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‘Together we stand’: coalition-building in the Italian and Spanish feminist movements in times of crisis

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We analyse coalition-building in feminist mobilisations in times of crisis in two similar cases: Spain and Italy. Based on social movement literature, we develop two key arguments. First, in austerity-ridden scenarios, connecting socio-economic grievances and feminist demands is key for the feminist mass mobilisations to follow. Second, anti-austerity struggles must resonate across different dimensions of coalition-building, both within the feminist movements and across feminists and other actors, such as LGBTQ collectives and anti-austerity challengers. The data used throughout the article come from semi-structured interviews with activists in Italian and Spanish feminist grass-roots organisations. Our results suggest that times of neoliberal crisis may present opportunities not only to advance the feminist agenda, but also to foster alliances within the feminist milieus and between feminists and other relevant collective actors. These alliances might well extend beyond the period of greatest hardship.

Key words feminist movements • grievances • coalition-building • critical juncture • Italy

• Spain

Key messages

- This article explores coalition-building in feminist movements in times of neoliberal crisis in Spain and Italy.
- The ability to bridge socio-economic grievances and feminist demands is key for successful feminist mobilisation.
- Grievances shape coalition-building both *within* feminist milieus and *between* feminist and other struggles.

Feminist coalitions in (anti-)austerity times

The outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008 was met with the mass mobilisation of citizens, especially in the European periphery. Anti-austerity protests were staged to contest growing social inequality and democratic exclusion (della Porta, 2015). Austerity policies implemented during the crisis hit disadvantaged social groups especially hard, including women, sexual minorities and migrants. The public welfare state has retrenched, material conditions have worsened and unemployment and labour precarity have increased, which has particularly affected female workers (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2013). In addition to this, women and social minorities have faced a cultural backlash from conservative milieus. Right-wing populist parties have risen in several European countries, actively pushing for regressive policies. Social movements of different types seized the recession and austerity contexts as opportunities to advance claims for economic redistribution and the restoration of the welfare state, as well as the improvement of civil rights. Women and feminists were, in fact, part of the anti-austerity protests from the beginning in different contexts (Roth and Saunders, 2020). In Italy and Spain, feminist organisations have been participating in anti-austerity mobilisations since 2011. Socio-economic grievances that were incorporated into the feminist mobilisations in both countries have worked since then as a tool to forge coalitions not only *within* feminist milieus, but also *between* feminist groupings and other social movement actors. In this article, we investigate whether and how socio-economic grievances have lasted even after the climax of the anti-austerity protest to today's mobilisation. Within the global context of the #MeToo and *Ni Una Menos* protests against structural male violence (2015–19), feminists have become the collective actors with the highest mobilisation capacity at present in both Italy and Spain. Which factors account for feminists' mobilisation capacity? Which factors have helped them to overcome the traditional tensions and division among feminist groups, thus facilitating the formation of coalitions? Which coalitions were built with other actors, and how did they come about?

Focused on the Italian and Spanish feminist mobilisations after 2011, this article investigates how crisis-related grievances have worked – and still work – as facilitating factors in coalition-building dynamics. Complementing literature on coalition-building in social movements and gender studies with insights coming from grievance theories, we shed light on the ability of feminist movements to build internal and external coalitions. While we know a great deal about the importance of political opportunities, identities and mobilising resources for coalition-building dynamics in the feminist movement and beyond (for example, McCammon and Campbell, 2002; Meyer and Corrigall-Brown, 2005; Roth, 2010; van Dyke and McCammon, 2010), the existing literature has not thoroughly addressed the role that grievance construction plays for coalition-building processes that involve feminist movements. Here, we contend that mobilisation around austerity-related grievances has allowed for the formation of coalitions along different dimensions (until today), both inside the feminist movement and with other social movements, including anti-austerity milieus.

We suggest that the crisis was a *critical juncture* (della Porta, 2015; Roberts, 2017), not only shaping sociopolitical institutions, but also encouraging new solidarity processes among mobilised citizens. Feminist activists reacted to the economic, social and political transformations associated with the crisis by increasing their level of engagement. Collective mobilisation built on grievances related to the economic and political crisis, material and symbolic deprivation, and austerity–precarity status

anxiety, which activated processes of cross-fertilisation within feminist milieus, and between feminist and anti-austerity activists. These coalitional processes have continued, to some extent, to be important for coalition-building over time. In addition, there were suddenly imposed grievances related to increasingly mediated cases of sexual and gender-based violence, which fuelled popular outrage and led to the emergence of the *Non Una Di Meno* (NUDM) (Not One Less) movement in Italy and to major protest events in Spain, both of which denounced the systemic character of male violence in European societies. After 2011, these factors fostered coalition-building processes at two different levels:

- *within* the feminist movement, contributing to the development of collaborations between previously separate organisations with different visions, as well as with individuals with different social, ethnic and generational backgrounds, and collectives fighting for adjacent issues, such as LGBTQI² organisations; and
- *between* the feminist movement and other types of social movement, such as the student, anti-austerity and the labour movements.

