



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(2) 2024: 350-367

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i2p350

Published 15 July, 2024

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Subverting motherhood: investigating the mothers' activism in environmental conflicts.

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ABSTRACT:

In recent decades, social movement scholars have paid significant attention to the study of local ecological conflicts, delving into various dimensions and actors involved in mobilization. However, the role of mothers' committees in such conflicts has consistently been underestimated, despite their pivotal role in shaping mobilization dynamics and triggering significant processes in both private and public spheres.

To address this gap, the paper aims at shedding light on the mobilization of mothers' committees in local ecological conflicts by using a qualitative method to compare "Mamme NO TAP" in Apulia, "Mamme No PFAS" in Veneto and "Mamme NO MUOS" in Sicily.

In critique of the *essentialist* interpretation of these mobilizations, this paper combines the approach of *strategic essentialism* with the literature on feminist political ecology in order to explore the arguments, the processes and the strategies that led these women to organise themselves into committees based on the motherhood identity. At the same time, this paper discusses how during the mobilization the traditional identity of mother is subverted towards a more feminist approach, by opening emancipatory spaces in the private and public sphere for all women. For this reason, these struggles need to be considered as forms of embodied feminism.

KEYWORDS: Ecological conflicts, embodied feminism, Italy, mothers' committees, strategic essentialism.

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1. Introduction

The field of study concerning ecological conflict has flourished in recent decades, with an increasing number of contributions exploring the phenomenon from different perspectives and with different focuses. A recurring feature of this kind of conflict all over the world concerns the wide participation of groups of women organized into mothers' committees. In Italy, there are several mothers' committees organized within a context of ecological conflict, among which are Mamme No Inc, Mamme Vulcaniche, Mamme No TAP, Mamme contro le fonti inquinanti, Madri contro l'operazione Lince, Mamme libere per la tutela dei figli. These are just some examples of groups of mothers that choose to engage and organize themselves in local environmental conflicts against noxiousness. Although these kinds of conflicts have received a great deal of attention in Italian social movements, previous studies have focused on the actors emerging within these mobilizations, such as grassroots local committees (della Porta and Rucht 2002, della Porta and Piazza 2008), traditional environmental associations (della Porta e Andretta 2002) and antagonist left-wing groups (Piazza and Frazzetta 2019), with no specific attention paid to the mothers' committees, notwithstanding their relevant role in the conflict. Meanwhile, literature on *maternalism* or *maternidad politica* has developed in Latin America in response to both the emergence of *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and to the several forms of mothers' activism in ecological conflicts (Grieco 2016, Rovoletto 2020), although this debate has not significantly influenced scholars in political science.

Starting from this overview, this contribution aims at bridging the gap by shedding light on mothers' activism, in particular in the local environmental conflicts in Italy. While this will be the focus of this paper, it may be worth pointing out that, first of all, the experience of mothers' committees does not exhaust the debate around the gender dimension in environmental conflicts and, secondly, the subjectivation of women as mothers cuts across various instances and types of conflict. The focus on environmental conflicts – in which the organization of mother's committees is recurring - just provides a privileged space in which to capture some processes.

By investigating a) the arguments and strategies that lead some women to organise themselves into specific committees based on the motherhood identity, and b) the effects of their activism in both the public and private space – topics underestimated still now – this paper purposes a *strategic essentialist* approach to reading mothers' activism, by simultaneously underlining how these mobilizations – although appealing to stereotyping roles – can be considered as forms of embodied feminism. By taking into account the combination of identity and *agency*, this paper questions the recurring essentialist interpretation that associates the militancy of mothers in Italian ecological conflicts with the mere biological dimension (i.e. as those who give life, the women are biologically inclined to take care of nature and to the reproduction of life).

In order to address these topics, the analysis delves into three case studies: the “Mamme NO TAP” in Meledugno (Apulia), “Mamme NO PFAS” in Veneto and “Mamme NO MUOS” in Niscemi (Sicily), all mobilizing against the environmental degradation and toxicity that affects their territories.

This paper is organized as follows, the first paragraph offers a review of literature about the activism of mothers coming from different areas of the world and different fields of study, while the second paragraph will focus on mothers' activism in Italy and more specifically in the compared ecological conflicts. In the third paragraph the method of research is presented, while the fourth paragraph illustrates and discusses the data collected. Finally, in the Conclusion the main results and interpretative purposes are outlined, before illustrating future research trajectories.

