of the founding entities of NUDM together with DiRe and UDI

In Miranda's view the previous collective engagements of this generation of feminists now in their 40s, was fundamental for the creation of *NUDM* itself. Another important aspect emerging from her account is how digital technology allows people to participate who couldn't otherwise. Accessing the assembly in streaming through Facebook allowed her to participate despite geographical distance:

"I was able to listen to the all assembly and comment on the Facebook event… here in Italy we use mainly Facebook […] we are a bit stuck in this dynamic and I think it would be very interesting to understand why".

What Miranda expresses here is in line with some of the findings of Mendes et al. (2019) recent study on digital feminist activism, which challenges narratives saying that online organising is not as worthwhile as offline organising. As evidenced here, online organising can allow those who cannot attend offline physical spaces (e.g. due to other commitments, disabilities, financial constraints) to mobilise and feel emotionally involved. This does not mean however, that digital activism is thought to substitute physical presence. As I have explained in chapter 6 in fact, this movement places great emphasis on the value of occupying space together however, there is also a diffused awareness of the opportunities granted by online participation. Moreover, online platforms often compensate the lack of spaces where to discuss in person between feminists. Furthermore, some of the organisers I interviewed (e.g. La Spezia, Milan, Bologna and Rome) mentioned how a large number of young women who do not participate in assemblies but follow *NUDM* on social media (i.e. Facebook and Instagram) then attend mass demonstrations. While this makes it difficult to quantify or truly define the movement's composition, it confirms how digital feminist activism sometimes operates in submerged but still impactful ways.

Overall therefore, since the launch of the first assembly, online and 'on the ground' engagements happened in continuation with one another. This seems particularly true for those who share some previously established relation of trust or experience of activism. Being able to fully participate in an assembly that was being streamed online, a process of mutual recognition between activists who previously worked together could start. Trust is a fundamental aspect in various feminists account and it appears in Miranda's recollection:

"so I had the chance to comment: 'girls....' [...] because I could recognise them [...] girls, women, comrades with whom maybe you did not get in touch for 2, 3 years but you crossed paths a thousand times so at least from my side [...] an immediate relation of trust, even with different experiences but a lexicon, an attitude and many... an accumulation of many different things done together so an alliance was possible".

As exemplified here, sharing a lexicon, an attitude, a set of experiences was fundamental in the creation of this movement, as it facilitated the creation of alliances between activists across various feminist and queer groups. As introduced however, many individuals who became attracted to this movement since its first demonstration and gradually after that, did not belong to these existing networks. In the next section therefore I analyse how the movement presented itself and conveyed its frames and themes in a way that might have contributed to expand its reach and attract a variety of individuals, including those who were not attached to pre-existing feminist or queer groups.

7.3 Expanding the network

In a country that is living though a prolonged political and economic crisis, with a media system often complicit in the reproduction of a culture based on sexism (Peroni, 2018), and with feminism still being considered a bad word, attracting new participants to a feminist movement cannot be taken for granted.

As I have introduced, the idea of forming *NUDM* was sparked by the outrage experienced by activists at the sight of yet another femicide, an event which can be understood as a *moral shock* (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995), contributing to make this initial assembly particularly *eventful* (Della Porta, 2011) as it fuelled a mechanism directed at profound social transformation. As Gould (2002) has shown in her study on ACT UP, social movements' *emotion work* is vital for their development and sustainability over time. In the case of ACT UP, organisers and participants' *emotion work* contributed to turn individual grief or anger into collective action. Similarly, if the initial pulse to launch *NUDM* derived from collective grief and outrage, the movement's *emotion work* was central for its development. Since its start, *NUDM*, tapped into a variety of emotions and despite being ignored for long by traditional media, it gradually became an interesting subject for many, especially in the young

parts of the population (Chironi, 2019). Feelings of shared vulnerability, anger, empathy towards those who pay the price of patriarchal violence with their lives, or those who live to witness it or experience it fuelled the desire to mobilise. The joy and enthusiasm in creating or finding a political community had a fundamental role in the movement's success. As I will demonstrate below, since the launch of the first demonstration and through a variety of actions – more or less intentional – *NUDM* nourished something similar to what Gould (2002) defines an *emotional common sense*. Through demonstrations, assemblies, direct action and a variety of slogans, songs and visuals, it transmitted a sense that something could be done about gender-based violence, while detaching from the imagery of women as victims and creating a sense of *togetherness* between feminists.

First of all, the symbol chosen by activists to represent the movement is that of a matrioska. This can be seen as a condensing symbol (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995) used to signify the interconnection between women and the desire to protect each other from violence.
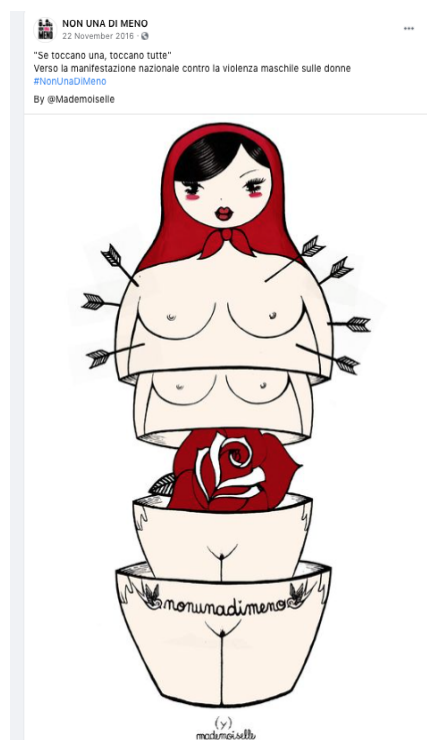

Figure 4 A matrioska is the symbol chosen by *NUDM*. In this post used to launch the first demonstration, the image is accompanied by the slogan: 'If they touch one of us, they touch us all!'

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When launching the first demonstration, the symbol of the matrioska[66] was accompanied by the slogan: *If they touch one of us, they touch us all!*[67] This reflects a desire to respond collectively to violence and to rely on each other rather than wait to be helped by some authority. It is also an attempt to detach from visual representation of women as powerless 'victims' of violence. More broadly, the influence of queer groups within *NUDM* is evident in the creation and diffusion of unashamed, 'in your face' imagery (Gould, 2002).

In my experience of attending demonstrations and assemblies, these can generate strong emotions, transmitting a sense of enthusiasm, purpose and connection. In Gould's words: "The intense emotional energy that is generated when people join together in pursuit of a common end—the joy, the solidarity, the feeling of being part of something that is larger than yourself—helps to explain why people engage in collective action even when they could easily take a 'free ride'" (Gould, 2002: 22). As I have analysed in chapter 5 and 6, activists underlined the value of recognising each other, counting each other, being present 'with our bodies' and 'reclaiming feminist spaces'. The strong emotions generated by being together during demonstrations and assemblies or other events therefore, also contributed to build and preserve a sense of connection felt by activists towards one another, and ultimately to the movement sustainability so far.

This sense of connection and togetherness between activists was also nourished by the development of ritualistic practices such as that of singing the movement's 'hymn' during demonstrations and national assemblies: *"We started together, We will come back together, Not One Less!"* and a variety of other songs created for these occasions[68].

