Special Issue Intersectionality

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory, Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Mariella Nocenzi

Università degli Studi di Roma "Sapienza"

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✉ redazione@fuoriluogo.info
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Angela Maria Toffanin[1]

Intersectional approach within Italian anti-violence centres. Challenges for research and policies[2]

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the call for the adoption of an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) in the social sciences seems to state the obvious, claiming as it does to consider every dimension of an individual's life as intertwined and shaped by the interactions of different social attributes of identity concurrently: gender, class, sexuality, age, migratory condition, culture, dis-ability, among others. Each of these categories of belonging can be considered as a code that in everyday life is mixed with others and is sensitive to the specific context of power relations. Furthermore, these codes are associated with symbolic constructions, shared representations, connected social structures related to the distribution of opportunities and vulnerabilities. The intersectional approach points to considering simultaneously all the axes of subordination that subjects experience and incorporate. That means that intersectionality is an epistemological and analytical transdisciplinary device used to understand power, inequalities, privileges, and their role in defining subjective and collective experiences.

This way of framing social problems and the challenges of contemporary inequalities is crucial in empirical research as well as at the epistemological level: often, variations and causalities are measured and explained by one or two variables (gender and nationality or religion, or age or culture), as if these simplified categorisations are enough to inform any practice enacted and signified by the subjects and groups analysed (Eve, 2013). Quite the contrary, simplified constructions and standardisations of categories in social analysis often end up reifying subjective and collective paths from partial dimensions assumed to be unambiguous determinants of social experience (McCall, 2005). People, indeed, normally carry and embody more diversity at the same time. The challenge proposed by intersectionality is, also, that of recognising and analysing both the differences among the people who are categorised into each group, and the similarities among those defined into different groups. This is a crucial debate for critical sociology, which aims to reflect on the relationship between belonging and social environment in the construction of subjective paths, thus focusing on both contexts, structures and institutions, and identity characteristics.

Born as a political tool to give voice and recognition to the so-called minorities, criticising the single-issue agendas of the anti-racist and feminist movements (Rebughini, 2021), intersectionality has been at the centre of the gender studies agenda (Yuval-Davies, 2011) since before Kimberlè Crenshaw (1989) invented the word. During the last decades, this concept has become crucial in feminist theories as well as capable of contaminating other areas of knowledge production (Vuola, 2017). Over the years, in its "amazing journey" (Lutz, 2016), this concept has become very popular, and its success has resulted in its diffusion to such an extent that it has become a buzz word (Davis, 2008), particularly when it comes to translating it from the theoretical to the empirical plane.

This article offers a reading, in the Italian context, of the international debate on the use of an intersectional approach in research on male violence against women (VAW). First, it addresses one of the most debated arguments in the scholarly discussion on gender relations, namely the dualist interpretative approach based on the differences between women and men. The first paragraph offers a literature review on male violence, arguing for the need for postures oriented

1 Angela Maria Toffanin, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - Istituto di Ricerche sulla Popolazione e le Politiche Sociali (CNR-IRPPS), angelamaria.toffanin@cnr.it, ORCID: 0000-0002-3224-2173.

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towards the adoption of a gender-sensitive approach. After the methodological description of the fieldwork, the following paragraphs will present and discuss some of the representations of "women in situations of violence" and "women who access services" shared by Italian anti-violence centres' (AVC) and shelters' workers and activists, and then representation of the particular methodologies enacted by AVCs of feminist and women's groups in supporting survivors. Among others, the goal of AVCs' interventions is confronting violence and supporting women in their pathway out of violence and towards self-determination. The aim of this article is to analyse constructions of meaning that implicitly define boundaries and stratifications of social eligibility granted (or denied) to the subjects in relation to their embodied differences, and to identify potentials and limits of the particular AVCs' intervention methodologies, which could be useful in rethinking care models.

