

Chapter 5

'Ndrangheta Women in Contemporary Italy: Between Change and Continuity

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There was a difference between women and men during my grandmother's time when we were in Calabria. Men were separated from women: Men ate, while women stayed in the kitchen. When the men finished, then the women were allowed to eat. This division, however, did not prevent women from knowing and seeing what went on. My grandmother was there, and she knew everything; all women know everything about everything. However, my grandmother was subjected to her husband. My grandfather drank. He beat my grandmother. He was naughty and unruly, like all men are. All women in the 'Ndrangheta are subjected—they have no say when others are present—but the husband always follows the wife's suggestions. And then, it just depends. Women are the ones who, when their husbands are in jail, always stand in their husbands' stead; however, in the context of the family—because the 'Ndrangheta is family-run for the most part—they are structurally connected with the family, that is, the Mafia family as well as the family of origins, the parental family (Ingrasci 2013, p. 67).

The tale of collaborator of justice, Emilio Di Giovine, offers a vivid description of gender dynamics inside his maternal family, the Serrainos, an historic 'Ndrangheta family in the area of Reggio Calabria. This scene sheds light on the contradictions of the female condition in the 'Ndrangheta, which goes from victimization to responsible participation.

Women play many roles in the 'Ndrangheta. In the household, they transmit the Mafia's cultural code, encourage vendetta, act as guarantors of honorary men's reputations, and are objects of exchange in prescribed marriages. In the criminal sphere, they often bring messages from prison, transport weapons, manage the money of the family, cash in extortions, and sometimes, they actually lead the cosca.

As shown by judiciary investigations, criminal organization does not officially recognize this variety of participation as far as women cannot be formally affiliated through the initiation rite. Indeed, women do not have an official position in the

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'Ndrangheta organizational chart. Their membership is due to their family connection. This is not surprising, given that the 'Ndrangheta's central core (the 'ndrina) and the blood family overlap.

Compared to the past, female participation is now more consolidated, and is becoming ever more systematic. It has changed so much that women have employed roles beyond the private sphere, becoming more and more involved in the criminal environment. Giovanni Musarò, magistrate of the DDA of Reggio Calabria observed: "Nowadays there is no 'Ndrangheta investigation in which women are not arrested" (Musarò 2012). This new scenario is the result of a new attitude of the police and magistrates that have weakened their chivalrous outlook toward Mafia women,¹ and at the same time, it shows a real transformation, as a consequence of the female emancipation of the wider society. However, the female emancipation has been a pivotal impact on the 'Ndrangheta not only to its advantage, but also against it, as shown by the growing number of women who turned state evidence.

In other words, 'Ndrangheta women act as agents of a double change: A change in continuity, taking on roles that were exclusively male in the past, yet without transforming their subordinate condition; and a transformative change, rebelling against the Mafia by collaborating with the State.

This essay will explore both directions of change by using judiciary materials and, above all, by "listening" the voices of those directly involved. First hand testimonies give an internal in-sight, allowing analysts to go beyond both the old stereotype of Mafia women being unaware of their male relatives' activities and the new cliché of the lady boss, according to which women would hold an equal or even superior power to their male counterparts.

The Private Sphere: Vendetta, Marriage, and Honor

Education and Vendetta

As much as in other Mafia-like criminal organizations, in the 'Ndrangheta, women play a traditional role in the private sphere resulting in both active and passive functions. The first function is educational: Women actively instill in their sons and daughters a mentality based on a series of beliefs, informing the ideology of the criminal group. A woman once belonging to a 'Ndrangheta family who turned state evidence said:

She is [last name of the woman] my mother. Are you kidding? Not at all [...] It is deeply rooted in her; she was born and raised, and even raised my son, in that way. She instilled in his mind what she was unable to do with me; in fact, if my son sees me, he will kill me (Ingrasci 2007, pp. 10–11).

¹ For more information regarding the change of view from the court toward women, see Ingrasci, O. *Donne d'onore. Storie di mafia al femminile*, pp. 108–121.

[È una [cognome della donna] mia madre. Stai scherzando? È mica una (...) è radicato in lei, lei è nata e cresciuta e lei ha fatto crescere mio figlio così, lei gli ha inculcato in testa quello che non è riuscita a inculcare in me, tanto è vero che se mio figlio mi vede mi ammazza].

Her mother taught her, like she did with her sons and grandsons, omertà, the law of silence:

We grew up with an oafish mentality: Never bring yourself to say: "That person stole something." Never say anything; you must remain silent. Oh, but I was unable to. In fact, once when I saw my brother stealing one thousand lire, I soon told my mother. I was beaten severely and told: "Why did you tell me? You must keep quiet!" (Ingrasci 2007, p. 11).

[Noi siamo cresciuti nella mentalità balorda: mai venire a dire «quello ha rubato una cosa», mai venirlo a dire, devi stare zitta, guai, ma io non ero capace, tante è vero che a volte vedevo mio fratello rubare mille lire e subito lo dicevo a mia mamma. Erano tante di quelle botte che prendevo «perché me l'hai detto? Devi stare zitta!»].

She transmitted gender discrimination, the superiority of male compared to female:

They [the bothers] were gods; I was the whore and they were kings. I, to do a favor for my brother, had to sell everything: My dowry, my gold, everything. Do everything for them [...] If her son told her: "Give me a million!" his mother would go around to find the million and she would end up finding it. I asked her: "Mom, I need a pair of shoes." "Regardless, you can do without them" she responded. This is the type of mentality that you carry with you for generations (Ingrasci 2007, p. 14).

[Loro (i fratelli) erano gli dei, io ero la puttana e loro erano i re. Io per fare un piacere a mio fratello dovevo vendere tutto, la mia dote, il mio oro, tutto. Fare tutto per loro (...) Se suo figlio le diceva «Mi serve un milione» sua mamma andava in cerca del milione e tanto lo cercava che poi lo trovava. Le chiedevo io «mamma mi servono un paio di scarpe», «nonostante tutto»- mi diceva- «puoi farne a meno. Questa è una mentalità che ti porti da generazioni in generazioni»].

