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Workerism, Feminism and Some Efforts of the United Nations

When I accepted the invitation to give this talk¹, I opted for an informative narrative report that would speak about feminism of the 1970s, in particular of a certain strand of that feminism, because the re-opening of a debate on the issue of abortion, on which some positions would withdraw the recognition of women's self-determination, made me think it useful to let people know the starting point of that battle, which was in Padua on June 5, 1973, a trial for abortion transformed into a moment of political mobilization, inscribed in a context of struggles that were important in determining major changes in the female condition.

The feminist movement in the 1970s in Italy had basically two souls identified by two different paths of action. One was self-consciousness based on the formation of small groups in which women, starting from their own experience, analyzed the female condition and hardships. This was similar to the North American practice of "raising consciousness" and was widely present in Milan and in relationship with the Parisian group "*Psychanalyse et Politique*" (with Antoinette Fouqué). The other, which carried out "political intervention" and in which *Lotta Femminista* [Feminist Struggle], later called *Movimento per il salario al lavoro domestico (Sld)* [the Movement for Wages for Housework (WFH)], was predominant, turned instead to interpreting the female condition beginning with the analysis of capitalist development and changing it through struggles. Thus it was immersed in a practice of intense militancy that aimed at a big change in the status of women and in a

¹ This text is the re-elaboration of materials presented at conferences I have held on the issues analyzed in this article at the University of Calabria at the Faculty of Economics in January 2008 and, in April of the same year, at the University of Caxias do Sul, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil; at the University of Buenos Aires, Faculty of Political Science, as well as at the Instituto de Desarrollo Economico y Social, Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, also in Buenos Aires, and in the same city, for the Seminar of Feminist Philosophy "Debate feminista" at the Libreria de Mujeres.

type of development with its own modalities of organization of production and reproduction. I will discuss this second soul whose fate it was, in the late 1970s, to encounter a phase of harsh repression, that in particular hit the movements that had fought hard, including this feminist strand, and to encounter an action of cancellation on a cultural level as occurred from the 1980s onwards. But without those struggles there would not have been the acquisitions that deeply changed the status of women in Italy and in other countries, since even the international dimension of this movement was very much alive and important. And if today those acquisitions seem obvious, they were not and are not expected and there is always the risk of being forced to retreat. To better explain this movement it's necessary to think back to the 1960s and point out a few things about that period.

The 1950s and 1960s were the years of *great emancipation through work*, primarily industrial work that finally gave a rather secure wage to subjects such as farmers, laborers, shepherds, fishermen, who now felt for the first time that they could get out of the poverty and uncertainty of the rural world and could migrate, no longer to foreign countries but within the country, to the city and industrial centers. The *city* also allowed one to get away from the overly tight control of the village and this was eagerly welcomed by *men and women*. The 1960s were also the years of *the emergence of the young* as a subject. Towards the end of the decade, however, modernization also revealed the intolerance of its hidden costs and its aspects of backwardness. Workers rose up against the harshness of conditions in the factory, the young against authoritarianism in the University, in the family and in society, and against the costs of studying (struggles about cafeterias, transport and housing). It was 1968 and 1969. It was the students' movement that soon discovered the factory and the workers' movement that soon coincided with

that of the students, and this was particularly true in Italy.

Even the women, as I said, migrated to the cities in search of their own income, and above all, they chose less and less to marry men who would not take them into the city.² But for the woman there still remained an indisputable “characteristic of her femininity”, the obligation firstly to fulfill her family duties, namely to guarantee the reproduction of the family, even if she sought and found work outside the home. A woman's place was in the home and if she did not marry she remained a “misfit”. On the other hand, Article 37 of the Italian Constitution, while sanctioning equal pay, stated that working conditions must allow women to fulfill their essential role in the family, in other words the carrying out of housework, even if at the time it wasn't discussed in such an open and brutal way. In 1960 and 1963 the first laws on equal pay were promulgated.³ But even if young men and women, as I said, were the emerging subject of that decade, the right of the woman to exist as a person was strongly prejudiced, not only by her primary family responsibility but also by legislation concerning her condition which is worth remembering. As for her status in the family, as Laura Remiddi observes, “Without referring to ancient times, but to just before the new reform [1975], the married woman was subject to the authority of her husband, who was the head of the family, she assumed his surname and was obliged to accompany him wherever he chose to fix his abode. The man even had the right to “correct” his wife, to control her actions, to punish her for her failings; in short, she submitted to really belonging to her husband which considerably limited her rights and established a profound juridical difference between the status of a married woman and an unmarried woman. Even the freedom and secrecy of telephone conversations and correspondence, rights which are

² I analyze this behavior within a reading of the processes initiated by women since World War II to build their own autonomy in *Reproduction and Emigration* (DALLA COSTA, M. 2012, 126).

