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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Wages for Housework': the evolution of the debate in the 1970s Italian women's movement

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Abstract

This article delves into the historical trajectory of Lotta Femminista, a pioneering separatist feminist network in Italy during the early 1970s, and its significant influence on feminist discourse, particularly concerning the advocacy for wages for housework. Through an examination of the group's development within the broader context of the Italian women's movement, this study illuminates the theoretical foundations and practical activism associated with the perspective on wages for housework. Drawing on archival documents and personal accounts, the essay investigates how Lotta Femminista depicted domestic labour as a form of women's exploitation within a Marxist framework. Despite facing criticism and opposition, Lotta Femminista's ideas resonated globally, leaving a legacy in feminist theory and activism. Through its engagement with issues such as the refusal to work and the recognition of unpaid care as a site of capitalist exploitation, Lotta Femminista contributed to the broader history of feminism in Italy and beyond.

Keywords: domestic work; Italian women's movement; wages for housework; 1970s political and social movements; feminist theory

Introduction

In March 1972, the Marsilio publishing house in Padua released *Potere femminile e sovversione sociale* (Dalla Costa 1972), a seminal work that featured Mariarosa Dalla Costa's essay *Donne e sovversione sociale*, Selma James's *Il posto della donna*, previously published pseudonymously in 1953 in English, and the document *Maternità e aborto* signed by the Movimento di Lotta Femminile in Padua. This collection served as a manifesto for a specific faction within the feminist movement, marking the inception of the theory of wages for housework. The theoretical framework of domestic work presented here highlights Italy's significant contribution to feminist discourse in the 1970s, gaining international recognition and sparking animated debates (Bracke 2013, 626).

As emphasised by Maud Bracke in *Women and the Reinvention of the Political. Feminism in Italy, 1968–1983* (2014), understanding the political dimension of the feminist movement is crucial for contextualising a decade often remembered solely for its political violence and social crises. Examining contentious issues like the debate over wages for housework complicates interpretations of the movement's origins and interactions within its historical context.

In tracing the history of Lotta Femminista, a pioneering separatist feminist collective founded by Mariarosa Dalla Costa in the early 1970s, this essay focuses on several aspects. Primarily, it investigates the evolution of the theory of wages for domestic work within the Italian context, its conceptualisation, and the resulting activism. Additionally, it emphasises how this feminism influenced the extra-parliamentary left, both in practice and theoretical reflection, and underscores Italy's role in shaping the transnational debate over wages for housework.

The focus is on the first half of the 1970s, following the widespread protests of 1968–1969 involving workers and students. The 1968 uprising was significant for women, highlighting their contradictions and asserting individual agency (Passerini 1988). Lotta Femminista emerged from the social context linked to *operaismo*, an Italian political philosophy trend that emerged in the 1960s.[1] Initially, the feminists who contributed most to developing the theory were closely associated with the extra-parliamentary group Potere Operaio. Led by figures such as Antonio Negri, [2] Potere Operaio aimed to translate workers' practical experiences during the class conflicts of the late 1960s into critical theory and organised political action. This group analysed significant shifts in the class struggle during the 1968–1969 period, including rifts with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and engagement in dialogues with student uprisings (Scavino 2018, 32–58). Many women from Lotta Femminista were active within Potere Operaio during the 1960s, despite later distancing themselves from male-dominated groups. The development of feminist thought was indebted to and strongly influenced by neomarxist and operaist reflections (Rebora 2023, 64).

In this essay, I argue that, conversely, feminism also impacted the Italian New Left. For instance, Italian Marxist feminism,[3] primarily represented by Lotta Femminista, introduced a pioneering perspective by framing domestic work as a source of value in the Marxist sense, highlighting it as the primary form of women's exploitation by capital due to its unpaid nature. This critique challenged the extra-parliamentary left's exclusive focus on the factory as the site of revolution, broadening the discourse on the societal role.

Another intriguing aspect of Lotta Femminista is its affiliation with non-Italian feminist groups, particularly those in English-speaking regions. This connection is evident in *Potere femminile e sovversione sociale*, where Selma James's piece was translated and included. Selma James rose to prominence in feminist circles on the European left and in North America, largely due to her active engagement with the small far-left organisation Correspondence, affiliated with the Johnson-Forest Tendency developed by C.L.R James (her husband from 1956 to 1980) and Raya Dunayevskaya. This trend evolved aspects similar to Italian *operaismo*, such as worker autonomy, but in a radically different social milieu.[4]

James's works extended across different geographical locations, as she lived in the USA, Trinidad, and England at various points in time. Throughout her life, she dedicated herself to advocacy campaigns centred on black liberation, anticolonialism, and women's liberation (Bracke 2013, 626). A defining feature of the wages for housework perspective is its international outlook and intersectional focus, prefiguring the acknowledgement of the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression and exploitation related to gender, class and, subsequently, race and sexuality (Toupin 2023, 16).

Modern historiography increasingly acknowledges the significant role of feminist demands and actions in shaping both the political and social landscape. In the anthology *Anni di Rivolta* (2023), edited by Paola Stelliferi and Stefania Voli, the curators show how contemporary studies in feminism are flourishing with fresh research and innovative perspectives. In line with the anthology's goals, this essay aims to understand the transnational influences on the movement's origins and challenge the idea of a perceived

delay in Italy's adoption of fundamental concepts central to contemporary feminism, such as intersectionality (Panighel 2023, 32). It sheds light on how Lotta Femminista developed a new feminist theory that influenced the global women's movement and sparked broader discussions.

