

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S AND GENDER ACTIVISM
AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: ITALY

**Transcript of Samanta Picciaiola
Interviewers: Bruno Grazioli & Lauren Duncan**

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Samanta Picciaiola was born in 1976. She received her research doctorate in Italian studies at Sorbonne Paris IV and the University of Florence and a degree in philosophy from University of Bologna. She has worked full time as a public primary school teacher since 2005. She is an activist for the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Bruno Grazioli is the Resident Director of the Italian Studies Program for Dickinson College in Bologna (Italy). He has studied in Italy and the UK, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and French, an M.A. in Pedagogy and Promotion of Italian Language and Culture at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice, an M.A. and Ph.D. in Italian Studies. For over a decade he was faculty in Italian at Smith College and twice served as academic director for study-abroad programs in Florence (Italy). Since 2018 Bruno directs the Italian Studies Program in Bologna where Dickinson students deepen their knowledge of the Italian language and culture. He developed and taught a course on Italian Activism combining traditional instruction in class with volunteering/community engagement work in local organizations. He has published "Social activism Italian style: building a community of practice through language immersion and civic engagement while studying abroad" for Routledge (2021) and co-authored "Crisis as Opportunity: Reimagining Global Learning Pathways through New Virtual Collaborations and Open Access during COVID-19" for *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* (2022). Currently Bruno is co-writing a book chapter titled "Building A Practice of Hope in International Education" for a two-volume publication for Cornell University Press.

Lauren Duncan is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Psychology at Smith College, in Northampton, MA. She obtained her Ph.D. in Personality Psychology and a Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She teaches courses in the Psychology of Women and Gender, Political Psychology, and the Psychology of Political Activism. Her research focuses on individual motivation for participation in collective action, particularly among women and LGBTQ+ individuals. While at Smith, she began studying the Italian language and culture (Dr. Grazioli was her first teacher, who became her friend and collaborator) and was able to extend her research on the psychology of activism to conduct oral histories with Italian feminist and feminist LGBTQ+ activists. She has recently written about "Better policy interventions through intersectionality" (*Social Issues and Policy Review*, 2022), the childhood origins of Gloria Steinem's feminist activism (*Journal of Personality*, 2022), "Psychology and political participation" for *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation* (2022), and "Power, gender, and collective action" for *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychology Power & Gender* (2023).

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Lauren Duncan: We should start with a conversation about your childhood and first of all with your family. What do or did your parents do?

Samanta Picciaiola: Well, my parents are young, rather young, they are—my mom is a housewife, she has never worked except in the very short time when we were very young, in my father’s store. And my father was an artisan and entrepreneur. One of the rather vivid demonstrations of family-based entrepreneurship is that in my region of origin, which is Marche,¹ so central Italy, there is a zone in some respects close to Veneto² which demonstrates vividly the spirit of initiative. My dad works with electrical appliances, there is an industrial district linked to Ariston,³ which was a rather important brand in Italy during the economic boom, and so let’s say that he linked his fortune, his prosperity to this situation.

LD: Do you have sisters or brothers?

SP: I had one brother who unfortunately is no longer with us now, so it’s just me, only me. But we grew up together until I was 20, so we were together until I was 20.

Bruno Grazioli: Grandparents? Another type of influence present while you were growing up?

SP: Well, my family moved away from our place of origin, because actually my parents come from inland Marche, from Matelica.⁴ Which by the way is a town close to where Enrico Mattei [top manager of the biggest Italian oil company at the time] came from. He was also a very significant figure who remained embedded in the community and also with my parents, but because of work they moved to the coast⁵ and so let’s say that our family was alone and all the rest of the family,—grandparents, uncles, it was a big family and still is—we are very close and connected but they haven’t had daily roles in my development because we were 80 kilometers apart.

¹ Marche is a region in central Italy. It is known for being very mountainous. (“Marche.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marche>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

² Veneto is a highly populated region in northern Italy. (“Veneto.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veneto>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

³ Ariston is a company that was founded in Marche, Italy in the 1930s and manufactures heating systems. (“Ariston Thermo.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariston_Thermo. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁴ Matelica is a municipality in a valley located in Marche, Italy. (“Matelica.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matelica>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁵ The coast refers to the coast of Marche, Italy. Unlike the rest of Marche, the geography of the coast is not very rugged. (“Marche.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marche#:~:text=The%20coastline%20is%20173%20kilometres,Climate%20is%20temperate>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

LD: What was it like growing up in your family?

SP: Growing up in my family was a positive experience because anyway I always had a climate of great serenity, a lot of attention and a lot of care, the figure of my mother is a traditional figure if we want, according to how traditional gender roles are defined. I think that the fact that she was really young was very important, she was only 20 when she had me, so she was a very energetic woman, who approached us kids in a very spontaneous way with few worries, few fears, and few difficulties. Let's say then that she is a woman who studied little, in fact up to middle school, so she's a simple person but who is very perceptive. And I also remember my development and my childhood as very playful, because there was my brother who was only 3 years younger than me, so we practically grew up together. The doors of our houses were always open and there was a great sense of welcome and hospitality maybe just because in the absence of this nuclear family of origin my parents always created extended friendship groups, so my male and female friends also would sleep over at my house. To this day it's still like this, I bring so many male and female activist comrades to sleep at my parents' house, so this habit of open doors is maybe a distinctive trait that I remember with a lot of pleasure.

Then my mom absolutely wasn't and isn't a feminist, so I received a traditional education, not restrictive, but anyway with a different approach for me and my brother, because my brother, being a boy, in some way was already more protected at birth, according to my mom, while with me she needed to take extra care. Although I have to say she always despaired, because I was always very much a protester, and the less calm figure of the two, because of this there was always a bit of this. But I don't remember particular prohibitions or close mindedness, simply a little apprehension, I was followed with a bit more attention because I was rather determined already from the time I was little, so she says. My father was not very present, in the sense that he was working a lot. He worked and so outside of work hours he was at home, he was there and he participated in family life, but without question the main educative role in my early childhood was my mother's. That is my father got involved in moments of conflict, in adolescence, and he surely is the person I had the biggest and most important clashes and confrontation with, but all during early childhood I remember her as a very sweet person, very welcoming and so positive.

BG: Did you talk about gender roles? What are the messages related to gender roles, related to sexuality that you received, directly or indirectly?

SP: Here I would distinguish between explicit and implicit, in the sense that just because my mom didn't have and maybe also doesn't have, despite all the conversations that I have with her now, she doesn't have an awareness of gender particularly, but simply reproduced those models that were hers then. I don't remember particular commands, that is gender

roles happened in daily life, in gestures and practices, and they weren't ever seen in constricting terms but it was simply a "It would be better for you, you should do it like this," but just never declared openly, I don't know how to say it, but that example, that practice was enough. I can remember—this is something I've reflected on a lot later on—that for a long time, at the end when my father's company started to be bigger, she needed to give him a hand, she worked within the company, but her role was always secondary, that is there was never an awareness of what she was doing, that she had acquired a job. There she was, giving a hand, she was there but then she would vanish then return and so it was a situation of implicit help and of support for my father, it's paradoxical but I don't remember one time, one discussion where I heard my father say, "You have to come, you have to work," and yet she always did it, as if she was anticipating the request, because she had deeply internalized it, or also maybe this more simple idea that the family was one and everyone would contribute in some way to its well-being.

So I remember this context, I don't remember particular prohibitions, I don't remember particular constrictions, but for example I remember a series of situations when my brother and I were teenagers, going out was always easier for him, going out and coming home; there was always a bit more apprehension for me, but then they didn't prevent me, I did it anyway, I also remember a certain ease that is related to this logic, of open doors, I was able to spend the night with my friend, I was able to be out, so there wasn't—I wouldn't say that it was an environment...—But the gender roles were these. It was a deeply peasant culture in my opinion which, how to say it, that supported my mom's socialization and so obviously there are some aspects of being the backup support to the male figure but there is also a great pragmatism, a great practical capacity for which I remember my mom: she whitewashed the house, did the shopping, cooked, and I found myself in my own life taking situations in hand and also doing so many things that then maybe I improvised with the same ease. I believe that in this sense anyway it was a positive example. However, we never talked about sexuality in my house. And the really strange thing is that I never perceived it as a taboo, as a prohibition, and I would also say that I had a completely peaceful individual discovery of sexuality, but there was never a moment where my mother and my father took me and explained or felt they had to tell me anything. There was always this really affectionate dimension between them, very physical, too, so I believe that this contributed to my idea of a close-knit couple relationship that was also based on communication, so it wasn't rigid, there wasn't an insularity, but I have never received in school, I didn't ever encounter in my schooling formative moments about sexuality, nor from them as parents. Nevertheless, I remember that I went to the public health clinic, I arranged it and I did everything with my friends, with people and peers who could be close to me but not my family.

