

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch

2013

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Financial support provided by

Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW)



Global Information Society Watch

Published by APC and Hivos

2013

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ISSN: 2225-4625
ISBN: 978-92-95102-06-4
APC-201310-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-197

ITALY

The internet and activism for women's rights



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Introduction

The women's movement in Italy started 40 years ago – in line with other movements born all over Europe at the beginning of the 1970s. Its moments of glory included the mobilisation around various civil liberties (such as the law that legalised abortion in Italy in 1978) and the protest against violence against women that brought millions of women onto the streets to claim their rights.

The general decline of political action in the 1980s (characterised in Italy by the rise of terrorism) impacted on the women's movement, which renounced mass street protests and preferred to concentrate on local action and on initiatives affecting daily life.

The trend changed again in 2005, thanks to the use of the internet by the women's movement. Myriad micro-initiatives have found ways of mobilising again using the internet, without the support of big organisations (such as unions and left-wing parties) and even without the support of the traditional media which, in Italy, seem to have totally forgotten civil rights campaigns and gender debates since the end of the 1990s.

Political context

This phase of "underground" activities coincided with the nearly 20 years of Silvio Berlusconi-led governments ruling Italy (1994-2011, with two interruptions). The political rise of Berlusconi was characterised by the aggressive use of traditional media (he owns the three major commercial TV channels, two of the main national newspapers, one radio network and the biggest chain of cinemas in the country). This provoked major changes in the level of the country's national discourse. One of its main characteristics has been the deliberate use of women's images in the media (often naked or half naked), the total denial of the civil rights campaign, the criminalisation of immigrants and, in general, a negation of diversity in society.

In such a context, union action became more difficult and access to rights for women (such as abortion in public health structures) became virtually impossible. Not only was civil action difficult to organise, but when it finally did happen, because of Berlusconi's tight control on the media, these protests were not covered at all, or their support and impact were minimised. The message was clear: all action against the official dogma was not welcome and needed to be censored.

As a result, any social activism that wanted to succeed in Italy needed to reorganise at the turn of the century according to new criteria and principles. The internet, as the only medium that cannot be controlled in the traditional way (and by the usual suspects), is welcomed by all social movements as a unique opportunity to communicate, raise awareness and act – even if this means taking on the traditional media.

The women's movement and the internet

Today the women's movement is divided in two: the groups, initiatives and organisations existing before the mainstreaming of the internet (that now have a second life thanks to the web) and groups, initiatives and organisations that were started online and then have tried to create an offline presence.

Among the best known examples of the first kind are LUD (*Libera Università delle Donne* or Free Women's University) in Milan, which was founded in 1987 as a centre for study and debate on gender and the feminist movement, and which launched its website in 1999,¹ and *Libreria delle donne* (Women's Bookshop), founded in 1975, which launched its website in 2001² and completely revamped it in 2013.

As for the second category of women's organisations, the most relevant is probably the website www.controviolenzadonne.org, the result of a successful national demonstration held under the same name on 24 November 2007. This became the portal to access all the centres that assisted women who had been victims of violence in Italy.³

1 www.universitadelledonne.it (English version: www.universitadelledonne.it/english/index.html)

2 www.libreriadelledonne.it

3 www.controviolenzadonne.org/index.html

Both these groups emerged from the darkness of the 1990s at the turn of the century, and moved to the front of the political scene thanks to the interaction between political action, networking and mass demonstrations. But their mass demonstrations were totally different from those of the 1980s and now focused on specific problems that women wanted to bring to the attention of society. Mobilisation has focused on three key topics: the right to abortion, violence against women, and the exploitation of women's bodies and the associated images that appeared daily in the commercial media.

2006: The women's movement discovers the internet as a tool to defend its rights

The first event of this new form of mobilisation took place on 14 January 2006 with a national demonstration in Milan under the banner "*Per uscire dal silenzio*" (Stop the Silence). This campaign was against the Catholic Church and Berlusconi's coalition parties, which aimed to restrict the number of cases in which abortion is legal. The demonstration started with an email chain launched by journalist Assunta Sarlo, who worked at the newspaper *Il Diario* and invited women to protest and stand up for their rights. The emails called for a protest to take place on 25 November at the headquarters of the leftist Trade Union Congress in Milan. More than 250,000 women attended the demonstration, although it was launched over the internet, virtually ignored by the government, and received very little coverage in the media. This was a lot more than expected.

