HUNGER AS PROTEST. THE "FASTING WOMEN" OF PALERMO

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Titolo: Fame come protesta. Le "Donne del digiuno" a Palermo.

Abstract

This article examines the unique role of women in the Italian anti-mafia movement, highlighting their emphasis on collective action and cooperation over individual recognition. Women's involvement challenges stereotypical roles and extends the movement's reach beyond personal experiences of victimization to include broader civic responsibilities. The study calls for a deeper recognition of women's contributions, situating their activism within broader feminist movements for justice, equality and democratic reform.

Keywords: mafia; woman; anti-mafia movement; social movements; feminist movements.

L'articolo prende in esame il ruolo unico delle donne nel movimento antimafia in Italia, focalizzandosi sull'esperienza delle "Donne del digiuno". Attraverso pratiche creative e simboliche, le donne rivendicano uno spazio politico e fisico, sfidano i ruoli stereotipati ed estendono la portata del movimento oltre le esperienze personali di vittimizzazione. Lo studio riflette sulla necessità di un più esteso riconoscimento del contributo delle donne contro le mafie, collocandone l'azione all'interno di movimenti femministi per la giustizia, l'uguaglianza e la democrazia.

Parole chiave: mafia; donne; movimento antimafia; movimenti sociali; movimenti femministi.

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1. The anti-mafia movement in the framework of social movements

Mafia organizations have been continuously present in Italy since the Unification. If in the early stages of history, they were characteristic only of certain regions, today they are present almost everywhere, with different characteristics and strengths, with branches in all continents. Alongside the proliferation of mafia organizations, segments of the citizenry immediately began to protest and mobilize against criminal oppression, starting with peasant struggles. While the literature on the mafias is robust and well-established, focusing on the mechanisms, dynamics, and actors involved, the literature on protests in which citizens mobilize against this phenomenon has long remained marginal in the field of social and political studies. With the exception of the work of a few researchers[1], there is a notable lack of in-depth studies in the literature that examine the "bottom-up" role in the fight against the mafia. Even rarer are analyses that focus on women within this space of political participation[2].

International and national studies on social movements have largely overlooked the anti-mafia movement, and the reasons for this exclusion may lie in the difficulty of temporally and spatially identifying the qualifying elements that define a movement as such. In fact, the concept of social movement has been subject to numerous revisions and reinterpretations within the social sciences over the past sixty years and has undergone profound critical rethinking. For a long time, the scientific literature placed the study of these phenomena on the margins of political science and sociology[3]. Today, the field of research is vast, widely recognized, and continuously evolving. Despite being a consolidated area of study, the very nature of the phenomenon prevents arriving at a single, definitive definition: some recurring

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1 Cfr. Umberto Santino, *Storia del movimento antimafia. Dalla lotta di classe all'impegno civile*, Editori Riuniti University Press, Roma, 2009. Cfr. Nando dalla Chiesa, *Storie di boss, ministri, tribunali, giornali, intellettuali, cittadini*, Einaudi, Torino, 1990; *Manifesto dell'Antimafia*, Einaudi, Torino 2014; *La scelta Libera. Giovani nel movimento antimafia*, Edizioni Gruppo Abele, Torino, 2014.

2 Cfr. Anna Puglisi, *Sole contro la mafia*, La Luna, Palermo, 1990; *Storie di donne. Antonietta Renda, Giovanna Terranova, Camilla Giaccone raccontano la loro vita*, Di Girolamo, Trapani, 2007; *Donne, mafia e antimafia*, Di Girolamo, Trapani 2012. Cfr. Antonia Cascio, Anna Puglisi (a cura di), *Con e contro. Il ruolo delle donne nella organizzazione mafiosa e nella lotta contro la mafia*, CSD, Palermo, 1986. Cfr. Luciano Mirone, *La città della luna. Otto donne sindaco in Sicilia*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 1998. Cfr. Ludovica Ioppolo, Martina Panzarasa, *Al nostro posto. Donne che resistono alle mafie*, Transeuropa, Massa, 2013. Cfr. Alessandra Dino, *Antimafia e movimenti delle donne. Protagoniste, culture e linguaggi*, in "Rivista di Studi e Ricerche sulla Criminalità Organizzata", vol. II, n. 3, 2016, pp. 3-23.

3 Cfr. Donatella Della Porta, Mario Diani, *Social Movements - An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2020. Cfr. Alberto Melucci, *Sistema politico, partiti e movimenti sociali*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1989. Cfr. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge NY, 1994, 2011. Cfr. Charles Tilly, Ernesto Castaneda, Lesley J. Wood, *Social Movements, 1768-2018*, Routledge, New York, 2020.

characteristics are considered fundamental and serve as a starting point for different schools of thought and methodological approaches. Here, we will adopt the most recent definition which describes a social movement as "a distinct social process, characterized by the fact that the actors engaged in collective action: i) have conflictual orientations towards clearly identified opponents; ii) are linked by dense, informal networks connecting them; iii) share a distinct collective identity"[4]. According to this definition, a social movement is a process in which actors engage in conflict (or defense) against identified opponents to promote (or resist) social change, creating dense and informal networks that share a distinct collective identity. Conflict mobilizations are activated through different forms of protest, according to the repertoire chosen by the actors[5].