Despite its international impact, the perspective on wages for housework faced sharp criticism within the feminist movement and encountered frequent opposition. Its theoretical and political trajectory gradually lost momentum after peaking in the 1970s, fading from both the feminist activist community and academic consciousness (Picchio and Pincelli 2019, 42). Hence, this work also aims to revisit the significance of this experience within the international movement and its legacy within the political discourse.

The exploration of the Lotta Femminista experience is mainly facilitated through meticulous archival research. It is notable that recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in documentary heritage, leading to the emergence of new research perspectives. This is exemplified by the Lotta Femminista archive in Padua which underwent significant updates in 2018, contributing extensively to this study. Additionally, seven interviews were conducted with diverse women associated with the Lotta Femminista network, offering nuanced insights into their activities.[5] Historians of feminism have long faced the methodological challenge of the unique nature of these experiences and their scattered sources, emphasising oral history as a crucial method to address gaps. Current research also explores how these interviews foster intergenerational dialogue between interviewees and researchers, particularly amid today's vibrant (trans)feminist awakening (Stelliferi and Voli 2023, 15–16).

The initial stages of the wages for housework perspective

In 1971, a group of women in Padua affiliated to Potere Operaio began to meet and discuss an unpublished text written by Mariarosa Dalla Costa on the productive value of domestic labour. Stemming from Dalla Costa's theoretical reflections, which were in turn influenced by her encounter the previous year with Selma James, a militant feminist group began to take shape. This group would generate insights and advocate for tools and activities aimed at facilitating women's liberation from the exploitation perpetuated by patriarchal and capitalist societies (Dalla Costa, Toupin and Curcio 2021, 72–75).

Mariarosa Dalla Costa, a prominent figure in Marxist-based feminism, played a crucial role in Lotta Femminista. While serving as Antonio Negri's assistant at the University of Padua during this time, she was deeply influenced by New Left theories. Dalla Costa's involvement in the workers' movement and extra-parliamentary activism led her to delve into the concept of exploitation, highlighting a significant gap in political discourse regarding women's struggles and challenges.[6]

According to the recollections of Flavia and Sandra Busatta, participants in the inaugural meeting that laid the foundation for the group, Dalla Costa was keen to discuss the oppression of women with some *compagne*, so in June 1971 she went to the Potere Operaio headquarters in Padua and, before the weekly meeting began, asked permission to share with the women in attendance a draft paper she had written addressing the role of unpaid housework in women's oppression. Selma James was also present. This initial meeting sparked enthusiasm, and the women continued to meet throughout the summer, either at Dalla Costa's home or at the Potere Operaio office.

During this initial phase, the group's primary goal was to raise awareness about the specific exploitation faced by women. Through intense internal debates, in July 1971, the group drafted a programmatic manifesto outlining its political strategy. Titled '*Manifesto Programmatico per la lotta delle casalinghe nel quartiere*', the document aimed to articulate clear and concise demands; however, it fell short in providing detailed insights

on the implementation of the group's proposals. The manifesto consists of two sections. The first section includes a succinct summary of theoretical perspectives on domestic work, highlighting how women, regardless of employment or social class, are predominantly tasked with household duties, which create value in the capitalist system but go uncompensated. The second part introduces proposals, such as assigning domestic tasks to specialised individuals and providing remuneration by the municipality or state, creating accessible social spaces for household tasks, establishing free daycare centres, and ensuring free healthcare and assistance facilities for the elderly and sick. This manifesto is unique for being initially composed in both Italian and English, stressing the group's transnational aspirations. Selma James played a crucial role in this direction, acting as a liaison with English-speaking countries.

Additionally, the collective aimed to encourage the involvement of women from more varied backgrounds, as it initially consisted mostly of middle-class women affiliated with universities, either as students or professors (such as the Busatta sisters and other interviewees). Establishing connections with women from different social backgrounds and life paths was vital for these activists. In the first few months, the group rapidly expanded and gained visibility through word of mouth and flyering. Flavia Busatta, a chemistry student and one of the group leaders along with Dalla Costa, recalled in her interview that the group grew from an initial meeting of six or seven participants to a core of about 20, with up to 100 women participating during peak periods of engagement.

Exchange ideas and sharpen political analysis

According to a periodisation endorsed by various scholars (Ribero 1999; Lussana 2012; Bracke 2019), following the mobilisations of the biennium 1968–69, there was a proliferation of separatist women's groups and collectives across the country. In this context, Lotta Femminista seamlessly fits into the ethos of those years, as it is during this phase that the expansion into towns beyond Padua and the beginning of collective mobilisations evolved. According to Giuliana Pincelli, an activist in the Modena group and a former Potere Operaio member, Lotta Femminista established connections with women from various regions in Italy also through the Potere Operaio network. The group's growth beyond Padua resulted in the formation of affiliated groups in numerous cities throughout Italy, including Venice, Milan, Rome, Bolzano, Modena, Reggio Emilia, Ferrara, Bologna, Florence, and Gela (Lussana 2012, 171). This expansion, fuelled not only by the establishment of groups in various cities but also by the collective's increasing recognition and the high level of interest generated by its proposals, allowed Lotta Femminista to evolve into a national organisation characterised by regular national meetings and tight deadlines.

