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**Author:** Alessandra Montalbano, University of Alabama

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**Author Bio:** Alessandra Montalbano is Assistant Professor of Italian at the University of Alabama. She received her PhD in Italian Studies from New York University and her *Laurea* in Philosophy from the Università di Verona. Her recent and forthcoming publications engage with issues ranging from victim-centered narratives of terrorism, to kidnapping victims’ experience of captivity, and the underworld of the Italian Republic. Other publications explore her interests in body, language, gender, and life writing, including studies of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and contemporary Italian feminism. She is currently writing her book on the phenomenon of ransom kidnapping in modern Italy.

**Abstract:** The last weekend of March 2019, Verona was at the center of media attention for having hosted the XIII World Congress of Families (WCF). However, the feminist response to this ultra-conservative and religious event became the true news. The transnational feminist movement *Non Una Di Meno* (NUDM) organized a three-day mobilization that included the biggest march in the history of Verona and had a strong impact on public opinion. This article offers an analysis of those days and the local politics that allowed them to take place. It argues that the WCF and NUDM are two opposite models of activism based on Super Political Action Committees (Super PACs) and solidarity, respectively.

**Keywords:** feminism, trans-feminism, abortion, protest, far-right.

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## Feminism Makes History in Verona: The Response to the World Congress of Families

ALESSANDRA MONTALBANO

When Brian S. Brown, president of the World Congress of Families (WCF), announced in October 2018 that the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> annual convention of his organization—designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) for its anti-LGBT ideology—would take place in Verona, Italy, he probably believed that he had found the ideal location for a three-day conference on the “natural family” (a heterosexual cisgender man married to a heterosexual cisgender woman and their biological children) to be held March 29-31, 2019.<sup>1</sup> In addition to being globally known as the city of love, Verona had just become the first officially “pro-life city” in Italy, a fact that promised a favorably welcome to the WCF and its reactionary political agenda.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the Verona that became visible to the world this March was not the official pro-life city, as Brown had hoped, but rather its opponent and progressive Verona Città Transfemminista (Verona, Trans-Feminist City).<sup>3</sup> The name of a three-day mobilization organized by the local branch of the international feminist movement Non Una Di Meno (NUDM, or Not One Less), Verona Città Transfemminista was the first public protest performed at a WCF convention.<sup>4</sup> With a march of more than 100,000 people from all across the country and beyond, on March 30 NUDM was able to bring to the streets the largest demonstration that Verona had ever seen.<sup>5</sup> Local, national, and international media with sympathy and support described the unexpectedly large event as peaceful, colorful, gay, and full of energy.<sup>6</sup> However, Verona Città Transfemminista did not just make history in the city. By turning Verona into the first transnational laboratory of NUDM, the local organizers made history in the feminist movement as well.

“How do you feel today?” I ask over the phone to Laura Sebastio, one of the local

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1. Southern Poverty, “World Congress of Families;” Hatewatch Staff, “Anti-LGBT.”

2. “Verona, mozione contro l'aborto: capogruppo Pd in consiglio comunale dice sì. ‘Ho votato secondo coscienza,’” *La Repubblica*, October 5, 2018. [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/05/news/consiglio\\_comunale\\_verona\\_aborto-208223679/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/05/news/consiglio_comunale_verona_aborto-208223679/).

3. “Verona città transfemminista: Tutte le info,” *Nonunadimeno* (blog), March 28, 2019, <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/2019/03/28/verona-citta-transfemminista-tutte-le-info/>.

4. The following is the definition of *transfemminismo* (trans-feminism) that NUDM gives in their manifesto *Abbiamo un piano* (We Have a Plan): “Il *transfemminismo* è un movimento di resistenza e una teoria che considera il genere, arbitrariamente assegnato alla nascita, una costruzione sociale, strumento proprio di un sistema di potere che controlla e limita i corpi per adattarli all’ordine sociale eterosessuale e patriarcale. Il *transfemminismo* muove dalla materialità delle vite e delle esperienze trans, femministe e queer, dalla complessità e dalla molteplicità delle collocazioni di genere e sessuali e riconosce l’intreccio tra la matrice patriarcale e quella capitalista delle oppressioni che colpiscono tutte le soggettività che non sono maschi bianchi eterosessuali.” (*Trans-feminism* is a movement of resistance and a theory that considers gender, arbitrarily assigned at birth, to be a social construction, a typical tool of a system of power that controls and limits the body in order to adapt it to a heterosexual and patriarchal order. *Trans-feminism* derives from the materiality of life and of trans, feminist, and queer experiences, from the complexity and multiplicity of gender and sexual collocations and recognizes the intersection between the patriarchal and capitalistic matrixes of the oppressions that affect all those subjectivities that are not heterosexual white males). NUDM, *Abbiamo un piano*, 4n1.