Within this framework, and with the necessary flexibility regarding historical periods that may not fully correspond to the definition, the anti-mafia movement can be considered as been marked by six phases[6] that have characterized its evolution and current weight. The first phase began in 1861, against the arbitrary violence triggered by the unification process; later, at the end of the century, the first mass movement was the "*fasci siciliani*," which challenged land monopoly and unjust working conditions; the third phase followed World War II, with unionists as protagonists, fighting for a fairer distribution of land; in the 1960s, a generation of politicians (especially from the Communist Party) and intellectuals fought for the recognition of the mafia itself, whose existence had until then been denied in public debate and court proceedings; the fifth phase began in the 1980s, after several assassinations of institutional figures, opening a new period of more widespread participation that involved other regions of Italy; the last phase, which began after the 1992 massacres, was rooted in the previous period, distancing itself from earlier distinguishing elements such as "class struggle" or "family ties" with the victims of mafia violence.

It is in this most recent phase, which is still unfolding today, that the protest of the "Fasting Women" takes place. They have activated a mobilization[7] that fits into the framework of the

[4] Cfr. Donatella Della Porta, Mario Diani, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
[5] Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions 1492–1992*, Blackwell, Oxford/Cambridge MA, 1993.
[6] According to Nando Dalla Chiesa, *The Antimafia Movement in Italy, History and Identity: a Focus on the Gender Dimension*, in "Rivista di Studi e Ricerche sulla Criminalità Organizzata", vol. VI, n. 4, pp. 6-40, 2020.
[7] According to William Gamson (*The Strategy of Protest*, Dorsey Press, Homewood, Ill., 1975) a mobilization refers to "the process that increases the likelihood of collective action" (p. 15) and is thus a form of collective action that either integrates into an existing movement or potentially generates a new one.

anti-mafia movement. This actor adopts specific forms, modes, and alliances that make it analytically relevant within the broader context of the movement's development.

In order to better understand its contours, the following sections first examine the role of women within the anti-mafia movement; then analyze the mobilization, highlighting its peculiarities and critical points; and finally draw some lines for the future development of studies on women's movements against the mafia, situating them within the broader context of women's movements in defense of democracy.

The paper[8] is based on i) literature on social movements; ii) four in-depth interviews with key members of the promoting committee; iii) three interviews with privileged witnesses; iv) study of grey literature; v) press reviews.

2. Women in the anti-mafia movement, women's anti-mafia movements: identifying the turning point

The history of grassroots anti-mafia activism is as long as the mafias themselves. Indeed, the peasant struggles that characterized the second half of the 19th century demonstrate that there has always been a civic consciousness in southern Italy that led people to oppose the unjust working conditions imposed by the earliest criminal organizations.

From the outset, women have played an active role in the fight against the mafia. For many decades, rather than forming associations specifically against the mafia, female involvement—which was either more or less significant, depending on the specific case—could be observed within male-dominated groups.

The involvement of women is already evident in agrarian movements. They participated in protest actions alongside men, demanding more dignified working conditions, including land occupations. However, looking at how this has evolved over the decades, it is clear that women's participation has always been marked by a distinctive and original pattern of protest actions[9].

[8] This article is a product of PRIN PNRR 2022 - P2022YRFWS: Sommossa – SOcial media and civic Mobilization as MOnitoring toolS in the SociAl construction of corruption

[9] Chiara Zamboni, *Il simbolico e la via del movimento delle donne*, in "Materiali di estetica", v. 8, n. 2, 2021, pp. 279-299.

In reflecting on the role of women in the anti-mafia movement, it is essential to pay special attention to the symbolic realm. Indeed, when the mafias are viewed as systems of power based on relationships of force, violence, and submission, the definition of gender roles and representations assumes a specific character, where the symbolic dimension is central[10].

The binary perspective assumes that gender distinctions are biologically determined. From a cultural perspective, this logic is deconstructed in a narrative process[11] in which women become agents of emancipation and political action. It is through this process that the fight against the mafias takes on a "feminine" force[12], which opposes the masculine violence of the mafias (even when perpetrated by women)[13] and challenges male protagonism within the anti-mafia sphere.

The female culture is expressed in its capacity to break mental patterns and orders, first and foremost by rejecting the culture of violence that is central to the mafia. The woman, as a symbol of birth and nourishment, stands as a bulwark against the perpetuated violence that produces oppression, submission, and death.

Literature has emphasized how anti-mafia activism often stems from personal experiences[14], and the narrative of women's presence within the anti-mafia movement intertwines with their individual biographies[15]. This perspective has led to a preference for personal aspects over politically significant ones, resulting in narratives where family and everyday life assume greater importance, relegating other aspects related to the political and social spheres.

