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Structural gender-based violence as a master frame

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This paper examines how feminist movements in Italy have reframed gender-based violence as a structural issue, leading to the creation of structural gender-based violence as a master frame. Drawing on frame analysis and interviews with feminist activists, the study explores how the Non Una Di Meno (NUDM) movement challenged prevailing media narratives that framed violence as an individual or exceptional phenomenon. Instead, NUDM diagnosed patriarchy as a systemic cause of violence, linking it to intersecting oppressions such as capitalism, racism, and institutional inequality. By emphasizing the structural nature of violence, the movement broadened its scope to address issues like labor rights, reproductive freedom, and migration, creating resonance through accessible, emotionally impactful messages. The study highlights how diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic frames contributed to the emergence of structural gender-based violence as a master frame, which unified diverse struggles and enhanced the mobilizing potency of feminist movements. This master frame facilitated large-scale participation and transnational solidarity, linking local struggles to global contexts. By analyzing NUDM's framing process, the paper underscores the role of feminist movements in reshaping societal understandings of violence and advancing systemic change, offering both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of social movements and framing theory.

KEYWORDS

gender-based violence, master frame, feminist movement, cycle of protest, social movement studies, Italy

Introduction

Over the past decade, a new wave of feminist mobilization has placed the fight against gender-based violence at the center of its claims and actions (de Souza and Rodrigues Selis, 2022; Gago, 2020). This movement initially erupted in Argentina following the femicide of Chiara Páez, a young girl murdered and buried by her boyfriend because she was pregnant (Gago, 2020; Terzian, 2017). The brutality of the crime sparked a massive public outcry, culminating in a large-scale demonstration on June 3, 2015, in front of the Argentine Congress in Buenos Aires (de Souza and Rodrigues Selis, 2022). From Argentina, the fight against gender-based violence spread globally, as thousands of people organized mobilizations against rising rates of domestic violence and the patriarchal structures that produce and sustain it (Bonu Rosenkranz and Della Porta, 2025; Chironi, 2019; Pavan and Mainardi, 2018). Movements such as Ni

Una Menos and the #MeToo campaign¹ specifically targeted violence and harassment against women, highlighting them as persistent threats to women's empowerment, self-determination, and freedom (Kaitlynn et al., 2018).

Through a process of diffusion, this wave of mobilization reached Italy in 2016, leading to the emergence of Non Una di Meno [Not One (Woman) Less; Barone and Bonu, 2022]. As in Argentina, mobilization in Italy was initially triggered by a femicide, that of Sara Di Pietrantonio, a young woman murdered and burned by her ex-boyfriend on the outskirts of Rome. In response, Non Una di Meno held its first demonstration on November 25, 2016.

Since its inception, Non Una di Meno has promoted a structural understanding of gender-based violence, framing it as a product of patriarchal systems and intersecting forms of oppression that sustain inequality. Over time, gender-based violence has become an overarching framework through which feminist movements address various forms of gender-based oppression across different spheres, including the labor market, border violence and migration, LGBTQ+ rights, health and reproductive rights. For instance, as in other parts of the world, the Italian feminist strike—organized annually on March 8 since 2017—focuses on the role of both productive and reproductive labor while identifying gender-based violence as the structural link between patriarchy and capitalism.

Thanks to feminist mobilizations, the issue of femicide in Italy has gained considerable attention in both public and governmental arenas (Bandelli, 2017). However, media coverage of femicides has generally framed this phenomenon as an emergency, often attributing blame to individual perpetrators whose actions are depicted as exceptional and unpredictable (Capecchi and Gius, 2023; Giomi et al., 2017; Giomi and Tonello, 2013; Saccà, 2024). In these narratives, women are frequently portrayed as helpless victims, unable to resist or escape violence (Busso et al., 2020; Capecchi and Gius, 2023). Meanwhile, perpetrators are often described as “good men,” responsible fathers and husbands, and honest workers who were suddenly overcome by an uncontrollable homicidal impulse (Busso et al., 2020). This individualized and exceptionalized framing has contributed to a predominantly punitive approach, prioritizing punishment over the implementation of consistent preventive policies (Donato, 2023).

Italy offers a particularly influential case (Gerring, 2007, p. 89) for examining feminist mobilizations and framing processes around gender-based violence. The country has a long and dynamic history of feminist activism, marked by both intense grassroots

mobilization and a legacy of autonomous organizing that continues to shape contemporary struggles (Bracke, 2019; Bertilotti and Scatigno, 2012; Bonu, 2022; Lussana, 2012; Magaraggia, 2015). As abovementioned, in recent years, feminist mobilizations have gained significant momentum, developing powerful transnational linkages while articulating an intersectional, structural critique of violence. At the same time, policy responses to gender-based violence in Italy have remained slow, uneven, and predominantly punitive in nature, often failing to address the systemic roots of the phenomenon (Corradi and Donato, 2024). These contradictions are further highlighted by Italy's consistently low ranking in the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) index, particularly in areas such as political representation and economic autonomy. This combination of feminist mobilization, structural policy shortcomings, and ongoing gender inequalities makes Italy a crucial site to investigate how structural gender-based violence is framed, mobilized, and transformed into a unifying master frame for feminist protest.

This article analyzes how feminist actors in Italy have worked to shift the understanding of gender-based violence, and how this process resulted in structural gender-based violence as a master frame. Thus, the paper contributes to the study of social movements and feminist politics by showing how the concept of structural gender-based violence has redefined the understanding of violence and fuels a new cycle of feminist protest in Italy.

Through frame analysis of 20 interviews with feminist activists and 20 documents from social movements, we unpack the conceptualization of gender-based violence as a structural issue. Our analysis traces how the movement has reframed gender-based violence and examines the broader implications of this shift. Furthermore, this paper contributes to understanding how this transformation has evolved over time, revealing its roots in earlier phases of feminist mobilization in Italy. It also highlights the multiple actors—ranging from politicians and anti-violence centers to grassroots feminist activists—who have played a role in advancing this structural perspective. This research is part of the Horizon project FIERCE – Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe, Grant 101061748.

To guide this analysis, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- How have feminist actors in Italy reframed gender-based violence as a structural issue?
- What diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames have been articulated by the Non Una Di Meno movement in response to prevailing public and media discourses?
- How does the notion of structural gender-based violence function as a master frame within this new cycle of feminist protest?

The first section of the paper provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the framing process of gender-based violence in Italy. The second section offers a historical analysis of how the Italian feminist movement adopted a structural understanding of gender-based violence. The third section examines the movement's framing process, demonstrating how NUDM identifies patriarchy as a multifaceted cause of violence and how its proposed solutions extend beyond policy changes to broader societal

¹ While the global #MeToo movement has had a significant impact in raising awareness about sexual harassment and gender-based violence, its role in Italy has been relatively marginal in terms of grassroots mobilization. The emergence of Non Una Di Meno in 2016 preceded the international diffusion of #MeToo and developed independently, grounded in a strong tradition of feminist activism and street protest. In the Italian context, #MeToo remained primarily a digital and media-centered phenomenon, with limited connection to sustained collective action. For this reason, our analysis centers on the framing processes developed by NUDM, which offer a more grounded and transformative lens to understand the current cycle of feminist protest in Italy.

transformation. This section also explores the movement's use of motivational frames, emphasizing the simplicity of its message and its effectiveness in fostering collective identification. Finally, the paper highlights the role of structural gender-based violence as a master frame, a lens through which feminist movements interpret and address various forms of social inequality—both those directly related to gender and those extending beyond it.

