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Original Article

Young Women's Informal Leadership: Reflections on Taking Responsibility in Youth Participation

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Abstract

This article aims to enhance understanding of young women's experiences in political participation by examining their practices of 'informal leadership' within Italian and German radical grassroots organizations. It explores the biographical pathways that lead young women to assume leadership roles and highlights the often invisible practices of responsibility that challenge traditional power dynamics. Drawing on gender and feminist studies, the article reveals how gendered practices of responsibility emerge in the analysed participatory settings and how gender biases obscure the recognition of certain leadership practices. In so doing, the article also examines the broader implications for understanding youth participation. It argues that dominant discourses, which emphasize contemporary young people's disinterest in taking responsibility in civic and political spheres, overlook how and where young people assume responsibility outside formal political institutions and fail to consider the impact of various inequalities on young people's ability to take on responsibilities.

Keywords

Youth participation, informal leadership, activism, responsibility, young women

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Introduction

Research on gender inequalities in youth political participation sketches a scenario where the space for young women's political engagement is at the same time growing and limited.

On the one hand, recent research highlights a growth in young women's possibilities of involvement in the public sphere. A decrease in the gender gap has been noticed in Western politics since the early 2000s with a new generation of women getting increasingly engaged in both institutionalized politics and social movements (Burns et al., 2018; Grasso & Smith, 2022). Increased educational attainments, freedom from the family, access to new technologies and visibility of women's issues in popular culture have been identified as factors explaining this growth in young women's participation, as well as their increasing recognition as political subjects (Harris, 2008; Taft, 2010).

On the other hand, young women encounter persisting difficulties in entering and finding their way into the public sphere (Briggs, 2008). Young women are comparatively less engaged and face more difficulties in achieving leading roles than their male peers in political organizations and, while this is more evident in institutionalized forms of participation, a gender gap exists in non-institutionalized forms of engagement (Gordon, 2008; Kennelly, 2014). Inequalities regarding time to invest between men and women due to care work have been identified as a key explanatory factor (BMFSF, 2014), and different understandings of politics acquired through socialization seem to matter (Allen & Cutts, 2020). Indeed, women tend to express less interest in political careers than men and to explain their paths of participation mostly in relational and emotional terms (i.e., searching for companionship and having fun) rather than in terms of ambitions for leadership (Dodson 2015; Geißel, 1999; Kennelly, 2014).

Considering this ambivalent scenario, this article aims to contribute to research on young women's experiences in political participation by focusing on their practices of leadership and by exploring what biographical pathways make them take such positions. It does so by understanding leadership as taking responsibility and by deploying the concept of 'informal leadership' to shed light on practices that remain often invisible when reflecting on dynamics of power and authority in participatory settings. In particular, the article analyses the intertwined relationships between young women's biographies and their practices of participation (Fillieule & Neveu, 2019) within an Italian and a German radical grassroots organization,[1] considering thus a form of political participation that appears particularly favoured by young women (Taft, 2010) and whose organizational characteristic increase opportunities for taking responsibility beyond formal leadership roles (Luhtakallio, 2012).

The analysis draws on gender and feminist studies on a twofold level. On the one hand, by focusing on young women, the article sheds light on gendered practices of taking responsibility emerging in the observed organizations. In so doing, it recognizes the performative nature of gender and shows how gender is 'done' also through participation. On the other hand, the article seeks to make visible ideologies that often remain invisible by revealing the (gendered) biases that limit the recognition of certain practices of responsibility as leadership.

In this perspective, the study has broader implications for the understanding of youth participation. We argue that drawing on institutionally established norms and hierarchically organized forms of responsibility, dominant understandings of youth participation dismiss young people's practices of taking responsibilities that do not reproduce traditional rituals of power symbolizing strength, occurring in public spaces and during extraordinary events.

The article is structured as follows. First, literature on young women's experiences and leadership in radical grassroots activism is discussed. By showing how organizational and cultural characteristics of these settings create both opportunities and limits to young women's engagement, we introduce the concept of 'informal leadership' within a processual perspective of analysis. Second, ethnographic and biographical data conducted in the framework of the European project Partispace—Spaces and Styles of Participation are presented discussing their appropriateness and relevance. Third, two biographies of young women taking on informal leadership roles in radical grassroots organizations are analysed regarding pathways into the role of informal leaders and practices of doing informal leadership. Finally, these findings are discussed regarding their contribution to understanding young people's participatory practices.

Young Women's Participation and Informal Leadership

Focusing on radical left grassroots activism allows us to shed light on a segment of the political sphere that has recently seen a sharp increase in young women's levels of involvement (Dodson, 2015; Earl et al., 2017; Harris 2008; Kennelly, 2014).

The specific characteristics of these forms of movement politics have been considered relevant to explain why young women today engage more in this kind of action. First, non-hierarchical ideas of society distinguishing radical grassroots activism would improve the possibilities of involvement of subjects that traditionally encounter difficulties in expressing their voice, such as young women (Reger, 2021). In line with an egalitarian idea of society, gender equality and feminism are commonly presented as distinctive values of many radical left-wing grassroots groups.