The peak of activity and influence for Lotta Femminista was 1972–73. These pivotal years witnessed the articulation of some of Lotta Femminista's crucial demands and strategies, initiated by the release of Dalla Costa's text *Donne e sovversione sociale*. Interestingly, the document circulated among women's groups as an internal resource even before its official release. Contrary to the '*manifesto programmatico*', which had a militant function, this text offers a political and in-depth analysis. Dalla Costa's work delves into the role of women within the framework of the capitalist division of labour, viewing the 'women's issue' as a unique form of class exploitation and touching on themes that later become central to the feminist movement discourse. Dalla Costa critiques the disproportionate burden of domestic labour on women, arguing that even those with jobs outside the home shoulder the bulk of household responsibilities. Her Marxist perspective highlights how domestic work generates labour power and value within capitalism, emphasising women's extended familial duties encompassing emotional and caregiving

responsibilities. She distinguishes between oppression and exploitation, focusing on the latter rooted in the invisible nature of housework. This perspective diverges from feminist views solely focused on improving domestic efficiency or reconciling domestic and external work through contractual conditions or shared responsibilities. Instead, Dalla Costa advocates for a systemic overhaul and women's liberation from the confines of domesticity, challenging the traditional role of the housewife as central to family life. The text prioritises movement-building and establishing a women's movement that addresses specific female concerns, predating the introduction of wages as a political strategy.

This publication played a role in the decision to host in Padua a seminar on the topic of wages for domestic work in April 1972 (Picchio and Pincelli 2019, 66). By this time, various groups in Italian cities were already inspired by the political stance advocated by Padua, thanks to the circulation of documents and reflections on the subject of women's exploitation. The seminar evolved into a significant platform for women from various regions to meet and exchange ideas, as was the case for Giuliana Pincelli.

Pincelli, a high-school teacher from Modena who was part of a women's group that had started meeting and delving into documents produced by the Paduan women a few months before, presented a paper during the seminar that played a crucial role in shaping the discussions.[7] By analysing domestic work and the societal roles imposed on women, she put forth proposals and objectives for the organisation of the women's movement. She contextualised the reflection within the political horizon of the 'refusal to work', emphasising that all forms of organisation should focus on reducing working hours. This reduction, she argued, would create more space for meetings, discussions, and organising the struggle against the imposed roles and the capitalistic system in general. Additionally, Pincelli argued that advocating for free services, including childcare, schools, cafeterias, cleaning, and decent housing, was akin to supporting wage demands. However, this stance presumed that these services were meant to facilitate meetings and mobilisation, not to increase production. It's important to clarify that these services weren't the end goal; rather, they were viewed as a way to secure favourable conditions for the broader expansion of the struggle.

> The demand for wages for housework is a demand for independence. No matter how many services we manage to win, no matter how much more free time we gain in this way, until we win our own income and thus break the bond of economic dependence on a man – whether husband or father – how can we form the relationships we want, decide if we want to get married or not, to have children or not? How can we control our own lives? … The demand for wages has in itself an ideological impact. We are looking at our work in a political way. [8]

The demand for direct payment was considered a means to achieve independence and, consequently, freedom of choice and self-determination. In this context, Pincelli's final remarks emphasised that the demand for income should be framed within a broader class perspective. The demand for a guaranteed wage for housework fundamentally rejected the idea that women should solely bear the responsibility for reproducing 'labour power'. Notably, Pincelli, a woman from Modena, raised the issue of services. In Emilia-Romagna, governed by the Left, there was a functional welfare system, unlike in other regions. However, the feminists' primary concern was the very concept of work and its definition. They did not seek to merely improve their conditions; they aimed to transform the concept of work itself and, consequently, the role of women in society (Gissi 2018, 147).

From theory to practice: organising a feminist demand in the early 1970s

In the Italian feminist movement, known for its widespread engagement surpassing that of other countries (Rossi-Doria 2005, 3), the perspective of wages for housework was actively embedded in practical activism and local mobilisations from the beginning.

Originally, Lotta Femminista focused on organising seminars, meetings, and surveys to better understand the life circumstances of housewives and women workers in areas like education, healthcare, and factories. Over time, the group intensified its commitment to tangible struggles. In alignment with other feminist groups, Lotta Femminista took action, distinguishing itself with a unique theoretical framework – specifically, interpreting society through the political lens of housework. The group addressed broad issues, including the right to contraception and abortion, the condemnation of violent medical practices, the lack of sufficient social services for mothers and workers, and concerns about school and housing conditions.

