

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feminist Responses to Anti-Abortion Attacks in Italy and Slovenia

Building Democratic Innovations in Contexts of De-Democratization

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary feminist movements' repertoires of action in Italy and Slovenia in response to informal challenges to abortion rights amidst the rise of anti-gender mobilizations and processes of de-democratization. While legal frameworks protecting abortion remain intact in both countries, informal barriers, forms of boycott and hijack of existing laws, such as misinformation, conscientious objection, and judgmental discourses undermine access to reproductive rights. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with feminist activists, the study identifies innovative grassroots practices – such as mapping conscientious objectors, accompaniment services, and public education campaigns – as key “democratic innovations.” These actions not only address gaps left by institutional frameworks but also promote self-determination, solidarity, and care-based peer support. By analyzing these feminist repertoires, the paper highlights how grassroots strategies counteract anti-abortion threats and stimulate democratic resilience in contexts of de-democratization. It contributes to the literature on feminist democratic innovations by expanding the understanding of how movements engage in transformative practices beyond formal political arenas to safeguard reproductive autonomy.

Keywords: Democratic innovations; De-Democratization; Feminist movements; Abortion; Reproductive rights

Introduction

In recent years, feminist movements in Europe and beyond have encountered escalating challenges from anti-gender mobilizations seeking to restrict equality politics. These mobilizations initiated by diverse network of actors – including religious groups, “pro-life” movements, anti-gender organizations, and far-right political parties – unite to counter and dismantle existing feminist achievements while promoting conservative views on family, kinship, sexuality, and intimate citizenship more broadly (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). Key equality politics areas in which this conflict has been most evident include opposition to LGBTQ+ rights (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018), resistance to the ratification and withdrawal from

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the Istanbul Convention (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021b; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018), as well as sexual and reproductive rights (Renner & Kralj, 2021). However, as Paternotte (2023) points out, anti-gender mobilizations are not merely directed against particular equality politics but represent a broader attempt to establish a novel neoconservative social order that is less democratic and more authoritarian. In this sense, contemporary anti-gender mobilizations accelerate contemporary processes of de-democratization, positioning gender equality at the heart of an intensely polarized context (Lombardo et al., 2021; Verloo, 2018).

In the process of de-democratization, anti-gender actors and their organizations seek to shape not only formal legislative institutions but also informal social landscape beyond legal reach. They employ strategies such as boycotting and hijacking existing laws to create a broader social climate aimed at reducing public support for specific rights by engaging in populist dialogue and applying subtle pressures to make these rights appear undesirable. De-democratization, therefore, can unfold in various ways and with differing degrees of strength and visibility, and often takes place without an explicit alteration of the legal framework. This is particularly true in those contexts in which gender-related policies have large consensus, thus pushing oppositional initiatives to take more indirect channels to reach their goals (Ahrens, 2018).

One such area of equality policies with a relatively high level of public acceptance and consensus is reproductive rights in Italy and Slovenia, particularly the right to abortion, which has been legally protected in these two countries for a relatively long time. Thus, in both Slovenia and Italy, opposition to abortion rights is not primarily pursued through direct legal challenges but rather through more or less successful attempts to create informal and indirect obstacles that can be framed as forms of boycott and hijack of existing legal frameworks.

Since access to legal and safe abortion is a fundamental aspect of democracy, and feminist social movements have historically prioritized it on their political agenda, the key question arises: how do feminist actors respond to these informal attacks and pressures from anti-gender actors? What “repertoires of action” (Tilly, 1978, 1986) they develop in response to these de-democratic processes? This paper argues that the repertoires of action developed by feminist actors in Italy and Slovenia represent “democratic innovations” (Caravantes & Lombardo, 2024; della Porta, 2020) aimed specifically at countering the de-democratizing influence of anti-gender actors in the field of reproductive rights.

To examine the repertoires of action that contemporary feminist movements have adopted in response to challenges to the right to abortion, this paper draws on interviews with feminist activists in Italy and Slovenia. The two countries serve as illustrative cases of broader dynamics unfolding across the European Union, where formal legal protection for abortion coexists with growing informal restrictions. In both Italy and Slovenia, indeed, the right to abortion is legal and has formally remained intact, and nevertheless, access to abortion is limited due to informal challenges enacted by anti-abortion actors. Studying these cases sheds light on a wider European trend in which feminist movements are compelled to defend established rights not only against formal legal reforms, but also against more subtle and diffuse forms of resistance that operate through cultural, institutional, and discursive means.

Our findings highlight that through grassroots initiatives such as direct social action and knowledge production, feminist movements in the two countries do not limit themselves to resisting threats posed by anti-abortion actors but enact and prefigure alternative approaches to reproductive healthcare. Overall, the paper shows that feminist movements elaborate essential democratic innovations in contexts of de-democratization, since they

protect and facilitate access to abortion, while at the same time promoting and embodying community-based approaches to care and self-determination.

In the following sections, we first outline the theoretical framework of our research. Subsequently, we contextualize the socio-historical background and current landscape of reproductive rights in both countries. Then, we detail our research methodology and present the main findings of our comparative analysis. In the concluding discussion, we critically examine these findings and present key insights drawn from our analysis.

Feminist Movements and Democracy: Between De-democratization and Democratic Innovations

The paper draws on the field of research exploring the relationship between feminist movements and democracy (e.g., Eschle, 2019; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021a, 2021b). Building on studies that examine the processes of de-democratization and the central role of opposition to gender politics, it aims to understand how feminist actors respond to the de-democratizing practices of anti-abortion movements (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2021; Verloo, 2018). In outlining feminist actors and organizations as part of broader efforts to resist de-democratization and deepen democracy, we build upon social movement studies to analyze feminist repertoires of action (Tarrow, 1989; Tilly, 1978, 1986) as democratic innovations, in as much as they contribute to protect and deepening democracy (Caravantes & Lombardo, 2024; della Porta, 2020).