2. Theoretical frame: dualist approach and intersectionality in the violence against women debate.

During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers in feminist, women's and gender studies, as well as those in racial theory and postcolonial studies, started to problematise the issue of differences in relation to a presumed homogeneity within the social group of "women" or of "black people", produced by a dualist thinking not empirically detected (Gregori, 1993). When talking about gender relations analysis, the critique was of relying on the myth of womanhood as an internally homogeneous category (Swindler, 1986), based on the sociological notion of the sameness built on a shared oppression. This kind of conceptualisation, to define the "woman" (but, in the same way, "the poor", "the black", "the young" people) as the ideal-type of the whole of the differences measurable within the human experiences of subjects that define themselves (or are defined) as "women", ends up ignoring the differences among "women as a group built up by narrations" and "women as their own *her*stories subjects" (Scott, 1988). The proposal consisted in taking into account the extent to which subjects constitute themselves (subjectively and as a group) through the practices proper to their statuses and roles, which in turn derive from the interaction between class, cultural, religious, age and sexual orientation affiliations, and not simply as a function of a particular economic system or other differentiations considered individually (Mohanty, 2003). More generally, the critique refers to the idea of "gender" as a self-sufficient modality of difference, without considering how each identity attribute affects in daily life practices and patterns of behaviour that each person represents. Furthermore, the category of gender does not coincide with that of "women", even less when built on a singular, universal, unique model of identity, namely that of the heterosexual, western, white and middle-class woman (Moore, 1994) These reflections have run throughout the scholarly debates on male VAW, in particular those born from adopting and discussing feminist patriarchal theory (Firestone, 1970; Millet, 1970; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). This theory has been crucial in the conceptualisation of VAW as gendered, but it has been criticised because, while highlighting the direction of violence itself (Walby et al., 2017), it has obscured the weight of both social context and subjective representations, both of which are necessary to understand gender-based VAW (Carby, 1982).

Three main arguments were made to claim the importance of distinguishing among differences (Toffanin, 2021): the first calls for considering power relations within the field of gender relations, recognising that subjects' concrete experiences (and their meanings) result from the interaction of different systems of domination, not only that of patriarchy: gender, "race" and culture are not to be considered as separate categories, but as "regimes of difference" linked to each other (Mason, 2002). This approach will allow us to understand the processes through which different categories of identity are built up and interact with each other (Wyatt, 1985; Hart, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991).

The second argument concerns the opposition between women-victims and men-aggressors in a kind of biological foundationalism in which attributed sex, biological body and socially fixed gender roles are overlapped (Nicholson & Seidman, 1999; Butler, 1993; Danna, 2007). Among other things, it would exclude from analysis the experiences of anyone who does not coincide with this dichotomic model: women who act out violence, men who try not to benefit from privilege, and individuals who experience violence because they do not conform to predefined gender roles and stereotypical gender identities that are functional to the dominant social order. Finally, the third critique of the patriarchal approach refers to the production of representations: the risk would be of portraying male dominance as insurmountable, underestimating women's capacity to enact practices that renegotiate subordination (Heise, 1995; Michalski, 2005). In this sense, international (Hearn, 1996) and national (Ventimiglia, 1987) debates on masculinities have already critically discussed the nexus between social construction of masculinities and violence. Here the proposal is to consider as crucial the differences between various experiences, constructed in different ways depending on the social, political and economic contexts (Bimbi, 2019). The intersectional approach states exactly the need to develop cognitive and empirical tools to recognise the interaction of class, gender and race/ethnicity, in order to understand the articulation of power relations, without producing inconsistent analysis that considers as separated and internally homogeneous the social divisions and categorisations produced by racialisation, genderisation, classism (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Within this debate, studies on gender-based violence suffered by women belonging to marginalised groups, particularly those women actively experiencing migration (Bograd, 1999; Menjíavar & Salcido, 2002; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010; Raj & Silverman, 2002), are particularly useful in demonstrating how to embody intersectionality as an analytical tool that helps to make distinctions, being able to investigate both the experiences of violence in the dynamic intersection of sex, gender, class and racialisation processes (Jonhson & Ferraro, 2000), and the differences between different symbolic-cultural horizons that also persist within (hetero)defined social groups (Crichton-Hill, 2001).