2. Mothers' activism: a brief review of the literature

The analysis of mothers' activism remains an underestimated field of study by scholars of social movements, particularly in Western countries, despite its relevance in various political and social fields. This issue has garnered more attention in Latin American studies, where the literature on *maternidad política* was developed in response to specific and disruptive political experiences, such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo who mobilized between the 1970s and 1980s advocating for truth and justice regarding the *desaparecidos* caused by the regime of Videla (Vecchioli 2005, Howe 2006, Zarco 2011, Kunin 2019). As underlined by Vecchioli (2005), by appealing to blood relations as a principle of collective adhesion, a dispersed group of citizens formed civil associations that have fought and struggled to achieve recognition in their demands during and after the last Argentine military dictatorship (Ibidem, 19). The women renewed the maternal values that the state urged them to practice in their private lives and took them to a new realm, the public realm, while the mothers moved from a biological environment to the political field. As Zarco (2011, 236) asserts, "the mothers of the disappeared were 'reborn' as political mothers, their children 'gave birth' to them as political subjects who used their maternal role as a base condition for constructing their citizenship". While this example – one of the most eloquent in history – concerns the political use of motherhood as a weapon against an authoritarian regime in which the protest was disincentivised and strongly repressed (Howe 2006), forms of mother activism also emerged in democratic regimes. One notable instance occurred in the UK during the 1980s mobilization against NATO's decision to install 96 US cruise missiles in the Berkshire military airbase. In this occasion, the activists of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp organized the "Embrace the Base" protest event during which 30,000 women joined hands and formed a chain around the perimeter of the airbase. During this protest, they tied baby clothes, toys, photos, and ribbons to the airbase fencing, strategically using their roles as mothers and addressing the issue of the defence of the future safety of their children in a political manner (Moore 2014). Most recently, a network of mothers worldwide has organized under the banner of the Mothers' Rebellion for Climate Justice, advocating to secure a habitable Earth for their children with the slogan "the mother's place is in the rebellion" (IG, 8/3/24).

What these mobilizations shed light on is that while motherhood, as a material and symbolic site of social reproduction associated with specific social norms and performances, may limit women's space of action, it "also provides an opportunity for subversive appropriation, contestation, and transformation" (Grieco 2016, 131). If the top-down use of motherhood tends to "link stereotypical gender roles of women as future mothers of the nation" (Carreon and Moghadam 2015), emphasizing their biological and socio-cultural reproductive roles (Yuval-Davis 1997) for celebrating the nation (Mhajne and Whetstone 2017), the bottom-up use of a mother's identity has the potential to transform the meaning and the associated role in an emancipatory way (Ibidem, Mhajne and Whetstone 2017). This process of transformation is shaped by the cultural and political landscape, which can include both violent or revolutionary contexts as well as peaceful ones. It can produce different patterns of mother's activism, ranging from the most moderate to radical or violent action repertoires (Gentry 2009; Stavrianos 2014; Carreon and Moghadam 2015).

In any case, this debate has scarcely interacted with the studies on New Social Movements, despite the relevance gained by mothers' organizations in several mobilizations. This phenomenon appears even more frequent in contexts of ecological conflicts, where many women choose to mobilize their motherhood in the public space to denounce the pollution and the poisoning of their children in the context of ecological degradation. The same concept of environmental justice owes its birth to the political commitment of a woman and mother, Marie Lois Gibbs, that in 1978 gave rise to *the Love Canal Parents Movement* in the USA to denounce the poisoning of hundreds of children in the Love Canal quarter, due to the toxic waste buried by a chemical factory. In this context, the organization of several mothers and in general parents in the low-income

neighbourhood turned out to be fundamental for the decontamination of that and of many other areas in the country and paved the way to the articulation between environment protection and social justice (Rosignoli 2020). But this isn't the only case in which motherhood has been used to mobilize against the *slow violence* (Nixon 2011) produced by the poisoning of the everyday-life environment. As Rovoletto (2020, 196) argues, since the 1990s, we have witnessed "an unprecedented phase of momentum and visibility of the women's struggles" against extractivism and land and natural resource grabbing that, particularly in the so-called Global South, has given rise to "tens of thousands of foci of resistance to the despoliation of resources and rights". In many cases, these women grouped together as mothers, often draw accusations by both the feminist movement for reproducing the existing stereotypes (Howe 2006, Ledda 2018), and by institutions and law enforcement for being bad mothers that put their children at risk (Moore 2014, Simoncini 2024), while celebrating instead the mothers that stay at home as being good mothers who are genuinely seeking the wellbeing of their children.

The choice to appeal to the identity of the mother "is based on the beliefs shared by the state and by those who make up civil society organizations about the strength and positive value of kinship and the place of family within the nation" (Vecchioli 2005, 19). Simultaneously, this set of beliefs and values is at the origin of women's stereotypes as mothers and caregivers, relegating them to the private sphere based on a child-centred network (Lynn and Flora 1973). This represents a cultural dilemma that, as underlined by Jasper (2004, 13), particularly shapes women's activism: women, in fact, "may challenge gendered feeling rules as feminists" or choose "to exploit them" to appear not as political activists but as women who simply want to take care of their children.

The collective identity – such as the mother's identity in this case – is the result of both self-identification and external recognition (often entangled in the good mother/bad mother dichotomy), but also as a means of giving shared meaning to personal experiences (Polletta and Jasper 2001, Taylor and Wittier 1992) and to connect them with collective action (della Porta and Diani 2020). In this sense, the collective identity operates as a means of mobilizing that can be continuously re-negotiated and re-elaborated over time and through conflict (McGarry and Jasper 2015; Melucci 1996).

At the same time, the use of the mother identity in the field of ecological protest can be interpreted in different ways. Several researchers dealing with the issue (Shiva 1988, Mies 1993, Mies and Shiva 1993, De Falco *et al* 2016) tend to interpret the political use of motherhood through the lens of *essentialism*. Based on the idea of the existence of a "feminine principle" (Shiva 1988), this perspective emphasizes the biological connection between women and nature, represented by their common ability to give and reproduce life (Shiva 1988) and perceived as productive and cooperative entities (Mies 1993).¹

However, the process of mother's mobilization cannot be reduced to the mere biological dimension, as their activism should not be viewed as solely dependent on an ancestral input derived from the ability of women to give life. As pointed out by several feminist scholars (as Resurrección 2017, Gaard 2011, Agarwal 2001 among others), celebrating the feminine role runs the risk of essentializing women and homogenizing their experiences, by reproducing fixed and reductionist views of gender (Gaard 2011).