De-democratization process refers to the erosion of democratic values and practices, such as equality, inclusion, participation, and human rights (Lombardo et al., 2021). This process creates political polarization, targeting feminist and social justice movements, and highlights the fragility of democratic institutions. At the same time, it provokes resistance from civil society and political actors who defend equality and social justice. As scholars have argued, de-democratization is not solely the result of formal legal changes, since “policy termination is rare and we need more gradual measurements of change towards erosion or dismantling” (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, p. 92). In the context of abortion rights, de-democratization takes place through the presence and expansion of a range of formal and informal obstacles, such as forms of boycott and hijack of existing laws. In many European countries, despite legalization and even constitutional protection, the right to abortion is hindered by procedural and regulatory barriers, such as mandatory waiting periods, time limits, obligatory counselling, conscience clause misuse, and financial costs (Marques-Pereira, 2023), as well as by the instrumental exploitation of the weaknesses of the law and the persisting social stigma. Given that these obstacles contribute to hinder access to a legally recognized right, that of abortion, we consider them as part of a process of de-democratization.

As a counterpoint to the erosion of democratic practices, movements develop democratic innovations. These refer to novel practices and institutional mechanisms that aim to improve the quality of democracy, often by increasing citizen participation, enhancing accountability, and promoting greater inclusion (della Porta, 2020; della Porta & Felicetti, 2022a, 2022b; Fominaya, 2022). These include participatory budgeting, citizens’ assemblies, and other deliberative forums designed to make democratic systems more inclusive (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Niessen, 2019). These practices are meant to enlarge citizens’ engagement with policy-making (Dryzek, 2002; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Pateman, 1975).

However, one of the main gaps in the literature on democratic innovations is that it tends to focus exclusively on the institutional arena, often neglecting the role that social movements play in fostering democratic innovation (della Porta, 2013, 2020) outside of institutional politics. As della Porta (2013) argues, “case studies have indicated that democratization is often linked to contentious dynamics, such as pro-democratic cycles of

protest, and waves of strikes” (p. 133). Feminist movements have been instrumental in developing new forms of democratic engagement, particularly through deliberative processes that prioritize inclusion, participation, and direct social action (Ciccia et al., 2021; Lépinard, 2014; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004). These innovations challenge the traditional boundaries of democracy by emphasizing that democracy should not only be about participation in formal institutions but also about transforming everyday practices of power and resistance (della Porta, 2020).

While studies of democratic innovations are generally grounded in contexts where political opportunities are open and movements can engage with institutional arenas, our study is situated in the context of de-democratization led by anti-gender mobilizations. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature on feminist responses to anti-gender mobilizations. Scholars in this field have shown that feminist resistance in the last decade has evolved from passive or defensive reactions to increasingly proactive and strategic forms of resistance (Smrdelj & Kuhar, forthcoming, 2025). Studies also show that feminist actors engage in both contentious public actions (like protests and humor) and institutional strategies (such as counter-framing, litigation, and parliamentary rule-making) to counteract delegitimization, misinformation, and anti-gender backlash (Caravantes et al., 2024; Cullen, 2021;). Moreover, scholars have explored how feminist responses vary across national and institutional contexts – from grassroots actions in Croatia due to generational and political changes (Böhmová, 2024), to embodied feminist counter-populist performances in Poland (Kurylo, 2021), and the development of feminist institutional categories in the EU and Catalonia (Caravantes et al., 2024; Kantola & Lombardo, 2024).

Bridging studies on feminist responses to anti-gender mobilizations and democratic innovations, this paper offers a deeper understanding of how democratic innovations emerge in contexts of de-democratization. Our analysis centers on the repertoires of action developed by feminist movements in Italy and Slovenia that facilitate and strengthen access to abortion rights through grassroots initiatives. These actions occur outside the formal institutional sphere, yet they are crucial in ensuring that abortion rights are upheld. Their significance is heightened by the fact that legal protections for abortion do not necessarily shield abortion seekers from encountering obstacles that, at times, undermine the right itself. In fact, there may be a notable gap between formal rights and actual access to those rights. We argue that the initiatives carried out by feminist movements to guarantee abortion access represent democratic innovations, as they not only effectively enact the right to abortion beyond the confines of the law but also enact and embody alternative approaches to abortion care. By focusing on grassroots democratic innovations, the paper proposes a more comprehensive understanding of how feminist principles and practices can challenge, expand, and redefine democracy in contexts of de-democratization. In doing so, we also suggest the fight for gender equality is not limited to legal battles or policy reforms but is also waged in everyday practices of resistance, solidarity, and care.

To examine how feminist movements engage with the context of de-democratization and how their activism innovates democracy, we draw on social movements’ literature on repertoires of action (Tilly, 1978, 1986), understanding democratic innovations as a form of repertoire that seeks to enhance democratic practices through novel and inclusive strategies. As scholars have widely shown, the choice of repertoires of action is influenced by many different factors. Movements choose specific repertoires based on their collective identity, collective memory, and ideological stances (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Traugott, 1993). However, the context in which they operate is a critical factor in determining their choices: the selection of forms of action is influenced by various political opportunities and economic contexts (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015; Tarrow, 1989; Tilly, 1978, 1986).

