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**From (inter)national women's movements
to cross-border networks.
Towards a “networking citizenship”¹**

1. Why women’s networks?

Since the French Revolution, when the rights of man and citizen were declared, women activists and intellectuals have pointed out the exclusion of women from the domain of “humanity” and citizenship. Theory and praxis of rights thus developed with an “otherness”, a “constitutive” lack concerning the absence of recognition of social groups and a deficiency in including segregated human beings in the public sphere.

Yet women’s awareness about male domination and their subjection to consolidated power structures did not only implicate a claim for women’s inclusion in the domain of citizenship. Women’s vindication was neither a purely formal matter nor a simple request for access to public office, institutions and representation. Rather, it was mainly an immanent critique of politics as a whole. Politics was understood as an inter-subjective public praxis, strictly interconnected with the family environment and the intimate space, that is, connected with gender relations. Women’s social criticism and agency were thus generated by “concrete” needs, rooted in everyday life and individual biographies. The women’s movement started with the generalisation of private experiences and biographies, where a common ground for collective objectives and public mobilisation was found. And women’s praxis as a social movement had an immediate resonance not only at the community and domestic level but

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at the international one. The birth of national and international feminism was in fact almost simultaneous in various countries, at least in Western societies.

Given the background of this brief reconstruction, the following paper aims to indicate in a few words the most important steps followed by women's mobilisation over time. In this process, a red line may be used to trace continuities in international women's mobilisation despite cultural diversities and interruptions, up to and including recent global developments.

My main argument is that women's (inter)national movements have transformed their previous "shape", becoming multifaceted, overlapping, world-wide networks, and developing innovative forms of cross-border cooperation. This new development should be understood as a transformation and at the same time a continuation of the previous tradition, in which women's groups could be identified as a more or less compact social movement or as a separated community.

These new kinds of flexible, variable and extraterritorial "associations" have potentialities that – I think – can challenge the process of globalisation and establish practices of deliberative and participatory democracy. In this case, an innovative notion of trans-national and cross-cultural "networking citizenship" also can take shape in the perspective of a cosmopolitan and extra-territorial democracy from the bottom up.

The present paper thus aims to investigate the notion of network from a gender perspective and to demonstrate the meaning, the framework, the function and immanent potentialities of women's networking in a global society and labour market, in politics and science.

2. From domestic and international women's movements to cross-border networking

The history of the women's movement is closely connected to the establishment and transformation of the nation state, the critique of the universalistic conception of human rights and the limits implicit in the notion of national belonging. From the start, the women's movement was both national and international because of trans-cultural communalities, intentions and

aspirations. The features of patriarchal dominion could be individuated in different places and times.

From the late nineteenth century up to the last century, national women's movements were aimed at stressing the prejudices, the imposing ideology and the manifest limitations of so-called universal human rights and political citizenship. Thus the socio-political and intellectual contribution of women in terms of public action was crucial, not only in terms of claims for public/ private recognition and against social exclusion, but because it helped transform the nation state into a woman-friendly welfare state, based on socio-economic rights and state machinery devoted to equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming.

Therefore, the public and collective strength of women's movements consisted in the confidence that experiences related to unequal and asymmetric gender relations and power systems were not limited to a few individuals but could be found in the lives of most women. Politics and collective action were based on mutual experiences and collective aims. The concrete existence of women was taken as a starting point for the development of a new approach to citizenship, rights and international cooperation.

Women's movements – at least in Western countries – matured and expanded over decades from the restricted space of a private room, to the boundary of local communities, from the borders of a nation state to an international dimension and – recently - to “virtual locations”.

We can fit the history of women's movements and Western contemporary feminism into three main waves:

1) *First wave: emancipationism*

from the eighteenth century up to the end of the World War II, women's movements struggled for access to political rights and full citizenship. Equal rights had to be recognised for men and women, who demanded free access to all offices, education and the labour market. The separation between the private and the public space was politically questioned.

2) *Second wave: from ideologies to differentialism*

from the late 1960s up to the 1990s, feminism became an autonomous movement, which elaborated “different” agencies and practices in order to differentiate itself from other social groups and political parties. Feminism started new campaigns and sparked controversies on specific gender-based issues, in particular on sexuality, reproductive rights and gender-based violence. In this context, there was a shift from an ideological approach to the “battle of sexes,” and then to the issue of gender identity and difference.

3) *Third wave: cross-borders networking*

a global approach to gender issues has developed since the last decade, in relation to the end of a polarised world order, the crisis of the welfare state, the establishment of new supra-national bodies (such as the European Union), the increasing mobility of people and the development of new information/communication systems. Nowadays, women’s trans-national mobilisation has turned into a multiplicity of interconnected networks.