Theoretical framework

The construction of gender-based violence as a social and structural problem results from a long-standing contentious process of framing. According to Goffman (1974), frames organize and provide meaning to one's experience in a social situation. Thus, through frames reality is apprehended and organized through socially constructed schemes.

Studies about the framing of gender-based violence in the Italian context have predominantly focused on the role of the media (Capecchi and Gius, 2023). Generally, media news and the public discourse have systematically contributed to downplaying the political dimension of violence against women, through discursive strategies such as those of degendering the problem and gendering the blame (Berns, 2001; Best, 1999; Meyers, 1996). According to Berns (2001), media discourses frequently frame male aggression as an exception, attributing violent events to personal deviations, while also gendering the blame by blaming women's attitudes for raising the likelihood of violence.

A large number of studies have investigated the shifts regarding the framing of gender-based violence in Italian newspapers, television and other media over time (Capecchi and Gius, 2023). The work of Gius and Lalli (2014) has highlighted how Italian newspapers in the early 2010s tended to depict femicides as connected to romantic love, by highlighting the role of jealousy, presenting perpetrators as acting out of an "excess of passion," or as having lost control in a moment of "raptus." Alternatively, the media tended to focus on other contextual elements such as the use of drugs or the depression of the murderer as factors to explain the sudden action. Other scholars, such as Giomi (2013), have found similar patterns. More recent studies (Dell'Anno, 2021) have shown that despite the diffusion of the term femicide and the changes in the media's attitude toward gender-based violence, it is still relegated to a psycho-individualistic framework. Similarly, the study of Magaraggia and Cherubini (2017) addresses how in Italian social advertising aiming at countering gender-based violence "the communication code is still heavily influenced by the dominant male gaze, and that most of the campaigns are not able to reveal the power relations inherent in heterosexuality" (p. 14).

While thus much of existing scholarship has focused on framing by the media, the role of feminist movements is central in understanding shifting meanings of gender-based violence. Significantly, while discussion surrounding gender-based violence have been central to feminist movements in Italy since the 1970s, framings have varied over times. In fact, during the 1970s the movement had predominantly focused on gender-based violence as sexual violence. In this sense at the time while movements were countering emergency-driven accounts of violence against

women and articulating their fight against patriarchy, the focus was mainly on the structural asymmetry of power between men and women. It was only later, in fact, that attention to the connection between gender-based violence, capitalism, racism and other forms of oppression emerged only later. As it will be detailed in the following section, it was in the 2000s that reflections on a structural understanding of gender-based violence started emerging, which later become embedded in the master frame promoted by NUDM.

This paper adopts frame analysis and theory to understand how the feminist movement conceptualizes gender-based violence, aiming at showing the relevance of social movements' ability to engage in frame disputes and in altering the social understanding of political issues. More specifically, the paper argues that structural gender based violence as a master frame is an explanatory factor in the emergence of the new cycle of feminist protest in Italy, and beyond.

Frames and framing theory have become fundamental concepts in understanding the dynamics of social movements. Developed primarily by scholars like Snow and Benford, this theoretical framework elucidates how individuals and groups construct, interpret, and deploy meanings to make sense of collective action and mobilize for social change (Benford and Snow, 2000; Verloo, 2007). The idea of framing "problematizes the meanings associated with relevant events, activities, places, and actors, suggesting that those meanings are typically contestable and negotiable and thus open to debate and differential interpretation" (Snow et al., 2018, p. 393). Frames are schemas through which individuals make sense of the world through collectively shared ideas, while at the same time negotiating them.

At its core, framing theory posits that social movements are not merely spontaneous reactions to grievances but are instead structured by interpretative frameworks or "frames" that shape participants' perceptions, motivations, and actions (Snow et al., 2018). These frames serve as cognitive tools that simplify complex realities, define problems, attribute causes, and propose solutions, thus guiding individuals' understanding of social issues and shaping their responses (Benford, 2013; Caiani, 2023).

One key aspect of framing theory is the distinction between diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames (Benford and Snow, 2000). Diagnostic frames identify and define the perceived problems or injustices within society, often by attributing blame to certain actors or institutions. Prognostic frames offer solutions or courses of action to address these identified issues, outlining strategies for change. Motivational frames appeal to individuals' values, emotions, and identities, mobilizing support and motivating collective action.

Furthermore, framing theory emphasizes the dynamic and contested nature of frames, which are subject to continuous negotiation, adaptation, and transformation over the course of a movement's development (Benford, 2013). As social movements evolve and encounter new challenges, activists may engage in reframing processes to adjust their messaging, tactics, and alliances to remain relevant and effective (Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1992). Feminist scholars studying framing have provided crucial contributions in this regard, examining how key concepts such as gender equality may have multiple and contested meanings within feminist movements (Lombardo and Meier, 2009; Verloo, 2007). These studies have proved that frame analysis may offer the

opportunity to explore the nuances that shape different meanings attributed to key concepts in feminist movements. In this regard, frame analysis appears as particularly suited to study the framing of gender-based violence in contemporary feminist movements in Italy.

Additionally, literature on framing provides unique tools to explore the relevance of frames in relation to cycles of mobilization. Indeed, to capture how framing process works in social movements at the macro level, and thus to explain the cycle of protests, scholars have introduced the concept of master frames, which appears particularly relevant for our study (Snow and Benford, 1992). A master frame refers to a generic type of *collective action frame* that is wider in scope and influence than run-of-the-mill social movement frames, as “a grammar that punctuates and syntactically connects patterns or happenings in the world” (Snow and Benford, 1992, p. 138). According to Snow and Benford, “associated with the emergence of a cycle of protest is the development or construction of an innovative master frame” (1992, p. 143). Building on their work, we analyze structural gender-based violence as a master frame to explain the new cycle of feminist protest.

The emergence of a unifying frame helps explain why feminist mobilization took a new turn with the adoption of structural gender-based violence as an ideational frame—one that not only identifies the root causes of violence but also articulates possible solutions. By framing gender-based violence as structural, the movement has sparked a wave of mass mobilization on a global scale.

While the concept of structural violence has a long intellectual genealogy, most notably introduced by Galtung (1969), our use of the term draws from feminist reinterpretations that emphasize its gendered and intersectional dimensions (Butler, 2004; Katzenstein, 1989; Marx Ferree and Tripp, 2006; Montoya, 2013, 2023; Walby, 2009). Galtung originally defined structural violence as the harm embedded in social structures that systematically disadvantage certain groups, even in the absence of direct physical force. Feminist scholars have extended this notion to highlight how patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and heteronormativity operate as interlocking structures that produce gender-based violence not only through laws and institutions, but through everyday practices, cultural norms, and economic inequalities (Butler, 2004; Gago, 2020). Rather than flattening experiences, this frame has enabled diverse actors to articulate specific, situated grievances—from anti-racist struggles to economic exploitation—within a shared analytical and political lens.