The paper considers the existing legal frameworks that ensure access to abortion in the two countries as part of the context that shapes both feminist movement repertoires and the ability to resist democratic backsliding.

Reproductive Rights as Battleground: The Context of Italy and Slovenia

In both Italy and Slovenia, abortion is legal due to legislation implemented in the 1970s. In Italy, Law 194 was instituted in 1978, while in Slovenia (then part of former Yugoslavia), the right to abortion has been included in the constitution since 1974. While these legal frameworks have remained unaltered over the decades, both countries have experienced significant challenges to the right to abortion, which have come from anti-abortion actors intervening through informal means, such as through forms of boycott and hijack¹. In fact, over the past decade, both Italy and Slovenia have become a key battleground in the global struggle over reproductive rights, gender, and sexuality, with the rise of both anti-gender movements and feminist resistance (Garbagnoli, 2014; Lavizzari, 2019; Lavizzari et al., forthcoming, 2025; Mencin Čepelak, 2016; Prearo, 2024a, Renner & Kralj, 2021). In both countries, the right to abortion is hindered by the initiatives of anti-abortion actors who “erode” the legal protection without challenging existing legislations. Additionally, both countries experienced a resurgence of massive feminist mobilization which have responded to the rise of anti-gender actors and elaborated innovative repertoires (Bonu Rosenkranz & della Porta, 2025; Markelj & Pajnik, 2025). While in this regard Italy and Slovenia share many similarities, they also present significant differences, which allow for a comparative exploration. In particular, in this article we take into consideration the different degree of protection that legislation about abortion in the two countries provides, as well as the extent to which anti-abortion politics has been institutionalized.

In Italy, abortion was decriminalized in 1978 with the approval of Law 194. Since then, Italy’s legal framework has remained highly contested (Caruso, 2020; Cozzi et al., 2025; Gannon & Pullan, 2025). Law 194/1978 allows abortion within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy under specific conditions, including considerations on the woman’s health, economic status, and family circumstances, assessed by a doctor, who must authorize the abortion. Additionally, the law allows healthcare professionals to refuse to perform abortions on the grounds of conscientious objection (Caruso, 2020). This provision has significant repercussions for women seeking to interrupt a pregnancy. Nearly 70% of Italy’s gynecologists, anesthesiologists, and other healthcare professionals claim conscientious objection, which means many women face severe difficulties in accessing abortion services. In some regions, the percentage of objecting doctors is even higher, forcing women to travel long distances or encounter bureaucratic hurdles in their search for available services. This process is coupled with the ongoing dismantling of the public health sectors, which have experienced numerous reductions in resources and services over the past decade. This has further exacerbated the challenges associated with accessing abortion services, as a result of the general shortage of doctors and resources.

¹ We use the term “informal” to identify those challenges to the right to abortion that do not directly aim to modify or overturn the law. We define informal means as both the discourses and practices that obstruct the right to abortion through “social” initiatives – such as reinforcing stigma against abortion seekers, pro-life actors attempting to dissuade individuals outside healthcare clinics, or medical professionals’ judgmental attitudes towards abortion seekers – as well as those that strategically exploit legal loopholes to restrict access. The latter strategy is particularly evident in the Italian context, where, despite not directly challenging the law, anti-abortion politics has leveraged the conscientious objection clause – included in the law – in a way that has effectively undermined abortion rights in practice. In this regard, informal obstacles to access to abortion may be connected to formalized limitations included in the law, which nevertheless become real threats to the right to abortion only to the extent that anti-abortion actors exploit them instrumentally.

The high prevalence of conscientious objection undermines the intent of Law 194, rendering the right to abortion increasingly precarious. Women are often left without sufficient information or access to the necessary services, and grassroots feminist organizations are stepping in to fill these gaps (Barone, 2024; Barone, forthcoming; Caruso, 2020; Giovannelli et al., 2023). Informal networks, often led by feminist activists, have emerged to provide information, support, and resources for women seeking abortion, especially in areas where access is severely limited.

Additionally, starting from 2022, when Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), became Italy's prime minister, anti-abortion politics has been increasingly institutionalized. Meloni's ascent to power has cemented a symbiotic relationship between radical right politics and anti-gender movements (Lavizzari, 2024). These actors, already mobilized around issues of traditional family values, national identity, and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, have found an influential ally in Meloni's administration (De Giorgi et al., 2023; Donà, 2023b, 2023a; Prearo, 2024b). Concerning abortion, the Prime Minister has openly stated that she did not wish to challenge the existing legal regulation as recognized by Law 194. At the same time, the government has intensified the use of indirect means to further obstruct the right to abortion. For example, state resources have been directed toward anti-abortion, allowing them to operate in healthcare centers and hospitals, often discouraging women from seeking abortions or intrusively questioning their decision to perform an abortion. Furthermore, the government's rhetoric has increasingly masked its anti-abortion policies as supporting motherhood and women in economic hardship. This strategy has allowed the government to challenge the right to abortion while maintaining its legal protection untouched. Conservative policy proposals have been repeatedly put forward by right wing parties to make abortion illegal, as a consequence of the significant influence in the public sphere and the government of anti-gender movements. The main anti gender actors, as the umbrella organization Pro Vita & Famiglia (Pro Life and Family) recurrently refer to abortion as part of the "gender ideology" project, that supposedly seeks to dismantle the traditional family and the natural gender order. In the timeframe of our analysis, several protests promoted by anti-gender movements, such as the demonstration related to the World Congress of Families in March 2019 in Verona, took place, witnessing an ongoing cycle of anti-gender contention.