These studies have highlighted the specific vulnerability that every woman may suffer as a woman and a migrant: critical elements do not only refer to the intersection of direct sexism and racism, but also to the effects of processes related to administrative constraints on the regularisation of the residence permit, and housing or labour policies. These issues reveal the weight of structural or social limitations also on the possibility of asking for help, or not, outside personal social networks (Toffanin, 2015). For example, it can be difficult for a migrant woman to leave her violent employer or her husband, if her legal status depends on her job or her marriage, as the Grevio[3] report on Italy warns (2020). Other conditions that can make it harder to find exit routes from violence for migrant women are linked to possibly reduced social networks, or to professional devaluation that complicates (or prevents) access to the labour market (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Pederson, 2009; Bimbi, 2014).

There are, then, analyses focused on the relation between migrant women and public and private services supporting survivors of VAW. They highlight that some women may feel uncomfortable approaching public or private social services because of different language and cultural norms, or because of the fear of possible racist stereotypes, or because of the perception that they cannot (or will not) adhere to the "ideal" victim model shared in their society of immigration (Brännvall, 2012; Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005; Villalòn, 2010). Finally, some analyses have pointed out the so-called secondary victimisation, that is, the condition of additional suffering experienced by those who turn to public or private actors looking for help but instead receive neglect, blame, or devaluation (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Fanci, 2011). The combination of these elements

3 The "Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence" (Grevio) is an independent human rights monitoring body mandated to monitor the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ("the Istanbul Convention") by the parties.

can negatively affect confidence in accessing public and private social services: the fear is, on the one hand, of being discriminated against and/or exacerbating stereotypes of one's social group, and on the other hand, of not being properly helped. Finally, many women refer to their concern that their situation may get worse, more serious or more dangerous, if they try to seek help (Leone et al., 2014).
From the results of these studies, we analyse whether and how, in Italian anti-violence centres, an intersectional approach has developed: the question is if, in their practices and methodologies, anti-violence workers and activists have incorporated a standpoint that is attentive to subjective experiences, also considering the specific social, political and economic contexts in which they occur. That means a kind of care for differences capable of recognising the survivors' subjectivities without reifying them.

3. Methodology

The focus of this study is the Italian anti-violence system and in particular the universe of AVCs born from the experiences of women's and feminist groups. Within these places, specific methodologies to support women in situations of violence are practiced, oriented towards women's agency and personalised interventions (Busi et al., 2021). It is a privileged observation point for reasoning about the relationships between workers and users, which can also provide useful information for rethinking the interventions activated by public and private social services in the sphere of social care, health and school policies (Toffanin, 2022).
This article is built on data and analysis collected during the ViVa Project[4] research activities. It refers to quantitative data collected in 2018 among the 335 AVCs and 264 shelters mapped in 2018 by IRPPS-CNR in collaboration with ISTAT (Misiti, 2019), and, simultaneously, to qualitative data collected in 2019 and 2020 analysing both thirty-eight case studies involving thirty-five AVCs and six shelters selected from all over Italy, considering their experience (in terms of years of activity) and the type of management, either public or private non-profit (Toffanin et al., 2021). Each case-study involved a desk analysis of the relevant contexts, study visits and interviews with workers and activists, with the aim of analysing representations of violence, survivors, perpetrators; professional practices, methodologies and organisational routines; network activities; sustainability.
The adoption of an intersectional approach has been considered indispensable in guiding the conceptualisation of research tools and analytical activities as well as interpretative ones. Nevertheless, it was not initially included as an argument within the interviews, even if a thematic panel questioned the AVCs' and shelters' practices in dealing with women with multiple vulnerabilities, such as those related to age, migratory condition, sexual orientation, disabilities.
From the perspective of research practice, in the last thirty years there have been many attempts to move beyond the merely additive approach (McCall, 2005). At the same time, the focus has shifted to the categories themselves employed in research (MacKinnon, 2013), highlighting that they result from the dynamic intersections between multiple hierarchies, within processes built up by workers, activists and, generally, the people (Corradi, 2013). During the research activities, such as in the daily routines, these categories often end up statically fixing the identities of individuals and groups, essentialising them, and hiding the dynamic and relational aspect of memberships and identities.
From the analytical point of view, the focus here is on the relationship between woman and worker/activist, and in particular to the latter's own positionality in models and practices of in-

