**Gender Activism in Contemporary Italy: Goals, Means, and Perspectives**

Wissia Fiorucci, University of Kent

Introduction

In many countries across Europe, but especially in Italy, twentieth-century reforms failed to bring about any substantial displacement of a widely-accepted sexist culture. Movements that had aroused optimism and political expectations in the early 1970s (e.g. *Movimento Liberazione Donna* (M.L.D.), *Fronte Liberazione Donna*, and *Rivolta Femminile*) virtually disappeared within the decade. Apart from a few early 1980s cases, women’s activism ‘si era contratto nelle voci di poche donne’ (Rosetti 51) and the feminist movement, though not dead, disappeared from the public sphere. ‘Avanza[va]no […] gli anni Ottanta, il tramonto dell’era dei movimenti, il disimpegno, lo yuppismo, il velinismo’ (Pisa 3), and the discrepancy between changes in society and their translation into legislation kept increasing.[[1]](#footnote-1) The situation worsened in the following decade, ‘when forces advocating traditional roles of women and the family prevailed’ (Rosselli 9). Any improvement in civil rights was met with strong opposition[[2]](#footnote-2) and, for a long time, women’s representation in top decision-making positions in the political and public scene continued to be near-negligible (ibid.). The late 1990s-2000s saw improvements in gender equality, most provoked by EU Directives and the allocation of European funds,[[3]](#footnote-3) while the media, particularly TV, feasted on gender stereotypes and women as sexual objects. However, in 2009, a nationwide wave of reactions against this state of affairs arose, stimulated in part by the international climate but ultimately triggered by the sex-body-power nexus of the Berlusconi’s era. In 2009, a journalist from the *Irish Times* wrote: ‘Historians are sure to devote much time and space to […] Berlusconi. But [will] they […] attribute to the Italian prime minister the merit of having […] sparked the renaissance of Italian feminism?’ (Agnew, ‘Berlusconi’).

According to Danielle Hipkins, opposition to Berlusconi’s regime of *velinocrazia* has come first from ‘journalists and academic, popular and party political feminists with a high profile on the internet, mainstream newspapers, or in popular feminist publications’ (421). Among these ‘self-appointed representatives’ of this ‘new tradition of feminist mass protest’, is Lorella Zanardo. Her film, *Il corpo delle donne* (2009), became a catalyst for visible growing discomfort. The film consists of a montage of scenes from private and public TV channels that present humiliating images of women. Broadcast first on Zanardo’s blog, it aired on La7 during Gad Lerner’s ‘L’infedele’ on 4 May 2009. This provoked an online chain-reaction, and from that moment on, ‘comincia una impennata di iniziative intorno alla questione donne-media’ (Dinelli 69).

In this essay I first examine the moments that preceded this outburst of protestation, showing that Zanardo’s video, credited with having triggered a nationwide response, was in fact supported by years of studies. I then analyse the *velina* question in more detail, highlighting similarities and differences between issues tackled by second-wave feminism and current concerns. I subsequently take a closer look at two experiences, namely those of SE NON ORA QUANDO (SNQ; a network of organised committees) and the congress PRIMUM VIVERE (PV; Paestum 2012, 2013). Despite being different in nature, they both exemplify some important aspects of today’s activism, particularly the immediacy of communication granted by the web, and the far-reaching impact of any initiative/activity favouring convergence of many different, individual, and collective realities. This, in both cases, has been a source of both strength and fragmentation. As noted by *FemminilePlurale*, the encounter and co-existence of different approaches, while a potential source of strength, has been rather a cause of division: ‘Può essere che siamo così pervase dall’idea che ci siano infiniti modi di essere femminista […], che non valga la pena […] confrontarci?’.