5. NUDM officially announced 150,000.

6. Rossana Caviglioli, “Verona. Le donne del corteo femminista; ‘C’è anche un’Italia diversa,’” RAI News, 1:24, March 30, 2019,

<https://www.rainews.it/tgr/veneto/vidео/2019/03/ven-corteo-femminista-verona-Congresso-Mondiale-della-Famiglia-df8b193f-194e-4ebe-a7a5-fef827783752.html>; Elena Chemesso, “Verona, decine di migliaia sfilano in corteo contro le tesi del congresso,” RAI News, 1:41, March 31, 2019,

<https://www.rainews.it/tgr/veneto/vidео/2019/03/ven-Migliaia-di-persone-alla-contromanifestazione-di-sabato-a-Verona-242ebd67-3e79-4c1f-97d6-2d117ab6c95b.html>.

organizers of Verona Città Transfemminista the day after the mobilization. “Did you see? It was unbelievable,” she says.<sup>7</sup> “I don’t know, I feel that I have a huge responsibility now. The person in charge of the press is overwhelmed. The media is covering the event extensively with positive articles and videos. Even *L’Arena* [the local newspaper] wrote a report that says that there were 50,000 of us [it had initially said 20,000].<sup>8</sup> There were many more, but it’s hard to estimate because there have been no other such demonstrations with which to compare this.”<sup>9</sup> We first talked about numbers because the protest was impressive but also because the day of the press conference in which NUDM officially opened the three-day event, I had asked how many people they were expecting to come. At the time they did not want to hazard a number, even if they were clearly hoping for massive attendance.<sup>10</sup> The contrast between the photo of the four organizers at this press conference and those of the protesters on the streets gives an idea of what they were able to accomplish (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> The Circolo della Rosa (Circle of the Rose), a women’s circle founded in 1992 in Verona, kindly offered to let NUDM use its space to talk to print and television journalists.<sup>12</sup> This is just one example of how Verona Città Transfemminista was made possible. Through the feminist politics of relationship, its organizers created a network of associations, galleries, circles, theaters, and clubs that wanted to offers their locations and ideas to the event. Just by walking around town, one could see that NUDM created meeting points for discussions, performances, and exhibitions through which to inhabit the city according to a feminist vision of society. The result was an open and inclusive social space, in which the participants felt part of an ongoing project.

NUDM has been present in Italy at the national level for three years. It is the Italian response to the call made by the Argentinian feminist movement Ni Una Menos that started in 2015 by staging a large demonstration against femicides in that country. The movement rapidly expanded all over Latin America and then spread to Europe. Meanwhile, feminists in Poland (2016), the Women’s March in Washington DC (2017), and the international #MeToo movement initiated in the US (2017) mobilized against anti-choice regulations, the presidential election of Donald Trump, and gender violence, respectively. “People recognized themselves in our and other activists’ topics, which we were able to identify and make part of the public domain. Something is moving within society. People are tired of this politics,” says Sebastio, speaking about public participation at Verona

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7. Phone conversation between the author and Laura Sebastio, April 1, 2019 (footnotes display the original in Italian, the English translation in the text is by the author). I wish to thank Laura Sebastio for having kindly dedicated her time to our phone conversation and for the material she made available for this article. I also thank Francesca Bragantini and Andrea Malesani for sharing some of their photos.

8. “In decine di migliaia al corteo femminista: ‘Mai vista tanta gente manifestare,’” *L’Arena*, March 30, 2019, <https://www.larena.it/territori/città/in-decine-di-migliaia-al-corteo-femminista-mai-vista-tanta-gente-manifestare-1.7229338>.

9. MONTALBANO: Come ti senti oggi?

SEBASTIO: Hai visto? È stato incredibile....Non so, mi sento di avere una responsabilità enorme adesso. Quella di noi incaricata della stampa è impegnatissima. I media stanno coprendo ampiamente l’evento con articoli e video positivi. Perfino *L’Arena* ha scritto un articolo che dice che c’erano 50,000 persone. Ce n’erano molte di più ma è difficile stabilire quante perché non ci sono mai state manifestazioni così con le quali fare un paragone.

10. Annalisa Camilli, “Chi sono le femministe contro il Congresso delle famiglie di Verona,” *Internazionale*, March 30, 2019.

11. “La marea a Verona per immagini,” Non Una Di Meno, Facebook, accessed July 17, 2019,

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/nonunadimeno/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=2404292696457608](https://www.facebook.com/pg/nonunadimeno/photos/?tab=album&album_id=2404292696457608).

Additional photographs of the event are posted on *gender/sexuality/italy* website. See “Verona, Trans-Feminist City,” YouTube video, 4:17, posted by “GSI Journal,” July 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgSLyEhf4Po>.

12. “Circolo della Rosa di Verona.”

Transfemminista.<sup>13</sup> She refers in general to the topics shared globally, but she also recalls the local political developments in her hometown in the months that preceded the WCF. In order to understand why and how in the spring of 2019 Verona hosted two antagonist and international political organizations—one fundamentalist Christian and the other feminist—dedicated to opposite activisms, it is necessary to first reconstruct these events.



Fig. 1: to watch a photo/video-gallery of the events, click on this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgSLyEhf4Po>. Edited by Paola Bonifazio and Alessandra Montalbano. Photos by Francesca Bragantini, Andrea Malesano, Alessandra Montalbano.