Concurrently, Italy has witnessed a resurgence of feminist activism, particularly embodied by the grassroots movement Non Una Di Meno (Not One [Woman] Less) (Barone & Bonu, 2022; Chironi, 2019). From 2016, this feminist coalition has mobilized in response to the growing attacks on women's rights and has organized public protests and direct social actions to defend reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and combat gender-based violence. Since its inception, Non Una Di Meno has consistently advocated for a broader feminist agenda, linking gender justice with economic, social, and political equality, challenging not only the reactionary politics of the far right but also the structural inequalities that make marginalized groups vulnerable to these attacks. One crucial characteristic of Non Una Di Meno is its autonomous and grassroots character as well as its conflictual engagement with institutions and institutional actors (Barone & Bonu Rosenkranz, forthcoming). The movement is largely organized through horizontal assemblies and adopts a prevalent strategy of protesting.

While in Italy the grassroots feminist movement has been confronted with an already weak legal framework for abortion rights, as well as with the increasing erosion of the right, Slovenia stands out with one of the most liberal legal reproductive rights frameworks in Europe. This framework emerged from feminist struggles, particularly during the socialist era, which led to Yugoslavia becoming the first country in the world to enshrine a constitutional right to freely decide on childbearing, with abortion restricted only on

medical grounds, as early as in 1974 (Mencin Čeplak, 2016). The consequent 1977 Health Measures in Exercising Freedom of Choice in Childbearing Act, still in force today, includes abortion as a family planning method, alongside contraceptives, sterilization, infertility treatments, and in vitro fertilization (Rener & Kralj, 2021). Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, Slovenia faced attempts to weaken these rights during the early 1990s, when a center-right coalition was in power. At the time, there was opposition to preserving abortion rights in the new constitution, framing abortion as being a threat to the Slovenian nation (Mencin Čeplak, 2016). However, strong feminist coalitions succeeded in maintaining this right, securing its protection under Article 55 of the 1991 Constitution.

While Slovenia has a legacy of constitutional protection of reproductive rights, these rights have been repeatedly contested throughout the country's history, both in terms of conservative policy proposals to remove abortion from health insurance coverage under the austerity measures, as well as discriminatory practices in health care institutions (Markelj & Pajnik, 2025). These forms of boycott and hijack range from providing inadequate information about abortion procedures to applying subtle pressure on women through intrusive questioning about their decisions. Women may also face a lack of psychological support or post-abortion counselling, and some even undergo the procedure in the same rooms as pregnant women or those undergoing in vitro fertilization, creating distressing situations.

The most recent threats to reproductive rights have emerged with the rise of the anti-gender movement, which targets abortion as a key project of "gender theory" (Kuhar, 2017; Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2024). Recently, the anti-gender movement, consisting of a diverse network of actors, including family associations, religious groups, nationalist organizations, "pro-life" groups and far-right parties (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018), shifted focus to influencing public discourse on abortion rather than pursuing policy changes. Public events, such as the 40 Days for Life rallies in front of a Gynecological clinic in Ljubljana in 2016, were organized by Zavod Božji otroci (God's Children Institute), one of the main "pro-life" actors and involved participants praying for the end of abortion and engaging with women visiting the clinic to persuade them against undergoing the procedure (Mencin Čeplak, 2016). Anti-abortion discourse has also been prominently displayed in the annual anti-abortion March for Life, held continuously since 2019 and organized in collaboration with two prominent anti-gender actors, Zavod Živ!m (I'm Alive) and the March for Life Organizing Committee.

Over the past decade, the feminist movement has actively resisted neoconservative mobilizations, primarily adopting a reactive stance to safeguard the existing reproductive rights. The contemporary feminist movement has shifted from centralized structures to diverse, decentralized forms of resistance. Spanning from NGOs with structured and formalized frameworks to informal grassroots groups grounded in self-organization, autonomy, and horizontality, the movement has embraced trans-thematic action, linking gender issues to broader economic and social shifts under late capitalism. The diversity of the movement is reflected in varied repertoires of action, with some using legal means and direct engagement with state institutions, while others transcend and challenge institutionalism in favor of participatory methods such as protests, events, and direct social action (Markelj & Pajnik, 2025). Advocating for the preservation of free abortion access (Rener & Kralj, 2021), the movement has engaged in both institutional and informal arenas to advance its demands. One of the most recent feminist mobilizations emerged in 2023 after feminist activists uncovered a rather secluded policy according to which individuals not paying supplementary health insurance faced additional costs for abortion (The 8th of March Institute, n.d.). While feminists successfully called for full state funding, anti-gender groups issued public opposition, labelling abortion as murder. These actions have generated considerable public and media attention, highlighting the ongoing struggle

between maintaining progressive reproductive laws and addressing the pressures from anti-gender mobilizations.

Ongoing struggle in both Italy and Slovenia highlights the critical role of feminist movements in ensuring reproductive rights, despite the differing historical and legal contexts in which they operate. Both countries face informal attacks, such as the obstruction of abortion access through conscientious objection in Italy and anti-abortion rallies or covert policy changes in Slovenia, which undermine these rights without directly altering the legal frameworks.

Methodological Framework

To examine contemporary feminist movements' responses to anti-abortion attacks, with a particular focus on informal settings, we employed a qualitative research approach. This included conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with feminist actors in Italy and Slovenia between December 2023 and February 2024, which provided the foundation for our comparative analysis. The focus of our research was on the period unfolding from 2010 onward, with the aim of exploring the most recent wave of feminist mobilizations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method because they allowed for capturing nuanced insights into feminist movements' responses to de-democratization processes, which might not be fully accessible through other methods, like quantitative approaches or secondary data.