Lotta Femminista groups actively participated in various mobilisations, including well-organised campaigns involving mass demonstrations, strikes, and press engagement as a means of exerting pressure. Notable examples include the campaign advocating for the right to abortion, whose first public and recognised event was the mobilisation in 1973 related to the trial of Gigliola Pierobon, a Lotta Femminista militant facing charges over an alleged abortion she underwent at the age of 17.[9] There were also targeted actions addressing specific local issues, related to hospitals, neighbourhoods, or factories. In these localised efforts, the groups often aligned themselves with ongoing struggles that addressed immediate needs and concerns, frequently collaborating with other leftist organisations. For instance, they supported single mothers resisting evictions mandated by the Province of Milan.[10] Similarly, they fought for larger schools with adequate facilities in Mestre and exposed the violent gynaecological practices at Sant'Anna Hospital in Ferrara. Evidence of these struggles can be discovered within the archives of Lotta Femminista in Padua, which conserves leaflets, internal circulation reports, and letters detailing the events. At the same time, archival research revealed that despite efforts to assimilate into society and diversify their membership, the activists of Lotta Femminista were predominantly well-educated, middle-class, white women, occasionally leading to a disconnect between theory and practice. Simultaneously, the strategy of collaborating with other groups helped spread Lotta Femminista's ideas and analyses to groups and communities that were not primarily concerned with domestic work.

The exchange of practices and coordination among groups took place during national meetings. These gatherings were crucial opportunities for each Lotta Femminista group to share its experiences, discuss ongoing campaigns, and exchange the tools they utilised. They also served as forums for deliberation on the perspective of the struggle, strategies, and the theoretical foundations of their political work. Sharing also occurred through the production of newsletters and newspapers crafted by different groups, circulated internally within the network. This ensured that all groups were kept abreast of the developments occurring in other cities.

During these early critical years, Lotta Femminista developed key demands and strategies, notably distancing themselves from male groups. The events known as *I fatti di luglio* in 1972, a violent attack by men from extraparliamentary groups at a conference on women's employment, reinforced Lotta Femminista's commitment to independence from male-dominated organisations. It also pushed the group towards a more radical separatist stance. As a result of these events, internal debates on feminism arose within the left movement, ultimately leading to Lotta Femminista gaining political recognition.

In 1972, the rise of the wage perspective brought about an early acknowledgement of potential criticisms linked to this political demand. These critiques originated from both

the PCI and the revolutionary left. The PCI advocated for women's emancipation through their integration into the workforce. Until at least the second half of the 1970s, the Unione Donne in Italia (UDI), one of the most significant women's associations established in the postwar era, unaffiliated with the PCI but closely aligned, upheld an emancipationist viewpoint. It prioritised attaining equality in civil and political rights with men, rather than engaging in discussions about female identity and roles. Moreover, it is important to highlight the PCI's promotion of a paternalistic and austere culture, particularly in the two decades following the Second World War, where women's roles were consistently viewed in relation to their position within the family (Arruzza 2010, 59). This stance faced significant criticism from the broader feminist movement for being outdated. Conversely, the general perception from the extra-parliamentary left was that the women's movement was bourgeois, dividing the working class. Serious reflection on feminism by the main radical-left groups would only begin in the mid-1970s (Zuffa 1987, 40). Additionally, challenges arose within the women's movement, where the pursuit of wages was seen as reinforcing traditional roles for women within the household. However, a more in-depth exploration of this aspect will follow in the next paragraph.

The origin of the Italian women's movement and Lotta Femminista

As noted before, Lotta Femminista prioritised the creation of a women's movement from the beginning. This led the group to undertake pioneering political initiatives during the early stages of Italy's feminist movement, alongside other organisations. As the Paduan group and initial collectives of Lotta Femminista formed, activists worked to shape a nationwide movement.

In alignment with Elisa Bellè's thesis in her essay in *Anni di Rivolta* (2023), Lotta Femminista's proactive involvement highlights the need to challenge hierarchical distinctions between centre and periphery, which often prioritize the experiences of major urban centres like Rome, Milan, or Turin in feminist narratives. Bellè advocates for a feminist geopolitical approach that values seemingly peripheral experiences, such as those in Trento, which served as crucial nodes in networks of friendships, intellectual exchanges, and political connections. Similarly, Padua, influenced by factors like its university presence, a robust New Left movement, and proximity to industrial hubs like Porto Marghera, actively contributed to shaping the women's movement through meetings, discussions, and networking.

While Bellè's analysis primarily focuses on a national level, her considerations of geographic rebalancing also have implications on an international scale. The case of Lotta Femminista illustrates that the origins of the women's movement are not singularly rooted but are more complex and multifaceted. As Elda Guerra suggests with her concept of *'molti inizi*' ('many beginnings'), the women's movement has diverse origins not only within Italy but also globally. Lotta Femminista's international engagement underscores Italy's distinctive role in the global theoretical production of the feminist movement, reinforcing the idea that there are multiple origins and paths within the women's movements worldwide (Guerra 2005, 29).

Throughout Italy, this period was marked by a flurry of initiatives, meetings, and discussions addressing women's issues in innovative ways. The discussion around periodisation holds significant weight in the history of feminism, particularly concerning its origins. Regarding Lotta Femminista, it is evident that its development was influenced not only by its proximity to the extra-parliamentary left but also by its geographical location, particularly in northern Italy.

Calabrò and Grasso's *Dal movimento femminista al femminismo diffuso* (2004) provides valuable insights into the early stages and structures of the feminist movement. They

detail the history of feminist groups in Milan and place Lotta Femminista within this broader context. A key moment was the June 1971 meeting at the Società Umanitaria in Milan, which included groups from various cities and marked a pivotal point in the movement's development. This meeting not only highlighted the idea of creating a unified movement but also revealed divergences within Italian feminism.