Drawing on the Italian case, we develop a theoretical explanation for this new cycle of feminist protest. As the following section elaborates, the contentious framing of gender-based violence has a long genealogy, but it became an effective tool for mass mobilization when it was consolidated into a master frame.

Background: the contentious framing of gender-based violence in Italy

In Italy as well as in other countries, the construction of gender-based violence as a social problem is the result of women's and

feminist movements mobilizations and efforts (Rose, 1977; Tierney, 1982). The topic gained centrality in the Italian public discourse during the 1970s, thanks to the intense mobilization of the feminist movement (Filippini, 2022). In 1975 the so-called Circeo massacre shocked the country: two young girls were kidnapped and tortured by three men. One of the girls was killed, the other managed to survive by pretending to be dead (Mascherpa, 2010). Following this event, the feminist movement brought rape and sexual assault to the public eye, and the topic quickly rose to prominence in Italian public discourse.

During the second half of the decade, when the movement was slowly receding in terms of massive mobilizing presence (Calabrò and Grasso, 2004), a network of feminist groups and associations drafted a bill, through the mechanism of citizens-initiative laws, against sexual violence (Feci and Schettini, 2017). At the time, violence against women was categorized as a criminal offense against morality in the “Rocco” Penal Code, adopted in 1939 under fascism. The bill caused severe internal divisions within the movement since some participants believed that it would uphold women's status as victims who need to be protected, which went against what the feminist movement had been advocating for the previous few years (Pietrobelli et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the bill was later presented to the Parliament. However, the parliamentary debate, which proceeded with the elaboration of different bills from different political parties, was extremely complex and no agreement was reached. In 1981 two key articles of the Rocco code were repealed (articles 544 and 587). The first article regulated the crime of “honor killing,” by granting reduced sentences to husbands who murdered their wives in response to their infidelity. The second one concerned so-called “rehabilitating marriage” that meant the possibility for a man who raped a woman to avoid any sentence by marrying the victim. It was only in 1996 that a national law was passed defining sexual violence as a crime against the person and not against morality (Donato, 2023).

Legislative progress was consequently sluggish; however, the Italian feminist movement began establishing grassroots anti-violence centers and shelters in the 1980s and 1990s, and these eventually became a national network in 1996 (Creazzo, 2016; Pietrobelli et al., 2020; Romanin and Campani, 2015). This was part of a broader shift that the feminist movement undertook toward forms of grassroots organizing at the cultural and social level (Calabrò and Grasso, 2004). By the end of the 1990s at least 70 anti-violence centers were established in the country (Pietrobelli et al., 2020).

While the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s had primarily focused on sexual violence and rape, it was especially in the 2000s that the movement's frame about violence shifted significantly, in a strongly contentious dynamics (Bandelli, 2017).

Indeed, during that decade, the issue of violence against women became a core topic in Italian political debates, deeply exploited by right-wing politicians who aimed to promote securitarian and racist politics. This has been particularly evident in the period between 2006 and 2008, reaching its peak in the aftermath of the killing of Giovanna Reggiani in 2007. Giovanna Reggiani was raped and murdered in Rome on October 30th, 2007. The episode prompted unparalleled securitarian and repressive measures against immigrants and was sustained by a rhetoric of moral panic and nationalist identity (Giomi and Tonello, 2013;

Woodcock, 2010). The crime was attributed to a young Romanian citizen, living in a camp. The racist rhetoric surrounding Reggiani's rape rapidly materialized in a Decree (181/2007) containing urgent measures to allow the immediate expulsion of EU citizens from the Italian territory for safety reasons. The mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, ordered the immediate destruction of the Roma camp (Giomi and Tonello, 2013; Woodcock, 2010).

The feminist movements in Italy strongly responded to the racist campaign with a mobilization called “Not in my name,” refusing racist and securitarian politics to be enforced in the name of the defense of women (Peroni, 2018). As the movement argued:

Once again, male violence is traced back to a problem of city security and public order, instrumentalising for political purposes the drama of women who are raped and in many cases murdered. Violence against women continues to be treated as the deviance of individuals or as a responsibility to be blamed on the nationality of the aggressors and murderers, whereas it is structured within society and the family, and stems from the historical domination of one sex over the other. Male aggression is the leading cause of death and permanent disability (UN data) for women worldwide. ([controviolenzadonne.org](#)).

Thus, the movement reacted to the instrumentalization of violence against women for securitarian and racist purposes, as well as to its mirroring narrative of victimization regarding women (Peroni, 2018).

Additionally, because of the movement's efforts and successes in introducing a different narrative into the public discourse in comparison to the one that was widely accepted at the time—which saw violence against women as the product of external threats, specifically originating from immigrants and foreigners—gender-based violence began to be perceived as increasingly affecting intimate relationships and the household by 2010s. In those years the word femicide entered the public discourse. As Bandelli and Porcelli (2016) argue, during the 2012–2013 national election campaign the term *femminicidio* became central in media and political discourses, marking a shift with respect to previous narratives: “The emergency was reconstructed as a structural problem within Italy's borders, affecting the Italian patriarchal family, originating in a backward sexist culture which is legitimized by politics and media domestically. In other words, *femminicidio*—which in its popularized version is understood as the “male murder of woman because she is a woman”—drew public attention to the issue of domestic and partner violence and enabled the deployment of a feminist gender reading in public representations of VAW.” (ivi, p. 3). As the authors explain, the relevance of the term *femminicidio* was overwhelmingly the result of advocacy efforts by feminist movements and feminist political actors. It allowed for a progressivist discourse against violence on women to take place in the country.

In June 2013, the Italian Parliament ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). The ratification marked an important symbolic recognition of gender-based violence as a systemic issue and helped elevate

public and political attention to the phenomenon. However, the implementation of the Convention has been uneven and has drawn criticism from feminist movements. While the ratification was accompanied by a wave of discursive commitments, the majority of policy responses since then have focused on punitive measures and criminalization, rather than on prevention or structural transformation. Key aspects of the Convention—such as comprehensive sex and gender education, adequate funding for anti-violence centers, and sustained training of public officials—have been largely ignored or underfunded. Feminist actors have repeatedly denounced the structural lack of resources for services, the bureaucratic obstacles faced by anti-violence centers, and the failure to address gender inequality through education and cultural change. This disconnect between institutional commitments and concrete action reinforces the movement's emphasis on framing gender-based violence as a structural issue that cannot be adequately addressed through reactive, state-centered interventions alone. As such, the gap between formal ratification and meaningful implementation further reinforces the relevance of feminist movements' calls for structural approaches to violence that go beyond criminal justice paradigms.

