The case of women's active citizenship in Italy. A comparison with the Danish and Swedish case

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Abstract

This article explores how active citizenship fosters new forms of social and political awareness among those who engage in such practices. In the case of women, active citizenship not only promotes greater social engagement but also has the potential to influence local public policies. Italy, in fact, continues to have low levels of women's representation in the political sphere. At the same time, the country is characterized by a vibrant landscape of informal activism. Drawing on the empirical research I conducted for my PhD in the Umbria region on women's active citizenship within associations, I will present a case in which these associations intervene at the local level by supporting women, as well as organizing seminars, events, and courses aimed at engaging people and addressing feminist and transfeminist causes that are often marginalized. The Italian case will then be compared to the Danish and Swedish ones, where grassroots feminism was integrated with institutional efforts, resulting in what some scholars refer to as state feminism (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). In these countries, feminist causes have been successfully incorporated into political frameworks, advancing gender equality. However, some Nordic scholars have criticized modern state feminism, arguing that feminist causes risk being co-opted by the state (Stoltz, 2021). Finally, I will argue that in both Italian and Scandinavian democracies, the very concept of citizenship must be reconsidered. What is needed is a more pluralistic and inclusive vision of citizenship, one that ensures broader participation and representation.

Keywords: women's active citizenship, associationism, state feminism, unconventional participation.

Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the extent to which active citizenship reshapes women's civic participation, political engagement, and empowerment. Based on relevant literature and the empirical research I conducted with eight associations in the Umbria Region, I will illustrate how the case of women's active citizenship can raise a new level of social and political consciousness. The aim of my research, based on twenty-four interviews and three focus groups, was to examine aggregation and women's participation in Umbria from the perspective of the people who actively engage in associations promoting active citizenship. After defining the concept of active citizenship and providing an overview of women's associationism and agency in Italy, firstly I will present the findings of my research. In my work, women's active citizenship often aligns with feminist activism, making the work of these associations essential in highlighting critical issues. This is particularly vital in small towns and villages, where their efforts play a crucial role in supporting other women and influencing local policies.

Subsequently, I will undertake a comparative analysis of the Italian case with the Nordic cases of Denmark and Sweden[1]. These Nordic countries exemplify how the practices of feminist associationism have been integrated into institutional frameworks, resulting in what is referred to as state feminism (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). This phenomenon represents the convergence of grassroots feminism with institutionalized, top-down feminist approaches. In the final section of the paper, I will argue that citizenship itself must be redefined to fully incorporate women's and transfeminist causes, as the model of citizenship women strive to achieve remains rooted in a patriarchal paradigm.

As Birte Siim (2000) reminds us, in feminist theory, empowerment has both an individual and a collective dimension, and it is often linked to women's autonomy in determining their own lives as well as their ability to influence politics. In this sense, women's active citizenship begins with problematizing everyday life, which can then become political. In the case of women, associative practice has historically played the role of a catalyst of battles for emancipation. Even today, women's informal action is crucial for understanding discursive universes and practices that might otherwise remain excluded from the usual narratives, particularly in areas such as transfeminist causes, intersectionality and equality rights. Not to mention that women's associationism is fundamental for the persistence of services - such as anti-violence centers, for example - which are increasingly prerogative of associations.

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[1] The in-depth study of Denmark and Sweden was made possible by a three-month study period I spent in Denmark and the prolific exchange with scholars there.

The common characteristic of all active citizenship experiences consists in the desire to influence the public scene and to affect reality (Moro, 2005). Therefore, what are the motivations that drive people into civic and social activation? It can be argued that they are numerous and that are rooted in recent phenomena (Jansen et al., 2006). A turning point in the contemporary political and social landscape is the birth, and subsequent spread throughout Europe, of welfare systems, that set up practices and initiatives aimed at ensuring safety and improving the welfare of the population activated by the State (Bonardi, 2012). Health, education, and social security have become real social rights, and have become the prerogative of public responsibilities. This new guarantee of protection of fundamental rights by the State has also meant, in the event of a deficiency, the possibility for citizens to claim them.

But what do we mean by the term 'active citizenship'? Starting from the 1990s, active citizenship refers to all forms of organization of citizens, who to mobilize resources, protect rights, and defend common goods, intervene in public policies (Moro, 2005). According to Giovanni Moro, an important factor of the phenomenon concerns its voluntary and self-organized character: it is the citizen, in fact, who in his/her daily life decides to take the field to effectively become leader of their own social and political action. We are facing a multiform, dynamic, and plural phenomenon: neighborhood committees, self-help groups, social enterprises, voluntary organizations, listening centers and environmental groups are just some of the main forms that active citizenship can take.

The context in which citizenship has developed profoundly changed in recent years, with the transition to a new phase of self-transformation of modernity, which Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash, and Anthony Giddens (1994) have called reflective. According to these authors, we are entering a new phase of modernity, which they call reflexive modernity, in which individualization is one of the defining characteristics. The process of individualization also describes a situation in which the subject is increasingly free from community bonds, able to build his own biographical narratives, and to organize collective actions aimed at the common good by overturning his own condition (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2000; Rinaldi, 2014).

The process of individualization is also linked to the disappearance of ideologies that have been portraying recent years, as already theorized in the Sixties by Daniel Bell (2000). The vanishing of ideologies has created a sense of deep crisis in civic and political participation, generating even more vulnerability and, above all, a strong distrust in institutions and public engagement. This process has also been changing the very concept of citizenship. New and complex phenomena—such as globalization, challenges driven by progress, environmental, social, and economic sustainability, issues related to privacy protection, and the rise of new social movements—have led to the emergence of a new type of subject in public life and the paradigm of citizenship, no longer fitting within traditional frameworks of sociality and organized solidarity.