Generational transmission of Mafia principles is fundamental in the 'Ndrangheta families as described by Giuseppina Pesce, a pentita who belonged to one of the most important families of the Tyrrhenian 'Ndrangheta (on the west coast of Calabria). In her confession, released in 2010, she declared that her children's destiny would have been predetermined by the family, had she not decided to change course:

If I don't change my ways now and take my children with me when I get out of jail, my son could already be in a juvenile detention center, and they will put a gun in his hands anyway. My two daughters, on the contrary, will have to marry two 'Ndrangheta men and they will be forced to follow them around. I want to try to create a different future for them. [...] When my son once said that when he grew up he wanted to be a policeman, his uncle beat him, and then he promised to give him a gun as a gift (Abbate 2013, pp. 71, 61).

[Se io non cambio strada e non li porto con me, quando uscirò il bambino potrebbe già essere in un carcere minorile, e comunque gli metteranno al più presto una pistola in mano; le due bimbe invece dovranno sposare due uomini di 'ndrangheta, e saranno costrette a seguirli. "Io voglio provare a costruire un futuro diverso per loro." E continua "(...) Quando il mio bambino, una volta, ha detto che da grande avrebbe voluto fare il carabiniere, suo zio l'ha preso a botte, poi gli ha promesso che una pistola giel'avrebbe regalata lui"].

Women are particularly active in the "pedagogy of vendetta." One of the mother of some children separated by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria kept her educa-

tional activity by visiting her son, reminding him of the future shoes he would have to fill as a member of a 'Ndrangheta family: “You are a Facchineri and like a black falcon you have to fall on your enemies; you are from a strong and important family that no one can put under” [Tu sei un Facchineri, e come un falco nero dovrai piombare sui tuoi nemici, tu sei di una famiglia importante e forte che non si fa mettere sotto da nessuno] (Siebert 2003, p. 27). The study reporting this episode underlined that:

By using the association between the last name and the falcon, the woman proposed to the child a violent image with which he has to identify himself. The child has to imagine that he is a predator, a member of a strong family, with no fear, ready to fight (Siebert 2003, p. 27). [Utilizzando l'associazione tra il cognome e il falco nero, la donna proponeva al bambino una immagine violenta con cui identificarsi. Il bambino doveva immaginare di essere un predatore, membro di una stirpe forte, senza paura, pronto al combattimento].

Women teach the principle of vendetta and are agents of private violence: Stimulating, encouraging, and reminding their male relatives to execute vendettas to regain lost honor. Women carry out this function especially during times of bloodshed. This function dated back to the so-called *prefiche* (mourners) and has been structurally modernized, as demonstrated by recent criminal investigations. In 2009 the *Operazione Artemisia* carried out by the DDA of Reggio Calabria ended the bloody feud in Seminara—a small village of 3,500 inhabitants of the plain of Gioia Tauro, in province of Reggio Calabria—which took place between 2006 and 2009.² Court records illustrate the significant role that women on both sides of conflicts, and belonging to different age groups, have played in order to continue the chain of vicious retaliations that fueled the conflict. In particular, wiretappings and environmental interceptions show the perspective of those who had a role in the war by revealing their practices and behaviors. Interviews recorded by law enforcement show the impressive daily life of women regarding death and the vindictive dynamics typical of a Mafia system. Women converse about different topics that range from recipes and doctor appointments to the desire to eliminate their adversaries. They do not seem intimidated. On the contrary, they even proved aggressive, “calling to arms” all members of the family. For example, the capobastone's wife of the 'ndrina of Seminara, in the aftermath of the attack on her husband, calls her daughter living in northern Italy, and with a threatening voice, forces her to come back to Calabria, otherwise she will be disowned by the family:

This is the last thing I will tell you [...] this morning we left for work and they shot at [...] your dad, but thank God they didn't get [him]; now your brothers are around. If you want to come, come; otherwise be aware that you do not have anybody else [...] without eating or drinking (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2008, p. 250).

[Vedi che questa è l'ultima cosa che ti dico, vedi che questa mattina siamo partiti per lavorare, ed hanno sparato a (...) e al papà meno male che non li hanno presi, ora i tuoi fratelli sono tutti in giro, se volete venire venite altrimenti fate conto che non avete più a nessuno (...) senza mangiare o bere].

² For a full reconstruction of the blood feud and the role of women in the event, see Ingrasci, O. (2011) *Donne, 'ndrangheta, 'ndrine. Gli spazi femminili nelle fonti giudiziarie. Meridiana* 67, pp. 35–54.

In the face of the numerous recordings that show this familiarity and cultural acceptance of violent death advanced by conflict between 'ndrine, the judge that produced the order for custody notes: “More than fear or sorrow for what has happened, the talkers, who are often women, only think about the next move: To revenge what happened” [più che la paura o il dolore per ciò che è accaduto, i colloquianti, spesso donne, pensano esclusivamente alla prossima mossa, per vendicare ciò che è accaduto] (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2008, p. 250). One of the women, after the attempted murder of her brother, protests against her relatives who are hypothesizing a possible reconciliation, stating that the bloody feud should not end and that the hatred will last until the seventh generation. The taped conversation showed the conspiratorial behavior of families from both sides. Women, relatives of victims, not only do not denounce the killings or injuries to the police, but even offer conflicting and unreliable statements in order to set investigations on the wrong track. Justice for them is a private matter, which must be compensated for only by an act of revenge showing the will—as written in the order for custody—“to exclude the state and its institutions from the dispute that they intend to solve with their barbaric methods” [di escludere lo Stato e le sue istituzioni dalla contesa che intendono risolvere con i loro barbari metodi] (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2008, p. 179).