Rather than asserting the existence of an intrinsic link between nature and women, it is necessary to identify the "lived material relationship of women with nature" (Agarwal, 2001, p. 151). This is essential for establishing a framework capable of overcoming essentialist perspectives and acknowledging the forms of embodied feminism emerging from women's everyday material and affective life (Harcourt and Nelson 2015,

¹ In order to make the topic clearer, it may be useful to clarify that in the essentialist current thought (in particular in Shiva's work), production - understood as the set of reproductive activities and subsistence economies - is framed in positive terms and distinguished by the "male-development", that responds to the hegemonic and patriarchal idea of production. Even if criticized by several feminist movements and scholars, this approach needs to be placed within the ecofeminist debate.

Resucción 2017, Salleh 2017). Embodied feminism can be conceptualized as an approach to feminism that stems from the everyday lived experiences of oppression and contamination of one's own bodies and territories, rather than from theoretical perspectives. In this sense, the critique of patriarchal capitalism is not so much a starting point as it is the result of the elaboration of socio-environmental relationships that affect women's material conditions.

Moreover, by paying attention to the processes, strategies, and consequences of mothers' activism in both public and private spaces, this paper aims to contribute to the literature and illustrate how the *strategic essentialist* approach (Spivak 1988) could better align with the observed phenomenon.

According to this perspective, rather than defining characteristics or essential traits shared by all members of a given group, it is more adequate to observe how marginalized groups temporarily emphasize a shared identity or set of characteristics in order to increase political opportunities within a specific power system. While Spivak strongly criticises the idea that there is an essence that defines an identity (in this case that of a woman), the scholar also acknowledges the political efficacy of employing a simplified identity for a political purpose. Among the various identities, that of mother "often appears as a common driver for women's activism" (Venes et al., 118).

3. Mothers' mobilization in Italian ecological conflicts

In recent decades, mothers' committees have been organized all over Italy against toxic waste, incinerators, pipelines, military bases, PFAS pollution, water poisoning, physical and judicial repression, in order to defend both the health of their sons and daughters and their right to demonstrate, threatened by repression.

The local ecological conflict revealed itself as one of the most common fields of mobilization of mothers' committees, probably because the ecological degradation directly threatens the reproductive sphere of which - for socio-historical reasons - women are more involved (Mellor 1996, Salleh 2017, Barca 2020). Studies in sociological (De Falco *et al.* 2016; Ledda 2018), historical (Armiero 2014) and anthropological fields (Lutri 2018) are dedicated to mothers' mobilization while recently the topic has become increasingly popular also in public debate, so much so that at the end of 2023 a book that collects dozens of interviews of mothers fighting against environmental devastation in Italy was published by the journalist Linda Maggiori.

This is because the phenomenon is becoming even more relevant in reaction to the structural transformation of the global economy towards a new neoliberal *governance* (Pellizzoni 2014) which, since the 90s, has led to the emergence of new patterns of natural resource management but also to widespread social conflicts related to the defence of nature, in which the mother's committees often play a key role. In fact, within this globalized chain of value, many territories become sacrifice zones (Little 2017) aimed at satisfying the profit-oriented market. This structural change has produced both negative externalities and popular resistance at multiple levels, first of all at the local level, in which several mobilizations spread in an endemic way (Imperatore 2023). The endemic nature of these kinds of local conflicts based on single-issue campaigns with specific goals and targets but very similar in terms of argumentations, practices, organization repertoire and symbology, has revealed a deep conflict rooted in the country between those who defend the *use value* of the territory and those who invest in its *exchange value* (Castells 1983; della Porta and Piazza 2008; Barca 2019; Imperatore 2023). On the one hand, the inhabitants of the territory who recognize its values in terms of social relationships and identification with its history and landscape, that together give meaning to the territory not as just a geographical space but as a social space. On the other hand, the economic and financial elite and, often, political institutions that recognize the value of the territory based on the opportunity to extract value from it. This pattern of value extraction from the territory and from its resources have produced an important cycle of

protest all over the country, in which the participation of women without past political experience but with a key role in the mobilization is a very common trend (Rovoletto 2020, Neves et al. 2023).

While several scholars have pointed out the cross-territorial and cross-class composition of these movements (della Porta and Piazza 2008, Caruso 2010) and have focused on the participation of different kinds of actors such as traditional environmental associations (della Porta e Andretta 2002), social centres (Piazza and Frazzetta 2019) or political parties (Mosca 2014, Caruso 2010), the presence and the role of mothers' committees has remained un-investigated.

The study of these committees is important for understanding the political nature of mothers' mobilisation, shedding light on the specificities that characterise it and the consequences that their participation produces in the public space - in this case, in the context of ecological conflict - and in the private space. By moving from this premise, this paper aims to analyse the mobilization of mothers' committees by focusing on their arguments, the use and transformation of the mother's collective identity, their strategic choices, and their outcomes, by comparing the case studies outlined below: No TAP, No PFAS and No MUOS mothers' committees. While these cases partially differ in terms of kind of ecological degradation against which they mobilize (groundwater poisoning in the case of PFAS; air and water pollution in the case of the TAP pipeline; and electromagnetic waves in the case of the MUOS military telecommunications infrastructure), all of them share some key features: 1) the context featured by a widespread local mobilization; 2) the pivotal role of mother's committees in the mobilization; 3) the defence of their children as leitmotif to start engaging politically.