LD: How did you learn about the political and social values from your family?

SP: I learned the values from my father. Regarding the political aspect, if by politics we also mean the sense of belonging to a party. In my family, I don't know when I realized it, but it was always clear that we were all leftists⁶ and this was the setting. My paternal grandfather was a tannery worker,⁷ so a very hard activity, very taxing and I remember that we found his PCI [Italian Communist Party] cards, he was one of the few because there weren't very many in Matelica, in his town of origin, he became a member right away so there was a sort of continuity between union consciousness and political movement, and my father always talked of this really strong power of the Church.⁸ When he graduated with a qualification to work in the field because he had been studying at a technical institute and for his family of origin it was already a really big effort, because my father was born in 1949, so a high school diploma was already almost a college degree, like he often says. Once he got his diploma there was, let's say, a jump in the iron and steel industry in the region that was beginning to take off, etcetera, and they told my grandfather clearly that if they wanted to have the possibility of hiring my dad to work at ENI, [the biggest Italian oil company]⁹ that one of the things he had to do was to go to talk with the parish priest.¹⁰

My father always told this story, but I don't know exactly if this is a story that he made up, but with the benefit of the doubt because I have never consulted the priest in question, but he and my grandfather went to him with the biggest rabbit that they had in the countryside, yes rabbit, because in that area they eat rabbit, to talk with this priest, and of course my grandfather said, "Here's Renato who just earned his diploma, he was really good, he earned high grades, we ask you to give us a hand, we don't know how we can do it for..." And the priest listened to them, took the rabbit and said, "Eh I'm sorry, you need to go talk with your friends in the Communist Party,"¹¹ and they were dismissed like this. And my grandfather was really angry because he didn't ever get that rabbit back, and this was the

⁶ Leftist refers to individuals whose political beliefs include, among other things, equality for all through the removal of status and wealth. ("Left-wing politics." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-wing_politics. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁷ A tannery worker is an individual who makes leather out of animal skin. ("tannery." Cambridge English Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/tannery>. Accessed 18 October 2022.)

⁸ Church refers to the Catholic church, which has had a notable impact on politics and on the development of western civilization in general. ("Catholic Church." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church. Accessed 20 October 2022.)

⁹ Eni is an Italian company started in the 1950s that specializes in energy. It is regarded as one of the most prominent oil companies in the world. Eni is now a part of many different fields and such as hospitality and the news industry. ("Eni." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eni>. Accessed 18 October 2022.)

¹⁰ A parish priest is a priest that works in a specific subclass of the church. ("Parish priest definition and meaning." Collins English Dictionary. [https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/parish-priest#:~:text=\(%CB%88p%C3%A6r%C9%AA%CA%83%20pri%CB%90st%20\),to%20it%20in%20their%20sermons](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/parish-priest#:~:text=(%CB%88p%C3%A6r%C9%AA%CA%83%20pri%CB%90st%20),to%20it%20in%20their%20sermons). Accessed 7 October 2022.)

¹¹ The Communist Party is a political party that supports communism and works toward recognizing it. Often dictatorship is associated with the Communist Party. ("Communist party." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_party. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

story, that is probably in times of high unemployment, the dynamics that were always and are always patronage, played also on a logical political base. There was just the clash between a Catholic¹² world and who belonged, or who identified, or how my grandfather had more than one party card and at that point then my father decided to marry my mother and leave and go to the coast to get a job that had no security, because then this is another thing that he always said—it is that at that time a business or a company wasn't seen as a safe choice—let's say it would have been more to quietly work for a public entity, being hired, etcetera. And this talk of being bound to individual commitment, however, reflects the values of the left and was always in my house.

BG: How do you think that you are the product of your family today?

SP: Even in terms of very strong objections, that is let's say that I have two important breaks in my life or anyway I present my path like this so far. One certainly was my university education here in Bologna,¹³ more than high school really, my time at university was a moment where I radically questioned all of those ideals that my family had passed down to me, but never the political positioning, that is I never stepped foot on the opposite shore. But the idea of the traditional family, roles, and also especially this idea of business, an initiative that I saw as very limited, I lost all of the social parts. I expressed my disapproval of this centrality of the nuclear family instead by participating in movements and volunteer activities that in effect were never done in my house. The other really important moment was that after my separation, because I had married very young, at 25, and I was married for 13 years, and let's say that I was a bit closed in this role. When I got there, we had come to the point of ending this relationship, it started another phase of my life where the disapproval of my family was extreme because, after having been the first to graduate from college, I was also the first to divorce, so these firsts, getting separated, happened to me. And, on the other hand, I understood, in short, I began to reflect on how heavily this example of the strong family weighed on me, of the total couple who had been my parents. And this aspect of criticism then began to assume contours of gendered reflections, because in any case I began to think that—I don't know exactly when or in which exact phase—but I always thought that I should also find a life partner and I would also express my existence in a couple or a family. And nobody ever proposed to me an individual life path as a woman, so this is a reflection that I beyond a doubt arrived at late, even though during university I had participated in meetings, groups, and student

¹² The Catholic church is also known as the Roman Catholic church. There are many subdivisions of the Catholic church across the world. ("Catholic Church." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church. Accessed 18 October 2022.)

¹³ Bologna is a city located in the region of Emilia-Romagna in Italy. It is known for being one of the largest and most populated cities in the region as well as the capital. ("Bologna." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bologna>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

movements. That is, the criticism of the traditional family also came from a political economic base. I remember that I was attending the Marxist Leninist Contemporary History,¹⁴ which was a group of guys who were reading and rereading Marx, Lenin, and all of their comrades, but I hadn't ever come to an individual critique, that is, it was a social critique, it was the idea of changing viewpoints, but I never thought, and I hadn't done the work of self-awareness like the feminists would say. This came later.

LD: How many years ago did you make this change?

SP: Exactly six years ago, yes.

BG: Since you talked about your university years, did you study in Bologna?

SP: I studied Philosophy in Bologna, I graduated in Philosophy. And then I did a Ph.D. in Italian Literature in Paris at the Sorbonne and I lived in Paris¹⁵ for three years. And then I returned to Italy to work as a primary school teacher.

BG: So, if you studied Philosophy, was that quite a change? I say it because I think it's at least four years?

SP: Yes, yes, four years.

BG: So in four years as you said earlier on, you participated in the political activities within the university?

SP: Yes, however without ever signing up and formalizing my participation because I've always had great difficulty taking mainstream positions even when they were not mainstream. I had a bit of, and there still is, this reluctance to identify myself completely with a label, in fact yes, I also met so many people who gravitated around more anarchist movements because the discourse of anarchy always interested me, philosophically speaking. And so I participated, then within Philosophy there were really so many groups, it was the end of the occupation of via Zamboni 32¹⁶ [Italian Language and Literature

¹⁴ Marxism-Leninism is a political philosophy in which it is theorized that everyone in the state is treated without reference to a social class. Countries including China and Vietnam practice versions of Marxism-Leninism, as that philosophy has evolved. ("Marxism-Leninism." Wikipedia.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism%E2%80%93Leninism>. Accessed 18 October 2022.)

¹⁵ Paris is a city in France. It is known for being the capital of the country and one of the most populated cities in the world. ("Paris." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

¹⁶ Via Zamboni 32 is the address to the Department of Classical and Italian Philosophy at the University of Bologna. This department was started in 2012 and its main goal consists of planning teaching activities and collaboration with other research institutions. ("Presentation." Ficlit. <https://ficlit.unibo.it/it/dipartimento/presentazione>. Accessed 18 October 2022.)

Department, University of Bologna] so there was, in any case, a very, very broad movement. And even though I was enrolled in Philosophy, I used to go there and to the DAMS [Department of Arts and Music] often. So this is another characteristic that I always had and still have now, that I always really liked to work in a comparative manner and so I was curious, I wanted to see, to understand, because they were very different worlds, they were speaking different languages and at times the contradictions jumped out just by putting comparing them with each other.

BG: Can you tell us a story about why they were different?