³ The agreement of 1960 on equal pay in industrial work, followed in 1963 by other measures relative to other

guaranteed to all citizens by Constitutions, laws and international treaties, were often called into question for the married woman, from whom the husband could take away letters and even intercept telephone communications to watch over her behavior (Court of Appeal of Milan, 09 July 1971).⁴ Let's also keep in mind that the 1960s represented a time when a woman's sexuality had yet to be "discovered" and affirmed. It was basically a service for male sexuality and a means of procreation. Housework and violence also had yet to be "discovered". The rules which defined the status of women in the family were linked to other rules that were always aimed at controlling their conduct in a highly discriminatory manner with respect to the conduct of men. First of all those related to adultery which, according to Article 559 of the penal code, constituted a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment for one to two years, only if committed by a woman. This article was repealed in 1968 under sentence no. 126 of the Constitutional Court given on December 19th of that year. Furthermore, anyone who wished to marry a woman against her will, knew how to obligate her through a brutal procedure that was practiced in some areas of southern Italy. That was to kidnap and rape the woman and then, relying on the fact that no other man would have wanted her for his wife after such dishonor, the man would go to her family asking for her hand in marriage. It was precisely the shotgun wedding that under Article 544 of the penal code expunged the crime of violence, as well as washing away the shame of the family. This article was repealed by Law no. 442 of August 5, 1981. But it was only the heroic rebellion of Franca Viola from Alcamo (Trapani) who put an end to the inevitability of having to accept such violence. After being kidnapped on December 26, 1965, raped

economic sectors, introduced a system of contractual framing no longer formulated on the basis of a separate classification for men and women but which defined remunerative parameters differentiated according to the criterion of skill. The reasons for the systematic sub-framing of the female labor force with respect to the male labor force remained uninvestigated let alone discussed. On this matter see BALLESTRERO (1979).

⁴ This passage by REMIDDI (1976, 73) is cited in DALLA COSTA, G. F. (2008, 46 note 3).

and left for days alone in an abandoned country cottage, she refused the shotgun wedding. It was a historic turning point in the affirmation of the woman as a person and her right to choose her husband. It was a preview of that process for self-determination that would be the *leit-motif* of feminism of the 1970s. Article 587 of the penal code enforced “honor killing”, a crime with a paltry punishment (three to seven years in prison⁴ as compared with 21 years as the minimum sentence for murder), practically a license to kill⁵ for a spouse, father or brother who had discovered an illegitimate carnal relationship of the other spouse, daughter or sister. It should be noted that while this legislation was valid for both spouses, the victim of these crimes was fundamentally the wife. Article 587 of the penal code was also repealed in 1981 along with Law no. 442 of August 5th of that year. Abortion was prohibited (permitted only in the case of so-called therapeutic abortion), however as always it was practiced by women and often paid for by death or disablement. There was a ban on the advertising of contraceptives, which was repealed under sentence no. 49 of the Constitutional Court on March 10, 1971. Incest was not punishable unless it constituted a public scandal (Art. 564 of the penal code) and the penalty was increased if it materialized into an incestuous relationship.⁶ Divorce, which had started its *iter* in 1965, entered into the Italian legal system in 1970 with Law no. 898 but in context it approved the rules for submitting it to a referendum, which would take place in 1974, decreeing in its results the victory of the feminist movement. Sexual violence against women had little or no chance of being taken to court with an outcome favorable to the woman, and certainly one could not take to court a husband against his wife or a pimp against a prostitute,⁷ or a prostitute’s case in general. Sexual violence against women was, however, listed in the area of offenses against public

⁵ As defined by REMIDDI (1976), commenting on Article 587 of the penal code.

⁶ For some hypotheses on the reasons for this strange law see DALLA COSTA, G. F. (2008).

⁷ In June 1977, the news of a prostitute denouncing her pimp for violence was announced on the radio as an

morals and decency, not against the person.