Second, radical grassroots activism adheres to an idea of engagement that encompasses the traditional sphere of politics (i.e., of managing and governing activities) to reclaim the political relevance of the private sphere. Both traditional (i.e., demonstrations and boycotts) and innovative forms of engagement (i.e., flash mobs and guerrilla gardening) of radical grassroots activism are commonly enacted in everyday spaces such as squares, houses, supermarkets, parks and social networks (Vromen & Collins, 2010). By valuing a sphere of action (i.e., the private) that is typically associated with femininity, this understanding of participation encourages young women's engagement.

Third, radical grassroots groups share common organizational mechanisms such as decision-making processes based on consensus which seems to limit inequalities in power distribution along age, gender and other dimensions (Luhtakallio, 2012; Pitti, 2018).

Finally, more general contemporary changes in the repertories of action of radical grassroots activism should be considered. In particular, scholars (Guzman-Concha, 2015)

have noticed a shift towards less confrontational and less violent forms of action noticed that would have brought young women closer to a political space that was, for long, perceived as 'too dangerous'. The diffusion of actions blurring the boundaries between political activism and volunteering has positively impacted this trend (Pitti et al., 2023). Being culturally close to traits traditionally connected to a feminine identity, the principle of 'care' that inspires these actions would make them a particularly appealing and 'comfortable' space of engagement for young women (Reger, 2021).

These characteristics of radical grassroots activism translate into richer opportunities for participation for young women. However, in-depth studies conducted in these participatory settings show that young women still face difficulties in achieving official leadership roles. Beyond the generalized difficulties young women encounter in their paths of participation, some radical grassroots activism's characteristics contribute to negatively shaping young women's paths.

First, young women must cope with an ideal typical 'activist identity' that, assuming an older, masculine or less feminine identity, undervalues them. Consequently, young women have to perform more identity work to make themselves congruent with this ideal type (Taft, 2010) and must legitimize their 'young woman identity' within their 'activist identity'. Gordon (2008) has argued that young male activists dominate the conversation and leadership roles in youth gender-integrated organizations and young women must deal with sexism also in allegedly egalitarian settings (Dodson, 2015).

Second, a larger base of female participants does not imply that leadership positions are evenly distributed between genders. As discussed by Kuumba (2002, p. 80), 'in gender-integrated movements, patriarchal assumptions are often superimposed on [a] hierarchical conception of leadership, creating a gender split in movement roles and leadership patterns'. A gendered public/private sphere split leads to a differentiation of roles between young men—who are most often placed in official leadership positions—and young women—who are mostly in charge of the 'more supportive, expressive, and background roles' (Kuumba, 2002, p. 80). Although these tendencies are evident in political groups adopting a confrontational and violent approach, a distribution of roles along this public/private split has been noticed in non-violent and non-confrontational ones (Geißel, 1999; Luhtakallio, 2012). For example, analysing gender inequalities in an anti-austerity organization in the United Kingdom, Craddock (2019) argues that 'the ideal activist identity is narrowly defined by doing "enough" of the "right" type of activism', that is direct action. In this light, men are better able to establish this identity than women are, and women would be more prone to suffer the negative emotional effects of failing to do so.

Third, young women's paths towards leadership appear to be shaped by self-perceptions. Taft (2017) argues that the life stories of women and young political activists 'tend to emphasize an on-going process of becoming an activist, rather than offering a completed tale that ends with the individual now, being an activist' (p. 36). According to Taft, this self-perception enables important political flexibility and openness but also makes them less respected.

Shedding light on the opportunities and limits distinguishing different participatory contexts, studies on radical grassroots activism have underlined the importance of observing individual trajectories within political groups (Fillieule & Neveu, 2019).

In particular, understanding participation as a 'long-lasting social activity, which shifts across time between different positions and forms of political engagement, in the course of an individual's full life history' (Bosi et al., 2022), processual perspectives in social movement studies have recognized the intertwined relationships between (young) people's lives, their experiences of participation, the characteristics distinguishing a specific participatory context and the broader social scenario in which biographical and political paths unfold (Walther et al., 2020). While identifying recurring patterns of mobilization and general trends in power distribution within political settings, processual approaches have stressed the importance of considering how different paths towards and in participation emerge in relation to different biographies (Muxel, 2015). As argued by Viterna (2006, p. 42), analyses of participation must consider that 'the same situational context affects different individuals differently given their unique biographies and network resources'. In this perspective, these analyses have also emphasized the relevance of individual agency and personal navigational capacities in determining one's possibility to take responsibility and achieve leadership roles within a given participatory context (Bosi et al., 2022; Muxel, 2015). This particularly applies to young women and other 'unexpected subjects' taking part in practices and spaces of participation that are frequently shaped around the priorities, forms and ideas of engagement of a generic male, white, able-bodied and adult subject (Mohanty, 2003). In line with this perspective, observing how marginal subjects navigate the organizational contexts in which they participate allows not only to shed light on inequalities in power distribution but also to observe how key tenets of participation—such as responsibility, leadership or power—are re-interpreted.