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[10] Renate Siebert, *La mafia, la morte e il ricordo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 1995; *Le donne, la mafia*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1994; *Mafia e quotidianità*, il Saggiatore, Milano, 1997. Pierre Bourdieu, *Il dominio maschile*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1998. Teresa Principato, Alessandra Dino, *Mafia Donna. Le vestali del sacro e dell'onore*, Flaccovio, Palermo 1997. Gabriella Gribaudi, Marcella Marmo (a cura di), *Donne di mafia*, in "Meridiana", n. 67, 2010. Alessandra Dino, *Donne e politica, tra esclusione, rivendicazione di diritti e bisogno di riconoscimento*, in *I Diritti Umani, oggi*, Elisabetta Di Giovanni (a cura di), Aisthesis, Milano, 2005, pp. 157-181, Sabrina Garofalo, *Donne, violenza e 'ndrangheta. Metodi, storie e politiche*, Novalogos, Aprilia, 2023.

[11] Judith Butler, *Questione di genere. Il femminismo e la sovversione dell'identità*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2013.

[12] Maria Stefanelli, *Loro mi cercano ancora*, Mondadori, 2014, Sabrina Garofalo, Ludovica Ioppolo, *Onore e dignitudine. Storie di donne e uomini in terra di 'ndrangheta*, edizioni Falco, 2015, Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, *Dalla violenza all'impegno. Storie al femminile per costruire il cambiamento*, 2018.

[13] Ombretta Ingrascì, *Gender and Organized Crime in Italy. Women's agency in Italian Mafias*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2021; *Donne d'onore, storie di mafia al femminile*, Mondadori, Milano, 2007.

[14] Paolo Jedlowski, *Memoria, esperienza e modernità. Memorie e società nel XX secolo*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1989.

[15] For instance, relatives of mafia victims fighting for justice for their murdered loved ones. The first example cited is Giovanna Cirillo, the wife of Stanislao Rampolla, a public security official who committed suicide due to mafia pressures. Also significant is the figure of Francesca Serio, mother of the labor unionist Salvatore Carnevale. For a more comprehensive examination, see cited works of A. Dino and A. Puglisi. On biographies of relatives of mafia, Nando dalla Chiesa, *Le ribelli. Storie di donne che hanno sfidato la mafia per amore*, Melampo, Milano, 2006; second edition Solferino, Milano, 2024.

However, the involvement of women in the anti-mafia movement has changed since the 1980s. During the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, some women assumed a renewed role in movements against organized crime and became iconic figures[16].

In the 1980s, Cosa Nostra initiated a new phase of violence that differed from previous patterns. The number of high-profile murders and victims from state institutions increased, prompting greater involvement from civil society. Up until then, the prevailing attitude was "they kill each other", and thus many citizens were less motivated to protest, with fear or disinterest in mafia power prevailing. But by the late 1970s, however, certain murders prompted a greater awareness of the "scope" of mafia violence, leading to a stronger desire for activism.

The assassinations of prominent public figures, including judges Cesare Terranova (1979) and Gaetano Costa (1980), police officer Lenin Mancuso (1979), regional president Piersanti Mattarella (1980), communist leader Pio La Torre (1982), and Palermo prefect Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa (1982), prompted a cross-class reaction that extended beyond Palermo.

The 1980s saw a surge in civil society activity and the emergence of a mass anti-mafia movement across the country. This movement also intersected with the pacifist movement, particularly in its opposition to the installation of Cruise missiles in Italy[17]. Later, in the 1990s, the anti-mafia movement found common ground with anti-corruption mobilization initiatives, particularly in response to the "attacks on the judiciary" that began in 1992[18].

In this evolving context, a gender-specific initiative was launched. Women were no longer simply involved in male-dominated groups but began establishing their own organizations.

The first documented instance of the formation of a female anti-mafia movement date back to the 1980s, specifically 1984, when the *Associazione donne contro la mafia* (Association of women against the mafia) was established by Rita Bartoli Costa, Giovanna Terranova, and Caterina Mancuso, wives of prominent figures within the institutional landscape. These women defied the wall of silence and took a stand against criminal violence. It is noteworthy that this was not only the first women's association but also the first one to openly include

[16] The story of Franca Viola led to the repeal of the "reparative marriage" law; another example is Vera Pegna, who revitalized the Communist Party in Caccamo by opposing the control of the local boss.
[17] Cfr. the Comiso protests, in which Pio La Torre was a leader.
[18] Francesca Rispoli, *In piazza contro la corruzione. Le mobilitazioni in Italia nel periodo 1984-2022*, Meltemi, Milano, 2023.

the words "against the mafia" in its name. Before then, many movements, committees, and coordination groups had emerged, some more formal than others, but no association had explicitly identified their adversary.

The formalization of the association was preceded by the creation of the *Comitato donne contro la mafia* (Committee of women against the mafia), which had already been active since 1982, with the objective of involving other women in Calabria and Campania. In their documents, they stated:

> "We finally appeal to all Calabrian and Sicilian women, to farmworkers, intellectuals, housewives, unemployed girls, and all working women, to unite, striving to overcome understandable forms of fear and shyness, and to go forward with their strength, with their ideas, with their struggle for the ideal and concrete contents of renewal against mafia terrorism, alongside all the forces already in the field, so that the values of democracy, participation, and progress may prevail over the logic of violence, terror, parasitism, brutal self-interest, and reaction, which are the enemies of all individual and collective freedoms"[19].