Gender equality, the minority's empowerment and the new needs arising from the LGBTQIAP+ community are also part of the new rights that many active citizenship organizations protect and support.

As a result, we are facing an epochal change in the field of governance and public policies because, in addition to being an important added value to democracy, this reality has contributed to making citizens more informed and aware of their civic condition.

The women associationism case

Has the organized action of women always been considered active citizenship? The history of women has taught us how the problematization of their social and political subjectivity has been fundamental to the affirmation of female identity and citizenship (Lister, 1997). Retracing the role of women back in the centuries, they have substantially moved from a philanthropic activity, linked in most cases to religious environments, to the attainment of their civil and political rights (Bianchieri, 2012). In the nineteenth century the most favorable conditions for women were developed, and women started to become aware of their condition of subordination and to organize themselves to claim their rights.

Associationism is one of the forms through which active citizenship can be declined. In fact, this category includes organizations or groups that dedicate their work to the promotion of activities, good practices, and the issues of their members or third parties. The strength of associationism lies above all in the sense of empowerment that gives participants, which, as the most enthusiastic say, can also improve the quality of democracy, as it induces citizens to become more interested in social and political issues (Putnam, 1993). As Christina Bergqvist (1999) stated, voluntary organizations have been functioning as communities and focusing on identity-building with the aim of moving closer to a political agenda. Specifically for women, voluntary organizations have been crucial, because since men were mobilized in political parties from the middle of XIX Century and were involved in trade union movements, women were allowed to express themselves especially in that specific area (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). These voluntary organizations represented in the past women's most important public and political arena.

Another interesting point of view comes from Frauke Rubart (2010), who stated an advanced theory as to why women prefer grassroot activity: women are attracted to informal, spontaneous, and non-hierarchical forms of communication and meaningfully strategies. Similarly, Helga Hernes and Kirsten Voje (1980) have explained why women are attracted to unconventional participation and activity. They claim that several structural barriers – as the gender-based division of labor,

the consequent difference between private and public sphere, and the partial exclusion from the vote – influenced the action of women, who have been looking for alternative political channels outside the institutionalized arenas.

In addition, associationism has historically been one of the forms through which women have had the opportunity to organize themselves to fight their battles. For the case of Italy, associationism has been typical of the whole political history of women in Italy since the nineteenth century (Taricone, 2004), since they were excluded from political law until 1945, they had as the only way of expression of their own thought the extra-governmental forms of political action.

The work of women's associations has been crucial not only for women to complete a path of emancipation, but also for the entire Italian society. As a result, despite much of this commitment has been lost over the years because of the non-institutionalization of certain women's associations and the lack of official places dedicated to the preservation of memory, women's associations have made a fundamental contribution to the definition of social and political models of a future common structure[2].

How must modern active citizenship deal with the associationism phenomenon? In the case of women according to Patricia Gouthro (2009), they take part in active citizenship not only for purposes purely related to gender and rights claims, but also to actively contribute to the society in which they live and to create real social change. In addition to arguing for their own space for political action, women have also become more interested in other social issues, such as the environment, urban security, the rights of immigrants and the most disadvantaged minorities.

Women as political subjects in the public scene build meeting spaces, strategical programs, self-managed consultancy, generating a change both in their daily lives or in the physical and territorial dimension of the city spaces. Donatella della Porta cites in her article (2019) an observation by Nancy Fraser that groups of individuals in a subordinate or marginal condition, such as women and ethnic minorities, model parallel discursive universes. In these spaces, counter-discourse arises with respect to the main common interests. These arenas are fundamental to understand and redefine the identity and needs of the part of the population that have been usually kept apart from political reflection.

An investigation on the Italian phenomenon

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[2] Fiorenza Taricone (2005) distinguishes different types of matrices of women's associations of the beginnings: from the emancipatory one, in which the presence of women is predominant, to that dedicated to assistance, education, and maternity.

Women's associationism in Italy deals with various aspects of public and private life, especially women's emancipation, women's rights for work and health, the fight against violence, and women's politics and policies. Analyzing all the women's associations that I have been looking for and searching online in every Region of Italy[3], we can primarily divide the content and aim of these associations into thirteen categories that I will summarize in: women's safeguard and protection; social progress; fight against violence; women's jobs; gender equality and agency; information and culture; political activism; maternity services; support and integration to immigrant women; support of queer, trans and LGBTQIAP+ rights; sex workers' safety; science and medicine.

This categories' classification is interconnected and variable because every association can occupy more than one area or two, but the crucial characteristic is that this division is made considering the inherent aim and purpose of the associations.

Briefly introducing the work of women's associations, in the Sixties and the Seventies in Italy the mobilization of feminist groups has borne some massive changes in politics (Balestracci, 2013) and law, precisely about abortion and divorce. In Italy divorce was introduced on 1 December 1970 with Law n.898[4]. In 1970, with the birth of the "Movimento di liberazione della donna" which was part of the Radical Party and was inspired by the feminist reflection of overseas liberation from sexuality, issues such as information on free and usable contraceptives and the legalization of abortion were raised on the public scene. However, the law for abortion was introduced only on 22 May 1978. It was in the Seventies that the associations became established as a vehicle of communion between women and a means of struggle to subvert the patriarchal social order[5]. After the conquest of abortion, the controversy did not stop, since the feminists claimed not only the right to decide on their own bodies, but also the autonomous sexual enjoyment (Wilhelm, 1987), a theme that would be central in the practice of the groups of those years.