Within this processual perspective, the article deploys the concept of 'informal leadership' to shed light on young women's trajectories within radical grassroots activism. Focusing specifically on leadership and power in political settings, research has shed light on (young) women's ability to orient political groups' strategy through a different, less visible, form of leadership. Observing different kinds of grassroots organizations, scholars (Barnett, 1993; Payne, 1990) have argued that women hold significant power in the 'interstices' of the official organizational structures and that women's leadership is frequently enacted in undefined areas where bridges between different parts, sectors and social groups participating in the organizations are created and where links with the world outside the movement are managed (Reger, 2021).

The concepts of 'invisible leadership', 'bridge leadership' and 'informal leadership' have been elaborated to describe a form of leadership that emerges in a 'free space' (Evans & Boyte, 1986) which, being unsupervised by an organization, can be carved in an authority niche by women and subjects who are excluded from formal leadership roles. Gender stratifications existing in most gender-integrated political groups make informal leadership common, especially amongst women. However, this kind of leadership is not exclusively gendered: as Robbnett (1997) argues, informal leadership can be enacted by men who are excluded from formal leadership because of their class or race, for example.[2]

Informal leadership consists, in fact, of an unofficial status that is created through sustained efforts and relationships which bring a given subject to be recognized as a leading force. In this perspective, the concept appears particularly useful to

analyse leadership within settings where hierarchies are formally absent or less rigid, such as radical grassroots activism. As suggested by different studies (Blee, 2012; Luhtakallio, 2012), the absence or higher flexibility of formal rules about membership and leadership distinguishing these settings increases the relevance of daily actions and interactions between members, as well as of informal norms and normative ideas about what an activist should be and do in determining one's possibility to achieve recognition and leadership roles. Connected to experience and trustworthiness, informal leadership is a kind of authority that emerges slowly and in day-to-day interactions, contributes to the everyday management of the organization and shapes its practices and goals through a bottom-up influence. In this light, informal leadership develops 'next' to or 'behind' formal leadership, and the relationships between subjects' enacting these different leading roles can assume both collaborative and conflictual forms (Herda-Rapp, 1998).

Although research suggests that informal leadership can be sometimes a stepping stone towards formal leadership (Culley, 2003; Daniel & De Leon, 2020), informal leaders' key role in sustaining the internal cohesion and external connections of political groups often remains unnoticed by the same members of the organization.

Methodology: Design, Contexts and Biographies

This research is based on the materials collected during the Horizon project Partispace (2015–2018), which aimed at analysing young people's spaces and styles of participation in European cities. The project included the conduction of 48 case studies on formal, non-formal and informal practices of young people's participation. While formal and non-formal cases represented institutionalized or semi-institutionalized practices of youth participation (like, respectively, youth councils and youth work), informal case studies were practices that were neither initiated nor led by adults.

This article focuses specifically on two informal case studies: a social centre managed by an autonomous-left political collective in Bologna (Italy) named 'Lucha' and an alternative political and cultural centre run by a leftist collective in Frankfurt (Germany) named 'PCC'.[3]

Opened in 2012, Lucha was a political squat created within an abandoned building located in the centre of Bologna that young people renovated and opened to the local population through a series of cultural and social projects. Lucha hosted a weekly organic market, a pizzeria and a micro-brewery as well as a children's playroom, a school of Italian and a legal helpdesk providing help to migrants, and a social dormitory offering a shelter to homeless people. All activities were self-managed and self-funded by the young activists, who were mainly university students or recent graduates aged between 20 and 30. Over the years, about 100 young people joined Lucha and a large majority of the activists were young women.

Research activities in Germany have focused on PCC, an alternative artistic and political hotspot in the city. Founded by a leftist social movement organization (SMO) in 2016, PCC was based in a small building meant to be demolished and located in Frankfurt's outskirts. A big basement room, with a small café/bar, was the heart of the PCC: here the activists hosted public debates, cultural events, political discussions, parties and game nights. The PCC was managed by an open plenary,

which was held on a weekly basis to coordinate the activities and management of the house. The PCC's collective involved a group of about 30 young people aged between 20 and 30. Most of them were studying art or social sciences and nearly half of the group was composed of young women.

Lucha and the PCC have been chosen amongst the Partispace case studies as they represent two classic examples of radical grassroots activism. The two case studies seek to mobilize (in) their surrounding communities through unconventional actions enacted mostly at the local level but aimed at achieving and promoting ambitious social changes. Moreover, both Lucha and the PCC maintained a clear connection with the larger radical left counterculture adopting its main values (i.e., antifascism, antiracism and feminism) and symbols, claiming to overcome patriarchal gender hierarchies.