Women in the Media: Critical Appraisals, 1980s-Present

During the 1970s, communication practices among women, as well as feminist reflections, were centred first on orality, then on writing, and finally on the self-produced image. Discussions on mass media, on the other hand, were present but not central and were tackled later, from the 1980s through the 1990s (Dinelli 61). These two decades were a complex period. Despite the advent of Berlusconi’s TV, there were important changes in female characterisation, such as in the satirical program *La TV delle ragazze*. In 1984, the board of journalists promoted by the *Commissione Nazionale per le Pari Opportunità Uomo Donna* was established. Internal work was also carried out by RAI, which led, in 1997, to an act by the Supervisory Committee aimed at promoting equality between male and female employees, and to non-discriminatory representations of women (the activities of the *Osservatorio di Pavia*, with its research on TV inequality, were often commissioned by RAI). Also important was the creation and work of the *Convenzione per l’Eliminazione delle Discriminazioni Contro le Donne* (CEDAW), ratified in 1985. Furthermore, a remarkable quantity of research was conducted, detecting the rise of a monotonous and negative form of stereotyping that sexualised the female image both in advertising and, particularly, in TV entertainment (Dinelli 61). Noteworthy are Milly Bonanno’s essays (1981, 1983, 2002), and contributions from Gioia Longo (1995) and Loredana Cornero (2001). The activity of the CENSIS ‘Politiche Culturali’ sector was also important. Additionally, one should note research carried out by the CNEL (e.g. 2006), as well as militant congresses such as *Donne e Media: ‘Ancelle’ o signore della comunicazione?* (Rome, 13 May 2006). Artistic groups and individuals—e.g. The Bolognese ‘Etichette stupide’—also conducted visual research. One example of this is photographer Ico Gasparri’s project ‘Chi è il maestro del lupo cattivo’. This focused on the use of images of women in street-advertising (Milan, 1990–2010), and thus on the sociocultural roots of gender violence. (In 2010 Gasparri was awarded the prize for best Italian artist working against gender violence, created by *Pare e Dispare*). One might also note texts such as Lipperini’s *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine* (2007) or academic studies—for instance, in 2008, Emma Bonino organised a congress at Bocconi University titled *Donne, innovazione e crescita. Donne italiane negli stereotipi: vita reale, comunicazione e fiction*, which highlighted links between media-representation of women and scarce female presence in roles of responsibility.

This field of activities and research acknowledged that ‘la donna “cresce” nella fiction, mentre resta […] marginale nei programmi di intrattenimento [dove] trionfa […] il “corpo” femminile, ridotto a puro “accessorio”’ (Santoro, ‘Donne’). Women were absent as competent, expert, authority figures. Even in fiction, ‘female decision-making abilities, both in the workplace and in private life, are expressed far more weakly than masculine ones’ (Censis 16).[[4]](#footnote-4) This situation created not only progressive inurement, but also growing intolerance among women; yet without the presence of a movement, these experiences had little or no visibility in the media, and thus within the public sphere. For decades, the general idea was, ‘le donne tacevano, […] omologate alla cultura prevalente’ (Dinelli 67).

And yet, all these investigations have had important consequences for the most recent mobilisation: when protest was sparked in 2009, it could rely on an existing corpus of research (including the examples above-mentioned). Moreover, networks concerned with the issues at stake already existed. For instance, the web had already enabled the work of *Server donne di Bologna*, as well as the creation of websites such as *Dol’s*. This indicates an infrastructure already in place, accessible to women wishing to get involved.

A 1970s antecedent can be identified:

‘Fare rete’ avveniva allora in gran parte in incontri ‘faccia a faccia’ […] e poi con la circolazione di testi scritti. Il Movimento fu fortemente anticipatore: nel profilare, praticare e dare centralità all’idea di rete e del fare rete come forme della pratica e comunicazione politica (Dinelli 62).

