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Women cross borders to confront the far right in Italy

Protestors from across Europe are coming to Verona to oppose this year's ultra-conservative World Congress of Families meeting.

by CLAUDIA TORRISI



The Italian feminist movement Non Una di Meno in Verona. | Courtesy of NUDM Verona.

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Thousands of people – including women from across Europe – are traveling to Verona, Italy to protest the World Congress of Families: a network of US, Russian and other anti-abortion and anti-LGBT rights activists and their political allies.

They have responded to a call for solidarity from the Verona chapter of the Italian feminist movement Non Una di Meno (NUDM), which is organising a

three-day festival, street demonstration and transnational assembly in opposition to the anti-choice Congress.

The program of events includes panels, film screenings and discussions “between international feminist movements that, like us, find themselves having to resist the growing wave of radical and fundamentalist right [campaigns]”, says the activists’ website.

The WCF network has for decades organised international conferences to strategise attacks on reproductive and sexual rights – but this is believed to be the first time that they will face such a programme of sustained counter-protests throughout their summit.

Feminist activists are expected to join NUDM in Verona from Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Croatia, the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belarus and Argentina.

Marta, a Spanish activist from the 8M Commission – which organised the 8 March International Women’s Day strike in her country – told openDemocracy that “the internationalist approach” of NUDM’s call for solidarity resonated with her group as “many of the struggles we are carrying out in our territories are truly common”.

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“We saw the Italian feminists’ call for solidarity and we wanted to show them the love and support that we would want in the same situation”, added Niku,

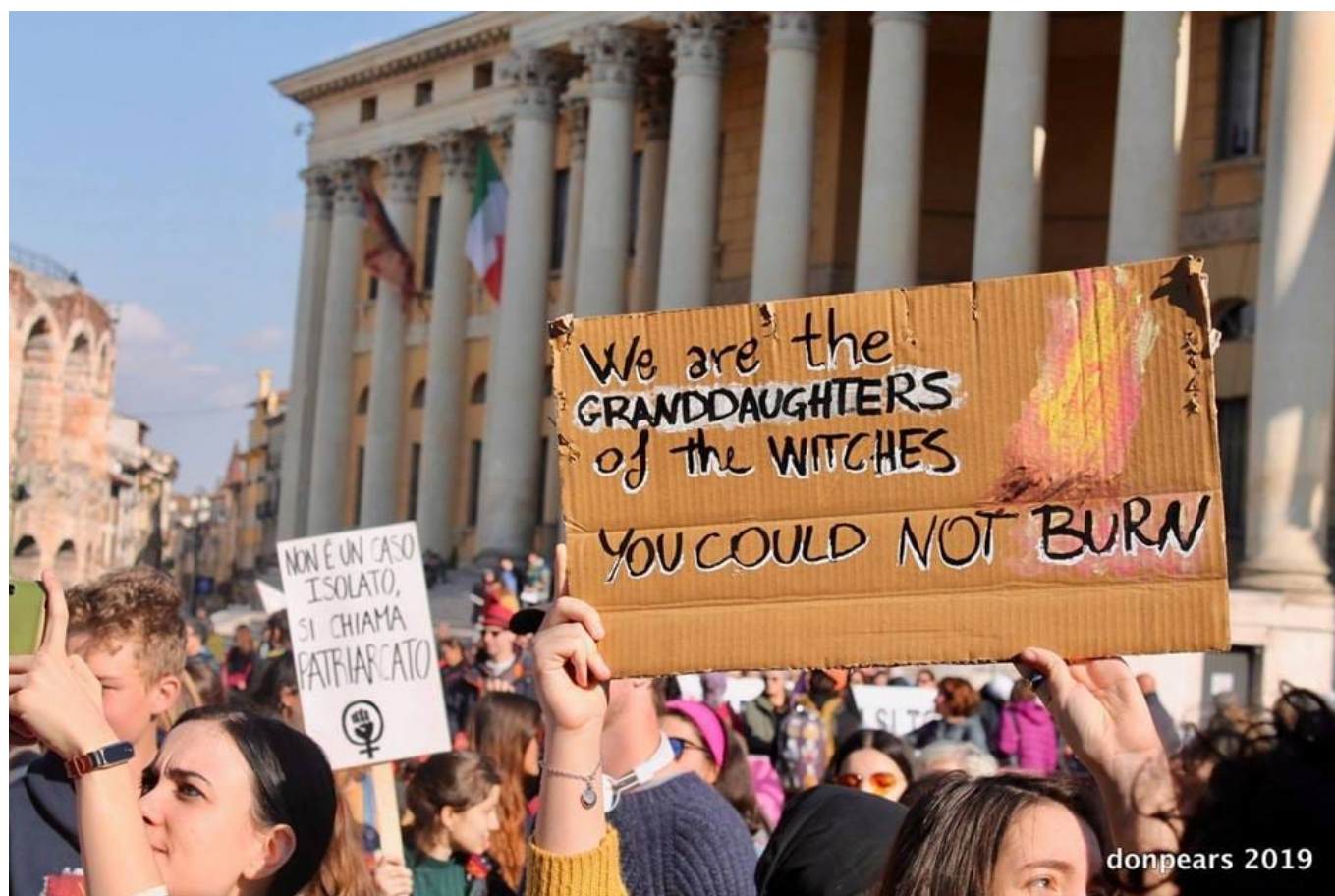
from the UK feminist group Sisters Uncut which is also coming to Verona.