One of the key factors deeply influencing the transformation of international women’s movement was the criticism from women from developing or transitional countries against some assumptions of Western feminism. Notions like subjectivity, rationality, democracy and human rights that were supposed to be universal but *de facto* reflected a limited viewpoint of Western society, were questioned. They were seen as an expression of a “Euro-centric” perspective that implicated a specific idea of politics and gender relations, an idea that cannot always be generalised in multi-cultural contexts. It was necessary to take into consideration the real experiences of women living in the ‘third world’ as well as to include their voices and viewpoints in order to develop a fair approach to sustainable development and respect for (bio) diversities.

However, recognition of the “ideological” limits of Western feminism only functioned as a motivation for the reinforcement of a frank confrontation and the development of joint platforms on issues of common concern. A constant inter-cultural dialogue among women has led to a better reciprocal knowledge. This open confrontation led to a common conviction: women can no longer be considered mere victims of patriarchy. Indeed, they are committed social actors,

who nevertheless suffer discrimination under the existing power structure and a male-dominated social order, both in the private and public space.

The necessity to overcome the ideology of “victimization” has become more evident when international networks and comparative research begins to indicate different realities and stereotypes held by women. An example is the common reference to poor, illiterate, vulnerable and passive woman of the South and East, versus the rich, literate, powerful and active Western woman.

Gender equality can be conceived and realised only when diversities are included and social inequalities are recognised.

Starting in the 1990's, cross-national women's movements thus were more concerned with finding a common ground for social and political justice than with radicalising differences.

The key event indicating a new trend of a global women's movement was the UN World Conference held in Beijing in 1995 on the rights of women and girls. In fact, decisions taken by national representatives had been discussed by and with women and pressure groups - including NGO's, universities, etc. - , that were present and very active during and after the UN conference. Even though only governmental representatives were admitted to official meetings, the Beijing conference reinforced a global movement, through the sharing of knowledge, establishment of contacts, organising of debates and individuating common objectives, all of which were followed up over the ensuing years. Informal meetings between women from different countries provided an opportunity to frame projects and to establish differentiated forms of cooperation that were developed later.

In fact, despite cultural differences, enough similarities were found in Beijing to form a basis for a common action, projects and social policies at the global level. The *Platform for Action* was focused on twelve areas of common concern, individuated as world-wide critical issues for women: 1) women and poverty; 2) education and training of women; 3) women and health; 4) violence against women; 5) women and armed conflict; 6) women and the economy; 7) women in power and decision-making; 8) institutional mechanisms for the advancement

of women; 9) human rights of women; 10) women and the media; 11) women and the environment; 12) issues for young girls.

Starting with these general indications, various networks in peace and war began to be established concerning various spheres of intervention: the socio-economic domain (labour and health), the political space (institutional representation and civic/ grassroots participation) and the educational realm (scientific system and career).

The UN conference in Beijing thus symbolized the inception of a “networking era” for feminism, thanks in part to the support of informatic means that make communication faster and inexpensive. However, a gender and cultural gap in computer use still exists in many countries, creating new social and educational inequalities. In any case, the role played by new forms of information and communication systems has been fundamental for the improvement of a global networking, the development of projects and the possibility to pay women for their work. In addition, information networks and telematic interactive forums can be very helpful in gathering information internationally and promoting social justice in different life contexts.

In sum, the individuation of areas of common concern gave rise to differentiated forms of cross-border networks that helped build knowledge and reduce prejudice about the situation and condition of women in the “first” and in the “third” world. In this way, a bridge between gender cultures was built.

3. A gendered viewpoint the process of globalisation

Without a doubt, the augmenting influence of international feminism has led to a new approach to the theory and praxis of human rights, social justice, politics, international cooperation and humanitarian intervention - in times of both peace and war - in Western nation states as well as in countries in transition/ development.

Yet in the last decade, international women’s movements also have changed due to ‘globalisation,’ which can cause radical socio-economic and cultural-political transformations. Globalisation causes new forms of social

inequality and creates new gaps between the richest and poorest countries. In this new geo-political context, women face new difficulties, increasing marginalisation from the labour market and various kinds of exploitation in the age of “flexible and precarious work.”

