

## **From consciousness raising to women's groups of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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### **Abstract**

Female sociality, which began in spaces and times far removed from domestic society, has been organizing itself in modern societies as the feminist movement, of whose history is evoked by the author, generating through the various historical stages new representations of women, that are able to contribute to the possibility of a new development in female identity.

**Key words:** women, female society, the feminist movement, group

Creating groups, in the most diverse situations and circumstances, has long been a way of forming relationships between the female gender. Long before the arrival of feminism, a form of socialisation existed in the home, through informal gatherings that allowed women a way to meet each other and build personal relationships, to share affection and develop friendships, and to which, as a result could also have social consequences. Sometimes they formed alliances between different families, consolidating networks of kinship, but could also circulate political ideas. During the Risorgimento, even subversive activities were born out of these informal groups. For example, affiliated to the Carbonaria (lit. charcoal burners, who were secret revolutionary societies) the Gardeners, who met in the gardens of their villas, officially to talk about trees and flower borders, were in fact in reality able to set up secret networks capable of transmitting encrypted messages to the patriots, therefore outwitting the Austrian police. But once the emergency was over the women substantially found themselves in their own private space.

If the group tends to be preferentially female, the ways instead of entering into relationships and building social ties invented by men are very different. Feminist scholars such as Lea Melandri identify in the team a mechanism that in part is still a foot in today's aggregations of power in our society. From the armies to the political parties to the Church, it's the team with its own rules and regulations, its hierarchies and its impenetrability that has long allowed the men to maintain the continuity of the institutions and their self-reproduction beyond any internal conflicts. As well as keeping the women as far away as possible.

If we take a jump forward in time, to the years of the youth protests against the authoritarian structures of society, we encounter something to which not everyone would have immediately realised the importance. For the first time women, and in particular girls, had said no. No to oppression of one gender over the other, no to sexism, which was particularly intolerable at a time when they were fighting to change the world. To find a more or less intact sexist attitude and behaviour in their peers, even in the midst of protests and riots, had produced a short circuit. Reconnecting to some pre-existent feminist experiences, a large number of girls

separated themselves almost in silence from the male component. In this way groups were born who practiced new and different ways of making politics involving personal identities, changing the habits and the relationship with others.

It's consciousness raising as one of the tools adopted by the "small group", the vital cell of what will soon become the movement. It is an original experience of women, initially experienced by female students at Berkeley, where being together was no longer limited to the private sphere, as had been the norm in informal groups in the past, but with the more ambitious goal of redesigning the position of women in the world being proposed. The big discovery was that of the "starting from yourself", bringing in the public domain one's own body, affections, sentiments and identity, in other words themselves and the gender to which they belonged. In the small Italian group, sexuality, relationships with the opposite sex, pregnancy, and contraception begin to be reviewed in a new light and consciousness. And this was an element of great strength, because it projected into the political arena the whole person and the request for an even symbolically different order from that characterised by the male, who instead separates public and private, individual and society. A phrase like "the personal is political", beyond the banality of the journalism, is one of the most interesting acquisitions of feminism. This was a new generation of women learning to think of themselves as a "new subject" and not as the person that others dictated they should be.

Other themes also emerged from the consciousness raising, such as the relationship with the mother, the rejection of the traditional family, the bringing to light of male violence. Around these and other crucial points were gradually formed different combinations. In Milan, for example, a lot of attention was given to Demau (Demystifying patriarchal authoritarianism) who were of the opinion that the oppression of women arose from internalized social norms, such as the "duty" to find a husband or the acceptance of a subordinate role in the family, which in those years was also laid down by many rules and regulations within the law.

Working on different analysis, the collective feminist Fight of Padua, who identified among the main causes of women's oppression unpaid domestic work, launched the slogan "wages to housewives." Criticized as economic, this point of view, however, did have the merit of analysing for the first time the free work of reproduction, on which the economist then demonstrated, rested the world economy.

Other groups, referring to Carla Lonzi, an 'important feminist theorist who has been rediscovered in recent years by the younger generation, and author of "Sputiamo su Hegel" (spit on Hegel), had worked on the controversial reinterpretation of male culture, philosophical, historical or literary, shedding light on the misogynist characteristics.

The turning point was the battle to introduce a law allowing the voluntary interruption of pregnancy. Even in the 70's, abortion was a punishable criminal offence and illegal abortions a social scourge. To this goal, which concerned the female body and the freedom of every woman to choose whether or not to be a mother, the Movement engaged in a direct fashion, overcoming their differences.

And, in addition to the large public demonstrations held by women, they invented new forms of protest, which in some ways derived from the work of small groups. Several confessions had emerged to having had an abortion, after a girl from Vicenza, Gigliola Pietrobon, had been put on trial, asserting to the court her right to terminate the pregnancy. There were trips to London and collective civil disobedience abortions DIY in the radical seats, with Emma Bonino and Adele Faccio both arrested. The rallies echoed the slogans unheard of until that moment, such as "the womb is mine, and I manage it." A shocking slogan for older men but also for many young people, signs that a new female identity was taking form.