This successful experience – which was a mix between a call for action using the internet and traditional tools for political action, such as public demonstrations – became a reference for many other initiatives that occurred in the last year of Berlusconi's government. Many women's organisations have started to consider the internet as a possible platform for political actions.

The internet and the campaign opposing violence against women

The next big event took place in November 2007 in Rome under the slogan "*Manifestazione nazionale contro la violenza maschile sulla donna*" (National Demonstration Opposing Male Violence against Women).⁴

The demonstration, again, was started on the internet using the website www.controviolenza.org⁵ as an advocacy platform. The website had been created for the purpose of sharing daily examples of violence against women with the public. One moving example is Hina Saleem, a young Pakistani immigrant in Sarezzo, a village near Brescia, who was killed by her father and brothers because she refused an arranged marriage and wanted to marry her Italian boyfriend.⁶

The demonstration was attended by more than 150,000 women from all over Italy, with the participation of many representatives from local government and municipalities. Parties from the left tried to ride the wave and wanted to enrol the initiative under their flags. But the organisers rejected their offers and preferred to stay out of the political game.

This first initiative was followed by another one with the same advocacy agenda in Rome on 22 November 2008, and by a third in 2011.

In the meantime websites like www.controviolenzadonne.org and www.zeroviolenzadonne.it had become hubs for coordinating all the disparate activities aimed at fighting violence against women.

The mix of street demonstrations and web activism created a new form of representation over the internet. A new portal was launched on 6 February 2009 by the journalist and activist Monica Pepe, called www.zeroviolenzadonne.it.⁷

Its basic idea is quite simple: to keep an updated account of all episodes of violence against women occurring in Italy through the constant monitoring of newspaper articles and electronic media, and publishing analyses and editorial reflections on these data and on media behaviour. The portal became the main coordination point for a national demonstration against violence against women, held in November 2011 in various towns across Italy.

Now the transformation is complete: the net is no longer simply a window on activities existing in the offline world. It holds an advantage over offline organisation, because it abolishes the barriers of time and space and can assist in coordinating groups through the efforts of a single person who supports a cause. It also has the advantage of fitting perfectly with the refusal of the women's movement to create permanent centralised structures, with consequent hierarchies and levels of engagement and participation. The internet seems to be the

⁵ www.controviolenzadonne.org/html/appello.html

⁶ According to data collected in 2006 by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT), more than 6,743,000 women aged between 16 and 70 had been victims of sexual or physical violence over the course of their lives. In the 12 months before the research alone, 150,000 acts of violence against women were reported.

⁷ Lea Melandri, co-author of this article, is the head editor of this website.

⁴ www.noidonne.org/articolo.php?ID=01440 www.controviolenzadonne.org/html/archivio_24-11-07.html

long-awaited answer for a movement that wants to remain dispersed but connected and without a hierarchical organisation.

The internet and the degrading use of images of women

Another issue around which the women's movement and its supporters have been mobilised is the use of degrading images of women in public. This protest followed the discovery of the "bunga bunga" parties held by then prime minister Berlusconi and involving underage girls.

The revelations quickly resulted in public demonstrations. On 13 February 2011 nearly one million people gathered in the streets of the main Italian cities under the slogan SNOQ – "Se non ora quando?" (If not now, then when?)⁸ – supported by the newspaper *La Repubblica* as well as the TV station Rai3.

The initiative was started by a group called "Di Nuovo", led by some well-known women in the world of the performing arts, cinema and TV (such as film director Cristina Comencini, actress Francesca Inno and many others).⁹ This group emerged thanks to the internet.

Following the success of the demonstration, Di Nuovo – claiming to represent the one million participants – opened negotiations with traditional parties, trying to negotiate rights in favour of women including a reserved quota for women's candidates at the next national elections.

The internet as an aggregation tool for the women's movement?

After these three successful initiatives in the "real" world, the Italian women's movement decided to go one step beyond and to determine if, through the widespread use of the internet, a new form of organisation (more agile, totally decentralised and open) could replace the traditional organisation of parties or unions.