Mamme No TAP. The committee Mamme No TAP was born in Melendugno (Apulia) in April 2017 during the escalation phase of the conflict around the construction of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). The protest campaign against TAP moved its first steps in 2011, when the project became public domain. After a long phase of institutional actions against the pipeline and counter information about its environmental, climate and social risks - during which the national government remained blind to local instances - in March 2017 the conflict exacerbated (Imperatore 2023). In fact, the national government - by ignoring the opposition of local institutions, the region and local residents - decided in favour of the construction of the pipeline: on March 17th the TAP trucks arrived in Melendugno escorted by police, with the goal of beginning the construction of the infrastructure. In this occasion, the local population took to the streets and gave rise to a strong phase of pacific resistance aimed at blocking the construction work, during which the level of repression exponentially increased, and a militarized red zone was instituted by the national government. In this context, several women organized themselves in the Mamme No TAP committee thus assuming a pivotal role in the mobilization and within the Movimento No TAP. They immediately distinguished themselves in the protest campaign for their arguments and action repertoires, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Mamme No PFAS. The Mamme No PFAS was born in Veneto in 2017, after local residents became aware of the results of the biomonitoring conducted by the region on persons aged between 14 and 29: the values of PFAS in their blood exceeded that present in healthy people by 30 to 40 times (Mamme No PFAS, *La nostra storia*). PFAS is a toxic substance produced by the chemical firm MITENI that for forty years has poisoned the watercourses and aquifers in the three main provinces of Veneto: Vicenza, Verona and Padua. In 2018 MITENI declared bankruptcy, but the contaminated area remained polluted, while the government declared a state of emergency and the Region of Veneto is currently evaluating how to proceed with the decontamination of the area (Mamme No PFAS, *Chi Siamo*). Since the publication of the biomonitoring results, the Mamme No PFAS have launched a protest campaign aimed at expanding screening of local residents, redefining the national limits of PFAS in water, food and industrial drainage, gaining access to safe water and food, obtaining the decontamination of the area and the building of a new water main, and having justice in the Court against

MITENI (Mamme No PFAS, *Obiettivi*). They are the protagonists of this campaign, and their role is recognized by both social movement networks and institutions.

Mamme No MUOS. The Mamme No MUOS committee was born in January 2013, in the middle of the escalation of the conflict around the installation of the Mobile User Objective System (MUOS), a US Navy telecommunications system within the military base of Niscemi, in the south-east of Sicily. As in the No TAP case, after a long phase of struggle conducted at institutional and communicative levels by the No MUOS Movement, in January 2013 the conflict intensified as the result of the beginning of building of the infrastructure. In the first weeks of 2013, trucks escorted by the Italian police tried to enter the military base to install the MUOS satellite dishes, but they found resistance from activists blocking the trucks. In this occasion, the repression against the activists increased provoking the indignation and solidarity of the local community that took to the streets and started to mobilize. In this phase, a group of mothers decided to organize a committee to defend their children and to support the struggles against both the negative consequences of electromagnetic waves produced by MUOS and the repression. In only a few days, the Mamme No MUOS committee gathered many supporters in Niscemi, by promoting their campaign at local, regional, national and European levels.

3 Methodology

This paper is part of a larger comparative research project on local ecological conflicts in Italy which started in 2017 and concluded in 2021, during which the role of mother's committees appeared as an expression of a wider phenomenon occurring all over the country.

In order to deeply explore mother activism in the above-mentioned case-studies, this paper is based on the triangulation of qualitative methods allowing the social phenomena to be explored from multiple perspectives, not only enriching the empirical material but also enabling the inherent limitations of using individual sources to be overcome (Yeasmin e Rahman 2012, 156-157, Bosi 2016, 18). Firstly, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors of mothers' committees and other organizations engaged in the protest campaigns in order to explore values, identities and emotions but also strategies and goals by "bringing human agency back to the centre of movement analyses" (Blee 2012, 96). The interviews were formulated in an open and flexible manner, leaving the possibility for interviewees to "produce their own narratives" (Bosi 2016, 16) and to connect micro/individual and the macro/political dimension during the interview (della Porta and Piazza 2008). More specifically, four interviews (Int. 1, 2, 3 and 6) were conducted with the spokespersons of the mother's committees investigated, with the goal of exploring their arguments, worldviews and strategies in the mobilization but also the way in which the participation to the conflict transformed the perception of their collective identity and their pattern of private life. In addition, three interviews (Int. 4, 5 and 7) were conducted with other key actors in the local mobilization (such as activists of other local committees, social centres, etc.) in order to capture the relationship between mothers' committees and other political organizations engaged in the conflict and simultaneously the outcomes of the mothers' activism recognized by external actors.

Wherever possible, empirical research has been enriched and integrated through participant observation in order to better understand processes, emotions and perceptions of investigated actors and to capture the interactions between activists and between them and their context (Cardano 2011). Given the political but also intimate dimension of this research, it has been important to spend time with activists to build relationships of trust (Ibidem) and better understand their everyday lives, that are shaped by both activism and motherhood. Participant observation was only conducted with Mamme No TAP because it was the only case in which the phase of fieldwork coincided with the presence of a permanent space in which the activists spent their everyday lives and to which I had access. Participant observation was conducted in two different contexts: the first (PO

19/01/19) was conducted in a private context, i.e. at the home of two activists (mother and daughter), while the second (PO 21/01/10) in a public context during a protest by the No Tap Movement in front of the pipeline construction sites, and was focused on the perceptions and values that the mothers/activists associated with the institution and police.