SP: Literature was very different from Philosophy. Philosophy and History are closer. And then DAMS, because, within the old Philosophical studies system, I chose the specialization in aesthetics, because a big, really big love, maybe the biggest in my life after my daughter, are books, literature, and so I studied Philosophy, including art theory. It was during my university years that I had the great fortune, at the end of university, to meet an intellectual who for me, was a fundamental figure: Gianni Scalia.¹⁷ And with Gianni I had a lot of really nice chats. And we read together, that is he obviously had already read everything, I don't know how to say it, but we went through some important texts together and he was a fundamental figure for me whom I remember very clearly. And it was very important to talk with him because maybe he was the first who made me understand that through art there was a huge revolutionary potential in everyday social life. And this idea of culture as an educational, pedagogical tool I've always felt was very much mine, all in all I did the high school diploma for teaching children because my father didn't make me go to classical high school [academics focused on the classics and humanities] even though I was very literate, because it was a school that wouldn't give me any work training and rather if things would change he wanted me to get a degree that could give me a job. And he was right because then I became a teacher. In the sense that I took a public exam and got the job as a teacher thanks to a teaching diploma and not thanks to a college degree. And I wasn't even a college graduate when I took the public exam so...

LD: What was your first political action?

SP: In my first or second life? Do you mean before or after the separation? Before the separation my first political action dates back to my university years. I participated actively in a whole series of initiatives and movements that were in Bologna. Bologna was still a very, very active place; it offered a lot. And it wasn't linked to the world of rights, it wasn't

¹⁷ Gianni Scalia was a professor at the University of Siena and specialized in Italian Literature. Scalia was involved in many literature groups. He died in November of 2016. ("Gianni Scalia." Wikipedia. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gianni_Scalia. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

linked to the feminist world either, and also not even to the LGBT¹⁸ world, but it was more of a theoretical political character, so with, I don't know, there were several social centers that I went to, and they were these visions of a radically alternative world with regard to the capitalist system, so let's say a critique of society based on Marx.¹⁹ This was my first introduction, it was very far from feminism because in any case I still considered it a perspective, that is it didn't seem to prioritize my issues, my needs, I didn't yet understand that instead everything is attributable to gender.

LD: Your first political action after the separation and also how did you find feminism?

SP: I found feminism because my first action as an activist in the second part of my life came right in the middle of the separation, and it was this walk that I organized at night for women's rights in Cento,²⁰ the town where I lived, in the province of Ferrara,²¹ a unique town, in a depressed zone, very closed, very far from Bologna even if it's 27, 28 km away. I came to organize this thing that seemed to me a really simple popular initiative because in fact with my Bolognese experiences I had seen it all.

BG: Were you already a teacher?

SP: I was already a teacher there.

BG: So you were already a parent.

SP: Yes, we also had a bookstore that I had opened with my ex-husband. And this bookstore also had a cultural association linked to it, that was the first cultural association that I created, it was called "Fucina zero uno," [Hotbed 01] and this cultural association promoted a series of activities relevant to books, including a reading group about women which I had created, that revolved around the bookstore. Why? Because in any case I had realized that in such a small community there weren't really places, opportunities for discussion,

¹⁸ LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. This acronym refers to individuals with various sexual orientations and identities. ("LGBT." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

¹⁹ Marx refers to Karl Marx, who is known for writing (among other things) *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Marx was a well-known German sociologist during the 1800s. ("Karl Marx." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²⁰ Cento is a town in the Po Valley, which is in northern Italy. It was previously known for being a fishing town, but now is referred to as a farming town. ("Cento." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cento>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²¹ The province of Ferrara is located in Emilia-Romagna, Italy in northern Italy. It consists of 23 communes. ("Province of Ferrara." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Province_of_Ferrara. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

especially for women. Because when the life of a community revolves around the bars or in any case around the traditional places designated in these small centers to be together, women disappear, they aren't there. And so my idea was let's do a reading group, let's make it only women, and let's not do it in the bookstore but let's bring it to the men's bars. So it would travel, and it would be found in all of the public locations, which meant there were restaurants, bars, wine bars. Once a month to discuss and talk about the book that we had all read and at the end of the discussion we would take a vote and choose the book for the next month, however the venue would have to host us for free, because it had to be a sign of recognition and men couldn't participate. And that was how Falling Book²² was born, which then became a cultural association.

And the first political action that we took was this walk because in our community there was an episode of aggression and attempted violence against a woman, in broad daylight, in the historic center and the response of the local authorities was terrible, and based on that, among us spontaneously the need arose to send a signal of solidarity beyond official statements. And not knowing exactly how we organized ourselves we said, "Okay! Let's do this walk at night," because in any case the historic center was depopulated, there had just been an earthquake, so in any case some of the stores there were failing, we would do it at night, we would do it in a symbolic way to say, in sum, that the streets belong to women too, and that's where I found feminism. That is, I found it in practice, I lacked all of the theoretical references, but I found the strength of women when we get together, and we were few, there were 10 or 15 of us.

BG: So you organized this walk not expecting that there would be so many women?

SP: The walk was a big success, because there were more than 100, 150 people which was a lot for a community of 30,000 inhabitants, but the preparation phase was terrible because when we made the announcement in an absolutely naive way at the bookstore website that we would do this walk, it stirred up a hornet's nest. Why? Because then extreme right-wing²³ groups attempted to contact us for the first time. They were offering us support probably because the perpetrator of the presumed aggression was a North African citizen, although nothing was known of this, it wasn't in the news, and so there was a first approach. And when we said, "Look, absolutely no, because our perspective isn't a law and order perspective, no, the problem that happened isn't a problem of lack of security, we

²² Falling Book is an organization that creates an open and welcoming area for women to converse and think with each other. ("About us." Orlando Association. https://orlando-women-it.translate.google.com/chi-siamo/?x_tr_sl=it&x_tr_tl=en&x_tr_hl=en&x_tr_pto=sc. Accessed 20 October 2022.)

²³ Right-wing refers to political beliefs that align with natural inequalities in society and tradition. Right-wing is generally regarded as the opposite of left-wing. ("Right-wing politics." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right-wing_politics. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

don't want a response in terms of law enforcement, protection through military strength, we want a response in terms of the right to move around the city, among other things, this thing happened during the day so there wasn't even the so-called mitigating circumstance of the late hour and a dark street." And so, there was then a truly resentful reaction, let's call it resentment, from these groups. Then since the city administration is apparently open to dialogue about these themes, there was resentment because our walk was, according to all of them, highlighting the fact that the administration wasn't able to guarantee the security of the streets of the region.

In sum, nobody could understand that instead the problem we were posing was of completely different origins. And so one morning I came down to go to work and on my doorbell there was written in black marker "gay and lesbian."²⁴²⁵ Because then we don't know how, and this is an interesting aspect which I've asked myself, from defending women's rights our position was already identified as one linked to the demand for the rights of homosexual²⁶ people, when we hadn't done that, because we didn't have the maturity of thought to do it. So I found this writing, then I had a gesture, an act of vandalism on my car, which I reported to the police. And there was great attention from the local media, the newspapers, obviously pages of stories. So they said, if I'm not mistaken it was either "il resto del Carlino" or "La nuova Ferrara." [two regional newspapers] So it was transformed into a very big thing, and at that point we received the solidarity of some leaders of the PD [Democrat Party] in Bologna, because the question had crossed beyond the confines of the Reno River.²⁷ And we found ourselves managing something bigger than us, in the sense that it had started in an absolutely spontaneous way.

BG: When was this?

SP: This was in 2012. And from there we understood that we also had the potential that was linked not only to the activity of the reading group but also to the fact that there was an enormous void, a chasm to be filled in that region. We began to work as a cultural association and we transformed the reading group into a non-profit organization,²⁸ and

²⁴ Gay typically refers to men (though it can be used to include lesbians), and is defined as being sexually attracted to an individual of the same gender. ("Gay Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gay>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²⁵ Lesbian typically refers to women, and is defined as a woman being sexually attracted to individuals of the same gender. ("Lesbian." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesbian>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²⁶ Homosexual refers to individuals that are sexually attracted to individuals of the same gender. ("Homosexual Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homosexual>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²⁷ Reno river is a river that runs through Emilia-Romagna, Italy and is one of the longest rivers in the country. ("Reno (river)." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reno_\(river\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reno_(river)). Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²⁸ A non-profit organization is an organization in which profit is not the goal and any profit that actually arises is not given to members or officers of the organization, but used to develop and support additional

now let's say that we have come to have two purposes within the group after 6, 7 years. One works and will always continue to work on gender-related literature. At this point we practically read almost only women authors—it's just a thing that we never had as a rule, but it developed on its own. And the other, instead, is that more activist part of the group which works on claiming rights. There is a great battle that we are looking to and will succeed in advancing, in my opinion, only because we have also created contacts with all the rest of the region including Bologna, and that is education about gender. Because many of us are teachers. They are teachers and so the discourse of education to consensus or education about differences as it is defined now is a central discourse for the prevention of violence. But it is really difficult.

BG: How many people are in the group?

SP: Every year we become members and we have between 15 and 20 women.

BG: All teachers?