4 The ViVa Project focused on the Italian anti-violence system, mapping and analysing the measures (in terms of policies, politics and services) to prevent and fight violence against women. Additionally, the project monitored and evaluated the interventions implemented. The project started in December 2017 and ended in June 2021. A second wave of the project began in April 2022. For more information please visit: https://viva.cnr.it/en/

terventions framed by a care approach. The analysis is based on those AVCs and shelters that represent themselves by referring to feminist and women's movements and acting "methodologies of relationship among women" in their daily routines and practices, as well as their internal organisation (Busi et al., 2021). AVCs' activities are also linked to the production of the knowledge and expertise developed by women's and feminist groups in the field of anti-violence in Italy. In this sense, the research practice adopted considered the workers interviewed as competent subjects with agency and history (Madison, 2005). We hypothesised that the narratives collected within the research activity would allow us to reason about the relational dimension that is at the heart of the debate on intersectionality (Cherubini et al., 2020).
If we consider the research activities, some of the main questions, which also crossed the AIS Gender 2021 Conference, remain partially open: how do we transcend the ethnic/racial/gender/class/ victimisation/othering frame of reference and dismantle the insuperable boundaries of otherness that end up reifying differences, as well as avoid simplified approaches to social inclusion? And conversely, is it possible, and if so how, to produce knowledge on the experience of others? Following the assumption that the relational dimension is embedded in the construction of inequalities, feminist studies propose routes to possible solutions, for instance by applying an "epistemology of partiality" (Haraway, 1988), and by focusing on the relational dimension and the researcher's continuous self-reflexive process, in order to take in charge, also, one's own position of privilege (Fremlova, 2018). To improve our capacity to adopt a "reflexive sociology" posture (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), each interview was conducted in pairs: active listening and the simultaneous participation of two researchers enriched the internal confrontation within the research group as well as the processes of self-reflexivity and analysis of each one.

4. Universalism and intersectionality? Activists' and workers' representations of women in situations of violence and methodologies of intervention.

During the interviews, AVCs' and shelters' activists and workers came up with very similar representations to describe their survivors-oriented methodologies, using the same words and expressions.[5] The emphasis is on the horizontal relational dimension of their practices, based on the meetings among women that are expert on violence: those who work in an AVC, whose expertise is related to specific training and grassroots professional experience, and those who enter an AVC for help because they are living a situation of violence. According to these methodologies, workers (who welcome) and women (who express needs and desires) build together personalised paths out of violence, starting from the survivors' subjective time, desires and needs, and not from professional or organisational routines (Goodman et al., 2016). The interventions enacted following these methodologies are described by AVCs' workers and activists as "accompaniment", and this practice differentiates AVCs from social, health, security and welfare services (Guarnieri, 2018, p. 21).
In their interviews, talking about VAW and their methodologies, often AVCs' workers and activists refer to "sisterhood" in defining practices, methodologies and routines. In these narrations, the asymmetry of the helping relationships seems concealed, at least from a discursive point of view, and a universalist representation prevails, in which women's common category membership is described as prevailing over the acknowledgement of each woman's differences. These

5 The description of organisational routines and daily practices reveals often a more diverse landscape (Toffanin et al., 2021). To give an example, from a formal point of view, some AVCs do not pre-define any limits to the interventions with regard to duration, number of individual meetings or type of service to be activated, while others follow a standardised process, proposing a sort of "menu-based" approach, offering a set of options for assistance framed in a fixed number of meetings. In many cases, this attempt to typify the variability of the paths moves from organisational and managerial needs, or from an assessment of the (scarce) resources available, to have also an impact of standardisation and regularisation on the Italian anti-violence system.

narratives follow the description of violence as a cross-cutting phenomenon which, since it is a structural problem, can affect any type of woman, particularly women who are or have been in an intimate relationship, as the surveys conducted by ISTAT (2007, 2014) have already revealed. It is interesting to note that, at the same time, workers and activists name the differences included in the category of woman, specifying that they do not impact on the risk of suffering violence but rather on the ways out:

«It is clear that different resources, such as social or cognitive competences as well as economic possibilities, can help in the path to exit from violence, but in experiencing violence there are no differences» (AVC 12, September 2019).

