



‘Lost Between the Waves’ or Riding a New Tide? Drawing Connections Between Italian and Polish Digitally Mediated Feminism

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Abstract: Recent studies have focused on the resurgence of feminist mobilisations facilitated or made visible by the advent of social media. In this paper I focus on the potential of social media to highlight transnational connections between women’s movements and strengthen resistance strategies in times of anti-feminist backlash. After tracing the history of connectivity between Italian feminism and mobilisations developing in the USSR during the first half of the 20th century, I draw the attention on recent feminist mobilisations in Poland and Italy. In order to illustrate the role of social media in the formation of transnational feminist mobilisations, I analyse how the use of Facebook by Italian and Polish feminists highlights the similarity of struggles in the two contexts and allows expressions of mutual solidarity. The focus on these cases is also motivated by the will to draw attention to locations such as Eastern or South Western Europe, which tend to remain on the margins in the feminist debate.

Keywords: Feminism, social media, digital activism, transnational, anti-gender, Italy, Poland

Recent contributions have focused on the resurgence of feminist mobilisations facilitated or made visible by the use of the internet 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; Redfern and Aune 2013; Scharff 2010; Walby 2011). While the attention towards digital feminism is increasing, we still know very little about how digital tools are being used by feminists (Mendes et al., 2018) and what is the role of internet-based communication and new media for feminist theorising and grassroots mobilisation. Furthermore, while the role of digital connectivity in relation to an increase in politi-

cal participation and activism is the subject of several studies, the number of comparative socio-political studies on digital activism is still very limited (Karatzogianni et al. 2017).

In this paper I illustrate how both Italy and Poland have witnessed the recent appearance of visible and active feminist movements utilising social media as well as street protests in order to denounce gender violence and reclaim women's rights (Davis et al. 2017). Italian and Polish feminist activists use social media to organise actions, build connections and show solidarity on a transnational level and, together with Argentina, they had a major role in the organisation of the International Women's Strike which mobilised women in more than 50 countries in 2017 and 2018 (Paro Internacional De Mujeres 2016).

While this special issue focuses on women and technology in post-Soviet spaces, this article specifically explores the unexpected connections between feminists in Eastern Europe and Italy, two contexts that often remain 'peripheral' in the feminist debate. Feminist scholarship in fact tends to pay greater attention to debates developing in the U.S., with the risk of overlooking the specificities of feminist movements in other contexts. Black and transnational feminists have famously challenged Western white feminists for not including in the debate issues that are outside the scope of their experience. Through the concept of intersectionality, black feminists highlighted how, in order to understand and eliminate gender-related oppression, our analysis must take into account how gender intersects with other sources of oppression such as race and class (Crenshaw 1989; hooks 2003). Similarly, East European feminists have attempted to highlight the peculiarities of the experience of women in the 'Second World' and the different genealogies of the feminist struggle in Soviet and post-Soviet times. The Second World however, has often remained on the sidelines in feminist scholarship. When talking about Polish feminism for example, Graff (2003) points out how Western feminists have often assumed that no feminist movement was present or possible in this context, due to the socialist regime and the Catholic conservative phase that followed. The formation in Poland of one of the most visible and vocal feminist movements at the European level in recent years seems to be evidence of the contrary (Graff 2011; Moskalewicz 2017; Sierakowski 2017).

The divide between Eastern and Western feminism could be partly due to post-Cold War socio-political arrangements and the full extent of these on feminist developments remains to be investigated (Bonfiglioli 2011). De Haan (2010) interestingly suggests how Cold War paradigms still influence the way we understand women's history, overlooking for example the important antifascist, internationalist outlook of post-war feminism and its critique towards global economic and political power structures. I argue therefore that unpacking the contextual variability in feminist histories in Eastern and Western countries can help us deconstruct these divides and contribute to a more nuanced and shared feminist history. Additionally, carrying on analyses of current mobilisations that contain a comparative element can highlight 'ways to use each other's difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles' (Lorde 1984: 122 cited in Pruchniewska 2016).