Moreover, contrasting gender-based violence is one of the main goals that women and feminist associations promote and disseminate. Acting particularly on victim assistance and theorizing gender violence as a result of the patriarchal system, numerous anti-violence centers have appeared to serve the function of supporting and empowering victims of violence, often linked to nonprofit associations and organizations. To counter the phenomenon of gender-based violence, feminist practice has established a dense network of help consisting of anti-violence centers. Therefore, it can be noted how numerous are the associations who run antiviolence centers as

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[3] This research was possible consulting the association's list in the registers published online by every Region's website.

[4] See Quadri 1985, Lussana 2012.

[5] To name some of the groups that animated the debate in those years we find "UDI", "DEMAU," "Rivolta Femminile" and "Lotta Femminista".

well as shelters. D.i.Re (Donne in Rete contro la violenza, translated as "women online against violence")[6] is an Italian group - in action since 2008 - of 82 organizations all over the territory, which manage over 100 antiviolence centers and more than 50 shelter homes, receiving about 21,000 women every year.

In Italy, antiviolence centers and shelters are often handled by feminist organizations and volunteers. A total of 373 antiviolence centers and 431 shelters, to which 34.500 women have utilised at least once a year, and 23.089 of these have then begun a path of exit from violence[7]. The network D.I.Re[8] has proven the inestimable value of the data collected not only for the purposes of statistics, research and monitoring, but especially for knowing better the dynamics and the actions that the institutions must all put in place to prevent the phenomenon and act in the interests of women.

The example of networking practices and the action of antiviolence centers run by women's associations are just two of the possible cases that can prove the necessity of the work needed behind the institutions, or eventually together with the institutions. In the next paragraph, I will try to illustrate the problem of women's agency in Italy, and the need of an established and solid dialogue between active citizenship and politics.

Women's agency in Italy

How can we understand the active participation of women as a construction of their own identity? A stimulating point of view is proposed by Franca Bimbi and Maria Carmen Belloni (1997), who define the citizenship of women as born from the union between the planning of the city's government, a redefinition of services and work and the acceptance of new social claims. Therefore, can the case of Italian active citizenship interact with the Institutions? To answer this question, it is necessary to deeply understand the case of representation of women in Italian politics.

Italy is characterized by a low representation of women in decision-making areas in politics. This is a case that, eighty years after the acquisition of the right to vote for women, represents a defeat of democracy itself and its legitimacy. Under-representation of women is visible in institutional positions, from women in Parliament to women in regional and municipal councils.

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[6] Source: https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/.

[7] It is the photograph taken by Istat (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, translated National Institute for Stathistics) and Institute of research on population and social policies of the CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, translated "National Research's Council"), based on agreements with the Department of Equal Opportunities, to monitor over time the performance and services offered to victims, with the aim of improving territorial coverage and staff competence. Source: https://www.istat.it/it/files//2023/08/2023-03-08-statreportprotezione-Istat-Dpo.pdf.

[8] Source: https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/.

In order to provide a brief overview of the situation, Italy had its first female minister in 1976 (Tina Anselmi[9] in the Andreotti III government) and it was not until 1993, during the Amato I government, that the first attempts were made to increase the number of women in politics, especially as regards elective office, through the introduction of gender quotas reserved for them, and at the beginning only in local and national elections. In the Nineties of the last century a series of initiatives aimed at achieving equal opportunities were founded. First of all, the establishment of the National Committee for the implementation of the principles of equal treatment and equal opportunities for workers, founded in 1991, introduced a series of positive actions and instruments in the legal system to promote women's employment and achieve substantial equality of women and men in the workplace. In recent years, the issue of equal opportunities has become more central, and some changes are required: we have turned from a generic principle of good practice to a real and concrete norm present in the Italian legal system. Another step forward is represented by law n.56/2014, which deals with the provisions to be followed in metropolitan cities, provinces, and municipalities to adapt the respective order to the principles of subsidiarity, differentiation, and adequacy. In 2017 law n.3 – still effective – was formed to regulate the election of members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic. The new electoral law introduced rules for more equal gender representation in lists, including no more than 60% of foremen and candidates in single member of the same gender and gender alternation between candidates on electoral lists. This law has allowed politicians to pay more attention to gender representation, but data regarding stability in the political bodies has not yet met expectations. At the moment, quotas are applied at all levels: from municipal elections to European elections, in forms such as alternating preferences in lists and proportion between the sexes equal to at least 40:60 in lists and single-member constituencies.

According to a 2020 article by an Italian newspaper[10], women occupy only one third of national and less than one fifth of local political positions; a discouraging circumstance for two reasons: it shows how far away the desired numerical equality is and highlights a limit in the representation of interests and specific rights of the status of women.

Even though Giorgia Meloni is the first woman in Italy to become Prime Minister, the center-right has the lowest percentage of women in party leadership. In fact, in the national organization charts including the top leadership, as reported by Ansa[11], "Forza Italia" has 7 men and 3 women, "Lega" 25 men and only one woman, and "Fratelli d'Italia" 17 men and 5 women. If we consider the latest allocation of ministries, out of 24 ministers only 6 are women; while in the whole Parliament we find 129 women out of 400 deputies in "Camera dei Deputati", in

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[9] Tina Anselmi was Minister of labor and social security.
[10] Source: https://www.econopoly.ilsole24ore.com/2020/01/09/donne-politica-rilevanza/.
[11] Source: https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/magazine/numeri/2022/10/01/donne-e-politica-giorgia-meloni-non-basta_c0e8845e-1c3c-4729-a0f8-5a8d9ec1c8e0.html.

"Senato della Repubblica" 71 women out of 200 senators. According to the article of Openpolis[12], recent local elections have seen a growth in women elected as first female citizens of major Italian cities (from 7 to 9), but these numbers mean nothing if we consider all the provincial capitals. Women council members in the capital municipalities are 44,5%; female are vice majors 35,8% and majors 8,4%.