Moreover, the translation of invigorating songs, slogans and the circulation of protest repertoires contributed to create a sense of connection between feminists that expanded across borders. Italian activists for example adopted a song used by *Ni Una Menos*: *Se va a caer!* (It will fall!). This song, sometimes performed during

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[66] Link to the call to the first demonstration on the movement's blog:
https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2016/10/25/matrioske-di-tutto-il-mondo-unitevi/
[67] One of the few articles documenting the events:
 https://global.ilmanifesto.it/if-they-touch-one-of-us-they-touch-us-all/
[68] A link to the page of the blog where all the protest songs are stored:
https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2018/11/20/slogan-e-canzoni-non-una-di-meno/

assemblies, expresses certainty regarding the unavoidable fall of the patriarchy and the success of feminist mobilisation. Furthermore, Italian feminists adopted the Spanish slogan *"Sister, I believe you"*, which *"*constructs a 'we' that is supportive and welcoming, a political community" (López, 2020: 16).

Lastly, in connection to the *International Women Strike,* the movement communicated the message that it is not necessary to accept the idea that some lives have no value. Through the circulation of the slogan *"If our lives have no value, we strike"*[69] feminists expressed their determination to act against all those forces, which do not value life: be it patriarchal violence resulting in femicides or neoliberal violence resulting in impoverishment and exploitation.

It is important to stress that, given the horizontal and participatory nature that *NUDM* favours and its transnational character, these themes and frames and much of the movement's *emotion work* were co-costructed by activists *in action.* Similarly to what Gould (2002: 6) explains regarding ACT UP "much of a movement's *emotion work* is non-strategic and unpremeditated. Where other tasks of a movement like mobilizing resources and organizing actions are deliberate and consciously undertaken, *emotion work* is often a less-than-fully conscious component of a movement's various activities. That is, the mobilization of emotions is often an *effect* of a movement's activities, but not necessarily the *intention* lying behind them".

Overall therefore, "interpretive and emotion work mutually reinforced one another" (Gould, 2002: 16). A pre-exiting network contributed to open up a space for action and start conveying themes and frames. Tapping into strong emotions and experiences of gender-based violence, individuals unattached to this network became attuned to the movement's demands. *Emotion work* contributed to the emergence of a sense of connection and togetherness through which feminists came to frame themselves as agents of radical transformation within a hostile environment for feminists, queers, trans people and other *dissidents*. Embracing these identities in a context that broadly rejects them, activists came to frame their feminism as rebellious in contrast to *lean-in* and neoliberal forms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Rather than asking to be accepted by society or 'saved' from gender-based violence, they declared society's deep need for transformation and their determination to protect each other from violence.

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[69] An analysis from the NUDM movement on the significance of the strike:
https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2017/03/14/the-inappropriate-weapon-of-feminist-strike/

In the following section I will expand the analysis on the variety of individual experiences that converged into the movement, focusing the attention on individual 'processes of becoming' feminists with *NUDM* or joining this movement after *passing through* other experiences of activism.

7.4 Processes of becoming: feminist awakenings and experiences of transit

As introduced, while some of the activists I interviewed arrived to *NUDM* from other experiences such as feminist or queer collectives, others did not have previous affiliations or **did not identify as feminist**. During interviews therefore, I discussed how they made sense of this step in their process of 'becoming' feminists or perhaps regaining energy to mobilise.

I recall how in one of the first national assemblies I attended, one of the activists declared with enthusiasm how she became a feminist on the 8th of March 2017, on the day of the first *International Women's Strike*, launched by *NUDM*. This experience can be interpreted as a *feminist awakening* (Mendes et al., 2019) a powerful moment where to discover a new awareness and start developing one's own political ideology. Some got close to the movement with no previous political experience of political activism. Sole, who is now one of the key organisers in *NUDM Milano*, with responsibility within the movement's press office and communication group was one of them:

> *"I became politicised with NUDM [...] I got close to the movement as an individual with no affiliation to collectives or movements [...] I took and went to the national demonstration in Rome, I had just learned to make videos [...] and I took a video of the demo [...] as the movement was not so organised at the beginning and there were no videos after the demo, I published it a couple of days ago and it got shared a lot because for a couple of days it was the only video of the demo that no one was expecting on Facebook".*

As we can see from Sole's experience her involvement started straightaway, she went to the demonstration spontaneously and elected herself as video-maker.

After posting the first video of the movement she then became gradually more involved.

Others identified as feminists but were not involved in feminist activism, as they felt detached from the existing feminist entities in Italy. The intersectional and queer approach to feminism carried forward by *NUDM*, brought Peonia into feminist activism:

"I was doing politics for a few years but I got closer to feminism in academia mainly because I had professors [...] who organise the Festival of Women and Gendered Knowledge [...](Then) I got closer to intersectional feminism because let's say, the other feminism did not interest me [...] what I read, studied, listened to from radical feminism did not interest me [...] so it was automatic to connect to NUDM [...] there was from the beginning this air of transfeminism and from there everything else started".

What emerges from Peonia's account is how she felt an automatic connection with the approach of *NUDM* and this then started her experience of feminist activism.

Some joined *NUDM* after having struggled to find their space in activists groups with a focus that they considered too narrow. This is the case for example of Gemma, a young organiser in Padova, who tried to get involved in university activism in her early 20s but gradually lost interest in a mobilisation that did not take into account the material conditions of students:

"I am the daughter of a family of workers [...] I always worked while I was studying".

What is interesting in Gemma's account of looking for her activist community is that it raises a similar question to the one giving origin to the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw and Bonis, 2005). With intersectionality, black feminists have been highlighting how oppression "is produced through multiple, intersecting axis" (Liu, 2018, p. 82). While the initial focus was how gender and race intersect as systems of oppression, intersectionality then started to be employed to analyse other sources. In this example, as Gemma did not feel like the class axis was considered

relevant within university activism, she started directing her attention elsewhere. Furthermore, while, she had always being fascinated by women's struggles, getting closer to feminism was a process of 'becoming', started while working in a small LGBTQ+ association, realizing and coming to terms with her bisexuality and then working in a counselling service (*sportello di ascolto*) for transsexual people and providing *"support for everything related to the transition path so… So I continued there until I stumbled into NUDM"*.

In Gemma's case as well as Peonia's, it appears clear that the interest towards feminism did not only focus on women's struggles or women's rights, they were both searching for a political community at the intersection between various struggles. Like others, Gemma's approach to feminism changed over time. She perceives her process of transformation as one where she gradually became more radical and not afraid to embrace conflict:

> *"my being feminist started systematically… not simply as in the 'suffragette' and everything that attracted me as a pre-teen and semi-teen […] the stuff about women struggle and struggles for reappropriation really excited me but I had less… less tools… then you grow up and […] you become more of a pain in the ass and so I became radical growing old (we laugh) […] I used to have more moderate positions […] dialogue etc, now I do not disdain conflict"*.

In common with other feminists I interviewed, her level of engagement grew over time as she participated into the activities of *NUDM*. In our interview she spoke about her group with great affection and involvement, highlighting the excitement of feeling part of a community. Interestingly, she defined her involvement in *NUDM* demonstrations as 'sweeping' experiences and her participation to this movement has 'addictive':

> *"I went from 'I go autonomously with my sister, we take a train and airbnb' to 'I am part of the organising group organising buses and paying up if someone doesn't turn up' […] so yeah, my level of participation changed a lot […] I become addicted […] I think […] because as far as I'm concerned romanticism is a full square, it is that thing where you look behind, you look*

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in front of you, you look on your sides and there's an endless crowd, you don't see the end of it [...] I feel like crying (we laugh) [...] you are in the middle of this tide of people and you say, 'I mean it's real, it's not only me seeing this' [...] and you feel swept-up by this crowd of people and these exchanges with people you don't know".