In an effort to contribute to the development of an understanding of feminism that is 'not only historically sound but comparatively grounded in order to be conceptually illuminating' (Offen 1988), I firstly analyse the historical roots of Italian feminism, with particular attention to its connections with the women's movements developing in USSR during the first half of the 20th century. Given the importance of the Communist party in the history of Ital-

ian activism after 1945 (Kaplan 2012) and its connection with Soviet Communism, I attempt to analyse what is the legacy of women's transnational engagements in revolutionary movements (Bonfiglioli 2011) on today's mobilisations. In order to illustrate how the relevance of social media for feminist activism also lies in its capacity to highlight the points of contact between women's struggles across different geographical locations, I then focus specifically on the Italian and Polish feminist movements and identify some similarities in the socio-political context in which they act.

One of the most important feminist demands in both contexts is that for reproductive rights. While Polish feminists continue their determined struggle to obtain a reform of the abortion law, abortion is legal in Italy and remains one of the major achievements of Italian feminism. However, due to the high number of doctors and pharmacists refusing to perform abortions or provide pills due to their religious beliefs, it is in practice not guaranteed (Torrise 2017). This results in women resorting to clandestine abortion clinics or buying 'abortion kits' online and putting their health at risk. Italian feminists have responded to this health concern through street protests, sit-ins in front of hospitals and clinics, calls for action and petitions on social media and through the creation of a digital map providing information of all the doctors and pharmacists who are invoking a 'conscience clause' (*obiezionerespinta.info* 2018). Similarly, Korolczuk and Grabowska (2014) identify the 'Declaration of faith' signed by doctors and pharmacists as a central problem for women's reproductive rights in Poland. Grabowska (2014) illustrates how following the Chazan case in 2014, where a doctor refused to perform an abortion of a severely damaged foetus referring to a 'conscience clause', various feminist movements organised a protest in front of the parliament to denounce the responsibility of the Minister of Health in guaranteeing access to care for women. Numerous women responded to the call for action on Facebook highlighting the potential of this tool for the fast coordination of urgent mobilisations.

Another phenomenon that is highly significant in the Italian and the Polish context is the rise of anti-gender movements. Anti-genderism is a conservative political movement inspired by Catholic ideologies. Anti-gender activists warn the public against the risks of 'gender ideology': a rhetorical device invented by the Vatican (Garbagnoli 2016) to refer to the challenges to traditional gender roles carried out by feminist and LGBTQ+ groups and individuals (Bernini 2017; Saraceno 2010). In a recent publication, Korolczuk (2014) points out how mobilisations against 'gender ideology' are a transnational trend, spreading throughout post-socialist countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Georgia and though Western countries such as France, Germany and the U.S. While Italy is left out from Korolczuk's study, the country is a 'privileged' viewpoint to observe the influence of the Vatican on political issues and to study the resistance strategies developed by feminists. In this article therefore I illustrate the phenomenon of anti-genderism as a main opponent to feminist demands in Italy and Poland and I present how these opposing demands are articulated through social media.

This analysis serves as a background to understand the recent 'resurgence' of feminist mobilisations in Italy and Poland as part of a wider transnational movement. I illustrate how the frame of connective action (Bennet and Sagerberg 2012) can be helpful to analyse these recent feminist mobilisations and propose some reflections on what might be unique about these mobilisations that has yet to be captured by social movement theory. Bennet and Sager-

berg (2012) point out how civil society membership organisations have declined due to neoliberal policies or have been weakened by active policing. This resulted in the formation of personalised civil society networks connected through social technologies. In this context communication becomes a central part of the organisation structures which assume hybrid forms. These organisations are still characterised by traditional collective action logics but also by the use of digital media for the sharing of personalised content and the use of personalised frames (Bennet and Sagerberg 2012). The dynamics of connective action can be observed in the transnational feminist movement analysed in this paper, where personal accounts are accompanied by political demands and often framed within a specific hashtag.