As mentioned above, in the fall of 2018 the city council of Verona proclaimed the town a “città a favore della vita” (pro-life city). This proclamation was included in Motion no. 434 presented to the council and approved on October 4.<sup>14</sup> The motion establishes that the city council has to financially support anti-choice associations (including ultra-Catholic associations) as well as public projects to promote pregnancy and guarantee that women can give birth anonymously. This was not the first time that the motion was presented to the council. In late July, its main signer, Alberto Zelger—a city councilor from the far-right political party Lega (League)—introduced the text to his colleagues with the approval of Verona’s mayor Federico Sboarina. Although the city council presented the motion as being favorable to women, its title illuminates the nature of its intentions: “Iniziativa per la prevenzione dell’aborto e il sostegno alla maternità nel 40° anniversario della legge 194/1978” (Initiatives to prevent abortion and support pregnancy on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Law 194/1978). Forty years after it was passed, “la 194” (the 194, as Italians call the law that legalized abortion in the country) was clearly undermined by a local motion. NUDM reacted to the news by launching a tweet-storm with the hashtag #194nonunpassoindietro (#194notonestepbackward) that went viral and began to awaken public opinion on this subject.<sup>15</sup>

However, the unconstitutional behavior of the city councilor Andrea Bacciga who, in a hall

13. SEBASTIO: La gente si è riconosciuta nei temi nostri e di altri che si occupano di attivismo che siamo riuscite a intercettare a fare in modo che divenissero di dominio pubblico. Qualcosa si sta muovendo nella società. La gente è stanca di questa politica.

14. Motion 434, “Iniziativa per la prevenzione dell’aborto e il sostegno alla maternità nel 40° anniversario della legge 194/1978,” Comune di Verona, October 4, 2018, [https://www.comune.verona.it/media/ComVR/Cdr/SegreteriaConsiglio/Allegati/mozioni/2017-2022/434\\_moz.pdf](https://www.comune.verona.it/media/ComVR/Cdr/SegreteriaConsiglio/Allegati/mozioni/2017-2022/434_moz.pdf).

15. “La Lega vuole limitare il diritto all’aborto”: Rivolta a Verona contro una mozione in Consiglio,” *La Repubblica*, July 26, 2018, [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/07/26/news/due\\_mozioni\\_contro\\_il\\_diritto\\_di\\_aborto-202726378/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/07/26/news/due_mozioni_contro_il_diritto_di_aborto-202726378/).

of an Italian public institution, gave the Roman salute (the fascist salute) towards members of NUDM-Verona present in person to protest the motion, caused a sensation that delayed approval.<sup>16</sup> Dressed like the women in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, a small group of feminists (including Sebastio and other organizers of Verona Città Transfemminista) stood in silence in the open gallery of the city council's hall to symbolically communicate their dissent. Bacciga—elected councilor within mayor Sboarina's civic list Battiti (Strive)—denied the ideological origin of his gesture in front of the council (whose majority members brushed it aside), but in a later tweet echoing Benito Mussolini he declared, “Se mi assolvete, mi fate un piacere; se mi condannate, mi fate un onore” (If you acquit me, you do me a favour; if you sentence me, you do me an honor).<sup>17</sup> NUDM asked for Bacciga's resignation without success—a failure that shows that councilors in Verona can violate the constitution without facing consequences. When the anti-abortion motion passed in October, however, the feminist movement successfully organized a significant demonstration that showed thousand of citizens protesting to defend “la 194.”<sup>18</sup>

*The Pro-Life Super Political Action Committees (Super PAC) Model of Activism*

The story of Motion 434 and its effects opens a window onto two very different models of political agency that became clear in Spring 2019 with the WCF and Verona Città Transfemminista. As journalists and scholars have observed, in the last decade the language and strategies of conservative religious groups shifted from being “anti-” to “pro-”: the expression “anti-abortion” has become, for example, “pro-life,” while “anti-LGBT” has become “pro-family.” This is evident in both the text of the local Motion 434, which, as the journalist Giulia Siviero noted, attempts to neutralize Law no. 194 without revoking it and in the rhetoric of the WCF in Verona, which unlike its previous conventions, according to SPLC observers, emphasized the “natural family” rather than wrapping “right-wing fears about transgender rights and the abortion industry into its platform.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is often by appropriating feminist and human rights arguments that religious groups advertise their objectives. A poster made by the ultra-Catholic platform CitizenGO against the women's strike organized by NUDM for International Women's Day, for example, shows the image of a fetus with a pink ribbon on her head and the words: “Dalla parte di tutte le donne. Non Una Di Meno” (On the side of all women. Not One Less). By twisting the meaning of feminist language in a poster against NUDM's fight for women's reproductive and self-determination rights, CitizenGO pushes anti-abortion messages. In another example of this communicative strategy, a poster shows the photo of a woman's belly with the words “L'aborto è la prima causa di femminicidio nel mondo” (abortion is the greatest cause of femicide in the world) turning the word femicide against women. *Il Post* calls this communicative strategy “doppio rovesciamento” (double reversal) and underlines that these groups “use the words associated with human rights, but clarifying the meaning that those terms have for them. They do so in order to contaminate (or to rectify) the vocabulary that their adversaries constructed, leaving them speechless.”<sup>20</sup>

16. To give the Roman salute is prohibited by Italian Law.

17. Paolo Berizzi, “Verona, in Consiglio comunale saluto romano ‘dedicato’ al movimento femminista. E il consigliere cita Mussolini,” *La Repubblica*, July 26, 2018, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/07/27/news/saluto\\_romano\\_destra\\_verona\\_consiglio\\_comunale-202795134/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/07/27/news/saluto_romano_destra_verona_consiglio_comunale-202795134/).