At the same time, globalisation facilitates an additional mobility of human capital, even though in many cases people do not voluntarily leave their countries as “willing migrants” but rather because of hunger, war and violence. The trafficking in human beings and international criminality have thus increased. Therefore, the worldwide trend of human mobility has led to the construction of new frontiers and greater limitations of the freedom to cross national borders. But this phenomenon contrasts with the expanding numbers of worldwide networks and connections among people.

If we look at a specific case like the internationalisation of gender issues and the expanding of women’s networking, we can gain a new understanding of globalisation, as a process aimed at democratising society, politics and science on the large-scale. New forms of women’s social action have in fact pointed out the possibility of dealing differently with the issue of globalization. Gender relations can be thus conceived from a cosmopolitan and normative perspective, where respect for the “others” forms the basis of fair politics, a woman-friendly economy and egalitarian science. Cross-border networks and projects can facilitate this complex and intricate process.

Rethinking globalisation thus implies a new understanding of international relations, a new approach to international law, and a diverse approach to international co-operation.

In fact, international relations are no longer understood as a mere diplomatic exchange of information and goods between “independent” nation States. The idea of sovereignty has been challenged by globalization. Sovereignty traditionally referred to the power and law exercised by a state within a limited territory. *De facto*, international relations refer now to an overlapping composition of nation states, supra-national bodies, international organisations, pressure groups and “cosmopolitan” citizens. But international law, too, has lost its old meaning: for instance, international criminal tribunals

and judiciary bodies create , the possibility to put citizens and armies on trial on charges of genocide and war crimes outside the borders of their own nation state. Thanks to this new legislative context, gender based violence and mass rape also have become internationally punishable, being considered both as a violation of human rights and a war crime. Here, too, the roles played by women victims, activists, scholars, and policy makers united in international initiatives and networks have been essential elements in changing the gender-blind approach to human rights and international humanitarian law. Last but not least, women's networks also have indicated the possibility to re-conceptualize in a pragmatic way notions of human mobility and international cooperation.

If we look at human mobility – when it's not forced - and globalisation from a “positive” angle, we can argue that this phenomenon implies mobilisation of energies, resources, experiences and knowledge. This potential already has been explored and used by women's associations to mobilise people on issues of common concern, to organise cross-border campaigns, to raise funds and to create new jobs and training opportunities, while developing common projects. International cooperation thus acquires a new, concrete educational meaning and a contextual location.

It's a given, that over the years, women's networks and NGOs have been able to establish and reinforce *alternative and transversal experiences of a participatory and extra-territorial democracy from the bottom-up and at the global level*. Contextual practices based on cross-border collaboration have suggested ways of rethinking labour, politics and science from a trans-cultural perspective, starting with the concrete needs of daily life and moving up to the global level. Women's networks can to develop personal abilities and links to professional abilities, shared with other people in relation to specific objectives.

Globalisation thus permits a sort of “networking citizenship”, creating new cross-national spaces for work, ideation, confrontation and governance, starting with contextually based experiences and interpersonal practices. This new kind of women's agency implicates the redesigning of traditional social movements, the significance of collective mobilisation and the meaning of political

participation in relation to common principles and shared goals at the global level.

4. Meanings and practices of networking

As mentioned above, forms of global governance and deliberative grassroots democracy have become possible, thanks to the establishment of networks that permit long-distance collaboration and contact, using innovative communication. Cross-border projects become thus easier and faster.

But how can we define a network?

A network can be conceived as a social structure based on a complex interaction and composed by individuals connected by interpersonal relationships and sharing common principles in relation to predetermined goals. Networking thus is based on an active dynamic among all members. For this reason, networking also includes conflicts and misunderstandings, especially when linking people from different cultures or different personal characteristics.

A network – which starts with asymmetries and disadvantages - is a permanent process of change and adjustment, always under construction. It is founded on differentiated and often instable communication, expertise, experiences and knowledge. Therefore, a network is always a work in progress because it does not refer to fixed models, being by its very nature contextual and depending on interaction.

Networks and networking are based on the capability to connect human resources, skills, experiences, exchange of information and opportunities in a productive way. A network does not necessarily originate with professional skills but rather begins with biographical resources and intuitions that are re-invented, adjusted and employed in different contexts and times. A network starts in fact from individual capabilities that become reinforced and rearticulated thanks to mutuality and the acquisition of new skills. It begins with individual/ interpersonal potential that are implicit to the goal. But the result cannot be judged only in terms of the end product. The final outcome should be seen in relation to the successful reciprocal empowerment that implies the acquisition

of new skills at the both personal and inter-personal levels, thanks to reciprocal respect and cooperation.