The rules, written and unwritten, that we have just now illustrated represented the backward aspects of modernization but women's commitment to change them would not be of little account. The emergence of the workers and students' movement in 1968-69 also involved numerous women. The chance to attend university and the opportunity of militancy in the student movement or in extra-parliamentary groups that formed in those years was itself an opportunity for a woman's emancipation with respect to a role and a predetermined path, passing from the house of her father to that of her husband without ever having had a time and a place in which to develop who she was and what she wanted. Above all, in such militancy young women found a free and friendly territory from which to discover and interpret the world, and ask themselves how to relate to it. The big difference with the condition of their mothers was primarily in this: they had a time and place for themselves where they could meet many others, where they could enjoy more equal and free relationships with their peers, classmates and companions in the struggle, where they could experience a social and even sexual life that wasn't dependent on one's marital status. Even in this there was a big difference with respect to how the sexual life of women of the previous generation had been denied in marriage itself because there existed not only the imperative of virginity before marriage but generally the first child, with all the responsibilities that it entailed, was born after nine months of marriage. And there had been very few opportunities to meet people and decide to whom to say "I do".

The context of that movement was steeped in the reading of Marx. The teachers who were most sensitive to social issues gave regular lectures on *Capital*; the most committed students knew at least Chapters 8, 24 and 25 of the first book of this work. Therefore, it was clear to them that in

“incident happening for the first time in Italy” (DALLA COSTA, G. F. 2008, 101, note 21).

order to understand the world it was necessary to start with the organization of work. And student militancy, as I said, discovered the factory. In the Veneto Region the large chemical plant in Porto Marghera was the main place of workers' struggles which soon made connections with others in the territory. If for the students the problems were authoritarianism and the costs of studying, for the workers the problems were despotism, unfairness and the brutality of working conditions. Wage raises and shorter hours were not the only issues on the table. There was also the determination to do away with the arbitrary nature of a wage level that depended on the foreman or team leader (a large part of the wage was paid by the job); the willingness for more equality and democracy in the factory that was articulated with the significant request of an increase in the production bonus of 5,000 *lire* a month for everybody; the request to have a month off like the office employees instead of just 15 days; the request for 100% of sick-pay like the office employees and not just 60%; the request to have elected representatives of each department that actually knew the problems of the work and who, on the basis of a real mandate, would bring forward departmental requests. Workers denounced and fought against illegal hiring, refused corporate paternalism which, by facilitating opportunities for study or holidays of the workers' children, tried to gain the approval of the workers thereby breaking the front of their struggle. They denounced the brutality of working conditions, workers' exposure to and contact with carcinogenic substances without proper protection.⁸ All of this was known to militant students and taken up by them; it was their training course on politics. The fight, as I said, soon went beyond the confines of a single factory, resulting in political recomposition with other workers⁹

⁸ See the interviews with some of the protagonists of the workers' struggles of the period in the DVD (WILDCAT and FRIENDS 2006).

⁹ The main stages and objectives of the struggles in Porto Marghera were brought to the attention of the workers of Montedison in Crotona (Calabria). On the history of this factory and its working class see the work of

and other subjects within the territory, aiming also at improving the conditions of life outside the factory, within the social factory: struggles for homes (against unsanitary housing and rent levels), for parks, against the high cost of living and for the autoreduction of utility bills, self-organization to build a sports field (created on their own with the help of Marghera dockers who brought in bulldozers to level the ground), the occupation of a building to convert it for use as a school. Neighborhood committees were created which were already carrying out the functions of promoting improvement in living conditions that in other times would have been carried out by social centers and in which the role of women became fundamental. In reality the worker community, factory workers and housewives already functioned, as has been observed, as a social center (WILDCAT and FRIENDS 2006). A great struggle on reproduction was opened up, even if it wasn't yet called that and even if its main subject, the woman, had not yet revealed all her cruciality and the specificity of her problems.

But it was the very close involvement in this "political work" which at some point provoked the women who took action to question themselves on their own militancy. This was because more and more there emerged the feeling that in those relationships for women there was also uneasiness; an uneasiness that stemmed from having noticed that as women they had problems but they had not put them into focus, that they were fighting for everyone but not for themselves.