18. Annalisa Camilli, “Da Verona parte l'offensiva contro l'aborto,” *Internazionale*, November 23, 2018, <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/annalisa-camilli/2018/11/23/verona-estrema-destra-aborto-europa>.

19. Hatewatch Staff, “WCF Verona.”

20. “Il Congresso Mondiale delle Famiglie, spiegato bene,” *Il Post*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/03/24/il-congresso-mondiale-delle-famiglie-verona/> English translation by the author.

Motion 434, the WCF, and CitizenGO are all interconnected not just at a rhetorical level but also the political level. Feminism, and NUDM (today's largest transnational movement) in particular, is their obstacle, target, and main opponent. The reason is historical as well as ideological. Many media commentators said, correctly, that the Verona three-day events showed two opposite visions of society and the world. I would argue that it also showed two opposite models of activism: one that seeks alliances with governments and politicians to create legislations and regulations according to religious views; the other that aims to radically transform society through a permanent state of mobilization that awakens public opinion. In response to the WCF hosted in Italy—the first convention in a founding country of the EU—many articles and studies have been published by journals and websites that analyze how since 2013 religious extremists started to organize a network of American and European groups to impose reforms against human rights.<sup>21</sup>

In December 19, 2018, the SPLC published a detailed article on the connections between the WCF, ultra-Catholic Italian groups, and far-right parties such as Lega.<sup>22</sup> The article also references a study published in April 2018 by the European Parliamentary Forum on Population & Development (EPF) that shed lights on an extremist strategic plan called *Restoring the Natural Order: An Agenda for Europe*.<sup>23</sup> The Forum defines Agenda Europe as “a Vatican-inspired, professional advocacy network, whose members meet in secret, and which is directly responsible for implementing a detailed strategy to roll back human rights.”<sup>24</sup> Agenda Europe, continues the Forum, has already obtained “concrete results, such as the 2016 Polish bill to ban abortion, bans on equal marriage in several Central European countries and over a dozen comparable acts at national level [sic] and in European institutions aiming to limit women’s and LGBTI rights.”<sup>25</sup> The EPF’s is not the only study that analyzes the Vatican’s reaction to European liberal reforms. The expression “gender ideology,” used by conservatives to label gender not as a scientific term but rather an ideological one, has a Catholic origin. It was in fact coined in the mid-1990s by the future Pope Benedict XVI and his collaborators as a reaction to Hillary Clinton’s famous statement that “Women’s rights are human rights.”<sup>26</sup>

The WCF was also founded in 1997 as a reaction to Clinton’s declaration. Its creators were the American evangelical historian Allan Carlson and the Russian sociologists Anatoly Antonov and Viktor Medkov.<sup>27</sup> Today the president is Brian Brown (also president of the International Organization for the Family, IOF), while the Russian representative is Alexey Komov—a close associate of the Russian orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev. What emerges from these studies is that over the last decade the WCF offered Agenda Europe the narrative with which to bring together all the different ultra-Catholic groups in Europe. In short, we are witnessing today an international extremist connection between European Catholics, the Russian Orthodox Church, and American Christians (evangelical and Mormon) mobilizing against women’s and LGBT rights.

Yet what became clear in Verona is that the WCF is giving Agenda Europe more than a

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21. Hatewatch Staff, “The American”; “Il Congresso Mondiale delle Famiglie, spiegato bene,” *Il Post*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/03/24/il-congresso-mondiale-delle-famiglie-verona/>; Jason Horowitz, “Italy’s Right Links Low Birthrate to Fight Against Abortion and Migration,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/world/europe/italy-verona-salvini-world-congress-of-families.html>; Hatewatch Staff, “Anti-LGBT”; “City of love? Christian Right Congress in Verona Divides Italy,” *The Guardian*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/city-of-love-christian-right-congress-in-verona-divides-italy-league-extremism>; Hatewatch Staff, “WCF Verona”; Ramsay and Provost, “Revealed.”

22. Hatewatch Staff, “The American.”

23. EPF, *Restoring the Natural Order*.

24. EPF, 2.

25. EPF, 2.

26. On the Vatican and “gender ideology,” see Kane, “Right-Wing”; Kuhar and Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender*; Garbagnoli and Prearo, *La crociata*.

27. Southern Poverty, “World Congress of Families.”

narrative. It is giving a financial and communicative model to campaign for their objectives. An article published by openDemocracy sheds light on the key-role played by the aforementioned CitizenGO.<sup>28</sup> An online platform (the conservative equivalent of Change.org) created by Ignacio Arsuaga in Spain in 2013—the year after the WCF was held in Madrid—CitizenGO operates in Europe as an American Super PAC. Pretending to be a potential donor, an undercover openDemocracy journalist approached Arsuaga in Verona to make a donation and discovered that by collecting money from anonymous sources—dark money—CitizenGO campaigns against parties and other groups that pose obstacles to their goals. While it does not officially have any political affiliation, CitizenGO sympathizes with far-right parties and receives money from oligarchs and European aristocrats. Its activism consists in using dark money to create favorable environments to help elect people who will pass the laws they seek. Like an American Super PAC, CitizenGO indirectly campaigns for those they want in power. Abortion and anti-LGBT ideology are the glue that keeps together the different interests connected to the platform and are seen in fact as threats to the gender binary, the patriarchal family, and European demography. Abortion is wrongly considered by far-right parties to be the cause of Europe’s declining birth rate—that is, in their view, the cause of a future disappearance of white Christian Europe. Beyond the advertisement style of communication used by CitizenGO and the “pro-” shift in the language of the WCF, there are anti-immigrant far-right parties that back the supremacy of the sovereign national state (which is why they call themselves *sovranisti*) (sovereignist) over the European Parliament, whose regulations on human rights govern member countries’ policies.