“Europe is at a very scary point, with these far right and ultra-conservative movements growing in many different countries”, she continued. “We feel under attack by these toxic ideals, so the only option is to stand up and fight against this hate”.

Jennifer, a German activist from a European network called WIDE+, said she will also be in Verona “to protest against the WCF and to show solidarity with feminists in Italy and with all the people who are affected by right wing and religious fundamentalism”.

Evgenia will come from Belarus, representing the ADLIGA: women for full citizenship group, to “support like-minded women and men that strongly believe in women’s human rights, full citizenship for women, and the value of individual choice over own life”.

She said she is coming to “fight for what the WCF is opposed to: gender equality, the right of women to be free in their choices, LGBTQI rights”, adding: “I chose to support a notion of family that is a union based on love, care, and respect for human diversity”.



A placard held up by a protester part of the Italian feminist movement Non Una di Meno in Verona. | Courtesy of NUDM Verona.

Since Italy's new government was sworn in in June 2018 – formed by a coalition of the Movimento 5 Stelle party and the far right Lega – rights activists say the country has seen a rising backlash against women, LGBT people, and migrants.

Interior minister Matteo Salvini – who once said “if you grow up with parents or a parent who is gay... you start with a handicap” – has repeatedly claimed that all Italian ports are closed to boats rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean, for example.

Family minister Lorenzo Fontana, meanwhile, is known for his opposition to sexual and reproductive rights: his nomination was celebrated by anti-abortion activists. Both Salvini and Fontana are expected to speak at the WCF in Verona.

The local context is also tense. In October, Verona's local council declared it Italy's first "pro-life city" and passed a municipal motion "to prevent abortion" and allow public money to fund anti-abortion groups and dissuade women from ending pregnancies.

Several other local administrations have since discussed similar motions – which have also passed in the regional council of Liguria, and the small northern town of Ceriano.

Feminist activists coming to Verona from across Europe described threats to rights in their countries including justice systems that are skewed against women and the rise of far right movements championing so-called "traditional" values and gender roles.

Belén, from Spain, said the recent 'La Manada' rape case – and the conviction on a lesser offense of five men accused of raping a woman during the 2016 'running of the bulls' festival in Pamplona – "showed how blindly patriarchal... our judicial system can be".

"The far right is a real threat in our political institutions with the rise of the Vox party, which advocates for sending women back to their traditional roles as housekeepers", she added.

Jennifer from Germany said the situation in Italy appears "more extreme" but also in her country "the far right managed to influence public debates and set agendas", while "what happens in Italy, Poland or Hungary... can easily swap over to other countries".

In Belarus, as in Italy, "the control over women's lives belongs to men. Women are given voice only and when they are loyal to men in power", said Evgenia.