Commodity Exchange in Arranged Marriages

In Mafia societies, arranged marriages constitute, even today, a fundamental part of the politico-military strategy of the families. They serve to form alliances between 'ndrine or make peace after a feud. In a criminal context, dominated by insecurity and distrust, blood alliances are crucial to the survival of a clan. They make it possible to expand the network of trust between families that share the same values and criminal objectives, and enhance the size of the cosca via connections with groups territorially close to them. The alliance of 'Ndrangheta families, Condello, and Imerti was sealed by a marriage, which allowed them to become stronger in the event of a clash with the De Stefano family.

Pentito Salvatore Morabito, regarding the practice of establishing relationships and alliances between clans through marriages in his home town of Plati, says:

[...] Families often intersect through marriages. Crossed marriages are used to keep the peace in Plati, which is actually the only village where there has never been a feud. It is more or less the same thing that happened with royal families. By now the families of Plati—Sergis, Papalias, Barbaros, and Perres—are all related to each other: Sons and daughters get married and become godparents, and distant relatives become first, second, and third cousins. So all of them know that if a feud would happen to break out, they would all be involved; and then, before getting revenge they'd have to think three times (Colaprico and Fazzo 1995, p. 100).

[...] Spesso le famiglie si incrociano con i matrimoni (...) I matrimoni incrociati sono serviti a mantenere la pace a Plati, che infatti è l'unico paese dove non è mai scoppiata una faida. È un po' la stessa cosa che succedeva con le famiglie reali. Ormai le famiglie di Plati – i Sergi, i Papalia, i Barbaro, i Perre – si sono imparentate tutte con tutti: le figlie e i figli si sposano, si fanno compari, diventano parenti tra cugini, secondi cugini e terzi cugini.

Quindi tutti sanno che se dovesse scoppiare una faida, in un attimo li coinvolgerebbe tutti, e allora prima di vendicarsi su qualcuno ci pensano su tre volte].

In addition, wedding ceremonies are privileged places to carry out attacks on enemies. Collaborator of justice, Rita di Giovine sheds light on this: “Usually when they want to kill someone they do at weddings, funerals, or baptisms” [di solito quando vogliono ammazzare qualcuno lo ammazzano o nei matrimoni o nei funerali o nei battesimi] (Terza Corte di Assise di Milano 1998). These words were comments on the attempted murder of her brother, Emilio Di Giovine; the attack was carried out during the wedding of her daughter, Marisa Di Giovine, but it was not successful because he was a fugitive (Ingrasci 2013).

During weddings, the organization takes fundamental decisions. The wedding between Elisa Pelle, daughter of Giuseppe Pelle (better known as Gambazza), and Giuseppe Barbaro, son of the deceased Pasquale Barbaro of the family “u Castanu,” celebrated on August 19, 2009 was held—as trial documents report—as important:

’Ndrangheta summit to decide the awarding of the new position for Crimine [...] the result of a complex “negotiation” that saw the opposition of Tyrrhenian, Ionic, and Reggio Calabria cosche, which was solved with a painstaking agreement (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria, 2010).

[Summit di ’ndrangheta per decidere il conferimento delle nuove cariche del Crimine (...) in esito ad una complessa “trattativa” che ha visto contrapposte le cosche della tirrenica al mandamento reggino ed a quello jonico e che è stata risolta in base ad un faticoso accordo].

The endogamy of class and the parental hermeticism guarantee the closure of the group, useful for reducing the risk of defections. The mating of close relatives within the same family tree have created many difficulties for investigations, especially in municipalities of the Ionic coast of Calabria where people, besides the same physical resemblance, often have the same last name (Gratteri, 2003). Judge Michele Prestipino explains:

In some places it is true that a Mafia family has a well-known name, but behind that name it is possible to identify a number of family units with the same last name. To untangle among people that not only have the same last name, but also the same first name, a specialized study on genealogical tree is necessary to understand the dynamics, alliances, and contacts that often conflict with each other (Pignatone and Prestipino 2012, p. 49).

[In alcune località è vero che la famiglia mafiosa ha un nome noto, ma dietro a quel nome spesso sono identificabili una pluralità di nuclei familiari con lo stesso cognome. Per districarsi tra soggetti che portano non soltanto lo stesso cognome, ma in molti casi anche lo stesso nome di battesimo, occorre uno studio specialistico sugli alberi genealogici per capire dinamiche, alleanze, contatti a volte contrastanti].

Women, in most cases, are pawns in these arranged marriages. The role of the bride of a man belonging to a ’ndrina is not always well-accepted to her. In such cases, she is, however, obliged to submit to the family’s will. Being a passive object of marriage exchange causes great suffering, above all, when the goal of the union is to reconcile two rival families after a feud. To confirm the end of the conflict, the virginal blood spilled during the wedding night is symbolically offered as compensation to the one shed in warfare. In the case of conciliation weddings, women are forced to marry killers of their own loved ones, namely those who, before the peace agreement, were from the opposite side.

Rebelling against the family choice is, in most cases, impossible. The passive role of women within the marriage practices of the 'Ndrangheta is closely intertwined with the code of honor.

The Code of Honor

Women are registered in the cultural regime of honor, which decides which behavior and attitudes are male and female, prescribes how one should act, and what one should not do. In the 'Ndrangheta, the code of honor does not only do this, but it is also a military control system reducing the woman to an object that belongs to the man and the family.³ Women are subjected to segregation from adolescence onward. A collaborator of justice confesses:

I was born and raised in a very strict family, and I was not allowed to go out. They did not let me study; when I reached the second grade they told me that it was not necessary to continue because, fittingly, the most important thing was to be at home, work in the home and, thus, school was of no use. But if I didn't need school, I didn't need to smuggle cigarettes, but I had to do it (Ingrasci 2007, p. 11).