Finally, these methods were triangulated with the collection and analysis of online and offline documents produced by the actors. Through the frame analysis of these documents, it was possible to capture the process of meaning attribution (della Porta and Diani 2006), shedding light on the system of meanings and values that organize the social actors' comprehension of the world. At the same time, the focus on discursive practices allows us to capture the nature of actors as "signifying agents" (Snow and Benford 1988) who play an active role in interpreting grievances and defining goals, highlighting the strategic and deliberative side of language usage (Lindekilde 2014) in order to mobilize and gain legitimacy and support. In particular, videos, Facebook posts, documents on their blogs and the collection of writings produced by activists-mothers have been triangulated with other sources.

In conclusion, with respect to my positionality in the research field (Loftsdóttir 2002), I introduced myself as a researcher and environmental activist interested in understanding the general dynamics of conflict, initially approaching mothers' committees with curiosity but also scepticism regarding the exclusive identification of women solely as mothers. The relationships established through interviews and fieldwork led me to reflect on my positionality and the limitations – inheritance of my personal and academic journey – of recognizing plural and situated forms of women's activism, inevitably different from mine because of the differences of contexts and histories which we experienced. By questioning the theoretical rigidity with which I initially approached the fieldwork, I learned to deeply understand the reasons, processes, and transformations involved in mothers' political activism.

4 Discussion

4.1 Mobilize motherhood

What are the reasons of mothers' involvement in the investigated local ecological conflicts? The risk for the safety and the lives of their children seems to be the *leitmotif* for these women to organize themselves collectively by using the identity of mother.

In Niscemi we have created a NO MUOS mothers' committee. Mothers are those who give their lives and would sacrifice their own for their children. A mother would be able to move a boulder weighing hundreds of kilos in order to protect and guarantee the well-being of her children (FB 30/1/13)

We understood that we had to protect our children, because no one else would protect them. [...] in our territory the killers come in through the tap (she refers to the PFAS in the water) not through the door or through the window, you have them in your house 24 hours a day every day and whoever let them in has the same responsibility as the polluting company (Int.1)

When analysing these mobilisations, we are dealing with women that are having their first political experience and that lack the political capital pivotal for engaging in new political campaigns (Bourdieu 1986, Coleman 1988), "women who are often low educated, housewives, who are at their first experience of public and political confrontation" (Int. 7) This too is the result of the hegemonic values concerning motherhood that often "structures environments that retard the development of a political self and skills" and that are "child-centred" (Lynn and Flora 1973, 102).

Political experience? Zero! I was really ignorant, I was never interested in politics, I started working when I was 16, I met my husband, I had a family... out of ignorance but also out of disinterest, I never liked politics. None of us ever belonged to a political party or movement. (Int.1)

At the same time “the mother does not need a boss or leader to protect her children” but they “acted on instinct” by realizing “how much love and sense of protection (they) have not only for their children but for life, for the planet, for people” (Ibidem). The input for using motherhood in the political space comes from worrying about their children but also from the loss of trust in institutions which results in feelings of rage, fear and betrayal, as emerged during the action at the TAP construction sites during which the mothers protested the police deployed in defence of the company instead of the citizens, and expressed disappointment and anger at being treated like criminals by those who should protect them (PO 21/01/19). As a consequence of these experiences, a new consciousness emerges: in order to protect their children they have to make their voice heard and organize themselves in a direct way.

The recurring frames used by these mothers, grounded in their roles as defenders of life and children, have led many observers to describe these mobilizations as forms of *essentialist ecofeminism* (Shiva 1988, Mies and Shiva 1993), based on an ancestral connection between women and nature (De Falco *et al.* 2016).

However, by moving the attention on the processes that occurred in the conflict, it is possible capture how the concept of mother evolves over time and the way in which the activist strategically uses the collective identity of mother to gain advantage in the field of mobilization.

The worry for their children and the distrust and rage felt towards public institutions exacerbate with the repression of the protest, which represents a key step able to produce a deep change in perceptions of the State and its apparatuses, but also in the role played by mothers in the conflict. In fact, in an informal lunchtime conversation, two activists talked about their participation in the movement: they had always admired the police and many people in their family work in law enforcement, but this changed when they saw their behaviour towards citizens protesting against the TAP. From that moment, they decided to be on the front line defending those who were taking the most radical actions (PO 19/01/19). The strategic dimension of mothers’ mobilization emerges here, as another activist pointed out:

Mamme No TAP was born when the repression started because when there were the police, the arrests and the charges, many ordinary people were walking away out of fear. Mamme No TAP wanted to be a way to reassure people that there were still women in the struggle, that there were children, that it was possible to stay within the mobilisation. It was a way to bring us all closer again, to unite even more people. (Int.2)

Another mum states that when the police started to repress the young activists “a fuse was lit inside them” and they “said to us, ‘what are we doing? Are we sitting at home quietly with this story that is bigger than us?’” (Int.3). They deliberately choose to group together as mothers because “it appears more reassuring, but we are not all mums in the group” (Int.2). Sometimes, journalists give the name to these emerging groups, as in the Mamme No PFAS case, but the group immediately captures the potential to use this category because “mothers have an impact on local but also national society” (Int.1).