It was in 2016 that a new massive feminist mobilization countering gender-based violence emerged in the country, with the emergence of the Non Una Di Meno movement. The NUDM movement has given an unparalleled centrality to the fight against gender-based violence and has popularized the structural understanding of femicides and gender-based violence more broadly (Barone and Bonu, 2022), to the point that when in 2023 Giulia Cecchettin, a young girl was kidnapped and murdered by her boyfriend, the Italian public discourse was forced to introduce the term patriarchy in the discussions about the causes of the episode.

In the discourse of Non Una di Meno, patriarchy is understood as a system of power that structures social relations through the domination of men over women and of cis-heteronormative values over other gendered and sexual subjectivities. It operates across institutions and informal fields, and it intersects with other systems of oppression, including capitalism and racism (Walby, 1990). In turn, capitalism is understood as a system producing and reinforcing economic inequalities and exploiting reproductive labor, while reinforcing gendered and racial hierarchies (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 2004).

Thus, feminist mobilizations in Italy have been central in politicizing gender-based violence long before the emergence of NUDM. Nevertheless, the new phase of feminist mobilization marks a significant shift. While earlier waves of feminist activism clearly recognized patriarchy as a root cause of violence, NUDM marks a shift in scale and discursive focus: it is the first movement in Italy to place structural gender-based violence at the center of its mobilization. This shift was made possible by the gradual institutional recognition of the phenomenon (including the first national survey on GBV done by the National Institute of Statistics—ISTAT—in 2006), the growing visibility of femicide, and the diffusion of transnational frames from Latin American feminist movements. NUDM's contribution lies not so much in innovating the diagnostic frame, but in mobilizing around structural violence as a unifying master frame capable of articulating intersecting oppressions and linking them to mass mobilization.

Having provided an account of the long history of how a structural understanding of gender-based violence has entered the Italian public discourse, in the following sections we aim at focusing on the framing process of the NUDM movement, in order to show how structural gender-based violence became a master frame.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the way in which the new wave of feminist mobilizations in Italy frame gender-based violence. The article draws on data collected within the HORIZON project “FIERCE – Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe,” which started in 2022 and involves eight European countries (Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey).

The research is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with feminist activists in Italy as well as on document analysis based on the movement’s publications. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach, but efforts were made to include a diverse range of activists. The interviewees, aged between 27 and 74, but the majority of our sample was composed of activists between aged between 30 and 40. All interviewees were white and predominantly women, though the sample also includes trans and non-binary individuals, lesbians, and a gay man. Most interviewees are part of the NUDM movement, which is the biggest feminist network in Italy. However, the study has included participants from other groups such as Cagne Sciolte, Consultoria Fam, the Lucha Y Siesta women’s house, Laboratorio Smaschieramenti, Obiezione Respinta, Cà Nisciun È Fessa, and Radio Onda Rossa. The sample of interviewees aimed at covering north, center and southern Italian regions. Interviews were conducted through a flexible outline that aimed at covering groups’ organizational structures, the main issues they tackle, and the repertoires and strategies they adopt. All interviews have been anonymized. The interviewees are identified with the label FA (feminist activist), the name of the group, and the age of the interviewee. The interviews have been conducted between 2023 and 2024, by both authors of the paper. Participants have been contacted mostly via email, in some case by personal phone number. Most interviews have been conducted by the two authors together, while some have been conducted separately. Our access to the field was facilitated by our participation in feminist movements in the country. Our positionality as knowledgeable participants to the movement has sometimes required care and attentiveness from our side, so to avoid that important aspect would be given for granted by participants. Overall interviews have represented a crucial tool for our research since as scholars have argued they allow the researcher to “gain insight into the individual and collective visions, imaginings, hopes, expectations, critiques of the present, and projections of the future on which the possibility endure or disband” (Blee and Taylor, 2002, p. 95). Furthermore, interviews offer a unique opportunity to gain knowledge on participants’ thoughts and ideas “in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992).

Additionally, our study also includes the analysis of key documents produced by NUDM, including the Feminist Plan Against Gender-Based Violence, public calls for mobilizations, and other materials that address gender-based violence.

All the empirical material has been analyzed through coding on MAXQDA. Adopting frame analysis, the study has proceeded by identifying diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames (Snow et al., 2018) in both interviews and documents. Thus, our coding has aimed at exploring how feminist actors define the problem of gender based violence (including the counterparts they identify), the solutions they propose to it and the resources they mobilize to foster participation in the fight against it.

Through this combination of interviews and document analysis, the study seeks to illuminate the ways in which structural gender-based violence is became a master frame within NUDM and its broader implications for feminist movements in Italy.

Analysis

Our analysis has explored diagnostic, motivational and prognostic framing produced by feminist movements. As the next sections will show, the movement considers gender-based violence as a structural and systemic phenomenon, resulting from interlocked structures of power such as patriarchy, capitalism, racism. Motivational frames are strongly articulated around the simplicity of the movement’s message and its embodied, often personal, and every day-based elaboration. Prognostic frames promote the idea of a radical social change, beyond securitarian and emergency-driven solutions, thus pointing at the role of prevention and culture. Finally, our analysis underscores that gender-based violence has become a master frame, allowing the movement to frame its struggle against multiple forms of oppression.

Diagnosis

As stated in the introduction, Sara di Pietrantonio’s 2017 femicide in Rome served as the initial catalyst for the recent feminist mobilization of Non Una Di Meno in Italy, as well as other countries (Barone and Bonu, 2022). As clearly stated in the movement’s initial call for a nationwide protest that the newly formed Non Una Di Meno network supported, a thorough comprehension of gender-based violence resulted in framing it as a structural problem. As the call argues, according to the movement “male violence against women is not a private issue nor an emergency. It is a structural and cut-crossing phenomenon in our society. It constitutes a primary political issue which is rooted in power disparity between sexes.” (SMD, NUDM, 2016). Also subsequent calls for the protest on the 25th of November, such as in 2018, present similar framing of the diagnosis of the problem. The movement’s framing of gender-based violence was aimed to counter the idea that such phenomenon could be reduced to a private issue, reclaiming that domestic violence and femicides were directly connected to a broader systemic dynamic reproducing women’s oppression in society:

For more than two years we have been in the streets and squares affirming that femicides are the tip of an iceberg made of oppression: male violence begins in the privacy of the home

but pervades every sphere of society and increasingly becomes a political tool of domination, producing loneliness, inequality and exploitation. (SMD1, NUDM, 2018)

The movement defines gender-based violence as a “structural and systemic phenomenon” (SMD, 8, 2021, Lucha Y Siesta). On the one hand, this understanding of gender-based violence was a response to individualizing explanations of violence as an exceptional phenomenon, as the following quote clearly shows:

There is no state of exception or emergency: femicide is only the extreme consequence of the culture that feeds and justifies it. It is a structural phenomenon that must be addressed as such. (SMD2, NUDM, 2016)