[Nata e cresciuta in una famiglia molto ristretta, io non potevo uscire, non mi hanno fatto studiare, arrivata alla seconda elementare mi hanno detto che non valeva la pena andare avanti perché giustamente non serviva a niente continuare perché l'importante è che io stavo in casa, lavoravo in casa quindi non mi serviva a niente la scuola; però se non mi serviva la scuola non mi serviva neanche andare a fare il contrabbando di sigarette (...) invece l'ho dovuto fare].

Women of man in prison are controlled not only by the family, but also by the entire cosca. The witness Maria Concetta Cacciolla, smothered by the continuous control of the entire organization, wrote to her husband Salvatore Figliuzzi of the Bellocco cosca of Rosarno, in prison convicted with Mafia association, to complain on her lack of freedom. She could only go out to drop off her children at school, but even in that situation she must be with a trusted person:

How can I live this way if I cannot even breath [...] I go out in the morning to drop off my children at school [...] I cannot have any contact with anybody [...] What good is my life when I cannot have contact with anyone? (Abbate 2013, p. 111).

[Come posso campare così se non posso nemmeno respirare (...) Esco la mattina per andare a portare i figli a scuola (...) Non posso avere contatto con nessuno, a cosa mi serve la mia vita quando non posso avere contatto con nessuno?].

Moreover, women have also been the subject of theft in cases where they refuse to get married. The boss Francesco Pesce (alias u Testune), successor of the Pesce family of Rosarno, had appropriated his fiancée by force against her will. The frequent kidnappings seem to suggest that there is a return of ancient practices, such as that of abduction.

Women are beaten and, in some cases, even mortally punished, often along with their beloved, in case it is discovered that they are having an extra-marital affair.

³ For an analysis of the exploitation of the code of honor in the Mafia, see Ingrasci, O. *Donne d'onore. Storie di mafia al femminile*, pp. 26–38.

Thanks to women's testimonies, judges have been able to shed light on old cases of missing women that were actually killed by their brothers, husbands, or fathers because they were guilty of relations outside the marriage and, thus, had violated the code of honor.

During 2011 investigations, collaborator Giuseppina Pesce shed light on the case of a missing woman archived by the police. The 'Ndrangheta court rules the death penalty for women who drift from the code of honor. The solution of the honor killing is a path used to restore the reputation after an event has tarnished the family name. In other words, deviant female behavior has dishonored the family, which now needs to prove to the entire community that it can defend its own pride at whatever cost, to the point of scarifying its own daughters, sisters, or wives.

The same codes of honor do not apply for men of the family that are allowed not only to have chaotic love lives, but, as we have also seen, brutal and violent behavior toward women.

Female Participation in Criminal Activities

The lack of a formal female presence in the 'Ndrangheta has not prevented women from active participation. The prohibition of women from participating in the organization through the initiation rite is a norm with very few exceptions throughout the criminal organization's history. There are, in fact, historic documents proving a formal structure of female involvement: In the minutes of some court documents from the beginning of the 1900s, there are cases of women not only tried for criminal conspiracy, but also affiliated with the so-called picciotteria. In the conviction of members of a criminal organization based in Palmi and its surrounding areas, there is a specific reference to women, in which the court says:

In this association of evildoers [...] women were also admitted, dressed as men, that took part in thefts and other crimes—women admitted to having to take an oath while pricking the little finger of their right hand to produce blood, and swearing the aforementioned secret. Everybody went out carrying pistols and daggers (Archivio di Stato di Catanzaro 1892, p. 336).

[Nelle associazioni di malfattori (...) furono pure ammesse delle donne, che vestite da uomini, prendevano parte alla perpetuazione dei "furti" ed altri reati e le donne ammesse dovevano pur esse prestare giuramento facendosi uscire il sangue dal dito mignolo della mano destra e promettendo il segreto, come si è detto di sopra. Tutti andavano armati di pugnale e rivoltella].

According to the police sources from the early 1900s, the picciotteria of Santo Stefano D'Aspromonte even had a female section, and in Nicastro, the boss' sister-in-law, "armed and dressed as a man," went with him to the night criminal activities (Ciconte 1992, p. 81).

More recently, the presence of a specific position for women has emerged—the so-called *sorella d'omertà*. The trial documents relative to *Crimine-Infinito* investigation, directed by the DDA of Milan and Reggio Calabria in 2010, described positions and ranks within the criminal organization, including the *sorella d'omertà*. This position was first mentioned by collaborator of justice Antonio Zagari during

a judicial hearing in 1995 for the process regarding the *Isola Felice* investigation. The pentito described the symbolic depiction of the 'Ndrangheta, its positions, ranks, hierarchy, and other issues regarding ritually symbolic matters. Zagari had already talked about *sorella d'omertà* in his autobiography, asserting that:

'Ndrangheta rules do not consider affiliating female elements a possibility; but if a woman is particularly deserving, she can be associated with the title of *sorella d'omertà*; without taking an oath, which is obligatory for men. However, it is difficult to recognize the title to those who are not already wives, sisters, fiancées, or related in some way to honored men (1992, p.12). [Le regole della 'ndrangheta calabrese non contemplano la possibilità di affiliare elementi femmina ma se una donna viene riconosciuta particolarmente meritevole può essere associata con il titolo di *sorella d'omertà*; senza però prestare giuramento di fedeltà alla organizzazione come è obbligatoriamente previsto per gli uomini; ma difficilmente si riconosce il titolo a chi non è già moglie, figlia, sorella, fidanzata, o comunque imparentata con uomini d'onore].

The Case of Maria Morello: Sorella d'Omertà

Other collaborator of justice mentioned the figure of *sorella d'omertà*, like Calogero Mercenò:

Such a position, which exists in every region, is committed to a woman. In the case of the region of Lombardy, we have Morello Maria, who has the task of helping fugitives within the organization. In the case of Morello [...] I can say that she is, with full rights, a member of the organization with the rank of *santista*—which is the highest a woman can have within the 'Ndrangheta. I want to point out that, in the region, there can be only one woman in the clan that assumes the rank of *santista* and, thus, has the role of *sorella d'omertà* (Gratteri and Nicaso 2006, p. 31).