During the event, two main strands emerged: groups emphasising consciousness-raising ('*gruppi di riflessione*') and groups more focused on social action ('*gruppi di intervento nel sociale*'). Lotta Femminista was immediately aligned with the latter category (Calabrò and Grasso 2004, 68). The congress was arranged by Anabasi, a women's group that had emerged in Milan a few years prior. Notably, the opening statement of the invitation letter mentioned that the inspiration for the congress partly stemmed from Selma James, described as *'una compagna femminista inglese*', who was visiting Italy during that period. Sources confirm that James led a workshop addressing potential challenges in forming a feminist movement, particularly the complications that might arise between feminist and revolutionary organisations or broader leftist parties (Centro di Documentazione delle donne - Bologna 1990, 57) .[11]

The debate over wages for housework quickly resonated throughout the feminist movement, attracting both support and criticism. This expansion of the discussion clearly underscores Lotta Femminista's prominent role within the women's movement. As a result of Lotta Femminista's significant influence and its close relationship with Selma James, I argue that James's ideas had a considerable impact on Italian feminism.

As recalled in a report of the meeting made by the organisers, the topic of housework immediately took centre stage in discussions during the conference. From the outset, Lotta Femminista emphasised its significance compared to other issues, such as *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising). However, this perspective faced swift criticism from other groups. The primary objection was that Lotta Femminista didn't draw from their own experiences but rather proposed theories about 'others' (such as female workers, housewives, etc.) without sharing personal stories.[12] Initially, criticisms centred more on the formal aspects of Lotta Femminista's approach rather than substantive concerns. Their methods were viewed as too reminiscent of those used by male groups. Concurrently, other feminist groups were already exploring the creation of alternative female realities, languages, and relationships. In subsequent years, as Lotta Femminista advocated for wages for domestic work, objections shifted towards the content of their proposal, as detailed in the following paragraph.

The debate around wages for housework within the Italian movement

In September 1973, the Lotta Femminista network took a crucial step in addressing the issue of wages for housework. They distributed a collaborative document called the *Volantone* among various women's movement groups. This pamphlet marked the network's first attempt to create a shared tool for organising a moment of public mobilisation, as highlighted by the network itself (Collettivo Internazionale Femminista 1975,15). The document served a dual purpose: presenting Lotta Femminista's analysis, which focused on the exploitation of women within the home, and rallying support for the demand for wages for housework.

In this document, there was an explanation of how to articulate the demand for wages for housework, beginning with an examination of the family allowances system. Although the debate over family allowances was less central to Italian politics and the feminist movement compared to other countries at the time, Lotta Femminista, likely due to its international connections, viewed it as a crucial entry point for exploring the broader role of women in the family and developing a strategic approach to their struggle.

Established during the Fascist regime and later regulated by a law in 1955, the Italian family allowance system allowed employed workers to request a subsidy from the state. However, it distributed a modest amount directly to the 'head of the household' operating on the premise of dependents (*persone a carico*). This meant that the wife, children, the elderly, and the disabled, were treated as individuals requiring financial support due to their perceived lack of productivity.

> A second point to consider relates to the concept of 'dependents', which might initially conjure images of a parasitic group within every household, seemingly just waiting to be fed, clothed, and tended to by the recipient of family allowances. However, in our experience as women, we find that this group is actively engaged in the ongoing work of domestic labour.[13]

The feminists of Lotta Femminista contended that the core problem lay in the perception of domestic management and caregiving. Rather than recognising it as work, it was viewed as a natural obligation for women, almost an inherent part of their identity. The concealment of household labour served the interests of capital and the state, allowing them to cut costs and obtain necessary social reproductive work without compensation. Moreover, women found themselves in a state of dependency, not just economically but also psychologically. Likewise, in line with the idea of making housework visible, Lotta Femminista advocated a strike of women 'from the home', precisely to highlight the essential nature of their caregiving work within the family. Lotta Femminista's approach, instead of seeking an increase in the allowances themselves, as suggested by the main unions, proposed demanding an income detached from the 'breadwinner' salary, linked exclusively to domestic work – a wage for a houseworker. As Tommaso Rebora (2023) astutely pointed out, these feminists' examination of domestic labour extended beyond conventional wage claims. Instead, they questioned the fundamental assumptions underpinning class struggle, advocating for income *against* work (Federici 1975).

After the pamphlet circulated, the discussion on wages for housework, as planned by the collective, expanded and reached the feminist movement's press. The feminist magazine *Effe*, which had already addressed domestic labour in its December 1973 issue, chose to open a debate specifically on the issues raised by the *Volantone* in its March 1974 issue. This edition featured a transcript of a discussion held at the magazine's office, with active participation from various feminist organisations based in Rome. The participants included Lidia Menapace from the newspaper and political group *Il Manifesto*; Luciana Di Lello from the *Collettivo Femminista Comunista*; Rita di Gioacchino, a journalist unaffiliated with any group; and several members of the *Pompeo Magno* collective,[14] including Giuseppina Santilli, Rosalba Pistelli, Giovanna Pala, and Lara Foletti, the editor of *Effe*.