SP: No, the majority, but also others of us among the group who have been together since the beginning come from different professional worlds. We have those of us who work in the communication sector, those of us who work in the travel agency, even some on non-political paths, some of us, so not on activism. Because the discourse on books is an extraordinary discourse in the sense that some incredible shared spaces are created around books, and this in my opinion is exactly a feminist approach, that there isn't such a great distance between the public and private. So the books, the stories, the narratives, become a tool to open up a whole series of windows and discussions. And we'll never give this up because it's our lifeblood.

LD: I don't know if you chose this, but I am interested, at the beginning of the reading group the reason that you revolved it around women only? Why?

SP: Well, there was a reason and there was an earthquake and so the historical center was truly devastated in Cento following the 2012 earthquake,²⁹ and so there was really a problem of livability, there were no initiatives and those few were blocked because parts of the streets were closed or disrupted. And really it got to the point where I was closing the

activities. ("Non-profit organizations." Cornell Law School. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/non-profit-organizations>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

²⁹ In 2012, there were 2 earthquakes in northern Italy, and the Emilia-Romagna region was affected the most. The 2 earthquakes were 9 days apart and as a result, 25 people were killed. ("2012 Northern Italy earthquakes." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Northern_Italy_earthquakes. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

bookstore's shutters at 7pm and it seemed like the Wild West,³⁰ being in a Sergio Leone³¹ film. There was nothing. I realized that even the access and turnout of my friends and of the bookstore's customers was diminishing but not only because it was a problem, how to say it, of disposable income, because then the bookstore had become a meeting place and so there really were so many people who came to see us, but it was just a fact that it had become difficult to live downtown, and so when I thought of the reading group, and because I had already some people, women, close to me who were those I carried out all of this with, they were saying, "What if we wanted to get together one evening for a coffee right now, there isn't any place we can go comfortably and where we can enjoy ourselves for an hour or two of chitchat and to be together." And this made me think. At the same time, at a personal level, the character of the bookstore, even though it was an aspect completely shared with my ex-husband and partner, it had become a situation in which paradoxically it had created a window where he took on the main role for a whole series of initiatives and activities and I had taken on a lot of the burden of all the behind the scenes parts and so organizationally, it was there that I started to reflect on the fact that I was reproducing exactly the family structure of my own family. It was there that I began to say no, I need a space of my own because otherwise we aren't equal. And I couldn't say which came first, the chicken or the egg, because obviously it was through both personal and collective experiences. It was born like this. But initially it wasn't a political or activism statement. In fact, it was sustained, and this was a very strange thing, by the confederation of downtown businesses.

BG: The demonstration downtown?

SP: No, the creation of the reading group. That is, they supported it by saying that it was the initiative that revitalized the activities of the center and commerce. And at the beginning it had been proposed according to a rather right-wing scheme, with many beautiful women who go to the bar, read books. A bit like a tea club in any case. Then we sabotaged it a little from the inside and they got a little angry, but anyway initially it was just quietly born this way and then it changed and became—I think that it couldn't have changed if there hadn't been those people close to me, because it isn't an individual undertaking and truly this is something we did together.

BG: Do you still meet now? In the bars?

³⁰ The Wild West refers to part of the United States during the beginning of the 17th century around the time of the first expansion westward within Northern America. ("American frontier." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_frontier. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

³¹ Sergio Leone was a well-known and respected Italian director who was especially known for his western films. ("Sergio Leone." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergio_Leone. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

SP: Of course, only now instead of staying in Cento, where at a certain point after the Walk it had become really difficult, because there was no longer the willingness of all these places to welcome us, we moved on to the eight municipalities of the Reno Galliera,³² which range from Pieve di Cento³³ to Castel Maggiore,³⁴ in this region that goes from Bologna toward Galliera.³⁵ And we always meet in the bars, in the wine bars, in the restaurants that host us for free. And we are in these eight towns that you have to imagine are spread across 25 km, let's say, from the closest to Bologna to the furthest.

BG: How often?

SP: Monthly. Every month.

BG: Summer and winter?

SP: No, we stop in July and August.

BG: At what point, we talked about it earlier, did feminism and the LGBT movement get closer? Before you said that the note on your doorbell surprised you but then you also said in hindsight that you were able to explain it, can you tell us more about this?

SP: Yes, it surprised me because we had never faced, as a group or me individually, the claims of the rights of people with sexual orientations different from ours. So it wasn't a topic that we had ever in any way raised or addressed. In hindsight I explain it because these extreme right-wing groups, which were already in Cento and now are strong, are Neofascist³⁶ types and so basically they see in the demand for women's rights that it's all the same thing, especially here in Italy with gay civil rights initiatives.³⁷ So the fact that that

³² The Reno Galliera Union is a group of 8 municipalities in Bologna, Italy. The union became official in 2008. ("Reno Galliera Union." Wikipedia. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unione_Reno_Galliera. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

³³ Pieve di Cento is a municipality in Bologna in northern Italy. ("Pieve di Cento." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieve_di_Cento. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

³⁴ Castel Maggiore is a municipality near Bologna in central Italy. ("Castel Maggiore." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castel_Maggiore. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

³⁵ Galliera is a municipality north of Bologna, Italy. ("Galliera." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galliera>. Accessed 8 October 2022.)

³⁶ Neofascist refers to individuals whose beliefs align with fascism, but arose after World War II, and often focus on opposition to immigration, nationalism, and authoritarianism. ("Neofascism." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-fascism>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

³⁷ In 2013, a bill was proposed to Italy's legislation that would protect people from discrimination based upon their sexual orientation and identity. ("Italy: Strengthen Legal Protection for LGBT People." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/25/italy-strengthen-legal-protection-lgbt-people>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

writing was offensive to them among other things, and the fact that we still don't know who did it, probably it was coming from that political side that I talked about. But then for me all of this was absolutely unknown. Among other things I wasn't even aware, I knew that there was a group organized in a more or less clandestine way which operated in Cento, but usually it led to the vigilantes [far right-wing initiative] in the park where second-generation immigrants, boys or girls, could be found, or our own symbolic initiatives. I didn't know that they were established, now a few years have passed where we have a much clearer picture of the situation there, but in that moment the writing for me was completely out of the blue.

BG: So now would you say that your political involvement coincides? It's parallel? Is there intersectionality from the point of view of your [female] comrades toward the others, how did you put it together?

SP: It became evident for us that there was intersectionality in one particular moment, which was when, as a group of teachers within the school, we chose to bring their classes to see a show, a theatrical show put on by the Rainbow Theater.³⁸ The show was called "Fa'afafine, my name is Alex and I am a dinosaur," and it was by Scarpinato.³⁹

BG: We already talked about it with someone else. How did it happen?

SP: We managed to bring the boys to the girls but it was a very troubled event, very difficult, in the sense that we had two attacks after the posting of banners outside the school by the extreme right, the first attack was claimed, if I remember it correctly, right before the show in January by "Evita Peron", a women's group within Forza Nuova [neo-fascist political party] so far-right women, and the other claimed by Forza Nuova itself, and it was June, the night between the first and second of June. In the first round of banners, there were these enormous white panels attached to the school gate which we found in the morning at 7:30, which we removed in a hurry, obviously, but already visible unfortunately to the boys and girls who go to class earlier in the morning, and these banners said things like, if I'm remembering correctly, "the fable of gender that doesn't exist" and "this only helps the pedophile," and in the second round instead, only one really big banner talking about gender culture. These were very serious because there was a very heavy community movement around these actions, because at school, they are small schools in small

³⁸ The Rainbow Theater was started in 2002. It promotes diversity, and its main purpose is to bring together children from various backgrounds in Israel. ("The Theatre That Educates Peace." beresheet lashalom rainbow theatre. http://www.masksoff.org/EN/the_theatre.htm. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

³⁹ Giuliano Scarpinato was originally an actor. He started his playwright career with *Fa'afafine*, which is a play constructed around a gender-fluid child. This play received many awards. ("Giuliano Scarpinato." Fabulamundi Playwriting Europe. <https://www.fabulamundi.eu/en/giuliano-scarpinato/>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

communities, with really strong polarization of pro and con positions, because the image that was communicated to the outside was that we wanted to bring them to see this absolutely inappropriate content, the danger was homosexualizing all the children, especially boys, and so from there it was really a negative surprise, seeing how much fear there was, fear aroused from the outside, and also the relationship of trust that there was as teachers with families and with a small community which knew us and this was really devastating. A true wound.