[Tale carica, che esiste in ogni regione, è affidata ad una donna, che nel caso della Lombardia è Morello Maria, che ha il compito di dare assistenza ai latitanti dell'organizzazione. Nel caso della Morello (...) posso dire che la stessa è inserita a pieno titolo nell'organizzazione e ha la dote di *santista* che è la più elevata che una donna può avere all'interno della 'ndrangheta. Faccio presente che nella regione può esserci una sola donna componente del clan, che assume la dote di *santista* e svolge per l'appunto le funzioni di *sorella d'omertà*].

Maria Morello is the only concrete case of *sorella d'omertà* that studies and magistrates know, and concerns the 'Ndrangheta in Lombardy during the 1970s and 1980s. Originally from Cosenza, but living in Como for many years, Morello performs a variety of functions for the Mazzaferro's cosca: Hiding weapons, individuating targets to rob, and creating protective nets for affiliates. Foti, in the trial relating to the investigation *Fiori nella notte di San Vito* of the DDA of Milan, calls her *sorella d'umiltà* (humility sister), meaning a woman who serves the society and “could be defined as a source of support in roles that are not exclusively military” [che potrebbe definirsi come un fiancheggiamento in ruoli non prettamente military] (Ingrasci 2011, p. 45). Maria Morello is not related to any affiliates, but she has a significant criminal past:

Bad checks, misappropriation of foreclosed homes, forging credit instruments, threats, resisting arrest, smuggling, and, in 1968, conviction for attempted bribery for helping a smuggler avoid the intervention of the Guardia di Finanza (financial police) (Ingrasci 2011, p. 46).

[Assegni a vuoto, sottrazione di cose pignorate, falsità in titoli di credito, minaccia, resistenza a pubblico ufficiale, contrabbando, e nel 1968 condanna per istigazione alla corruzione per aiutare un contrabbandiere ad evitare l'intervento della Guardia di Finanza].

Her specialization, being an informant to the police in exchange for favors, did not prevent her from joining the group and thus assuming the position of *sorella d'omertà*, although keeping secrets is a fundamental prerequisite of this role, as the name itself implies. The woman continued to act as an informant, adapting this activity to the new function: If called by the police regarding activities of affiliates, she maintained confidentiality while handling fabricated information against rivals of the 'Ndrangheta to the benefit of her criminal group. In the conviction magistrate wrote: "The informant Morello [...] could have said more to the Warrant Officer if she wanted to, but she instead handpicked information to pass on to police, following the logic of helping the honored society" [La confidente Morello (...) avrebbe potuto dire di più al maresciallo, se avesse voluto, ma in realtà selezionava le informazioni da passare alle forze dell'ordine, secondo una logica di favore verso la "onorata società"] (Ingrasci 2011, p. 46). As some collaborators have pointed out, the member of 'Ndrangheta did not like her activity of informer; however, they accepted it because it could have worked in their favor.

In 1976, at her restaurant in Laglio, on Lake Como, there was an important summit of 'ndranghetisti who had moved northward with the aim of creating, on the initiative of Mazzaferro, a "control room" for rank assignments in Lombardy's 'Ndrangheta. In the conviction, it is highlighted that "reserving the restaurant for the meeting had required particular confidence for the sensitivity of the topics discussed" [riservare il ristorante per la riunione, comportava particolare fiducia, per la delicatezza degli argomenti (...) trattati] (Ingrasci 2011, p. 46).

Morello proceeds like a woman that reached a high level, so that she not only entertains close relations with Mazzaferro, the boss, but she can even express her dissent for the assignment of ranks; showing, thus, the high amount of knowledge and respect she had within the organization. In judging her position, the court evaluated the following elements of danger: "Her closeness to previous offenders, her numerous criminal records, her loyalty to the code of *omertà*, and typical values of the 'Ndrangheta" [quali elementi di pericolosità la frequentazione di pregiudicati, i numerosi precedenti e la fedeltà al codice di *omertà* e di valori tipico della 'ndrangheta] (Ingrasci 2011, p. 46).

Apart from the rank of *sorella d'omertà*, of which little is known, women do not reach high-command or leadership positions in the 'Ndrangheta. This indicates a total formal absence in the organization. Nevertheless, they play an important role in the criminal sphere, especially in the absence of men.

Female Ambassadors, Cashiers, and Bosses

Female participation is particularly accentuated during the absence of men, when they are fugitives or in prison. As told by a collaborator of justice:

[...] Men were always fugitives or under house arrest, because they forced themselves—that is, locked themselves—at home, and women were the ones who always worked [...] Everything that happened, happened through us women [...]. My aunt and cousin do all the work. I, too, when I was in Calabria, not the weapons, but I took my uncle somewhere in the car, or I went to get little notes to bring to my uncle, he called them “ambasciate;” [...] When weapons arrived, it was my aunt who acted as a relay, she delivered them; or my cousin went to take, I don’t know, the gun, the shotgun, whatever was needed, and brought to her father (Ingrasci 2007, p. 78).

[Gli uomini erano sempre latitanti o erano agli arresti domiciliari forzati, perché si arrestavano da soli, cioè stavano chiusi in casa, e chi lavorava erano tutte le donne (...) Cioè tutte le cose che si svolgevano erano sempre tramite noi donne (...) Mia zia, mia cugina fanno tutto. Anch’io quando ero giù in Calabria, non le armi, ma portavo mio zio, lo accompagnavo in macchina da qualche parte, oppure andavo a prendere i bigliettini da portare a mio zio, lui le chiamava “ambasciate” (...) Quando arrivavano le armi era mia zia che faceva da staffetta, mia zia che le consegnava, oppure mia cugina andava a prendere, non so, la pistola, il fucile, quello che serviva e lo portava a suo padre].