Today, ‘fare rete’ designates a sort of horizontal networking through online communication that permitted, among many initiatives, the series of events that filled squares throughout Italy on 13 February 2011, mobilising more than a million people under the banner of SNOQ. This was a remarkable occurrence, advertised and organised online by a committee of actresses, directors, politicians, scholars, and sociologists. And although one of the most visible, it was certainly not the only event. Many of the protests sparked since 2009 have been activist in nature, spurred by a sentiment of urgency and the need to obtain quick results. Dinelli (74–77) mentions a few of these initiatives, summarising some of the recurring issues and the means used by the protesters, for instance, against the use of detrimental images in advertisements (e.g. in 2010–11 mail-bombing initiatives proliferated on the web, against offending firms, with requests to the IAP—Istituto di Autoregolamentazione—to ban said ads). To this end, the UDI (*Unione donne in Italia*) launched a campaign entitled ‘Immagini Amiche’, seeking collaboration with institutional authorities. The UDI’s choice was not to attack negative images, so much as encourage the use of positive representations of women. To involve younger generations, students have also been engaged in active criticism of negative stereotypes—the aim of Zanardo’s *Nuovi occhi per la TV*. Women working in the media promoted activities such as the *Tavolo donne e media*, by the *Associazione stampa romana*, which brings together professional journalists and women’s associations. Another example is the aggregation supported by ‘Immagine diversa’ and the Commission PO RAI in Milan, with the intent of initiating a proactive dialogue with the company and creating a network of universities for monitoring and training initiatives. In 2011, the association of journalists GIULIA was also created.

This (non-exhaustive) list shows that the foundations had been laid for a convergence of older feminists, new generations of women, leading political and show-business figures, academics, and women working in the media. This was facilitated by the instruments available and by the political method used: the web enabled a ‘fare rete’ from a distance, conferring speed on initiatives and news dissemination, and on exchanges where criticisms could be expressed without formal confrontation. The various groups also seemed to be engaged in a search for targets on which to converge, insofar as ‘il disagio per il modo arretrato e stereotipato di rappresentare le donne non è solo di poche politicizzate’ (Dinelli 69).

*No Longer Subversive Flag, but Prosthesis of Established Power*

From the outset, Berlusconi’s propaganda relied heavily on a political manipulation of sexuality towards heteronormativity. This strategy, carried out especially through his unconstitutional control of the media, was instrumental in his economic imperialistic objectives. Initially, Berlusconi fashioned a family-oriented image for himself. Yet, as his private life was exposed in the media, the façade of family-man collapsed. At this point, his publicists made his figure a symbol of (hetero)sexual power to keep public opinion on his side. To this end, the *velina*, the Italian showgirl, became ‘the rock on which [he] built his political career’ and established his image as seducer (Power, ‘How Berlusconi’), through what Recalcati has defined ‘l’enfatizzazione feticistica dei corpi femminili come strumenti di godimento’ (14).

The *velina* became a political symbol, an icon strictly connected with the political leader’s power. Yet while this figure ‘has come to incarnate all that is negative about Berlusconi’s period of power’ (Hipkins, ‘Whore-ocracy’, 415), gender stereotypes ‘esistevano già in Italia. Berlusconi ha solo ripreso questo modello e lo ha declinato alla luce del neoliberalismo’ (Dentico, qtd. in Nasi, ‘Dov’è’). However, as Hipkins claims, since ‘the beauty contest culture’ now ‘involves political power for women’—with Berlusconi’s attempts in 2008 to put forward women from show-business with little or no political background as candidates for the European Parliament (ibid.)—‘its perversion of democracy is finally deemed important’ (‘Whore-ocracy’, 420).

In spring and summer 2009, during the first assemblies of the newly-founded association *Pare o dispare*, the media issue was discussed as a crucial point for the attainment of women’s equality. During its public presentation on 11 January 2010, the association emphasised the connection between women on TV and the unfavourable conditions faced by women in the labour market.