So, each path out from VAW may be very different, both on the basis of the lived experiences and needs of the women and the moment when they arrive at the AVC, and also in terms of self-reflection on their relation: *«Every woman has her own time, has her own questions. There is a world of needs behind it» (AVC18, July 2019.)*

As already mentioned, interviews did not include a specific focus on "intersectional" practices and training, although they did refer to the issues of interventions aimed at migrant women, disabled, very young or elderly women, women with addictions. However, the analysis highlights that activists and workers are aware of the criticalities of working with women with multiple vulnerabilities. According to AVCs' workers and activists, their survivor-defined practices based on "relations among women" is the tool to customise interventions according to one's own unique circumstances and hopes for the future (Davies & Lyon, 2013). Often, a universalistic approach based on a representation of women's sameness is applied. In this context, nevertheless, intersectionality is described as virtually embedded in each practice: the heterogeneity of women's needs requires personalised interventions, as each one's situations, desires, goals and needs "vary enormously by virtue of culture, class, sexual orientation, immigration status, degree of social connectedness, family situation, and many other factors", as previous researches revealed (Goodman et al., 2016, 165).
In the daily practice, to guarantee this approach is often extremely complex, also because of contextual factors: women's paths usually concern many different areas and domains (safety, housing, employment, social connection, the well-being of children, …) involving collaboration with social services, hospitals, police departments, the justice system, child protective services, among others.
Regarding the professional routines and practices enacted, qualitative interviews reveal a strong polarisation among AVCs. On the one hand, many AVCs seem to maintain a universalist approach to VAW, which is not always able to make distinctions in order to avoid transforming diversity into inequalities. The risk remains that of the designation of "other", of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish particular categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norms (Scott, 1988). On the other hand, we find (a few) AVCs with great experience, expertise and professionalism in working with diversities, able to operationalise and make concrete that intersectional approach to supporting women and confronting VAW.
In the next paragraphs, the analysis focuses on AVCs workers' representation of women-users' diversities and multiple vulnerabilities, the criticalities in maintaining their specific methodologies, and some tools useful in order to manage these complexities.

4.1 Same methodologies for different women and different needs?

Analysis reveals representations of huge heterogeneity among AVCs' users. A first element of difference is related to the social context in which the AVCs are active. AVCs in big or medium-sized urban centres, characterised by a historical and established presence in the territory, well known

by the citizens, and associated with an idea of greater confidentiality, have a high number of users, both working- and middle-class women, including professional, highly skilled, successful ones. In contrast, in the AVCs that are based in small towns and have a limited number of contacts, one encounters predominantly women with low educational qualifications and income levels, employed in precarious work positions and/or limited to the domestic sphere. According to the workers in these places, these categories of women have less difficulty in approaching AVCs than others who also have other resources to deal with the problem, such as: «Those who have extra tools get by on their own, find the psychologist, find help first» (AVC4, July 2019).
The role of economic, social and symbolic resources that can be activated to get out of a violent situation is particularly noted when referring to the shelters:

> «Women in shelters often have social and/or economic issues (...) We were already seeing this fifteen years ago in other European countries, and now it's here: in the shelters there are women who also have other social issues besides violence. 80 percent are migrants, while in the AVCs more Italians come, even of a high social and cultural level» (AVC 6, September 2019).