What Gemma describes here does not only reflect on how profoundly feminist activism 'invaded' her life but shows how, among the variety of affects contributing to mobilise feminists, such as anger (Lorde, 1984), rage (Ahmed, 2017), *feminist respair* (Kay and Banet-Wiser 2019) and *affective dissonance* (Hemmings, 2012), there is space for the joy of connecting with others. This is documented for example also by Mendes et al. (2019), as well as by Gould (2002) in her study on ACT UP and by Ahmed (2017) who talks about the joys of being a *feminist killjoy*.

Like Gemma struggled at first to find a collective of people interested to act at the intersection between various social issues, Stella found it difficult to continue to engage with the hierarchical dynamics of party politics. Now a university student, Stella had been active inside the youth wing of a radical left party in the small town where she lives (La Spezia) where the average population is very old. She excitedly recalls how moving to the nearby city of Pisa to study at University, finally helped her getting to know a *"younger version of activism [...] the one of collectives, movements…"*. It is through this possibility to connect with activists in another city that she stumbled into *NUDM*:

"it is in Pisa that I got to know NUDM and started participating to assemblies always in a somewhat distant way at the start as I did not live in Pisa and only knew a few people [...] so I could not fully give my contribution [...] but my idea has always been that of transporting this… this packet of experiences and practices to La Spezia where there is no youth activism outside of parties and characterised by horizontality of relationships and practices".

As we can see from this extract, Stella's participation also grew over time. If at first she felt somewhat distant, she gradually became more involved as she was determined to start a *NUDM* assembly in her city. At the beginning (2016/17) Stella

struggled to get people interested in what was happening around the country because not many people knew what *NUDM* was. She recalled feeling quite isolated while enthusiastically telling people: *"do you know what is happening in Pisa and in other Italian cities?"* With a few friends she then managed to create a group, inviting personal contacts and people with whom they shared political interests and launched an unexpectedly successful demonstration on the occasion of the International Women Strike on 8th March 2018. As previously outlined, the possibility to tap into existing contacts (Jasper and Poulsen, 2001) was fundamental in this instance. Overall, as for others, becoming active in *NUDM,* transformed Stella's understanding and practice of political activism. Disappointed by the hierarchical dynamics of party politics, the lack of horizontality and transparency, and what she defines a diffused *machista* attitude, in *NUDM* she found a community, a network of like-minded people to collaborate with:

> *"The power of NUDM, managing to create networks, seemed necessary to all of us in a provincial context like this one [...] and let's say that in parallel with this, there was a decline of interest on a personal level towards all the other dynamics that are top-down and aiming at hegemony and over determination [...] this perspective helped me see certain dynamics within party politics [...] there is always this machista attitude while maybe showing off because the party secretary or the trade union secretary is a woman [...] this is one of the reflections we made also to diffuse a different perspective and a different way to approach one another [...]*
>
> *The most beautiful thing that was constructed with NUDM is a different network of people who collaborate towards a common aim… beyond 'chairs', appointments, political roles [...] we always said that in there we are individuals, we are the people, not the director of something or [...] things like that".*

The idea of establishing relationships 'simply' between people and beyond labels or political roles mentioned by Stella, also becomes clear in other accounts and can be explained by the efforts to create participatory and horizontal spaces, favouring a sense of connection between activists as previously introduced (Gould, 2002). As Stella explains enthusiastically, the creation of a network of people joined

by a common aim, collaborating with each other beyond the need for hierarchies or titles is *'the most beautiful thing'* that the movement managed to construct. This focus on the role of each individual, stripped of any 'official' political role or title is also present in other accounts. Contributing to a collective work is central in the understanding of feminist activism within this movement.

Peonia, from *NUDM Rimini,* adds something to this idea, stressing the importance of becoming a reference point, a point of contact, making oneself available, being present with one's own body:

"it is useful, much more than the conferences [...], more than the... what the fuck do I know?! more than institutional projects [...] the contact... the contact! [...] on March 8th a woman approached me who had big problems, but really big ones [...] and then in the end I helped her, I managed to help her [...] you are that point of reference, if someone has a problem comes to talk to you [...] and knowing that they are non-judgmental people, who have their own non-judgmental action but who can help you because maybe they have a network".

Bringing her own autobiographical account into activism and sharing it in our interview, Peonia explains for example how, as a child in a difficult situation, meeting people by chance who turned up to be a point of reference was central and how now she wishes to be perceived in the same way:

"there are moments in life when you ask yourself questions [...] and you remember that it was that person you once met who made leaflets and calmly explained a certain thing to you, explained it to you with a smile, etc... or I'll give you another cute example: on March 8th [...] the demonstration passed in front [...] at the doors of a convent and a very galvanized nun came out, all smiling, with a smile like this (we laugh) and she did: 'but this thing is for the 8th March? for women?'. And we... we did not expect it, we said 'Yes yes of course'. 'Well done! I can't come but I'm with you!' [...] and she went back inside ... after reflecting on it one thinks: 'the church is a totally different thing but that is not the church, that is a person' [...] and if one day that woman should have a doubt: 'But what the fuck am I doing?' [...] She will

remember those with the fuchsia handkerchiefs that passed by on March 8th, no? Maybe she will remember that they welcomed her with a smile and she will feel part of that, instead of part of the church where [...] she made her journey".

The focus on valorising interpersonal relations between individuals beyond labels or belongings (for example to a specific party, trade union or other organisation) is also salient in the view of feminist activism expressed by Alba, active in Reggio Calabria:

"what I care about are people, what matters to me are people, what matters to me are comrades (masculine form) who take a clear stance and comrades (feminine form) who work side by side instead of making no concessions [...] against a masculine world [...] I mean, in the 70s it made sense to make no concession (in Italian: fare muro contro muro) but now we need to try to work together".

Alba's account also highlights the necessity to network and build alliance beyond differences (including but not limited to gender differences), partly due to the harshening of the political circumstances, which I introduced in chapter 5. The determination to try to 'make things work' despite differences is accompanied by a desire to develop and rely on interpersonal relationships and reflects in her efforts to work together with various actors from local institutions and NGOs:

"we build projects together, we work together in schools [...] we organise meetings"

Alba has matured this perspective having been active in feminist collectives since the 70s in Reggio Calabria, where together with other women she founded a feminist collective and more recently a *NUDM* assembly:

"we define ourselves 'differently young' because we are all over 50 [...] and with a story behind (us)[...] I was 15 when I started doing politics with Lotta Continua, with the students' movement, with the feminist collective and in the 70s it was even harder than now [...] (it is) a pretty right wing city and we can still call it that now so this is a big challenge... now we are trying to

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network with associations which however cannot really be called feminist…
so [...] we network for specific projects, for certain situations [...]
Actionaid's referent in Reggio Calabria is a really great girl, woman [...]
also very advanced with the feminist thought so we manage to do things
together".