From these words, it is clear that the women of the Committee, and later the Association, focused on the need to free themselves from mafia oppression through participation, taking a stand first and foremost as women, regardless of their social status. This was a fundamental paradigm shift. Previously, women's participation in anti-mafia demonstrations had often been interpreted as linked to personal biographies, mainly related to mourning: "During the demonstrations, people would ask me 'Whom did you lose?' with my husband touching wood, as he was there with me" (int. 3).

The transition from coordination to association represents a formalization that marks a significant leap forward for the group, both in terms of the recognition of women's political roles and for the anti-mafia movement as a whole. A notable instance of women's presence in the anti-mafia movement, within this formalized structure, occurred during the Maxi Trial (Maxiprocesso), when the Association actively encouraged the relatives of innocent mafia victims, including those who were not "servants of the State", to enter a civil suit for damages.

[19] Cfr. Umberto Santino, Anna Puglisi, Sylwia Proniewicz, *La memoria e il progetto. Dal Centro Impastato al No Mafia Memorial,* Di Girolamo Editore, Trapani, 2020, p. 154.

The presence of the Association became a defining feature of the Maxi Trial, bringing women into the public spotlight for the first time, as they engaged in a direct challenge to the mafia bosses and the power structure that was "caged" in the courtroom. The imprisoned mafia bosses reacted with a series of provocations against the institutions and witnesses of the trial, seeking to demonstrate that, despite their restricted conditions, they still had the capacity to act violently, both symbolically and derisively [20].

Following the Maxi Trial, a new era unfolded both nationally and internationally. This was a period of profound rethinking of the relationship between the state, politics, and the economy, partly due to the rising public debt, which led to a long phase of privatizations and liberalizations. The fall of the Berlin Wall was imminent, and, in this context, movements began to play a key role in the redefinition of collective identities, with notions of citizenship and related rights becoming central[21].

The 1990s context witnessed the overcoming of "class" divisions within the movements and marked the beginning of a new period of political participation. This period was characterized not by antagonism between different sectors of society but by a focus on the issue of rights. This change in the social and political landscape was further accelerated by the massacres in Capaci[22] and Via D'Amelio[23], which acted as detonators for a collective burst of energy within the anti-mafia movement.

It is during this period that the transformation that had begun in the 1980s fully unfolded. The anti-mafia movement no longer set itself material goals (such as the collectivization of land or the recognition of "mafia" as a legal definition in the Penal Code) but rather pursued value-based goals, such as the enforceability of the rights enshrined in the Italian Constitution.

[20] For example, Turi Ercolano, a defendant who sewed up his mouth during depositions as a form of protest.
[21] Mario Diani, *La società italiana/Protesta senza movimenti?,* in "Quaderni di Sociologia", v. 21, 1999, pp. 3-13.
[22] At the Capaci/Isola delle Femmine highway junction, on May 23, 1992, over a kilometer of highway was blown up, targeting Judge Giovanni Falcone. Along with him, his wife Francesca Morvillo, also a judge, and his security detail agents Rocco Di Cillo, Vito Schifani, and Antonio Montinaro lost their lives.
[23] A car bomb destroyed the entrance to via Mariano D'Amelio 19, where Borsellino's mother lived and where he often visited her. In addition to the magistrate, five security detail officers were killed: Walter Li Muli, Agostino Catalano, Claudio Traina, Walter Eddie Cosina, and Emanuela Loi, the only female police officer murdered by the mafia.

The key terms of this phase of the movement were written in spray paint on the bed sheets that "invaded" the balconies of Palermo after the massacres. The "bed sheet committee"[24] exemplifies the desire to act in person and take responsibility in the fight against the mafia. The wall of widespread fear and intimidation was crumbling. The desire to express anger and grief prevailed, emotions that spurred collective action and were mobilized by women[25].

The year 1992 was a turning point for the anti-mafia movement, when the state came under attack and at the same time was seen as incapable of protecting its representatives. But what made this "attack" different from those of the late 1970s and early 1980s? The year 1992 was marked not only by mafia violence but also by another profound "trauma": it was the year of Tangentopoli, the uncovering of a vast system of corruption that permeated all levels of politics, generating widespread disgust with politicians and a protective attitude towards the judiciary[26].

The national context was characterized by a state of crisis, requiring a systemic change. The demand for a moral requalification of politics and institutions emerged throughout Italy, creating a "double perspective" on institutions: attack and protection. Attack on those who acted without safeguarding the common good; protection for the servants of the state who fought to reaffirm constitutional principles.

In this context, the "Fasting Women" initiated their protest.