On the other hand, framing gender-based violence as a structural issue also entailed a broadening of the movement’s scope, in order to address all aspects of women’s lives, ranging from the labor market to border violence, to health and reproductive rights. As an activist explains, this approach was one of the most innovative elements of the Non Una Di Meno movement:

The particularity of NUDM was to look at violence as systemic violence and from the very beginning to identify all aspects of the system, that there was a system that was violent towards women, but also other subjectivities, such as LGBT persons. So since the beginning, there was a discourse about the labor market, about the economic issue, or about the issue of education and so on. (FA1, NUDM, 36)

In 2017 the Non Una Di Meno movement issued the “Plan against male violence on women” (Non Una Di Meno, 2017). The plan represents the concretization of a 1-year-long collective writing, organized through several meetings, structured according to the different topics the plan envisaged to address. While the plan focuses on ending male violence against women, it actually addresses diverse topics such as sexual and reproductive health, the labor market, borders and migration, education and others. It thus constitutes the embodiment of the movement’s diagnosis based upon a structural analysis of gender-based violence as rooted in the multiple sources of oppression and in the various fields of women’s and LGBT persons’ life. As the movement states at the beginning of the pamphlet: “When we say that violence is systemic, we mean that its forms of expression are multiple and transversal: in fact, they touch all spheres of our lives, constantly intertwining with each other.” (Non Una Di Meno, 2017).

Diagnosing gender-based violence as a structural issue, also entails a peculiar understanding of who is responsible for the stated problem. Indeed, the answer to the question “who’s to blame?” appears complex and essentially involves a systemic explanation.

Activists generally point at the role of patriarchy as a structural power relationship that entails a multifaceted cause of oppression for women and LGBTQIA+ persons.

I would say a hetero-cis-patriarchal system, almost like a concrete but abstract entity. [...] The fact that the violence, the subordination of one gender to the other is structural, that this is the system in which we live, that therefore there is

no identification of a specific, punctual cause [...] That’s the cause of violence, the system is heterocis-patriarchal, what other causes do we need to find? (FA7, ROR, 43)

Why is there harassment in the street? Well... My answer is... patriarchy. I wouldn’t know how else to explain it. (FA17, NUDM, 31)

Indeed, the movement does not focus on blaming specific political parties and not even specific governments. When asked about their main adversaries or those that the movement identifies as responsible for the current situation, activists proposed a “tentacular” vision of power relationships.

The adversary is not easy, like in the movies: there is no villain; there is a really tentacular system, so you see it, you know it [...]. But actually patriarchy is patriarchy, so then who is responsible is kind of everybody. There may be someone who puts more into it than others, but even in the cases in which it is easier, in a femicide there is a person who acts that violence, the responsibility it is far beyond that person (FA12, LYS, 34)

As the next two sections will show, this understanding of gender-based violence as a structural and systemic issue, that pervades all aspects of women’s lives and that cut across the dimensions of gender, race and class has significant implications for the ways in which motives for the fight and answers to the problem are framed.

Motivational frames

Motivational frames are meant to foster participation and make others’ perceive that the mobilization is relevant to them. NUDM has been particularly successful in mobilizing large numbers of participants over the years. In this section we examine how the movement achieved this result, by exploring the motivational frames it adopted and how they resulted as particularly resonant for participants. While the identification of the causes of the problems appears complex, multifaceted and somewhat abstract, the movement has significantly gained strength and constantly increased the numbers in terms of participants over the years also thanks to what activists refer to as a rather “simple message.”

In fact, one of the movement’s strengths was to be able to politicize gender-based violence as a structural and systemic problem through an approachable, clear message that could be shared by a large number of people. As activists explain:

You could identify with that, the keywords were very simple, perhaps these were the strongest innovations (FA9, NUDM, 33)

NUDM was immediately comprehensible even to those who maybe had a vague feminist sensibility but had never taken to the streets This, in my opinion, was about the simplicity of the message, it paid off a lot (FA5, NUDM, 37)

In fact, both NUDM’s discourses and repertoires provide a very concrete expression of how gender-based violence affects women’s

lives, and portray the struggle as concerning every woman's everyday life. Women feel the resonance of movement's claims in their own life, so rather than a vague grievance, the political stance is deeply felt as something affecting each of the person that listen to movement's messages. Thus, the problem is perceived as familiar, and this immediate way to mirror themselves in slogans and claims is the source of massive women's participation.

It was a demonstration where the women were so focused, because I mean, you're talking about my life, it happened to my mother, it happened to my sister, it happened to a friend of mine, it happened to my comrade... it was the first time we felt something like this. (FA7, NUDM, 33)

We experience every day how violence is a structural phenomenon of our societies, a tool for controlling our lives, and how it conditions every sphere of our existence: in the family, at work, at school, in hospitals, in court, in newspapers, on the street. (SMD6, NUDM, 2017).

Recalling the feelings experienced during the first national demonstration against gender-based violence organized by NUDM a participant told us:

It was a demonstration where the women were so focused, because I mean, you're talking about my life, it happened to my mother, it happened to my sister, it happened to a friend of mine, it happened to my comrade... it was the first time we felt something like this. (FA7, NUDM, 33)

The movement systematically underlines the "everyday" dimension of violence. This is something that every woman can identify with. Indeed, one of the most powerful messages of the NUDM movement is precisely the fact of having presented violence as a component of every woman's life, rather than as an exceptional phenomenon. This empirical finding confirms the mobilizing potency of structural gender based violence as a master frame, that concerns the resonance dimension, including empirical credibility, experiential commensurability and narrative fidelity.

Other examples of the concrete and simple message articulated to promote a vision of gender-based violence can be found in some of its key slogans and street performances. For example, one of the movement's main slogans states "the murderer is not sick, he's the healthy son of patriarchy" (*"l'assassino non è malato, è il figlio sano del patriarcato"*). This slogan clearly counters exceptionalist and pathologizing individual readings of gender-based violence while at the same time introducing the vision that patriarchy as a structure is the real cause of femicides. Similarly, one of the movement's key street performances consists in waving keys while chanting "the murder has the keys of home" (*"l'assassino ha le chiavi di casa"*), countering accounts that promotes "othering" and externalize the threats of gender-based violence. These slogans and performances have the unique quality of synthesizing the diagnostic frame of the movement in very clear, simple and concrete images of what gender-based violence means. The capacity of synthesize a very complex understanding of gender-based violence as a structural phenomenon into concrete and easily communicable slogans, performances, and messages has constituted one of the movement's most powerful motivational tools.

Furthermore, the movement has also promoted the idea of a care-based sisterhood against gender-based violence that has been particularly relevant in fostering feelings of belonging, participation and commitment to the struggle. The fact that beside denouncing gender-based violence the movement actively supported women's victims of violence has been a key element in the NUDM movement. Indeed, one of the main slogans the movement has promoted is "Sister, you are not alone!". This very simple message has had a concrete translation in forms of mutual aid and support that the NUDM movement has engaged with. The idea that the feminist struggle could break the sense of isolation of women facing violence was a key motivational aspect.