The need to use the label of ‘mothers’ is to show people that we are normal people, not terrorists as defined by the media or judges (Mamme in Lotta)

In this sense, they know that society attributes positive values and credibility to the role of the mother and so they strategically use their identity to gain consensus, widen their mobilization potential and legitimize the protest campaign in its entirety.

At the same time, in all the investigated groups there are not only biological mothers but they also include everyone that takes care of the territory (Ibidem): the topic of women as natural recipients of care work is strategically used to encourage people to participate in the mobilization, but at the same time this is contested insofar as they open the committee to all people, as some of the participants to Mamme NO TAP have said:

I'm not a mother, but I'm a woman, and what I share with the group of mothers is the desire to leave the next generations a future free from contamination and from the resignation that the future is already written (Cosa è cambiato con TAP, p.14)

I am not a mum, I am not even a dad, but I can say that I have a huge extended family. I have nieces that are not just my brothers' but they are the children of all of the comrades who live the movement. (Ivi, p.29).

Moving on to the forms of action, the mothers' committees adopt a wide action repertoire aimed at involving the whole community, including walks to discover wild herbs, archaeological trekking, and other activities aimed at taking local residents close to the construction site of the infrastructure in order to develop a consciousness about the defence of the territory (Int.2). They write books and fables aimed at schools and informing people about the contested project (FB 4/6/18), organizing a long coffee morning during which they make the mobilization known (FB 8/12/13a) and mobilize for international woman's day (Int.3). In some cases, they use a typical private activity, such as preparing breakfast, by politicizing a traditional female task and use it in the public space as a form of protest, or they recover the heritage of past women's struggles by circling around construction sites (FB 28/7/18) or hanging puppets and toys from the fences of the military base (FB 8/12/13b). In other cases, they occupy space traditionally reserved to men, by speaking up in criminal trials and by bringing forth civil action (Mamme NO PFAS, *Obiettivi*).

With their presence and their choices in terms of action repertoire, the mothers' committees play a key role in the conflict as a bridging actor between the most radical groups and the local community avoiding the fractures between "good and bad" demonstrators and increasing the legitimacy of the protest campaign in the public debate. Through Mamme NO TAP "the 80-year-old lady entered the social centre and approached this other pattern of life, with no more conflict. Now the old ladies take part in actions of struggle too" (Int.2). Also, the other activists engaged in the protest campaigns recognize their fundamental role of bridging and mediation, in particular in the most conflictual phases:

at the first roadblocks there were only the most radical militants, but the fact that we all had the mothers next to us who mediated with both the militants and the local population revealed itself to be a strength, because it prevented a split from forming at that moment (Int.4)

As confirmed by an activist of a social centre, "the mothers were a link to the whole country, not just the angry youth group" (Int.5), and they have succeeded in involving a wide and heterogeneous community in the protest campaign. This strategy of networking has also occurred at national level, at which several Italian mothers' committees organized in 2019 in a group named "Mamme da Nord a Sud" (Mothers from North to South), through which they increase media coverage of the territorial resistances, and they share knowledge and legal tools to empower themselves (Centro Studi Sereno Regis, 25/5/21).

While the mothers' participation in ecological conflict produces positive effects in terms of legitimacy of the campaign and networking between most moderate and most radical actors, their physical resistance puts in crisis the institutional strategy in crisis, by representing a physical obstacle not just to the construction of the infrastructure but also to the repression used to stop the protest. As a local activist comments, for the police there is a relevant difference between facing political militants that can easily be repressed without creating a wave of indignation, and facing mothers, old people, teachers or other "categories" usually well accepted by society at large (Int.4). These mothers are aware of this, and they exploit this to their advantage:

the vehicle blockade was also done with our bodies, but the mothers with the pearl earrings put the police in trouble, because a policeman would not dare to grab me and yank me away (Int.3)

On arriving at 4 a.m. I would already find the mothers with a fire lit and breakfast ready, in the middle of the road blocking the vehicles, so even the police's approach was completely different to just finding youth doing this. (Int.4)

By deeply investigating these mobilizations, the *agency* and strategy of the mothers clearly emerge. It's interesting to notice how several women without past political experience or interest in political participation produce a deep transformation in the field of conflict and, at the same time, are transformed by the conflict, through which they subjectivized by taking a consciousness about gender stereotyping that bear on mothers. In this context, they don't just occupy the public space, but also redefine the role traditionally associated to motherhood towards a more feminist pattern, as will be discussed in the next section.

4.2 Subverting motherhood

If it's true that the role of the mother is largely accepted in society, it is at the same time disciplined according to hegemonic values and embedded within specific borders. As Grieco (2016, 133) argues, "the maternal body is the centre of practices that concur in fashioning hegemonic social norms which define the appropriate way of being member of the nation". Attitudes and performance (Butler 2013) based on the natural inclination for the care-activity and their passive and submissive disposition has been historically associated to the role of mother. On this basis, society has specific expectations about the behaviours considered appropriate for a mother.

During the conflict, the process of politicization and the process of subversion of the mother's identity occurred in an intertwined way. When the mothers decided to become organized and join the struggle by occupying the public space, they put the hegemonic narrative of a mother as a docile woman devoted to the care work in the domestic sphere in crisis.

