

Using a Feminist Paradigm (Intersectionality) to Study Conservative Women: The Case of Pro-life Activists in Italy

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This article builds on ethnographic research concerning the Italian pro-life movement and argues for the use of intersectionality theory in studying conservative women. The article suggests, first, that understanding conservative movements necessitates linking their political claims to the social identities of their activists, as would be the case for any other social movement (e.g., feminism). These social identities are as complex and intersectional as any other: a white, upper-class pro-life activist is no less intersectional than a black feminist from a poor background. Concomitantly, there is no unique feminism, but rather a plurality of feminisms, a diversity that intersectionality facilitates the identification of. The same is true for pro-life movements, but scholars tend to use the singular form to talk about conservatism; in this article, I explore the use of the plural to show that pro-life women do not constitute a monolithic group. On the contrary, these women are diverse in terms of their reproductive stories, their working status, and their class, race, and sexual practices, and this diversity translates into different ways of being pro-life. Second, recognizing this complexity does not suggest a natural link between feminism and conservatism. Alternatively, I suggest that a better understanding of conservative women can only be reached if they are studied on their own terms.

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Feminist scholars have long been fascinated with nonfeminist women and antifeminist social movements, perplexed by women's involvement with them. I am no exception. "Why are they fighting against (what seems to me) their own right to choose?" That is the enigma that I wanted to explore when I started to investigate the anti-abortion movement in Italy and especially women's role in it. Being not only a feminist scholar but also an ethnographer, I decided to engage in long-term fieldwork within the major Italian pro-life organization, the Movimento per la Vita (MpV), and some other smaller and local pro-life groups that are active in the northern part of Italy. When one looks closer, as any ethnographer should do, things are always much more complicated than one expects. The fieldwork revealed unexpected findings on at least two levels.

First, a large number of what I considered "anti-women activists" prior to the fieldwork were actually helping migrant and poor women coping with unexpected pregnancies in the pregnancy crisis centers opened by the MpV. What I observed in the pregnancy crisis centers were pro-life women finding places for battered pregnant women to stay, helping migrant mothers claim their rights to social services, and distributing baby supplies to needy mothers. Should I consider, then, that these activists are more feminist than I thought? Are they more feminist than they would like to admit? Many feminist ethnographers who have studied conservative women have reached this conclusion, but such a point of view, as I will show in this article, is problematic in several respects.

Second, the anti-abortion activists whom I met did not always fit the stereotype that I had in mind, which was consistent with the literature on pro-life activism in the United States. Relying on the classic works of Kristin Luker (1984), Faye Ginsburg (1989), and Suzanne Staggenborg (1991), confirmed by the research of Donald Granberg (1981), Kerry Jacoby (1998), and Carol Maxwell (2002), I expected to find stay-at-home, middle-class mothers living a traditional marital life. The reality of the Italian pro-life movement today, however, is far more complex, and I was surprised to find pro-life women with careers, with no children (or with children but no husband), and from diverse social classes.

How, then, to deal with this unexpected political and sociological complexity? I argue that intersectionality is the most useful analytical tool to study conservative women activists in all their diversity, without

falling into normative judgments (are they feminist or not?) that would diminish our capacity to fully understand conservatism.

I begin with a review of the feminist ethnography of conservative women and the literature on pro-life activism in the United States. Building on these literatures, I depart from some of their proposals that limit, albeit in different ways, the ability to reveal a more nuanced understanding of the evidence. Concerning the feminist ethnography of conservative women, I argue that we should no longer measure conservative women's distance or proximity to feminist political standards and instead try to apply feminist analysis. Using intersectionality theory as an analytical tool allowed me to take into account the heterogeneity of the women I met during the fieldwork, revealing significant aspects that the literature on the U.S. case did not fully acknowledge.

THE FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHER STUDYING CONSERVATIVE WOMEN: ARE THEY FEMINIST AFTER ALL?

Conservative women have been largely unrecognized by political analysts (Schreiber 2008). “We can say in the West that acting for women, in the existing literature, has frequently been equated — and operationalized in empirical studies — with the demands of the second wave of women's movements” (Celis and Childs 2014, 4). Thus, “conservative women's activism was often sidelined or disregarded, leaving a gap in knowledge about the implications and effects of ideological diversity among women” (Schreiber 2013, 475). Feminist scholars, though, have been more concerned with the issue (Bacchetta and Power 2002; Blee 2002; Blee and Deutsch 2012; Celis and Childs 2014, 2018). More specifically, there is a literature that is useful for my purpose: the feminist ethnography scholarship that deals extensively with conservative religious women, activist or not, which is currently focused on Muslim contexts. The Italian pro-life organizations claim that they are non-religious, but I never met an activist who was not a devoted Catholic churchgoer. Thus, the feminist ethnographic literature that focuses on religious conservative women is particularly appropriate to this case study and to my methodology.

As Béatrice de Gasquet (2015) shows, a pattern became ideal-typical in this literature: a feminist nonreligious scholar decides to engage in fieldwork with conservative religious women to understand why they are choosing the “enemy.” However, doing fieldwork means trying to

understand the “other’s” point of view. While doing so, the feminist ethnographer realizes that these women are not victims laboring under a false consciousness (Klatch 1988), a view that was common in the literature prior to the 1990s (Bilge 2010; Bracke 2008). She starts to focus on conservative women’s agency (Gerami and Lehnerer 2001; Mahmood 2005; for a literature review, see Giorgi 2016) and eventually ends up claiming that these women are, in fact, a bit feminist, too. She then finds herself in the middle of what Avishai, Gerber, and Randles (2012) call “the feminist ethnographer’s dilemma”: the tension between feminist analysis and political projects. Rachel Rinaldo (2014), for instance, in her work on Muslim women activists in Indonesia, asks whether “pious critical agency” is necessarily incompatible with feminism and women’s rights. Similarly, Tanya Zion-Waldoks (2015) talks about “devoted resistance” in her work on orthodox women activists in Israel as a form of feminist resistance. Equally, Gerber (2008) considers that the ex-gay movement in the United States (a movement that promotes “reparative therapies” in order to “heal” gays and lesbians) can, paradoxically, be seen as a place where gender critique and experimentation thrive and as the realization of certain feminist ideals of gender innovation.