In the next section, we review the issue of coalition-building, paying specific attention to how it has been addressed by research on feminist movements, and develop our theoretical framework by emphasising the importance of grievances for coalition formation at various levels. In the methodological part, we present our qualitative data and justify the comparative approach. Subsequently, we provide the contextual background for the Italian and Spanish feminist movements. We then analyse feminist coalitions both *within* the feminist movement and *between* the feminist movement and other social movements, especially anti-austerity actors. Specifically, we empirically show the influence of grievance-related discourses for coalition-building dynamics. To conclude, we discuss the main implications of this article.

Coalition-building in feminist movements

Coalitions are one of the most vital tools that social movements have in their tactical repertoire (Meyer and Corrigall-Brown, 2005; Heaney and Rojas, 2008; van Dyke and McCammon, 2010). They are agreements between organisations to collectively address a given set of policies or political objectives (Heaney and Rojas, 2008: 42). By forming coalitions, activists seek to establish rules of interaction, boundaries and specific goals, and to bring stability to what are more typically multipurpose, unbounded, unruly and dynamic structures (Heaney and Rojas, 2008). Coalitions may have a varying duration, encompass various interests (while pursuing more or less similar goals) and involve divergent degrees of formality, commitment and resources (van Dyke and McCammon, 2010). Actions are oftentimes loosely coordinated, consisting of informal ties, and may be established ad hoc for a given protest event (Heaney and Rojas, 2008).

Coalitions are most likely to be successful in multi-issue movements with congruent groups in terms of ideologies and styles. Prospects for success increase when there are personal and group affinities, there are bridge-building agents at work, and their goal is to enhance their political influence. Success is also more likely when the environment generates threats, when there are previous network interactions and when organisations are socially embedded but still retain some autonomy and

distinctive identities (McCammon and Campbell, 2002). Identities are crucial for coalition-building dynamics within the feminist movement: even when two branches of the same organisation share similar goals, they may choose not to work together if group identities are incompatible. For instance, Reger (2002) shows how different chapters of the National Organization for Women in Cleveland did not collaborate due to class differences. Roth (2010) explores how second-wave feminists failed to take common action because activists in black, white and Chicana organisations believed that to take action on other women's behalf was paternalistic and women should organise on their own behalf.

Feminist scholarship has documented the ways in which feminists have organised autonomously or as part of mixed movements. Molyneux (1998) has proposed a taxonomy of women's movements centred around autonomy, distinguishing three ideal types: independent movements; movements with associative links; and movements based on direct mobilisation, where the initiative for action comes from an external institutional authority, such as parties or governments. In movements with associative links, independent women's organisations form alliances with other organisations based on limited agreements in order to promote the feminist agenda (even at the risk of diluting it). These alliances often produce contradictions: feminists organising in neoliberal contexts face co-optation (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2018), and even their involvement in radical democratic movements, such as 15M, implies internal differences and only partial successes in influencing the movements' discourses and praxis (Cruells and Ezquerro, 2015). These difficulties notwithstanding, coalition-building has become a common strategy for contemporary feminist movements, as they are increasingly embracing intersectional politics, both as an identity and as a repertoire of action (Evans and Lépinard, 2020). What is more, empirical research seems to support our expectation that neoliberal policies in times of crisis may have the effect of intensifying feminist intersectional mobilisations. According to Lombardo's (2017) analysis of the Spanish case, the alliance between feminist and civil society organisations against austerity was necessary to prevent the re-domestication of women in the context of a conservative and neoliberal gender regime.

Interactions between networks of actors are crucial to understanding how cycles of protest unfold, as material and symbolic exchanges occur between actors along the way. In fact, eventful protests can shape subsequent processes of interaction within feminist milieus. Staggborg and Lecomte (2009) have found that the 2000 World March of Women strengthened networks and coalitions, and enhanced the collective identity of and commitment to organisations, in this way contributing to mobilising and maintaining local movement communities. However, whether and how grievance construction affects coalition-building dynamics in feminist movements has been much less explored.

Grievances have been central to collective behaviour models, also known as strain and breakdown theories (Useem, 1998). These accounts stress disruptive strain caused by unmet needs, dashed expectations or relative deprivation, which alter the normal conditions of social order and boost collective action (Smelser, 1963; Gurr, 1970; Useem, 1998). After the 1970s, social movement literature substantially neglected the discussion on strain-engendering aspects, as they were supposed to have little explanatory power (Klandermans, 1997; Useem, 1998). Scholars assumed that grievances were a constant among the disadvantaged. Material and structural conditions – including social classes and worsening life circumstances – can, in fact,