As I have illustrated so far, while some activists became politically active with *NUDM*, others were already part of activist or specifically queer or feminist circles. By transiting between these experiences, activists brought with them practices developed elsewhere and by doing so contributed to shape *NUDM*. This is the case for example of those who were active within the network of queer and transfeminist groups (*Sommovimento Nazionale)* which, as introduced, was instrumental in the creation of *NUDM*. One of the characteristics that these two networks share, according to Peonia now active in *NUDM Rimini*, and previously in *Sommovimento Nazionale*, is the importance assigned to thinking and discussing collectively and as inclusively as possible during assemblies:

"this thing of speaking slowly, waiting for the other person to finish, taking a
moment to assimilate what was said, come up with 'fuck! you hurt me, that
thing you said hurt' no? [...] Or the refusal of the personal attack... fucking
social networks are only personal attack... the gist of the social network is the
personal attack and instead, in the assembly what we try not to do is to attack
the person but to attack the content [...] they are two (separate) things
unfortunately [...] from what I've seen in recent years... Because you can't
like the page, read what I say and believe you are part of that movement...
You are part of the movement if you move [...] if you have something to say
come to the assembly and we will talk about it [...] and we all discuss".

What emerges from Peonia and other activists' accounts is the value assigned to meeting in person as it opens possibility to communicate fully and embrace conflict when it arises. Beyond the difficulties of digital communication, what Peonia reflects upon is also how assemblies are transformative *per se*. She explains for example how her way of communicating with others was shaped by the attendance to assemblies:

"I would never have, maybe I would never have changed my way of speaking if I had not attended certain assemblies [...] my way of presenting myself, of speaking, of explaining things ... the assembly forms you".

What this extract exemplifies is that while individual activists bring their voice, skills and experiences to collective moments such as assemblies, in turns they are shaped by these experiences. Beyond these experiences of transit through different political groups, another element emerging from some accounts is the impact of travelling and migration had on activists' experiences.

Miranda, one of the key organisers in Bologna, for example explains how she didn't feel the need to declare herself a feminist for a very long time and how this necessity manifested itself gradually as she moved across various cities participating to different experiences of activism. Now in her 40s, Miranda *"started doing politics within social movements [...] at 16 [...] with the eviction of the Centro Sociale Leoncavallo [70] in '89".* She was then active in students movements and in mobilisations in Genoa, one of the biggest historical centres in Europe, *"proletarian and with a prevalence of migrant population".* Throughout the 90s she was active *"in the migrants movements in a moment where there was a passage from an antiracist movement to a movement of and by migrants".* She *"co-founded an association called Città aperta [...] with whom (they) opened a surgery because at a certain point there was a law prohibiting access to health services for those without papers, so called 'clandestines'".* She then moved from Genoa to Padova, where she was active within the university, and in the movement against the Kosovo war (1998/99). Within this breadth of experiences within different movements, Miranda did not feel the need to call herself a 'feminist'. Rather than a *feminist snap,* her experience seems very gradual and organic:

"I always had a feminist sensitivity but I was not openly declaring myself feminist maybe also because in this initial formation [...] contrary to the majority [...] of the centri sociali which have been pretty important experiences between the 80s and 90s [...] so, contrary to the majority of these

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[70] A self-managed social centre in Milan, started as a squat in 1975

experiences, in Genoa the most visible people were all women, some coming from feminisms, some not but let's say that I formed myself in a context where, since I was very young, as a woman, us as women, I don't want to deny that there were problems of sexism […] but in fact I had an encounter with social movement politics in a context where as women we were hegemonic.[…] So until a certain point I didn't perceive...although I (was)… studying, reading, having a sensitivity of certain kind… but I did not feel the need or I didn't have the opportunity, until I was 23, 24, 25, to declare myself a feminist and look for alliances based on this…".

Moving first to Padova and then to Bologna, which she defines a 'very queer city', with a long history of feminism and LGBTQ+ struggles, brought her close to this identification and to getting involved into a variety of experiences of activism within feminist and queer circles.

My intention so far has been to demonstrate how a variety of interrelated issues, brought about by individual activists with such diverse experiences came to shape the intersectional agenda of *NUDM*. This exploration allowed me to demonstrate how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized to contribute to the collective process of organizing feminist activism.

Furthermore, I have highlighted how experiences of transit through different groups, travelling and migration had transformative effects on participants and at the same time shaped collective processes, as for example activists were able to make links between practices and strategies learned in different contexts. These experiences of transit between groups however, are not free from challenges. What remains to be analysed however, is whether something gets lost or misunderstood in these processes of transit and who remains at the margins of the movement's collective processes, as I will analyse in the following sections.

7.5 Processes of becoming *estranged* and experiences of transition

As introduced at the beginning of the chapter, the existence of a network, and the sharing of a lexicon, an attitude, a set of experiences facilitated the creation of alliances and the emergence of *NUDM*. The existence of personal relationships between activists within a network however, can sometimes result in unintended

marginalisation of certain voices (Doerr, 2018). The sense of connection between activists (Gould, 2002) and the joy of recognising each other, having previously worked together, might leave those who do not belong to such groups feeling left out.

This is the case for example for Margherita, an organiser now active in *NUDM Roma* and previously *Milan,* who joined the movement after having been 20 years abroad:

> *"from 1995 to 2000 I worked within movements, mainly in the European Social Forum, in the World Social Forum… so I always followed all the international themes […] I lived in Greece, in Hungary, in England, in Spain. In Spain I had this wonderful experience of the Movimento 15M […] so from 2011 until 2017 I worked in the 15M, I worked for the radio …[…] I worked in an internationalist assembly which is La Plaza de Los Pueblos and then I always worked in all the assemblies of the 15M at Puerta del Sol".*

Deciding to return to Italy was very difficult for Margherita as she recalled the Italian political situation as not stimulating at all. This *"phase of depression"* however, is replaced by hope and by the surprise to see the huge demonstration and assembly organised to launch *NUDM* in November 2016:

> *"what struck me was the fact that the women who participated to this demonstration […] decided to go to an assembly at the University which is what we used to do in Spain all the time… (there is) this idea that the demonstration does not work if at the end of it there is not a moment of collective elaboration and to express the will to continue a common path […]* ***I heard of thousands of women meeting and wanting to work together and I said maybe even in Italy there is a little hope*** *[bold mine]".*

What this extract expresses is the relief and hope seeing that something new is moving even within a context which she remembers as quite dull. When getting close to the movement however, having been away from activists circles for many

years and no longer sharing the same lexicon and points of reference, Margherita feels like an outsider:

"I have always been involved in politics in all the places where I went and I must say that also in other places there is this thing that you are still a person who is not known, people don't know where you come from [...] there is always a certain resistance... in Italy this resistance is even greater [...] even if you are Italian, however, you are no longer known because you have been away for 22 years, you no longer find the people you had mobilised with before and therefore you feel this feeling of estrangement [...] in my opinion this is a general problem in… in movements [...] and also in NUDM ... it is something we have worked a lot on, for example in the assemblies (of 15M)… the topic of 'welcoming'…".

As Margherita points out, this characteristic is present in other contexts but very accentuated in the Italian one and would need to be openly addressed. As I introduced in chapter 4, when arriving to assemblies from the UK after 10 years away from Italy, I also experienced the resistance mentioned here and could relate with Margherita's account. For example, when participating to national assemblies at the beginning, without being known or affiliated to any existing group I perceived a certain level of suspicion from some participants. It took some time to be somewhat welcomed as for example, when trying to get in contact by email or message to introduce my research and connect with potential interviewees I did not receive any reply for a long time. Doerr (2018) describes similar mechanism in relation to the case of the *Italian Social Forum*: despite organisers best intention to be inclusive, some grassroots activists felt that some speaker or groups where favoured over others. While organisers expressed the intention to include different ideological groups and encourage a dialogical atmosphere, some of the speakers were perceived to receive more attention than others in decision-making:

"Whatever their egalitarian ideals or intentions, people naturally tend to acknowledge and associate most readily with those with whom they already have familiarity, friendly connections, or established community ties" (Polletta, 2002 cited in Doerr 2018: p. 34).