To make women's agency more effective it would be necessary to focus more on the barriers that discourage women from competing in elections and conducting a political campaign. What is most striking about this situation is that the rise of women's political empowerment in Italy is a climb in terms of difficulty, because it takes place without the spontaneity of a society open to substantial values of gender equality. Indeed, structural barriers such as the unequal distribution of domestic work and gender stereotypes are still strong deterrent factors for the opportunity and legitimacy of women's active participation in political life (Moller Okin 1999). In Italy, the gender quotas system has been quite effective in promoting greater women's participation in politics, but a further step in this direction would be the voluntary adoption of gender quotas for internal positions by political parties (Mansbridge 1999).

An interesting point of view comes from Rainbow Murray (2014), who notes that gender quotas have been introduced broadly as a resolution of unequal imbalances in representation. Murray underlines the emphasis within gender quotas that normally address women's underrepresentation, arguing that the general approach to this issue is problematic. Even though gender quotas raise serious questions about the quality of representation - above all given the problem of meritocracy – also male overrepresentation itself compromises the good and equal achievement of democracy. Nevertheless, debates on quotas are always concentrated on the women's issue. Even though decreasing the overrepresentation of men is a necessary consequence of improving women's presence, it is never presented as the primary aim with its own fundamental benefits. Therefore, Murray proposes to pay more attention to male dominant groups in order not to consider any more women as an underrepresented category, and therefore as outsiders. While women must prove constantly whether they deserve their presence in politics, men as a category are allowed their inclusion without any required proof of their competence. Murray proposes to reframe the gender quota system, shifting from implicit quotas for women to explicit quotas for men. This emphasis would cause a turn from women's underrepresentation to men's overrepresentation, considering how a huge group majority could cause damaging influence to the quality of representation in general. The solution that Murray proposes consists of a reconceptualization of quotas: instead of a quota for women, a quota for men would designate the maximum percentage of men who could be present in a legislature.

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[12] Source: https://www.openpolis.it/ancora-poche-le-donne-alla-guida-delle-principali-citta-italiane/.

The problem is that women and men have a different background in politics, such as distinct access to resources, as well as money, education, and available time. Fox and Lawless (2011) noted how women have always been socialized into a low level of political ambition, meanwhile men have been supported and encouraged.

The empirical research: eight women's associations in Umbria

The research focuses on providing an overview and a contemporary reading of women's active citizenship in Umbria. Through the comparison of the various associations chosen, the aim is to present an indicative picture of the Umbrian women's association landscape and to highlight, through the points of view of the members, the motivation that led them to become active. Importantly, the associations chosen had in common the composition of women[13] and have at heart, above all, the wellbeing and condition of women. The associations are: "Donne contro la guerra", Spoleto; "Donne la Rosa", Città della Pieve; "Forum Donne Amelia", Amelia; "Liberamente Donna", Perugia; "Non Una Di Meno", Gubbio; "Soggetto Donna", Castiglione del Lago; "Terni Donne", Terni; "UDI", Perugia.

In order to select the associations, I have first proceeded with a sampling of all the associations in the Umbrian territory, which was followed by a scan based on the actual activity both offline and online. The associations in question were chosen because, in addition to being present in the territory – with organization of events and courses, but also a share of information on their online pages –, in their statutes and biographies they share goals that have in common the affirmation of women and their empowerment. The sample of participants was chosen via e-mail or contact with the association's social media, which was followed by a selection phase of the association's components by asking them for at least three people who wanted to collaborate. Regarding the survey instruments, for each association I decided to conduct an interview with three qualified witnesses, obtaining twenty-four total interviews. In addition, I organized three focus groups, to focus on some aspects that came out of the interviews[14].

It can be said that, in terms of active citizenship, all the women's associations considered have carried out interventions in all three areas outlined in the theoretical section: empowerment, the care of the common good, and the protection of rights. These three dimensions are so intertwined that it is difficult to place the action of these associations in one precise sphere, not least because the feeling is that all the activities, courses, workshops and so on put into practice

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[13] The research was indeed open to other subjectivities except cisgender men, but the ones who participated all defined themselves as women.
[14] The interviews and focus groups were conducted from December 2021 to November 2023.

are nothing more than pieces of a larger picture. A fundamental point emerges from the overall analysis of all the interviews, namely, the idea that only through cohesion and share, effective results can be achieved. Women's action, then, is not only oriented towards altruism and the creation of relational goods, as Pierpaolo Donati (2011) would say, but also towards sisterhood. What emerges from the interviews is a willingness to stand together, both socially and politically, with the aim of configuring a collective dimension that seems opposed to what was enunciated in the first pages of this paper about the recent strong individualization. The women's battle is a struggle to be carried out together, some with their political instruments, some with their social actions: it is thanks to the union and fusion of these two dimensions that it is possible to conceive a strong sense of belonging that unites all these women.

In particular, the first focus group of the research is especially interesting for the aim of this article, since it was focused on the correlation between women's associationism and the Institutions. What has been said so far has already partly outlined a picture of the political dimension of active citizenship, which, in addition to often matching for the interviewees with the social dimension, has a specific meaning for women's action. It has been said that women's 'doing politics' does not always take place in the most traditional ways, such as by joining a party or going to vote but rather takes the form of a range of practices that escape the form of conventional political participation. In literature, there has been talk of a crisis of representative democracy, post-democracy, distrust of politics: all phenomena found in the social composition. In the case of women, is there a direct link between the growing distrust in Institutions and active citizenship? From what has been said, active citizenship manifests itself in the area of public policy; however, it is important to reiterate that civic activism is not meant to replace traditional political actors. Indeed, it is fair to wonder whether the actions of the associations might come from the distrust in politics: one can assume that where the Institutions fail to reach, the associations intervene.