Using the net once more it launched a call for three days of discussion and analysis in Paestum on 5, 6 and 7 October 2011 (right in the middle of the crisis in Berlusconi's government and his resignation, and a few days before the inauguration of Mario Monti as prime minister). The choice of the place to hold the discussion was not an accident: Paestum was the venue for the last gathering of the Italian women's movement in 1976, when it was still called the feminist movement. However, with the inclusion of younger women, the agenda for the

discussions was quite different, including perspectives on jobs, equality and so on.

The women's movement discovers its international voice using the internet

In February 2013, on Valentine's Day, many collectives in Italy promoted the idea of participating in the Italian chapter of the "One Billion Rising" campaign.¹⁰

Once again, thanks to the internet, the initiative was celebrated in many Italian towns.¹¹ The campaign aimed to combat violence against women using the language of music and dance with the idea that this would be more appropriate than political slogans and political quarrels.

The circle is now closed: a national movement made up of small groups and local initiatives is also able to interact, coordinate and exchange information on an equal footing with global initiatives using the internet.

Conclusion

The women's movement in Italy discovered the internet quite late (around 2005). Activists studied it carefully, and once they realised that the online world supported a non-hierarchical and decentralised movement, they started to use it widely for information sharing, support and campaigns. Essentially, the women's movement adopted the internet as an alternative to the traditionally highly centralised structures of political parties and trade unions, linking initiatives, groups and individuals around specific and concrete battles such as combating violence against women and ensuring respect for women's dignity. But in doing so, the Italian women's movement has also been consistent with its different and quite unique approach to feminism since its origins 40 years ago, in its view that it is more important to produce changes in daily life than to change laws. According to this approach, gender problems, such as foregrounding the debate on gender roles, are more important than parliamentary political battles. The key phrase of this approach is: "The thinking that produces concrete changes in human behaviour is already politics." The internet supports this approach perfectly, because it allows political action and campaigning without the need to obtain the approval of traditional political channels of expression.

8 www.senonoraquando.eu

9 www.leiweb.it/celebrity/personaggi-news/10_a_di-nuovo-comencini.shtml

10 The Italian initiative is a local chapter of the global initiative of the same name, promoted by US playwright Eve Ensler, best known as the author of the "Vagina Monologues". www.onebillionrising.org

11 www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Kngnnon46ac

Action steps

Paestum 2013

Just before summer 2013, an online appeal was launched by the Association of Italian Art Directors (ADCI). It called on the minister in charge of gender equality to clamp down on “sexist advertising” in Italy. It asked for the introduction of rules for protecting the dignity of women in advertising campaigns based on a European Parliament resolution of 3 September 2008. Using social networks, it has arranged the second national gathering of the women’s movement in Paestum (called “Paestum 2013”). This year the campaign will be dedicated to issues such as “sexual behaviour” and the vulnerability of women in the workplace when it comes to short-term contracts that can be renewed without permanent employment being granted.

Infrastructure

The new government (an Italian “grosse coalition” with left- and right-wing parties) has announced massive investments in spreading access to broadband and liberalising Wi-Fi infrastructure all over the country. This is expected to increase the number of internet users in Italy, currently amongst the lowest in the EU. This has the potential to strengthen the women’s movement, and should be supported.

Legislation

Little progress has been made over the last ten years when it comes to women’s rights in Italian legislation – except for a law against stalking which was approved in 2009 under the pressure of various TV personalities. However, recently a number of activities have arisen, thanks mainly to the fact that the new speaker of the parliament since March 2013 has been Laura Boldrini, a human rights activist. Since her arrival, the Italian parliament has finally ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention (on 19 June 2013). The legislature had been dragging its feet for some time over this ratification because of the lack of political will of the previous parliament. The ratification was supported through an internet campaign for signatures under the slogan: “No more”. In just a few months 100,000 signatures were collected. This shows that the internet can be successfully used to support and encourage the development of legislation – which might usher in a new tactic for activism in the women’s movement in Italy.

Join the women’s movement!

The women’s movement in Italy is now well publicised online. For an updated list of websites, visit: www.universitadelledonne.it/siti.htm ■