It could be argued that the common experience of living in contexts where the rise of the new right and the anti-gender backlash, the lack of solutions offered by political representatives on issues such as femicides, rapes and gender violence, the austerity measure and cuts to welfare affecting great numbers of women, create the political opportunity for women to react. However such a reading does not fully capture the emotional involvement of women (and their allies), struggling at times for safety or survival. While many scholars focus on rationalistic explanations, it is important therefore to analyse social, psychological, emotional and cultural factors influencing political participation (Flesher Fominaya 2010; Melucci, 1995). Moving away from rationalistic explanations I ask whether there are some unique dynamics within feminist mobilisations that might have not yet been explored by social movement theory. The feminist practice of sharing one's experience in a process of exploration of the self and of our relational dimensions facilitates the construction of support networks. While this practice precedes the advent of digital media, these tools can expand its reach.

The main questions that the article wishes to address are: How can feminists use social media to build transnational resistance strategies in times of gender backlash? What is the legacy of past struggles on current feminist mobilisations within the contexts analysed? The first part of the analysis I present is based on the observation of website content and public Facebook posts produced by the Italian *Non Una Di Meno* feminist movement and serves to illustrate the ways social media is used by feminists to respond to anti-gender rhetoric and reach out to transnational allies. The second part of the analysis is based on the observation of the *International Women's Strike* and *Non Una Di Meno* Facebook posts, as well as the monitoring of news articles in Italian and English media and serves to illustrate how social media was used by Polish feminists soon joined by women all over the world to organise the International Women's Strike on March 8, 2017. In conclusion, I discuss the centrality of social media for the creation of transnational feminist ties and for the formation of collective identity built on expressions of mutual solidarity. I also reflect on the possibility to use social media to re-construct the fragmented history of women's mobilisation in a way that captures contextual nuances and peripheral voices. I conclude with some considerations on the necessity for feminism to revive its anti-fascists and internationalist agenda in order to elaborate resistance strategies in times of anti-gender backlash and neo-fascist rhetoric.

The narrative of waves

The metaphor of waves is usually utilised to illustrate the history of feminism. 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 and they experience oppression in various ways and various degrees, due to the intersections between gender, 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 paradigm is that it tends to focus on the individual and can lead to the depoliticisation of feminism. Some argue that we have recently entered a Fourth Wave (Cochrane 2013; Magaraggia 2015), characterised by the use of the internet for feminist activism. This wave draws the attention to the intersectionality of struggles and the creation of a call-out culture that serves to challenge sexism and misogyny online (Munro 2013).

The notion of fourth wave and the necessity to use this definition to frame current mobilisations are controversial. However, it is undeniable that in recent years we have observed a 'resurgence' of feminist debate and activism corresponding to the proliferation of digital spaces and digital means of communication. While the literature is still limited, recent research suggests that post-feminist claims picturing feminism as a declining movement might not correspond to the reality of women's lived experience. In recent years we have witnessed the resurgence of feminist mobilisation in various contexts, with women taking part in protests during the Arab spring, anti-rape protests in India, and the creation of movements like Stutwalk in Canada, PussyRiot in Russia and FEMEN in Ukraine (Cochrane 2013; Dean 2010; Long 2012; Mendes 2015; Motta, Fominaya, Eschle and Cox 2011; O'Keefe 2014; Redfern and Aune 2013; Scharff 2010; Walby 2011). 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 recent appearance and wide resonance of the #MeToo campaign (Mendes 2018) with all the controversies that followed (Valenti 2018) and of the feminist movement *NiUnaMenos* in South America (Davis 2017; Federici 2018) also signals a renewed interest in the wider public for women's issues and the importance to investigate the role of social media as a platform for gender-related discussion and mobilisation.

While the wave metaphor can be useful in order to synthetically analyse certain differences within feminist discourse, waves cannot be seen as fixed categories. The consideration that feminist movements developed in different times outside the American context, calls into questions the applicability of the notion of waves. 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. It can also be argued that the no-

tion of waves 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. Rather than trying to fit the history of the women's movement developing in Italy and Eastern Europe into the wave paradigm, I will draw attention to phases when the activity of the Italian women's movement was more visible and attempt to identify how feminist thought travelled across Europe (Cerwonka 2008).