What emerges from Margherita's account are two important points raised by feminist theorists. First of all this feeling of *estrangement* that can be felt in the process of migration and secondly the central issue of who has the right to speak even in places that aim at being horizontal and inclusive. On the first point, Ahmed (1999: 344) argues for the possibility to talk about migration as "a process of becoming estranged from that, which was inhabited as home. The word estrangement has the same roots as the word 'strange'. And yet, it suggests something quite different. It indicates a process of transition, a movement from one register to another".

Throughout this PhD I experienced something very similar: being originally from Italy but having lived in the UK for ten years I returned to Italy for fieldwork as somewhat of an outsider while at the same time being familiar with the contexts I was visiting. Reconnecting with activists' circles in Italy after having made a home abroad, required the learning of new registers. Similarly, the estrangement felt by Margherita, is not only linked to her return to a home that no longer feels familiar but also a difficulty reconnecting with the register of activism and acquiring *'political citizenship'* within a context that she thinks should welcome her:

> *"because those who arrive do not always have to know the history or the geography to be able to speak... one has the right to a political citizenship anyway".*

The issue raised here connects with the long-term concern raised by feminist theorists regarding who is allowed to speak, whose voices count? (Harding, 1991). Specifically, it raises the question of "who is able to speak (or not), about which issues, on which platforms" (Mendes et al. 2019: 32) within a movement that aims to be inclusive. Margherita explains:

> *"But instead here in Italy there (is still) this (attitude) 'it is my territory and I do this, I have the way, the truth, the light, this is another territory'.... and these territories within the same left movements either do not speak to each other or conflict in a way [...] I am very aware of this strangeness by returning to the place where I thought that the strangeness should not exist ...*

after 22 years of being alienated in different places I also experienced the strangeness of the place where I shouldn't have, I shouldn't have... but the absence for long periods can cause this... that is, I still feel like a migrant here now".

This extract brings up another problem that other activists pointed at: the tendency each entity within the movement (i.e. groups, associations, collectives) has to 'tend to their own gardens', focusing on their own interests rather than adopting new modes of doing politics within a transnational movement – a practice hard to eradicate from Italian activism, that Gemma defines *orticellismo* (orto meaning garden in Italian).

Despite these challenges, Margherita and other activists founded a transterritorial and transnational assembly within the movement that attempts to bring together feminists based in different locations. As I have explained in chapter 5, some of the activists within this assembly lamented how the issues they care to carry forward (including for example ecofeminism and anti-speciesism) have been consistently side-lined and the assembly, perceived as a somewhat separate entity within the movement, an anomaly, with its own methods and agenda. While with time this assembly started gaining more space within *NUDM*, it required extremely persistent activists, acting as intermediaries. These dynamics can be explained as something similar to what Doerr defines as *positional misunderstandings* (2018: 7) where "activists challenge the ideals of neutrality and impartiality in situations that many participants in a meeting perceive as unfair, in which a dominant group systematically ignores demands for equality and justice made by another, less privileged group".

What I have demonstrated here is how despite the stated intention of working together across differences and creating inclusive spaces, tensions and marginalisation emerge and some activists can experience feelings of *estrangement*. This does not concern only *NUDM* but feminism more broadly as the variety of voices and ideological positions and approaches increasingly contribute to divisions and conflict, particularly online, which can result in feelings of *estrangement* or the marginalisation

of certain voice. This is an important point as surpassing these types of divisions is a "key social justice project of our time" (Hines, 2019).

Similarly to the British and other contexts, the feminist movement in Italy is split on themes such as sex-work, pornography, surrogacy and trans rights. Within Italian feminism the main division is between groups adhering to or somewhat close to *NUDM* and radical feminists who are critical towards it *(Resistenza Femminista, RadFem Italia* and *Arcilesbica)*. Broadly, radical feminist groups propose essentialist positions on sexual difference, refuse the notion of 'gender' and 'gender identity', oppose prostitution classifying it as 'paid rape' and surrogacy as a capitalistic commercialisation of women's bodies. In my experience of being confronted by some feminists within these groups due to my research on *NUDM,* this movement is accused of promoting sex-work and the practice of 'rent-a-womb', claiming the hegemonic position of representing Italian feminism, using propaganda tones to appear politically more relevant than it is, 'erasing' women's experiences by centering the attention on queer and trans lives. The discussion of these themes often leads to *flame wars* online.

In particular, as evidenced by Pearce et al. (2020) in a recent article, the issue of trans rights and trans-exclusionary rhetoric is provoking extreme divisions within feminism, needing to be investigated from a sociological perspective: "Analyses of trans-exclusionary rhetoric provide an important contribution to sociology. This is not only because they offer an insight into the production of ideologically ossified, anti-evidential politics (including within academic environments), but also because of what can be learned about power relations. Questions of whose voices are heard, who is found to be convincing, what is considered a 'reasonable concern' and by who, and how these discourses impact marginalised groups are key elements of sociological enquiry".

I believe that the concept of *positional misunderstanding* developed by Doerr (2018) might be useful in order to better understand how conflict between different branches of feminism takes place, ultimately leading to feelings of *estrangement* and in some cases disengagement.

Similarly to what Pearce et al. (2020) argue in their work on *TERF Wars*, my observations or participation in online exchanges revealed a great divide between activists from different strands of feminist or queer activism. In Italy, conflict usually

plays out between radical feminists labelled as TERFs (the pejorative term referring to Trans Exclusive Radical Feminists, untranslated) and queer-trans-feminist activists accused of being the 'handmaids of patriarchy', 'letting gay lobbies set the agenda of feminism' and/or 'being financed by pimps'.

Interested in understanding "who is able to speak (or not)" (Mendes et al., 2019: 32) about these issues on platforms such as Facebook lead me to look beyond *NUDM* and into the ways various contemporary feminist and queer groups dialogue online. While the study focuses on *NUDM* in fact, pointing out its efforts towards inclusivity of heterogeneous voices, I believe it is important to understand also how it is perceived and who is not included or attracted by this movement.

An in depth interview and a series of exchanges with Nada, a transsexual woman previously active in *Arcilesbica* (the main radical feminist lesbian association in open contrast with *NUDM*) contributed to shed light on how conflict between different 'types' of feminism often emerges from the lack of a common language and cultural references. Nada's account is illustrative and salient in order to reach a more nuanced understanding of how dissonance between feminists plays out online. Her position as a transsexual woman choosing to adhere to a radical feminist association and trying to express an independent stance in fact, resulted in her receiving abuse from various sides both online and in physical spaces. Due to her 'atypical' stances, Nada describes finding herself between two fires: on one side the trans exclusionary radical feminists who refuse her right to a *'political citizenship'* within radical lesbian feminism and on the other side the queer and trans activists challenging her insistence on sexual difference. She refers to the first as infused with traditional values and catholic bigotry, *'smelling of incense'* and *'sackcloth'* and describes some queer and trans activists as *'fabulous misogynists'*:

> *"for me there was an even more accentuated level of exposure because I was actually the only transsexual person (I am operated)... who adhered to these positions [...] they also attacked me both on a personal level but also on social media, sometimes I received very unpleasant comments, full of insults [...] they insulted me saying but what are you doing? you're a bit like the Egyptian in the Northern League, you're like a Negro who votes for the KKK [...]. In reality, I have always supported my very precise and very clear position regarding recognizing on the one hand a need for difference between*

biological women and trans women and at the same time, of course, the need to be inside the feminist world with a strong anchor as a woman and trans and also claiming our female identity… and therefore, how can I say, also fighting that fringe of the feminist world that I think is objectively trans exclusionary [...] what I do not accept is an indiscriminate generalized accusation because it is not true that all feminists are trans exclusionary [...]But with no doubt there is a small fringe... and it is a fringe that attacked me precisely because of my commitment to Arcilesbica... because from their delusional point of view a trans woman however remains a man because they refer exclusively to a biological datum ... for them it is not possible to be a woman if you are not one biologically [...] from their point of view, that it is purely paranoid, because everything that goes beyond biology is an attack on biology... And therefore we should preserve… for me with a language... with a very Nazi, very Aryan mentality [...] I mean, they are afraid that there may even be a colonization [...] of feminist associations from people who were previously men".