On 5 June, *La Repubblica* reported Pasolini’s words from an interview with Dacia Maraini, originally published in *L’Espresso* (22 October 1972): ‘La tv: qui la donna è considerata […] un essere inferiore: […] Una specie di puttana che […] viene adoperata ancillarmente come “valletta” (al “maschio” Mike Bongiorno e affini)’. The journal also petitioned about Berlusconi’s comments on Rosy Bindi during the TV show *Porta a Porta* (‘Ravviso che lei è sempre più bella che intelligente’), and gathered numerous signatures in a few days. The day after this episode, 6 June 2009, an open letter was sent to *La Repubblica*, signed by Michela Marzano (Professor of Philosophy, Paris V), the journalist Barbara Spinelli, and Nadia Urbinati (Lecturer in Politics, Columbia University).

Il corpo della donna è diventato un’arma politica […] nella mano del presidente del Consiglio. È usato come dispositivo di guerra contro la libera discussione, l’esercizio di critica, l’autonomia del pensiero […]. Le qualità giudicate utili per gli show pubblicitari si trasformano in doti politiche essenziali, producendo indecenti confusioni di genere.

This letter addressed traits of Berlusconi’s politics that the scandals had revealed—traits of the society Italy had become after three decades of *Berlusconismo*, shaped by neoliberal hegemony against the backdrop of exchange between sex, power, and money—a society where, as claimed by Dominijanni’s *Il trucco*, the crisis of patriarchy had been concealed behind the carnivalesque glamour of Arcore’s parties. ‘Una “società senza padre”’ where ‘nessun singolo […] tiene in mano da solo il potere e anche le cariche più importanti dello stato, […] non hanno più quell’aurea di sacralità istituzionale che rivestivano una volta’ (Deriu, ‘Tra la crisi’).

This question has again brought to the fore the division between public and private, and the tendency within such a society to conceal the constructed nature of their boundaries (and thus the expression of a patriarchy which no longer acts in the form of sovereign power, but through a network of knowledge and diffused powers). Unveiling the political character of the private, second-wave feminism had focused on three main issues: male control over the female body and, in particular, its reproductive power; control of sexuality—understood as heterosexuality; and, finally, unequal division of care work. These issues are topical once more, but while ‘la sessualità torna a fare irruzione nel discorso pubblico’, it does so not ‘come bandiera sovversiva, bensì come protesi del potere costituito’ (Dominijanni 205). The man-woman relationship thus resurfaces as a political issue, but differently from the origins of feminist revolts. A new form of power has arisen, claims Dominijanni, which is neither authoritative nor authoritarian but rather libertine and seductive, which no longer arrogates to itself—appealing to ‘natural law’—either the female body or woman’s tacit approval, but has to buy them. This power no longer segregates women in the private sphere, but co-opts them in public roles, not exploiting them in a regime of slavery, but using them under one of liberalism (205).

*Velina and the Jeune fille: The Post-feminist Masquerade*

Drawing on reflections by the Parisian collective Tiqqun on the figure of the *jeune fille* as a device in the hands of neoliberal politics, it seems clear that Italy’s regime of *velinocrazia* is an exacerbated example of how nowadays ‘le ragazze si trovano sempre più schiacciate [da] un girlpower reso commerciale e istituzionalizzato’ (Cossutta 52)—(this is exacerbated because criticism of representations of women on Italian TV acquired widespread visibility only when the situation had deeply deteriorated). ‘Rather than a solely Italian concern, the preoccupation with the velina […] overlaps with a transnational concern about the “sexualisation” of young girls and women in the face of an increasingly deregulated global media industry’ (Hipkins, ‘Who Wants’, 155).