Women in movement through history

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Italian feminism was a suffragette and rights movement. Women had a central role in the workers movement and in the development 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 in its program the legal and political equality between men and women (Kaplan 2012).

The years of fascism (1922 to 1946) were also central for the development of the Italian women's movement and are helpful to understand current struggles against neo-fascist formations throughout Europe. During fascism 'the female body was imagined as the main instrument to achieve the Fascist dream of a new Italian nation' (Malagrecia 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. In response to Mussolini's oppressive dictatorship and the advancement of laws against women's rights however, an important underground resistance movement (*partigiani*) was formed and women played a vital role in it (Kaplan 2012). In this period, the main counter power forces 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. After the war, with the need to reconstruct society, the two parties were also instrumental in the formation of a new constitution, which introduced the notion of equality between genders and the right to vote for women (1946) (Kaplan 2012). It is also in this phase that the Communist Party, concerned that suffrage might have led to the resurgence of fascism, created the *Unione Donne Italiane* (UDI, Italian Women's Union), 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). Italian women had followed with interest Russian women's engagement since the beginning of the Russian revolution on March 8, 1917 and a few years later started celebrating International Women's Day. After the war, UDI started attracting large numbers of women and organising debates and events through its very popular magazine *Noi Donne* (*We Women*) (Kaplan 2012). It is through this magazine that during the 1950s the ideal of the 'emancipated Soviet woman' started to be advanced 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).

During the 60s and 70s, in connection with protests in other countries, Italian feminists were heavily involved in a variety of social movement protests advancing demands in relation to working conditions, housing crisis and student issues (Kaplan 2012). New feminist collectives and consciousness-raising groups were born in this period and the most influential theorisations started to be composed, often resonating with international debates on central issues such as 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 or compensation for domestic work, the centrality of the body and independent sexuality (Dalla Costa 1982; Lonzi 1972). Through strikes and demonstrations, often violently suppressed, feminists obtained major reforms and attracted the population's attention to gender-related issues. Despite the fact that many fascist laws were still regulating Italy and despite the opposition of the Church, the Christian Democrats and conservative pro-life movements, women obtained civil divorce and a reform of the abortion law, bringing forward a real cultural revolution. 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. Nearly twenty years of 'Berlusconism' (Berlusconi 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 engaging through street protests and digital activism to highlight the premier's inadequacy to lead the country (Ginsborg 2013). In 2011, following one of Berlusconi's sex scandals, this time involving a minor, one million women and men took to the streets in a demonstration organised online by the newly formed feminist group *Se non ora quando?* (If not now when?) (Ardizzone 2016). 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 a short documentary *Il Corpo delle Donne*, Zanardo (2011) analysed the pervasiveness of sexism in commercial Italian television. A very common stereotype in Italian popular culture and television for example concerns the representation of Eastern European women. If the independent Soviet woman had been an important role model for Italian feminists, the representation of Eastern European women in Italian popular culture portrays them predominantly as sexual objects. This is exemplified by the controversial case of a recent TV program hosting a 'debate' on the fact that Italian men prefer Eastern European women to their Italian counterparts as they are 'good mothers but regain their figures after having children, dress in sexy ways all the time and forgive betrayals' (BBC 2017). Recently, a new feminist movement emerged in Italy. The movement, called *NonUnaDiMeno* (Not One Less) (2016), takes inspiration from the Argentinian *NiUnaMenos* and brings together various feminist and LGBTQ+ collectives, groups and individuals. In the subsequent analysis I will illustrate in more detail how the use of social media facilitated the appearance and development of this movement, which together with the Polish Women's Strike, is part of an important transnational feminist mobilisation.