These roles also emerge from the analysis of the case of Seminara feud, identified in *Operazione Artemisia*, aforementioned. Women of clans in conflict had the role of “custody and concealment of weapons, external surveillance, acquiring information, and transmitting messages” [di custodia e nascondimento delle armi, di vigilanza esterna, di acquisizione di informazioni, di trasmissione di messaggi] (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2008). According to magistrates, these seemed to be simple activities, but they were extremely significant, in order to maintain the group cohesion and strength, and resist to the attacks coming both from institutions and from their rivals, and finally to organize for winning the struggle that had been unleashed, by committing new bloody crimes.

The women involved in the 'Ndrangheta are always women belonging to the family nucleus at the base of the criminal organization, the 'ndrine. They go outside the domestic threshold when it is needed.

In April 2012, the *All Inside* and *Califfo 2* investigations shed light on the role of women in the Pesce cosca of Rosarno. According to the arrest warrant, the “bacinella”—the common fund of the groups—was in the hands of Maria Grazia Messina, mother-in-law of Antonino Pesce and grandmother of Francesco Pesce. Other women, on the contrary, acted merely as figureheads. The collaborator Giuseppina Pesce told about this active feminine presence, emphasizing particularly the role of messenger:

[...] Our role was just that of carrying messages. We went to the prisons and could not escape when our family members, brothers, husbands, fathers, asked us to do this, in short, to relay messages (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2012).

[...] il ruolo nostro era proprio questo, di portare i messaggi, andavano al carcere e non potevamo sottrarci quando i nostri familiari, fratelli, mariti, padri, ci chiedevano questo, insomma, di portare i messaggi].

The female role emerges even more in the other powerful cosca of Rosarno, the Bollocco. Judge Giovanni Musarò defined Aurora Spanò, partner of Giulio Bellocco, as “an authentic boss” (Musarò). Previously involved in *Operazione Tasso* and sentenced to 6 years for criminal association aimed at loan sharking, Aurora Spanò was struck again by *Operazione Tramonto*, which, in March 2013, hit the Bellocco

cosca. The woman was even accused for the leadership position she shared with her partner. According to the indictment:

Bellocco Giulio, class 51 and Spanò Aurora in the role of management of the cosca, with the task of deciding, planning, and identifying criminal activities to be carried out, targets to pursue, and victims to hit, gave directives which were implemented by the others members (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2013).

[Bellocco Giulio cl. 51 e Spanò Aurora nel ruolo di direzione della cosca, con compiti di decisione, pianificazione e di individuazione delle azioni delittuose da compiere, degli obiettivi da perseguire e delle vittime da colpire, impartivano direttive alle quali tutti gli altri associati davano attuazione].

The hardening of authoritative head is also evident from the way she relates with her cellmates. Two of them denounce that fact that—as reported in the order for custody:

By relying on the importance of her criminal family, Aurora Spanò put authoritarian and oppressive behaviors in place towards them, demanding that the bed be made or that the bathroom of the cell be cleaned after she used it, or that the breakfast be served. Even during the two women's grieving periods, there were threats of retaliation once their sentences were served. (Don't you dare talk to me that way [...] Do you not know who I am?! [...] If you do not know who I am, it means I'll be seeing you outside [...] I'll make her pay, too) (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2013, p. 150).

[Aurora SPANÒ, facendo leva sullo spessore criminale della sua famiglia, poneva in essere nei loro confronti comportamenti autoritari e vessatori, pretendendo che le venisse rifatto il letto o che venisse pulito il bagno della cella dopo che la stessa ne aveva usufruito o che le fosse servita la colazione. Davanti alle rimostranze delle due donne scattavano le minacce di ritorsioni da consumare una volta scontato il periodo detentivo (“(...) non permetterti di parlarmi in questo modo...non sai chi sono io!” “(...) se non sai chi sono io vorrà dire che ci vedremo fuori (...))” “(...) gliela faccio pagare anche a lei”)].

She showed a strong and criminal attitude when one of her cellmate insulted her calling her “miss” to point out that Aurora was not married to Giulio Bellocco. To exact her revenge, she ordered her son to punish the husband of her cellmate who, soon after, would be brutally beaten. The judge defined her behavior toward the other inmates as “dictatorial.”

Agents of Change

Female turning state's evidence is a novelty for the 'Ndrangheta, although the first case can be traced back to 1993. It is interesting, therefore, to wonder about the motivations and processes that have triggered this transformation.

One of the factors that undoubtedly facilitated the beginning of this new role of women as agents of change has been the process of female emancipation in the Italian society. Though incomplete and imperfect, it has been able to offer different and alternative female models to women enclosed in traditional and patriarchal families.

Another contributory factor has been the diffusion of an Anti-Mafia spirit and action recently developed in Calabria. Since 2008, the arrival of judges Giuseppe Pignatone and Michele Prestipino at the DDA of Reggio Calabria, and later the ar-

rival of Alessandra Cerreti, has strengthened the work of colleagues that had already been working against the 'Ndrangheta, like Judge Nicola Gratteri, leading to a long list of successful investigations.

The Anti-Mafia affected other institutions, such as the municipalities of Monasterace and Rossano and Decollatura, each with a high concentration of Mafia infiltration and run by women mayors, respectively, Maria Carmela Lanzetta, Elisabetta Tripodi, and Anna Maria Cardamone. All have determined to enforce the rules and laws. This has also joined the efforts made on behalf of civil society, comprising mainly young people who, in recent years, have organized various types of events and initiatives against the 'Ndrangheta.

Turning state's evidence has made the work of magistrates more effective since it has enabled to break the secrecy of the Mafia organization and, therefore, to carry out new investigations. Such investigations had negative impacts on organized crime, and positive effects on the perception of public opinion about the effectiveness of Anti-Mafia state's actions.

