



Giovanna Terranova, founder of WAM, a group of women who've lost loved ones to mob violence, stands beside a memorial to the Mafia's victims.

# WOMEN AGAINST THE MAFIA

*Sicily's mothers, wives, sisters and daughters have had enough of murder and bloodshed. For the first time, they are standing up to the Mob. By Virginia Westbury.*

September 25, 1979, the day Sicilian magistrate Cesare Terranova was gunned down on the streets of Palermo, marked a grim turning point in Italian history — it was the first time the Mafia had shot a judge. For Giovanna Terranova, it was the day that changed her life.

The events are still vivid in her

memory. Around 8.30am, having said goodbye to her husband, 56-year-old magistrate and anti-Mafia campaigner Cesare, she had just opened the morning paper when shots rang out in the street below their apartment.

"My heart went numb with fear," she recalls. "I ran downstairs but people pushed me back, they wouldn't let me see▷

what had happened." Cesare, his driver and a policeman were lying dead in their blood-spattered car. In a busy street filled with passers-by and early morning traffic, two gunmen had calmly stepped up and opened fire through the windows of the vehicle. Like most Mafia "hits", the assassins took no pains to hide themselves. It was a very public execution.

"They had never shot a magistrate before then," says Terranova. "The Mafia sometimes killed other crime bosses, but never public officials. Of course there had been threats, but we never thought it would happen to Cesare."

The event propelled her from a life as a carefree, well-to-do socialite into the turbulent arena of Italian politics. Today, she is one of the country's most prominent anti-Mafia campaigners, founder and head of an organisation, Women Against the Mafia (WAM), responsible for sparking the first major backlash against the organisation that many say governs Sicily and has a stranglehold on Italy.

In eight years, WAM has become one of Italy's most vocal and prominent anti-Mafia groups. Its members produced the first successful petition against the Mafia, forced the speedy introduction of new banking laws, and testified against mafiosi during the famous "maxi" trials. They have conducted education programs, campaigned for anti-Mafia legis-



F. ZECCHIN/MAGNUM

**WAM members Piera lo Verso and her daughter lost their husband and father.**

Today, it controls a multi-billion dollar criminal empire. Run by sophisticated corporate businessmen, utilising networks of professional assassins, it deals in everything from drugs to real estate and major public works contracts. Since 1979, it has executed more than a dozen prominent figures who have threatened to thwart or expose its activities. The tally includes eight judges, a journalist, several policemen and even a former president of Sicily.

Women Against the Mafia began when a handful of women, some of them

and hide," she remembers. "Then came the anger, the feelings of impotence, danger... These are what pushed me to do something."

Before long, she found herself talking about the Mafia to community groups and school children, urging them not to blindly accept the crime syndicate as a "necessary evil". Then, in 1982, angered at the Government's inaction, she and several other women drew up a petition demanding tougher measures, including speeding up the approval of banking laws to restrict the flow of illegal cash. It gathered 50,000 signatures in the Mafia's heartlands, Calabria and Sicily.

Not long after Terranova presented it to Italy's President, the Government approved the new banking regulations. The victory spurred her and the other women to form an official organisation and the following year WAM was born.

It has since become the leading anti-Mafia pressure group in Sicily. In 1987, they held a sit-in in Palermo's main square against plans to dismantle a special pool of Mafia investigating magistrates. The plans were shelved. Earlier this year they participated in a 7000-strong street march in Palermo.

WAM's most important action, however, came during the "maxi" trials of 1986 in which 456 mafiosi were rounded up by police and tried. Several women — many of them members of Mafia families and supporters of WAM — testified "with great courage", says Terranova. As a result they were ostracised by family

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lation and organised several demonstrations and sit-ins — not bad for a group which began as a loose coalition of politically inexperienced housewives and shopkeepers, a support group for the grieving relatives of Mafia victims.

Giovanna Terranova founded WAM in 1983, not just because of her husband's death, she says, but because of her alarm at the Mafia's phenomenal expansion. As a girl, she had hardly heard of the crime organisation. The Mafia was a rural phenomenon, small scale and not very powerful outside its own networks.

members of Mafia families and those who'd lost husbands, brothers or sons to mob violence, gathered in Palermo to commiserate and comfort each other. Michaela Buscemi, who came from a family with strong Mafia connections, had seen both her brothers killed; Piera lo Verso had lost a husband; Rita Costa was the wife of Palermo's public prosecutor, shot dead not long after Cesare Terranova; Vita Rugnetta had lost her son. In their midst was the forthright Terranova. "After Cesare was killed all I wanted to do at first was stay at home

**Left: WAM members testified at the 1986 'maxi' trials. Below: Mafia boss Michele Greco — jailed for 78 murders, then freed.**



and friends, threatened and harassed. One woman had her shop bombed. Another WAM member, Piera lo Verso, paid for her testimony by losing her business to a customer boycott. Michaela Buscemi had to withdraw her allegations after receiving threats to her children. "Those trials were the only time I felt

amount of time accused people can be held pending trial and, for one reason or another, prosecutors simply failed to get the cases together fast enough. "It seemed like a tremendous waste of time," says Terranova. "But in a way it was a victory because it brought the whole thing into the open." She is firmly