And there even the non-secular component of this country played a very heavy role because even though there was a clear legislative framework that came to our defense and supported our initiative and even though everything had been done in the appropriate and correct way, by let's say luckily not consisting of families, maybe a strong minority, the idea was that an offense was being committed. When it was simply, everything had gone as planned according to the rules of the school organization. It was a rather well-known case, because then there was also a very serious episode where a complaint was filed. At a certain point in an online newspaper, the news came out that the teachers who had brought the kids to see the Fa'fafine show had staged a gay marriage among the kids in the schoolyard. Obviously that was denied, there was a complaint filed, but it was clear that none of this was ever done, but when this news broke after we had already had all of the effort of going because we had gone to the theater escorted by the police with explosive-sniffing dogs, because in the press release, the first press release from "Evita Peron" it was written that if the teachers didn't desist in their intention to bring these students to see the theatrical performance they would have impeded with every means possible the access of the children. So it was a public order issue and so to guarantee the safety of the children we had police deployed there.

BG: I imagine that many parents came to see it?

SP: All the parents came because in the end, together with the artistic director, we offered this possibility. Since there was now this great fear, but then there was also a fear actually for safety, because these are events that shake people up a lot, and so we offered this possibility to all of the families of the classes who went, that if they wanted to, they could come. In the end we went to the room with the boys and girls and at least one of the two parents of almost all of the families.

BG: Nobody refused?

SP: I believe only in one case. Because then the great majority of the families agreed. That reaffirmed the faith in the teachers' choice. But I repeat the show had been chosen because it was planned for the children's theater. Rainbow Theater, a proposal that was offered to

the schools. So just like any proposals coming to the schools at the beginning of the year for children's shows and activities. But this wasn't enough to guarantee the normality, that is this fact of going to the show was a very, very strong act. Then the unanimous opinion was that the show was very nice and then the parents came to thank us and say that the activity was truly worthwhile. So that was really the nicest thing. There the LGBT movement supported us. At that point, we came in contact with Cassero,⁴⁰ with Famiglie Arcobaleno... [a same-sex parents group] In short, after relevant groups moved from the city, also because we are actually really small and so in this situation, before that time we hadn't had any direct connections. And then there was this overlapping effort in the sense that the teachers who had made this choice were also behind the Falling Book association so at a certain point the two strands were considered to be one, so much so that in the second claim by Forza Nuova saying, "Your culture is against nature," so what was written on their second banner, so this group was particularly worried about the dangerous teachers who militated, hysterical or not, recalling one word typical of Forza Nuova to define feminist women who militated in a dangerous feminist association of the region. They were shrewd not to indicate which association, otherwise we would have filed a complaint, but actually we are the only feminists in the lower Po valley.⁴¹

BG: You couldn't even file a complaint.

SP: No, no. There was a complaint filed for the bill posting, and so we didn't do it, but the managers did it, I don't remember if it was the mayor or the principal, anyway everything that had to be done was done, but we as an association weren't able to file a complaint in any way because there was no reference to a name or last name.

LD: This is my central question. There are other people who have had similar experiences, but they didn't become activists. In your opinion what are the personal or experience factors that pushed you to act?

SP: Well, I don't know, I've already reflected a bit on this question. Let's say that from the point of view of my biography, phenomenologically, that is of what has happened to me, I know that I have always sought to share and only in sharing am I able to understand and deal with certain things, so more than by vocation it is out of necessity, and I've always needed this sharing. Then from the personal point of view I am an individual who has a strongly logocentric background. [words represent an external reality] I have a lot of confidence in the word despite everything, and so for me the fact of sharing through the

⁴⁰ Cassero is a political group that is dedicated to promoting the rights of LGBT+ people. ("The Cassero." Cassero. <https://www.cassero.it/chi-siamo/il-cassero/>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁴¹ The Po valley is located in northern Italy and is essentially a large plain. The plain lays atop canyons. ("Po Valley." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Po_Valley. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

word, spoken or written remains the fundamental human aspect, that is really what, Aristotlecally speaking distinguishes us. And so, I would not have been able to carry out my duty individually in a solitary manner, then I am also convinced to some degree that if I hadn't been able to spread these ideas, I wouldn't have had such great results. Because activism is central for me right now. In one sense it is what allows me to define, even to positively express or share experiences, that are not always that fun, like the one I just told you about. That is the importance of the group in my life is central. Then I've thought a lot about the fact that I wasn't ever able to fully join other groups and I created one; I don't know if it is a problem of egocentrism that comes from my father, or if it was like this because it just happened. I am a person who takes the initiative so it is likely that I couldn't wait but did it myself. But I wouldn't know how to do it differently. Gianni Scalia always said that one writes because one needs to, and like going pee you can't decide, and I believe that activism is like this, it's not that you decide it, you feel it and you do it, and the times where maybe I wasn't able to participate, because that happened to me, or I couldn't do things, made me suffer. I don't know if I answered.

LD: How important are your relationships with other activists?

SP: Fundamental. In the sense that over time they have grown and anyway being in a network is really important in fact, also in a spirit of reciprocity, I worked in these last two years, I would say, especially to create these networks. A big problem in the region where we operate, which is a region far from all of the urban centers, and so we understood that to deal with certain things if there were more of us, obviously it isn't easier but more efficient, then we took the situation in hand a bit and we tried to create these networks, and it is a big effort because it isn't an exciting business to put people together. Especially because the movements are different and, in the province, they are always linked to a single person. And this is a great effort because to delegate your decision making capacity, to share it, ways for coming to common decisions are also very tiring, and when you are far from urban centers and maybe the group concerned is your group, the one that you created, a series of personal relationships have allowed the group that you represent to obtain certain things, it becomes really difficult then to sit everyone around the table and discuss in a collective way, and here we have another question of gender, because almost always these movements have male leaders, and there is a strong male chauvinism even within the movements, even within environments which are, for example, not connected to the political parties, and I believe, at least in my experience, it was easier to come together to talk when they were women. Really difficult when you try to bring together very strong figures, very rooted and who don't accept this idea of extended representation; that is, we found ourselves doing two hours roundtable discussions about what name to give an entity because it mustn't identify him, mustn't identify him, mustn't—when maybe it is important to do it, because then activism in the province is this: organizing an event, having a protest,

they are already difficult things because there isn't the same sensitivity even on the part of the institutions or at least not all of the local authorities are able to accept certain requests. So, this talk of building networks, being promoters of networks, working in an intersectional way is a very difficult discourse outside the urban centers. Really difficult. So this is our effort, our nice effort because we have been able to achieve synergies. Now it's a few days ago that we heard the news that an Arcigay⁴² section will open in Cento and I'm so happy—that "gay" on the doorbell, how to say it, it gratifies me. Because there wasn't such an entity and between Ferrara and Bologna there isn't any Arcigay section or any other movements, delegations of homosexual people.

BG: How many inhabitants are there?

SP: There are 40,000 including the suburbs. 30,000 in the urban center.

BG: What are the relationships of your group with other groups in the region?

SP: They are very positive. In the sense that we, maybe also because we found ourselves in the center of this incident, we worked and collaborated with all the entities that are concerned in some way with training and educating about differences. And so along with "Famiglia Arcobaleno," with "Cassero," we say that we are among the entities which have contributed to the founding of "Educating about differences," which is this network of associations at a national level which concern themselves with education about consensus, we came across so many other movements, for example "Arcigay Ferrara"⁴³ —we also collaborated with them—sometimes the unions, because anyway, working in the world of school, we collaborated with "Scuola e Costituzione,"⁴⁴ then obviously the "Alice" project,⁴⁵ which is one of the founding associations for educating about differences, "Scosse,"⁴⁶ which is an association that is always concerned with education about respect, a Roman association that we often, however, have come across and brought to Bologna. Now there are so many, we collaborated with "ANPI" [Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia - National Association of Anti-fascists founded in 1945] actively, because in any case the

⁴² Arcigay is a gay organization in Italy. It is the first organization of its type in Italy and is now a worldwide organization. ("Arcigay." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arcigay>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁴³ Arcigay Ferrara is a branch of Arcigay located in the province of Ferrara that educates citizens about LGBT+ rights in the community. ("Ferrara." Arcigay. <https://www.arcigay.it/en/ferrara/>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁴⁴ Scuola e Costituzione is an organization that is dedicated to educating teachers and communities about secular teaching. ("Insegnamento religione Cattolica." [comune.bologna.it. http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/coscost/irc/index.htm](http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/coscost/irc/index.htm). Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁴⁵ The Alice Project is an organization that is dedicated to education reform in Italy. ("NEW FROM ITALY." Alice Project. <https://aliceproject.org/news-from-italy/>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

⁴⁶ Scosse is an organization that is dedicated to creating a welcoming area free from any discrimination for everyone. Scosse does this by educating children from a young age. ("Mission." Shock. <https://www.scosse.org/chi-siamo-2/mission/>. Accessed 7 October 2022.)

theme of anti-fascism is ours, we make it ours and we also collaborate with some institutions. So there is also the institutional aspect.

