
The Lilith Information Network

Italian Feminism in an International Context

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INTRODUCTION

The Lilith Information Network (LIN) is the first Italian database that collects and provides information specifically on what women write in Italy and abroad. Lilith is connected with other women's documentation centers in Europe; our goal is to link our network with women's centers throughout the world.

Lilith can increase international cooperation in several ways. It makes it easier for scholars to do research on Italian women; it enables us to share with other women's groups our experience of building and managing an independent women's documentation center; it provides research tools for academicians interested in developing comparative women's studies departments at their universities; it is connected with projects sponsored by the European Community to train librarians specialized in women's texts; and it has helped to sustain and spread the cultural impact of independent feminist journals.

WOMEN'S DOCUMENTATION CENTERS IN ITALY

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, women in Italy founded a large number of women's documentation centers; several others have been founded since then.

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Some of these centers are fully autonomous, both financially and institutionally. Others are linked to, and at times directly dependent on, state funding, mostly in cities with supportive left-wing administrations. It is difficult to estimate the number of centers that have existed or continue to exist, because the situation is always in flux; new ones are founded, others close down, and some undergo crises but are eventually able to continue their activities. A few years ago, a census revealed the existence of about 100 women's centers, documentation centers, bookstores, and libraries in Italy.

THE LILITH INFORMATION NETWORK

In 1984, the Association for the National Coordination of Women's Centers was founded. Almost a decade later, in 1993, ten of those centers and bookstores, which had been working together on several other projects, founded the Lilith Information Network. The ten founding centers are in Florence, Rome, Milan, Ferrara, Bologna, L'Aquila, Cagliari, and Genoa, and all have large, specialized women's libraries with rich archives of material that would be difficult to catalog with traditional (male-centered) cataloging systems.

Cataloging Feminist Material

In order to catalog this feminist material, and thanks especially to the expertise and the commitment of Eugenia Galateri and Piera Codognotto of the Florence women's bookstore, we have been able to develop a computer program (using CDS/ISIS software) that incorporates the specific features of a woman-centered database. For example, we have eliminated the generic masculine in all its forms and have developed specialized feminist search words, which do not exist in male-oriented cataloging systems.

The quickest, most effective way to catalog such female-specific documents and books as the ones we own seemed to be the creation of an index based on a female thesaurus—that is, on a list of keywords derived from the feminist books and documents themselves. The most significant advantage of this indexing strategy is that we can now search not only by author and title but also by *feminist* subject, using keywords that belong to the specific lexicon developed in the context of the women's movement and women's studies.

Creating a Thesaurus

By using a female thesaurus we can also pass on and insert into our everyday language the words and phrases that have emerged from the women's movement and that reflect its history and contributions to many fields of knowledge. All this aims first at preserving a female and feminist heritage that may be lost or forgotten, and second at transforming contemporary reality by popularizing

in everyday language a gender-conscious vocabulary that, by its very existence, will help change traditional attitudes and ways of thinking.

For example, the following words are traditionally used to designate women's work inside the home:

- Housewife
- Domestic work
- Family work

These terms suggest the invisibility of such work. But the use of Caretaking as a thesaurus term implies that the work should be redistributed between the sexes.

Some new, more politicized words have been adopted for thesaurus use:

- Double labor
- Double presence

Using such terms to designate women's work inside and outside the home emphasizes the complexity of women's labor.

From the dichotomies nature/culture, body/mind, woman/man, a woman-centered thesaurus helps women arrive at an awareness of their bodies and their cultural and political implications.

Expanding the Thesaurus

The thesaurus, created by Beatrice Perucci and Adriana Perrotta of the Milan women's center, is being enriched, revised, and computerized. We are also planning to develop a multilingual thesaurus, with the Centro de Investigacion Historica de la Dona (CIHD) in Barcelona; we plan to extend this international collaboration to other women's centers in various nations and continents.

About 4,000 of the 10,000 records in the Lilith database were taken from *Leggere Donna*, an independent feminist literary journal founded in Ferrara in 1980. In Italian, the name contains a pun: "reading women" and "reading as women." The goals of the journal have always been to document, discuss, and preserve women's artistic production. *Leggere Donna* was in fact the first journal in Italy to deal systematically with books by and about women. The multidisciplinary and international variety of texts reviewed since 1980 continue to make the journal an important source of information on women's accomplishments in literature and the other arts. *Leggere Donna* is instrumental to the continual updating of the Lilith database.

CONCLUSION

Since the establishment of the Lilith Information Network, others have joined the ten founding centers in collaborating on implementation of, or in simply using,

the database. Other institutions, including public libraries and university research institutes, have applied to become members of LIN. The network is available throughout Italy. We have met with other European women's centers, and we have an active network member (CIHD) in Barcelona. We are collaborating with CIHD on a New Opportunity for Women (NOW) project sponsored by the European Economic Community. NOW projects aim to increase the opportunities for cultural and technological professionalization for women. More specifically, the NOW project connected with LIN focuses on training women librarians specializing in cataloging women's texts. Training includes courses in women's studies, library science, and computer science.

Above all, our goal is to link our network with other women's centers throughout the world. We want to let others know about our activities as feminist librarians in Italy. We also want to learn from and about the activities of women in other countries.