The feminist movement was forming in Italy. After a few skirmishes in the second half of the 1960s, of which the behavior of Franca Viola is a significant example, and after the sporadic formation of some feminist groups (CALABRÒ and GRASSO 1985; ZUMAGLINO 1996) at the beginning of the 1970s those two great souls, which would be referred to as the psychoanalytical and the political, began to emerge in the

movement. If the former didn't much like demonstrations and what it called external deadlines, so that even on crucial initiatives, such as those related to mobilization for abortion, it sometimes preferred not to be present, the latter represented an ever-running engine of initiative facing outward. The political soul, strengthened by the reading of Marx and the experience of intervention in the factory and in the neighborhoods carried out within groups of the New Left or in the students' movement, intended to do political work on the female condition expressing the same kind of militancy. The two souls were united, however, by the break with the perspective of emancipation, by the lack of interest for the goal of equality seen as the bearer of the vice of homologation with men's condition, by the refusal to have anything to do with the institutions.

"Liberation", not emancipation (in any case a difficult and limited conquest of previous generations) constituted the new flag that, as women advanced in their journey and claimed their human rights and fundamental freedoms, and their citizenship rights, constantly took on new contents. Liberated from male authority, liberated from economic dependence on man, liberated from having to suffer violence, free to decide about sexuality and procreation, free to be self-determined in every aspect of their lives.

"Difference" was the other big affirmation opposite the discussion of equality. Difference as a specificity of the female condition, difference that needed to come out and which needed specific answers.

The strand of *Lotta Femminista*, which later became the network of Groups and Committees for Wages for Housework [WFH/Sld], and which had its first nucleus in Padua with women coming from a background in workerism and the experience of political work in Porto Marghera represented an organization in rapid growth. In a short time WFH/Sld Groups were formed from the Trentino Region to

Sicily. Already in 1972, the International Feminist Collective was formed to promote debate and coordinate action in various countries. As for Europe, groups for Wages for Housework were formed in Germany and Switzerland as well as in Britain and Italy, and also across the Atlantic in the United States and Canada. And they held regular international conferences.

Lotta Femminista saw the difference as it was represented in the capitalist sexual division of labor. Men's work of producing goods was remunerated, women's work of producing and reproducing labor power was not. This was the unbearable contradiction, the unpaid female worker in a wage economy. This was the difference that created a hierarchy between men and women. This was the unbearable condition, being a housewife (Italy at the time had a particularly high rate of housewives) who was continually required to carry out her work of reproducing the entire family, but dependent on the man for support, a dependence which hindered all her life choices.

Breaking this contradiction meant starting struggles everywhere in order to make housework cost. But it was also a great cultural awakening. The issue of housework dominated the whole feminist movement, taking the place of emancipation through work outside the home, even in those circuits that did not share the request for remunerating it. Women increasingly rejected a femininity made of infinite willingness to reproduce others for free.

The cornerstones of the matter were: that the family was first and foremost a place of production, here the labor force was daily produced and reproduced (as opposed to those who saw it only as a place of production of use values, or as a reserve of labor power, or as a place of mere consumption); that the subject whom the capitalist sexual division of labor had saddled with doing this work for free was the woman, thereby defining her condition and compromising her every other life choice; that the woman and her work in the

house constituted the other pole of production with respect to that of the factory, and around that pole revolved the so-called social factory; and that the work of women constituted the hidden phase of capitalist accumulation and was vital to the capital seeing as it produced the commodity most precious to it: labor power itself. Consequently a woman held in her hands a fundamental lever of social power. She could refuse to produce (but in too many cases this would prove to be an impassable road, or utopia). The concept of class was expanded to include the housewives who had been called, according to the workerist approach, *houseworkers*, pointing out that in reality with one salary a boss acquired two employees, the worker and the housewife behind him.¹⁰

Having put into focus how wages actually commanded not only paid work but also a lot of unpaid work provided a fundamental key to understanding the relationship between the First and Third World, to analyzing, even in the current globalization of the economy, how much the work of reproduction, by old and new subjects, is commanded in areas of advanced capitalism just as in rural and urban areas of “developing countries”.

If the leftist proposal to women had always been emancipation through work outside the home, which did not really free them from their first job within the home, the novelty of the issue taken up by *Lotta Femminista* lay in the claim for retribution for housework together with the request for a more adequate network of services and a reduction of hours in the work day for everyone, male and female. So not only was the demand for wages for housework carried out by organizing demonstrations and other events but most of all actions spread to make this work, which was considered a free obligation, stand out and cost at every workplace. Beginning, above all, with the quota regarding child-rearing. In this regard, almost all

¹⁰ *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (DALLA COSTA, M. & JAMES 1972) was the book that defined this analysis and, translated in several languages, promoted international debate on wages for housework.