A common opinion links the work of associations to the role of 'a thorn in the side'. Again, the work of the associations should not be a substitute for politics: indeed, active citizenship should remain well separated from the sphere of politics, because on the contrary there could be a risk of alteration and distortion. A reference is made to the fact that all struggles for rights arise from a need for a counter-narrative of the institutional voice, with a possibility of being accepted by policy and transformed into actual rights. As Lister points out (1997), it is about gaining more power, from a generative perspective capable of making women's demands effective through the action of associations.

In the case of Italy, some efforts are made by these women in feminist associations also in another direction: some of them have carried or are carrying out institutional activities within municipal councils. Between the interviewees, for example there are councilors or former

councilors who have remarked how much their dual presence within politics and in associations has a great value. This testifies a strong need to give voice to the needs and demands of women and LGBTQIAP+ people who, usually, do not find representation in the political sphere. Thus, we are facing a phenomenon where there is a 'pushing' on politics both from outside, through associations, and in some cases from within. As a matter of fact, it is important to underline that in some cases, the presence of these women in the Councils is vital, because according to the interviewees, the politics of the government is still not willing to really change the situation, as it prefers to maintain a convenient status quo. When it comes to gender-based violence, rather complex areas are touched upon. Since doing such necessary work – as supporting and advocating for victims of violence or sustaining actions of awareness about gender-based violence – without the sustenance of the Institutions is impossible, it is the associations that suffer from this situation.

One of the focus groups was centered on the analysis of the associations in relation to gender violence. In Italy there are numerous feminist and women's associations that run anti-violence centers. Typical of the feminist practice, both Italian and international, has been to show how violence – physical, psychological, economic – is endemic in society. Since the Seventies, many feminist groups have decided to take the path of helping women victims of violence by establishing centers, safe houses and shelters. One of the main problems these associations observe consists in the few funds they receive for contrasting gender-based violence. In both interviews and focus groups, it was remarked how much the associations with anti-violence centers depend on regional funds, which often follow a very slow process. Therefore, the interviewees would like to see a future in which the associations enjoy conspicuous financial independence. According to the interviewees, the problems with funding for the centers testify a situation in which the Institutions do not sufficiently recognize the fundamental and necessary role of the associations.

Moreover, another point of view emerges from this analysis: being part of an association that is committed to addressing women's issues adds an important dimension to active citizenship, as it immediately incorporates a focus on combating gender-based violence, patriarchy, and various levels of domination. In this sense, all the courses, initiatives, seminars, and events organized by these associations are directed to local women and LGBTQIAP+ identities, not simply to offer activities or services but to create spaces for meaningful exchange. These opportunities can be fundamental in awakening 'hidden' citizenship as well as fostering inner reflection.

In conclusion, the final focus group centered on evaluating the extent to which these associations are recognized and known within the local community. The interviewees recognize that they are sufficiently known in their social and political reality, but not enough. Contrasting gender-based violence is the common thread connecting most of the activities carried out by

these organizations and this point of view aligns with the opinions of the interviewees, who agree in acknowledging that in Italy the situation is critical and that only through education can there be hope for a brighter future.

Many associations focus their efforts on raising awareness among young people in schools, especially about gender-based violence, but this cannot be the only approach: there is a demanding need for greater political intervention. According to some interviewees, the problem also lies in the type of public actions implemented in schools, which are often deemed outdated and limiting. In fact, some interviewees acknowledge that feminism and equality are discussed more frequently amongst young people, but the problem lies in the fact that this is not reflected in reality. Thus, the youngest interviewees refer to the concept of a digital 'happy bubble'[15] in which young people live, experiencing a reality through social networks that is distorted compared to the real world and the political representation. According to the interviewees, this is a condition that characterizes the situation across Italy, not just Umbria.

The associations do not necessarily hope for greater political involvement or a closer relationship with institutions. As Silvia Cervia (2010) notes, women's actions serve as a counter-power, but in the case of the fight against gender-based violence, institutions cannot any longer delegate all the work on associations without the recognition that this kind of work brings to society.

The analysis shows how the associations in question are oriented towards doing politics in the sense of creating common good and relationships among women but also intervene in the public scene. But the question resurfaces: is it possible for these 'politics' of the associations to turn into something else, something more incisive? After all, the cases of Scandinavian countries have shown how citizenship can be rethought from an inclusive and feminist perspective, putting into practice multilevel participation. Scandinavian countries favor a woman-friendly welfare state approach, integrating feminist practices into their political agendas. The experiences of Scandinavian countries illustrate how citizenship can be reimagined in an inclusive and feminist framework, emphasizing multilevel participation. The idea of equality between men and women is central for Scandinavian social democracies, which have undergone a very specific process. Feminist organizations and social movements of the 1970s and 1980s were gradually absorbed into the political sphere, driving efforts for gender equality across all sectors. This process followed a dual approach, blending top-down integration (through institutions and political parties) with bottom-up activism (through civil society, social movements, and voluntary organizations), ultimately leading to what is known as state feminism.

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[15] The term "happy bubble" was mentioned by one of the interviewees, referring to the online activism sphere and social media accounts dedicated to advocating for intersectional transfeminism. According to her, the most cutting-edge topics widely discussed online are scarcely reflected in offline life and, specifically, in the political sphere.