This effort to see beyond classic feminist standards to understand the experience of women who are different from us (mostly white, middle- and upper-class, Western, nonreligious feminists) has been very inspiring for me. Indeed, it is important to study conservative women with a comprehensive approach that allows the suspension of our own political judgments and moral values to be able to understand theirs.

The turn to agency, however, is problematic in several respects. First, these feminist ethnographers, even if they wanted to dispel the stereotype that conservative women are simply passive victims of patriarchy, end up imposing a political identity (feminism) on these women who do not claim it for themselves, or even sharply refuse to do so (Schreiber 2018). Is this not a paternalistic attitude? Some of the pro-life women I met during fieldwork said that they act for women because they think that abortion is violence against women, but all of them clearly said that they are not feminists. They consider feminists to be women with a very different gendered identity in terms of life, sexual, and political choices, and they do not want to be equated with them. Why should I impose this categorization on them?

Second, the feminist ethnographer’s desire to understand women who are agentive in ways that differ from feminist notions of agency produces

an understanding that risks removing structural constraints and conditions from the very notion of agency (Bracke 2008). In short, the risk with this approach is the potential to neglect the very question of women's oppression that motivated feminist ethnographers to study conservative women in the first place. "Biased by a certain romanticism," these approaches, "with their eagerness to give voice," "are not attentive enough to explaining the working of power" (Bilge 2010, 19; see also Abu-Lughod 1990).

As de Gasquet (2015) suggests, the only solution to the feminist ethnographer's dilemma is to renounce the question "are they feminists after all?" The dilemma is arguably solved not by measuring their claims with respect to feminist standards that they do not acknowledge, but by analyzing their gendered claims for themselves. Celis and Childs (2014), for example, suggest that we should make a distinction between gendered claims that "address women's concerns and perspectives but do so in ways distinct from traditionally understood feminism" and gendered claims that are openly feminist. However, the problem of women's oppression versus agency remains: how can feminist scholars take the question of oppression seriously without necessarily considering conservative women as a uniform group of passive targets with no agency? I argue in this article that intersectional analysis is an effective way to bring social structures, and thus the question of domination, back into the picture, by showing that not all conservative women have the same agentic capacity in the movements they are a part of. Following Bilge (2010), I argue that intersectional analysis allows us to go beyond the opposition of subordination (religious women as victims of false consciousness) versus resistance (religious women as feminists after all).

THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT: A LIFESTYLE CONSTITUENCY?

The second literature that is relevant to my subject is the scholarship on pro-life activism, a literature currently focused on the U.S. context and almost nonexistent for the Italian one (with the exceptions of Mattalucci 2012a, 2012b, 2017). For Luker (1984), in her groundbreaking book *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, which compares pro-life and pro-choice activists in California, the abortion conflict in the United States concerns the *opposition* between two groups of women. Pro-choice women tend to have higher cultural capital, careers, and smaller families. Pro-life women commonly are less well educated, are stay-at-home

mothers, and have bigger families. This makes pro-life women more dependent on their husbands, and it is one reason they have an interest in defending maternity as the core of women's lives, whereas for pro-choice women, maternity is only part of their identity. For Luker, the abortion debate is a conflict between two opposing visions of maternity, making the anti-abortion constituency, much like the pro-choice movement, a lifestyle collective (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012). The two opposite sides of the debate are "championed by feminists and housewives" (Luker 1984, 193).

In her ethnographic study of the conflict triggered by the opening of an abortion clinic in Fargo, North Dakota, Ginsburg (1989), who also compares pro-life and pro-choice activists, found similar results. Pro-life women are housewives and mothers who wanted to give more social value to reproduction and saw legal abortion as a degradation of it. Staggenborg (1987, 1991) also defines the pro-life and pro-choice movements as lifestyle constituencies. Her focus is more on the organizational level, but she also uses the paradigmatic figure of the pro-life stay-at-home mother to show how the movement's organization is linked to this figure. It is, for example, a more time-consuming activism than the pro-choice one, since feminists have a job and pro-life women do not.

Few of these findings are consistent with the reality of the pro-life movement in Italy today. Pro-life women can be single women with careers, they can have no children and high cultural capital, or they can be single mothers working low-income jobs. Thus, they do not exactly present the role model of the traditional woman pictured in these studies. The pro-life housewife remains a valued figure in the movement, but it is certainly not the only gender role that a pro-life woman can embody.¹

Recognizing the seminal work of Luker, Ginsburg, and Staggenborg, I consider the life experiences of the women in my study, especially their reproductive lives, to understand their activism. However, contra the tendency to compare pro-life and pro-choice women, leading to a focus on the differences *between* the two groups and thus overemphasizing the

1. It is not surprising to find housewives in the pro-life movement, given the fact that they are very common in Italy: in 2016, there were 7,338,000 housewives in the country (out of more than 60,795,612 inhabitants and 25,816,311 families). See <http://www.istat.it/it/files/2017/07/Le-casalinghe-in-Italia-2016.pdf?title=Casalinghe+in+Italia++10%2Fflug%2F2017+-+Testo+integrale+e+nota+metodologica.pdf> and <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2015/08/ItalianiCifre2015It.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2018).

similarities *within* them, my work deals explicitly with pro-life activists (following the methodological lead of Bacchetta 2002 in her work on women in Hindu nationalists). This enables me to be attentive to the more nuanced differences within this specific group.² To take this complexity into account, and to understand the political consequences of internal diversity, it seems to me that intersectionality is the best tool we have (Bilge 2009).

HOW TO USE INTERSECTIONALITY TO STUDY CONSERVATIVE WOMEN

Intersectionality is one of the major contributions of feminist studies, aimed at avoiding the danger of essentialism and of presuming that women are a homogeneous category (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1990). But this attention to the diversity of women's experiences is rarely applied to conservative women activists, who tend to be described as a homogenous group.