The project was based on a comparative framework inspired by the Grounded Theory (GT) method (Glaser and Strauss, 1963). In this perspective, within the general objective to highlight patterns in styles and spaces of youth engagement in European cities, the methods of data collection were partially adapted to the characteristics of the case studies (Charmaz, 2014). GT coding made it possible to consider data deriving from multiple sources.

Specifically, research activities conducted on Lucha consisted of participant observations realized between April 2016 and August 2017 (when the social centre was evicted) and 20 biographical interviews with young activists. Fieldwork in PCC has been conducted from May 2016 till April 2017 and involved the realization of participant observations, a focus group, an action research project and four biographical interviews.

The two case studies have been selected due to their similarities, which allow for a clearer comparison of the research data: both case studies represent gender-integrated organizations, both case studies lacked a formal hierarchical structure and had no formal leadership, and, in both case studies, decisions were taken in consensus-based open assemblies. While lacking a formal hierarchical structure and formal leadership, we could observe gendered dynamics of horizontal and vertical segregation in both settings. In Lucha, for example, young women were mostly involved in social projects focusing on helping migrants and children, while young men were mostly involved in cultural projects (e.g., music events) in the micro-brewery and in the organic garden. Moreover, the most prestigious public roles—such as those of Lucha's spokesperson—were held by young men at the time of the research. In the PCC, most core members and the first contact persons of our research group have been young men. Getting deeper into the daily life of the centre, we noticed that administrative and representative tasks were mostly carried out by young men who, for example, managed the space's economic resources and the negotiations with the building's owner. Young women were engaged in the daily management of the space, such as organizing exhibitions, arranging the rooms and taking care of the coffee bar.

Lucha and PCC are both located in major cities with strong economies, big universities and therefore many young people, and vibrant grassroots leftist political scenes. However, Italy and Germany differ significantly in how youth and gender are represented, normed and institutionalized and the analysis will consider the effects these differences exert on young women's biographies and ways of taking responsibility. In particular, Italian young people often remain dependent on their families,

delaying milestones like leaving home and entering the workforce due to high youth unemployment and a lack of institutional support. In comparison with their male peers, young Italian women encounter even more difficulties in entering the workforce, achieving economic independence and housing autonomy (Unt et al., 2021). In contrast, Germany offers a more structured environment with strong institutional support, including welfare programmes that facilitate education, employment and housing, enabling German youth to achieve independence earlier (Chevalier, 2016). While differences between young men and young women exist in terms of employment, wage disparities at first job and housing independence, these are less alarming than in Italy (Unt et al., 2021). Regarding gender norms and gender equality, in Italy traditional roles limiting women's inclusion in different social spheres, including political engagement and representation in politics, seems to persist more than in Germany (Grunow et al., 2018). For example, the Gender Equality Index's (2023) indicator on 'political power' registering the participation of women in key political institutions such as governments, parliaments and local/regional assemblies is 71.4 for Germany and 62.4 for Italy, resulting in a lack of role models for young women wishing to pursue political careers.

Over time, we could observe a stronger visibility and centrality of young women in both Lucha and the PCC, but young women were not holding formal leadership roles at the time of the research. However, some young women managed to exert an influence on the organizations' practices and agendas acting as 'informal leaders'. To illustrate their paths and practices, we analyse the stories of two of them: Matilde (for Lucha) and Erika (for the PCC).

At the time of the research, Matilde was a 23-year-old young woman living and studying in Bologna and had been involved in Lucha for one year. She was born in a city in Northern Italy from a middle-class family (both parents are secondary school teachers) and she had moved to Bologna to study at the university. She had previous experiences of volunteering both in Italy and abroad and had taken part in some political demonstrations, but she defined Lucha as her first true experience of activism. Within Lucha, she was mostly involved in the homeless shelter.

Erika has just turned 18 when our research on the PCC started. She had grown up in a small town as the first daughter of a nurse and an engineer. Although Erika described herself as an 'outsider', during childhood and adolescence, she has engaged in football, in student representation boards and in a singer's countrywide fan network. She took part in her first political demonstration while dating a politically active young man and visited the PCC for the first time a few months before the interview, while she was preparing for her high school final exams. She quickly became part of the PCC's core group.

The stories of Matilde and Erika are chosen amongst the biographical interviews collected in the case studies for two main reasons. First, they are representatives of the socio-demographic profile of the young women participating in the two analysed case studies which were mostly white, middle-class students with limited previous experiences in radical activism. Second, their paths within the groups are particularly representative of the role of 'informal leaders' and, specifically, of the in-between positioning that distinguishes this role. As the analysis will discuss, informal leadership entails both opportunities for and limits to participation as it expresses a form of leadership that obtains only partial recognition.