A comparison with the Nordic countries. The Danish and Swedish state feminism case

As regards to the backgrounds and the different narration of equality, if we consider an overall spotlight of the situation in Europe, we can note several differences between the countries. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), on 13 June 2013 published the first report[16] on the gender equality index as a result of three years 'work. The data was updated in 2015, but in 2017 a third edition of the report was published[17], which offers comparative data between countries from 2005 to 2015. A recent update was published in 2023[18], and according to this latest data, Nordic countries scored some of the best records. For the first time, a synthetic but broad indicator of gender disparities has been developed in the European Union and the individual Member States. The index, which considers 6 different sectors (Work, Money, Knowledge, Time, Power, and Health), has a value between 1 and 100, where 1 indicates an absolute gender disparity and 100 marks the achievement of full equality of its kind. The European average score is 70 for the year 2023, and nine single countries overtake this mean: Belgium (76); Denmark (77,8), Ireland (73); Spain (76,4); France (75,7); Luxemburg (74,7); Netherlands (77,9); Finland (74,4); and Sweden (82,2). As it can be noted, Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark are the countries with the highest scores, as proof that Nordic countries 'do it better', but let's consider the two cases.

According to Hernes (1987), Sweden is the first country which considers itself feminist, and both in Denmark and Sweden, there is the case of what is called the Nordic state feminism. State feminism represents a situation of women-friendly welfare states in which feminism has been institutionalized, and where the Government guarantees equal rights and equal access to the decision-making tables, as well as a fair distribution of resources to women (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). Every political decision is made by evaluating the impact on the lives of women and men, because gender equality has become a core value of the Scandinavian countries during recent years. As well as this, these welfare policies can be noted in extensive parental leave (either for mothers or fathers), strong public care services for children and the elderly, and high political representation of women in public and political life. According to Christina Bergqvistvet (1999), the Nordic welfare state coincides with a social democratic regime, usually described by words such as open, equal and pragmatic. The ideal of equality was born from the action of strong social democratic parties, which played a cardinal role throughout the past century linked with feminist movements and characterized the development of the Nordic welfare state. This

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[16] Source: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2013.
[17] Source: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2017.
[18] Source: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023/EU.

phenomenon is deeply connected with the incorporation of the social movements and actions in the political sphere. For instance, the feminist organizations of the 1970s and 1980s argued for more gender equality in every area, and several policies were adopted to improve the position of women in the public sphere. What counts in these countries is the advantageous combination between feminism from above and feminism from below, that has taken different forms in Sweden – the most institutionalized – and Denmark – the most bottom-up oriented model – as Birte Siim and Borchorst (2008) noted.

To briefly illustrate the situation in the two Nordic countries, in Sweden the political party "Feminist Initiative" formed in 2005 from a pressure group with the same name, was the first party overtly feminist that won a mandate in the European Parliament. This party rapidly built strong support among young urban people and even had a representative in the European Parliament in 2014. The same year, Feminist Initiative received 3.1% of the vote in the Swedish general election and won seats in thirteen municipalities in the municipal elections. As Martinsson, Griffin, and Giritli Nygren (2016) noted, Sweden has a strong self-image of the most modern and gender equal country in the world. Thus, these scholars highlight how Sweden has the most institutionalized model of gender equality, because feminist causes have never gained the same ground in politics in the other Nordic countries as in Sweden. The Swedish gender equality model is characterized by a paradigm in which the high rate of female labor is seen as an important success for the whole nation, not only for women as an isolated group. The issue of gender equality was absorbed in the restructuring of the Swedish welfare state model during the 1990s according to de los Reyes (2016), and therefore, the feminist political mobilizations too have been assimilated into a self-evident national goal implemented by the government.

A crucial date for how the Swedish gender equality model was born was the Feminist Nordic Forum in 2014, which was dominated by a radical and modernist state feminism (Martinsson, 2016). On this date, the state gave a certain importance to the feminist cause, first of all to gender equality. However, gender equality policies and norms have been severely criticized by feminists for becoming neoliberal, racist and postcolonial since their nationalist iterations. Moreover, they are seen to be only oriented towards middle class women's needs, and with a focus just on heterosexual and cisgender people and couples.

In Denmark, the new women's movement (called Red Stocking Movement), started in 1970, has represented a protest either against patriarchal society, or against the old kind of feminism connected to the Danish Women's Society (existing since 1871), and has worked through political reform to better the woman's position in Danish society. Some of the activists in the new women's movement came from a more radical young organization in the Danish Women's Society, who became independent and started to organize more actions in particular towards free abortion. The ideology behind this new movement was based on a radical vision and

problematization of a society free from barriers and oppressions, in fact, the movement proclaimed itself as feminist and anti-capitalist. It was important to understand the oppression of women as an integral part of the exploitation of the capitalist society. As Drude Dahlerup (1986) noted, the famous feminist slogan 'the private is political', has reached in Denmark a certain significance: the problems previously considered private are now seen as public, therefore, discussed as social problems. The author noted that the new women's movement brought taboo problems to the public discourse: incest, battered wives, rape, women's neuroses, men's domination of sexuality, the unequal distribution of housework. These issues were discussed problematizing sex segregation in the labour market, or unequal pay for men and women. Dahlerup also noted how, as in other countries, the issue of equality between men and women reached the political agenda during the 1970s and 1980s in two ways. Talking about the political side, on one hand, starting from 1975 there was an equality consultant in each county, who worked to improve the women's position in the labour market and on the other hand, the associations and voluntary organization's actions were interconnected with democratic institutions.

As like Finland, Denmark is one of the few countries globally which has reached a very high representation of women in elected assemblies without using any type of quota system for elections. In Denmark, since the 2019 government, about 40% of the representatives in Parliament are women. After the parliamentary election in the fall of 2022, the share increased to 44 percent, a high record score. According to an illustrative title of an online article "Denmark has more women in parliament than ever before"[19]. Furthermore, in 2018 Sweden had one of the highest percentages of women in the National Parliament with 46,1 percent[20]. In the recent Parliamentary elections, the numbers have remained almost similar as in previous years.