The concept of intersectionality is usually linked to the work of black feminism and thus focuses on the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 1990). It was then meant to study dominated social actors, typically black women. Working on dominant actors with a dislikable political agenda, I use intersectionality as a paradigm allowing empirical investigation, not as a political tool of emancipation for actors facing multiple oppressions (Hancock 2007). This article is part of an emerging, although still minor, research trend (see Mügge et al. 2018 for a bibliographical summary) using intersectional research to study dominant social actors (Chauvin and Jaunait 2012, 2015; Yuval-Davis 2015).³

I analyze pro-life activists, especially women, at the intersection of gender, class, race, and sexual practices. This allows me to show the heterogeneity of the group "women" within the movement and the political consequences of such heterogeneity. The intersectional paradigm was born as an internal criticism of white, middle-class,

2. In the literature on the U.S. case, Munson (2008) deals extensively with the internal diversity of the pro-life movement. But he focuses on the organizational and ideological diversity, not the life experiences, of the activists.

3. Some authors argue that this trend depoliticizes the field (see Mügge et al. 2018 for a summary of this complex debate). I think that pointing to whiteness as a constitutive element of conservative movements and highlighting their class, gender, and sexual normativity is also, in a way, a political contribution to the field of intersectionality.

heterosexual feminism. It allowed black or lesbian feminists to show how the causes defended by the movement were deeply linked to the social identity of their leaders. This same theoretical potential can be applied to conservative social movements.

In this article, I use intersectionality as my theoretical frame and ethnography as a method of inquiry. Ethnography is an inductive method starting from the experiences of the people in the study. Thus, it is important not to subsume what gender, class, race, and sexual practices mean in the field but to identify the categories that make a difference in this precise group, organization, or environment (Avanza, Fillieule and Masclet 2015; Bassel and Lépinard 2014; Kofoed 2008; Mazouz 2015; West and Fenstermaker 1993; Yuval-Davis 2006) to display what Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) call “an emic approach to intersectionality.” I then use intersectionality to understand, in an empirical and inductive way, which categories make sense (and make power relations) in the pro-life arena and what these categories tell us about conservative women’s activism and agency. I start with a classic gendered analysis taking the group women as a whole (summarized in Table 1). Then I show why it is not enough and what we gain when we go beyond sex (summarized in Table 2). Finally, I analyze pro-life activism at the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexual practices (summarized in Table 3), which allows me to take the diversity of pro-life women into account.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This article is based on ethnographic research on the Italian pro-life movement. During the first stage of the fieldwork (February–July 2013), I was able to verify the feasibility of the research, define the boundaries of the pro-life movement, and identify the internal conflicts among the organizations. This first stage of full-time fieldwork was about gaining access to and mapping the pro-life arena.

During the second stage (2014–15 academic year), I concentrated on the main pro-life organization in Italy, the Movimento per la Vita, the only group that has a national organization and claims 15,000 volunteers (a majority of whom are women, according to my observations, but the movement does not keep statistics on the sex ratio). I was particularly interested in the pregnancy crisis centers. These centers (there are more of 300 of them in Italy) are run by pro-life women, and their scope is to

convince women facing an unwanted pregnancy to “keep their baby” and to do this by offering moral and material help. I was able to gain access to two of these centers, where I observed how pro-life activists deal with pregnant women. I was also able to observe local, regional, and national meetings of the MpV, discovering how it works from the inside.

During the third stage (2015–16 academic year), the fieldwork continued at a less intense pace. I attended national meetings and conferences, including the MpV Papal Audience, but did not take part in the everyday life of the movement. In addition to participant observation (of conferences, public prayers, meetings, marches for life, pregnancy crisis center sessions, and so on), which provided my primary data, I also conducted 30 in-depth life-story interviews (about two hours each) with pro-life activists, both men and women, in different organizations and at different levels of responsibility.

Since I already had worked ethnographically on a movement with which I profoundly disagree (Avanza 2008), I expected, since I consider myself a feminist scholar and pro-choice, that it would be hard for me to spend time within the movement. Sometimes it was, especially while I was doing participant observation within the most radical groups. Praying in front of a hospital where abortions are performed while a feminist group shouted at me and the other prayers, for instance, was emotionally challenging. But several elements made the fieldwork less difficult than I anticipated. One is the internal diversity of the movement in which I could find people who were easier to spend time with than others. This prompted me to take this diversity seriously.

People knew that I was researching the movement; I took notes in front of them and recorded our interviews. I kept my personal opinions to myself. But, since I was taking part in the movement’s conferences, marches, and prayers and volunteering in a pregnancy crisis center, activists assumed that I was sympathetic, which made my fieldwork easier and deepened my access. This moral ambiguity is somehow inherent in the study of groups with which the ethnographer has an “awkward relationship” (Snow 2006).

GENDER (OF COURSE) MATTERS: WOMEN AND MEN IN THE MOVIMENTO PER LA VITA

Abortion has been legal in Italy since 1978, when the Parliament, with a majority even within the Catholic party Democrazia Cristiana, voted for a bill legalizing abortion in the first trimester (later if the fetus shows a

significant disability or the life of the mother is at risk). Elements of the Catholic world, including the Catholic Church, felt betrayed by the Democrazia Cristiana and began to react. Catholic activists from various organizations started a petition in favor of a referendum to abrogate the law and authorize abortion only when the fetus shows a significant disability or the life of the mother is at risk. This petition and the voting campaign that followed marked the beginning of the Italian pro-life movement. The first generation of activists all started that way: collecting signatures for the referendum and campaigning for it. The Movimento per la Vita, which remains the main pro-life movement in Italy today, organized under these circumstances.

The referendum took place in 1981 and was a total disaster for the pro-life side. The MpV had to admit that the legal fight (making abortion illegal again) was not an option any more. The movement reacted by distinguishing itself in two spheres: first, a political area geared toward establishing a “culture for life” designed to make people realize that abortion is wrong; and second, a care area that has tried to “save as many lives as possible” by opening pregnancy crisis centers (Centri di Aiuto alla Vita, CAV) where women facing unwanted and/or difficult pregnancies can find help and thus have the option to choose not to have an abortion.