be prerequisites for the generation of mobilising grievances (Portos, 2021). However, grievances are also the result of signifying work and have a subjective component, as they neither automatically arise from material conditions nor are naturally occurring sentiments (Klandermans, 1997). Crises shape citizens' perceptions about the country's performance and their financial self-sufficiency (Portos, 2021). Many groups may feel that they are not getting what they believe they are legitimately entitled to. This mismatch is likely to breed distress and feelings of perceived injustice, which are often accompanied by resentment and anger, and it lies at the core of relative deprivation theories (Gurr, 1970; Klandermans, 1997). Walsh (1981) found that the mass mobilisation of the communities close to nuclear sites ensued after an environmental disaster and the resulting evacuation, which worked as 'suddenly imposed grievances'. Similarly, Snow and his colleagues (1998) talk of 'quotidian disruption' to refer to the alteration of taken-for-granted routines and structures of everyday life, which may foster collective action. Whether in the form of illegitimate inequality, feelings of relative deprivation, injustice, moral indignation, suddenly imposed grievances or quotidian disruption, grievances are at the heart of every protest (Klandermans, 1997). Research on feminist movements has addressed the role of socio-economic grievances. Roth and Saunders (2020) argue that gender regimes that provide access to decision-making and social support shape individual experiences of grievances. Fisher and her co-authors (2017) have explored intersectionality as a mobilisation tool for different constituencies, noting how an intersectional coalition of issues (social class, racial identity, gender and sexuality) influenced participation in the Women's March in the US. In her examination of LGBTQ participation in the undocumented immigrant youth movement, Terriquez (2015) found that the recognition and activation of multiple marginalised identities catalysed intersectional mobilisation, meaning high levels of commitment among a marginalised subgroup within an already disadvantaged constituency.

The Great Recession represented a 'political watershed that has broken down and rearranged pre-existing alignments of partisan competition in a number of countries', including Spain and Italy (Roberts, 2017: 12). Society also pushed back against heightened exposure to market-based insecurities and inequalities. In Southern Europe, mobilisations were staged against the imposition of harsh austerity policies, labour market deregulation and the increasing privatisation and liberalisation of essential services (della Porta, 2015; Roberts, 2017). The development of rationales for action and engagement is necessary to recruit new members and keep motivating individuals who are already mobilised (Gamson, 1988). This article unravels the ways in which shared grievances were key to fostering coalitions both within the feminist movements and between feminist and anti-austerity actors, in turn, increasing the feminist movements' mobilisation capacity.

A methodological note

Our qualitative empirical data come from 22 semi-structured interviews with activists and key informants, which were conducted as part of a research project that studied how young people mobilise for justice in selected European polities.³ By recruiting using snowballing techniques, we were able to interview representatives of grass-roots organisations that are engaged in feminist struggles in Spain and Italy. We covered organisations based in Florence and Bologna, with the ages of the activists spanning

from 27 to 70 years old; in Madrid and Barcelona, we interviewed 12 activists who were aged 19 to 66 years old. By inquiring into the mobilising role of crisis-related grievances, these interviews allow us to discover each respondent's experience and interpretation of reality. We are also able to access a wider range of relevant actors than those reflected in the media, to scrutinise the meanings and semantic context of mobilisation, and to provide 'a longitudinal window on social movement activism' (Blee and Taylor, 2002: 92–5) – from the awakening of the feminist mobilisations in 2011 up to the major protest events of 2018. In the analytical part, the interviews are used to identify the processes linking grievances and coalition-building within the feminist movements, and between feminists and other anti-austerity actors. Excerpts from the interviews are used to support the main arguments.

Following a 'most similar' logic, we analyse the continuities and discontinuities in the collective actions of feminists. In Italy, mass feminist protests re-emerged in 2011 when a right-wing government was in office and promoted traditionalist visions of sexuality, gender roles and the family. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi embodied a subaltern conception of women as sexual objects, which was expressed in his sexist jokes about female politicians and inappropriate behaviour, such as relationships with minors and sexual favours, often in exchange for money, expensive presents and even political positions. In Spain, feminist activism intensified following the cycle of anti-austerity protests that unfolded after May 2011. Activists prioritised women's rights and aspirations that were put at risk by the 2011–18 conservative governments of the *Partido Popular* (PP) (People's Party), whose legislative proposals attempted to restrict access to abortion. Furthermore, the social-democratic PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) faced a crisis of values and popular support similar to that of the Italian Democratic Party (PD). In short, a number of similar developments unfolded in both our two cases: the Great Recession and austerity policies, which struck Spain and Italy heavily and were strongly contested by citizens; the electoral dealignment of social-democratic constituencies; and a conservative backlash that fuelled mass feminist mobilisations. However, while the formation of the leftist party Podemos in 2014 opened up new opportunities for feminist claims to be channelled into the public institutions in Spain, the Italian radical left instead remained weak and fragmented. Notwithstanding the presence of a rising leftist party (that became an ally of the feminist movement), that is a major difference between Italy and Spain, noteworthy continuities between this pairing justify the selection of these two cases for a qualitative inquiry into coalition-building processes in feminist movements in times of crisis.

While we rely on deep background information of the contexts being examined, the paired comparison we perform throughout is a distinct analytical strategy that uses the leverage afforded by the differences and similarities of comparable cases, thereby increasing the inferential power of the design over standard single-case studies (Tarrow, 2010). While previous scholars have taken for granted the presence of more than one movement partaking in the same campaign, they have rarely explored these cross-movement interactions from a comparative lens. By zooming in on the contemporary feminist movements in Spain and Italy, this work makes a move in this direction. Overall, we observe many common traits across the two national contexts, and construct a unique narrative based on discourses of austerity and grievances. This strategy allows us to add nuance, singling out the discontinuities between the two cases at stake.