This opens new spaces of conflict within both the private and public spheres, to which political and family institutions often react by attempting to stigmatize the mobilizing mothers as *bad mothers* (Simoncini 2024). In this sense, the identity of the mother is also strategically used by the counterparts to delegitimize the activists and to blackmail them pushing them to retreat from the protest by using the care of their children as an argument.

When the mothers take to the streets with their children to denounce a problem, some newspapers have written that the "protest enlists children" (Repubblica, 2/4/17), accusing the mothers of using their children as an instrument of protest and putting them at risk. This strategy is also adopted by public institutions and therefore the police, as argued here:

in order to instil fear and loosen the grip of this fight, the police singled out mothers in fragile situations: one of them had a child custody trial under way, but if you are investigated or charged with contempt or other offences you risk losing custody, so they leveraged this. (Int.6)

The mother engaged in political activism clashes with a chauvinist culture that emerges in three main contexts: society, the institution and the family (De Falco *et al.* 2016), that create the stigma of a bad mother who instead of protecting her children puts them at risk or disregards them. The mothers that choose political mobilization face all these obstacles and stigmas, not renouncing their identity but transforming it. As a mother affirms, the mobilization has “upset” their everyday life by taking her out of the house 7 days a week (Int.1). This everyday engagement in political activity adds “a substantial load of unrecognized and unpaid labour to women” (Grieco 2016, 143) and produces a deep sense of guilt for neglecting one’s own family:

towards your family you have a sense of guilt because, you say 'I am neglecting the rest. What is the point of doing this to protect you, if I am neglecting you now?' I thought they (the children) were mad at me because I was never home (Int.1)

On one hand the sense of guilt related to their children, a feeling that is socially constructed and gender-dependent; on the other hand the pressure of the husbands within the domestic sphere to convince the women to give up on the activism.

You have to imagine how I found myself. On the one hand I had the law at home telling me ‘certain things you can't do’ (her husband is a military man), and on the other hand in my heart there was a woman who would split the world in half. My husband took a step back. (Int.3)

There were many mothers with military husbands, and one of these mothers came to do the mobilization in secret because her husband was against her being involved. Her husband thought that we were in the square and she was doing shifts at the presidium instead. This makes you understand how much we believed in this struggle. (Int.6)

When the mobilisation exploded, my daughter had just turned three months old. I felt a sense of helplessness and guilt for all the times I was trembling to be there and being told 'YOU think of the baby'. So I told myself that thinking of the baby was undoubtedly a priority, but I would have died, my person, my being a woman (not just a mother) would have died, if I had not tried to help. (Cosa è cambiato con TAP, p.19)

Despite the several obstacles to mothers’ activism that we capture through these words and that lean on the stigma of *bad mother*, in the protest these women find the courage and the determination to go on and to open emancipatory space for themselves as women and mothers. They become conscious of the care work and mental burden that is offloaded onto them:

In the end, the one who thinks about the family is always the mother... we women have to think about shopping, washing, ironing, we have to think about our elderly parents. There are so many things, it's not that a woman finishes work and is done (Int.1)

Their activism deeply changes this pattern of life within both the private and public sphere, during which “dynamics that I thought were firm and stable were broken” (Ibidem). It was not so easy, and it also reveals

itself as traumatic, but these “mothers knew that if they stopped everything would stop, that things would go back to the way they were before”:

Here my life has changed radically because I have to fight at home with my husband [...] It means fighting in the family trying to mediate the equilibriums, it means fighting against the system, and against the town. It's not easy to fight. (Mamme in lotta)

It was difficult for us but it was like a thorn in our side and we had to move to ease the pain. I discovered a side of me I didn't know existed (Int.1)

This new everyday life created a space and time for the women, during which they became conscious of the gender division of labour and the power dynamics that innervate their lives, but also of their *agency* in redefining the idea of mother by rejecting hegemonic social norms. The mobilization of mothers also becomes a feminist instance in as much as they break some schemes and rules that bridle the mothers within specific social norms and performance that do not contemplate their active participation in public life. As one activist argues, in their territorial context the role of women is disciplined by the hegemonic idea of “married woman whose husband did not want problems at home” (Int.4). Therefore, the extraordinary centrality of women in the mobilization was transformative for the territory:

the fact that these women came to the presidium at 5 a.m. and left their children at home, and that it was the husband who took the children to school and not the mother, was a revolution in a place like Sicily where women in such small towns still have that role of woman and mother who take care of the home. In Niscemi there was a social revolution that no one expected (Ibidem)

The choice to participate in International Women's Day on March 8th by organizing demonstrations or supporting the Non Una di Meno transfeminist movement is an expression of how the struggle of mothers has incorporated demands for the rights of all women. The women are not just defending their children, but they are “building resistance against the violence” of large infrastructures, they are also mobilizing “all women can live their future”, they are “shouting alongside Non Una di Meno and the Casa delle donne (Women's House)” because they are “rejecting the alliance between patriarchy, racism and neoliberalism that leads to the exploitation and disfigurement of land, territories and bodies” (FB 9/3/19).

5. Conclusion

By focusing on mothers' activism within the ecological conflicts in Italy, this paper aims to bridge the gap in literature on this relevant phenomenon, by simultaneously putting into question the main interpretations offered by existing studies.