Historical similarities

This brief historical analysis of Italian feminism can be used to highlight some points of connections with the Polish women's movement. With this analysis, I do not want to imply any essentialising national connotation. Rather, I wish to suggest how specific cultural, political, economic, historical or social contexts have an influence on the development of a women's movement, its aims and strategies. As previously introduced, there is a diffused tendency of reading social processes and transformations happening in Eastern Europe through a Western lens (Graff, 2003). Grabowska (2014) argues that what is lacking from such analysis is an understanding of how the local context 'shapes the modes and the intensity of both conservative and feminist rhetoric and practices'. Bystydziński (2001) warns of the risk of making universal claims regarding how feminist movements developed in Eastern Europe and argues that such universalisations have often been made by Western feminist scholars focusing on the West and North. The aim of this article is of course the opposite, making context-specific observations and drawing connections in order to contribute to a broader understanding of feminist mobilisations that listens to voices that are not usually as audible as the Anglo-American ones. Hoping not to reproduce these misrepresentations therefore, when talking about the Polish context, I rely on work from Binnie and Klesse (2012), Bystydziński (2001), Cerwonka (2008), Donert (2013), Fuszara (2005), Graff (2003, 2007), Grabowska (2012, 2014) and Korlczyk (2014, 2016).

As previously illustrated, the Communist and Socialist Parties in Italy had an ambivalent role in relation to women's struggles: they served as sites to discuss women's issues, but at the same time they revealed the tendency to silence women in order to advance class struggle over feminist demands (Kaplan 2012). Similarly, it can be argued that in Poland women's issues have been advanced when this was in line with wider socio-political goals, only to be put on the sidelines when there were other priorities. Grabowska (2014) points out that the recent attacks on women's right in Poland are only new right wing strategies used to achieve long-standing goals. She explains that the backlash against women's rights is a way to further the position of the Church and is a result of historical processes such as the 'retraditionalisation of socialist emancipation politics after 1953 and the re-emergence of a neo-conservative and fundamentalist discourse after 1989' (Grabowska 2014). Both moments are seen as central in the decline of women's rights, sacrificed in order to strengthen the alliance with the Catholic Church. Following 1953, reforms were aimed at reconstituting a gendered division of labour and abortion was liberalised as an attempt to control the number of births within a traditional view of the family. In the 80s women were a big part of *Solidarność*, however after the end of the revolution, as male leaders within the union reached a compromise with the Catholic Church, women's issues became secondary. In the phase that followed, with *Solidarność* abandoning the ideal of the peaceful revolution, the emergence of nationalism and religious fundamentalism, many feminists turned to Western feminism, adopting liberal values and identity politics. This can be seen as an attempt to detach the feminist movement from Marxism and the male dominated system of state socialism. In this passage however, women lost all the provisions that had been obtained during the communist era (i.e. maternity and childcare provisions, legal abortion, labour rights) and which were never recognised as successes of the feminist organisations (Grabowska 2014).

It can be said therefore that in both contexts women's rights have often been used as 'political football' (Bystydzienski 2001), taken into account when they served to advance a particular political agenda only to be set aside when more urgent issues needed to be favoured. A significant connection between the Italian and the Polish contexts, which appears from this analysis, is also the influence of the Catholic Church in the political sphere particularly in relation to women's rights. This is an important aspect in order to understand the diffusion in recent years of the Catholic right and the rise of anti-gender movements.

Anti-genderism

Anti-genderism is a conservative political movement inspired by Catholic ideologies. Anti-gender activists warn the public against the risks of 'gender ideology': a rhetorical device invented by the Vatican (Garbagnoli 2016) to refer to the challenges to traditional gender roles supposedly carried out by feminist and LGBTQ+ lobbies in order to destroy the traditional family and the Christian idea of society (Bernini 2017; Saraceno 2010).