The local movements took charge of the cultural (organizing conferences, publishing journals, making speeches in schools) and political (lobbying for pro-life friendly social policies and trying to join political parties) fight. The local CAV took charge of care activities in the field. Local movements and local CAV adopted a federal organization with a regional level, a national assembly, and a president. Today, the federal organization counts more than 600 local groups (movements and pregnancy crisis centers) across Italy.

This two-area organization is highly gendered: men are in the majority within the political arm of the movement, and women are almost the only activists within the care sphere. The sexual division of labor, as Daniëlle Kergoat (2000) has shown, follows two principles: separation (there are jobs for men and jobs for women) and hierarchy (jobs for men are more valuable than those for women). Separation applies perfectly to the MpV. Women activists are predominantly located in care roles, while men are more commonplace in political ones. This is a classic organizational strategy for conservative and far-right movements: channeling women out of political positions and into the social and charitable domains, which are considered better suited to their “maternal instinct” (Passmore 2003).

In the MpV, this division is usually rationalized by reference to “the spirit” for the political masculine area and “the heart” for the feminine care area. Carlo Casini, president of the MpV between 1990 and 2015, best described the organizational hierarchy in the MpV. He explained that from the outset, the MpV decided to separate the “public and political” engagement of the local movements from the “hidden and silent” work of the pregnancy crisis centers because of tensions about the abortion issue.⁴ Even though this is a significant volume of work — for example, counseling pregnant women, liaising with social services, seeking financial help, collecting baby clothes, and monitoring a national emergency phone number active 24 hours a day — Casini pointed out (surely involuntarily) that a certain invisibility of women’s work within the CAV is desirable. We know, of course, that invisibility characterizes the sexual division of labor (Delphy 1977). When it comes to attending press interviews, meeting the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or pushing someone into a political career, it is almost exclusively the men from the political sphere who are on the front lines, not the women working in the CAV.⁵

The political wing of the movement tends to diminish the work of the CAV activists. CAV activists should counsel women within their first trimester who are facing an unwanted pregnancy and can still decide to get an abortion. They should convince these women not to terminate, by offering them help and support, and thus “save a life.” But the reality of the CAV activity is very different: most women arrive at the pregnancy crisis centers not wanting to terminate at all. The majority are in the final stages of a pregnancy or have already given birth. They are mostly migrants facing economic problems and some even personal ones (single mothers, prostitutes, victims of domestic violence).⁶ The CAV activists know that these women are not their “target,” but they choose not to

4. Carlo Casini, *Sì alla vita: Storia e prospettive del Movimento per la Vita* (Milan: San Paolo, 2011), 72.

5. The former president of the MpV has been an Italian or European Union congressman between 1979 and 2014. The new president, Giancarlo Gigli, elected in 2015, is also a member of the Italian Parliament. Other members of the MpV have been elected at the local or regional level. It is noteworthy that they are all men from political backgrounds.

6. According to the CAV 2013 report, based on the activity of 215 centers (out of a total of 345) that send their statistics to the national organization, the CAV helped 35,875 women in 2013, of whom 43% were pregnant and 57% had already given birth. Only 6% of these women were CAV targets: they arrived at a center with an abortion already planned (89% changed their minds). In all, 59% of these women were married; the majority (53%) were 25–34 years old and were housewives (38%) or unemployed (33%). About 74% of these women faced economic problems, and 82% of these women were immigrants. Moroccan women were the most important group (22% out of the total), followed by Nigerian women (18%), Romanian (7%), and Peruvian (6%). There are no data about the religion of these women, but a large number come from Muslim countries. See *Segreteria nazionale di collegamento dei centri di aiuto alla vita, Vita CAV 2013*, April 2014.

send them away even though they do not want an abortion and therefore are not in need of “convincing.” Many activists in the political wing of the movement argue that this is not what the centers are supposed to do — that the CAV do not accomplish a pro-life action but simply a charity one. For example, one activist argued that “we are not here to give away diapers” typifies what political activists, mostly men, often say to criticize the women’s work in the CAV.

Accomplishing what is considered feminine work puts the majority of women activists in a subordinate position relative to the masculine activism of the political sphere. But this subordinate position also opens up the possibility to build a “women-oriented” pro-life activism, in contrast to the “embryo-centered” pro-life message that the political sphere is clearly more directed toward. The majority of the women whom I met in the CAV said that their motivation is helping other women (as is the case in the U.S. pregnancy crisis centers; see Haugeberg 2017; Kelly 2012; Munson 2008). Of course, in their words, that still means bringing a woman to accept a pregnancy regardless of the consequences on her life. Nevertheless, some of these women told me that they are against the banning of legal abortion on the grounds that women would do it anyway, only in unsafe conditions. One activist of the first generation told me that she had lost a friend while in high school because of an illegal abortion and does not want to see a thing like that happen again. This is something that I have rarely heard from activists from the political sphere, who tend to talk about the “educational function of the law” to justify their abolitionist position (meaning that even if women would have an abortion anyway, it is important that the law stresses that it is not right, and thus illegal, to do so).⁷

Should I therefore consider that this “women-centered” pro-life activism is a form of feminine, or even feminist, resistance to the “embryo-centered” activism of the masculine part of the MpV? As I stated earlier, I do not think we should impose feminist etiquette on anyone. The women of the pregnancy crisis centers do not want to be considered feminists. Their

7. The MpV’s official position on this matter is particularly ambiguous. On the one hand, there is absolutely no question of abortion being considered a right: the slogan “my body, my choice” is anathema to the MpV. On the other hand, the MpV is no longer officially in favor of penalizing abortion (even if, individually, most members remain favorable to the repeal of Law 194). The official position of the MpV entails that abortion should be tolerated in the same way that drug abuse is tolerated — that is, it is not penalized in Italy, since the drug addict is considered a subject to be protected, unlike the dealer. Abortion therefore should be legally tolerated but morally condemned. Everything should be done to avoid it, which is precisely what the MpV claims to do with its pregnancy crisis centers.

work in the CAV is about “acceptance” (acceptance of women’s nature, which in their view is reproduction), not about free choice. In their view, there is no choice because “an abortion does not exempt you from becoming a mother, it only makes you the mother of a dead child.” They see feminists as women who underestimate, or even depreciate, the importance of maternity in women’s lives, and thus they do not want to be associated with feminism.