The same month that Motion 434 was first presented in Verona, CitizenGO organized a workshop taught by WCF members to Catholic groups in Italy.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the motion, the far-right Lega Senator Simone Pillon, a participant at the workshop, presented to the Italian Senate a decree law (DDL Pillon) that would regulate divorce and shared custody, among other things, that has been criticized because it does not protect women from domestic violence.<sup>30</sup> Pillon also promoted a parliamentary group called Vita, Famiglia e Libertà (Life, Family, and Freedom) to back pro-life and pro-family laws.<sup>31</sup> We can here recognize the pattern denounced by the EPF. Wherever the WCF goes, there is an impact on legislations and rules. Verona became the ideal place for their convention, given that it passed the anti-abortion motion the day after Brown visited the city in October. It is also the city in Italy where the intersection between ultra-Catholic groups and far-right parties is not recent and whose history includes having been both the capital of the fascist Repubblica di Salò and an important center for right-wing terrorism in the 1970s. However, it is the connection that Verona has today with the most extreme members of the Italian cabinet that made it a fitting site for the WCF. For Matteo Salvini (leader of Lega and Minister of the Interior), his good friend the ultra-Catholic and Lega Minister of the Family, Lorenzo Fontana (a native resident and previous deputy mayor of Verona), and for Marco Bussetti (Lega Minister of Instruction), Verona became the Rome that they would like to create. This is visible in the logo of the 2019 WCF, in which the flat arches that we see looks more like the Roman fascist Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (Palace of Italian Civilization), known as the “Colosseo quadrato” (Square Colosseum), than Verona’s Arena theater. Two stylized human figures—one blue and the other pink that together form a heart—represent a rigid gender binary relationship that is likened to Romeo and Juliet’s

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28. Ramsay and Provost, “Revealed.”

29. Hatewatch Staff, “The American.”

30. DDL stands for *disegno di legge* (draft law).

31. “Il DDL Pillon, spiegato bene,” *Il Post*, November 10, 2018. <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/11/10/dll-pillon-spiegato-bene/>.

love.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the Comune di Verona and the International Organization for the Family, among the organizers of the WCF are CitizenGo, ProVita, the National Organization for Marriage, and Generazione Famiglia (Family Generation), all ultra-Catholic groups whose websites are the sources for the anti-abortion arguments cited in Motion 434 and whose leaders have connections with extreme parties such as the fascist Forza Nuova (New Force).<sup>33</sup> Yet the day after the march organized by NUDM, Matteo Salvini had to proclaim on national television and to the media that “la 194 non si tocca” (Law 194 won’t be touched), Senator Pillon had to postpone his DDL, and Laura Boldrini—deputy from the left and previous President of the Chamber of Deputies—was able to get the Parliament to pass a law against revenge porn that had been opposed by the majority the day before Verona Transfemminista counter-protest started.<sup>34</sup> After the WCF in Italy, the Italian cabinet in Rome was impacted by feminism.

### *Feminist Solidarity as a Model of Activism*

A sea of feminists wearing fuchsia and black (the colors of NUDM) and the rainbow of the LGBT community came from all over Italy to take Verona back.<sup>35</sup> While the “city laboratory of the far-right” (a label that Verona earned at the national level) was barricaded inside the Palazzo della Gran Guardia (The Gran Guardia Palace), surrounded by the police, the trans-feminist city was creating spaces of liberation from the oppressive neo-liberalist and patriarchal system.<sup>36</sup> “They got the Gran Guardia for free,” Laura Sebastio tells me over the phone. “We had to pay for the two rooms the city council gave us.”<sup>37</sup> Yet NUDM had the streets and a relational network on their side. Laboratorio Autogestito Paratodos (an independent theater that among its many initiatives offers immigrants classes on how to become a professional *pizzaiolo*), the Circolo Pink (an active LGBT center known at the national level for its projects), the aforementioned Circolo della Rosa, the ANPI (National Association Partisans of Italy), the independent bookstore Libre, the gallery Fonderia 20.9, Teatro Satiro Off, Batteria Scarpa (a former fort), La Sobilla (an independent cultural association), and Sala Elisabetta Lodi and the ex Magazzini Generali (the two rented rooms) were all places in which the organizers of NUDM-Verona were able to make the city trans-feminist for three days by offering cultural events and workshops in response to the WCF’s panels.<sup>38</sup>

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32. World Congress, “Il Congresso.”

33. Ferruccio Pinotti and Elena Tebano, “Tutti i legami di Pro-Vita e Forza Nuova,” *Il Corriere della Sera*, July 10, 2017. Among these groups are the organizers of the Family Day and the *pro-vita* marches in Italy. Generazione Famiglia is the Italian version of the French La Manif Pour Tous (The Protest for Everyone), and for this reason it’s also called La Manif Pour Tous Italia.