Women gradually have developed differentiated forms of networking, prompted by the difficulties of daily life, where mutual cooperation and informal exchanges form the foundation of a so-called “economy of favours”, as was the case in the Soviet Union during socialism and is still true for many countries in development/ transition. Concrete, family-related needs lead women to “invent” strategies of surviving as well as innovative forms of entrepreneurship, using their own skills and motivations, as demonstrated by the successful experiences micro-credit.

Due to daily contingencies, women thus are traditionally better at networking than men. But men have more experience in organising lobbies and “old boys’ networks”, which permit them to maintain and reinforce political power and economic privilege. Wealth vs. skills?

Women’s networks and lobbies =now try to fill up this gap not only in terms of meeting the family’s budget and providing mutual aid but also in terms of seeking top positions and achieving economic recognition. For instance, a guide published by an American women’s network “dedicated to the advancement of women in business, explains why women's networks are valuable. It shows how companies large and small have leveraged women's networks to their advantage.” In addition, the guide argues that this kind of initiative “increases leadership talent through the establishment of women's networks - networks that link specific female employee concerns and larger organizational goals in ways that bolster the bottom line.”

Despite successful experiences, questions about the relationship or differences between women’s communities, associations, movements, parties, networks and lobbies remain controversial and complicated issues in the feminist debate. But clearly, networks are useful for women in many situations.

In fact, there is an increasing number of women’s business pressure groups and trans-national lobbies in institutions (like the *European Women’s Lobby* in Brussels). In particular, the United Nations is trying to introduce gender mainstreaming in all its initiatives. For instance, various UN sections – like

Unifem, which is devoted to women; like Unesco, which focuses on education and science; and Undp, which addresses development programs - are coming up with *ad hoc* interventions, research and proposals for the advancement of women, based on worldwide networks.

Yet networks have different aims. For instance, networks encourage the presence of women in top positions and in the scientific arena. From the political viewpoint many initiatives aim to augment the number of women in institutional politics and parliaments. From the scientific point of view, many research networks have developed with the support of the European Union, which has established a Unit on "Women and Science" at the European Commission.

In this EU framework, it is important to mention at least two successful networks in the educational and scientific field.

The first example is the *European Thematic Network Project for Women's Studies, ATHENA*, "a project recognised and supported by the Socrates programme of the European Commission since 1997. It is a well-established and very functional network in which 80 Women's and Gender Studies Programmes at universities, research institutes and documentation centres in Europe participate. It has proved to be a unique opportunity to systematise the comparison of European perspectives and thus contribute to a more precise definition of interdisciplinary gender-education."

The second example concerns the *European Platform of Women Scientists* – also supported by the European Commission – which "calls for special attention to the gender aspect in science and science policy and asks for maintaining instruments to ensure the consideration of gender balance and gender mainstreaming in European research policy".

Thanks to new forms of UN and pan-European cooperation, women's networks are becoming influential, at least at the level of education and public discourse. Women's networks thus can be employed not only to assist in daily survival or as business lobbies but in the perspective of an inclusive approach to democracy, politics, science and social justice, starting with the concrete,

daily challenges of human life, and recognising the condition of marginalised or underrepresented social actors.

Feminism also has been “integrated” into public knowledge and discourse thanks to the expanding web of women’s networks.

5. Gender studies and networks: a global extra-territorial democracy from bottom up?

An important but also controversial development in the women’s movement concerns the establishment and institutional recognition of gender studies as an autonomous and/or interdisciplinary research and educational field.

Gender studies started with the experiences of former students, teachers, researchers and scholars who had participated actively in the feminist movement since the late 1960s. Gender studies were based on the interest in re-elaborating previous personal practices in theoretical and political terms and transmitting them to new generations. Over the years, gender studies became a branch recognised even by academia and the scientific system. Yet despite its institutionalisation, gender studies continues to be crucial to a critical understanding of society, politics and science. In fact, it has contributed to rethinking the origin and meaning of social inequalities, starting with the comprehension of patriarchy, power and male domination.

Since the late 1990s, a gender perspective questioned consolidated forms of social, political and scientific understanding. Networks and publications (which, for instance, often have indicated the narrow-minded vision of male peer referees) contributed to strengthen this innovative approach, helped by gender mainstreaming programs, which introduced a gender perspective to all social policies. This new trend led to a different approach to equal opportunities, which in many cases were merely conceived as a top-down and formalistic issue related to gender equality.

Personal experiences, women’s movement, gender studies and networks are thus interconnected.