The term ‘post-feminist masquerade’, formulated by Angela McRobbie, designates the form of widely-publicised body-centred power upon which male supremacy is based. As typified by the ‘so-called fashionista’ (67), the post-feminist masquerade and its various incarnations and products—*velina*, *jeune fille*—are adopted self-consciously as statements of female empowerment and free personal choice. Yet underneath this façade of gender equality, a ‘provocation to feminism […] on the part of resurgent patriarchy’ (85) develops. The post-feminist masquerade proliferates at international level at this socio-historical moment, because women now participate in working life. Thus, the excessively-stylised feminine masquerade surfaces as a tactic to reinstate the gender order: ‘As women advance in the spheres of both education and employment, the fashion-beauty complex must work even harder to maintain gendered hierarchies’ (Butler, ‘Post-Feminism and Its Discontents’). The post-feminist masquerade works to ‘re-secure the terms of submission of femininity to masculine domination’ (McRobbie 70):

In today’s media [the] possession of a ‘sexy body’ […] is presented as women’s [main] source of identity […], as source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, […], discipline and remodeling (Gill 255).

Tiqqun’s *jeune fille* is the perfect product of the practices and establishment of a show-business society (Cossutta 51). Similarly, the term ‘velina’ designates a form of modern subjectivity integrated into the system, product of absolute commodification. *Velina* is the ultimate commodity: intelligent, dancing and, above all, living (Ronchi, ‘Velina’).

 With its charged biopolitical implications, this symbol of neoliberal hegemony entails the potential to stimulate productive reflection on the current crisis. Yet reactions to Zanardo’s documentary testify to the rise of diverging positions which uselessly displaced public attention onto debate on moralism and other occurrences (e.g. the mediatic battle between *L’Espresso*, *La Repubblica* and Mediaset, with a video produced by *Striscia la notizia* and aired on the TV programme *Matrix*).[[5]](#footnote-5)

In Hipkins’ words,

Some […] and side with the kind of libertarian patriarchal thought that endorses [young women’s] exploitation […] through the rhetoric of ‘choice’. On the other hand, the argument that these young women […] need re-education is more than redolent of paternalistic, puritanical attitudes […]. Thus […] most opposition collapses into these binary patterns of thought. Yet the most important question […] is: why does [the velina] matter so much? (‘Whore-ocracy’, 415).

The *velina* matters so much because this figure has brought to light the need to address larger issues from an angle that is neither puritanical nor supportive of neoliberal thought: ‘La questione non riguarda affatto solo l’uso del corpo femminile’ and should start from ‘la pensabilità di un discorso politico [sull’] immagine femminile’ (Dinelli 78).

In 2007, Lea Melandri commented that ‘se la politica è stata sin dall’inizio una biopolitica, […], oggi questo aspetto è innegabilmente sotto gli occhi di tutti. Nascere, morire, invecchiare sono oggetto dei poteri della vita pubblica’ (Serafini, ‘Intervista’).

*If Not Now, When?*

SNOQ can be credited with shifting the main focus of gender activism from media-representations of women to wider reflection on (bio)political issues. Besides the removal of the Berlusconi government, three main points were addressed: work, maternity, and the ‘cultura e rappresentazione dell’immagine delle donne rispettose della loro integrità di persona’ (Fedeli, ‘SNOQ’). The passage below highlights the centrality, in SNOQ’s considerations, of media-representations of the female body within the context of collapse and institutional crisis Italy is facing today.

La maggioranza delle donne lavora fuori o dentro casa, […] cerca un lavoro […], studia, […], si prende cura delle relazioni affettive e familiari. […] Questa […] vita è cancellata dalla […] rappresentazione delle donne come nudo oggetto di scambio sessuale. […] Il modello di relazione tra donne e uomini […] incide profondamente negli stili di vita e nella cultura nazionale, legittimando comportamenti lesivi della dignità delle donne e delle istituzioni (SNOQ, ‘Appello’).