The quote mentions the migratory condition, which seems to be the most attentively addressed by workers in Italian AVCs and shelters, as the vulnerabilities lived by migrant women are recognised and well documented. In relation to migrants, often activists and workers do not mention cultural differences: instead, they refer to poverty or lack of social networks and, more generally, material obstacles. If, on the one hand, there is an awareness of avoiding culturalised interventions, on the other, it should be considered that the migratory condition does not in itself coincide with that of poverty (even if many migrant women accessing AVCs, and shelters in particular, are in precarious situations from an economic point of view). The risk, here, is to focus only on material obstacles in migrant women's lives, leaving in the background the need to protect women's rights as universal human rights. The point is that, even if material conditions have to be considered, they cannot overshadow other elements that interact in producing subordinations.
According to the surveys conducted by IRPPS-CNR and ISTAT since 2018, more than 75 percent of women who access AVCs are Italian. The workers' perception though is that there is a huge presence of migrant women among their "users". Despite this, in 2019-20 only 48.1 percent of Italian AVCs included among their services linguistic and cultural mediation. Furthermore, only 25.4 percent offered support to migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women. So, this kind of service is not capillary or widespread throughout the country. The Covid pandemic has made the situation even worse: in fact, in 2020 90 percent of the AVCs reported a decline in requests for help from migrant and asylum-seeking women. That means that during lockdown they were left to deal with violent situations on their own.
Going beyond migratory conditions, if we consider other types of differences, such as younger or older age, sexual orientation, disabilities, only 2.2 percent of AVCs offered specific support (ISTAT, 2021). In some territories, namely those where AVCs have activated informational and awareness-raising campaigns together with NGOs, schools and universities, these groups of women have become more visible in also contacting AVCs. In other contexts, workers and activists of many AVCs refer to the criticalities of dealing with very young or very old women, while others name their difficulties in dealing with women in lesbian relationships in a situation of violence. Lastly, many workers refer to the fact that it is still very difficult to plan and organise support for women with addiction problems, as well as those with disabilities.

4.2 Economic vulnerabilities and challenges for relational methodologies.

Supporting women in their pathway out of violence and towards self-determination appears to be particularly challenging when helping women with multiple vulnerabilities, as the stratifi-

cation of women's experiences can affect the methodology of keeping survivors at the core of interventions.
Focusing on the experiences of women living in shelters, it appears that socio-economic vulnerabilities are often combined with few social networks and no job experience, which means that these women are often facing many difficulties aside from the gender violence in their marriages. As VAW is a multifaceted phenomenon, impacting many dimensions of women's daily lives, the support activities in the case of VAW could not be undertaken without an alliance with public and private social services, in particular, but not limited to, the issues related to the labour market, economic precarity and housing (Gadda & Mauri, 2021). In this sense, networking activity has become crucial for many AVCs and shelters, opening up new challenges related to the conservation of their particular methodology.
In some activists' representations, besides their subjective precarities, these women face the structural and sociocultural aspects of the Italian welfare system and labour market that often end up prolonging their length of stay in those institutions. Then, these survivors risk being unable, in a short time, to be autonomous in acting out rights and citizenship practices in the Italian public space, namely in the labour market.

«The poorest women are also the ones who use shelters… And their pathways are longer and longer. This is because they are often poor women, that often coincides with being migrants in this historical context (…) you clash with the outside (…): there is sometimes a lot of racism in giving jobs to migrant women… they only find precarious, fragile, few-hour jobs (…) And then there is the problem of housing, because the private market is unaffordable, it is inaccessible for many women, especially if they are single women with children» (AVC-Shelter A, September 2019).

So, the operators of AVCs and shelters warn about two main orders of problem concerning keeping their own methodologies. The first refers to the socio-economic context and the second to the possibility of maintaining a horizontal relation with survivors. Regarding to the first, on the one hand, material problems related to the lack of economic resources may impact on the possibility of changing homes, with all the expenses involved such as paying for the move, initial rent, security advances, fees of intermediaries, if any, and then bills. Then, on the other hand, workers and activists highlight the stereotypes to which these women are subjected: in their opinion, neither employers nor housing market actors offer opportunities to "women in a situation of violence", particularly if they are migrants and with children, as they are considered the most vulnerable category, identified with low or no spending capacity, unreliable with respect to the continuity of rent payments, as well as with complying with labour market requests in terms of presence. In these cases, often AVCs manage to find creative solutions:

> «A foreign woman had found a house and it was very important for her because it also meant residence, but she didn't have the deposit and so we... well, we have a "stash fund". The boss doesn't know this, but we lent the lady money with a receipt.... It's not a donation, it's a loan. She has a house, she has residence, and she can become independent… and she will give us the money back» (AVC 10, June 2019).