Within Partispace, biographical interviews were designed to illuminate the intertwined relationships between youth's biographical paths and their experiences of participation. In both case studies, interviews began with broad prompt encouraging participants to freely discuss their lives. This open prompt allowed interviewees to identify key biographical and participatory turning points. Following this, specific questions were posed to explore issues related to the projects' focus and objectives. These questions covered topics such as the interviewees' political socialization at home, the role of educational institutions in their participatory paths, and their experiences of (mis)recognition in different institutions (Walther et al., 2020). These specific questions were introduced when the topics were not independently or sufficiently addressed by the interviewees in recounting their biographies. Beyond the biographical interviews, conversations with Matilde and Erika were constant throughout the whole fieldwork in the case studies: indeed, these sustained interactions allowed the researchers to witness the analysed changes in the young women's positioning within the groups.

Paths and Practices of Informal Leadership

The following analysis aims to shed light on young women's roles and opportunities for taking responsibility in the considered case studies. The analysis is guided by two main research questions: (a) How does young women's informal leadership emerge? (b) What form does young women's informal leadership take?

The first question reflects on the conditions that allow young women's informal leadership to develop focusing on biographical experiences and events that shaped their way of taking responsibility. The second question sheds light on the peculiar practices through which young women enact responsibility in gender-integrated political spaces.

Paths Towards Informal Leadership

This section presents a biographical analysis of the stories of Matilde and Erika focusing on the events that they interpreted as relevant in shaping their ways of participating within the observed groups. In doing so, it must be considered that positions of leadership within a given political group are always shaped also by the organizational features of the group itself. While the ambition of this article is to shed light on how biographical events shape the two young women's approaches to leadership, the relevance of organizational features should be acknowledged and developed in further analyses.

Family—and specifically parents—plays an obviously crucial role in the process through which the observed young women acquired capacities for informal leadership. For example, considering Matilde's story, the dynamics of power she observed within her family taught her the relevance of "being present". Matilde observed women being the 'shadow boss' running the family from behind the scenes, ensuring stability and strength to the family through their constant presence.

> I owe a lot of what I am to my mother … I come from a rather traditional family: my father is the one who formally takes decisions at home … but then my mother and grandmother are the one running the house every single day. … My grandmother is this tiny, cute old lady and you won't believe how strong she is. She is the real boss. (Interview with Matilde, May 2016)

Erika instead experienced her mother not as a strong female leader, but as a woman often dismissed and silenced by her own family. Erika says that her mother was often 'pushed around' by her family and that she often needed to speak up for her.

> I have a good relationship to my mother, but she has been growing up in a smaller village than me and … even if it sounds shitty, it is a completely different mentality … that my family there has, and that's the reason why I have fights with them. (Interview with Erika, November 2016)

Erika's style of leadership, which is more confrontational than Matilde's, mirrors the role of 'advocate' for her mother's rights she has in her family; a role that has socialized her to the power entailed caring for others.

Peers and one's position within peer groups also pay a key role in shaping young women's way to leadership. For example, Matilde emphasizes the importance of the bonds developed with other girls during childhood and adolescence in influencing her way of understanding power and participation. Caring about each other and making someone feel safe are important aspects in Matilde's way of expressing responsibility.

> Here at the shelter, I am just trying to make my part to create a safe space for the hosted people. This means creating a space where we take care of each other, where no one is left behind … In my life, I rarely felt safe. I think, if we are lucky, we feel safe with family and friends and that is all. … I am still very close with my school friends, especially the girls. We cared a lot about each other, like sisters and, thinking back, I felt extremely safe with them … In a way, I am considering friendship as a model for activism. (Interview with Matilde)

However, relations with peers also emerge as a space where young women are discouraged from expressing forms of open and visible leadership. For example, Erika describes herself as a 'wild child' who, during early childhood, 'always played much with the boys' (Interview with Erika) putting herself into trouble to show her braveness like when she climbed over the fence in the kindergarten to steal apples from a tree. Erika suggests that these behaviours helped her to get self-confidence and to acquire an attitude for leadership that, retrospectively, she connects to masculine experiences. At the same time, other experiences with peers during adolescence taught her that taking on a visible leading role may have a negative impact on her perception as a girl, leading to her being seen as someone not fitting in. Recalling her middle-school years, Erika describes herself as an 'outsider' in the girl group:

> [The girls would say about me that] she is friendly but sometimes a bit strange, because she is interested in, I don't know, not some make-up … but, I don't know, culture and politics. They always thought this was very strange. (Interview with Erika)

Educational and work experiences abroad emerge as relevant within both biographies as being carried out away from one's family requires and allows young women to count only on their own, to put themselves in the game and experience independence. Being alone abroad during a traineeship with an NGO in Cameroon is described by Matilde with the following words:

> I found myself alone for the very first time. It was traumatic yet powerful: I couldn't ask my family for help, and I was forced to find my own way of doing things. (Interview with Matilde)

Matilde had to learn to stand on her own two feet by travelling abroad. She learned not just to care about others but to care about herself and make her way in uncertain surroundings.

The involvement in the singer's fan group during lower secondary education led also Erika to travel a lot all over Germany and to connect with other peers sharing her passion.