Overall, the discussion revealed unanimous agreement on Lotta Femminista's analysis of domestic work, emphasising that external employment did not liberate women from their oppressed conditions. However, amidst ongoing political changes, some women stressed the importance of defending female employment as it could be valuable in certain contexts. Opinions diverged sharply on the issue of wages. Critics expressed concerns that a salary might further entrench women in domestic roles rather than liberate them. Some argued for the abolition of domestic work entirely, viewing it as a role rather than a job. Others criticised the economic focus of Lotta Femminista's discourse, arguing that merely demanding compensation was insufficient for challenging patriarchal and capitalist systems. Additional criticism questioned the practicality of obtaining wages, given capitalist resistance and the state's likely refusal to entertain such proposals. Concerns also emerged about the commodification of domestic work, with some fearing that

remuneration could turn it into a commodity, complicating collective bargaining due to the lack of a shared work environment.

Concerns about economism and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles diminished when it was clarified that Lotta Femminista viewed the demand for wages not as an ultimate goal but as a strategic tool for initiating broader systemic changes. This perspective was grounded in the idea that, firstly, housework could not be eliminated, and merely asking men to share duties would not be a resolution. Secondly, housework was productive and essential for capital. Therefore, in a waged society, it should have been remunerated to be considered valuable, regardless of who would do it (Toupin 2023, 80–88).

While some criticisms seemed to arise from misunderstandings of Lotta Femminista's proposal, concerns about commodification brought a new perspective on reproduction and whether labour power could be considered a commodity. This viewpoint suggested that while a campaign for wages might not be fundamentally flawed, it could be exploited and twisted to undermine women's interests in the current context. The core question was whether reproduction should be seen as work just like factory labour, and if commodifying it was necessary to challenge the system of female exploitation. Lotta Femminista took a firm position: housework constituted labour that produced commodities, even though it was unpaid. The real commodity was the labour force itself, which capital exploited through the work done by women ('*Soldi alle Donne*', Archivio di Lotta Femminista per il salario al lavoro domestico, sez. 4, serie 1, 9, 1973).

The objections to the wage proposal, highlighted in *Effe*'s article, continued to resonate and re-emerged later, without ever reaching a resolution. However, the significance of the debate was underscored by its prominence during the first national feminist conference in Italy, held at Pinarella di Cervia in 1974. This historical context emphasises the ongoing debate within the movement and the challenges of reconciling differing perspectives on the role of wages in addressing women's issues.

The end of Lotta Femminista and the beginning of a new phase

Lotta Femminista disbanded in October 1974 due to disagreements over political strategies and internal discord. Throughout 1973, the collective engaged in substantial internal debates during national coordination meetings, addressing issues related to power dynamics, the organisation of the struggle, and the structure of the national network. A document circulated by the Milan group during this period raised concerns about the absence of a clear division of labour among different locations and leadership issues involving certain *compagne*. The document, circulated strictly for internal use, did not mention specific individuals, or make precise accusations, but some interviewees suggested a reference to the Padua group, which was criticised for centralisation. Additionally, the Milan group proposed concrete measures for political practice.

> ... we think that the topic of wages shouldn't be approached purely in a theoretical and abstract manner, to the extent that it becomes a discriminating label attached to us. Instead, we propose enriching the conversation with concrete examples and practical initiatives that can already be implemented.[15]

The Milanese group emphasised the need for practical actions. They actively engaged in the local feminist movement, participating in collective meetings where various groups exchanged ideas. This interaction made the group especially open to criticisms from other feminist currents, which it sought to share with the rest of the network in this document. They pointed to certain women within Lotta Femminista who, adopting an attitude of

intellectual superiority, leaned towards sectarianism rather than engaging the broader feminist movement. Against the backdrop of certain factions within Lotta Femminista distancing themselves from the broader women's movement, the Milanese group responded with strategic initiatives. They shared three significant experiences that enhanced their discourse on wages, resonating with various collectives. Firstly, their push for full wages for part-time women workers found support from influential female workers at the Eni factory. Secondly, they proposed establishing a cost-free nursery managed by women in a community-oriented neighbourhood. Lastly, the group teamed up with other feminist collectives in Milan to produce a pamphlet addressing abortion.

Archival documents reveal that other cities faced similar challenges in translating political theory into action, engaging in local mobilisations across sectors like hospitals, factories, schools, and universities. The issue appeared to revolve around both internal communication and coordination among the various groups. After the initial push, the groups began operating independently, each pursuing different approaches and even differing in how they articulated the wage demand. Externally, the criticism of sectarianism directed by Milanese groups towards others was tied to a perceived lack of dialogue within the women's movement overall. The situation in Milan was distinct not just because of the city's size, which had spawned numerous feminist groups, but also because Milan had a communal meeting space (a room on via Cherubini) for gathering and sharing ideas (Calabrò and Grasso 2004). This was a resource lacking in other towns and cities across the country, where communication between different feminist groups was more challenging.

During national meetings in Padua (October 1973) and Florence (November 1973), two opposing positions emerged. One proposed a national campaign for wages for housework, culminating in a three-day national strike in the summer of 1974, while the other rejected the campaign idea and suggested practical local actions, including the creation of sexual information centres, the establishment of a women's struggles-focused newspaper, debates based on leaflet distribution, and increased demonstrations supporting the salary theory. The Padua group led by Dalla Costa[16] and the Venice group supported the national campaign, advocating for committees to be formed across Italy.