Nevertheless, all that glitters is not gold since some Scandinavian scholars have been very critical about the Nordic phenomenon. As Pauline Stoltz (2021) noted, a great interest in postcolonial, indigenous, antiracist, and queer feminism is shown in the latest Nordic scholar's publications, but the change of directions compared to the 1970s and 1990s does not correspond to the situation in today's feminism in the Nordic countries. Globally, Nordic countries – as we just illustrated – are well known for their gender equality performances and policies, leading the way for the other countries. However, according to Pauline Stoltz (2021), while scholars are exploring the intersections between feminism, neoliberalism, and ethno-nationalism under an intersectional gaze, we are seeing, in these years, an ideological shift in public discourses that accentuate inequalities, to an opposition between productive citizens and those who rely on the burden of the State. State feminism and the Nordic exceptionalism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012)

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[19] Source: https://www.thelocal.dk/20221103/denmark-has-more-women-in-parliament-than-ever-before.
[20] Source: https://www.statista.com/topics/6092/women-in-politics-in-nordic-countries/.

must face now multiculturalism in relation with women's rights and social justice. Another key argument, according to Stoltz, is the co-optation implied in the relation between welfare state and social movements. She said: "'Co-optation' can capture the ambiguities that feminist scholars and activists can simultaneously express when considering persistent metaphors, concepts or discourses of 'woman/women-friendly' or 'gender-friendly' welfare states. These, which I refer to as metaphors, indicate a form of feminist success, since they imply that the collaboration between states and social movements has led to high levels of gender equality. However, the Nordic welfare states have simultaneously reinforced democratic deficits and serious exclusions by benefiting certain gendered groups, while leaving others disadvantaged." (Stoltz 2021, 24). What co-optation points out is the issue of the politics of inclusion and exclusion, and to some extent according to De Jong and Kimm, as "the appropriation, dilution and reinterpretation of feminist discourses, and practices by non-feminist actors for their purposes" (De Jong & Kimm, 2017, 185). It is therefore essential to incorporate activists' grassroots actions and active citizenship into public and institutional life to ensure a feminism that remains independent to co-optation. Stoltz, considering the point of view of Patricia Hill Collins, proposes to use the intersectionality gaze of social inequalities to analyze the co-opted context and the results of political thoughts and actions, understating how to better react and opening the possibility for new feminist scenarios.

As a result, is the Nordic state feministic institutionalized model better than the Italian one for the inclusion of women? Sainsbury (2001) considers Nordic countries as a favorable environment where women citizens are more likely to participate in politics, because of the history of strong intervention of women's organizations throughout the years, and the allocation of women's traditional tasks from the private to the public sphere. However, state feminism typical of Denmark and Sweden cannot be the one and only possible solution to the problem of gender equality. Consequently, scholars have argued that, regarding Sweden, the gender equality issue has become a sort of mythical success story and a national mantra, while the problem is still extremely challenging (Martinsson et al., 2016). Interestingly, the idea of Nygren, Fahlgren, and Johansson (2018) concerns how the concept of participation and responsibility have been co-opted by the state, as gender equality. The scholars emphasized how the gender equality issue has been absorbed in neoliberal discourses by the government, so that feminist theory and political practice has been mystified and obscured. As a consequence of the action of politics, there is no need any more for political mobilization and grassroot protest activity. Martinsson, in fact, draws attention to the community of activists, researchers and people taking part in everyday non-organized movements that are trying to challenge the problematic norms that the gender equality Nordic model has embraced.

Conclusions

Unlike the Swedish and Danish case, we have considered Italy as characterized by a less institutionalization of feminism, but with a strong and ongoing grassroot mobilization. I have observed that almost in every State Capital and in the main cities – also in several little towns - a women's association is present. As a result, women associationism has always characterized the Italian scenario, but without a fusion between feminism from below and the political sphere.

In recent years, the work of feminist associations in Italy continues and a considerable importance has to be noticed in the "Non Una Di Meno" phenomenon. "Ni Una Menos" is a feminist fourth wave grassroot movement born in Argentina in 2015. The movement commonly holds protests against femicides, gender roles, sexual harassment, the gender pay gap, sexual objectification, legality of abortion, sex workers' rights and trans people's rights. After spreading all over the south American countries, the movement gained a lot of publicity also in Italy, so that in a lot of cities and villages there is present a "Non Una Di Meno" delegation or little group[21].

If we assume that social participation for women lays the foundation of political participation, it is clear how the active citizenship phenomenon could reach a new level of consciousness and awareness for people who participate, and in addition intensify women's interest in citizenship and politics. After carrying out social activities, women can enter the public sphere for claiming a form of self-protection from a civil and political point of view[22]. What is remarkable is the political awareness that comes from social participation. Through the phenomenon that has been discussed so far, the citizen comes out of his dimension of private interests and meets the dimension where questions of general interest are reflected. Concerning the case of women, solidarity and sisterhood (understood as the need to create cohesion) are the key concepts of their social participation, as it can be seen also in a lot of association's statutes.

According to Pateman (1989), a great number of feminist writers have claimed that citizenship is a gendered concept that reflects the inequality of a patriarchal oppression of men above women within the society. The author underlines that citizenship in the past has been essentially built around the concept of what a man should be and how he must act in society (public sphere), while women have been relegated to the secondary private sphere, being excluded from full citizenship status. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that our current concept of citizenship is shaped by a Western perspective, one constructed around age, wealth, residence, and gender (Barthélémy, Sebillotte Cuchet 2016). Also Virginia Woolf (1963) in her well-known

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[21] One of the associations considered in this work is the group of "Non Una Di Meno" in a little town in Umbria, Gubbio.
[22] The idea that the relationship between associative participation and political participation is linked is not new. Already Almond and Verba in 1963 recognized that civic culture was, also, and perhaps above all, a participatory political culture.

essay on the connection between war, gender, and power, raises the issue of whether achieving equal citizenship for women by joining patriarchal institutions merely perpetuates the existing power dynamics. Woolf recognizes that, as women gain access to the institutions that have long excluded them, they must not mirror the behaviors of the 'educated men', as she refers to them, because "though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes" (Woolf, 1963, 18).