> I had my contacts all over Germany, just not where I lived, I was on the messaging-board every evening and travelled to a lot of concerts [...] it was a big part of my puberty … it helped me a lot, getting independent and made me braver. (Interview with Erika)

This experience socialized Erika to an idea of responsibility as taking care. While being involved in the organization of meetings and sleepovers all over Germany, Erika learned to take care of spaces and relationships while also acquiring other key leadership competencies, such as communication skills, group motivation and self-confidence.

Finally, a key role of romantic relationships emerges. Both Matilde and Erika spoke about their former relationships with two young male activists, and their recalling of these romantic experiences shows their ambivalent role in shaping young women's space of participation. In the beginning romantic relationships may be a door-opener for young women in a male-dominated environment such as radical activism, but they must fight to be heard as a self-determined person.

Matilde's narrative shows the kind of identity work that young women must engage in to be recognized as 'true activists' when entering a participatory setting through a romantic relationship.

> For good and for bad, I was Giulio's girlfriend. This helped me at the beginning: I was granted with some relevant tasks because … being with him made me appear more attached to the project. But when he started to have problems with the group, I was seen as a problem too. They didn't ask me if I was agreeing with him. Some people just assumed that I agreed with him, and I had to demonstrate that I was trustworthy. (Interview with Matilde)

Erika also started getting interested in politics while engaging in an affair with a politically active young man who introduced her to political participation: they talked about politics, watched political TV shows and attended demonstrations together. Erika recognizes this relationship's importance for her political path: 'I had to live it up, I was collecting self-confidence' (Interview with Erika). At the same time, she distances herself from this relationship to reclaim her independence as an

activist. She affirms that she visited the PCC for the first time after the end of this relationship and refers to this event as the 'beginning of [her] politicisation' (Interview with Erika) claiming it was not her boyfriend who brought her into politics but her own decision. In both Matilde's and Erika's stories we can observe the acknowledgement of the role of romantic relationships in processes of political socialization, as well as the need to emancipate oneself from these relationships to be recognized as an independent person.

The analysis suggests that some biographical events can be identified as having a key role in shaping young women's ways of taking responsibility within Lucha and the PCC. These events are relevant for this study because they encourage young women to express their engagement and capacity for taking responsibility through a series of practices that are considered appropriate for their gender. These same events also show how gender can be produced and sometimes subverted through practices of participation. In other words, through these events, we can observe how gender is 'done' in and through participation.

Practising Informal Leadership

This section focuses on Matilde's and Erika's experiences within the respective organizations to shed light on how informal leadership is practised. Considering the two young women' forms of engagement, we could observe that their taking responsibility was expressed mainly through practices of 'presence', 'knowledge' and 'care' that appear deeply linked to their biographical experiences.

As a leadership that emerges from the trivial moments of sociality and daily interactions, informal leadership requires sustained presence in the organization as a prerequisite. *Practices of presence* consisted mainly in inhabiting the observed spaces as much as possible. Both Matilde and Erika, in fact, spent a large amount of their personal time at Lucha and the PCC and their continuous presence in the space made them stand out. In case of urgencies at Lucha Matilde would be one of the first people to be called because she was at the social centre almost 24/7, while Erika's presence at PCC was so constant that we could observe her spending entire days 'curled up on the sofa' (Fieldnotes, PCC, 2016).

Offering one's time as a proof of commitment is a tactic that is often used by women to acquire recognition when the rules and values of a given organization reward characteristics (i.e., physical strength, aggressivity) that are not culturally associated with femininity (Viterna, 2006). This, however, could limit the very possibility of participation of those subjects who cannot or are not willing to sacrifice all their time for the organization due to, in example, family obligations.

Practices of knowledge consist of collecting, keeping track of and reporting information that is relevant for the internal functioning of the organization. Informal leadership is exerted also through the management of the group's information flow and internal assemblies represented key moments where to observe this form of leadership.

During assemblies, like official secretaries of the organization, informal leaders are often asked to reconstruct past events and decisions or to summarize the main line of discussion. For example, although decisions concerning Lucha were taken in open assemblies where everyone could have a say, Matilde's role as informal

leadership was recognizable within this allegedly non-hierarchical setting in her capacity to formulate the final version of the discussion.

> Matilde is usually the last one speaking during the assemblies and her final oral summary of the discussion is the most import moment of the whole meeting as what she says is what remains of the meeting: through her summary she can emphasize or silence parts of the discussion. (Fieldnotes, Lucha, 2016)

In PCC, it was also possible to notice that 'Erika was reporting on … events the most …' during assemblies (Fieldnotes, PCC, 2016), but practices of knowledge often happen at the margins of the official assemblies too. For example, Erika's emerging role within the PCC was recognizable in her whispering and chitchatting with other activists at the end of plenary sessions to finalize decisions through a side agreement.