In 2007, there were 97 collaborators of justice that previously belonged to the 'Ndrangheta, and in 2008, another four were added (101); three more in 2009 (104); in 2010, the number grew by ten (114), and in the first half of 2011, another four collaborated, reaching a total number of 118.⁴ The women who turned state's witness have doubled from 2008 to the first half of 2011 (from four to eight).

The collaboration proceedings have brought the legendary impenetrability of the organization into question. The family structure of the association led many analysts to believe that the blood relations at the core of linkage between the members of the association explain the lower number of collaborators in comparison with other Mafia associations. There is no doubt that accusing relatives is difficult and, therefore, in many cases, it was indeed the constraint of blood that prevented a falling-out within the association. However, as hypothesized by sociologist Rocco Sciarrone, other factors, there exist in order to explain the lower tendency of informants within the 'Ndrangheta, including the type of structure of the organization, solid and flexible at the same time, and with a hierarchy of the knowledge based on the model of the Carbonari society at the end of the 1800s; and the anti-pentiti strategy implemented by the organization grounded more on offering informants money, rather than implementing revenge actions. In other words the "lost sheeps" are not killed, but rather contacted one by one, being promised better opportunities than those offered by the government. Women have been pawns of this reconquering technique, playing a very valuable role in getting their deviant men back on track. The reaction of women, when faced with their relative's choice to collaborate, is of great importance for the success of the collaboration itself. Supporting the man obviously facilitates the process of collaboration. Conversely, if not endorsed, or even disowned by his wife and family, he can sometimes retract his statements.

Women who turned state evidence show to be vulnerable and, at the same time, firm in separating themselves from the criminal organization. Yet, some cases of

⁴ Data received from "Relazione del Ministero dell'Interno al Parlamento" regarding special protection measures.

women who offered their testimonies to the state ended in tragedy. Lea Garofalo, 35 years old, was killed by her husband, Carlo Cosco, 'Ndrangheta boss from Crotona. In 2011, Maria Concetta Cacciola, 31 years old, mother of three, became collaborator of justice, but soon after retracted and left the protection program. After returning to the oppressive environment of her original family, she committed suicide by drinking muriatic acid. Even Titta Buccafusca, 38-year-old wife of Pantaleone Mancusi, boss of Vibo Valentia, and mother of a child, was not able to keep testifying against the 'Ndrangheta. In 2011, she decided to speak out, but after a few days she changed her mind and committed suicide by drinking muriatic acid.

Other female collaborations continued, despite the numerous emotional, logistical, and organizational difficulties that the decision to testify implies. Rita Di Giovine turned herself over to the police in 1993, when she was 36. Her declarations not only helped the judge Maurizio Romanelli to carry out *Operazione Belgio* against the Serraino-Di Giovine clan—one of the most powerful criminal organizations in Milan in the 1980s—but also provided the first insight into the role of women in the 'Ndrangheta, revealing its oppressive features. Rita was able to start a new life despite the assassination plans by her relatives belonging to the 'Ndrangheta. She did not only finish high school, fulfilling the dream of learning how to write, but she also met a man with whom she could share her life. Giuseppina Pesce, from a historic 'Ndrangheta family on the plain of Gioia Tauro, has kept collaborating with judges, showing great courage. She also offered as Rita Di Giovine did 20 years ago, a representation of Mafia women that went beyond stereotypes. The fear of being killed, especially by her brother, never leaves her. Nevertheless, she has kept to testify in front of the court.

When looking at women who turned state witness, it is no doubt that one of the main aspects of their stories is the relationship with their sons and daughters. According to many observers, children are the main cause of their change: Maternal love would push these women toward the state, previously considered as an enemy. Redeeming the future of sons and daughters is undoubtedly a fundamental incentive; however, it is necessary to deconstruct the myth that maternal love is the sole motive behind turning state evidence or becoming a witness.

First of all, a mother's love is not the discriminating factor that makes the difference compared to those who do not rebel against the 'Ndrangheta. On the contrary, maternal love is the root of the behavior of women who do not collaborate and continue teaching their daughters to obey the men of the family. This could be a coping mechanism in order to survive in a sexist and violent environment. Indeed, in relation to the "survival techniques" of Mafia women, sociologist Renate Siebert wrote:

Women themselves tend to become spokeswomen of male superiority, adjusting themselves to the prescribed female role in order to secure a space where they can act without being disputed, to exercise power over objects, people, and relations that are not formally recognized to them (Siebert 1998, p. 58).

[Le donne stesse tendono a farsi portavoce della superiorità maschile, adeguandosi formalmente al ruolo femminile prescritto – al fine di garantirsi uno spazio incontestato per agire, per mettere in atto un potere su cose, persone e relazioni che formalmente non viene riconosciuto loro].

In addition, maternal love pushes women to perpetrate the vendetta system. Women accused in the *Artemisia* investigation, described previously, hope for the death of the rival clan's young guys in the name of their children.

Finally, attributing the reasons for collaboration merely to maternal love risks to reduce the femininity to an ahistorical and universal role tied with maternity, like the 'Ndrangheta does.

Instead, it seems to be mainly the fatigue and exasperation of experiencing segregation, family, and male control that can bring 'Ndrangheta women to the choice of collaborating with justice. More than motherly love, it is vulnerability that makes them strong and ready to make such a brave choice as rebelling. And not surprisingly often is the love for another man who offers them the opportunity to escape or to dream to run away from her overbearing husband. Giuseppina Pesce met a worker in the factory where she worked, while Maria Concetta Cacciola glimpsed her freedom just virtually, as she knew a man by a social network.