34. “Revenge porn: sexually suggestive images of someone, typically a former romantic partner, that are posted online or otherwise shared without the person’s consent,” Dictionary, “Revenge Porn.” See “La Camera ha approvato l’emendamento sul ‘revenge porn,’” *Il Post*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/04/02/camera-revenge-porn/>.

35. “Verona, Trans-Feminist City,” YouTube video, 4:17, posted by “GSI Journal,” July 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgSLyEhf4Po>.

36. “Solidarity is in the Air,” YouTube video, 6:27, posted by “openDemocracy,” May 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62njPUHUL4I&fbclid=IwAR2NrSD1yN6TVkaalt9fsbmS3r45XK6HiRWNdDmbviI3cvOAgHj1msTZlck>.

37. SEBASTIO: Hanno avuto la Gran Guardia gratis....Abbiamo dovuto pagare le due stanze che il consiglio comunale ci da dato. The WCF website also announced that the people going to the “family parade” could use public transportation for free.

38. See note 35 above and also the program “Verona Città Transfemminista,” accessed July 10, 2019, [https://nonunadimenoverona.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/verona\\_prog5-1.jpg](https://nonunadimenoverona.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/verona_prog5-1.jpg).



Among the events were two exhibitions: a visual and written story of Verona's far-right violence and the resistance, and an art project called *Femminismi Manifesti* (Manifest Feminisms) that featured remakes of historical feminist posters by contemporary female artists. The program included three book presentations about trans, the taboo of menstrual periods, and women and regression in Europe, as well as three documentaries on the LGBTQI community in Uganda, on abortion, and on desire and disability. The calendar also presented a kid-friendly option, a cartoon about different kinds of families. In addition to books and visual arts, Verona Città Transfemminista offered two workshops on pedagogy and gender strikes, two plays entitled *Il corpo lesbico* (The Lesbian Body) and *Corpi impuri* (Impure Bodies), and an international panel on "The Role of Gender and Family within the Mobilization and Politics of the Right: Feminist Solidarity and Revolutionary Perspectives."<sup>39</sup>

"The program was designed by NUDM-Verona," says Sebastio, "but the three days were the result of a larger collaboration. NUDM-Bologna, for example, was in charge of the graphics."<sup>40</sup> NUDM-Bologna also organized the two workshops, while *Femminismi Manifesti* was promoted by NUDM-Vicenza. "When we contacted NUDM-Italy to mobilize against the WCF," Sebastio continues, "they were very busy organizing the March 8 women's strike. However, as soon as the strike was over their attention and energy turned completely to Verona."<sup>41</sup> The 100,000-person march, and the first transnational meeting of NUDM—attended by over 400 participants—that followed the next day made this engagement and its effects evident to all.<sup>42</sup> Sebastio's account, the rich and diverse program, and the network created by NUDM for transportation and hospitality showed a model of activism opposite to the WCF and its Super PAC financial system. The key word to describe this feminist model is "solidarity," which not coincidentally appears together with the term "Revolutionary Perspectives" in the title of the international panel. What NUDM advocates and practices is the possibility to create spaces of freedom: free because they happen outside the capitalistic logic of profit and exploitation, and because they are inclusive spaces in which all the different subjectivities can be self-determined and interact. The solidarity among people, associations, and even clubs that makes a trans-feminist city possible is an economy of desire. This desire to do, love, and move starts with the subject rather than with the coercive binary control imposed by neo-liberalism and patriarchy.

Although organized and connected online, NUDM is not a platform. On the contrary, it is a movement that needs to meet in person and create a collective body out of all the single bodies united together. The peak was reached in Verona by the visible human river that walked through the streets on March 30, welcomed by the people that were standing on balconies and at windows while

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39. Eva Von Dedecker (Humboldt University, Berlin), Sara Garbagnoli (Université Paris 3), Adriana Zaharijevich (University of Belgrade), and Elzbieta Korolczuk (Warsaw University), "The Role of Gender and Family within the Mobilization and Politics of the Right: Feminist Solidarity and Revolutionary Perspectives," panel introduced and moderated by Laura Sebastio, Sala Elisabetta Lodi, Verona, March 29, 2019, <https://nonunadimenoverona.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/calendar-ct.pdf>.

40. SEBASTIO: Il programma è stato disegnato da NUDM Verona, ma la tre giorni è stata il risultato di una collaborazione più ampia. NUDM Bologna, per esempio, si è occupata della grafica.

41. SEBASTIO: Quando abbiamo contattato NUDM Italia per mobilitarsi contro il WCF, erano molto occupate ad organizzare lo sciopero delle donne dell' 8 marzo. Tuttavia, appena finito lo sciopero la loro attenzione ed energia sono state rivolte completamente a Verona.