SNOQ achieved some success in the months following the 13 February 2011 nationwide protests against Berlusconi. (In July 2011, the many committees that had sprung up in various parts of the country came together in Siena to work on a range of issues). Yet despite media success, interesting premises, and the involvement of many sectors of the female population, not all Italian feminism met under the banners of SNOQ, and nowadays the latter is hardly mentioned at all. Many groups active nowadays have not answered SNOQ’s call and have chosen a different path. These groups have rejected the direction that its debate on respectability took, as it suggested a somewhat moralistic discourse on women’s dignity. Borrowing Hipkins’ words, SNOQ’s response ‘to “velinismo”’ is one in which verbal and visual practices raise consciousness about […] sexism in Italian culture’—and certainly, this should not be denied. Yet ‘they also risk reinforcing certain long-standing stereotypes about the “velina”, and a whole category of “other women”, who wear too much make-up, have cosmetic surgery, and sell their bodies in one way or another’ (‘Whore-ocracy’, 428).

According to Melandri,

non sono piaciuti i tempi e le modalità dell’appello, la semplificazione […] quando è in atto un lavoro di approfondimento, la fretta che inevitabilmente accentra la visibilità su figure note ai media, lasciando in ombra l’aspetto innovativo di un movimento che tenta per la prima volta di darsi forme organizzative rispondenti alla complessità del tema che affronta: un potere che si è confuso coi rapporti più intimi (‘Non basta’).

She adds that after more than a century of battles for emancipation, and of practices against ‘modelli di femminilità e maschilità interiorizzati, fatti passare come “naturali”’, it is not enough to affirm that ‘vogliamo contare’, because the implied risk is that of suggesting ‘che si tratti ancora una volta di uno svantaggio delle donne da colmare’ (ibid.).

SNOQ’s strategy has focused public attention on Berlusconi’s sex politics not as symptomatic of larger issues, but as their main target—albeit inadvertently. For, in the words of sociologist Chiara Saraceno (SNOQ): ‘[Il] 13 febbraio […] era una manifestazione contro Berlusconi, […] ora invece si tratta di combattere contro […] la marginalizzazione delle donne competenti e dei nostri interessi, caduti fuori dall’agenda politica ed economica’ (‘La pretesa’).

Berlusconi was not SNOQ’s sole object of criticism—after his downfall, the campaign *Mai più complici contro il Femminicidio* was organised. Yet without Berlusconi-as-target, SNOQ’s philosophical discourse was weak, occasioning if not its end, at least corresponding loss in public interest as well as from other activist groups. I’d suggest that despite its manifesto’s contents, SNOQ eventually failed to focus on the fact that Power, arguably more than ever before, had mingled with the most intimate aspects of people’s lives in a pervasive sense. This led to a moralist perspective, excluding the diversity of today’s discourses on gender and resulting in a somewhat superficial analysis.

Attention to the areas of reproduction, sexuality and family remains crucial—and perhaps never before has it been so important to understand the forms assumed by what many have called ‘contemporary neopatriarchalism’. SNOQ’s agenda showed some awareness of this. However, claims such as that by actress Angela Finocchiaro who, promoting the 13 February protest in Francesca Comencini’s video, said ‘E mostriamo nude, le nostre facce’, implied that a retrograde position was being adopted (see ‘Whore-ocracy’, 424).[[6]](#footnote-6) If the issues now at stake were already familiar to second-wave feminism, women’s position within society had since changed significantly. And ‘se all’origine il [femminismo] significò […] collocarsi altrove e altrimenti rispetto alla politica data, oggi l’altrimenti resta ma l’altrove cade: il desiderio è di mettersi al centro della trasformazione, e di guidarla’ (Dominijanni, ‘Contro la crisi’). Dominijanni explains that ‘la crisi che oggi viviamo’ is already marked ‘dalla presenza e dalla libertà femminile, e che per questo chiama le donne a un salto di responsabilità’ (ibid.).

*Life, First*

The PRIMUM VIVERE experience began with the premise that today’s crisis presupposes women’s freedom and that, for this reason, one must approach the question by tackling the root of the problems, rather than symptoms. In this respect, the aims of the Paestum 2012 conference addressed precisely:

L’idea, ripresa dal femminismo anni Settanta, che la politica vada ripensata a partire […] dal corpo, dalla sessualità, dalla maternità, ovvero, da tutto quello che è stato […] sacralizzato e quindi depoliticizzato. […] PRIMUM VIVERE vuol dire rimettere al centro […] un soggetto uomo o donna restituito al suo corpo (Brancadori, ‘Intervista’).