They viewed wages primarily as monetary, placing battles for services in a secondary position. The other position, initially seeming predominant, left open the possibility for Padua and Venice to form committees but engage on other fronts too.[17] Discussions regarding the preferred political strategy continued throughout the subsequent year. On 10 June 1974, Padua group number 2 (led by Dalla Costa) sent a letter inviting other groups to an urgent co-ordination meeting in Padua by the end of the month. The letter makes mention of the advocacy efforts carried out by the women of that group in the previous months to garner support for the campaign idea and foster unity within the network. They visited every city and held meetings with each group to explore issues related to their vision. Despite extensive internal discussions, Lotta Femminista decided to disband, citing 'varied political analyses and practices' as the reason for dissolution (cf. Collettivo Internazionale Femminista 1975, 16). It appears that reconciliation between the two positions was unachievable.

After the disbandment, some groups joined the *Rete dei Comitati per il Salario al Lavoro Domestico*, continuing their feminist efforts within this new framework, while others established autonomous women's centres, focusing on feminist politics without national coordination. The women who had proposed the committee network the previous year worked diligently to establish it and integrate Italy into the broader international network, which had by then launched the International Wages for Housework Campaign.

Although Lotta Femminista's trajectory ended, the discussion about wages persisted and gained renewed global significance. This resurgence was propelled by participants

in the committee network, which was part of a broader International Feminist Collective that included women's groups from the UK, the US, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany (Toupin 2023, 83).

Conclusion

In this essay, an examination of the history of Lotta Femminista sheds light on the evolution of the stance regarding remunerating housework from a feminist perspective in the 1970s in Italy. Originating from the New Left and heavily influenced by a neomarxist interpretation of society, Lotta Femminista transcended its role as a mere militant group to function as an authentic feminist laboratory, where participating women could forge new feminist notions and explore different ways of interacting within women's communities. Even though the composition of the group did not achieve the diversity they had hoped for, the reflections from the participating women prompted significant societal inquiries into crucial themes such as class, gender, sexuality, and race. Like other feminist groups, Lotta Femminista provided spaces where women could become the protagonists of their own lives. By doing so, it also taught the male-dominated groups new practices and theories.

Stemming from Dalla Costa's insights into the productive value of domestic work, a fresh set of theories and practices emerged to confront the exploitation and oppression of women. This was achieved through dialogue among women from diverse backgrounds, facilitated by the establishment of the Lotta Femminista network. As evidenced by this essay, the text *Potere Femminile e Sovversione Sociale* served as both a manifesto and a starting point for the group's theoretical development, which, in the realm of activism, expanded and enriched the ideas it contained through collaborative endeavours. The call for wages by Lotta Femminista emerged from a prolonged discussion within the network. The political approach, founded on the idea that unpaid domestic work was a form of exploitation and the primary cause of women's control and subordination, gave rise to this demand. This political strategy, rooted in the theory of the refusal of work, aimed to challenge the hierarchical distinction between wage and non-wage earners, offering the opportunity to negotiate the conditions of reproductive labour and rejecting the ingrained notion that caregiving work is inherently tied to women (*lavoro d'amore*). According to this new perspective, all categories of non-wage earners were seen as integral to the capitalist production cycle, making them potential subversive actors. Lotta Femminista activists believed that the logical outcome of these stances was the establishment of a movement uniting all those exploited by capital, essentially a women's movement (Dalla Costa 1972, 24–25). As argued in this essay, the initial willingness to collaborate, a defining characteristic of Lotta Femminista women from the outset, played a significant role in shaping the women's movement in Italy and was a direct result of these theoretical positions.

Certainly, during the 1970s, there was a fertile ground for new political ideas and grassroots movements, but it is crucial not to downplay Lotta Femminista's role. The shared past activism experiences among many women paved the way for establishing new connections where women took centre stage. International exchange, also facilitated by the New Left formations that encouraged transnational relationships among activists – such as the connection between Dalla Costa and James brought together by a mutual '*compagno*' – deepened the level of analysis and promoted a global understanding of oppressive processes, avoiding oversimplification and adding complexity.[18]

Dalla Costa's book became a cornerstone text in Gender Studies programmes at universities in many countries, alongside other works inspired by fellow activists which, stemming from Dalla Costa's analysis, tackled various issues such as domestic violence (by

Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa), the enforcement of heterosexuality (by Wilmette Brown), and the intersection of race in the capitalist division of labour (by Selma James and Silvia Federici). Documents produced by Lotta Femminista, as revealed in archival records (particularly in the Archivio di Lotta femminista in Padua) underscore the vibrant exchange of ideas and political practices among Italian women and their counterparts from other nations.

Lotta Femminista's ideas resonated globally, eliciting strong opposition but nevertheless prompting extensive debate. The decision to disband the co-ordination and establish the *Rete dei Comitati* stemmed from internal disagreements regarding the methods of activism, yet it also marked the beginning of a new initiative – the International Wages for Housework Campaign, which saw Italian participation throughout the entire decade (Toupin 2023, 83–129). While the objective of securing wages was never realised, neither in Italy nor elsewhere, it's essential to highlight the intellectual heritage that this political endeavour contributed to feminist theory and political ideologies. The emergence of Social Reproductive theory and the recognition of the economic value of unpaid care and domestic work in international economic metrics stand as notable examples of this legacy. Furthermore, recognising the role played by Lotta Femminista is essential in understanding the broader history of the women's movement in Italy during the 1970s.