The Italian and Spanish feminist struggles in context

Following a demonstration on 15 May 2011, thousands of people occupied Plaza Puerta del Sol in Madrid under the slogans ‘They [politicians] do not represent us!’ and ‘They call it democracy, but it isn’t’, within a scenario ridden with austerity (Portos, 2019a). Information quickly diffused through social media and digital tools, and the initial sit-in escalated into occupations that were replicated in over 130 cities across the country in the following weeks (Portos, 2019a; 2021).

When 15M abandoned the occupation of squares, it decentralised through neighbourhood assemblies and compartmentalised by focusing on specific issues, such as housing and the public health and education systems (Portos, 2019a). Feminists forged internal and autonomous spaces that promoted a feminist agenda within the 15M/*Indignados* struggles. They drafted a feminist manifesto, organised performances and undertook pedagogical actions to “normalise feminist claims and priorities in the collective imaginary” (Int.ES.F2; see also Galdón, 2018: 233; Portos, 2019b). Young women with neither previous records of activism nor a particular affiliation joined the *Comisión de Feminismos Sol* (Commission of Feminisms in Sol), where they met older activists who had promoted feminist insights and committees in a wide array of contexts in the past, for example, the transition to democracy, unions, left-wing parties and the alter-globalisation movement of the 2000s (Galdón, 2017).

In early 2012, the founding manifesto of the *Marea Violeta* (Violet Tide) won support from more than 400 organisations for mobilising against the ‘aggression towards progress made during the democracy for women’s rights’ (Caravantes González, 2012: 778). A number of collectives joined together to stop the regressive reform of the Abortion Law proposed by Minister of Justice Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón in 2012. More than 100 public health system-related organisations created the State Platform in Defence of the Sexual and Reproductive Rights *Decidir nos hace libres* (Deciding makes us free) to denounce the ‘cutbacks in the rights and liberties of women in the area of reproduction’ (Caravantes González, 2012: 778, quoted in resigned Portos, 2019b: 779). This was followed by the *Tren de la Libertad* (Liberty Train), a broad campaign for women’s sexual and reproductive rights (Int.ES.F4). Popular contestation was key to forcing Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to withdraw the reform; after this Ruiz-Gallardón resigned (Portos, 2019b).

Besides the conservative government’s regressive policies during 2011–18, a second issue marked the feminist agenda in Spain. During those years, a number of cases of femicide, violence and abuse against women garnered much media attention and left a deep imprint on Spanish society.⁴ In November 2015, the *Marcha Estatal Contra las Violencias Machistas*, also known as 7N, brought together more than 300 feminist organisations, and was supported by more than 200 institutions (such as parties and unions) and 135 municipalities. After the successful march (with at least 200,000 participants), a number of activists behind the 7N decided to keep working through the newly constituted *Plataforma Feminista Contra las Violencias Machistas* (Feminist Platform against Sexist Violence), whose narratives increasingly resonated in the public debate.

The mobilisation capacity of the feminist movement increased steadily in the following years, especially through the global Women’s Strike in 2017, which coincided with the traditional Women’s Day. Coordinated by the 8M Commission under the slogan, ‘If we stop, the world stops’, Spanish feminists responded to the call, with an impressive turnout on 8 March 2017 (Campillo, 2019). A year later, they

staged the largest event with ‘a general 24-hour strike [the only one in the world], partial walkouts by five million workers, and massive demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people’ (*El País*, quoted in [Portos, 2019b](#): 1463).

In the depths of the Great Recession, Italian feminist struggles returned to the forefront under the Berlusconi government in 2011. A judicial inquiry into the sexual misconduct of political elites triggered a wave of public indignation. Several well-known women (such as film directors, actresses, professors, politicians and unionists) called for action against ‘a model of relationship between women and men, displayed by one of the higher office-bearers in the State, which deeply affects the lifestyles and the national culture, legitimating behaviours that violate the dignity of women and institutions’ (quoted in [Chironi, 2019](#): 1472). The appeal marked the birth of the *Se Non Ora, Quando?* (SNOQ) (If Not Now, When?) campaign, which staged protest events throughout 2011. While SNOQ’s claims were rather vague and its fortunes were linked to those of its founders (Int.IT.F1; Int.IT.F6; Int.IT.F7), the connections built at this stage were key for organising future actions (Int.IT.F5; Int.IT.F6; Int.IT.F7).