In Italy, the notions of *teoria del gender* or *ideologia del gender* (gender theory or gender ideology) have been accompanied by the formation of a political movement called *Sentinelle in Piedi* (Standing sentinels): individuals who join periodically standing up silently in public squares to denounce the risks of 'gender ideology' and preserve morality (Bernini 2017). The sociologist Chiara Saraceno (2010) publicly denounced the fact that 'gender theory' does not and cannot exist, as there are a variety of gender theories and pointed out how various scholars who were previously feminists and are now closer to the Church have contributed to the formation of this mystifying concept, creating an enemy to be defeated. The anti-gender rhetoric however, is openly supported by the ultra-conservative Catholic members of the Parliament such as the newly appointed Minister of the Family and Disabilities Lorenzo Fontana or the Northern League Senator Simone Pillon. I propose that the possibility to create and diffuse such a misleading debate in the context of Italy can be partially explained by the lack of critical discourse on issues related to gender in the media and the very limited attention given to gender studies within Italian universities (*Associazione Italiana Sociologia*, 2013). Far from being an issue limited to the Italian context however, Korolczuk (2014) points out how mobilisations against 'gender ideology' are a transnational trend, spreading throughout post-socialist countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Georgia and though Western countries such as France, Germany and the US. The main targets of anti-gender groups are feminists, LGBTQ+ groups and individuals, sexual educators and state officials. 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). Regarding gender equality education programmes in preschools and schools, it is interesting to note that while in Poland these are compared to totalitarian practices of the communist regimes, in Italy they are framed as a result of the moral degradation of American origin. Furthermore, anti-gender discourse proposes that 'gender ideology' will not only negatively impact individuals but also families, the nation and Christian civilisation. It can be argued that this is in continuation with anti-migrant stances, which are also increas-

ingly characterising public discourse in both the Italian and Polish context. 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). The fact that many of these groups have appeared in different countries simultaneously, the similarity of their communication strategies and the ability to accommodate transnational agendas to specific socio-political contexts (Datta 2018) suggests a common origin that needs to be investigated further. 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 establishing the field of anti-gender studies (Datta 2018, Garbagnoli 2016, Korolczuk 2016). It is in this context that we can better understand the urgency and relevance of feminist activism in Italy and Poland as part of a transnational mobilisation.

Digitally mediated feminist activism in Italy and Poland

As introduced, the most central issues in the current feminist struggle in Poland are related to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe's 'Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence') and the reform of the abortion law (Grabowska 2014). Korolczuk and Grabowska (2014) identify the 'Declaration of Faith' signed by doctors and pharmacists as a central problem for women's reproductive rights in Poland. Grabowska (2014) illustrates how following the Chazan case in 2014, where a doctor refused to perform an abortion of a severely damaged foetus referring to a 'conscience clause', various feminist movements organised a protest in front of the parliament to denounce the responsibility of the Minister of Health in guaranteeing access to care for women. Numerous women responded to the call for action on Facebook highlighting the potential of this tool for the fast coordination of urgent mobilisations. This is an important point of connection with the Italian movement as, while Polish feminists continue their determined struggle to obtain a reform of the abortion law, abortion is legal in Italy and remains one of the major achievements of Italian feminism. However, due to the high number of doctors and pharmacists refusing to perform abortions or provide pills for religious reasons, it is in practice not guaranteed and increasing numbers of women resort to clandestine abortions or buy abortion kits online putting their lives at risk. Italian feminists have responded to this health concern through street protests, sit-ins in front of hospitals and clinics, calls for action and petitions on social media and through the creation of a digital map providing information of all the doctors and pharmacists who are invoking a 'conscience clause' (obiezionerespinta.info).

In both countries however, these mobilisations have been met with strong opposition by anti-gender advocacy groups. 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 *NonUnaDiMeno* protesting its appearance.¹ 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.² For the purpose of this analysis it is important to note also that Facebook was used by Italian feminists shortly after to make reference to transnational mobilisations for abortion rights and to express mutual solidarity.