42. "Assemblea Transfemminista," Facebook video, 2:30, posted by "Non Una Di Meno," March 31, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimeno/videos/280346769556818/UzpfSTE2MjEwMzQxNjQ1OTI1NTY6Mjc1ODEzOTA4NzU0ODcxOQ/>.

the parade advanced.<sup>43</sup> Without the symbols of any political parties, at the march all signs were slogans and messages.<sup>44</sup> The uniqueness of this creative language and its effective sense of humor were at the center of the parade as well as the songs and voices. “Insieme siam partite, insieme torneremo, non una, non una, non una di meno” (Together we depart, together we will return, not one, not one, not one less) is NUDM’s main chant.<sup>45</sup> It recalls the fight from which the movement started—the fight against gender violence. Never alone but to the contrary always with the solidarity of an entire movement that advances from Argentina to Italy and beyond, women are connected by a feminism that is transnational. Yet, NUDM’s fight is not only for and by women. The suffix *trans-* in *trans-feminism* indicates that the movement is not separatist but rather inclusive and open to alliances. Feminist, trans-feminist, but also anti-racist, anti-fascist, and anti-capitalist, this movement identifies at the heart of patriarchy a violence that attacks women, LGBT subjectivities, immigrants, as well as the planet.<sup>46</sup> NUDM has its own plan against gender violence that includes, among other things, a pedagogy that considers the existence of gender diversity, a feminist professional formation, universal welfare, full access to abortion (including pharmaceutical), the creation of trans-feminist medical consultation rooms, a European minimum wage, a basic income, the *ius soli* and citizenship for children that grow up in Italy, and green policies.<sup>47</sup>

What is at stake for the movement is not a gender equality that would confirm the system’s status quo. It is a radical transformation of power relationships that only the end of new-liberalism and patriarchy can allow. The recent book *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser—the latter a quoted reference by NUDM, together with Angela Davis—declares that the fork in the road for feminism today is a choice between two models.<sup>48</sup> The first is a liberal model personified by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and her famous “lean in” to push women to reach leadership positions in business. The second—supported by the Manifesto—is the model of the *huelga feminista* (feminist strike) that with a 24-hour suspension of women’s productive and reproductive work performs a protest that is intersectional in terms of race, transversal in terms of social class, and transnational because organized by feminists in different countries on Women’s Day. The largest example is the 2018 *huelga feminista* in Spain, where over five million people participated. The feminist strike is for NUDM a political tool. In “Sotto il nostro occhio” (Before Our Eyes), the official document that motivated Verona Città Transfemminista, we read:

On 8 March thousands of us occupied the squares and the streets of the world, abstaining from all forms of labor and deserting places where exploitation and patriarchal violence thrive. We spoke up against racism and oppression; we shouted out of our freedom from gender norms and from the oppressive institution that is the heteropatriarchal family. *The feminism and transfeminism we put in place go beyond identities and their codification, crossing through spaces in our societies to create new forms of struggle, advancing through relationships rather than identification and running through every aspect of this global mobilization. The International Women Strike revealed the connection between heteropatriarchal violence,*

43. “Striscioni e cartelli: Da un balcone spunta un ‘Non cammino ma vi sono vicino,’” *L’Arena*, March 30, 2019, <https://www.larena.it/territori/citt%C3%A0/striscioni-e-cartelli-da-un-balcone-spunta-un-non-cammino-ma-vi-sono-vicino-1.7229995>.

44. See note 35 above.

45. Stefano Battaglia, “Corteo Verona Città Transfemminista – 30 Marzo 2019 – NUDM vs XIII Congresso Mondiale delle Famiglie,” YouTube video, 4:13, “SB Services – Foto&Video production,” April 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dj8Bqe1WU>.

46. “Retro March 2019 – Da Verona con Amore,” YouTube video, 15:05, “eustachio79,” March 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOP5Frgsgeg>.

47. NUDM, *Abbiamo un piano*.

48. Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism*.

*racism and exploitation.* By taking our freedom and collective power into the streets, on the 8 March we broke that connection.<sup>49</sup>

It is with this energy and ideas, the document adds, that NUDM went to Verona. Its first international meeting with feminists from all over the world—including the Argentinian Marta Dillon, one of the movement’s founders—transformed the city into the laboratory of the *huelga feminista* model, making feminist history.

The striking aspect of Verona Città Transfemminista was the level of information that a participant could obtain from the material available, the events and debates, and the workshops, all well documented with facts and official data on violence. Importantly, the Università degli Studi di Verona also took a firm position against the WCF and its thesis on gender and LGBT people with a petition signed by 400 academics.<sup>50</sup> “The fact that the university was on our side was fundamental for us,” states Sebastio during our conversation. Indeed, it legitimized the protest.<sup>51</sup> The approach that Verona Città Transfemminista took towards gender violence, abortion, and human rights was based on research not only to contrast the narrative of the WCF but also, and perhaps more importantly, to awaken public opinion on these subjects. Beyond being a model of protest, the activism of the trans-feminist city is a model of citizenship that is the basis of an engaged democracy. Against the imposition of the constructed and artificial “natural family” that is the nucleus of authoritarian regimes, today democratic societies need their citizens to be activists in order to resist. This is the meaning of what trans-feminism calls the “stato di mobilitazione permanente” (perpetual mobilization). The Assemblea Pubblica (Public Meeting), where people come together to discuss and decide, is the political tool for this citizenship. Although different than the 1970s feminist Gruppi di Autocoscienza (Groups of Consciousness-raising) because they are open to all subjectivities, they also consider the personal as political and raise awareness through relationship, knowledge, and culture.