What emerges from Nada's account is how she also experienced a sort of *estrangement,* for the duration of her engagement*,* for wanting to express an independent perspective matured through her experience of transition. Her experience points to a risk of 'group thinking' within feminism, weakening its revolutionary potential and the ability to form much needed alliances. Furthermore, her account points to a paradox that results from feminism internal divisions: while the intersectional and transfeminist approach promoted by *NUDM* aims to put trans rights at the centre of feminism, the movement was not able to reach out to Nada and she did not feel attracted by it. Similarly, *Arcilesbica,* declaring to work to protect the rights of all women, included activists who did not respect Nada's experience as a trans woman, resulting in her finally growing tired and disengaging from feminist activism.

What I have demonstrated here is how internal dissonance between different approaches to feminism can arise resulting in marginalisation of certain voices. In the following section, I will illustrate what are other challenges that contemporary feminists face. If combining online activism with offline organising can grant certain opportunities and facilitate more horizontal processes, it can also 'double' the

challenges presented to activists and add to the strain of organizing activism with very limited resources. While I have touched on this issue of online abuse in chapter 5 for example, here I analyse it from the perspective of those who receive it and highlight how the labour required to tend to hateful comments (Lewis et al., 2017) adds to activists fatigue, rise to important reflections on the emotional and unrecognized labour of activism (Federici, 2004; Mendes et al., 2019).

7.6 Online and offline organising, abuse and the unrecognised labour of activism

A common theme emerging from various interviews is that conflict between different perspectives escalates rapidly online while outside the digital sphere the oppositional dynamics within feminism usually tend to be more nuanced, dependent on the context, on the existence of interpersonal relationships between activists and the issue at the centre of mobilisation. Alba, from Reggio Calabria, for example explains the relationship with activists from UDI[71]:

> *"UDI was very active until a few years ago then they had internal problems [...] for many years it was silent but now a new group emerged and we are trying a bit to intersect, cooperate [...] it is not easy, it is not easy because among many other things you will know that NUDM carries forward certain themes and they are pretty much against these, surrogacy for example [...] we are in favour of surrogacy, we don't have problems with those who chose prostitution and it is a personal choice while they are more... but on themes, on the main themes [...] we manage in some ways [...] to collaborate, to meet half way [...] in the end there is a need to network".*

As already explained, the consideration that online communication tends to sharpen tones and favour misunderstandings and conflict, is one of the reasons why the feminists the movement took a concerted effort not to take decisions through mailing lists, chat groups or social media but only by consensus during assemblies. The rationale for this is partly explained by Gemma:

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[71] Historical women's association

"you have all those non-verbal proxemic elements that also allow you to interpret a speech in a way that is as close to the intentions of the communicator as possible ... which is a bit lost in the mailing list, the tones may seem more aggressive and then you lose sight of the goal of making a concrete and effective decision [...] while you are still in time".

The combination of online and offline organising however, results in a great amount of labour shared only by a limited number of organisers (Verma, 2018). Camelia for example is one of the two people in Milan who works as a point of connection with the rest of the movement. There is *"a communication group managing a blog, a Facebook page, an Instagram profile and a Twitter profile [...] within these we divide tasks between us [...] for a long time I dealt with the blog now I have this grateful and grateful task of responding to Facebook messages and sometimes I help out with the Twitter profile [...] now we also have a Telegram channel".*

Additionally, all activists agree on the difficulty of dealing daily with a very large amount of information, and communication (i.e. messages, emails, notifications). Sole, also from Milan, for example explains:

"the amount of information is crazy ... one of the problems in my opinion is this... How to make... how to make activism compatible with life? [...]because in any case it is really not many of us and this is true for almost all territories [...]beyond the difference between large territories and small territories for which obviously in small territories the problem is exponential but even in large territories there are not many people who really put work into building things [...] and therefore you are always struggling...".

Both online and offline organising work intensifies around specific dates, such as in preparation for each strike (8th March), the demonstration for the 'anniversary' of the movement in November. Additionally, as introduced in the first chapter, with the harshening of the political situation in the period analysed, activists reported an intensification of mobilisation in order for example, to respond to frequent far-right pop-up events organised throughout the country or contrast pro-life

events. These tensions resonated online in the form of abuse and attempt to silence feminists, adding a charge of emotional labour to the very real, although often invisible, labour of activism carried out by those who administer social media pages. In their study on the online abuse towards feminists in the context of the UK, Lewis et al. (2017) point out how rather than seeing this phenomenon as related to the digital sphere, it is useful to conceptualise it as a reflection of the dynamics happening in the offline world (i.e. diffused sexism and the silencing of women). What emerged from some of the interviews is indeed a continuity between online and offline day-to-day sexism (championed also by institutional actors and journalists) with online attacks and episodes of harassment towards single activists or women's spaces.

Lewis et al. (2017), highlight how the majority of literature on this subject fails to consider experiences of *receiving* online abuse. With this study I start to fill this gap in literature. Part of my interviews with Italian feminist activists in fact focused on these experiences, the various strategies experimented by activists and the very different emotional reactions to abuse. Some lament feeling upset by the experience, worrying about how specific incidents affected their friends, reflecting on the extent to which abuse or trolling distracts or distances from the movement those women who might have come close to its social media page to seek help or exchange. Generally though, my understanding throughout various exchanges is that activists try to find ways not to give too much power to the abuser, for example by ridiculing the comments expressed by those who target them (e.g. Men's Rights Activists, 'separated fathers' groups, anti-gender activists) and talking about it humorously with each other. Of course, this is not the case when attacks are particularly violent or threats are aimed at one specific activist. Gemma, organising in Padova, for example, talks to me about the great amount of abuse their group received on Facebook, in connection to specific events they organised and how she always finds new ways of dealing with the abuser:

"I collaborate with the administration of the Facebook page [...] my Olympic sport is distributing creative bans".

Gemma's use of the expression 'creative ban' refers to the practice of 'banning' diffused on Facebook. This is usually done to prevent someone from

continuing to write offensive content. In this context, Gemma explains how she developed various creative tactics to respond to inappropriate contents or identify users who need to be blocked. Interestingly, online abuse, as well as the great amount of more moderate comments criticising the legitimacy, the issues raised or protest methods used by *NUDM*, are perceived as somewhat of a 'nuisance' by Gemma. With a very busy life, managing three precarious jobs and dedicating herself to the time consuming labour of activism, dealing with abusive comments just adds extra work.