Even more problematic is that this “women-centered” activism does not typify all the women in the movement, only CAV activists. The women who are active in the political sphere tend to share the “embryo-centered” point of view, like the men. Thus, talking about a feminine resistance to the masculine norm is an inescapably essentialist standpoint. For a better understanding of pro-life women’s activism, it is necessary to go beyond sex, to see what differentiates the women who are active in the MpV. In the following section, I cease considering the category “women” as a unified one and use an intersectional approach to unpack the more complex and nuanced differences, consistent with the reality of the movement.

Table 1. The sexual division of labor in the MpV

<i>Pregnancy Crisis Centers (CAV)</i>	<i>Local Movements</i>
Care area	Political area
Strong majority of women activists	Majority of male activists
“Feminine” work (care, support, empathy)	“Masculine” work (speak, lobby, represent)
Activists value the political work	Activists undermine the care work
Discretion, hidden spaces	Visibility, public spaces
Women-centered activism	Embryo-centered activism

BEYOND SEX: MARRIED, STAY-AT-HOME MOTHERS AND WORKING SINGLE WOMEN WITHOUT CHILDREN IN THE MOVIMENTO PER LA VITA

As I made clear earlier, the literature tends to see the abortion conflict in the United States as an opposition between two groups of women: pro-choice activists with no or few children and pro-life activists who are perceived to be family focused, with larger families and no job/career. The reality, however, of the Italian pro-life movement today is far more

diverse. When I compared the lives of the women I met in the MpV, two very different groups appeared.

The Stay-at-Home Mother as the Typical CAV Activist (Care Sphere)

The American findings corresponded, at least in part, to the first generation of women activists, more specifically those in the CAV, whose life experiences are remarkably similar.⁸ These women entered the movement between 1978 (legalization of abortion) and 1981 (referendum against the law that the movement had organized). They shared an age of around 40, and the referendum campaign was their first political commitment. These women were all Italian white churchgoers, married with children, and commonly held a professional high school diploma, which was a good level of education for Italian women at that time, especially as these women were for the most part born in lower-middle-class families. Almost all started working after high school and stopped after marriage, or after they had children, with few exceptions. They married middle- or upper-class men (first generation of university degree holders) who were able to provide for their families; it therefore would have appeared obvious to stop working. When they became pro-life activists, their children were in school, so they were able to have some free time. They initially thought they would only help during the referendum, but they ended up remaining active, mostly in the pregnancy crisis centers. In these centers, their maternal experience and skills are valuable (they have to talk with scared or poor potential mothers), and their life choices are something they can be proud of (they are there to tell pregnant women that maternity is the most important thing a woman can achieve). In the CAV, they can acquire skills, such as how to speak with a scared pregnant teenager or how social services work. They also enjoy spending time with women like themselves, in a female-only environment, or with women who are very different from themselves (pregnant migrant women in difficult situations⁹).

For these reasons, the women are very attached to the pregnancy crisis centers and the work that they accomplish in them. They spend at least one and often two half days a week at the CAV, and the first generation

8. I established this conclusion with my Italian colleague Claudia Mattalucci of the University of Milan Bicocca (see Avanza and Mattalucci 2013).

9. The boundary between the group of volunteers (Italian, white, Catholic, middle-class women) and those assisted (mostly immigrant, nonwhite, non-Catholic, and poor women) is sharp. It almost never happens that an assisted person becomes a caregiver (one observed case that did not last).

of activists have been doing this for the last 35 years. This first generation have built the CAV and continue to keep the centers going. This has, however, become an obstacle to the recruitment of younger activists: a process of renewal is necessary now that the first generation of activists is around 70. The first generation of pro-life women who organized the CAV worked around the implicit assumption that women did not work outside the home, because almost none of them did. It is therefore difficult for younger women, who often have jobs, to fit into an organization planned for stay-at-home mothers or retired grandmothers.

The Single Woman with a Career as the Typical MpV Activist (Political Sphere)

Not all pro-life women are mothers. I was surprised to meet in the field a significant number of single women without children. For these single women, most around age 40 (but a few of them from the first generation of activists who are now around 70), having no children was not a choice but something they could not achieve because of their single status, which they did not choose either. It was impossible for them to think of having a child out of wedlock or even having a sex life. They all say that they wanted children but could not find the right person. Some of them openly recognized that having very strict rules about virginity or religious practice is not easy nowadays and may have made things more difficult for them. For these women, who find themselves single with no children at 40, pro-life activism can be a way to cope with the fact that they will never be mothers, but it enables them to “act for life” in other ways.

Single women without children are far more common in the political sphere than in the pregnancy centers, where it is rare to find single women; this is true even for the first generation of activists. These women are often better educated, many holding a university degree, than CAV women. Having no children and no husband to take care of, they were able to have a professional career: they are doctors, teachers, and lawyers — the same professions as MpV men. Some of them even play a leading role in the movement. For this elite group, pro-life activism can become a means to achieve recognition for their professional and intellectual capacities. They can travel for the movement, meet clerical and political elites, talk in conferences, and write articles, but until now, they have not been able to use the movement as a platform for a political career in the same way as men. There is a further difference between

women and men in the political sphere: the latter have a professional career and a leading role in the movement, but they also have families because they can rely on their wives to take care of their homes and children; “having it all” seems much easier for men than for women in the MpV.

I have demonstrated that the MpV can certainly be a resource for women’s agency. Agency is typically defined in feminist ethnography literature as a subject’s capacity to act upon the world, the “possibility of a non-subaltern action and voice” (Giorgi 2016, 63). The women who have access to the movement’s leadership surely have this capacity, but this is not the case for the rank-and-file CAV activist, whose work is less valued. Furthermore, for the women who do become legitimate political actors in the movement, the price to pay, first of all in their personal lives, is higher than for men. These women, like the men in the political sphere, tend to have a much more “embryo-centered” activism than the women working in the pregnancy crisis centers. They tend to take an ethical stand based on their expertise (as a pro-life doctor or lawyer), while women in the CAV clearly use more emotive language. Like the men, they tend to criticize CAV women because they forget that their mission is to “save lives,” not to help migrant women who have no intention of having an abortion.