After the fall of the Berlusconi cabinet and the formation of a ‘technical’ government led by the economist Mario Monti, feminist organisations stressed that Berlusconi and his acquaintances were not the only problem, as the issues of women’s bodies and their dignity remained open ([Cavallari and Robiony, 2017](#)). In 2012, grass-roots activists allied with trade unionists and members of radical left-wing parties to form the network *Donne nella Crisi* (Women in the Crisis). They focused on the effects of austerity policies, underlining how women ‘pay the higher price because they are doubly exploited both in the job market (lower wages, more job insecurity and precarity, fewer labour protections, and so on) and at the social level ([due to] the dismissal of the public systems of social protection)’ ([Pirotta, 2015](#)). In 2014, the network’s fundraising initiative helped finance self-managed social clinics in Greece,⁵ and distributed information about the retrenchment of the public health service in Italy (Int.IT.F5). In the same year, Italian activists organised the ‘I decide’ campaign in solidarity with Spanish women who were opposing the government’s proposal to restrict access to abortion. National coordination and a proper meta-organisation were lacking until NUDM emerged in 2016. After the brutal murder of a 22-year-old female student in Rome, a national assembly was called to oppose the dominant narrative, which described the crime as the outcome of the male partner’s excessive passion. Different organisations converged here: veteran feminists who had been politically socialised in the 1970s, collectives of recent formation, groups from squatted social centres, *centri antiviolenza* (anti-violence centres),⁶ LGBTQI activists and so on. NUDM became a central node that connected different generations and visions ([Chironi, 2019](#)), as well as feminist and LGBTQI movements, which often organised separately in Italy (Int.IT.F1; Int.IT.F2; Int.IT.F3; Int.IT.F4; Int.IT.F7).

NUDM first elaborated a feminist plan against male and gender-based violence, with concrete proposals for the workplace, language, education and health system ([NUDM, 2017](#)). Later, 250,000 people demonstrated in Rome on 25 November 2016 during the Global Day against Male Violence over Women; more than 1,000 women attended the closing assembly. Several initiatives were taken in the following two years, large assemblies and marches were organised for the Women’s Day and the Global Day of Action against Gender Violence, and the movement expanded at the local level through the permanent monthly assemblies that were held in major cities.

Grievances and coalition-building *within* the feminist networks

Construction of common grievances allowed the broadening of the cross-cutting social basis of the feminists and led to movement convergence through intra-movement coalitions by bridging not only different generations, but also intersectional sources of discrimination (for example, social class, ethnicity and disability). While the role of these dimensions emerged clearly from the interviews, they are both at the centre of contemporary analysis. The importance of connections and conflicts between feminist generations was underlined by Whittier (1995; 1997) and confirmed by recent research on the Italian and Spanish cases (Chironi, 2019; Portos, 2019b). Similarly, Ferree (2009) has emphasised that contemporary feminist alliances are linked to intersectional framing processes and choices.

Cross-generational coalitions

Since 2011 in both Spain and Italy, veteran and new feminist activists have forged arenas of encounter, fostering debate and synergies during the cycle of anti-austerity protests (Chironi, 2019; Portos, 2019b). In light of austerity and regressive policies, different generations became united given the urgent need to further consolidate women's rights.

First, the main achievement of the veteran activists, namely, abortion laws, was at risk. In Italy, fundamentalist Catholics and pro-life groups, as well as doctors who refused to perform abortions on the grounds of conscientious objection, increasingly challenged Law No 194/1978. In Spain, the aforementioned law reform advanced in 2012 by the conservative PP forced women to justify the termination of their pregnancy. In the eyes of an Italian veteran feminist, "Abortion and divorce can be included among the 20 laws approved in the 1970s for the actual implementation of the Constitution" (Int.IT.F7). A Spanish interviewee concluded, "Women's rights are international: the right to life, right to abortion, right to get a job with the same conditions [as men], to make care work compatible" (Int.ES.F5). With basic rights under attack, feminists focused on defending the right to abortion and expressed international solidarity with women in other countries whenever restriction to access was proposed, for example, in Poland (Int.ES.F1; Int.IT.F5).

Second, the '*consultori*' (public clinics for women), another outcome of the struggles of the 1970s, were being shut down due to cuts in welfare. Third, older interviewees noticed a strong social push towards conformity and traditional gender roles in the context of a male-dominated neoliberal democracy based on economic arrangements (see Ferree, 2021), which particularly affected younger women (Int.ES.F7; Int.ES.F11; Int.IT.F7). Fourth, advisory committees, where feminist activists would meet municipal and regional politicians, became less effective, and popular law initiatives for gender equality were systematically ignored (Int.ES.F5; Int.IT.F5; Int.IT.F6). Similarly, channels connecting social movements and public institutions also closed for the younger activists, who were attempting to introduce legal protections for LGTBQI and disabled groups (Int.IT.F9).

Against this backdrop, from 2011, veteran activists came to meet with younger women. They were mostly activists who had joined movement politics in the wake of the large movement cycles: the student movement of the 1990s, the alter-globalisation movement of the 2000s and the anti-austerity mobilisations of the 2010s. Middle-aged activists had a sense of a partial success: while they at least helped advance a

feminist agenda and a gender language in leftist environments, they still needed to expand their battle at the societal level. As one of them recalled:

‘At the beginning of my political engagement, the feminist struggle was always seen as something that was separate from the other leftist issues. Compared to those early years, there has been an important improvement, and we even managed to break traditional [male-neutral] grammar. However, frustration still exists when you realise that women’s culture is far from being assimilated and digested, even in social movements!’ (Int.IT.F6)

The need to redress cuts in public services and cope with welfare state retrenchment is widespread – even these days. Activists in their 20s and 30s are described as, “the hungriest; they feel a deep sense of dispossession” (Int.IT.F5). This is due to both material sources of deprivation linked to precarious jobs and the contraction of welfare, as well as stagnation in the field of civil rights (Int.ES.F8; Int.ES.F9; Int.IT.F5; Int.IT.F7; Int.IT.F8).