3. Fasting: a practice between deprivation and affirmation

The mobilization of the "Fasting Women" represents a particular form of grassroots action against the Mafia, which was activated in Palermo after the massacres in Capaci and Via d'Amelio. Compared to other demonstrations, this one has specific characteristics that can

[24] Roberto Alajmo, *Un lenzuolo contro la mafia*, Gelka, Palermo, 1993. Matteo Di Figlia, *Marta Cimino e il comitato dei lenzuoli. Antimafia, cordoglio e mobilitazione nell'Italia degli anni '90*, in "Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche", anno XX, aprile 2023, pp. 187-208.

[25] Marta Cimmino was the founder of this initiative; a few months before, other women (Simona Mafai, Letizia Battaglia and Rosanna Pirajno) founded *Mezzocielo*, a magazine that is still a reference point for a gender-based perspective on social justice issues.

[26] Indeed, the first initiatives in front of the Palace of Justice in Milan were recorded after the Capaci Massacre (Cfr. Rispoli, *op. cit.*, p. 91).

still be considered unique, and thus worthy of detailed analysis, including an assessment of whether and to what extent it left traces in the broader movement against the mafias.

The facts: in the aftermath of the Capaci massacre, a phase of strong civic activation took place in Palermo. This was in response to the work conducted by the magistrates of the "anti-mafia pool", which appeared to be being erased by a violent strategy targeting the highest offices of the State. In the following weeks, people organized dozens of public meetings, and demonstrations in an attempt to express closeness to Paolo Borsellino, a frontline judge and clear target of the mafia. Borsellino was assassinated on July 19. The funerals of the security detail agents in the cathedral turned into a heated demonstration of violent opposition against institutional representatives who were deemed guilty of failing to protect the two magistrates.

In the eyes of the public, all hopes of a future free of the mafia were dashed. This sentiment was symbolically summed up by the words said by Antonino Caponnetto, former coordinator of the anti-mafia pool, during his eulogy to Paolo Borsellino, "It's all over". The sense of having hit rock bottom was pervasive. This same feeling of disorientation gripped the citizens attending the funeral, who felt powerless.

In the midst of the confused and grief-stricken crowd, a group of women gathered. They found themselves "squeezed against a wall" (int. 3) and began to recognize each other, holding hands, although they had not arrived together. They felt "desperate but not resigned" (int. 2) and decided to meet immediately at the headquarters of the Unione Donne Italiane in Palermo.

Eleven women formed a circle to discuss the situation, forcing themselves to speak even though "there were no more words" (int. 1). Out of this lack of words and the feeling of "not knowing where to stand anymore" (int. 4), they decided to act through a form of protest that the women of the anti-mafia movement had not yet tried: a hunger strike[27].

[27] In Sicily, the practice of fasting was introduced by Danilo Dolci in Trappeto in 1952 as a form of protest against the extreme poverty in the area, particularly in response to the death of a local child from starvation. To find an example of fasting initiated by women, it is necessary to look to early 20th-century England. Marion Dunlop was the first suffragette to go on hunger strikes in prison to demand women's suffrage. The prison authorities subjected her to force-feeding, which was considered a form of torture. After the "Fasting Women" of Palermo, the same practice appeared in Calabria during the period of kidnappings, as seen with the "Comitato Pro Bovalino Libera" following the abduction of Lollò Cartisano in 1993.

In their discussion, the need for a disruptive action[28] emerged, an act that had not yet been undertaken in the political history of the movement. This need led to the proposal of a hunger strike in a symbolic and central place in the city.

According to Angela Lanza, one of the main participants:

> "The hunger strike [...] is a form of struggle not traditionally associated with the history of the women's movement in Italy, but it makes us physically present. It is a sign of purity, of transparency, to prevent the dissipation of energy. It is a direct opposition to violence, to the overwhelming, Pantagruelian greed of the clans, a behavior of domination that is not a sign of life. Nor is it merely a metaphor for our hunger for justice and truth. This symbolic order [...] makes us feel safer in our actions"[29].

The day after the funeral, on July 22, 1992, the hunger strike began in Piazza Castelnuovo. The square was chosen as the epicenter of connections and interactions, a place where their action could not and should not be ignored, particularly because the protest had specific demands directed at the institutions, and as such, it needed to be visible and supported by as many people as possible.

The press release issued at the beginning of the strike stated:

> "This afternoon, as citizens of Palermo, beyond any affiliation to associations or political parties, we begin a hunger strike with a sit-in at Piazza Castelnuovo that will last until Prefect Jovine, Chief of Police Parisi, Prosecutor Giammanco, High Commissioner for the fight against the mafia Finocchiaro and Interior Minister Mancino resign. [...] We demand at least that those in institutional roles finally take responsibility. This is the only action we feel we can take. We want to continue living in this city[30]".

In these few words are the three defining features of this mobilization: hunger strike, affiliation, and responsibility.