What makes someone a Type 1 (CAV “women-centered”) or a Type 2 (MpV “embryo-centered”) activist is not simply the fact of being a woman or a man, but being a certain kind of woman. A woman who is not a mother, a woman who works outside the home, or a woman who holds a university degree is more likely to adopt Type 2 activism than Type 1. What makes a woman a Type 1 or Type 2 activist stands at the intersection of the reproductive stories of these women (mothers or not), their class status (especially which kind of cultural capital), and their working status (inside or outside the home). These are specific

Table 2. Beyond sex: Type 1 versus Type 2 MpV women

<i>Type 1</i>	<i>Type 2</i>
Women of the care area (CAV)	Women of the political area
Women-centered activism	Embryo-centered activism
Married women	Single women
Women with children	Women without children
Women with a high school diploma	Women with a college degree
Housewives	Women with a career

intersectional categories that make sense (and explain power relations) in the MpV but not necessarily elsewhere.

SEXUAL PRACTICES AND RACE MATTER: IN FACT, THEY MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

The MpV is not the only pro-life organization in Italy. There are a lot of smaller groups challenging the MpV, which they consider too soft in terms of pro-life orthodoxy (Avanza 2018). What about the women in these radical groups? Do they fit the same two types identified for the MpV? To reveal more nuanced differences between the women of the MpV and the radical ones, sexual behavior and race need to be added to the picture.

With few exceptions, the women of the MpV present with classic situations: they are either single without children and no sexual life or they are married (no divorced women or single mothers) with children (between one and three — big families are rare). I never noticed this “ultra-normality” until I began to observe more radical pro-life groups challenging the MpV. In those groups, there are not only families with four, five, or six children or more but also, more surprisingly, divorced men and women and single women with children. I then realized that my assumptions might be problematic. I never noticed that there were no divorcees in the MpV, since in my stereotypical view, churchgoing Catholics do not divorce. However, things were obviously more complicated than I first thought, resulting in three differentiated groups within the pro-life movements.

The Middle-Class, Catholic, and White Respectability of the Mainstream MpV Families

Going to MpV conferences, observing the CAV activities, and undertaking in-depth interviews allowed me to meet many activists and many couples; for the first generation, “couple activism” was very common. When I met these couples and spent time with them, I could not help but notice that they seemed happy and shared strong religious values, and their activism was something that firmly held them together. These couples, now in their 70s, have steady marriages and steady couple activism; these two things are linked.

The MpV women — those with whom I was able to talk about sex — told me they had been virgins when they married. When it came to birth control, their official version was that they respected Catholic doctrine and thus only used “natural methods.” Only a few told me they used other forms of birth control when they realized, after the second or third unwanted pregnancy, that the natural method was not working. But the majority said it worked for them, and if it did not work for others, it was because they did not know how to do it right.

The fact that MpV families have only one to three children, except some rare exceptions, makes me wonder whether what they say is true, although it is not the salient feature of the story. What is more interesting is that these women believe that natural methods are better for women’s sexual lives. If you use natural methods, there are days — and they are not few — when penetrative sex is forbidden if you want to avoid a pregnancy. They told me they could use these days to experience other forms of sexual activity with their husbands to create a better intimacy between them. The fact that they talk about nonpenetrative sex that better suits women reminds me of feminist claims about women’s pleasure. These women also talk about the fact that using natural methods means that the husband “respects” his wife and accepts it when she says no to penetrative sex, which is not that easy given the fact that Catholic women are supposed to fulfill their marital duty (Della Sudda 2016). Of course, he accepts because he does not want his wife to get pregnant again, not because she may not have sexual desire. Still, since the husband usually does not know how fertility works, natural methods, paradoxically, can increase these married Catholic women’s capacity to say no to their husbands (Dworkin 1983). The practice of natural methods, far from being a mere limitation imposed by their Catholic faith,¹⁰ can thus be agentive for these women, but we should not forget that using natural methods

10. The Catholic Church’s position on contraception is clearly stated in the 1968 *Humane Vitae* encyclical and in the post-synod document on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*, issued in 2016. In these documents, though it is now recognized that marital sexual activity cannot be reduced to reproduction, contraception remains forbidden and only natural methods of controlling fertility are acceptable for the exercise of “responsible parenthood.” These methods allow births to be spaced out, but because they cannot guarantee that there will be no pregnancy, their use implies that the couple remains “open to life.” The MpV reproduces the Church position on contraception (although there are internal debates on the issue, see Avanza 2018), but it avoids references to Catholic doctrine when justifying this position. The MpV’s website for young members states that contraception, “because of the cavalier attitude to sex it encourages,” results in an increase in unwanted pregnancies and thus in abortions. See <http://www.prolife.it/category/5-domande-scomode> (accessed December 12, 2018).

involves risking an unwanted pregnancy — and, more to the point, accepting it, as abortion is not an option for these women.

Having a successful marriage between a housewife and a working husband, choosing not to have too many children (so that they can afford their education and thus reproduce their class status), being pro-life activists but within a moderate (in the pro-life categories) movement approved by the Catholic Church, these MpV families perfectly embody middle-class, Catholic, white, respectability.

I identify this respectability not only as middle class and Catholic but also as white. This racialized aspect appeared clearly to me during a training session for CAV activists in November 2014. The trainers (a male MpV vice president and his wife, who teaches natural methods) were telling the CAV activists attending the class that they should encourage the women coming to the centers to use natural methods in order to teach them to “respect themselves” (meaning to stop having a dissolute sex life). But the CAV women thought it was unrealistic because “those” women are not “like us”; they do not have a husband or even a fixed partner. When they do, they are not able to make their husband “respect them” (meaning they are not able to control their husband’s sexual impulse). “Those” refers, of course, to migrant women, who are by far the majority of the CAV’s public, and more so to Muslims, whom the CAV activists considered oppressed by their husbands. As pro-life activists say, practicing natural methods is not a birth control technique but a “way of life” — apparently one that is middle class, Catholic, and white.