Finally, when exploring how the movement managed to mobilize participants in large numbers, it is essential to reflect on the peculiar way in which it has framed both the feminist struggle and the form in which it has engaged with protest actions. The generally militant, antagonistic and highly engaging rhetoric of social movements was here reframed in the terms of something that creates joy. Protest is assumed to be something that makes feeling good: "what I feel as new is the necessity of adopting actions that can make us feel good [...] feminist politics has had precisely the great virtue of putting the body really in the forefront not only in the fact of occupying the square or occupying the public space but also of acting in a certain way, of having an awareness different from the traditional way of doing demonstrations: the awareness of doing certain things, certain actions to find joy in doing them" (FA14, NUDM, 45).

Prognosis: "we demand the means and resources for self-determination"

The prognostic dimension in the framing of gender-based violence reflects the complexity of the diagnosis and is grounded in (1) the movement's attempt to promote a structural change of society at large (2) the willing to avoid and reject emergency-driven, exceptionalist, pathologizing measures such as repressive and punitive policies and (3) more generally in the movement's anti-institutional character.

Indeed, the Italian feminist movement has historically been characterized by a strongly anti-institutional character (Alonso et al., 2023; Barone and Bonu Rosenkranz, forthcoming). The current wave of feminist mobilization shares with its antecedents the same approach. The skepticism toward male-dominated politics, institutions and political parties results in a largely grassroots, autonomous character and in the refusal to engage with the institutional dimension.

The connection between the movement's anti-institutional character and its structural understanding of gender-based violence orients the prognosis toward cultural and social change rather than policy-oriented one:

For me, for example, the cultural element is very strong—maybe sometimes even more than the institutional-political dimension. It's true that institutional politics makes the laws, and most of those laws go against us, against our lives and our will to live freely and consciously in so many ways. However,

for me, it's not just about that. For example, the cultural level—which, of course, goes hand in hand with politics to some extent—isn't only secondary. Sure, there are governments, especially reactionary ones, that create harmful laws. But if, at a cultural level, there were significant progress in a certain direction, maybe those kinds of laws wouldn't even have a chance to be approved. Or maybe those people wouldn't even be in government in the first place. (FA3, *Sguardi sui generis*, 32)

Thus, the structural understanding of gender-based violence is often translated into the need for cultural and social solutions, as another interviewee further argues: “Combating male and gender-based violence means questioning the culture and social relations that support it” (SMD4, NUDM, 2017).

As a result, policy-oriented responses to the phenomena are rarely included in movement framing processes. Instead, there is a significant opposition to any type of intervention that results in increasing police control or primarily punitive measures against violent men. As an activist explains: “We don't agree with the call for more military power. Adding more cops doesn't seem to make things better; if anything, it makes things worse” (FA17, NUDM, 31).

While punitive measures are considered almost useless to address the problem of gender based violence, the prevention and protection pursued by feminist movements' organizations and services are rather portrayed as crucial to change social and cultural relationships. In a document, the movement argues “male and gender-based violence as a structural and systemic phenomenon cannot be tackled by increasing the penalties for crimes or by emergency approaches but by building on the experience of anti-violence centers and the feminist movement.” (SMD4, NUDM, 2017). Thus, countering this trend, one of the main prognostic frames the movement purports concerns the role of anti-violence centers and the movement itself in holding the proper expertise and methodology to counter gender-based violence and sustain women and LGBTQ persons who aim at quitting violent relationships. Anti-violence centers in fact are institutions run by feminists and are rooted in the history of the feminist movement (Creazzo, 2016; Pietrobelli et al., 2020). The feminist movement thus reclaim that anti-violence centers should receive more public funding from the State since these structures adopt a methodology that actually prevent and counters gender-based violence as a structural issue. As movement's document addresses:

The anti-violence center is an autonomous women's space, self-managed by lay women's organizations, that offers support and empowerment, in which gender inequality is made visible and countered by promoting a reversal of power relations on the individual level of intimate relationships and on the general level of women's subjectivity. In anti-violence centers, the methodology adopted is women's relations as a central practice based on reading gender-based violence as an overall political and social phenomenon that is structural and not emergency-based. (SMD4, NUDM, 2017)

In this framework, the movement promotes peer-to-peer practices of support that are seen as key tools to counter violence

and oppression. For example when discussing how to combat precarity and poverty, the movement states:

Let's build solidarity networks and effective practices against harassment and discrimination in the workplace, against the blackmail of precarity and economic dependence. (SMD3, NUDM, 2018)

In this regard, the movement's grassroots action is seen in itself as a prognostic element to support women facing violence.

Furthermore, a key claim the movement promotes against gender-based violence is the recognition of an income for women who exit violent relationships. Indeed, the movement's structural analysis of gender-based violence is strictly connected to the possibility of economic independence and self-determination:

One of the most innovative ideas we developed was the concept of a self-determination income—a financial resource that enables people to escape violence. While social movements had long discussed the idea of income, they struggled to clearly convey the necessity of an income for existence. The key is explaining why such an income is needed: not just because financial independence allows someone to leave a violent partner, but because it enables them to make choices in the first place. If I have financial security, I can decide whether to live with a partner, whether to marry, and so on. In this sense, the self-determination income serves as a preventative measure against violence by fostering autonomy. I believe this was one of Non Una di Meno's most significant contributions—emphasizing economic autonomy and the need for an income that extends beyond basic citizenship rights. It's about having a financial safety net that can be actively chosen as a tool for escape. One of the most important aspects of this proposal was its focus on providing concrete means of escape—this is not a trivial achievement. Within just one year, the movement not only defined what gender-based violence is but also proposed tangible solutions. The ability to connect economic demands to the material conditions of people's lives was crucial. To fight violence, we must recognize the importance of material realities and demand concrete, structural changes. (FA9, NUDM, 33)

This excerpt exemplifies how NUDM articulates structural gender-based violence through a prognostic frame that goes beyond punitive or legalistic solutions. Rather than merely addressing gender-based violence as an isolated incident requiring intervention after the fact, the movement interprets economic autonomy as a preventative mechanism. The concept of a self-determination income reframes financial independence not only as a means of escape from violent situations but as a precondition for self-determined choices in relationships and life trajectories. The interviewee highlights how previous movements had long advocated for a basic income, but struggled to make its necessity resonate with the general public. NUDM's framing of this claim as a response to gender-based violence effectively bridges economic justice with feminist claims, demonstrating how financial dependence reinforces structural forms of violence. By embedding economic autonomy within the movement's broader critique of patriarchy and capitalism, NUDM moves beyond

traditional feminist demands focused solely on legal or social protections. Furthermore, this framing demonstrates a shift in feminist discourse from a reactive to a proactive stance. This aligns with broader feminist critiques of neoliberal policies that erode the welfare state, reinforcing how economic precarity is deeply intertwined with gender-based violence.