> After the assembly, Lucas [one of the PCC's core members] return on the issue of the keys [discussed during the general meeting] by making a short side agreement with Erika. (Fieldnotes, PCC, 2016)

Finally, *practices of care* consist of managing, arranging and looking after the space, the relationships between people within the organizations, and the personal relationships with people external to the organization. Practices of caring for the space included activities such as cleaning of the PCC or the programming of the weekly grocery shopping for the homeless shelter at Lucha. They represent background activities that are crucial to the daily maintenance and effective functioning of the space. For example, when a party was hosted in a public place outside of the PCC, a member with keys was required to take guests to the PCC's restroom and back and Erika frequently took this role:

> In the late hours, Erika walks around with a big, labelled cardboard, shouting like a barker, 'Who wants to go to the toilet?' … she takes an empty beverage crate and starts walking. She is there all the time, highly engaged. (Fieldnotes, PCC, 2016)

In our case studies, caring for the relationships within the organization took many forms from checking on activists going through difficult times, to organizing parties for birthdays, to managing the conflicts (and the related emotions) between the people attending the observed spaces as shown in the following fieldnote:

> The activists have decided that someone needs to speak with Yassin and Mouhammed [two hosted migrants] as their frictions are creating tensions within the homeless center … Matilde is asked by other activists to organize a moment of confrontation between the two. "You are the only one they will listen" says Marco to her. (Fieldnotes, Lucha, 2017)

Practices of care also involved the management of personal relationships outside the organization. In some cases, taking care of the relationships with 'external people' meant helping and assisting them during their permanence in the space. For example, Erika's recognition within the group increased after she helped the external organizers of a jam session in setting up the event, acting as a good host:

> Two persons—a young man and a young woman—enter [in the PCC] to debrief a jam-session. … The woman thanks Erika for her commitment to make the jam-session possible, standing for another activist who didn't show up. She calls Erika 'the hero of the night'. (Fieldnotes, PCC, 2016)

In other cases, this practice of care consisted of the creation of personal relationships with representatives of local authorities and civil society organizations that could provide material resources and social recognition for the observed spaces. Although in public events (i.e., demonstrations or rallies) interactions with these external organizations would be managed by the people emerging as formal leaders, informal leaders played a key role in establishing and maintaining daily personal connections with them.

Although distinguishable, practices of informal leadership are strictly connected to each other. Indeed, the possibility to properly exercise care (i.e., organizing the shopping list for the homeless shelter) depends on knowledge (i.e., knowing what the hosted migrants prefer or can eat) and, at the same time, practices of care represent key moments through which one can collect meaningful information. Practices of presence can be interpreted as a prerequisite to the other two practices of informal leadership as 'being there' constantly and consistently allowed both Matilde and Erika to acquire knowledge and a central role in the daily care of the spaces.

Overall, it is possible to notice that practices of care enacted by the two young women are similar to the ones commonly attributed to women within households. Despite differences between the two young women's biographies, the two groups' organizational features and the two local/national contexts, it is interesting that both girls appear in charge of a peculiar role with observed case studies: the transformation of a political space in a familiar place. Taking care of the everyday management of emotions, relationships and administrative tasks, informal leaders play a key role in making a participatory organization a 'safe and open space'. As shown in the following fieldnote, this was considered a key element for achieving also political success:

> The success of Lucha has much to do with the participation of "normal people", I mean, non-activist people in the center … We worked to make Lucha a safe and open space to everyone. We wanted the social center to feel like a home. … People like Matilde … who take care of Lucha any single day are extremely important in this perspective: they are the one making this space something familiar. (Interview with Damian, Lucha, 2016)

However, these practices of leadership also contribute to re-producing a certain gender order and their "feminine" character limits their very recognition. This implies a deeper reflection on the opportunities and limits that informal leadership offers to marginal subjects in political settings.

Comparative Notes

As the article considers only two biographies, it is not possible to generalize the observed paths and practices of informal leadership. However, the analysis allows us to shed light on how contextual differences can shape young women's biographies and their approaches to taking responsibility.

For what concerns differences in the institutionalization of youth, for example, Erika had opportunities to experiment with autonomy much earlier than Matilde, whose first major experience of independence came only after high school through the mentioned traineeship. In this light, Matilde's biography shows how the limited opportunities of independence offered to young people (and especially young women) in the Italian context can imply also fewer possibilities to train through daily practices and in daily contexts a series of 'skills' (such as autonomy in decision-making, problem-solving and assertiveness) that are considered relevant for leadership.

In relation to gender norms, both Matilde and Erika demonstrate awareness about inequalities limiting the power of women in institutions like family and in society at large. However, Erika shows a clearer rejection of traditional gender norms, while Matilde's emancipation entails almost a positive revaluation of the behind-the-scenes role reserved for women. In this perspective, the gender norms distinguishing the two countries appear to be reflected in different understandings of how women can enact power.