In other words, witnesses decide to start the meandering and difficult route of collaboration with justice because they are moved by a desire concerning them as women. It is important to represent witnesses as women, subjects, and persons that choose consciously, since it permits to counterbalance the attempts of lawyers, families, and, sometimes, journalists to depict female witnesses and collaborators as affected by mental disorders, and, thus, to contribute to highlight their reliability as witnesses in trials. The judge for the preliminary investigation regarding *Operazione Tramonto* based on Maria Concetta Cacciola's own testimonies defines them as "intrinsically credible, logical, and held up under scrutiny" [intrinsecamente credibili, logiche e riscontrate dagli accertamenti compiuti] (Tribunale di Reggio Calabria 2013). Maria Concetta Cacciola died in 2011, whereas *Operazione Tramonto* was carried out in 2013. Surviving, her words still have a devastating effect on the 'Ndrangheta's cosche. This is a clear example of the power of collaborating and becoming a witness.

Having deconstructed the rhetoric of "the mother witness," it is however important to emphasize that it is their maternal status that produces a long-term liberating effect that continues for generations to come. It is a choice of freedom, first of all, for themselves, but also has important effects on their sons and daughters; and, moreover, the fact that these women distance themselves from 'Ndrangheta—because women and not just because mothers—makes their testimony a real opportunity to produce a new transmission bringing discontinuity.

Giuseppina Pesce, in her first meeting with judge Alessandra Cerreti, affirmed: "I have wanted to see you because I feel like I'm a victim [...] of this family context that does not belong to me" [io l'ho voluta vedere perché mi sento vittima di questa (...) di questo contesto familiare che non mi appartiene] (Abbate 2013, p. 55). At the same time, Giuseppina is aware that her choice will guarantee a different education for her own children, as seen previously.

The role of agent of change played by Giuseppina as a mother is evident in the words entrusted in a letter that explains her reasoning:

On October 14, 2010, I expressed my desire to start this process, driven by love as a mother and also by the desire to have a better life, far from the environment in which we were born

and raised. I was—and am still—convinced that this is the right choice. Due to lifestyle choices of family and relatives, we have always been marked by a life of suffering, hardship, and above all, a lack of courage for fear of consequences; when, however, each one of us should be able to do and choose what is right and wrong (Prestipino and Pignatone 2012, p. 146).

[Il 14 ottobre 2010 ho espresso la mia volontà di iniziare questo percorso spinta dall'amore di madre e dal desiderio di poter avere anche io una vita migliore lontano dall'ambiente cui siamo nati e cresciuti. Ero e sono convinta che sia la scelta giusta dal momento che per scelte di vita di familiari e congiunti siamo sempre stati segnati da una vita piena di sofferenza e difficoltà e soprattutto mancanza di coraggio per paura delle conseguenze. Quando invece ognuno di noi dovrebbe avere la facoltà di fare e scegliere ciò che è giusto e sbagliato].

At the trial for the death of Lea Garofalo, her daughter Denise Cosco sued her father. The gesture is in continuity with her mother's breach as a demonstration that Lea's choice had an impact on the transmission of a female model of liberation from 'Ndrangheta oppression.

Giuseppina Pesce, finally, aims to be a positive example for women with a life similar to hers. In her letter to judges, she wrote: "I also hope that many people like me who find themselves in these situations find the courage to rise up" [spero anche che molte persone come me che si trovano in queste situazioni trovino il coraggio di ribellarsi] (Prestipino and Pignatone 2012, p. 147).

The aspect of the emulation effect is not to be neglected. Giuseppina has led the way for her cousin Maria Concetta Cacciolla, just like Piera Aiello did for her sister-in-law Rita Atria in Sicily in 1991. Giuseppina has shown that it is possible to escape from the 'Ndrangheta unashamedly, acting as a concrete example of the possibility of abandoning the criminal family.

Conclusion

Exploring the role of women in the 'Ndrangheta is difficult because researchers have to deal with a secret criminal organization and with a subject that operates primarily in the private sphere. It is, therefore, a doubly hidden object of study. The knowledge gap can be filled only by listening to former men and women of honor that, due to law number 82 of 1991, have decided to cooperate with the justice system.

Through testimonies of women that publicly took a step against the organization, it has been possible to reconstruct the different facets of the female universe in the 'Ndrangheta, and, especially, to overcome stereotypes, according to which Mafia women are not aware of their husband's activity and are respected as women. Grasping the internal insight is undoubtedly effective, thus, confirming the importance of using oral sources in the study of the Mafia in order to integrate the representation offered by trial sources (Ingrasci 2013).

Women who belong to the families of 'Ndrangheta are women who, on one hand, understand, know, and act criminally in the name of family; work as watchmen in

homicides; transmit sensitive information; take positions that are heard; and have conspiratorial attitudes. On the other, they leave the spheres of formal power to men and, on the private level, are subjected to severe male control. On the one side, they act independently; on the other, they are dependent on men of the family or even suffer from abuse. In the 'ndrine, their presence, often strong, is certainly aware and, at the same time, marked by extreme vulnerability.

'Ndrangheta women are the protagonists of a double transformative course movement influenced by the emancipation process of society: One is the result of a pseudo-emancipation process; the other is the result of a path of liberation.

In the first process, women have taken tasks that in the past were exclusively male, yet they kept suffering to male oppression: They seem to "left over," but in reality, they continue to perpetuate the chauvinist system of the 'Ndrangheta.

In the second type of change, on the contrary, women who turned state witness have undertaken a liberating track. This change is a positive transformation not only for themselves, but also for the society, and, therefore, it must be understood in terms of innovation and not, like the first type, as a change that masks continuity. When Mafia women are able to break the chains of subordination, affirm their will-power, and teach their sons and daughters the value of words against the Mafia's law of silence. Women who collaborate demonstrate their ability to capitalize on the emancipatory influences acknowledged by the whole of society, being agents of change on two levels: One of self-determination and the other of transmission. For this reason, they may be defined as free and emancipated women, as opposed to those women who remained caged in the 'Ndrangheta's family networks, conformed to the male model.

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