[28] Cfr. Charles Tilly, *op. cit.*, 1993.
[29] Angela Lanza, *Donne contro la mafia. L'esperienza del digiuno a Palermo*, Datanews Editrice, Roma, 1994, p. 46.
[30] *Ibidem.*

3.1 Why the Hunger Strike

First and foremost, the hunger strike. The decision to deprive oneself of food has several interpretative keys, none of which are mutually exclusive. Feminist movements often use symbolic methods to mark their presence in the public sphere, with the body playing a central role, serving as a tool for political practices that are never conformist, but rather creative[31].

Listening to the participants of the mobilization and analyzing the materials produced around the initiative reveal different and not contradictory perspectives regarding the choice of this practice. The centrality of putting the body at risk and emphasizing female authority and agency is common to all perspectives, but the hunger strike is interpreted through at least four different lenses.

Some participants saw the hunger strike as an action framed within a culture of nonviolence[32] that opposed the violence of the mafia: the disarmament of a body made transparent. Another interpretation, voiced by some of the participants, is more in line with Gandhi's practice, where fasting acts as a form of leverage against institutions because it is a protest that, if taken to its extreme, could lead to death "a violence against oneself that nevertheless implicates others" (int. 1). However, this perspective was a minority within the group, since the organizers had decided early on that the hunger strike would be carried out in shifts of no more than three days per person, thus ensuring that no one's life would be endangered.

Another point of analysis concerns the importance of food as a primordial connection, and the idea that the body must be purified in an otherwise deeply corrupt context. Food is seen as part of the women's world, because "we nurse, we raise children, we prepare meals"[33], and since food becomes waste, abstaining from it is also a way to avoid contributing to "the shit that exists in this city"[34].

Finally, the slogan with which the women presented themselves in the square sum up the most widespread feeling among the participants: "I am hungry for justice. I fast against the mafia". This slogan clearly links the concept of justice—for which they are hungry—with the presence of the mafia, against which they are fasting in order to escape and not to

[31] In Zamboni's studies, the practices of feminism are characterized as being unexpected gestures that illuminate other faces of reality, sometimes through visions. It is an inventive response that aims to change a context by bringing the self into play (Chiara Zamboni, *op. cit.*). Cfr. the recent FEMEN or Extinction Rebellion protests.
[32] The 1980s in Sicily were marked, as mentioned, by a strong presence of the peace movement.
[33] Angela Lanza, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
[34] *Ibidem*.

continue to feed it in complicit silence. "Hunger" was provocatively represented by an empty plate, which all the participants wore, and on which the slogan was written.

Although the different perspectives on the choice of fasting are not contradictory, they provoke complementary readings of an innovative action that had not been taken before. This action allowed the different strands of the movement to reach a single, shared decision, centered on the fact that "fasting is about risking the body we have. We begin without too much theorizing"[35].

3.2 "Beyond affiliations"

The second point in the statement highlights a key element of this mobilization: the transcendence of affiliations to political parties and associations.

The existing literature on the presence of women in the anti-mafia movement underscores how grassroots activism often emerged in response to tragic, personal events. The stories of the first women who decided to take the front line against the mafia highlight individual biographies, resulting in a narrative that prioritized personal aspects and left the political dimension in the background. For a long time, the family dimension and the space of the everyday took precedence, to the exclusion of other aspects related to political demands.

Another element that characterized the women's participation was their membership in those political forces (predominantly, as described, the trade union and left-wing parties) that had previously been prominent in the anti-mafia movement.

As we have seen, 1992 represents a turning point for the driving forces behind the anti-mafia movement, and this shift is clearly expressed in the words of the declaration, where the "Fasting Women" initiated a unifying action that bridged different backgrounds.

Within the group of eleven organizers, as well as the larger group of one hundred "fasters", there were women with a variety of political experiences: some were union members, some

[35] Piera Fallucca, *Vivere a Palermo la passione politica: Femminile Plurale (1987-1995*), in *Simona Mafai. Una vita per la politica,* Piera Fallucca, Giovanna Fiume (a cura di), Istituto Poligrafico Europeo Casa Editrice, Palermo, 2021, p. 268.

were active in feminist associations, some were party members, while others had been involved in various anti-mafia efforts[36].

These affiliations represented different political visions and priorities, but they were overcome by the common condition that each woman experienced—the feeling of being "desperate but not resigned," and the desire to "do something" at a time when everything seemed futile. The theme of food was strongly symbolized and prevented the fragmentation of the group: fasting, as a symbol of inner and physical purification, gave each participant the necessary strength and fostered cohesion among them.

This sense of cohesion was evident in the internal dynamics of the group, where egalitarianism and the interchangeability of roles were strongly emphasized. There was no leader, no spokesperson, or secretary: everything operated within a framework of circularity, close to anonymity, and this is what gave the group strength and resilience. Every day, the organization was reassessed, "the issues that arose were addressed in a circle"[37] and decisions were made collectively by those present, following a logic of shared responsibility that did not involve the appointment of leaders or delegations.

This interchangeability is a distinctive feature of women's movements[38] and, more generally, of female participation in movements, where the logic of leadership is avoided, setting them apart from "male modes of doing and understanding politics," where leadership is essential. From a female perspective, "politics does not mean power but serving the common good" and fostering "a sense of social responsibility"[39].