What emerged from various conversations by activists are the transformations of the strategies used in order to minimise the damaging impact of online abuse and taking care of each other's wellbeing. At first, many tried to engage with abusive comments and attempt explanations. After reflecting collectively on the amount of time and emotional labour required to do so, they decided to become stricter with their social media policies: warning that hateful, sexist comments will be blocked and blocking those who persist with abuse straightaway. Similar strategies have been found by Mendes (2015) in her study on Slutwalk feminist groups.

These practices are significant as they illustrate how feminists attempt to shape the digital spaces they pass through, finding ways to shelter each other from abuse for example, even though with great difficulty also due to the digital infrastructure (Harvey, 2020). This practice also demonstrates once again how the personal and collective experiences of feminist activism are connected, synthesised by the slogans I pointed out at the start of the chapter: *if they touch one of us they touch us all!* Activists arrive at these processes through collective reflection. The shared experience of administering a Facebook page, helped them realise that, by responding to abuse, they would not only *"gift free labour to Mark Zuckerberg",* as Camelia jokingly explained, but they would also be performing the task historically assigned to women of carrying out unrecognised affective and relational work (Arcy, 2016; Federici, 2004, 2018). While there is growing scholarship on the precarisation of digital work, with the exception of Jarrett's (2014) work on social reproduction and immaterial labour in digital media, an in depth feminist analysis is still needed. Federici (2008) encourages such analysis while showing criticism for example,

towards the concept of 'affective labour', which, she argues, 'throws a bone' at feminism while continuing to side-line domestic and reproductive labour.

Conclusion

To summarise, in this chapter, I have demonstrated how *emotion work* (Gould, 2002) carried out more or less intentionally within this movement contributed to its expansion. I have pointed at the ways feminists' individual experiences transform and are transformed by collective engagements and how individual resources and affective connections are mobilized towards organizing activism (Hemmings, 2012). I conceptualised the experience of feminist activism through the notion of *transit* in order to illustrate the variety of experiences converging into this movement *passing through* other experiences of activism. I have then documented which challenges arise in these processes such as the unintended marginalisation of certain voices, leaving some feminists feeling estranged. I illustrated how internal tensions and misunderstandings (Doerr, 2018) arise particularly online, despite attempts to work beyond differences. I then explained how, combining online and offline engagements, feminists experience fatigue due to the implications of activism in terms of time and the emotional and mental charge of receiving online abuse (Lewis, 2017) and argued that documenting these challenges also serves to make visible the labour of activism (Mendes et al. 2019: p. 179).

Chapter 8 - Conclusion

"We are witnessing the dawn of feminism in real time, hearing the questions it poses and seeing the disobedience it incites. Bearing witness to the dawning of this movement turns the story we write into a story about ourselves". (López, 2020: 6).

This PhD thesis considered the significance of contemporary feminist activism in Italy focusing on the case of *NUDM* as part of a transnational mobilisation started with the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos.* I conducted a digitally mediated autoethnography, drawing from my involvement within this movement for a period of three years (2016-2019). Adopting this approach allowed me to immerse myself in the processes of knowledge production that feminists are contributing to, through their varied digital and grassroots practices. It also revealed to me the role of strong emotions and affect within feminist mobilisation. Adopting an intersectional approach to research, I have integrated contributions from feminist theory and social movement studies in order to reach a fuller understanding of this movement and conduct an analysis that incorporates the historical and social context (Hancock, 2007) in which it developed. I have attempted to capture aspects of cultural and contextual variability and investigate how emotional (Gould, 2002), relational (Polletta and Jasper, 2001), cognitive (Monforte, 2014) and affective (Hemmings, 2012) factors affected the movement's emergence and development.

Through this research I have conceptualised feminism as a movement and a set of theories and perspectives that are never fixed and always in transit and the experience of feminist activism as one of *transit* and *transformation*.

This led me first to tell the story of Italian feminism by trying to surpass strict juxtapositions between different waves (Harvey, 2020). I have illustrated how Italian women and feminists passed through different phases in history, intertwining with other revolutionary movements and building the foundation for today's emerging

internationalism. I have then traced recent developments in the political sphere and media landscape in order to provide a fuller picture of the context in which the contemporary feminist movement emerged and the challenges it faces.

I highlighted that, as "the longest revolution" (Kaplan, 2012), Italian feminism has lived through phases of augmented visibility and phases when it kept operating in more submerged ways. This served me to contextualise the current resurgence of feminism within a phase of reactivation of movements denouncing the effects of neoliberalism at the global level (Della Porta, 2017). I traced similarities between the transnational feminist movement clustered around *Ni Una Menos* and other innovative and communitarian experiences of activism such as Occupy.

I have then developed my analysis around three different levels corresponding with my research questions:

- How did the *NUDM* movement transform during the period analysed?
- How did feminist activists perceive their practices of activism as transformative at the local level?
- How and why did feminist activists perceive their experience of activism within this movement as transformative on the individual level?

Main contributions

This thesis provides empirical, conceptual and methodological contributions to the fields of feminist and social movement studies as I have detailed in the introduction.

An empirical contribution resides in the fact that, to my knowledge, this project is one of the first to explore *NUDM* since its start, tracing its transformations over time and documenting the variety of grassroots and digital practices activists developed at the individual and collective level (with their assemblies). The activists I interviewed as part of this project in fact were extremely supportive and eager to read the results of this study.

As a result of this study, I argue that *NUDM* certainly contributed to shape the feminist discourse in Italy and participated in a process of construction of a new subject, which does not have a hierarchical transnational structure but shares a transnational identity. What interviews revealed is that there is a diffused desire to establish more concrete connections in order to organise transnationally, beyond expressions of solidarity. A difficulty that emerged is how, due to the large amount

of labour divided between only a few activists it is difficult to have sufficient time and resources to do so and to respond to the great demand for help received by activists on social media. Mendes et al. (2019) have found similar results, with activists being unsure what to do when someone reaches out online for help, for example sharing their suicide plans.

Furthermore, I have found that the movement expanded across the territory despite the hardships presented by changes in the political context (entry of a populist far-right government), and I argued that this was facilitated by the existence of a network of digitally connected assemblies and the creation of affective relationships between feminists, sharing resources. A challenge that emerged from interviews is related however, to the difficulty coordinating across territories. This, together with the difficulties organising transnationally, signalled that digital connectivity facilitates the organisation of feminist activism but it is not always sufficient.

I have found also that activists carry out a variety of actions both online and in person that escape media visibility and even the narration that the movement gives of itself on social media. I have documented these actions and practices in detail throughout the thesis in order to make these efforts visible, demonstrate what feminist activism actually entails and reveal the often invisible labour carried out by activists behind the scenes (Mendes et al., 2019). I have argued that this calls for an expansion of the notion of activism.

This project also contributes to better understand how dissonance between different feminist perspectives may take place particularly online and points to some dynamics within the movement that contribute to the marginalisation of certain voices. The project also contributes to knowledge about the increasing phenomenon of trolling and targeted attacks to feminist social media pages carried out by Men's Rights Activists. The study starts to fill the gap in literature about what these attacks look like and how individual activists perceive them (Lewis, 2017).

Interviews revealed how participation in this movement is perceived as a 'sweeping' experience. The participation to assemblies is often narrated as a transformative experience, happening within generative spaces where feminists learn together, changing ways of thinking and explaining themselves. This, together with my own experience within this movement, is what lead me to conceptualise the experience of feminist activism as one of *transit* and *transformation:* where feminists

pass through different experiences of activism, travelling and migration and by doing so they shape and are shaped by collective processes.