The interviewee also underscores a key aspect of prognostic framing: the importance of developing tangible, actionable solutions within a movement's timeframe. By stressing that NUDM was able to propose concrete escape mechanisms alongside their critique of violence, the movement positions itself as not only diagnostic but solution-oriented. This highlights how NUDM's prognostic frame moves beyond abstract theoretical critiques, actively working to reshape economic conditions that sustain gender-based violence.

Thus, a key component of the movement's prognostic framing concerns women's autonomy and self-determination. Indeed, most policies on gender-based violence tend to reproduce the victimization of women. On the contrary, feminists argue that to counter violence on women, on the one hand society needs to change, and on the other, women must be provided with the necessary means for self-determination:

We do not need guardians or gatekeepers; we are not victims and we did not ask for it. We fight for structural change, starting in schools, work, health, administration of justice and the media, we demand respect for our paths of freedom and self-determination and our independence. Therefore, we demand the means and resources to self-determination and choose over our lives. (SMD4, NUDM, 2017)

Connected to this prognostic framing, the feminist movement engages with protest and mobilization as a way to counter gender-based violence by impacting upon and changing the cultural and social sphere. It also promotes forms of solidarity and peer-to-peer support as tools to counter violence. Given the anti-institutional character of the movement as well as its refusal to delegate the fight against gender-based violence to the State, the more concrete measures envisaged concern the funding to anti-violence centers, which are recognized as structures holding a feminist history and methodology and the introduction of measures to economically support women who exit violent domestic relationships.

Structural violence as a master frame

The previous section highlighted the framing process of gender based violence done by contemporary feminist movements in Italy, through diagnostic, motivational and prognostic frames. First, the cause of the problem is interpreted as a nested entanglement between patriarchy, the economic system and broader inequalities. Rather than a concrete enemy, the movement addresses a system of power that perpetuates gender based violence as the dynamic that keeps existing power relationships in place. Second, despite this structural and somewhat abstract interpretation of the cause of the problem, the movement seems really effective in fostering participation, since structural gender based violence becomes a simple message that deeply and affectively resonates with women's

experiences. Finally, because of the structural interpretation of violence, solutions to the problem are not policy oriented but rather conceive social and cultural change as the only way to counter the phenomenon.

The paper argues that this framing process explains the creation of structural gender based violence as a master frame in the new wave of feminist mobilizations. In the literature on framing and social movement studies, the concept of master frames represents overarching, widely shared interpretive schemas that shape how individuals perceive and understand a broad range of social issues. Master frames provide a foundational framework for interpreting reality, guiding individuals' understanding of society, politics, and collective action.

The identification of structural gender-based violence as a core issue for the feminist movement, thus, coincided with the adoption of the latter as a broader frame to examine all other aspects of women's lives, by addressing systemic causes and creating connections across various fields of inequality. In order to unpack the concept of structural gender based violence as a master frame, we can go through the diagnostic, motivational and prognostic dimension, by underlying how the interpretation shifts from micro to macro level.

In terms of diagnostic framing, rather than presenting domestic violence and the most extreme consequences, such as femicides, as individual acts of violence, the feminist movement interpret them as manifestation of systems of oppressions that are interweaving, such as patriarchy, capitalism and institutional inequality. For example, in a call to the national demonstration against violence which is held every year in November, the movement states:

We will not stop in the face of daily rapes and feminicides. We will not stop until we gain freedom from the sexist violence we experience in the workplace, from harassment, discrimination and abuse of power, but also from the daily violence of exploitation and precarity. From the violence we experience when budget cuts planned by national and European governments impoverish our lives and attack anti-violence centres and their autonomy. We will not stop until we are free from the violence of institutional racism and borders, until rapes are instrumentalised to justify racism in the name of women. (SMD, 01)

This diagnostic frame puts blame to societal structures rather than individual abusers, as a way to give voice to feminist critics of systems of power. We can see this structural interpretation in movement's recognition of interconnected oppressions, including war, economic precarity and state inaction, that are all reconvened in a structural interpretation of violence. As an example, the movement adopts the frame of violence to address precarity and exploitation as a form of economic violence, border control and racism as a form of institutional violence, and cuts to public spending as part of violence against women. As an activist explained:

Different groups worked on labor, but it wasn't just about workers anymore—it was about looking at everything from a different perspective. This approach of connecting violence to the various spheres of our lives, and the lives of the

discriminated and marginalized, allowed us to go beyond that moment. The demonstrations didn't just stop there; they gave us the foundation to organize one of the biggest strikes on March 8. (FA7, ObRes, 33)

The frame of patriarchal violence has been adopted to counter very different phenomena of oppression. For example, in 2024, countering measures that criminalized protest and dissent in the country, the movement stated: "Criminalizing dissent, conduct, the 'margins' is patriarchal violence" (NUDM, SMD, Call National Demo Against GBV, 2024). Patriarchal violence also became a key frame in exposing the causes and the consequences of the wars that exploded in Ukraine and Palestine: "We rebel against war as the most brutal expression of patriarchal violence" (NUDM, SMD, Call National Demo Against GBV, 2024). Additionally, the movement tackled racism through the lenses of violence:

Racist state violence is perpetuated through CPRs,² the failure to assist migrants crossing the Mediterranean, and the denial of citizenship to those born and raised in Italy. The center project in Albania³ is just a continuation of these policies, of the violence we reject and fight against. (SMD5, Call National Demo Against GBV, 2024)

Thus, NUDM's framing of gender-based violence is never disentangled from the broader context of systemic oppression, and this includes a strong and explicit critique of racism as a structural component of patriarchal violence. Rather than treating racism and sexism as parallel or additive oppressions, the movement adopts an intersectional lens, where institutional racism—enacted through border regimes, detention centers (CPRs), and the denial of citizenship—is not only adjacent to, but constitutive of, gendered violence. Migrant women, racialized bodies, and those excluded from national belonging are positioned at the frontline of state violence, which is understood as both gendered and racialized.

By shifting the interpretation of gender-based violence from the micro to macro level, feminist movements enhance the motivational function, by building forms of emotional resonance. The master frame provides an emotional trigger for mobilization by emphasizing collective reasons in addressing structural violence. Motivational frames often highlight the urgency of systemic change, creating resonance with participants by showing how structural inequality impacts their lives directly. As an example, the simplicity and accessibility of the slogan "Non Una di Meno" (Not One Woman Less) allowed participants to see themselves as part of the struggle and created a sense of shared belonging and willingness for change.

² Centri di permanenza e rimpatrio (Centers for detention and repatriation). These centers have substituted the Centri di identificazione ed espulsione (Center for identification and expulsion). They are administrative detention facilities where immigrants are held if they lack a valid residence permit or have already been issued an expulsion order.

³ The reference is to the project of building new centers for detention and repatriation in Albania and use them as hub for immigrants arriving on Italian territory. The project was later implemented in 2024. See <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/29/italy-approves-new-decree-to-use-albania-migration-centres-as-repatriation-hubs>.