The presence of common grievances in a context of crisis facilitated the collective mobilisation of different cohorts, enabling them to overcome generational tensions around approaches to feminism. Many veteran activists expressed their concerns over a growing focus on the body and performance, as well as heteronormative oppressions (Int.ES.F5; Int.IT.F4). They understand subjectivities as distorting the ultimate feminist aspiration, which should seek to knock down patriarchy, considered as the source of systemic inequality and discrimination. In the words of a Spanish veteran activist:

I especially ask young people how is it compatible to be anti-capitalist and develop a Marxist analysis of the economic situation, and then sometimes defend terrible positions such as prostitution and surrogate motherhood.... It’s embracing the discourse of the most extreme neoliberalism. My point of criticism is that by embracing the queer agenda, they have left out the feminist agenda that contests systemic discrimination and inequalities, for the sake of privileging subjectivities and sexualities. (Int.ES.F5, quoted in [Portos, 2019b: 1453–4](#))

While disagreements remain today, especially on surrogate motherhood and sex work, a consensus was reached on the major and pressing issues. Indeed, topics such as the self-determination of women, freedom of choice, combating male violence and discrimination against homosexuals are accompanied by the quest for human, social and civil rights for a vast amount of eccentric and oppressed subjectivities (Int.ES.F2; Int.IT.F4). Crucially, for our argument, precarious conditions and the consequences of austerity policies (especially for young women) have reinforced solidarity bonds and facilitated cross-generational alliances among feminist milieus.

Intersectional coalitions: precarious youth, immigrants and disabled people

The vast majority of activists in contemporary feminist movements have embraced intersectional, transfeminist and queer theories, opening a lively internal discussion in Italy and Spain (Int.IT.F7). Intersectionality is a form of critical feminist thinking

that does not assign priority to sexism over other forms of discrimination and oppression. Rather, it analyses the intertwining of class, race, sexual orientation, age, disability and gender in contemporary society. Queer theories, popular among the youth (Int.ES.F1; Int.ES.F2; Int.IT.F9; Int.IT.F10), consist of “questioning the gender assigned and reflecting on the type of violence that gender in itself entails” (Int. IT.F4). Through the framing of binarism as a normative oppression, groups advocating the rights of intersex and transgender people have mushroomed (such as the Italian *Intersexioni*), as has their direct involvement in the feminist movement. These groups have become networks of traditional and intersectional feminists, lesbian activists, “trans and non-binary people who have experienced misalignment with the gender they were assigned at birth ... [and] people with different sexual orientations, such as homosexuals, bisexuals, pansexuals and asexuals” (Int.IT.F9).

In recent years, integration into the feminist milieus of not only LGBTQI activists, but also immigrants, precarious workers, students and disabled people, has been facilitated by two factors. First, unity of action between oppressed subjectivities is the core programme of intersectional feminism. Second, the austerity-ridden scenario as well as its resulting consequences – in terms of further discrimination against already marginalised minority groups and the formation of common grievances – were key to building synergies between different movement milieus and thus facilitating intersectional alliances. As one young Italian activist put it: “We [the movements] work for the union of all the oppressed against the oppressors. Women, homosexuals, transgender people, migrants, workers, the disabled – we’re all on the same side” (Int.IT.F2). In this sense, recent feminist movements have acted like the other ‘movements of the crisis’, promoting social, rather than organisational, inclusiveness. In Italy and Spain, they have established the ‘feminism for the 99%’ (Fraser et al, 2019), where self-organisation, grass-roots groups and individual participation take centre stage. Young workers, often militants in squats and social centres, and students from university collectives tend to support women’s struggles, and vice versa (Int. IT.F1; Int.IT.F2). In the Spanish case, the *Bloque Feminista Estudiantil* is a network of university assemblies born in the wake of the *Marcha Estatal Contra las Violencias Machistas* in November 2015.

Feminist activists have supported migrant protests and included migrant women in their groups and events. Many feminist activists have a migrant background themselves. Yet, as one Spanish activist notes:

‘The incorporation of migrants depends on the platform and organisation. In the 8M Commission, they are fully involved and get a lot of recognition.... Recently, we have spoken to CEAR [*Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado* (Spanish Commission for Refugees)] in order to see how we could develop some joint initiative on refugee women.... I think there is a need to build bridges with other movements.’ (Int.ES.F5)

When planning their actions, contemporary feminists take into consideration the “limits of fragile bodies” (Int.IT.F4), rejecting the stereotype of the radical militant who fights the police, and preferring instead a creative action repertoire that disabled people can also perform. As an Italian transfeminist queer activist summarises it: “We need to be involved in all social struggles ... [and] find large alliances between the

oppressed, including racialised and disabled bodies, to move towards an anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchy transformation” (Int.IT.F4).

Grievances and coalition-building *between* feminist and anti-austerity activists

Many feminist groups were actively engaged in the broader anti-austerity environment in 2011 and thereafter. The sense of belonging to the social majority that was suffering from the crisis and demands for better life conditions were, indeed, widespread. Inter-movement coalitions implied frequent conflicts, though these were often faced and solved in view of the common grievances and shared goals.