We collaborate with another feminist association that's called "Rose Rosse"⁴⁷ in Castel Maggiore, with whom we have done some projects, we have had the opportunity to do some activities together with "UDI Bologna" (Unione donne italiane). Then we are within a national network called "Rebel Network,"⁴⁸ which was established two years ago, this network works a lot on the communication plan, it carries out so many campaigns linked to national feminist political questions, so the Pillon bill, [a restrictive bill with respect to contraception rights named after a right-wing Senator] it did a lot of work on these issues, and obviously in this case our bond and our support when we try to establish these discussions in the regions, because then in Italy there is this double level, the national one and then the local ones, because regions are just so varied and it is just a lot of work to bring it down to that level. We are confronted so many times with European models where it is much easier to think of a consistent structure for regional agencies that have a rather clear vertical organizational chart down to the details, but in Italy every region stands by itself, maybe because of what I mentioned about single figures in the regions, maybe for our history of local loyalties, I don't know, but it is very difficult. Very.

BG: In some way this also explains the variety of associations and collectives. Are there any registries in Italy?

SP: I don't think so, they try to institute it, there are some provincial and regional registries of associations but even there it's a hodgepodge⁴⁹ because, for example, we're in the local registry of the associations of the towns of Reno Galliera, but isn't it automatic that you're included in the regional registry? And you wonder, "But if I'm in the small one, why am I not contained in the big one?"

BG: There must be other regions that function better instead.

SP: More advanced, because here it's a disaster.

BG: It's interesting because with every person we've interviewed new worlds, other entities, other connections have emerged.

⁴⁷ Rose Rosse is a nonprofit feminist organization dedicated to educating and uplifting women. ("Rose Rosse." Facebook. <https://m.facebook.com/pg/RoseRosseAss/events/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁴⁸ The Rebel Network is a group that supports women in politics and promotes the equality of all genders. ("Rebel Network." Rebel Network. <https://www.rebelnetwork.it/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁴⁹ Hodgepodge is mixture of many different things. ("Hodgepodge Definition & Meaning." Dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hodgepodge>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

SP: Then we also collaborated with the University of Cambridge, England.⁵⁰ There is this research institute called "GenPol"⁵¹ that was born within the University of Cambridge and its president Giugni⁵² is Italian, she comes from Naples,⁵³ and she is doing very interesting work to trace economic and political aspects from a gender perspective. Their first conference was focused on the theme of how education can prevent gender-based violence, and so we went to Cambridge and brought the experience of one of our first important projects called "Uscire dal guscio," [coming out of your shell] a literature festival for young boys and girls, young teen boys and girls—come out of your shell. We were co-promoters of that, and we were a case study, and we brought our experience, and we brought it in contact with so many groups, even Italian ones, that we weren't aware of.

BG: Do you remember what her name is?

SP: Lilia Giugni. I believe she has become a teacher now, if I remember correctly, and she's the one that also called us in Brussels, last November 21 [2018] because there was a roundtable discussion about digital violence and so about cyber bullying, how to prevent it in school, and what the current situation was, because there is an important alarm about this, too in the sense of both the age of exposure to violent content and action, that is where there can be male and female protagonists even in primary school, so 4th and 5th grade; the last two years we've had cases of both bullies and victims of bullying, and the network often already uses iPhones, cell phones, WhatsApp⁵⁴—they are all channels they already have at that age and that's why we went, we have been called to report on the situation because we see it, it's in constant evolution. And it is much earlier than only five or six years ago.

BG: Is that a worrying fact?

⁵⁰ The University of Cambridge is a well-respected research university in the United Kingdom and is one of the top universities in the world. It is known for the many Nobel Prizes that have been awarded to past students and professors. ("University of Cambridge." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Cambridge. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁵¹ GenPol is a research institute that uses their research findings to support equality for all. ("Who We Are." GenPol. <https://gen-pol.org/who-we-are/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁵² Dr. Lilia Giugni is the co-founder of GenPol and a feminist activist. Her research is based on gender-based violence and various social justice movements. She is also on the boards of many feminist organizations. ("Who We Are." GenPol. <https://gen-pol.org/who-we-are/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁵³ Naples is one of the largest cities in Italy and is located in southern Italy. It is one of the most populated cities in the country. ("Naples." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naples>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁵⁴ WhatsApp is an application that can be downloaded on smart devices that allows people to send messages and videos. ("WhatsApp." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WhatsApp>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

SP: Very. It is very worrying. The teachers are with the kids for the five-year cycle [duration of primary school in Italy] which is from first to fifth grade, so in just five years, in a five-year period, we can say that there has been a great worsening of both exposure and interaction, with all of a series of related phenomena. Difficulty with attention, concentration, in addition to the obvious changes in behavior and incorrect language, disrespectful children. However, all of this does a good job of solidifying all the gender stereotypes that we try to combat. So it is a powerful vehicle in the service of tradition. This is how I would summarize the paradox.

BG: Can I ask you to give us an example of something you do to change? Traditionally what happens with the institutional programs at the school?

SP: We have to distinguish what we do as a group and what we can do at school in the sense that the Italian school has a set of rules that, first of all, dictates that the school, which is a constitutional body, so one of the main promoters of the aims included in the Constitution, and the question is clear—Article III of our constitutional charter dictates that we work as teachers to socialize male and female citizens who are respectful and who don't discriminate, not by gender, race, political position, etcetera—and this, let's say, which is the backbone, within this great scheme there are also a series of laws that ask the school to work specifically on the prevention of gender-based violence. But then it becomes very difficult to make it happen every day because for a few years now there has been a great difficulty in making oneself understood with respect to what the real activities and real purposes of these projects are. Because like in the rest of Europe there is a group of what I would call ideological and political characters who work to make all of these activities seem dangerous because they would bring about the destruction of traditional values, gender fluidity and all of these things that they associate with gender ideology, and so right now in practice a male teacher or a female teacher who wanted to undertake specific projects that could also include readings of famous books in which boys and girls are confronted with family situations that in the end represent varied family configurations, so such teachers can find themselves in trouble, in kind of a stalemate, from those families who may not be supportive of these visions and so invoke the discussion of educational priorities of the family with respect to school and here we open a legislative controversy, because in Italy there is this great impasse right now; on the one hand there is the school that indeed has its democratic⁵⁵ constitutional function, on the other there is the idea, the ideology that the school is a sort of restaurant with a menu that parents can choose whether to do something or something else, but this isn't there in the school legislation, there is always talk about

⁵⁵ Democratic refers to a type of government that allows citizens to make choices regarding legislation by electing individuals to represent them. ("Democracy." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

adequate information for families, there is the theme of consensus, which is a thorny issue right now.

BG: Can you explain your point of view?

SP: Let's say that since '74 this country has given itself a formidable tool which was the delegated decrees that established that the region must be a part of the school. How? In the established ways and times: the collegial bodies, the famous class assemblies that we still remember, the famous class representatives, which meant giving voice to the parental component and the region, so what we do as teachers, and what we are required to do, obviously sharing with families all of the initiatives and activities that we will carry out during the school year, and we are required to adequately inform, explaining the reasons and illustrating the purposes and the objectives, but nowhere in the current legislation is it written that the families then have the right to veto. And above all how do we obtain family consent? Currently there are different interpretations about this and then is the consensus unanimous? So, making this very simple: school trip? If 16 out of 18 families agree on a trip we go, and the two families that don't agree, obviously we try to convince them, we try to meet them, otherwise the school offers an alternative. On this ground, there is a lot of difficulty which needs clarification. It's clear that there is the obligation for the male and female teachers to inform, to share, even to discuss, but we are not a private school, where there could be a choice of content, we respond to the objectives of the Constitution,⁵⁶ by vocation, by mandate from the constituent fathers and mothers and here is the really great difficulty, that we hope that the male and female legislators address because obviously then it could become a deterrent because then, what's next?