In this experience, the transcendence of previous affiliations and the lack of defined roles and responsibilities were also facilitated by the limited duration of the protest. The initiative lasted one month and ended on August 23, 1992, with a theatrical performance in the square. From then on, and for a year, the women would return to the square for a sit-in (but not fasting) from the 19th to the 23rd of every month, until the large-scale Palermo Anno Uno

[36] Only one participant, Michela Buscemi, had a "direct" experience of mafia violence, having lost two brothers to criminal hands, which motivated her to take an active role in the anti-mafia movement. She is known for having joined the Maxi Trial as a civil party, standing against her entire family of origin. Cfr. Michela Buscemi, *Nonostante la paura*, La meridiana, Bari, 1995.

[37] Angela Lanza, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

[38] As in the "the spring of movements" in Rispoli, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

[39] Angela Lanza, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

demonstration[40]. Setting limits to the duration of the action allowed for a concentration of forces and energies, at a time when the city was covered in the ashes of recent bombings, and the citizenry "had never been so united" (int. 3) in seeking a way to rise again.

Indeed, the proposal to go "beyond affiliations" is symptomatic of one of the innovations of the new phase of the anti-mafia movement: a non-ideological approach.

3.3 Responsibility: To Each Their Own

The third point to analyze from the statement of the Fasting Women is the explicit demand for the resignation of Prefect Jovine, Chief of Police Parisi, Prosecutor Giammanco, High Commissioner for the Fight against the Mafia Finocchiaro, and Interior Minister Mancino.

The protest had a clear objective: to target the institutional leaders, asking them to account for their actions and why they failed to protect a "moving target" such as Judge Paolo Borsellino. "We demand at least that those in institutional roles finally take responsibility", the movement's documents read, emphasizing that nothing had been done after the Capaci massacre to prevent the second tragedy.

However, the issue of responsibility is not only framed as attack to the institutional representatives[41], but also implicates the participants themselves, who felt that they had "not done enough" (int. 2), had not occupied the public space sufficiently, and had delegated too much to the institutional sphere, when the struggle was also cultural and required collective presence and action.

The starting point of this mobilization is "the assumption of responsibility"[42], which challenges individuals to reassess their relationship with society in this context and leads them to mature and conscious citizenship. No more submission, silence, indifference, or even helplessness. Protest activates power—a power that opposes that of the system. Through

[40] On the first anniversary of the Capaci massacre, May 23, 1993, 150,000 people participated in a street demonstration.
[41] Meanwhile, on July 31, the Prefect of Palermo, Mario Iovine, left his post, while on August 3, Public Prosecutor Piero Giammanco was transferred to the Court of Cassation.
[42] Angela Lanza, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

their bodies, the group of women in the square creates a political practice that illuminates "reality with a meaning against the total dismantling of meanings carried out by the mafia"[43].

In this dynamic, each participant seeks to regain their voice, after it was lost in the aftermath of the massacres. One of the banners hung in the square bore a quote from Christa Wolf: "Between killing and dying, there is a third way: live". And so, "we want to continue living in this city" is one of the statements of the protest.

The strategy implemented against extreme violence is not escape or abandonment (*exit*); instead, women affirm themselves and the ability to continue living in Palermo with their bodies. The body deprived of food becomes an element of strength.

As in a paradox, the hunger strike pushes towards a new life.

Fasting and the demand for resignations are at opposite poles of a continuum of responsibility—towards oneself and towards the institutions. Responsibility and the maturation of citizenship become prerequisites for making Palermo a livable city, no longer defined only by mafia violence.

At a time of deep social fracture, the choice of these women was not to send a message of despair or hatred, but to emphasize the importance of staying in order to reclaim and regenerate both public spaces and institutions, ushering in a new political era.

It was an attack on institutional representatives that is protection of institutions themselves.

Being in the public space as a symbol of feeling anchored in a space to be protected and at the same time radically changed and regenerated. In this respect, the previous political experiences of the protest's initiators played a crucial role. The women organizers, all of whom had been politically active in various ways, carried a message that change was possible only through personal and collective engagement. Their prior involvement in political and social movements brought a wealth of experience and a forward-looking perspective that served as an antidote to the despair that threatened to take hold at the time. An analysis of the participants' backgrounds shows that they all had a history of participation, particularly since the 1980s, when they had been involved in previous waves of mobilization.

[43] *Ibidem*.

Mobility between different initiatives is a characteristic that focuses on the "why" of an initiative rather than on the "who" is promoting it, and is a defining feature of female participation, where a spirit of cooperation prevails over competition. "Among us, there was no room for 'anti-mafia champions'" (int. 3). The call for responsibility and the willingness to take it personally activate a dynamic that involves other citizens throughout Italy and even the world. Hundreds of messages of support were recorded at the stalls[44], and interviews were given to international media.

This group of women became both a physical and moral point of reference, occupying the main square of Palermo and emphasizing that the future of the city depended on the commitment of everyone. In a moment of total disorientation, occupying a public space meant marking a new beginning. The experience of fasting thus opens a symbolic space that inhabits the boundary between the visible (the 24/7 occupation of the square as if it were a domestic space) and the invisible (fasting as a formula for disappearance, for purification, and for interrupting the production of waste).