European and North American countries had some form of remuneration for housework where young children were present, especially for single mothers (the welfare of welfare mothers in the United States, the family allowances in England, the allowances destined to unmarried women with children in France). Italy was a very negative exception. It was willing to provide substantial funds to institutions for abandoned children, funds which were usually scattered in the maze of political patronage, but not to directly support a mother in difficulty.

The pressure on wages carried out by other subjects in the struggle, not only the workers but also the students who demanded a pre-wage, gave further impetus to the decision to claim wages for housework. Once that work had been revealed in all its breadth and complexity of the material and immaterial work of psycho- affective reproduction, it was imperative to claim remuneration, to want economic recognition for it because largely in economic terms it conditioned the life of the woman (who was not only discriminated against but also self-discriminated in order to be able to bear the family burden, a horse arriving already tired on the labor market). On the other hand, the dimension of a totalizing militancy that had been experienced in the factory intervention would continue, and would characterize the feminist action of this movement. The other very important element was that the women activists autofinanced their whole activity, including the rental of their office in Piazza Eremitani n. 26, on the first and only floor of a strange building, a kind of fortress overlooking the old church with frescoes by Mantegna. They didn't occupy a building, deeming that they would waste too much time and that they would always be in a precarious situation (nor did they think to ask the City Hall because at that time it was inconceivable). They were more interested in having a stable home where they could gather and plan their actions. *Lotta Femminista* printed a newspaper, *Le operaie della casa* [*The Houseworkers*], and produced many small

brochures for militant use. In addition to these materials, more analytical works on fundamental issues were produced, building a body of theory that has continued to be developed over time.

Considering the type of practice it should first be pointed out that, as far as Italy was concerned, the regions which saw a more widespread presence of the Groups and Committees for Wages for Housework [WFH/Sld] were the Triveneto and Emilia Romagna. But there were also very active WFH/Sld Groups in Milan, Varese, Florence, Rome, Naples and Gela. Furthermore, there often spontaneously arose Groups which were not registered in any way, not even in the address roster, such as the San Donà di Piave branch which, among other things, published an interesting brochure on the issue of health entitled “The Power of Well-Being”. For this feminist strand one could roughly indicate four main areas of struggle,¹¹ and intervention: work, sexuality, health and violence. But on closer inspection they were all closely intertwined seeing how a woman's sexuality had been transformed in the function of procreative reproductive work of others. It constituted the central task of housework, and violence was the disciplinary instrument par excellence of such work seeing as it was free labor.¹²

Sexuality, childbirth and abortion were a very important sector. Great struggles were carried out in hospitals. But these areas also constituted the ground of considerable analytical commitment. Just think of the interpretation of the witch hunts (FEDERICI and FORTUNATI 1984; FEDERICI 2004) within the macro-processes of original accumulation in which it had been brought to light how, by no coincidence, midwives were among the privileged victims, since midwifery was to become a male profession. In fact, the state assumed control over the reproduction of labor power, taking this knowledge away from

¹¹ For a more detailed account of these struggles refer to my two articles, (DALLA COSTA, M. 2009a; 2009b).

¹² This is the main thesis put forward and developed in *The Work of Love*, (DALLA COSTA, G.F. 2008).

women and relying upon the nascent medical profession, itself under the control of the state and the church. But above all, it came to the fore how the witch hunt served to redefine the social role of the woman who, in the capitalist family, had to become subordinate to the authority of her husband, sexually repressed, devoid of economic autonomy and above all without knowledge and decision-making power about sexuality and procreation. Opposite the female body, since then transformed into a machine for reproducing labor power, there was the determination to return to the woman that knowledge and that power. On the other hand, the need for women to know their own bodies was one of the traits characterizing the origins of the feminist movement, not just in Italy.