Our sample included 43 feminist activists, 20 from Italy and 23 from Slovenia, selected to capture the diversity of feminist actors in each country. Interviews aimed to cover the internal variety of the movement in both countries. In Italy, most of the interviewees are part of horizontal and grassroots groups, while in Slovenia, given the nature of the movement, interviews also included representatives of more formal groups such as NGOs.

Each interview, lasting between one and two hours, followed a semi-structured format and explored a range of topics, including organizational structures of the movement, the main issues they tackle, repertoires and strategies they adopt and responses to anti-gender mobilizations. We also captured networking practices, outcomes of feminist actions, and future visions for the movement. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, all interviews have been anonymized. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

The data analysis was conducted in two steps. First, using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, we identified the main themes in our interviews based on the topics outlined above. In the second step, we extracted all repertoires of action related to feminist democratic innovations in informal settings. To ensure confidentiality, quotes are attributed using the following labels: FAI, number of the interview (Feminist Activist Italy) and FAS, number of the interview (Feminist Activist Slovenia).

The Analysis of Results

The following section examines the main repertoires of action within feminist movements in Italy and Slovenia as they resist efforts to restrict reproductive rights. Our analysis demonstrates that feminist activists in both countries intervene against the erosion of the right to abortion through two key strategic approaches: (1) *direct social action*, including peer-to-peer mutual support and solidarity initiatives, and (2) *repertoires of knowledge production* aimed at countering anti-abortion narratives, disseminating accurate information, and providing tools for informed decision-making about abortion.

Direct social action as a form of solidarity: Assisting and supporting women in accessing abortion

Activists in both countries have increasingly articulated the struggle for abortion rights through direct social action (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015; Zamponi, 2019; Zamponi & Bosi, 2018). With this term, scholars refer to mutualistic and peer-to-peer practices that do not target the state or other stakeholders but act immediately and concretely. By reshaping everyday routines, these practices actively prefigure an alternative society, expand democratic agency, and promote solidarity and shared responsibility (Butzlaff & Deflorian, 2021). In the case under scrutiny, solidarity initiatives respond to the systematic erosion of the right to abortion enacted through indirect attacks, such as boycott and hijack. Direct social actions act as powerful examples of democratic innovation: through these initiatives, feminist actors not only offer practical support to those facing barriers to abortion access, but also attempt to enact alternative forms of case-based support, redefining the boundaries between users and experts, enhancing individual agency and promoting an alternative infrastructure of reproductive healthcare access.

In doing so, feminist collectives serve as democratic garrisons, standing as a barrier against forces of de-democratization that seek to erode hard-won rights, such as the continuous challenges to abortion access. As an Italian activist argues:

Institutions, the law, constitute props. Sometimes they are much further back than you would like, sometimes they become the foothold so that we don't get swept away by the drifts, because we are in formal democracies. [...] In addition to the struggles and the building of this better world we want, this different world, there is the management of the everyday, there are answers that need to be there, in the 'here and now', because if one wants to do a voluntary termination of pregnancy one has to do it on time, without all the stumbling blocks that this entails. (FAI15)

As the above quote shows, feminist activists believe that their everyday practices of peer-to-peer support and resistance constitute a fundamental tool in the "here and now" that takes places outside the institutional arena.

In Italy, for example, feminist activists actively support individuals in need of abortion by practicing accompaniment. With this term activists identify all those practices that are meant to actively support the person who needs an abortion. This may involve physically accompanying the person to the hospital, staying by their side to address any potential difficulties they may encounter, as well as more generally providing social and moral support. As an activist reported:

When we say accompaniment, we don't mean just physical accompaniment, like accompanying someone to the healthcare center or the hospital, but we mean a more comprehensive approach. [...] There is this whole part of the support that we do that is at a distance. It is related to giving clear information, helping people contact healthcare providers, and making appointments. (FAI15)

Thus, accompaniment aims at ensuring that the persons do not feel isolated as well as to support them in facing any obstacles they may encounter. Indeed, beyond the tangible obstacles posed by hostile doctors or conscientious objectors, one of the primary challenges individuals face when accessing abortion is a pervasive judgmental climate. Thus, activists have expanded their focus beyond merely publicly denouncing inefficiencies and obstacles to include "accompanying people who find themselves in need of abortion or need of contraceptives and who find themselves in a situation of difficulty" (FAI15). In this regard, the practices that feminist activists develop as responses to existing obstacles and threats to the right to abortion represent crucial enactments of alternative ways of

practicing reproductive healthcare. Accompaniment, in particular, while responding to the obstacles that abortion-seekers may encounter due to the presence of conscientious objectors or broader judgmental and stigmatizing attitudes, also represents a way of embodying mutual support based on care and trust, which innovates the existing approaches within the healthcare system.

While direct support for women seeking abortion has been particularly prominent in Italy, the feminist movement in Slovenia has also embraced direct social action to secure abortion rights. However, direct support has not been as central at the national level, as informal barriers such as conscientious objection clauses are less problematic than in Italy. This is partly due to Slovenia's legal framework, which does not explicitly enable conscientious objection but instead emphasizes the state's role in ensuring conditions that support reproductive decision-making, including access to abortion.

However, in recent years, anarcho-feminist groups have fostered transnational solidarity rooted in the concept of "commoning," which highlights collective community responsibility in supporting marginalized women. In 2022, these groups collaborated with feminist collectives from Ukraine and Poland to address the urgent lack of abortion access for women affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war. Slovenian feminist collectives organized fundraising efforts to supply "Plan B" pills and coordinate their transportation to women in Ukraine and neighboring countries.