The important role of social media in the formation of transnational feminist mobilisations can also be illustrated more broadly by looking at the organisation of the International Women’s Strike (Davis et al. 2017). The International Women’s Strike (Paro Internacional De Mujeres – PIM 2016) has been coordinated through Facebook by a group of women in Poland and Argentina who have been joined by women in more than 50 countries. The first strike took place on the 8th of March 2017 and a second strike in 2018. The strike is a tool used not only to highlight gender inequality but to frame it as an issue of social justice with wider implications. Gender violence is understood as a systemic issue manifesting itself through physical violence but also through the ways legislation is designed, labour is organised and welfare distributed, through the development of inhumane migration policies, oppressive sexual and reproductive rights policies and ultimately in the disrespect for the environment. The movement has an intersectional, anti-racist, anti-fascist and environmentalist agenda which translates into different context specific issues depending on the localities. The centrality of Poland in the organisation of the International Women’s Strike comes from the determination showed by Polish feminist activists in the organisation of a strike on October 3, 2016, following the parliamentary decision to consider a ban on abortion (Moskalewicz 2017). The massive demonstrations organised by feminists on the day that became known as Black Monday as well as the ones that followed were celebrated by feminists in other contexts, and the development of the Polish feminist struggle keeps being documented through social and traditional media (Allen 2017; Bielińska-Kowalewska 2018; Cocotas 2017; Davies 2018; Pikulicka-Wilczewsk 2018, Sierakowski 2016, 2017). October 2016 also saw huge mass demonstrations organised by the *NiUnaMenos* (Not One Less) feminist movement in Argentina in response to the brutal rape and femicide of a young girl. Shortly after, similar demonstrations took place all over South America where the issue of gender violence and femicide is central for the women’s movement. Taking inspiration from Argentina and Poland, the Italian feminist movement *NonUnaDiMeno* was formed (2016). The Italian movement has utilised social media to express support for the Polish and South American

¹ Link to the post on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/photos/a.1873992449487638.1073741828.1863649617188588/2162972520589628/?type=3&theater> (12.12.2018)

² Link to the post on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/photos/pcb.2163070063913207/2163068597246687/?type=3&theater> (12.12.2018)

women's movement and dedicated space on its site to narrate their achievements and strategies (Mazzonis 2016). Street protests have also always been characterised by moments for the collective celebration of demonstrations happening elsewhere.

Feminist resurgence in times of gender backlash

Recent contributions have highlighted how feminist activism has an increasingly transnational character and agenda (Hawkesworth 2006; Mohanty 2003). By allowing the formation of ties beyond geographical distance or generational differences (Humphreys 2013; Keller 2012) social media is central in the formation of transnational feminist mobilisation. Through the example of the International Women's Strike, I suggest that by providing a place to share resources, celebrate the presence of mobilisations happening simultaneously in other contexts, that are geographically remote but driven by similar aims, social media can contribute to a sense of collective identity and belonging. Firstly, what these digitally mediated feminist mobilisations highlight is the possibility to translate a transnational agenda into context specific struggles and, in turn, generate connections between women's movements that are built on expressions of mutual solidarity. Secondly, it can be argued that members are emotionally committed to the feminist struggle as a matter of identity and belonging but also as a matter of life or death. The issue of femicide and gender violence is at the centre of the transnational *NiUnaMenos* mobilisation. Once this is interiorised and often connected to personal experience, it can serve as strong motivation to participate. The sharing of extremely intimate accounts transforms the weak ties typical of individualised societies (Granovetter 1983) into relations of trust and the mutual solidarity experienced within a group encourage to act and to remain engaged. Engagement in feminist activism in this way can be seen as an expression of personal hope and values enabled by technology (Bennet and Sagerberg 2012).