Overall, I have argued that the prefix *trans** is fundamental in order to understand this mobilization which is at once transfeminist, transnational and enabled by collective processes of *political translation*. Furthermore the prefix *trans** encloses the radically transformative character of this mobilization and helps make sense of how this movement expands the subject of feminism, surpassing essentialist notions of gender and understanding 'womanhood' not as "a biological trait but a site of political articulation" (López, 2020: 2). Lastly, it connects to activists' intention to identify themselves as *'people in transit'* between genders and across borders (NUDM, 11/2018), moved by the desire[72] to *'transform the existing'*.

The project's methodological contribution consists in making visible what are the opportunities and challenges associated with conducting a digitally mediated feminist autoethnographic research. By doing so, the study contributes to a growing corpus of literature on digital media research (Mendes et al., 2019).

Chapters overview

In chapter 2 I illustrated the history of Italian feminism in order to point at the lessons contemporary feminists can learn from previous experiences. I pointed at the legacy of anti-fascism and anti-capitalism that resonate in current feminist articulations. I have also highlighted how processes of contamination between feminist movements at the international level and the ability to connect with other revolutionary struggles are a foundational aspect of feminism rather than a characteristic of current mobilisations. I have traced some of the sources of internal difference between strands of feminism that can help understand today's divisions. In this chapter, I have also provided an analysis of the political context and media landscape in which feminist movements operate. Through this analysis, I set the foundations for an analysis that takes into account how factors related to the socio-political context have an impact on mobilisation.

In chapter 3 I reviewed recent literature from feminist and social movement studies attempting to explain the resurgence of feminism in recent years (Mendes et al., 2019) and the diffusion of protest cascades (Della Porta, 2017), with movements denouncing in various ways the effects of late neoliberalism. I considered the similarities between recent experiences such as the *forum* and the *camp* (Della Porta and Doerr, 2018) and the transnational feminist mobilisation started by *Ni Una Menos*. The consideration that social movement studies have only recently started paying attention to gender as an important factor in the study of mobilisation (Ferree and McClurg, 2004), led me to illustrate how integrating feminist and social movement studies can be a fruitful strategy. I developed my theoretical framework and outlined the theoretical concepts underpinning my analysis, aimed at exploring cognitive, emotional, affective and relational factors contributing to mobilisation.

In chapter 4 I illustrated how I developed a tailored methodology for this study that I define a *digitally mediated autoethnography*. I pointed to the difficulties finding a methodological approach that would help me analyse both online and offline practices of activism. In this chapter therefore, I explained my methodological choices to combine elements of feminist autoethnography and online ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012). Here I reflected on the main criticisms towards this approach and explained how I addressed them. I then offered an analysis of the opportunities and challenges of employing this approach.

As introduced, the thesis attempts to conceptualise feminist activism through the notion of transit and transformation. Therefore, I developed my analysis around three different levels: transformation of the movement, activists' efforts aimed at transformation at the local level, experiences of transformation.

In chapter 5 I have demonstrated how the *NUDM* movement transformed over a period of three years and highlighted the role of a collective process of deliberation and writing lasting one year as central for the development of affectionate relationships between activists as well as for the emergence of the movement's main articulation. I have explained how, through the development of a network of assemblies across the country and sharing a movement's identity as a *'global feminist tide'*, feminists were able to mobilise despite concerning changes in the political context (2018-2019). I have documented how feminists responded to a variety of threats to women's and LGBTQ+ rights and xenophobic attacks. I have

also demonstrated how, in this phase, the movement finally gained some visibility and how this resulted also in attempts of silencing through online abuse.

In chapter 6 I have expanded my analysis, focusing on the variety of practices and actions activists developed in order to achieve radical transformations starting from their local territory. Here I have illustrated how these are often rooted in the history of Italian feminists and in a variety of experiences that feminists are trying to preserve. I have argued that documenting these actions and practices, which do not normally receive visibility, leads to expand the notion of activism.

In chapter 7 I have focused on the exploration of individual experiences of activism and pointed to the ways feminists shape and are shaped by these experiences. In particular, I tried to tell the story of how the movement emerged from the perspective of those who were involved in this process. I have analysed how, initially relying on a pre-existing network, feminists managed to expand their network also by conveying emotions and frames through condensing symbols. I explored with participants their processes of becoming feminist activists, and how they came to join this movement in particular. This has given me the opportunity to point at how activists contribute with their life story to the formation of an intersectional feminism.

Drawing conclusions

When starting this project and observing the exceptional developments in Italian politics, I could never have imagined that the word 'exceptional' would have taken a new meaning. That with a pandemic, it would have entered into everyone's daily life so abruptly.

The effects of late neoliberalism, and of the short-sighted policies on healthcare and social services, that many had been mobilising to denounce, came to the surface with catastrophic consequences: consequences, which, beyond all else, are gendered. Women in lockdown are being killed more frequently. Sexual and reproductive rights are being put under threat. Vulnerable LGBTQ+ people are experiencing isolation. Domestic violence is rising. Gains achieved in terms of

gender equality at work are at risk. Online abuse, including sexual abuse, is on the rise. Women and girls and those more marginalised are paying the consequences of the mismanagement or lack of resources. These are just some examples. We have witnessed however, also unprecedented levels of mobilisation in all corners of the world, with Black Lives Matter raising awareness of structural racism and many other movements emerging.

If the intersectional feminist analysis articulated by the transnational mobilisation started with *Ni Una Menos* was needed before, it should now be looked at closely, understanding its value for any attempts to reconstruct society in a radically different way.

It is not easy to draw conclusions on a movement, which is still ongoing or make predictions on its future developments. *Not One Less* however, is a call for action as well as a movement, a cry to reject the logic that some lives have less value than others, that some lives can in fact be sacrificed.

With the cry of *Not One Less*, a new collective body has taken shape with feminists in different countries, moved by shared feelings of vulnerability and anger but also by the desire to transform everything and the joy of prefiguring a feminist society. As a *deep river* (López, 2020), *Not One Less* expanded across borders as well as beyond gender binaries, constructing a trans, multiracial, international feminist subject. The diffusion of this movement however, faces many challenges both at the local and the global level: an anti-gender backlash, attempts of repression and silencing, a global health crisis and a crisis of care, as well as internal tensions and misunderstandings.

After finishing my fieldwork I remained in contact with feminists in this movement. Despite the difficult crisis hitting Italy, some continue to invent ways to support those who are more vulnerable in the current crisis, organising crowdfunders for medical expenses or to support sex-workers, running errands for older people or babysitting for free. Digital tools are also being used in new ways by feminists, finding ways to meet up and organise despite geographical distance but also, like everyone, facing the risks of isolation and exhaustion. These aspects open new avenues for research on digitally mediated feminism, its transformative potential and its sustainability. There is an urgent need to carry on discussions that opened up with the feminists I interviewed but that concern feminist researchers and activists around the world, particularly in times of crisis: *how to make feminist activism compatible*

with life and create more sustainable digital practices as well as more hospitable, horizontal and safe spaces of encounter where solidarity can flourish in times of crisis.

Over the past 4 years, I tried to use my space to amplify the voices of those who keep believing that all lives have value. In this process, anger, love, hope, grief and joy coexisted.

With this project, I hope the call *of Not One Less* will be heard by many.

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