Another striking aspect of Verona Città Transfemminista was the peaceful collaboration of its participants. Among the local NUDM organizers, Sebastio oversaw the relationship with the DIGOS (special police department) and met three times with its Chief, Tea Mercoli, in the months before the three-day event. “The relation with the DIGOS was excellent. Towards the last meeting, though, because of the attention the event was receiving, the DIGOS realized that something big was about to happen on the feminist side and asked me several times what our intentions were, especially during the WCF parade.”<sup>52</sup> Sebastio reassured them that NUDM did not intend to irrupt into the “family parade” and instead negotiated the feminist march’s route. “The DIGOS clearly did not allow us to enter in Piazza Brà [where the congress took place] but it had us march very close to the Palazzo della Gran Guardia,” adding that the feminists were more interested in obtaining high participation levels than in taking provocative actions.<sup>53</sup>

Although in Spring 2019 Verona hosted two international organizations that reflect politics at the global level, local politics brought this event to pass. The presence of the WCF in the city was in line with the policies of its council and with a long history of intersection between far-right parties

49. NUDM, “Verona Trans-Feminist City.” Emphasis in the original.

50. NUDM, “Verona, prof. dell’Università.”

51. SEBASTIO: Il fatto che l’università fosse dalla nostra parte è stato fondamentale per noi.

52. SEBASTIO: La relazione con la Digos è stata eccellente. Verso l’ultimo incontro però, a causa dell’attenzione che l’evento stava ricevendo, la Digos ha realizzato che qualcosa di grande stava per accadere dalla parte femminista e mi ha chiesto più volte quali fossero le nostre intenzioni soprattutto durante il corteo del WCF.

53. Ironically, Chief Mercoli was all over the news because of a confrontation she had with a Salvini supporter who was screaming in front of Gran Guardia and who disrespectfully provoked her by flashing his rear-end at her. Calling her “una poliziotta” (a police officer), the media did not mention that Mercoli is the current Digos Chief of Verona.

and ultra-Catholic groups. This continuity remained contained in Verona and did not affect policy in Rome as the organizers of the WCF had hoped it would. As noted above, the day after NUDM march Salvini had to publically support Law 194 (that allows abortion), Pillon had to put his DDL on stand-by, and Boldrini was able to pass the revenge porn law. The effect of Verona Città Transfemminista was therefore politically stronger than that of the WCF. Yet, the activism that the WCF represents, and will continue performing, has power as its objective—that is, its purpose is to elect the lawmakers that will affect and change the system according to its vision. “Our work was to make these subjects become part of public debate and show that people care,” says Sebastio, and when I ask what NUDM thinks about the left in Italy and its parties, she responds, “We are not against them, but we do not ask or want them to get involved in our activism.”<sup>54</sup> The question remains open, however, although it is perhaps the left itself that should find a way to respond and represent a civic society that, independent from any parties and following a feminist movement, clearly expressed its opinion on the streets.

Even if feminists did not seek out politicians, the same day of the NUDM march, the women of the PD (Democratic Party) organized a public meeting in the K2 Theater in Verona (Figures 2-3). Attendance exceeded expectations, and the organizers had to put loudspeakers outside the theater for the numerous people that could not fit inside. Among the participants on stage were Laura Boldrini and Monica Cirinnà—the latter a Senator from the PD and promoter of the civil union law that bears her name (Figures 4). Their powerful speeches in favor of feminism and the fight against gender violence roused the audience in a city where the PD is the fourth party and whose councilor voted in favor of Motion 434. Verona Città Transfemminista clearly energized these institutional politicians whose rhetoric became incisive. Verona also had a positive impact on Boldrini’s visibility in the media and on social networks. During a flash-mob that the PD organized on the Castelvecchio Bridge, the RAI (the Italian public television) showed her dancing and singing *Bella ciao* among the people, a fact that Salvini promptly criticized on Twitter (Figures 5-7). The hashtag #ioballoconlaura (#idancewithlaura) started trending and encouraged her to change her communication strategy, which became more direct against the Minister of the Interior.



Fig. 2: K2 Theater. Courtesy of Alessandra Montalbano.

54. SEBASTIO: Il nostro lavoro era quello di far diventare questi argomenti parte del dibattito pubblico e di mostrare che la gente ci tiene....Noi non siamo contro, ma non gli chiediamo o vogliamo coinvolgerli nel nostro attivismo.



Fig. 3: K2 Theater. Courtesy of Alessandra Montalbano.



Fig. 4: Representative, Laura Boldrini. K2 Theater. Courtesy of Alessandra Montalbano.



Fig. 5: Flash mob. Ponte di Castelvecchio, Verona. March 30, 2019. Courtesy of Alessandra Montalbano.



Fig. 6: Flash mob. Ponte di Castelvecchio, Verona. March 30, 2019. Courtesy of Alessandra Montalbano.



Fig. 7: Flash mob. Ponte di Castelvecchio, Verona. March 30, 2019. Courtesy of Alessandra Montalbano.

A tide of people responded to the WCF, to Verona’s city council and its pro-life policies, and to the Roman salute of its far-right councilor. They shouted in unison “Siamo tutte antifasciste!” (We are all anti-fascists!) and sang “Questa mattina mi son svegliata” (This morning I woke up)—the song of the 1940s anti-fascist resistance—using feminine-gendered Italian endings (including by the numerous men present). Feminism made the language of the historical resistance its own. The local NUDM organizers were able to make an Italy empowered by its own history march to take Verona back from its far-right laboratory and resist against a global threat to liberal democracy. The PD, together with other left-wing parties and unions, participated in the march without any identifying symbols. Would they be able to attract this energy and represent a civic society that is recognizing itself in feminism? Meanwhile, NUDM has a plan.

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