A sort of mud machine⁵⁷ where those poor female and male teachers who decide to carry out a project simply on the many types of families that exist find themselves implicated in all the bar conversations across the whole country for three months, you no longer live, you no longer go to the post office, you no longer go shopping. Obviously then, if you are a male or female activist, you take charge of this, you share it with the group, but we can't think of it as martyrdom for the few, it should be an obligation of the school just like we do health education, road safety, only the discussion is very complex because in my opinion, and so in this I express one of my personal opinions, that is, paying attention to differences means a way of being in the classroom that isn't just related to only one subject or discipline. That is, it's a way of relating to the boys and girls, and here I speak of that age that I am well aware

⁵⁶ The Constitution was created in 1947 and was drafted by the people who supported Italy during the Italian Civil War. ("Constitution of Italy." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Italy. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁵⁷ Mud machine refers to an organization that defames people/other organizations based on political motives. ("mud machine." Wikipedia. https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/mud_machine. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

that, from 16 years old on, it has to be a give and take, and we unfortunately maybe don't realize it. I myself, when I started to teach in 2005, we transmit a whole series of implicit models in our behavior that didn't pass on only through curriculum, the times tables, or the verb "to have," but which is in our way of being. I learned this with feminism and in practice because the children watch us, they imitate us, because the basis of learning is imitation, so our job is a difficult one because both women and men are forced to always put ourselves constantly in question, but this scares people a lot right now in Italian history, it scares people a lot and it's seen as destabilization and so this opens up different philosophical questions about why the crisis isn't fruitful but retrograde.

LD: If you had to choose one important point from your story what would it be? Is there a message that you want people to understand from your experience?

SP: Well, I think the most important point as an activist was the night between the first and 2nd of June [Republic Day, the day the country voted to become a republic in 1946] because I found the Forza Nuova banner. It was night, I was returning from an evening out and I immediately informed my comrades, but basically in that moment there weren't any of them and it was one of the most difficult moments for me, because it was a moment that came after extremely difficult and complicated months, where in some way I had always played the role of spokesperson to the outside world, and so I also had always tried to maintain this attention, vigilant and constant attention to all of the words and messages that I was delivering. And faced with that umpteenth act I felt very vulnerable. Very angry, a moment of great personal anger. And I shared with them, but of course I shared it by phone, I informed them, it was midnight so really late, and then after we informed the authorities, the police arrived, then afterwards we did everything we had to do but those, I don't even know how long they were there, 10 minutes or a quarter hour there alone in front of that banner, for me it was a very difficult moment that I believe I have to share as a message that I really want to give because being male and female activists in some way means always exposing yourself, there is a lot of exposure. And a total guarantee doesn't exist, that is you assume an existential risk and I think that it's in all of our lives, because if there was in my activist path (that I would call little, limited, even regionally; I dare not imagine that in the lives of great people, figures) a moment where I felt vulnerable, I believe that maybe it often or almost always happens to those who decide or who live this dimension.

Here, in that moment my saving thought was that I wasn't alone even if in that moment I was alone, they were there, and I believe that it is truly the only true guarantee even if then it isn't a guarantee. It goes to fill up something that maybe is a fear of being alone, I don't know this personally, in my story, but for sure that was a very difficult moment for me. And in the end, I believe that the thing that kept me up is the idea that my comrades were there

even if they weren't there physically. But I want to say that doing activism means exposing yourself, this exposure is having your say even when it isn't activism through words, I want to say this, surely that. On the other hand, at a personal level in my life, a moment in which I understood that there was a need for a huge revision was when I reclaimed my life after the separation. In some way it was difficult to understand my situation, which was of a young woman, after all, I wasn't even 40, with a daughter, who despite a high level of education because I had completed university and a Ph.D., you found yourself in a fairly banal situation, rather cliché, and there I understood that the problem wasn't individual, but it was political, collective. That is that it was fortunate to be ending up in that trap because it was necessary to begin to seriously discuss a series of things that transcended being Samanta, and the other person who was with me, those people of that age, in that moment; it was a great opportunity for me.

BG: When did you become aware of being an activist? When did you start to use the term activist for yourself?

SP: The others used it before me. Almost in a derogatory sense. Because in the end I arrived late, that is, it's not that I had had a career, a curriculum that spoke in favor of this. I've never been—I don't know, so many of my comrades have been in the youth, university, party movements, they had done all the Unità festivals [annual Italian Communist Party festival] or others—I hadn't ever entered that dimension. The others began to use it to define me, maybe just when I started to speak publicly, so let's say from the time of the walk I organized.

BG: So, no other activists?

SP: No, the opponents. From outside. In a derogatory manner or anyway it was a label. I believe that there has always been this problem in the reception of my person outside in the public dimension, that is, they struggle to frame me as I'm a bit hard to define with respect to many categories. Jokingly I always say it and I also said it in the hearing that there was in the region some months ago for the law that was just approved against homotransphobia.⁵⁸ That is, I am not a homosexual person, I am a heterosexual⁵⁹ person, I am a teacher, but I know very well what homophobia is because I was a victim when I

⁵⁸ Homotransphobia is prejudice or discrimination of individuals based upon their sexual attraction, attraction to individuals of the same gender, or gender identity, individuals who do not identify with the sex they were born as. ("FIGHT HOMOTRANSOPHOBIA IN & THROUGH EDUCATION." may17. <https://may17.org/fight-homo-transphobia-in-through-education/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁵⁹ Heterosexual refers to individuals (sometimes called straight) who are attracted to individuals of the other dominant gender. ("Heterosexuality." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heterosexuality>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

supported it. While it was being discussed this crazy category which is the heterophobia⁶⁰ that pro-life movements⁶¹ invoke as a justification for their legitimate defense of the natural family, as a heterosexual person I have never been the object of heterophobia, then it is clear that my position was born out of intersectionality, from feminism, but I don't struggle to understand the simple concept that in the defense of the rights of a group there is the defense of the rights of every man and woman, yet this creates a great effort, and so I arrived at being an activist without knowing it, maybe, now I like to use it because basically it is the best part of my life. And this is the most comprehensive word even if it doesn't resolve everything for me.

BG: In your opinion, I'm asking you a question that I haven't ever asked anyone, and I'm asking you teacher to teacher. We understand well, you used the word activism, it was there in the questions. It was there in the first contact we sent you. We know what we're talking about, but we know how others have started to use this term in a derogatory sense toward you. Is the word activism used, activist in current Italian? How is it used? My perception comes from here, where I created my course, it comes from students in a protected college, because it is a rather small private university. In between these two worlds they already identify themselves as activists. Both because they come from that type of college and because they were born American, as part of their citizenship, there are two privileges: one is to vote and the other is to make your voice heard, in many ways, they write letters to newspapers... So my course was born from there to explain what activism is and there's very little to explain what activism is in Italian, we find only pedagogical activism of 1920 by Maria Montessori.⁶² Then to explain that type of activism we have to resort to a series of other terms: militancy, active citizenship, also volunteerism, participation, commitment, which highlights a slightly different aspect. Give me your opinion as a teacher.

SP: So, there isn't an awareness of what activism is; it isn't taught, it isn't a category that finds an explanation in scholastic programs, and I believe that it is truly symptomatic of a problem upstream, I return to what I said at the beginning, that is, this is a country that doesn't know how to be secular, and fundamentally the concept, it isn't a coincidence, of

⁶⁰ Heterophobia refers to prejudice or discrimination against people who are attracted to individuals of the other dominant gender. ("Heterophobia Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heterophobia#:~:text=Definition%20of%20heterophobia,a%20vow%20to%20bas h%20back>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁶¹ The pro-life movement, also known as anti-abortion movements, opposes abortion. ("United States anti-abortion movement." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_anti-abortion_movement. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁶² Maria Montessori was an educator who is known most for her outlook on education. She is also known for one of the first women to graduate from medical school in Italy. ("Maria Montessori." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Montessori. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

activism, borders on volunteerism and commitment which are already strongly moralizing, conscientious. And then it is a big problem in my opinion because we aren't secular, so there is no push, support, fertile ground to create a civic conscience; and then it is difficult to talk about activism anyway if you live in a political, cultural context little aware already of the concept of rights, little awareness of the historical conditions that led to the achievement of these rights, with all in all very little historical memory, so when the teacher tries to explain what activism is to the boys and girls, even really little boys and girls, it is very difficult because you can't find examples to bring to them. And this depends on a strong Catholic imprint, in my view, in our culture, because that secularism that should also be a guarantee of the possibility of being Catholic, because this is also very interesting that the constituent fathers and the mothers pose as a problem. That is, the fact that secularism could also be the possibility of being, professing themselves Catholic or other religious denominations is absolutely not accepted in the common culture, that is if you commit yourself, it's because you have good will.

You have good will because you are a good soul, we are already in a private context of conscience. On the other hand, it isn't the concept of a common good that doesn't depend on a particular excellent personality, but that it should be in the being here and now together with you that provides a part of activism because to be activists simply means to have a viewpoint that makes you willingly stand up for others. It's completely absent. It's also difficult to build because in their families the boys and girls don't experience it, not as volunteers but almost always with the Catholic imprint. At this moment for example, efforts are being made in Italy to merge into one network movements linked by an environmental theme, including movements against the Mafia,⁶³ but the common denominator of rights is difficult to sustain because we lack this secular heritage. And this is still to be built, and I think, this is my personal opinion, that it's a bit of the responsibility of the Catholic world, because not the whole Catholic world accepts the importance of secularism, for example, even in the school it's fundamental. However, this is my personal interpretation. Maybe I'll become better at explaining it in the coming years to the boys and girls.