At that time, it was identified that women could not access abortion because of the war. [...] There was a coordinated effort to obtain and send Plan B pills to Ukrainian women, either within Ukraine or to bordering countries. (FAS17)

Thus, in the Slovenian case, direct social action to grant the right to abortion for women in other countries has offered the opportunity to challenge national borders and foster transnational solidarity. While offering practical support to abortion seekers, these efforts also prefigure radical alternatives in the context of de-democratization.

Overall, both cases offer the opportunity to rethink the role of practices of resistance in contexts of de-democratization, showing how forms of practical support may turn into prefigurative politics that promote alternative visions of caring community and reproductive justice.

Repertoires of knowledge production: Countering anti-gender narratives and providing information on abortion

Feminist movements in both Italy and Slovenia have been significantly engaged in producing and sharing knowledge about abortion. In both countries, this approach primarily aims to counter anti-gender narratives surrounding abortion in the public sphere. By generating and sharing knowledge, feminist movements work to educate the public, advocate for abortion rights, provide accurate information to improve access to abortion services, and offer tools for informed decision-making about abortion. Additionally, feminist movements promote alternative narratives about abortion, countering the idea that it necessarily represents a traumatic experience. In this sense, they can be considered as forms of action that democratize knowledge and redistribute epistemic power.

In Italy, a key strategy in this regard has been that of mapping and monitoring healthcare facilities and providers. During the last decade, the adoption of this practice has increased: feminist groups in Italy have put intense efforts in gathering and sharing information about healthcare facilities that are relevant for abortion procedures (such as hospitals and family health centers), creating independent maps that serve as guides to help others avoid negative experiences. For instance, feminist activists have initiated projects to

systematically track the presence of conscientious objectors. In Italy, the government and public hospitals do not officially disclose the names of conscientious objectors, making it difficult for individuals seeking abortions to find non-objecting doctors. The collective *Obiezione Respinta* (Objection Rejected) began creating a digital map in 2016. As an activist explained, this is ...

... a map in which to report the cases of conscientious objection throughout the country, which is a practice that began as a very simple form of grassroots activation at almost no cost in the sense that users simply send a message. Then it has gradually transformed also into a much stronger tool to denounce conditions of access to abortion and collect data. (FAI5)

The map identifies those healthcare structures where abortion services are readily available and those where conscientious objectors work. Pins on the map are based on personal experiences shared anonymously by users. This community-driven map serves as a practical tool for bypassing the challenges individuals might face when seeking to terminate a pregnancy. While in most cases, users themselves spontaneously share their experience, in some cases, activists purposefully go undercover as patients, asking staff about the abortion procedure and personally assessing whether the facility is safe and supportive. This knowledge is then used to help guide others in safely accessing abortion services.

Activists in Slovenia have also intervened against the limited accessibility of accurate information about abortion. While this problem is particularly evident online, it also stems from inadequate explanations from healthcare personnel; as one activist noted, “you have to have a lot of personal capital in the sense that you are educated, and you know Slovenian language” (FAS17). To address this gap, a feminist collective collaborated with several gynecologists to launch a comprehensive website providing clear information on women’s rights, abortion procedures, and contraception. This initiative empowers women by giving them accessible, reliable information, while also aiming to educate the public on reproductive rights.

One of the problems is that access to information is somehow restricted, and at the same time, if you google ‘how to have an abortion’, you will first of all get websites that want to discourage you from having an abortion, and that's why we made website, which basically explains these procedures in a very neutral way, and doesn't encourage anyone to have an abortion, and doesn't discourage anyone not to have an abortion either. (FAS8)

In Slovenia, despite broad public support for abortion rights, a significant challenge persists in the form of anti-gender movements attempting to influence public opinion. As a result, activists emphasize the need to build a compelling feminist counter-narrative, presenting well-founded arguments to protect abortion rights and communicate effectively with the broader public:

We don't react with moral indignation, we analyze what it means, why it happened, and what we need to do to prevent it from happening again. We are actually doing with the arguments. We focus less on the anti-gender movement's actions and more on the content we believe is important to explain to the public. (FAS1)

In response to misinformation spread by anti-gender groups, activists highlight the importance of presenting feminist arguments in a clear, non-patronizing, and accessible manner. This means using straightforward language free from specialized jargon, which can risk alienating the general public. Their counter-narratives incorporate core concepts of

bodily autonomy and self-determination, highlighting the adverse effects of restrictive abortion policies on women and children.

In Italy, anti-abortion discourse has fostered a pervasive judgmental climate within healthcare institutions, creating additional barriers for women seeking abortion. As a reaction, activists promote grassroots campaigns aimed at disseminating information and counter narratives about abortion. Thus, for example, several online projects have emerged recently such as IVG Ho Abortito e Sto Benissimo (VIP I had an abortion and feel perfectly fine) and Libera di Abortire (Free to abort), aiming at deconstructing stigmatizing narratives about abortion and fostering positive accounts of women's self-determination, challenging the notion that abortion is inherently traumatic, violent, and painful. The stigma on those who decide to terminate a pregnancy is indeed one of the most powerful – yet informal – obstacles to the right to abortion in the country.