This is also true for me. What I have argued above does is not merely dealing with theoretical assumptions and historical reconstruction but with my concrete experience as a director of the “International Network for Research on

Gender”, established in 1996 at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics and continuing up to my present occupation in Milan. The network has travelled with me over years, challenging it in various contexts and cultures, in different spaces and times.

The network-building was and still is a quite complex process, working in different countries and collaborating with various international bodies, research centres, universities, associations, NGO’s, etc. A network permits on the one hand a continuous collaboration between institutions and informal groups, and on the other hand a constant cross-cultural interface with policy makers, grassroots movements/ civic associations, scientists/ researchers (the so-called “velvet triangle”).

But one key-aspect is the interpersonal and biographical one. In fact, it is important to individuate people, who seem able to work together, in order to strengthen common initiatives, to develop reciprocal skills and to form a collaborative working group. The composition of a group is thus basic in terms of “interpersonal” compatibility, despite individual skills and capabilities.

A network has in fact not only to do with professional expertise but also with communication skills and in particular with the understanding of differentiated forms of “language”, which in many cases can cause misunderstandings and conflicts. But it is not only a matter of understanding of foreign languages but a question of comprehension of body expressions and cultural codes, which implicates a complex and delicate process of “translation”, often leading to a “loss in translation”.

A network always has to deal with different disciplines. A variety of scientific and professional languages are simultaneously employed in order to realise a project or to realise an objective. In this case, it is necessary to have an inter/ cross-disciplinary approach to projects and the ability to de-codify issues, in recognising expertise and in facing possible problems.

Another issue that cannot be forgotten concerns the intergenerational dynamic among participants that complicates relationships between senior and junior members, with their diverse experiences, diverse expectations and dissimilar “generational languages”. In this case, it is very important to develop

a stimulating and fruitful atmosphere where ideas and experiences can be exchanged. Senior participants should dedicate time for mentoring and knowledge-transfer and at the same time junior members should communicate their innovative viewpoints and skills in using new technologies that are ignored by the senior staff.

In this way, a network can become a very important exercise for a mutual “entrepreneurship”, in which each participant learns from the other. Networking also means learning how to “invest” in oneself and one's own skills/ potential. A network thus offers the possibility to use both expertise and biographical resources in different ways. Any experience has potential and therefore should not be thrown away: if correctly reworked, it can become useful for a new objective.

Thus My work is concerned with a cross-border, inter-generational and interdisciplinary approach to ethics, politics, social justice and science, building dialogue between Western and transitional societies. It is based on the attempt to connect research, political institutions and civil society in relation to processes of democratisation and the public discourse. A network thus facilitates an innovative connection and continuous interaction between theory and praxis.

In my work, I have always tried to combine normative assumptions (respect for human rights, fulfilment of social justice, and critique of violence) with concrete objectives and case studies. Normative commonalities can be found in different cultures just as similarities can be found in diversity. Therefore, I always keep in mind counter-factual principles while planning projects, collecting information, creating databases, dealing with interested people.

Normative issues thus trace the path while I'm developing research with colleagues. They can be summarised as follows:

- a) *Development and empowerment of human talents.*
- b) *Functioning of democratic institutions and promotion of social fairness.*
- c) *Education for all citizens and scientific excellence.*
- d) *Increase of civic engagement and participation to public life.*
- e) *Fulfilment of gender equality and equal opportunities for all citizens.*

f) Enhancement of social quality of life and critique of violence.

These issues are valid both in Western societies and in post-colonial/ post socialist countries: communalities can be found in different societies. A merely formal universalism can be rethought, starting with concrete case studies where normative assumptions can be found.

Networking promotes compatibility between ethical principles, political aims, scientific work and the re-conceptualisation of social and scientific policies. Reciprocal respect among human beings, political representation, fair distribution of resources, gender equality and respect for the law thus are inter-related in the effort to plan and realise projects with the aim of a sustainable freedom and development.

Networks give the opportunity – working with ideas, real people and defined projects – to realise new possibilities and hopes. In fact, it also offers the opportunity to re-considering cross-border and transversal forms of citizenship and cosmopolitan democracy. A “networking citizenship” is thus possible, overcoming cultural limits and political boundaries. But this implies a challenge to the traditional idea of citizenship as a matter of national belonging and the acquisition of political rights.

A “networking citizenship” links human beings not necessarily through “geo-political spaces” but through issues they share with people from different countries and cultures, establishing common aims and shared principles. The sense of “belonging” becomes related to cross-border projects based in different places but supported through collaboration with different talents and diverse viewpoints. Hope can assume a new, concrete and trans-cultural voice, with both a contextual and extra-territorial resonance.