This “way of life” goes with a “moderate” way of being pro-life. Unlike the activists from radical groups, the MpV activists from both the CAV and from the political sphere never use the word “murder” to talk about abortion. They never use pictures of fetuses cut into pieces. They even refuse the term “pro-life” (in English) that the radical groups use to define themselves because of its similarity to the American movement, which is far too radical for them. They prefer the expression *popolo della vita*, meaning “people of life,” used by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

The Radical Reproductive Choices of Traditionalist Catholics within Radical Pro-life Movements

When I started to expand my fieldwork from the MpV to more radical pro-life movements, I noticed a marked proclivity toward bigger families

with four, five, or six children or more that I had rarely seen at an MpV meeting. These bigger families are often the ones of traditional Catholics who love their Sunday service in Latin and have more radical pro-life positions; they are, for example, against abortion even in cases in which the woman has been raped. The radical pro-life activists also say that they only use natural methods, but apparently with less success, or with more integrity, than the MpV women. If I say “with less success,” this is because they do not say that they wanted a lot of children but that, using natural methods only, the children “arrived,” and of course they “accepted them.” These big families go together to pro-life meetings because having a lot of children is living proof of their pro-life integrity. Generally, the husband is the one doing the political work, while his wife is just following him.

These families challenge reproductive norms by having so many children in a society with one of the lowest rates of fertility in the world.¹¹ They are “abnormal” not only in the eyes of society but also in the eyes of more moderate Catholics, such as MpV activists. Their choice seems radical because they are not rich; for the most part, they are middle class, just like the MpV activists. Consequently, having so many children means they face economic restrictions or even difficulties when unexpected expenses arise, and even more so if there is only one salary in the family.¹² There are not only families of this kind in the radical pro-life groups, but these families are very visible and much admired in these kind of groups.

All the radical pro-lifers with big families whom I met during fieldwork were once MpV activists; some even held important positions at the national level. Over time, they became more critical of the MpV political line, which they found too soft. The conflict came out in the open when the MpV (as the Italian Catholic Church) decided to defend the possibility of a law regulating medically assisted reproduction that would be the least worst in the eyes of a pro-life activist (meaning a bill “protecting” embryos by prohibiting cryopreservation and pre-implantation

11. According to the World Bank (which synthesized data from the United Nations and national census data), in 2015, only Italy, Japan, and Portugal had birth rates as low as eight births per 1,000 people. According to ISTAT (the Italian national statistics bureau), that means that only 1.35 children are born for every Italian woman on average. See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN?end=2015&start=1960&view=chart> and <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2016/11/Statisticareport-Nati.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2018).

12. One of the most famous radical pro-life thinkers recently died at age 45, leaving behind his wife (who does not work outside the home) and their four young children. A pro-life editor who used to publish his books organized a fund-raiser to help the widow to support her children.

diagnosis). Pro-life activists are all, in theory, against medically assisted reproduction, but some in the MpV thought it would be better to reduce damages than to stay out of the game. Others, however, claimed that a pro-life movement ought not compromise and should stay outside political debates around this subject. The latter lost the internal debate and decided to leave the MpV in 2004 after the law was approved. They launched a small pro-life group called *Verità e Vita*, which became the sharpest critic of the MpV action. The dissenters who left the MpV often have big families, which among other indicators, is suggestive of the kind of relationship that they have with orthodoxy.

Unconventional Family Situations and Sexualities in Radical Pro-life Groups

I did expect to see big families within radical pro-life groups, but I was certainly surprised to meet single mothers in this kind of environment or women who had had an abortion. However, after listening to the reproductive stories of some of these women, I understood that their presence in a pro-life movement made perfect sense. Women who have had an abortion and regret it can testify that abortion is wrong and that they are still suffering because of the bad decision that they made. They often talk at conferences organized by radical pro-life groups, especially when there are special sessions for young people. For example, at the March for Life in Rome in 2013, a young woman, with tears in her eyes, told the young public how her life had been ruined by her abortion. Other women had all the reasons women usually invoke to explain their decision to have an abortion, except that they had chosen not to have a termination.

Manuela, for example, is an activist in the “No 194” committee, a group formed in 2011 (the 194 law legalized abortion in 1978). This group wants to promote another abrogative referendum (as in 1981), but the other pro-life organizations, such as MpV but also more radical groups such as *Verità e Vita*, do not take this claim seriously. They think that abolishing abortion is unrealistic. Certainly because of this marginality, the No 194 committee recruits heterodox profiles like Manuela. Manuela is a single, almost 50-year-old nurse, living with her son and her daughter, who have two different fathers, one of whom is a Moroccan Muslim, which is even more controversial for a very religious Catholic like Manuela. Her pregnancies were defined by stories of domestic violence from her

Table 3. Pro-life activism at the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexual practices

<i>MpV Activists</i>	<i>Radical Groups, Type A Activists</i>	<i>Radical Groups, Type B Activists</i>
Middle and upper classes Catholics (mainstream church)	Middle and upper classes Catholics (orthodox fringes of the church)	Middle and working classes Catholics but less integrated into the church
Virgin or married No divorced activists	Virgin or married No divorced activists	Sex out of wedlock Divorced activists
Natural methods (with exceptions)	Natural methods (without exceptions)	Contraception is tolerated
Married couples, one to three children (or singles without children)	Married couples, bigger families (or religious vocation)	Children out of wedlock; unplanned/ unwanted pregnancies
Respectable Catholic sexual practices appropriate in terms of race (whiteness versus migrant sexuality) and class	Respectable Catholic sexual practices but not appropriate in terms of class (too many children = risk of downward mobility)	Non-respectable sexual practices (similar to the CAV's audience's sexual experience)
Moderate (in terms of doctrine and modes of action) pro-life activism	Pro-life orthodoxy (in terms of doctrine)	Radical pro-life activism (in terms of mode of actions, not necessarily in terms of doctrine)

boyfriends and abandonment by her family. Her daughter, now a teenager, has significant health issues as a consequence of the abuse her mother endured during the pregnancy, before she escaped. Manuela is from a modest background: she had no money and was living in a desperate situation, but she never even thought about having an abortion. Consequently, her life can be seen by the movement as living testimony that abortion is not the solution, that as difficult as things can be, you can keep your baby.