In the 70s another important strand of the movement was created, that of mutual aid amongst women. I think it was the journalist and writer, Gabriella Fate, who in 1973 set up one of the first centres to help woman, where medical and psychological care was available and where several lawyers were ready to support women's rights. This was the beginning of the tradition of "women's lawyers", specializing in conflicts between the sexes, in divorce cases and discrimination in the workplace. In the '80s the first women's libraries were debuted, becoming also centres of discussion and study, beginning with the first Women's Bookstore in Milan, founded by Lia Cigarini.

But the 80's, marked by the withdrawal into the private sphere and the emergence of a consumer-based society, seemed to many to be the last years of feminism. The reality was different. It was unlikely that a movement so disruptive, so rich in thought, relationships and new practices could disappear as if nothing had happened. Rather, there had been a "backlash", as the American Susan Faludi reported in her famous book. One of the aspects, but not the only one, was the apparently successful attempt, to change the fierce women consumers, or even to convince them that it was better to be a career woman rather than a woman in revolt.

Disappeared from the streets and declared dead in newspapers, feminism (or something very similar to it) was working on the sidelines. It was the "popular feminism", which had continued to circulate in the various social bodies, in the work place but also in the world of politics, trade unions, school practices and digging deep into the awareness. Despite the apparent decline, the spirit of the Movement had gone through more than one generation. This is not to say that there had been a genuine transfer of inheritance, but an awareness has been spread of the specificity of being a woman, the bearer of a difference no longer suffered but on the contrary often claimed. They had also contributed books that in a language less theoretical but no less effective showed how the subordinate role of women is constructed from early childhood on models imposed by the school, advertising and from the television. I refer to that bible of previous generations "Dalle parte delle bambine" (On the side of the girls) by Elena Gianini Belotti, but the list is much longer.

In the new century, at least in our country, there are various changes in the ways women relate amongst themselves, and who by now, even if feminism is only in the

background, identify themselves as belonging to a genre no longer destined to be the minority. We return again to the subject of mutual aid required in life's more challenging moments, though this time in a more complex form. One of the most illuminating is that of IVF, a practice opposed by the Catholic Church and the subject of a restrictive and prejudicial law for women, the famous 40 law (march 2004). For quite some time groups of aspiring mothers had existed, exchanging tips, addresses and solidarity also through the internet, creating knowledgeable and highly valued websites so as not to find themselves alone in the difficult world of IVF. After the approval of Law 40 and after the failure of the referendum to try and make amendments to it, something had happened again. Faced with the paradox of a law that sought to make maternity harder for them in a country that had fought so hard against abortion, we realized that also this time, substantially, the freedom of the woman to make her own decisions about her own body was at stake again, the choice of whether to be a mother or not. Although divided into negative in the case of abortion and into positive in the case of artificial insemination, it was still the same old tune. Even though only a minority of women had taken up the battle, particularly at the time of the referendum, against the "technological manipulation of the female body", the request to amend the punishing provisions of Law 40 was prevalent, and has contributed to creating new groups, or to changing the character of those already in existence, adding a concrete solidarity to the struggle through the courts. Various would-be mothers have complained in the courts of their inability to get pregnant due to prohibitions of Law 40. Defended by jurists, in turn connected to each other, gradually dismantling the blows of judicial decisions, it has been termed the burqa law.

Another example of dramatic actuality concerns gender-based violence and femicide, terms brought into circulation in relatively recent times to indicate a much older phenomena, but which today reflect complex social situations, which are not always easy to read. As yet, there are still questions being asked as to whether it's due to the death throes of a crisis in masculine gender for the loss of power over the female, or for the effects of an increasingly violent and less united society. The women have been busy. Having set up refuges and homes for battered women, often to the indifference of the public authorities. The lawyers here have also consolidated their networks, while among the magistrate solidarity is growing. Perhaps the newest aspect is the diffusion of groups working their way through the social fabric, first of all in schools. Producing documentaries and collective analysis, trying in every way to shed light on submerged violence, both old and new, which try to threaten civil co-existence.

**Chiara Valentini** is a journalist and an essayist. She has been special correspondent for "Panorama" and "L'Espresso" with whom collaborates nowadays and on whose web-sites she holds the online program "Rosablog". Her books received several awarded re-prints, particularly "Berlinguer e l'età difficile" (Mondadori Ed., 1989). Actually, the fil rouge of her journalistic fatigue runs through her books on

women and women condition in the world, from “L’arma dello stupro”, an essay about ethnic rapes in Bosnia (La Luna Ed., 1993), to “Le donne fanno paura” (Il Saggiatore, Ed., 1997), The latter is considered one of the first books dealing with discriminations on women in Italy. She also wrote “La fecondazione proibita” (Feltrinelli Ed. 2004), that has become a reference for assisted conception debate. In the book “Donne del Risorgimento” (Il Mulino Ed., 2011), she wrote Sara Levi Nathan’s biography. In the month of March in 2012 “O i figli o il lavoro” has been published by Feltrinelli. It is a book on disguised war to maternity, which is the focus of several debates on the internet and on the newspapers.

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**Translated from Italian by Laura Rodriguez**