PV claimed that the fundamental structures of life all suffer from neglect in an increasingly-clear male matrix—from politics to education, from the Church to the family, from economy to culture, and from relationships between generations to those between the sexes (Pisa 8). So the key, bluntly put, would be to unravel this ‘male neglect’—not, however, into an exclusively ‘female care’ realm, for that would merely reaffirm gender bias. When referring to ‘common goods’, we underline dependency on conditions such as air, water, etc.—but we neglect ‘cura’, that is ‘[il] lavoro di riproduzione e manutenzione delle esistenze. Sarebbe invece interessante, come si fa per i beni comuni, sottrarre tutto il lavoro di cura al rigido dualismo fra pubblico e privato, ormai inservibile’ (Masotto, ‘Cura’). And this would be possible ‘purché si riesca a portare sempre più uomini ad agire nella quotidianità della vita [considerando] l’esperienza e il sapere della quotidianità come una leva per cambiare il lavoro e l’economia’ (ibid.). According to Letizia Paolozzi, ‘pensare la cura come strategia innovativa dell’esistenza significa […] agire per trovare delle strategie per […] creare una società solidale’ (‘La cura’). Because, in today’s situation, ‘la pratica di cura, che si realizza in larga parte attraverso […] donne migranti di altre culture ed etnie, è strumentalizzata dal patriarcato, che la utilizza in sostituzione a quello che dovrebbe essere un welfare garantito e paritario’ (Callegari 178). In practice, these women make up for the failures of a welfare/social system to provide guarantees essential to well-being. The process of care-commodification has to be interrupted, transforming care, an essential support for community life, from possession to relation, thereby promoting a different way of life (see Ibid.).

 ‘Affrontare ogni nodo politico partendo dalle nostre vite […], mettere la vita al centro’ (Patuelli, ‘Un esercizio’): placing ‘life’ at the centre would imply focusing on what is considered a female virtue—‘cura’—and extending it to the whole society, in order to face the current crisis. Aware that ‘questa crisi sembra solo economica, ma interroga soprattutto il valore e la cura della vita’ (Pomeranzi, ‘Mettersi’), one cannot but conclude that ‘cura, lavoro e politica sono un unico terreno di confronto e di azione per avviare un reale cambiamento verso la democrazia’ (Primum Vivere, ‘La lettera 2012’).

The Paestum meeting did not quite expand on these premises. Yet this event was an important one, not only for its theoretical considerations, but also for the climate of the congress itself. The choice of location is significant—Paestum, in 1976, was the setting of another major conference. However, the atmosphere then was different: the tendency of Italian feminism to form ‘small groups’ had made it difficult to speak, and deepened the gap between those who could verbally and actively engage in politics, and everyone else. In 2012, the microphone was passed around, as remarked by the organisation *Femminile Plurale*: Paestum 2012 ‘fu un’occasione per […] incontrarsi e ri-conoscersi, per tessere […] relazioni indispensabili [al movimento] femminista’ (Redazione Femminile Plurale, ‘Perché’). Through this, ‘si […] è dato vita a gruppi nuovi, a nuove relazioni e a nuovi conflitti’ (ibid.) which led to Paestum, 2013. But there was no Paestum 2014. Why not? ‘Dopo Paestum 2013, […] si è bloccata ogni comunicazione a livello sovralocale, nazionale’ (Redazione Femminile Plurale, ‘Perché’). The causes may be multiple, and as previously mentioned, according to *FemminilePlurale* it has been, once more, a matter of division. The blog *Femminismo a Sud* commented, ‘nonostante l’ampia copertura mainstream, […] i femminismi non sono tutti rappresentati’ (‘Primum’).