In Spain, collaboration between feminist groups and other anti-austerity elements had already begun in 2011, during the occupation of Plaza del Sol. Following a number of general assemblies, some activists agreed on the need to make the movement more transversal, forging a proper feminist space, namely, the *Comisión de Feminismos Sol*. As was the case for the feminist groups in the Italian social forums of the 2000s (Int.IT.F6), Spanish feminists soon realised that ‘Sol is not an island in the middle of nowhere’ (*Comisión de Feminismos Sol*, 2011: 5), as social movements are not immune to ‘machista’ visions and arrangements. Within the 15M occupations:

different committees had to deal with manifestations of structural violence in the form of a lack of [female] representation in committees and assemblies, patronising behaviour (when setting out their arguments) and sexist stereotyping (mainly having to do with women’s demands being considered not universal, or ‘personal caprices’ ...). Also, they suffered acts of violent sexism, and the undermining of women’s demands. (Gámez, 2015: 360)

As the scale of the protests shifted downwards from the national to the local level, feminists forged and engaged in spaces of exchange and debate, such as the *Marea Violeta*, as well as in different local assemblies, social centres and collectives. These ranged from the anti- eviction *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform for those Affected by Mortgages), to the *Marea Blanca* (White Tide) in defence of the public health sector, for example, *Mesa en Defensa de la Sanidad Pública de Madrid* (Committee for Public Health Services in Madrid). to the occupied sociocultural space ‘*La Eko*’ in Madrid and the community garden ‘*Ágora Juan Andrés*’ in Barcelona. These spaces were essential for fostering the exchanges necessary in order to build further feminist coalitions and campaigns.

In Italy, anti-austerity protests involved a vast constellation of actors, such as established and grass-roots trade unions, student organisations, local environmental committees, squats and social centres, housing action assemblies, and feminist and LGBTQI collectives. Although they never unified under a common *Indignados/ Occupy* identity (Zamponi, 2012), these groups joined forces for demonstrations or campaigns. Women contributed to the politicisation of the public debate around the crisis, highlighting the Italian conservative drift (in the case of SNOQ) and the dangers of retrenchment in public health services (in the case of *Donne nelle Crisi*) (Chironi, 2019). During 2011–14, the general mobilisation brought together feminist collectives of different political orientations, favouring a re-problematisation of feminist and gender issues within various political arenas, particularly social centres

and leftist circles, and the strengthening of ties with the LGBTQI movement (Chironi, 2019). These cross-fertilisations allowed the forging of coalitions that came under the spotlight when feminists reacted to mediatised femicides, creating the NUDM platform. Gender violence has been understood by NUDM activists not only as rooted in the patriarchal culture of European society, but also as fuelled by the increase in poverty and gender inequality (Chironi, 2020). According to an NUDM interviewee, growing impoverishment and social disintegration are major causes of male violence: “First, violence is directly proportional to economic problems. Second, violence not only entails physical aggression: cuts in welfare, services and funding devoted to supporting women all have a backlash on our lives” (Int.IT.F3).

In the absence of large social movement organisations, coalitions have formed, especially at the local level. For instance, in Florence, feminist organisations collaborate with environmentalist collectives (such as ‘Mondeggi as a Commons’ and the Fridays for Future assemblies), rank-and-file trade unionists working in the health system, the radical left party *Potere al Popolo*, the local political association *Firenze Città Aperta*, and the major social centres of the city (Centro Popolare Autogestito Firenze-Sud and Ex-Emerson). We can find similar patterns in other Italian cities.

Coalitions with anti-austerity protesters were based on the perception of increasing inequalities and discrimination, both in society and in the job market and workplaces (Int.IT.F1; Int.IT.F2; Int.IT.F5; Int.IT.F8). Worsening economic and working conditions fostered new forms of class solidarity, as reflected in the testimony of an NUDM activist: “We cannot defeat inequalities just because we are all together. If we have different incomes, we might be on opposite sides even though we are both women” (Int.IT.F3). Although (partially) satisfied by the approval of Law No. 76/2016 introducing same-sex civil unions in Italy, an LGBTQI activist strongly contested the post-crisis labour and social policies: “Do you want my judgement about all the other laws that were approved in the last years on pensions, labour and school? They all increased our problems” (Int.IT.F1).

In the final decades of the 20th century, major unions, such as Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO., Workers’ Commissions) and UGT Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT, General Union of Workers) in Spain and CGIL Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL, Italian General Confederation of Labour) in Italy, contributed to the channelling of feminist demands. However, since then, precarious workers have now become the bulk of feminist activism. Given the inability of major unions to secure and safeguard workers’ rights and welfare state provision in austerity-ridden contexts, mistrust increased and the sentiment of having been left behind became more widespread – even before 2011. An NUDM activist underlined that, these days:

‘None of us, in my generation and younger, have had a structured job. We don’t slander trade unions, but we don’t look for a strong relationship with them either. The participation of union members is accepted but we don’t want the movement to become their property and we have made this clear in a stark way.’ (Int.IT.F3)

Similarly, in Spain, a veteran activist pointed out:

‘As they [the younger activists] have precarious jobs, they have few expectations regarding the rights we got, such as pensions.... They don’t

want to have anything to do with institutions because they have failed them; institutions have left them behind. When it comes to the relationship with parties and institutions, in the autonomous social movements, we tend to be very protective.... For instance, in a feminist march, women are at the forefront, they lead it. Then, parties and unions are sent to the back of the procession.’ (Int.ES.F5)

Amid the increasing inability of representative institutions, political parties and mainstream trade unions to meet women’s demands, self-organisation and radical horizontality has favoured coalitions at the grass-roots level of individuals, groups and organisations engaged in anti-austerity struggles. Typical examples are rank-and-file trade unions and squat social centres (Int.IT.F1; Int.IT.F3; Int.IT.F5; Int.ES.F6). In Italy, social centres did not engage with the SNOQ demonstrations, considering them as the expression of a moderate and “institutionally oriented” feminism (Int. ITF1). Later, they became involved in the NUDM, which was perceived as “a radical movement born from below” (Int.IT.F1). In Spain, social centres are part of the feminist environment, constructing stable links with other organisations that have made (occasional) mass performances possible (for example, *Marea Violeta*, 7N, 8M). In the words of a feminist scholar:

‘We’re reaching now a time of convergence and collaboration [in the feminist movement] ... we share spaces and academia has opened up. For instance, at the Equality Unit [at her university], we have one person from 7N; we have congresses and workshops.... We invite people from [the social centre with a feminist assembly] *La Ingobernable*, 7N, etc.’ (Int.ES.F1)

Individual participation is also welcomed (Int.ES.F9; Int.ES.F11; Int.ES.F12; Int. IT.F1; Int.IT.F3). Major international events, such as the Women’s Strike, are also used to expand the coalition and increase participation, mostly rooted in anti-austerity environments. According to a Spanish activist:

‘In the autonomous social movements of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, militancy was articulated in the organisations (with a president, vice-president, etc).... In postmodernity, whether we like it or not, the younger movement is not articulated in organisations. I am part of the 8M platform. For each meeting, we have about 200 women attending to organise the march and the strike.’ (Int.ES.F5)

Conclusion

On 8 March 2018, more than 5 million Spanish women joined the strike on International Women’s Day. Hundreds of thousands flocked onto the streets in order to put an end to ‘machista’ violence, while demanding dignity and equality. Similarly, tens of thousands of Italian feminists marched during the international days to stop male violence against women in November 2016, 2017 and 2018. The ability to forge coalitions within the feminist milieus and across movements (especially with anti-austerity activists) emerged as crucial to understanding this huge mobilisation capacity in Italy and Spain. With both anti-austerity and feminist networks strengthening and

increasing their activities against a crisis-ridden scenario, common grievances (about precarity, austerity, material deprivation and so on) facilitated coalitions in both cases.

This article has advanced two main arguments. First, bridging socio-economic grievances and feminist demands is key for coalition formation and the mass endeavours to follow – and thus accounts for the current feminist mobilisation capacity. Second, coalitions unfold along several dimensions, both within feminist organisations and between the feminist movements and groups hit by other intersectional forms of discrimination, including those based on economic inequalities, ethnicity and disabilities. Against the precarity and austerity backdrop, the construction of common grievances fostered solidarity processes within different generations, which contributed to smoothing out traditional tensions and divisions among feminist groups. At the same time, shared grievances favoured synergies between feminists and actors involved in other sectors, including anti-austerity struggles, which eventually facilitated coalition-building processes from 2011 to today.

Going beyond the exploratory scope of this article, further research is needed to systematically unravel the (micro-level) mechanisms shaping the association between economic downturn and feminist mobilisation. Moreover, the comparison can be expanded to other similar cases that despite having been hit by the Great Recession and experiencing popular anti-austerity contestation, have not experienced mass feminist movements, such as Greece and Portugal. However, in line with Lombardo's (2017) findings on the Spanish case, our results suggest that times of neoliberal crisis may present opportunities not only to advance the feminist agenda, but also to foster alliances within the feminist milieus and between feminists and other relevant collective actors. These alliances may well extend beyond the period of greatest hardship. Intersectional politics as a strategy to foster mass mobilisation might work as long as it successfully bridges feminist claims and economic grievances (see Evans and Lépinard, 2020; Fisher et al, 2017). By following mass mobilisations against austerity in two similar South European cases, this article has attempted to show that coalition-building remains an open-ended and relational process, which unfolds along different dimensions.

Notes

- ¹ Both authors contributed equally to the article and are listed here alphabetically.
- ² The acronym LGBTQI stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersexual”.
- ³ The full list of interviewees is reported in the supplementary online appendix, available at: https://figshare.com/articles/journal_contribution/Appendix_Chironi_Portos_EJPG_pdf/14035823
- ⁴ The figures for femicides in the country are available at: <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/599214/numero-de-victimas-mortales-por-violencia-de-genero-espana/>
- ⁵ Greek anti-austerity activists created self-organised solidarity structures, including social clinics, after 2012 to provide food and basic services to the population in need.
- ⁶ Anti-violence centres are city structures that provide services for victims of violence.

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