BG: From a local point of view, it's super interesting. Things are complicated but also easy, it's interesting from a certain point of view.

LD: What does the word activism mean to you?

⁶³ Mafia is an organized society of criminals. The mafia originated in Italy, but is now present in many countries. ("Mafia Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Mafia>. Accessed 18 October 2022.)

SP: Activism is bread and roses⁶⁴ as I wrote once. Feminism was salvation for me, a late achievement, but also the key to my whole biography. I think that it was my primary salvation, it permitted me then to truly deviate from the predetermined path, and it helped me discover the potentials that I didn't think I had. I'm behind with respect to feminism in the sense that I feel that I have to make up for lost time because my education, which also includes university, didn't include feminist thinking, and this also makes me a bit angry, but I believe that one thing that I had is curiosity, but it wasn't in fact easy for me to intersect, intercept feminist thought. I'm not lucky, because now I have so many feminist comrades who have mothers who had already protested, who had already demonstrated for law #194. [law legalizing abortion in 1978] I don't have this genealogy of feminist women, I am the first of my family, but I am working hard, because my daughter knows exactly what feminism is, then maybe she won't take advantage of it, and make her choices, but this is also a feminist. However, I didn't have the training, I built myself, and right now I don't know, I think of figures like Graziella Priula,⁶⁵ who I had the opportunity to know, she taught the sociology of communication in Catania,⁶⁶ now I don't think she teaches any more, travels all over Italy and carries out very interesting work about language, a long-standing problem that we have in Italy. This language that utilizes the masculine. Graziella is a person who I've known, with whom I have done things, and right now I often consider her to be an elective mother, and I believe that these encounters, these openings, were possible only in this way, but then also the reality that I live with my women, as I call them, is based on this, so I really believe it will accompany me to the end.

BG: The very last question is about language. It comes from a language teacher. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon⁶⁷ and American context, in the little protected college where there is change, it is normal to conceive functional rules so that today you can enroll as women and graduate as men.

SP: For Italy, all this is futuristic.

⁶⁴ The phrase 'bread and roses' refers to the idea that people should be able to have access to the basic necessities and more, like healthcare and education. ("bread and roses': meaning and origin." Word Histories. <https://wordhistories.net/2021/09/11/bread-and-roses/#:~:text=The%20phrase%20bread%20and%20roses,the%20phrase%20bread%20and%20circuses>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁶⁵ Graziella Priulla is a sociologist and writes many essays on politics and gender stereotypes, as well as culture and journalism. ("Graziella Priulla." Wikipedia. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graziella_Priulla. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁶⁶ The University of Catania is a public university in Sicily. It is known for being one of the oldest universities in the world. ("University of Catania." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Catania. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁶⁷ Anglo-Saxon refers to people of a country that speaks English. ("Anglo-Saxon Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Anglo-Saxon>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

BG: The question was, “How is it possible to de-gender?” The answer was, I don’t know, but the answer is no. Actually, in the course of these interviews, we discovered there are other tricks, in writing the @ instead of the importance of adding the feminine generic to the masculine generic.

SP: So, let’s say it’s a hard, really hard base which is difficult to reach, in my opinion, in those of my age and maybe also let’s say from thirty years on for those who received an education where clearly the language was transmitted with the proper morphological rules that assume this universal masculine. We have to work on the younger generations, that is, we have to transmit a different use of the language when we teach it, both because it’s actually wrong, and there’s a delicious attachment from the Accademia della Crusca [the Italian language academy] that illustrates all the tricks, and the ways that we have to use in the correct way the language and to not discriminate regarding the feminine gender. So we already start from the fact that an offense was committed. In all of these years teaching Italian in this way. On the other hand, there’s a problem of use, because it is difficult for me, like so many other people like us or of my generation or even older, to convert the language with adequate linguistic rules, but it’s fundamental because really, like Plato⁶⁸ said, things exist if you name them, and so never naming the feminine, the feminine is never a public discussion, and this is very serious. So how can you do that?

There are so many tricks, some are simple, I don’t think it’s a huge problem to say boys and girls, seeing that we squander so many words saying nonsense, in this case to be more inclusive [masculine] and more inclusive, [feminine] and on the other hand to start to include some symbolic substitutions, that is, the history of men becomes the history of humanity, it isn’t difficult. Politicians [masculine plural] becomes political life. [feminine singular] However, this is a task that always falls within the discourse of questioning oneself, at school it isn’t conceivable to teach the asterisk⁶⁹ or the “u.”⁷⁰ Because this is used but hasn’t yet entered into the morphology of the language, but I repeat that the Accademia della Crusca⁷¹ helps us, and so you should get there and work on it first as teachers, and also continue training. In this sense, Educating about Differences, which is this network of associations that once a year proposes a national self-training meeting proposing many

⁶⁸ Plato was a foundational Western philosopher from Ancient Greece. (“Plato.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁶⁹ In the Italian language, the asterisk is often used after a word to indicate gender neutrality. (“The Asterisk for Gender Neutrality.” ScuolaScuola. <https://www.scuolascuola.com/blog/the-asterisk-for-gender-neutrality/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁷⁰ The letter ‘u’ can also be used to indicate gender neutrality. (“The Asterisk for Gender Neutrality.” ScuolaScuola. <https://www.scuolascuola.com/blog/the-asterisk-for-gender-neutrality/>. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

⁷¹ Accademia della Crusca is an organization of linguists and Italian language professionals. It is located in Florence and is the oldest academy of its kind. (“Accademia della Crusca.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accademia_della_Crusca. Accessed 10 October 2022.)

workshops, there are, there is a world that opens up. For example, I did a really nice job on the Feminine toponymy, [names of places] about the territories that is carried out by the Feminine toponymy association, which is a nice job of rediscovery and of renaming the streets. That is, there are so many Italian streets, for example in the countryside, because my little school is in the countryside, it has some streets that are called “the street above” and “the street below,” “the street of the ditch,” just to not give them the name of a female character, of an important female figure, and then there it’s necessary to bring all of the beggar schoolchildren to the mayor to ask them to please rename the street because you made it a project, it turned out—

BG: Are you the author of these questions?

SP: Yes, we did it.

BG: What happened?

SP: I should wait for the official title, because in the meantime the council is changing, but when it happens, I’ll let you know. I leave it in suspense. But this work is very fine-grained, and unfortunately it passes through many people. The majority let’s say, the common man who thinks these feminist questions are exhausted, that is they have always heard me say so many times, “But it will never be, come on, but it’s the same thing,” it’s here I think that it’s necessary to be categorical. It happened to me. For example, at school, which is a completely feminine environment, the lower school grades in Italy, the body of teachers is almost always completely made up of women, well, I have participated in some meetings where in my school the teacher who was speaking, a woman, said, “Good evening to everyone” [using the masculine plural] and we were all women in front. Good evening, everyone. [using the masculine plural] After a couple of times, I stood up and said, “Excuse me, I don’t feel greeted, you say ‘good evening, everyone [using the masculine plural] and everyone [using the feminine plural] because I’m also there, but don’t you feel embarrassed when you talk?” We are talking among women. But this is a huge problem. Because it is a form of adjustment to power. The reassuring language creates an enclosure, you come inside it and how to say it, you don’t have to take the risk of unknown pastures. But it is super hard. There are administrative circulars that ask the public administration in all of its offices to the secretariats to adjust the language to not support gender discrimination, but in your opinion it’s possible. Recently for personal reasons I had a hospital form from the gynecology department that said, “The patient [using the masculine article] affected by [...]” That is, “the patient” [using the masculine article] in gynecology. We can’t do it.

BG: Yes, yes, it would not take much to acknowledge it.

SP: I pointed it out to the doctor, and it was if I had said for the first time that the earth was round, he looked at me and said, "But you're right, I never realized it before." It is a huge job, culturally but also here it's necessary to be activists, activist effort, to say it, every time.

BG: You are an activist of the word but, it seems to me, that activism is a means, not a weapon, but a tool with which to do activism.

SP: I have also known action activists who haven't loved to speak or expose themselves, so it depends; of course, if by activism we mean a structured movement to claim civil rights of course, but if we enlarge it to all groups and movements that don't maybe find a constructive objective but also include destructive movements, there are also action activists and not word activists, not always.

BG: Thank you.

SP: I hope I have given you insight into the lower Po valley.