4. Conclusions and Research Perspectives

Although the literature on women's involvement in institutional and civil opposition to the mafia has grown considerably in recent decades, we still lack a full and in-depth legitimization of the role they play. For a long time, the recognition of women's presence in the anti-mafia movement was limited to the family sphere. In a stereotypical logic, only the personal repercussions of mafia violence provoked reaction and mobilization. It is important to emphasize that the actions of the victims' families generated greater awareness of mafia violence and, regardless of their specific role in certain historical phases (see, for example, the formation of the Committee of Women Against the Mafia), contributed to creating a broader civic consciousness against the mafia. This laid the foundations for an "expanded" phase of the movement.

Part of this lack of recognition and study can also be attributed to the general lack of recognition and study of the anti-mafia movement within the broader literature on social movements. The epochal change brought about by 1992, both politically and socially,

[44] Some of the "cards" with messages and support are preserved in the historical archives of the Unione Donne Italiane in Palermo.

ushered in a new phase of the movement in which personal experience was secondary to the motivations driving political participation. Before then, the movement had been a two-headed entity, composed on the one hand of actors leading the class struggle and on the other hand of families of innocent victims. Subsequently, this division was overcome, with women playing a central role[45].

These women place the value of justice and the sense of sisterhood[46] at the center, overcoming typically male practices and initiating mobilizations in which there are no designated leaders, spokespersons, or "champions". This is a process of de-identification, where the collective is prioritized over the personal. These women are trying to broaden the stage, making it more inclusive. By taking a step back to move forward with others, they often struggle to gain recognition. It is no coincidence that many of them are "illustrious unknowns" whose names are not widely known.

However, the practices they adopt are marked by originality and creativity, as seen in the case under study. The feminine languages they use are aimed at challenging the dominant masculine logic. The symbolic violence does not only come from the mafia but could also come from the anti-mafia sphere. These feminine languages and practices are inclusive, aimed at a movement that needs to grow and move beyond its own boundaries and comfort zone. Indeed, in these forms of female-led struggle, where the body is central, as a subject of

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45 Another pivotal role is played by students: cfr. Nando dalla Chiesa, *Gli studenti contro la mafia. Note (di merito) per un movimento*, in "Quaderni Piacentini", n. s. 11, dicembre 1983.

46 The concept of sisterhood, as discussed by Bell Hooks, represents a foundational bond among women grounded in mutual support and the pursuit of collective liberation. bell hooks argues that true sisterhood transcends race, class, and other social divides, aiming for solidarity that confronts all forms of oppression, not just those experienced by white women. She emphasizes that this inclusive sisterhood should be an active, politically engaged movement for dismantling systemic structures of patriarchy and racism, rather than a superficial or symbolic unity. For hooks, authentic sisterhood relies on shared goals and empathy, rooted in a commitment to justice across intersectional identities. Italian scholar Giorgia Serughetti expands on these ideas by highlighting the potential of sisterhood in feminist movements today, especially in response to contemporary social issues. She echoes hooks' call for an inclusive, intersectional sisterhood, arguing that feminist solidarity should evolve to address both longstanding and emerging inequalities. Hooks and Serughetti advocate for a sisterhood that not only uplifts women but also challenges broader systems of inequality, envisioning a feminist future that is deeply attuned to the diverse experiences within the collective struggle for equality.
These perspectives underscore that sisterhood, as envisioned by both scholars, is not simply about unity among women but is a transformative force challenging oppressive systems in society. This framework repositions sisterhood as a vital component of activism, addressing multifaceted struggles across different social identities. Cfr. Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, South End Press, Cambridge, MA, 1984; *Sisterhood: political solidarity between women*, in "Feminist Review", n. 23, 125-38, 1986. Giorgia Serughetti, *La società esiste*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2023; *Potere di altro genere: donne, femminismi e politica*, Donzelli, Roma, 2024.

militancy, there emerges an urgency to rethink the relationship between individuals and institutions, as well as between individuals themselves. Fasting, then, is not a gesture of renunciation or withdrawal, but an extreme assertion of agency. A power over one's body that is also a provocation of the social body.

From the particular to the general, this process addresses and questions the very essence of democracy, in the demand for recognition of equal opportunities in the public sphere. Claiming one's space through political practices means fighting for a society where rights are fully enforceable.

The mafia, on the other hand, thrives in societies where privilege replaces rights, and thus the very demand for equal opportunities, as a demand for fairness and justice, can be interpreted as a call for policies that limit the scope of organized crime.

From this perspective, women's mobilizations against the mafia fit into the frame of women's struggles for democracy and the defense of women's rights. Patriarchy, as a model of male dominance, fuels mafia culture, a culture in which the oppression and subjugation of the weak prevail. In this context, studying the anti-mafia efforts of women's movements can benefit from integration into the broader field of feminist movements for justice and equality.

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