Abortion, as I said, was forbidden. Disablement and often death were the costs women paid for having clandestine abortions carried out by doctors who officially objected to the procedure. And they used to perform the curettage without anesthesia, an infernal pain for the women, from which these doctors made large and ill-gotten gains. Midwives used knitting needles and parsley. A woman in Padua was accused of getting an abortion. It was decided to transform her trial, which started on June 5th, 1973, into political mobilization in which the entire movement participated. This was the start and the engine of mobilization that would lead to the legalization of the voluntary termination of a pregnancy. At the Burlo Garofalo Children's Hospital of Trieste there was a case in which a woman, already the mother of three, was refused a therapeutic abortion (the only kind permitted by law at the time) in the third month of pregnancy. Her only remaining option was a clandestine abortion. The mobilization of women forced the hospital to accept the case and perform the abortion (COORDINAMENTO NAZIONALE dei Gruppi e Comitati per il Sld 1978). It was important that the movement had brought to light that the women who most frequently had abortions were not so much girls but mothers of families, already bringing up children, who could not afford to have another one. As we

know, after years of struggle and mobilization Law no. 194 of 1978 was passed.

Childbirth also experienced a profound transformation becoming hospitalized and overly medicalized. In this transformation the woman was made totally passive and treated as a patient by doctors who were often arrogant and at times sadistic (suturing without anesthesia, leaving women in labor without any assistance, etc.). The struggle against St. Anna's Hospital of Ferrara remained famous. Here women denounced, among other things, babies injured at birth due to poor practice and in particular from the improper use of forceps. The action taken by women was duly documented in the book *Dietro la normalità del parto. Lotta all'ospedale di Ferrara* (GRUPPO FEMMINISTA per il Sid di Ferrara 1978). More generally women wanted to bring childbirth back to being a natural, not pathological, event and to return the role of protagonist to the woman. She should be able to experience that moment beside a trusted person, the husband or someone else. Thus the discussion on residences for childbirth began and the *active birth movement* took off, which still counts on a network of ANDRIA¹³ gynecologists who are particularly hard-working in this perspective. A part of this network would make its voice heard years later when it became the case to denounce another medical abuse on the female body, abuse of the hysterectomy (DALLA COSTA, M. 2002). But various types of actions were conducted in other hospitals. One such significant and winning action was taken against the Padua hospital to defend a student nurse named Marlis against an accusation of abuse of her profession, a charge laid on the weak link of the hospital hierarchy but which really represented the deficiencies of the structure itself.

In addition to the struggles in the hospitals there were investigations in public clinics. Authoritarianism and medical arrogance were, in fact, the object of numerous investigations

¹³ ANDRIA is the national coordination of gynecologists and obstetricians. Their mouthpiece is the magazine *Istar*.

by the women of the movement. The most widely used method was to check on treatment in these clinics by pretending to be patients. Another popular method was to collect women's testimonies. One of the nicest brochures that recounts these testimonies is "*Basta tacere*" [*Stop Being Silent*] (MOVIMENTO DI LOTTA FEMMINISTA di Ferrara).

Another area of intervention was that of work outside the home in which women wanted to make the job of reproduction visible and costly using forms of struggle that ranged from taking their children to the office to refusing to carry out tasks that replicated domestic duties and were required just because they were women.

A particularly important year was 1974. On the one hand, the entire movement won the divorce referendum thereby managing to keep this institution in the Italian legal system. On the other, there came into being a very significant initiative on sexuality and women's health: the first self-run women's clinic was opened and would be followed by others in other major cities.¹⁴ Various doctors generously volunteered their services for free. But above all, in an equal relationship between women, without a hierarchy between the male doctor and the female patient, many women began that journey of knowing their own body, its biological deadlines and its potentials which were a prerequisite for healthy sexuality and motherhood. The following year the law on clinics would be passed, number 405 of 1975, but the clinics would always remain undersized compared to what the law provided and far from able to effectively perform the functions of giving information and preventive medical assistance that were assigned to them.

New family legislation was also passed in 1975. It hinged on equality between spouses, an element more consonant with the greater presence and mobility of women in

¹⁴ On this see JOURDAN (1976). For a significant historical analysis of the relationship of women and medicine see EHRENREICH, ENGLISH (1973a; 1973b).

the labor market. And it was the year in which the United Nations called for the first decade of the woman, organizing a conference in Mexico City that still recorded some difficulties between the priorities of women in the North in contrast to those of women of the South who placed the problem of poverty in the foreground.