All this results in Matilde feeling less at ease with leadership and being more cautious in enacting authority than Erika. Even if, as an informal leader, Matilde oversaw many key organizational tasks within Lucha, she always dismissed her role, rarely used the word 'activist' to describe herself, and sometimes refused opportunities to take more visible roles and actively chose to stay in the 'backstage'. More in general, the analysis shows how, even when biographies show similar paths and practices towards taking responsibility, the characteristics of the contexts in which personal histories unfold can inform different styles of leadership.

Conclusions

Drawing on the analyses presented in this article, in the conclusions we aim to reflect on what can be learned about young people taking responsibility in participatory settings by observing young women's practices and paths towards informal leadership in grassroots activism.

First, although the practices of informal leadership analysed in this article are far from being exhaustive, it has revealed that practices of taking responsibility in political spaces often take forms that are difficult to see. Practices of presence, care and knowledge, for example, rarely obtain recognition as forms of taking responsibility in political spaces due to bias leading to recognize leadership only when it is expressed through rituals of power that are highly visible, loud and public. Leadership is easily recognized when enacted through practices that symbolize strength (i.e., shouting or fighting) occurring in public spaces (i.e., squares, assemblies) during extraordinary events (i.e., demonstrations and confrontations with authorities). In apparent analogy to a traditional gendered division of work in families, informal leadership instead emerges in the daily interactions occurring between the participants and entails a capacity to direct the group's action through a soft power that dominant understandings of participation, responsibility and leadership fail to recognize. For example, knowledge obviously represents an important element also of formal leadership as formal leaders must keep themselves informed about current legislation on migration before speaking at a public event on migrant's right. However, in this case,

knowledge is expressed in practices that symbolize strength, occur in public space and during extraordinary events, thus emphasizing a traditional idea of leadership. In informal leadership, knowledge appears to be directed primarily towards the everyday life of the observed organizations. This points to the fact that to recognize young people's participation (and especially the forms of participation of the more marginalized segments of the youth population), we need to develop theoretical lenses and methodological tools able to shed light on those forms of taking responsibility occurring in everyday occasions of sociality that develops around the main political activities of a political group. Practices of informal leadership might be easier to observe in settings of participation where the lack of formal hierarchical structures creates more opportunities for liminal forms of taking responsibility as in the case of grassroots activism. Yet, analysis of formal political settings highly structured by norms and rules of engagement (such as parties or unions) may give visibility and deepen our knowledge of the roles young people take.

Second, deploying the concept of informal leadership to analyse and compare two young women's stories, we have sought to show not only that responsibility can take many forms, but also that different 'styles' of informal leadership emerge in the interactions between the participatory settings (what it allows certain groups of people), the individuals' personal backgrounds, biographies and gendered socialization, and broader contextual features such as youth conditions and gender norms in the country. In this article, we have focused on young women and used a gender lens as recognized forms of taking responsibility in youth participation largely follow a traditional male model. However, as an analytical category, informal leadership appears useful to understand the role of different marginalized actors in participatory settings whether it is young people from ethnic minorities or simply those refraining from subjecting to an adult citizenship status. Paying more attention to invisible forms of taking responsibility could, in fact, improves our understanding of different roles in (youth) participation not only by recognizing the specific practices of informal leadership they adopt but also how these forms of taking responsibility are performed and rooted in biographies and social backgrounds.

Finally, the cases analysed in this article show that, depending on the point of view, informal leadership can be seen either as an opportunity or a limit to participation. Informal leadership emerges as an in-between position between the lack of power and the status granted to formal leaders: on the one hand, informal leaders have a key role in shaping political organizations, on the other hand, they do not receive the same public recognition than formal leaders. While acknowledging the relevance of less visible forms of taking responsibility, we need to consider that these may represent a 'trap' for some young people; a mechanism that encourages them to occupy a secondary role while the primary role remains steadily in the hands of more dominant groups. To fully understand how young people's paths of participation emerge, we must consider not only factors that hinder the possibility to reach formal leadership on behalf of certain groups of young people but also symbolic and discursive processes that encourage the latter to enact their responsibility (only) through less visible and less recognized form or leadership.

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Notes

1. Leaning on Guzman-Concha (2015) and Ekins (1992), we conceptualize radical grassroots activism as a form of political participation that, organizing a local community to take action to influence social and political issues, pursue an agenda of drastic changes by mobilizing a repertory of action characterized by the employment of unconventional means and by progressively adopting countercultural identities that frame and justify unconventional objectives and methods. Examples of such activism include local chapters of broader antifa and autonomous-left movements, alter-globalization groups, as well as radical environmental organizations and minority-rights movements.
2. Informal leaders also exist within groups composed only by women. In this case, race, class, (dis)ability, sexuality and other intersectional elements are relevant in determining one's possibility of being or not the formal leader. For example, Daniel and De Leon's (2020) analysis of a radical reproductive-justice SMO suggests that Black women and women of colour often occupy informal leadership roles in intersectional groups.
3. In referring to the case studies and the interviewees we use fictional names.

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