Structural gender-based violence as a master frame extends beyond diagnosis and motivational frames by articulating solutions that challenge systemic roots of violence. Thus, feminist movements are not calling to policy-oriented solutions, but rather to solutions that seek to address prevention and protection through a social and political change at all levels of society. These solutions include economic autonomy (e.g., self-determination income), cultural shifts, and the reformation of legal and social institutions. As an example, NUDM repeatedly calls for comprehensive education about gender and increased public funding for anti-violence centers. Since gender-based violence is nurtured by a culture of abuse, rather than a culture of consent, only by education from early age to different relationship styles, society can change and violence can be eradicated.

Empirical evidences have been presented in the paper about the connection between the adoption of the structural gender-based violence master frame with the global resurgence of feminist mobilizations since 2016. As Snow and Benford (1992) argue: "framing activity and the resultant ideational webs that some movements spin or that emerge from the coalesce of collective action can also be crucial to the emergence and course of cycle of protest" (p. 142). In the case of structural gender-based violence, this paper emphasizes the role of the master frame in linking local and global issues, facilitating transnational solidarity while remaining adaptable to specific contexts. As an example, this master frame traveled from Argentina to European countries, fostering a new wave of mobilizations around the issue of gender-based violence. This frame unifies diverse struggles across geographies and forms of inequality, from labor rights to reproductive freedom.

As found in the empirical analysis, the master frame meets the criteria of resonance, such as empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity. Empirical credibility is rooted in statistics on rates of gender-based violence and numbers of femicide, while narrative fidelity resonates with lived experiences of violence and inequality. These findings demonstrate how this resonance has enabled mass mobilizations in Italy and globally, showing the mobilizing potency of the structural gender-based violence master frame.

To conclude, diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic frames contribute to the production of structural gender-based violence as a master frame. Through the empirical analysis, the paper argues for the master frame's broad applicability, emotional resonance, and actionable solutions that have been instrumental in generating the current cycle of feminist protest. While the reframing of gender-based violence as a structure was the result of a long history of feminist fights in the country, the Non Una Di Meno movement took a step further by managing to adopt violence as a master frame to go beyond the structural diagnosis. Indeed, violence as a master frame has become an innovative lens to give meaning to different fights, which were not originally connected to the fight against violence.

Conclusions

Gender-based violence has been an important focus of feminist mobilizations for decades (Bandelli, 2017; Gago, 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband, 2017; Pietrobelli et al., 2020). However, since 2015,

there has been a noticeable increase in the intensity and spread of these mobilizations globally, and since 2016 in Italy (Barone and Bonu, 2022; de Souza and Rodrigues Selis, 2022). What explains the seemingly sudden rise of this new wave of feminist protests? Why did large-scale mobilizations begin only after 2015, even though the conditions for them already existed—such as the economic crisis, the rise of anti-gender movements, the populist turn, the worsening effects of neoliberal policies, ongoing rates of femicides and domestic violence, and persistent gender inequalities?

This paper argues that the concept of structural gender-based violence as a master frame helps explain this new wave of feminist mobilization. While feminist movements had long engaged with gender-based violence, they previously lacked a cohesive, unified, and resonant master frame capable of effectively diffusing their claims and amplifying their mobilizing potential. Non Una Di Meno represents a distinctive case in how it consolidated this framing into a unifying and mobilizing master frame. Drawing inspiration from Latin American movements such as Ni Una Menos, NUDM embedded this structural understanding within the Italian context, marked by institutional inertia, punitive policy responses, and persistent gender inequalities. Its success lies not in the novelty of the frame itself, but in its capacity to activate transnational resonances while grounding them in localized struggles, thereby fostering a broad and sustained cycle of feminist protest. The adoption of structural gender-based violence as a master frame created a unifying framework that galvanized collective action and reshaped the feminist agenda.

Thus, this paper has examined the re-framing of gender-based violence as a structural problem from the point of view of feminist movements in Italy. Research on discourses and frames about gender-based violence in the country has predominantly focused on the role of the media (Busso et al., 2020; Capecchi and Gius, 2023; Giomi and Tonello, 2013). However, research on social movements has highlighted the role that movements play in re-defining social problems (Benford and Snow, 2000; della Porta, 2015, 2013; Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1975). The case we have analyzed shows how the feminist movement in Italy has re-framed gender-based violence, going against existing public discourses which have generally interpreted this phenomenon in individualizing terms, often downplaying the political and gendered dimension of violence through an exceptionalist gaze. This effort, through specific diagnostic, motivational and prognostic framing processes, enabled the creation of a master frame, that enhanced the mobilizing potency of feminist movements.

First of all, in terms of diagnostic frame, the study demonstrates how NUDM views patriarchy as a complex source of violence rather than blaming a single person or group of people and instead treating it as a “concrete but abstract entity.” The movement diagnosed patriarchy as the foundational cause of gender-based violence, treating it as a diffuse and pervasive system rather than targeting specific individuals or groups. This interpretation of gender-based violence shifts the targeted counterparts from single individuals or organizations to interconnected systems of oppressions and discrimination, such as patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism. This interpretation enabled the movement to address violence in multiple spheres, including the labor market, border control, health and reproductive rights, and institutional policies.

Second, the article demonstrates how this interpretation of violence, rather than referring to an abstract entity, resulted in a strong and intimate resonance, since it directly connects to women’s life and experiences that they can relate to, and that bring them to wide political participation. Thus, the movement was able to leverage emotional resonance and simple, accessible messages to foster participation and collective identification. Finally, the article shows the movement’s structural understanding of violence and its predominantly anti-institutional attitude lead to a prognosis that addresses a broader societal and cultural change, often surpassing the policy level. Indeed, the movement focused on solutions that prioritize structural change over punitive or emergency-driven responses, emphasizing economic autonomy, feminist anti-violence centers, and cultural transformation.

This framing process allowed to convey structural gender-based violence as a master frame, which serves as a unifying lens for addressing diverse issues such as labor rights, reproductive freedom, migration, and economic justice. The adoption of structural gender-based violence as a master frame contributed to the global resurgence of feminist mobilizations since 2016, linking local struggles to a broader transnational context. The master frame’s resonance (empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity) has been crucial in sustaining large-scale participation and enhancing transnational solidarity. By framing gender-based violence as a structural phenomenon, NUDM expanded the feminist agenda to encompass broader social injustices, including economic precarity, racialized state violence, and climate crises. This broad applicability of the master frame reflects its adaptability to different contexts and its capacity to unify fragmented struggles.

The paper proposes a theoretical and empirical contribution. Theoretically, it highlights the importance of framing processes in social movements, demonstrating how master frames shape cycles of protest and the mobilizing potency of certain social phenomenon, such as gender-based violence. Empirically, it emphasizes the role of feminist movements in reshaping societal understandings of violence and mobilizing for systemic change.

Further research could explore how the structural gender-based violence master frame evolves in response to changing political, economic, and cultural contexts. Furthermore, research might explore if and how a successful master frame that triggers a new cycle of contention, as in the case of structural gender-based violence, also results in changes in the public discourse and social and cultural sphere.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Commissione etica, Scuola Normale Superiore. The studies were conducted

in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

GB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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