Violence was the other important area that always found the overall feminist movement united and determined and therefore this strand was also in line with the other groups. The movement gathered for a conference, the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women, held in Brussels from 4 to 8 March 1976. About 2,000 women from different regions of the world convened to denounce the various forms of violence they suffered. At that conference, during the final general assembly, a resolution submitted by the activists of the Sld/WFH network from Italy, Canada, the United States and Great Britain was also, almost unanimously, voted in. The resolution said “that unwaged housework is robbery with violence; that this work and wagelessness is a crime from which all other crimes flow; that it brands us for life as the weaker sex and delivers us powerless to employers, government planners and legislators, doctors, the police, prisons and mental institutions, as well as to men, for a lifetime of servitude and imprisonment. We demand wages-for-housework for all women from the governments of the world. We will organize internationally to win back the wealth that has been stolen from us in every country and to put an end to the crimes committed daily against us all” (DOCUMENT 01467, May, 1976).

On the issue of violence, there were some major trials that marked a turning point with respect to the matter for which the victim was humiliated and turned into the accused, something that discouraged any woman from denouncing the violence suffered. Two of these were the Verona trial for violence perpetrated against Cristina Simeoni, a 16 year old

girl the victim of rape, and the Circeo trial in which a woman, Rosaria Lopez, was killed after being tortured and another, Donatella Colasanti, was saved only because she pretended to be dead. The movement not only exerted its strong presence at the trials but rejected the perverse logic through which the victim was transformed into the accused. It also promoted a new bill that, first of all, listed sexual violence against women among crimes against the person and not among offenses against public morals and decency. It increased the penalties for sexual violence, better detailing the various types. And above all, it eschewed humiliating interrogations as irrelevant. About twenty years would go by to get a new law on sexual violence, number 66 of 1996.

Meanwhile, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention against all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), on 18 December of 1979. It went into effect in 1981, binding for all the signatory states, including Italy. The CEDAW Committee which oversees the application and interpretation of this Convention through two General Recommendations (G.R.), n. 12 of 1989 and n. 19 of 1992 (interpretative recommendations), reiterated that the Convention implicitly included violence among the forms of discrimination and bound the states to take any initiative to combat it. Above all, the signatory states had to include in their own legal codes all the forms of violence indicated (G. R. 19 of 1992 listed 15 forms, including those in the context of armed conflict). Following CEDAW was the 1985 U. N. Nairobi Conference in which the problem of violence was denounced in all the forms it assumed in the world. This would then be followed by the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1993, the same year as the Congress of Vienna on Human Rights where it was recognized that women's rights are an integral part of human rights. Violence, according to the G. R. of 1992, and correspondingly to its definition in the Declaration of 1993, means even a threat of

violence.¹⁵

Another very important area of attention and commitment was prostitution. In the mid-70s in various countries, prostitutes were particularly under attack by the police and were often deprived of their children. This was also the case in the United States where, according to the Loitering Bill of June 10, 1976, prostitutes were subject to frequent round-ups. In France in 1975 there was yet another prostitute killing in Lyons. It was the spark that got them organized in a movement. Determined to reaffirm their rights, primarily to be free from violence with impunity, they decided to invade the churches.¹⁶ At that time, violence against a prostitute was seen on a social level as a natural risk of those who chose that life, not a fact worthy of note. In Italy, if the Merlin Law of 1958¹⁷ abolishing brothels had restored the possibility of dignity to a woman and eliminated her exploitation by the state, nevertheless the figure of the prostitute was still in the shadows, without a face or a voice.

It should be noted however, that, even in Senator Lina Merlin's initiative to end the regulation of prostitution through the system of brothels, the delegation of women from the United Nations who came to Rome and made contact with members of the Italian Parliament had an important role. They had to point out that Italy (which along with Spain represented the only two remaining cases in Europe of nations that had such regulation) needed to abolish this system if it aspired to join the UN. Therefore, it was bound to respect the rights of human beings as defined by the Universal Declaration of 1948 which was followed in 1949 by the "Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of

¹⁵ Violence against women, according to the Declaration of 1993, means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, harm or physical, sexual or psychological suffering for women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. This definition is also echoed by the Beijing Platform in Art. 113, paragraph D, which indicates the strategic objectives and actions related to the area of violence against women.

¹⁶ For information on the movement of prostitutes see DALLA COSTA, G. F. (2008, Chap.VI)

¹⁷ This is Law 75 approved on February 20, 1958 after a parliamentary procedure lasting 10 years.