## Most businesses in Sicily pay a tithe. They wanted Grassi's entire business.

really afraid," Terranova recalls. "There was a man who sat with his back to the court staring at me all throughout the proceedings." The trials seemed a landmark victory for Italian justice, the first time it had prevailed against so many mafiosi. Nineteen life sentences were handed down. But by 1990, most of those convicted, 80 percent, had had their sentences quashed on appeals. Sicily's reputed Mafia leader, Michele Greco, 67, was jailed for life in 1987 for having ordered 78 murders. He was released last February on a technicality. Others were freed before they ever got to court. Italian law sets limits on the

convicted, however, that the Government is not serious about wiping out the Mafia. "If they were, something would have happened by now," she says. Her group is just one of those calling for special legislation, including allowing a greater lead up time to trials and longer jail sentences. It's significant, she says, that not one arrest has yet been made in connection with more than a dozen murders of public officials since 1979, including her husband's slaying. Terranova is just one of many who believe that the crime bosses have connections within the Government — "In that sense, the Mafia

sees itself as part of the state, not against it." And it continues to grow. Just a few months ago, its latest victim, a Palermo entrepreneur, Libero Grassi, was gunned down after he refused Mafia demands. Grassi became symbolic of the new wave of expansion. Most businesses in Sicily pay a tithe, called *pizzo*, usually between 10 and 40 percent of their income to the Mafia. In the case of Grassi, they wanted his entire business. Frustrated by the Government's weakness and unable to force any new legislation, Terranova and her group continue their sit-ins and marches. In a way, it's an unlikely occupation for this soft-spoken, elegant woman who has been used to mixing with the cream of Sicilian society. Born into a privileged land-owning family, married to the handsome, up-and-coming magistrate, her life could have been very different. Sitting in her antique-filled apartment in Palermo, sipping strong Sicilian coffee and overlooking the street on which her husband was assassinated 12 years ago, it's easy to imagine the comfortable retirement she might have enjoyed. While they had no children, they had a good marriage and were very close, she says. She reads to me an extract from a letter he wrote to a friend a year before his death in which he ▷

# 'I believe women are bolder and can take more initiative than men,' says Terranova.

◀ spoke of his gratitude to his wife for having been close to him "in all the important and painful moments ... I regret only that I've not always been able to give her what I would have liked or to have seen her as she wished and deserved to be seen."

Cesare Terranova had been one of



F. ZECCHIN/MAGNUM

## Rita Costa's husband was shot dead.

Italy's leading anti-Mafia campaigners, the prime force behind a major series of trials in the sixties (he was the first judge to put a Mafia boss, Luciano Liggio, behind bars) and a member of a 13-year parliamentary inquiry into the group. He entered politics in the seventies but became bitterly disillusioned with government inaction, especially after it ignored all of the inquiry's recommendations. After serving two terms, he headed back into the magistracy.

He was about to resume an important investigative position on the bench in Palermo when he was murdered. In a newspaper interview given two days before his death, he talked about the changes sweeping the Mafia, how it had dumped its old rural leadership and penetrated the realm of government and big business. He spoke scathingly of the parliament's inaction and concluded that the "Italian Government no longer works". Of the threats to his own life, he said he was aware of them but "not afraid".

Giovanna Terranova sees WAM's most important role in providing education. "Sicilians have always lived with the Mafia. They have this idea it's fate," she says. "I want to convince people it's not necessary." She believes women have

a special role in eradicating the violence and bloodshed in society. "That's because they are more compassionate and closer to their feelings," she says. "I believe they are bolder, too, and can take more initiative than men."

"Our role has been changing. Once we were under the control of the family but now we are getting more freedom and influence. We don't have men's bitterness and cynicism. We still believe change is possible."

Terranova doesn't believe she will be killed, not because of any old fashioned Mafia chivalry — hit men recently gunned down a six-months' pregnant woman along with her husband — but because "we simply don't have enough evidence". Crime bosses don't waste time or money on what they consider inessential killings. But Women Against the Mafia is achieving results in the arena of public opinion. "Our biggest victory is that we've raised public awareness," says Terranova.

More and more ordinary citizens are speaking out in trials and in the media. Anti-Mafia marches are becoming regular events. In September, following the death of Libero Grassi, 7000 local business owners took to the streets of Palermo to demand urgent action. Grassi's widow and children are reported to be under pressure to co-operate in the way the entrepreneur wouldn't, but according to all accounts, they are resisting. "Will they kill the whole family?" wonders Terranova. Providing support for those with the courage to stand up to the Mafia or to bring evidence before courts is essential, she says.

Even Italy's reluctant politicians may soon be forced to act more effectively. As the country prepares to join a united Europe, pressure is coming from foreign governments who look on with growing unease. What consequences will there be once trade and other barriers are dropped and the whole of Europe becomes the Mafia's playground, they wonder?

In spite of the setbacks, Terranova and her small band of determined women say they will fight on. "I will go on challenging them," she says. "Even if that challenge is limited, even if they kill me, I don't care. We will never surrender." □