The issue of money, furthermore, is a good topic in relation to which to discuss the criticalities for AVCs workers in building a horizontal relation "among women", keeping the protagonism of the "other" at the core, with women perceived as poorer and more isolated than oneself. The problem is also connected with the public funding system and the organisational routines of protection, that end up limiting and disempowering survivors instead of helping them to build up their autonomy.

«We give the money to the women, but we have to account for each expenditure. So they have to give us receipts. This is heavy work. It is an additional control you have over the women. It is an

additional dependence they have on us that is not easy to handle. The relationship with money is difficult. These are delicate things that also affect the relationship» (AVC 24, October 2019).

Even if these aspects have not been openly debated during the interviews, at the same time they have been leaked. If in some anti-violence centres women workers work to empower women, through paths that are often very long and with uncertain (and difficult-to-measure) results, in others empowerment is implemented through controlling practices, such as a request to show the receipt for grocery shopping, and the imposition of which items to buy as a priority.
Another challenging sphere is that of women's sociality, including the dimension of sexual behaviour.

> «We become punitive! In shelters women live in situations of cohabitation. Living in a shelter is a strong limitation of women's freedom and sometimes they emphasise it. (...) If one is in a shelter for two years, migrant or not, she has to keep up her duties, respect the timetable and our rules, to be a good mother, keep track of money and everything we ask of her (...) But, for instance, where does she have sex? (...) Bye-bye privacy (...) Workers sometimes have to be the controller, which is not our right, but it would not be up to the social workers either, who log on to Facebook to see where a woman went ... because she cannot go to a disco» (AVC-Shelter B, October 2019).

These practices of control emerged also in other analyses focused on vulnerabilised experiences (Pasian, Toffanin, 2018) and are well discussed in the debate on care as protection and control (Held, 2010; Tronto, 2013).
Finally, methodologies' suspension may occur when children are involved or in a high-risk situation:

> «If it is a situation that is assessed as "high risk" or there are children, the situation changes a little, because we have a responsibility that we cannot ignore. (...) You try, I don't say to force the hand, but to make women understand that the situation is serious» (AVC 31, June 2019).

Despite all these critical issues, there are AVCs able to maintain their specific methodologies even in the face of all the administrative constraints, tensions in the territorial networks, and limitations of the socio-economic context. In the next paragraph some tools enacted by these AVCs are described.

4.3 Keeping to survivor-oriented interventions

Activists and workers are aware of the criticalities of working with women with multiple vulnerabilities, and they refer to their practices in order to manage them. Among the AVCs there are those able to maintain their methodologies, even in the challenging situation when survivors share projects, needs and desires both difficult to achieve and far removed from those considered appropriate by AVCs workers:

> «Women find the door open even when they follow paths different from those considered appropriate by us: I have to do a job to remind myself that it is their story, their life, and not mine (...) The relationship is at the basis of everything, even there: I know that if I have a difficulty in that relationship, with that woman with whom I may not be able to.... if things don't work out, I know that I'm not alone, I have colleagues, the team and I can possibly pass the project on to someone else, even in an honest way» (AVC 21, August 2019).

Here, the training is central: it is composed of face-to-face training on the topic of VAW and of the methodology of relations among women, shadowing more experienced colleagues, and opportunities to activate self-reflective processes.

> «When I started the training course, I already had ideas, but there were also surprises. In the training course we start from oneself and the stereotypes and attitudes that are inherent in each of us» (AVC1, June 2019).

Talking about specific intersectional training, it is not provided in all the AVC. Quantitative findings highlight that in 2020 only one out of two AVCs and two out of three shelters were engaged in specific training on the multiple vulnerabilities lived by migrant women. In the same direction, the results of qualitative analysis reveal an increasing demand by AVC workers and activists for training, demonstrating an awareness of how much the incorporation of multiple vulnerabilities may affect pathways out of violence, and, then, of the need of specific capacities and knowledges in order to deal with this kind of situation (even if in many cases, at the time of the interview, this training was only planned and had not yet been delivered).

> «We are trying to prepare ourselves also culturally (for work with foreign women) but it is a time-consuming undertaking and we would need people dedicated to this, because one cannot do everything, and it is not easy to dedicate oneself to this» (AVC 4, October 2019).