The Prostitution of Others” which required the signatory states to implement its provisions with regard to human trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution.¹⁸

In the feminist movement of the 1970s there were two positions on prostitution: one did not admit that such work could be pursued, the other argued that in any way, one had to recognize the self-determination of the woman who alone could judge which work she believed most acceptable among the few choices available. Above all, it was thought important to remove the debate from an area of a moral question and highlight the working aspect of prostitution. Since then *sexworkers* became the name to indicate prostitutes, the freedom of women’s choice was reaffirmed, and the battle for civil rights of prostitutes was sustained. At the *Mutualité* Theater in Paris on June 16, 1976 the first meeting of prostitutes in France was held. In Italy the Committee for Civil Rights of Prostitutes was formed as a non-profit organization in 1983 in Pordenone and in the same city on February 19th and 20th of that year the conference “Prostitution in the 1980s: Marginalization or Social Issue?” was organized. It was the first conference organized by prostitutes in Italy. The same committee organized the conference “Prostitution. Conditions and Constraints, Rules and Freedom” at the *Teatro Comunale* of Treviso on March 16, 1985. Across the Atlantic, in the United States, the Puma and Coyote networks of prostitutes had already taken a stand for wages for housework in the previous decade. Prostitutes had come out of the shadows. They had acquired a face and a voice, and publicly expressed their problems, their thoughts and their will. The 1970s were the years when the rights of *sexworkers* also came out and began to be affirmed.¹⁹

¹⁸ ZANETTI, (2006). In France, the activist and former prostitute Marthe Richard was instrumental in closing the brothels in 1946.

¹⁹ Among the texts of those years: *Prostitution. A Quartet for Female Voices* (MILLETT 1971), *Folles Femmes de leur corps (La prostitution)*, (BELLADONA 1977); *Ulla par Ulla* (1977).

But after the 1970s, the profile of prostitution would change again. In the 1980s the increasingly drastic application on a global level of structural adjustment policies, and then the neo-liberal globalization for the process of proletarianization which it would induce, and the spreading of war policies, would all represent a lethal attack on the possibility of human reproduction, on women's work to ensure some gain for themselves and some autonomy. More and more women with no other chance of survival, migrating from other countries or remaining in their country of origin, would willingly sell sex or be forced to do so by criminal organizations. In tough competition they would lower their prices, set aside their rights, protect themselves much less, and again be exploited by others.

Nevertheless, the battle begun in the 1970s by prostitutes so that their work was recognized as a job would be reflected in the laws of some states. Switzerland adopted a law that recognized prostitution as a legal activity to all effects provided it is freely exercised by those who have reached the legal adult age and observe the canton and city rules about it. It also amended the Federal Law on Residence and Domicile of Foreigners. Prostitution is subject to taxation and the payment of contributions which entitle a person to the measures of Swiss welfare. Among the structures designated to legally host such activities are the "bar-hotels". These places provide a certain security to women practicing prostitution who, after work, go home. And these structures are located and managed so as not to conflict with the territory. There are other forms of organization of legal prostitution just as there is still a wide scope of illegal prostitution but since the entry into force of the new law, many women are trying to profit from it.

Germany, which is considered one of the countries with the largest number of prostitutes, half of whom are foreign, also adopted a law on January 1st, 2002 recognizing prostitution as a legal activity in all respects, subject to taxation

in exchange for the enjoyment of the benefits of the German welfare system: coverage for retirement, unemployment, sickness, and social assistance. In Germany, too, there are various types of structures where prostitutes practice and from which they return home once their work is done, thereby separating their professional and private lives. Veronica Munk, who heads a group for assistance to foreign women in Hamburg, argues that if prostitution is now recognized as legal work, entry visas should be granted to the foreigners who want to come and practice this work.

We have only given two examples, albeit significant ones, of this last stage marked by *sexworkers* from the 1970s to today: from refusing to be invisible, victimized or ghettoized, to deciding to speak openly in the first person, to the self-organization for the defense of civil rights, to demanding recognition of their work as a job. As for the states, as we have seen, some cases went from a lack of answers to the formulation of policies that permit this work within the law, a crucial aspect in the dimension of poverty and paucity of choices that neoliberal globalization has imposed on an increasing number of women, forcing them to dependence on, and blackmail by, criminal organizations. How to explore other choices in life for which one does not pay the price of poverty or dependence remains the problem that continues to trouble women's lives.

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