Where Are We Today?

SNOQ may have virtually ceased its activities, and PV 2014 did not take place. Yet occurrences since 2009 have had important implications for the women’s movement(s), which remains visible and active through a series of events. These range from the more academic, focusing on ‘gender’ from a variety of theoretical perspectives, to events and web initiatives that are open to anybody willing to express an opinion. For example, two important meetings were organised in Milan’s ‘Sala Alessi’, on 18 April and 3 June 2015 respectively, by the association *Casa delle donne* *di Milano* and the network *Donna nella crisi*. On these occasions a supportive dialogue was established with women from other countries. Another event worth mentioning here is the third edition of the summer school *Differenze e identità plurali* that took place in Palermo (25–30 May 2015). On the internet, the website of *Dol’s* is highly active, for instance through its initiative ‘Le donne italiane’, a space where photographs by women are published, reflecting the way they see themselves and/or other women, within the context of different circumstances (daily routines, work, holidays, etc.).

Although the protests seem to have stalled, this is mostly because they have been replaced by this rise in web initiatives of many kinds: protests have brought together ‘antiche femministe, nuove generazioni di donne […], figure di rilievo in politica e nello spettacolo, operatrici dei media e della ricerca’ (Dinelli 68). This, I believe, is one of the main reasons we are now witnessing a surge in activities.

Assessing the most tangible effects—e.g. at the legislative level—of this wave of protest goes beyond the scope of this essay.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet I would like to conclude by pointing to recent changes to parental-leave-related issues in Matteo Renzi’s ‘Job’s Act’ as an important result. These changes—the upshot of several attempts in recent years to offer a solution to embarrassing statistics concerning the presence of Italian women in the labour force, including the Law 188 saga[[8]](#footnote-8)—were in fact stimulated by a European trend (e.g. the German law on paternal allowance). However, they were also the fruit of the climate created by activist initiatives, and of related theoretical implications—e.g. the question of ‘cura’.

There is still a long way to go before attaining an acceptable situation. Excepting one positive area in which Italy has surpassed the EU average—women’s health—the state of affairs in the country leaves much to be desired. Italy still lacks centralised structure for stimulating, managing and overseeing programmes for gender equality. Ultimately, whether the awareness of these issues sparked by the waves of protest will lead to substantial changes within society remains to be seen, and will also depend on the presence of women in decision-making positions—which is still limited, but a number of recent measures aim to improve the situation.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is crucial for enabling women to obtain satisfactory political representation, an inevitable precondition for the future introduction of suitable policies.

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1. It took until 1996, for instance, for Law 66/1996 to be introduced, which categorises rape as a crime against an individual rather than morality (see Rosselli 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is confirmed by the absence of legislation in defence of gay rights, as well as by the consequences of Law 40/2004 on Assisted Reproduction Technology, which endangered women’s health by giving precedence to the safety of the embryo. The Italian Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights later acknowledged that this endangered women’s health. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Such as 97/80/CE on discrimination and 2002/73/CE on equality in employment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Cornero 2001, Molfino 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Loredana Lipperini’s blog *Lipperatura.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘The condemnation of excessive make-up’ and ‘this disdain for young women’s practices around the body, taste and consumption, […] rings a familiar bell if we look back to the 1950s and anxieties about the “fotoromanzo”’ (‘Whore-ocracy’, 424). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Successful campaigns include those sustaining the approval of the law against *femminicidio* (Law 119/2013) and the participation of women in the decision-making bodies of companies and administrations (*quote rosa*). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Law 188/2007 was ratified during the Prodi Government against the ‘dimissioni in bianco’ (a practice adopted by firms asking new employees to sign a resignation letter with no date on it. The implications for women are self-evident: in case of pregnancy, the female employee would be made to resign). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For instance, amendments have been made to the regulations for electing local administrations which stipulate any local government being composed exclusively of same sex members. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)