In Britain, Niku said, the "mainstream narrative is a very arrogant one which assumes that we are a progressive nation" – while public figures, including self-proclaimed feminists, "fail to see the different levels of oppression of women in our society, and in particular how black, brown, migrant women and gender non-conforming are more marginalised".

“We have to stay together because, as [the] WCF shows, far right and ultra-catholic movements are very coordinated and united, so we have to be too”, said Laura from NUDM in Verona. “Staying together we give each other strength”.

“We are the feminist, trans-feminist, anti-racist and anti-fascist tide that will flood Verona”

On Saturday (30 March), feminists, human rights activists and other progressive social movements will take to the streets to protest the WCF. “We are the feminist, trans-feminist, anti-racist and anti-fascist tide that will flood Verona”, says NUDM on Facebook.

The group has also organised a ‘feminist festival’ including a discussion with German, French, Serbian and Polish scholars on the role of gender and the family in far-right policies; a documentary on struggles for LGBT rights in Uganda; an exhibition of historical feminist posters revised by artists; theatre plays, book presentations and other events.

“We did not want to organise ‘just’ a protest”, said Laura from NUDM, but “build an alternative proposal to far right and ultra-catholic views of women and all the subjects that are marginalised and discriminated against, represented by the World Congress of Families”.

Other groups have also planned protests during the WCF – including flash mobs and a sit-in – while the Facebook page “Verona citizens open to the world” published a list of the hotels in Verona that WCF participants will stay at, inviting people to boycott them.

More than 500 University of Verona academics, researchers and workers signed a letter criticising the WCF for presenting opinions and religious beliefs as scientific evidence, including the the idea that access to abortion “is the cause of demographic decline”.

"Some of the positions that will be discussed are baseless and not validated by the international scientific community", said the university's rector, adding: "For this reason I denied the use of university spaces to host the event".



Claudia Torrisi

Based in Rome, Claudia is a freelance journalist and has contributed to Valigia Blu, VICE and Rai TV in Italy, as well as Al Jazeera. In 2020, she was a Documenting the Resistance Fellow for Tracking the Backlash, the feminist investigative project of openDemocracy's gender and sexuality section. Follow her on Twitter: @clatorrisi.

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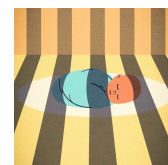
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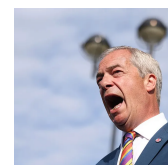
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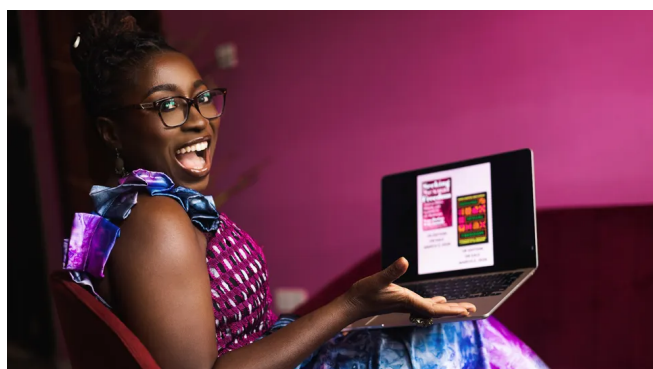
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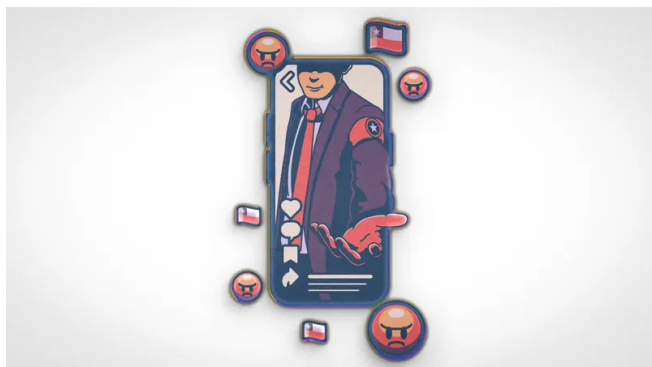
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