Even though women in today's democracies are now full citizens, the structure of citizenship that they have 'won' is still built in a patriarchal paradigm of power, in which their qualities and tasks are undervalued. Fascinatingly, the point of view of Carole Pateman distinguishes itself for what she calls the "Wollstonecraft dilemma": from at least the late 1700s, women have struggled to become citizens, facing the dilemma of, on one hand, demanding that the ideal of the patriarchal citizenship was extended to them; on the other hand, that women have also insisted on their peculiarities and specific capacities, so that the expression of citizenship should be different from that of men. Chantal Mouffe in 1993 responded to Pateman's dilemma sustaining her critique to the modern conception of patriarchal citizenship. However, she argued that what a democracy needs is a project of radical and pluralist model of citizenship, not sexually or gendered differentiated, but rather built on a system in which is present "a truly different conception of what it is to be a citizen and to act as a member of a democratic political community" (Mouffe 1993, 82).

Moreover, Breckenridge et al. (2002) challenge the conventional Western conception of cosmopolitanism by focusing on the individual, the subject, and the lived experiences of marginalized groups, introducing the concept of "cosmofeminism." Rather than positioning feminism as a critique of false universals through a voice of specificity, cosmofeminism advocates for a reorientation toward a situated universalism, emphasizing the importance of context and intersectionality in shaping global narratives. Breckenridge et al. acknowledge that U.S. mainstream feminism critiqued the notion of citizenship as being constructed around the interests of able-bodied, white, heterosexual cisgender men. Additionally, Asian American and African American feminisms have highlighted that mainstream feminism itself is inherently racialized. Therefore, the voices of situated knowledge expose the limitations of these false universalisms and reveal the complex and often exclusionary nature of citizenship. Consequently, it can be argued that reframing citizenship not only for women within a patriarchal society is crucial, but also for other marginalized groups, encouraging a more inclusive and unbiased understanding of citizenship. Women's and gender history has thus played a crucial role in revealing that social citizenship is a multifaceted concept, encompassing not only the acquisition of rights within society, but also the various forms of activism, campaigns, resistance, and practical actions that have emerged across different historical periods (Barthélémy and Sebillotte Cuchet 2016).

Richardson (2017), in her exploration of sexual citizenship as a framework for understanding the rights granted or denied to various social groups based on sexuality, introduces a crucial additional theme[23]. The author contends that the concept of citizenship has been historically conceived through a heterosexual lens, and as such, heterosexuality has led all the social and legislative norms of our western societies. To construct a more inclusive notion of citizenship, Richardson argues that we must acknowledge that legislative and policy reforms must be reexamined in response to social and legislative advances that promote LGBTQIAP+ equality. These reforms should consider, for instance, how social institutions such as marriage and family structures may need to be redefined considering the civil recognition of marginalized groups.

A factual politics (and a policy) for women and LGBTQIAP+ identities is somewhat absent in Italy and active citizenship is a kind of policy made by way of real request, as the results of my research testify. The 'politics' portrayed by the associations I examined represents a complex and multifaceted approach that transcends mere companionship and caregiving. These politics go beyond simple associationism, but they integrate feminist thought, transfeminism, and intersectionality into their foundational principles. These ideological frameworks are not just theoretical, they are translated into tangible actions through community-based practices such as meetings, events, and seminars. These moments, often held within smaller, localized communities, serve as spaces for reflection, learning, and mobilization. However, as some interviewees suggest, the potential for these 'politics' to evolve is significant: what begins in these intimate, grassroots settings could, over time, grow into something much broader and more transformative.

As the witnesses of the women interested in my research display, politics do not sufficiently notice the work of women and feminist associations, not taking into account the importance of this kind of grassroot action. The case of Danish and Swedish state feminism, beyond all the motivated critiques made by Nordic scholars, has shown that at least the government tries to comprehend the gender equality issues in public discourses and narratives, and that feminist organizations have been working together with policies to arrive at a better perspective. As a result, this situation has also proved that more women are willing to participate in political parties and additionally they find – theoretically – a gender friendly environment.

Could it be a starting point for Italy? Obviously, not necessarily are women's active citizenship associations or feminist organizations intended to work together with policies or get political recognition in a system that has not always taken them into account. When a government tends to openly ignore women or include them just for interest, collaboration and taking part in

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[23] Richardson cites different literatures to acknowledge talking about sexual citizenship, as lesbian and gay citizenship, bisexual citizenship, trans citizenship, intersex citizenship. In recent years the status of sexual citizenship has included also issues on disability, sex workers rights and lesbian motherhood.

political processes can be a denaturalization (Martinsson, 2016). However, many associations, women's groups, feminists, as well as scholars, have argued that traditional political concepts may have to be radically reformulated or even substituted if women are to be included on an equal basis, and they have produced an incredible body of thought that tries to do this. A gender pluralist approach recognizes that other factors, such as ethnicity, class, sexuality and disability, are also significant for defining individual identity and citizenship status. Pateman (1989) stated that for feminists, democracy has never existed, because in every so-called democracy women have never been acknowledged as equal citizens as men. I would like to mention Anne Phillips (1998), since she quoted that representative representation can only be reached when all citizens are fully equal. Beyond the play on words, by extension, democracy can really only work when every individual feels embodied. Thus, a new idea of agency that also comprehends more the needs raised in active citizenship is needed in Italy, but also in Nordic countries.

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