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Notes

1. *Operaismo* is a philosophical current, situated within the realm of neomarxism. It expressed scepticism towards institutionalised entities such as unions and political parties. These were perceived as a form of 'cage' for the working class, considered the primary force driving revolution (Gentili 2012).
2. Antonio Negri was a prominent Italian political philosopher known for his contributions to autonomism. In the 1970s he was a professor of political philosophy at the University of Padua, focusing on state and constitutional theory. Negri also founded the Potere Operaio group in 1969 and later held a leading position in Autonomia Operaia party.
3. In this context, 'Marxism' designates an Italian radical neomarxist movement that emerged in the 1960s as a revolutionary alternative to the Togliattian strategy of the Italian path to socialism and the policies of the PCI.
4. Born as an offshoot of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the key Trotskyist organisation in 1930s America, the Johnson-Forest Tendency recognised the power of the working class's independent initiative in handling its political demands. It emphasised the rejection of union leadership and the political determination of workers during the US wartime efforts in the 1940s (Sica 2012).
5. Selma James interviews 19 May 2023; Carla Manfrin interviews 23 May 2023; Sandra and Flavia Busatta interview 24 May 2023; Giulia Pincelli interviews 16 June 2023; Silvia Federici interviews 3 October 2023; Leopoldina Fortunati interviews 18 October 2023; Maria Rosa Cutrufelli interviews 5 November 2023.
6. Biographical note and introduction to the Inventory Archive of the Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework, donation by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, available at https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/it/collezioni-biblioteca/dalla-costa.
7. Pincelli's talk at the conference later appeared in the collection *L'Offensiva: Quaderni di Lotta Femminista,* credited to Giuliana Pompei, as it was the custom in Italy for women to use their husband's surname. In 2019, it was republished in a volume edited by Pincelli and Antonella Picchio (Picchio and Pincelli 2019), featuring foundational documents of Lotta Femminista.
8. The original Italian text by Pincelli was published in *L'Offensiva, Quaderni di Lotta Femminista* No. 1 (*L'Offensiva* 1974), and later translated by Joan Hall, a feminist activist in the women's movement in the UK. It was then published in *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (*Women* 1972).
9. The events surrounding Pierobon's case brought heightened awareness to the struggles faced by countless women, fuelling the collective's determination to fight for women's reproductive rights and autonomy.

During that era, women frequently confronted the necessity of undergoing abortions in distressing circumstances, exposing them to significant life risks and forcing them to navigate this process alone. This isolation often originated from the illegal nature of abortion and the prevailing stigma associated with it, making it challenging for women to openly discuss their decision to terminate a pregnancy. By choosing to turn Pierobon's individual experience into a collective, public process, Lotta Femminista brought the matter of abortion to everyone's attention, effectively elevating it to a political issue (Gissi and Stelliferi 2023, 103–107).

10. Archivio di Lotta Femminista, *Lotta delle ragazze madri via Pusiano,* sez. 1, serie 3, 49/1973.
11. Archivio della casa delle donne di Torino, *Fondo Zumaglino*, Dossier 2/1971.
12. Archivio di Lotta Femminista, *Al femminile*, sez. 6, serie 5, 79bis/1972.
13. This and the following quotations have been translated by the author of this essay. Archivio di Lotta Femminista, *Volantone*, sez. 8, serie 4, 264/1973.
14. This collective, whose full name was the Movimento Femminista Romano di via Pompeo Magno, was the primary separatist feminist group in the city of Rome, and within the movement, it held a central role (Bracke 2019, 134).
15. Archivio di Lotta Femminista, *Traccia di discussione*, section 1, serie 1, 12, n.d.
16. During 1973, for internal reasons, the Padua group split into two factions, namely Padua 1 and Padua 2. Dalla Costa belonged to Padua 2.
17. Archivio di Lotta Femminista, *Coordinamento di Firenze del 10–11 novembre 1973*, sez 1, serie 3/50.
18. For further insights into the subject of transnational feminist connections mediated by the New Left, refer to Rebora 2023.

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Italian summary

Questo articolo esamina la storia di Lotta Femminista, un gruppo separatista attivo in Italia nei primi anni '70, e il suo rilevante impatto sul dibattito femminista, in particolare per quanto riguarda la richiesta del salario per il lavoro domestico. Attraverso l'analisi dello sviluppo del gruppo nel contesto più ampio del movimento delle donne in Italia, lo studio mette in luce le basi teoriche e l'attivismo pratico legati alla proposta del salario per il lavoro domestico. Utilizzando documenti d'archivio e testimonianze orali, l'articolo esplora come Lotta Femminista abbia interpretato il lavoro domestico come una forma di sfruttamento delle donne all'interno di una prospettiva marxista. Nonostante critiche e opposizioni, le idee di Lotta Femminista hanno avuto una risonanza globale, lasciando un'eredità non solo nella teoria femminista, ma anche nella società nel suo complesso. Attraverso l'impegno su temi come il rifiuto del lavoro e il riconoscimento del lavoro di cura non retribuito come forma di sfruttamento capitalistico, Lotta Femminista ha dato un contributo significativo alla storia del femminismo in Italia e oltre.

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