Similarly, in Slovenia, efforts to inform and educate the public about abortion rights extends to online spaces, where social media campaigns play a crucial role. Activists emphasize that feminist responses should avoid amplifying anti-gender discourse by sharing or reposting anti-gender messages, as this can legitimize their narratives. Instead, activists focus on launching independent campaigns that assert the feminist perspective. For example, when graffiti reading "Abortion is murder!" appeared on a LGBTQ+ organization's office, activists responded with a social media campaign that highlighted information about abortion, aiming to counter misinformation directly and reinforce public understanding of reproductive rights. As an activist explained:

We have tried to find innovative ways to respond without repeating false information. [...] We posted a longer text and visually crossed out 'murder' and added things like 'Abortion is a decision, abortion is a right'. We basically took the message and tried to correct it so that it was factually accurate. (FAS13)

Thus, in both countries, knowledge production stands out as a key repertoire that has aimed to counter cultural and logistical obstacles to access to abortion. Indeed, lack of information, misinformation, and stigmatizing narratives represent crucial barriers to the right to abortion. Feminist movements' initiatives, in this regard, fill a crucial gap and facilitate and grant access to a legally recognized right. At the same time, activists also enact alternatives to top-down communication and promote a community-driven practice of knowledge sharing that innovates the healthcare field. Additionally, by diffusing information that is essential for abortion seekers, activists enact the practice of informed decision-making, promoting innovative approaches that healthcare institutions do not employ. For these reasons, these actions not only democratize knowledge but also redistribute epistemic power.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has examined how feminist movements in Italy and Slovenia respond to the peculiar challenges posed by anti-abortion actors' de-democratizing threats in the field of reproductive health. De-democratization processes are understood as eroding democratic values and practices, such as equality, inclusion, participation, and human rights (Lombardo, Kantola & Rubio-Marin, 2021). This dynamic is not solely the result of formal legal changes: beside policy termination or change, more subtle and gradual mechanisms may impact on democratic systems, such as forms of boycott and hijack of existing laws (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018). In this paper we argued that in Italy and Slovenia, with regard to abortion rights, de-democratization takes place through a range of informal obstacles, including misinformation, social stigma, judgmental discourses and practices and the

proliferation of conscientious objectors. In fact, while the legal framework protecting the right to abortion in the two countries has not been altered, access to abortion is systematically threatened and hindered through forms of boycott and hijack.

Our analysis has examined feminist responses to this complex scenario, drawing on the concept of democratic innovations. While the latter has generally been used to analyze phases of democratic expansion (Caravantes & Lombardo, 2024; della Porta, 2020; della Porta & Felicetti, 2022a, 2022b; Fominaya, 2022), our analysis has explored how movements enact democratic innovations in contexts of de-democratization. Our examination of feminist responses indicates that grassroots repertoires of action aimed at supporting the right to abortion constitute crucial democratic innovations, in as much as they enact and prefigure alternative forms of community-based care and promote informed decision-making and self-determination.

Our analysis has identified two key repertoires of action: direct social action and knowledge production. Through the adoption of these repertoires, feminist activists aim to effect changes in informal arenas, beyond official institutions, the state, and other holders of social power. Our analysis demonstrates that feminist responses to informal barriers to abortion access can be considered forms of democratic innovation not merely because they step in where institutions fail, but because they reconfigure the very meaning and practice of democratic participation and care. These grassroots initiatives do not simply fill institutional voids; rather, they challenge dominant, exclusionary forms of governance by creating alternative infrastructures of access to an existing right. In doing so, they enact a prefigurative politics that puts into practice more inclusive and participatory models of democracy. More specifically, these practices are innovative in at least three ways. First, they expand democratic agency, in the sense that by centering women's and marginalized people's autonomy over their own bodies, feminist responses reclaim a form of political subjectivity that is often denied in institutional settings. This reclaims reproductive rights as a matter not only of health but of democratic self-determination. Second, they democratize knowledge and care, that means that through peer-to-peer support, shared information, and community-based infrastructures, these practices subvert the arbitrary and discretionary system that regulates access to abortion. In this sense, they redistribute epistemic power, challenging who gets to define what is legitimate knowledge. Finally, they stimulate collective responsibility and solidarity, because rather than framing abortion as an individual and often stigmatized decision, these practices build communal spaces of solidarity that counteract the isolation, fear, and disempowerment produced by informal barriers. This shift from individual to collective action constitutes a democratic reimagining of responsibility and care. Thus, feminist responses to abortion barriers qualify as democratic innovations because they not only respond to democratic deficits but actively reimagine and enact more inclusive, participatory, and caring forms of democracy, particularly in contexts marked by backlash and erosion of rights.

Our examination of feminist repertoires of action in Italy and Slovenia indicate that movements in both countries engage with practices of direct social action to varying degrees. While this type of action is present in Slovenia mainly in a form of transnational solidarity such as sending of Plan B pills to Ukraine, it is more prominent in Italy, where the practice of accompanying constitutes a crucial response to the often-complicated dynamics that women willing to interrupt a pregnancy may face. This goes from the convoluted procedure for obtaining the certificate, to the difficulties of finding a non-objecting doctor, to the often-judgmental attitude of healthcare professionals. The practice of accompanying in this regard represents the grassroots enactment of both a response to the existing obstacles and an innovative way of conceiving and practicing health, ensuring women feel

supported, can express doubts, fears, and concerns, and find reassurance in shared experiences. Similarly, in Slovenia, direct social action has constituted the enactment of an innovative form of transnational solidarity, aiming at overcoming borders and barriers in access to abortion. In both cases, direct social action practices aim to secure universal access to reproductive health “as commons,” even amid crises like the Russo-Ukrainian war, striving to achieve change in the “here and now” as a way of constituting new forms of prefigurative politics.