Furthermore, by exposing activists to a variety of remote experiences and allowing the sharing of resources, social media can facilitate the re-construction of a fragmented women's history that can be used as common ground for the formation of transnational solidarities. Highlighting the often forgotten contributions of women's movements, such history exceeds the narrative of waves to capture contextual nuances and peripheral voices. The lack of continuity in the history of women's movements, often prevents us from seeing how women's engagement has intersected with other radical ideas such as anti-fascist resistance or revolutionary struggles and how, despite the material difficulties, women have managed to build important transnational solidarity networks. I believe that contributing to the reconstruction of these developments and to a re-telling of history that takes into account the contribution of women's movements can help us identify the common roots of today's mobilisations and further elaborate and overcome unfruitful divides such as the one between Eastern and Western feminism. It is with this aim that I have presented an historical overview of Italian feminism highlighting points of connection with Soviet spaces and then focusing specifically on Polish feminism. In the case of Italian feminism, it appears that the antifascist common goal gave women a sense of unity and left a legacy after the war. The role of women in a strong resistance movement and in the worker's struggles contributed to the formation of a common narrative at the basis of much of Italian feminist activism. In Soviet countries women's issues

have been advanced when this was in line with wider socio-political goals, to be sidelined when there were other priorities. While welfare benefits for maternity and other forms of social support were made available to women during communism, this period also saw the suppression of independent women's associations. As De Haan (2010) suggests however, women had a much more active role during communist times than it is usually narrated by Western historiography and organisation such as Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) had an openly anti-fascist and anti-capitalist agenda. The narration of the history of women's movement itself therefore could be at the base of some of the divides between Eastern and Western feminism that the recognition of a common aim can help reconcile.

Conclusion

The feminist mobilisations analysed here are part of a broader feminist tide (Palmeiro, 2018) that has advanced globally in recent years. Due to the scope of this paper and in an attempt to draw the attention on experiences from East and South-West Europe that often remain on the margins of feminist scholarship, I have limited my analysis to the Polish and Italian cases. Looking at the history of women's movements and their internationalist character, I have highlighted the connectivity between the Italian and Soviet context, particularly since 1945. This was done in order to better understand how the legacy of women's struggles reflects into the formation of current mobilisation such as the International Women's Strike. I have then illustrated some points of similarity between the struggles carried out by women in Poland and Italy today, specifically their efforts to defend and expand sexual and reproductive rights (i.e. abortion rights) and the ability to utilise social media in order to organise mobilisation and establish transnational connections.

The analysis I presented served to highlight how the recent rise of anti-gender groups presents a threat for women and LGBTQ+ rights at the transnational level. Specifically in the two contexts analysed we notice a trend towards the affirmation of right-wing populist movements with ultra-nationalist and anti-egalitarian positions combining anti-immigration and anti-gender discourses. Many different explanations can be given for this trend, from the discontent caused by the inequalities produced by neoliberal globalisation to the need to recreate some sense of belonging in a society that is increasingly alienating. The recurrence to traditional values elaborated by conservative anti-gender discourses, might be reconducted to the existential insecurity experienced by individuals in an increasingly uncertain and unequal society (Bauman 1998; Beck 2010). Furthermore, the rise of conservative anti-gender movements could be interpreted as a sign of the relevance of religion and point to the inadequacy of the secularisation thesis to explain the transformations in our global society (Berger 1999; Davie 2007). This aspect however is beyond the scope of this paper and will need to be addressed by future research.

I suggest however that the fear-inducing notion of 'gender ideology' disseminated by the Vatican provides a frame to read social transformations; it is a response to the obtained or demanded rights and acknowledgements that feminists and LGBTQ+ movements and individuals have fought for. In order to preserve and advance these rights it is necessary for activists to elaborate transnational resistance strategies based on collaboration and on the sharing of in-

formation and resources. Looking at the history of past struggles can make activists aware of the risk of their demands being exploited for broader political goals and ensure internal differences don't lead to insurmountable fragmentations. In times of anti-gender backlash and with the rise of the new right, it is vital for feminism to revive its anti-fascist and internationalist agenda, which has often been washed down by a more palatable 'gender equality' rhetoric within a neoliberal frame. Furthermore, activists need to think of ways to coordinate and communicate effectively through social media in order to debunk misinterpretations or malevolent representations resulting from anti-feminist and anti-gender discourse.

Much like in a mass demonstration in a public square, social media can function as a megaphone to potentiate less audible voices. In order to help in this process, feminist scholarship should contribute to bring the attention to the development of feminist activism in contexts that are often overlooked.

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