First of all, although this does not represent the focus of this paper, the widespread of mothers' organizations seems to be a recurring trend in ecological conflicts. The environmental degradation threatens the same reproductive sphere, namely the possibility of having children or healthy children, and also increases the burden of care work related to the spread of disease, for which women bear the brunt (Venes et al. 2023). The bodies of the women are at the frontline in experiencing ecological degradation and the consequences of harmfulness, and this helps us understand why it is precisely in the ecology field where we see the most recurring forms of mother's activism, by outlining the material connection between women and nature

(Agarwal 2001). In fact, women's proximity to nature does not arise from any inherent biological or spiritual connection but rather from the social-material circumstances founded on specific gender-roles that shape the everyday life of women (Salleh 2017, Gaard 2011, Mellor 1997). Nevertheless, some scholars consider the activism based on the mother identity as a form of *essentialism* (Shiva 1988, Mies and Shiva 1993, De Falco *et al.* 2016), in which the supposed ancestral connection between women and nature as those that give life is defined as the *leitmotif* of mother activism.

More significantly, this paper has highlighted other dimensions and processes that occur during mobilization, providing a more detailed and complex overview in order to appreciate this kind of activism. This research in fact suggests another interpretation: these forms of mothers' mobilization could be better understood through the lens of *strategic essentialism* (Spivak 1988, Venes *et al.* 2023) that attempts to combine the dimension of identity with the dimension of *agency*, by focusing on the strategic use of essentialist narratives. By adopting a constructivist approach, Spivak rejects the idea of an essential identity but argues that its use could be considered a strategy, "used self-consciously as well as unself-consciously" (1990, 109), resulting from a pragmatic and political approach aimed at connecting identity and *agency* to realize a social change (Tarim 2011).

The interviews bring out the deep identification of these women with the identity of mother as those that defend their children but, simultaneously, their *agency* in strategically using this identity to gain success and legitimation "by representing themselves as naturally altruistic mothers" (Grieco 2016, 142) moved by blood relation. The phase of the conflict in which they choose to take to the streets and the frame and action repertoire that they select cannot be understood merely as a biological instinctive reflex but also requires being read as the outcome of specific strategic choices aimed at legitimizing the mobilization during a critical phase and reducing police violence (Venes *et al.* 2023). In this sense, strategies are also embodied in specific contexts and vary according to the cultural, social and political landscape in which the mobilisation takes place, underlining the opportunity to link strategic essentialism and embodied feminism. Indeed, the political strategy of women who use motherhood in an essentialist way must be considered an embodied practice in their everyday lives, since the political use of motherhood facilitates mobilisation in their context of reference.

At the same time, the field of protest represents a key space for the subjectivation of the participant and the transformation of their collective identity and the related performance or social norms (McGarry and Jasper 2015, Melucci 1996). Throughout the bottom-up use of motherhood, the mothers' committees reject both the top-down use of motherhood, by entering into conflict with the same institutions that claim to define the maternity models which are considered acceptable, but also to reproduce a stereotypical image and role of motherhood, as feared by feminism. By means of their activism, the mothers' organizations challenge the hegemonic social norms that discipline the traditional identity of mother and take voice in the public realm by opening *intra-role conflicts* (De Falco *et al.* 2016) between their multiple roles of "mothers, daughters of elderly people, wives and activists". Their subjectivation as political activists doesn't reject the idea of identifying themselves as mothers but deconstructs the hegemonic representation of motherhood as linked with passivity and docility as well as the dichotomy public – private based on gender binarism that represents masculinity as intrinsically political and femininity as naturally apolitical.

Within this context featured by plural and conflicting dynamics, the mothers opened an emancipatory space for themselves, in which "contesting ideologies of 'good motherhood' or embracing and transforming them to meet their needs" (Grieco 2016, 145). Initially born to defend their children from environmental hazards, the mothers' groups face a series of material and political concerns which are directly connected to women's rights (Stephen 1997) that lead them - through conflict - to subvert the dominant idea of the mother towards a more feminist pattern. In this sense, this paper suggests considering these mobilizations as forms of embodied feminism (Salleh 2017): starting from a context in which the traditional cult of women as mothers has

historically confined them to the domestic space, these activists revealed themselves to be capable of transforming - with specific practices, keywords and language that are rooted in their context - the patterns of private and political life in an emancipatory way. Although in contexts that are often marginalised and not very permeable to feminist claims, the mothers' committees have been able to rearticulate patriarchal power relations and to open a terrain for the conquest of rights for all women. The right to leave the domestic space and take voice in the public space, to struggle, to contest the gender-based organization of labour and to reorganize it in a more balanced way, to create a space of women and for women, were not always given to women, nor are they guaranteed now. For this reason, it is valuable to recognize these processes as inherently feminist and necessarily situated: even if they may not always explicitly name feminism, they effectively embody feminist practices.

In conclusion, this paper suggests that the combination between identity, material conditions and tactical evaluations could together explicate the forms of political maternalism that emerge in the environmental conflicts studied.

At the same time, there are several possible trajectories to continue along this line of study. Firstly, comparative research will be necessary in order to assess how the political context and both local and national culture - also in relation to the role of women - can influence the emergence, patterns, evolution and outcomes of mothers' activism. Secondly, the internal conflicts about the interpretation of motherhood and the different way in which the mothers' committees develop narratives about nature need to be deeply investigated. Thirdly, future research will have to address certain questions to understand how this type of mobilisation can contribute to the analysis of collective action, focusing in particular on issues of identity and strategic dilemmas.

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