Unlike the traditionalist Catholics with big families, these women with unconventional sexual and reproductive histories have never been in the MpV. They discovered pro-life activism directly in the radical groups that they found on the internet or by word of mouth. Some of them knew the MpV and/or the CAV of their town, but they did not like it there. I can imagine they felt uncomfortable next to these very mainstream women with such uncomplicated love lives. In fact, their lives were closer to those of the women coming to the CAV searching for help than to the more “respectable” persona of the CAV activists.

The No 194 committee has a questionable image in the pro-life arena, and even more so within the MpV, not only because of the referendum’s project but also because of the types of actions that the committee promotes. The MpV, which certainly had a fundamentalist reputation in its early years, has made a lot of effort to look like a moderate group that politicians and ecclesiastics can work with. This is why they do not appreciate spectacular actions such as the March for Life in Rome, the biggest action organized since 2011 by the radical pro-life groups, or the public prayers that the No 194 committee organizes in front of hospitals where women can have an abortion. People like Manuela, however, prefer precisely this kind of action. She never misses a Saturday public prayer and is very proud to stand in front of the feminist groups protesting against their presence. On these occasions, she wears a T-shirt with a fetus picture that she designed herself, which makes her very visible. This kind of pro-life exhibitionism is something the “respectable” middle-class MpV activists would never tolerate; I wonder whether they would countenance people with “messy” (equated with nonwhite) sexual histories like Manuela’s?

CONCLUSION

Pro-life women have been archetypal figures of antifeminism ever since the legalization of abortion in the West. It could seem provocative, then, to use

intersectionality, created to make the experience of marginalized women visible (Crenshaw 1991), to study these activists. However, I have shown in this article why it is an effective tool to reveal a more nuanced understanding of conservative women's activism.

While the accounts in the American cases argue that there is an archetypal figure of the pro-life woman (a housewife with children), using an intersectionality approach, I was able to show the diversity of social identities in the pro-life movement. Luker, Ginsburg, and Staggenborg are right when they stress the importance of the life stories, especially the reproductive stories, of these women. However, in contrast to their analysis, my data shows a very different picture. Not all pro-life women have lived the same lives: some have children but some do not, some have careers while others are housewives, many are married and have a conservative lifestyle (stay-at-home mothers), while others had children out of wedlock or had an abortion. This diversity has obvious political consequences. Single working women without children are for the most part found in the political sphere of the main Italian pro-life movement (MpV) and stay-at-home mothers mostly in its care arm (pregnancy crisis centers). Women with unconventional reproductive and sexual histories are to be found in the more radical movements, trying to challenge the main and moderate one.

The difference between the women-centered pro-life activism of women in the CAV and the embryo-centered activism of the women in the political sphere of the MpV lies at the intersection of the reproductive stories of these women (mothers or not), their class status (cultural capital), and their working status (inside or outside the home). The differences between the mainstream and "respectable" MpV activists and the radical pro-life activists are to be found at the intersection of class and sexual practices: what kind of reproductive choices allow this middle-upper-middle class to secure their children's future? Which sexualities are seen as respectable? In addition, these differences also have a racialized aspect.

The moderate nature of its claims and the "respectability" of its activists allow the MpV to have access to the church (the Italian Conference of Catholic Bishops funds the movement) and the state (which considers the MpV an acceptable discussion partner and even funds some of its projects). The radicalism of groups such as *Verità e Vita* opens doors to the more orthodox fringe groups in the Catholic Church but not to the mainstream ones. Of course, this radicalism precludes them from access to the state, but since they refuse to be compromised in their pro-life principles, they would not necessarily want this anyway. Finally, at the

end of the spectrum, the No 194 committee has such a radical agenda and such heterodox activists (they even have a homeless activist) that they have almost no institutional support, even within the Catholic Church. However, because of their provocative actions, such as prayer in front of hospitals, and because of the feminist counterprotests, they do receive media coverage.

Thus, in the same way that there is no single pro-life movement, there is no single pro-life woman, and this plurality needs to be acknowledged. The category “woman” is obviously useful to understand pro-life activism, but it can also limit more nuanced analysis of the phenomenon. In order to take the heterogeneity of the group “women” into account, I have analyzed pro-life feminine activism at the intersection of gender, class, race, and sexual practices. Using an emic approach to intersectionality that aims to identify the categories that make sense in a particular environment, I emphasized the role of motherhood (having or not having children), work (inside or outside the home), and sexual practices (“respectable” or not, “unconventional” or not, “white” or not) to show that there are many possible ways of being a pro-life woman and to underline the political consequences of such diversity among pro-life women.

This diversity can be surprising. In the field, I met activists who were more interested in helping pregnant women coming to the CAV, instead of being obsessed with the idea of the embryo. I have seen professional, child-free women flying everywhere to build a European pro-life lobby. I have talked to single mothers with hard lives, who through activism found a way to make sense of their experiences. I listened to women using “natural methods” talking about the advantages of nonpenetrative sex. It is important to do justice to this complexity and to recognize that pro-life activism can certainly be a resource for women’s agency. However, we should not abandon structural power relations in our understanding of these forms of agency. What I have suggested is that using intersectionality is a means to bring back power relations, but without giving a uniform picture of oppressed and passive conservative women.

Equally, it is important to recall that pro-life women make claims in the name of women’s interests. But I do not consider them unknowing supporters of feminism, as many feminist ethnographers tend to do. First, I do not impose on these women a political label that they openly refuse, and second, I understand conservatism on its own terms, avoiding the temptation to measure its distance or proximity to feminist standards. In

so doing, this article presents a strong case not only for the claim that differences among conservative women in pro-life movements are considerably more complex and diverse than the existing literature suggests, but also that intersectionality theory provides a tool allowing these complexities to be identified and more thoroughly explained.

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