The difference in practicing direct social action between country cases can be partly explained by the institutionalization of the anti-abortion politics, allowing the government to take up indirect means to further restrict the right to abortion. In Slovenia, while anti-abortion discourse has permeated the political sphere and fostered strategic alliances with right-wing parties that mainstream its rhetoric, constitutional protections for reproductive rights pose significant challenges to overturning these provisions. As a result, political decision-makers remain cautious in their approach. Differently, in Italy, the symbiotic relationship between anti-abortion actors and far-right political parties has provided broader opportunities for infiltrating the institutional system (Lavizzari, 2024). Thus, the prominence of feminist direct social action in Italy is reflecting the structural conditions provided by the existing legal framework, which introduces specific structure of informal restrictions to abortion rights such as specific conditions to perform abortion and use of conscientious objection by healthcare professionals. In response, grassroots feminist organizations have stepped in to address these gaps through direct social action. Meanwhile, in Slovenia, the state is constitutionally obligated to guarantee the exercise of reproductive rights, creating a legal safeguard against restrictive measures.

Our analysis has also disclosed the centrality of the diffusion of information and knowledge production around abortion. The “repertoires of knowledge production,” which tend to become particularly relevant for social movements’ in times of perceived crisis “as old structures are challenged and new ones envisaged and proved feasible” (della Porta & Pavan, 2017, p. 297), emerge as crucial strategies in both countries. While activists in Italy are focusing mainly on providing information to avoid obstacles in accessing the right to abortion, activists in Slovenia are mainly aiming at debunking misinformation and enhancing awareness about existing rights. This category includes, for instance, repertoires of action focused on informing and educating the public about abortion by providing accessible, clear, and scientifically grounded information. These efforts dispel misconceptions and false claims about abortion – such as the belief that abortion always leads to trauma or regret – and promote the understanding of abortion as a legitimate healthcare service and a right essential for gender equality and women’s reproductive autonomy.

In Slovenia, a particularly notable example is the creation of a website about abortion that provides women with comprehensive information about this right, addressing the lack of guarantee that healthcare professionals will inform women about all their rights and the details of the procedure. The website represents an independent campaign in the sense that it is not tied to any specific anti-abortion event or situation. However, in repertoires of action that prioritize educating and informing the public about abortion rights, it is not only essential to provide accurate and relevant information but also to ensure that this information is presented in a way that does not legitimize moral panic, pressure on women, or other anti-abortion discourses.

In Italy, the creation of maps of conscientious objectors represents a unique form of feminist democratic innovation in the field of knowledge production, developed as a response to significant informal barriers. We can understand these maps as parallel social structures at an informal level, providing women with information about clinics, thereby

facilitating access to abortion. Without such democratic innovations, many individuals would face significantly greater challenges in exercising this legally guaranteed right. Importantly, by creating these maps, feminist actors not only ensure access to abortion rights but also establish and reinforce patterns of participation rooted in solidarity and direct action between activists and service users. In doing so, they directly counteract processes of de-democratization and build a community that, through its innovative approaches, creates more transparent and equitable conditions for realizing abortion rights, promotes self-determination, and fosters informed decision-making. Similarly, the promotion of de-stigmatizing narratives about abortion represents a way to facilitate access to abortion while at the same time challenging the definition of abortion itself.

From this viewpoint, these repertoires of action represent an effort to realize a broader feminist social vision with the long-term goal of creating a social climate that protects and expands abortion rights and actively supports it through normalization, destigmatization, and the provision of accurate information.

Through direct social action and knowledge production, feminist actors respond to the gap between formal and actual access to rights. Indeed, it is precisely by intervening in the space between formal and actual rights that anti-abortion actors propagate misinformation and obstruct access. At the same time, the implementation of these grassroots practices represent more than a simple attempt to cover the empty spot of the institutions: feminist actors embody an alternative way of practicing health that foster self-determination, aim at empowering women's decision-making, and promote a sense of community-based peer-to-peer support that counter the feeling of loneliness as well as the lack of information, both central in the context of the increasing erosion of the right to abortion.

In conclusion, our study shows that feminist movement initiatives in contexts of de-democratization are not merely reactive nor solely focused on resilience and the preservation of existing rights. Rather, they are also transformative and generative. In the case of abortion activism, feminist responses to anti-abortion attacks challenge traditional notions of care and solidarity by experimenting with alternative ways of practicing reproductive autonomy. By addressing informal threats, feminist movements not only resist democratic erosion but actively foster innovation, even under conditions of vulnerability and backlash.

This study contributes to broader debates on democracy and social movements by suggesting that grassroots feminist activism can serve as a site of democratic innovations in contexts of de-democratization. By focusing on abortion activism in Italy and Slovenia, we explore how feminist actors develop new forms of agency, solidarity, and participation that reimagine democratic engagement. As such, our findings have implications not only for understanding reproductive politics in Europe but also for theorizing how democratic renewal may emerge through grassroots practices that respond to anti-gender and anti-abortion trends.

Building on our research, future studies could investigate similar dynamics in other social movements, exploring how grassroots initiatives may evolve into essential democratic practices in contexts of de-democratization, democratic backsliding, and backlash. Such an exploration would help illuminate whether and how different movements across various domains develop innovative forms of participation and care in response to de-democratization. Additionally, a longitudinal analysis of how repertoires of action shift in response to the growing influence of anti-gender and anti-abortion actors could offer deeper insight into the ways in which de-democratization reshapes both the strategies and capacities of social movements over time. Ultimately, understanding how democratic innovation unfolds in contexts of de-democratization is key to grasping how democracy can be not only defended, but reimagined and revitalized in moments of crisis.

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Transparency on the use of generative Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI tools have not been used to enhance the quality and readability of the article.

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