Also, in relation to the interventions with women with disabilities, many workers refer to a lack of training: only one out of four AVCs and one out of five shelters report that they have promoted specific training, and very few AVCs say they are able to provide support and advocacy for women with mental disabilities.
In many AVCs, the "learning by doing" approach is emphasised, as well as the continuous confrontation between workers. Fundamental in this sense are multidisciplinary teams; in particular they often provide the possibility of active self-reflection and networking practices:

> «When you work with a lawyer or a psychologist you inevitably learn something» (AVC5, September 2019).

> «In the AVC you deal with people's lives (…) When there is a team that works, there is trust, there is networking, and you feel supported. In this razor's edge situation we are very sensitive to the support of those who are on top of us, those who work with us. I feel it when there is an organisational context that gives you confidence» (AVC10, June 2019).

Finally, many AVCs involve cultural mediators in order to facilitate the relations with migrant women, revealing some criticalities due to the need for specific gender violence training for these professionals, as well as their cost, in terms of sustainability.
Other research will analyse and discuss these kinds of relations between workers and users with multiple vulnerabilities, giving the opportunity for the scientific debate to go further in the reflection on the construction of alterity and the process of defining other-ness, starting from the process of categorisation and its effects on the construction of meanings, categories of belonging, social stratifications and boundaries. Here, I argued that intersectionality might be a resource to maintain the personalisation of standardised interventions (Toffanin et al., 2020), particularly to situate experiences in a symbolic, social and economic structure of relations, related to embodied belongings, claimed as well as assigned.

Conclusion

Thirty years of debate on intersectionality demonstrate that its journey is not yet over, and nor are the interpretative, ontological and epistemological conflicts that it generates (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Nevertheless, its utility has been taken for granted as a tool to study the complex interactions between different social categories producing social inequalities (Hill Collins,

2015). This is possible keeping in mind the relational and contextual dimensions of human lives, at both the subjective and the social levels. By analysing the narrations about practices enacted within the AVCs to take care of diversity through survivor-oriented interventions, this study contributes to the current debate on anti-violence policies and interventions and their ability to propose personalised models of care to all women in situations of violence. The focus is on the challenges and the opportunity posed by an intersectional approach, starting from an analysis of the debate on gendered VAW. Following this interpretative reading of international researchers, intersectionality appears as a useful tool to conceptualise and understand the phenomenon, surmounting dualistic approaches based on contraposition of "man" and "woman" as internally uniform categories.

Many studies have focused on the capacity of society to respond to gender-based violence, and in particular to accompany women on exit paths: as here presented, they are crucial to discuss the results of an analysis of the Italian anti-violence system, and namely to reflect on the practices of AVCs' and shelters' workers and activists, represented as survivor-oriented, horizontal, non-judgmental interventions. Workers' and activists' narrations provide an awareness of how the presence of multiple vulnerabilities can define subjective experiences in specific ways, at the very least highlighting how there may be specific critical issues to be addressed, and how supporting activities are strictly connected to economic, social and cultural context. Sometimes, this awareness is informed by an intersectional approach, while for other professionals an additive approach seems to prevail.

Talking about methodologies of intervention, the analysis reveals huge heterogeneity in terms of practices as well as the symbolic and political meaning. Often the capacity to apply the intervention's personalisation is still lacking when women with multiple victimisation are involved. As in the research practices, also in the support ones, the universal categorisation of womanhood risks veiling the differences produced by activists', as well as researchers', positionality and privilege (Wekker, 2004). Indeed, both in the practices of AVC workers and in those of researchers, an intersectional approach may help to keep in mind the meaning negotiation process enacted within the daily interaction with women in situations of violence: here, two subjects meet, they are engaged in a process of recognition of differences (of status, role, sometimes age, languages, cultures, racialisation) and similarities. In this sense, it appears that a survivor-oriented intervention can be more fruitful if it is based on active listening, non-judgmental sympathetic observation, self-reflective process, specific training, and team confrontation among workers. Moreover, an intersectional approach, focused on power structures in which embodied differences interact, can offer many tools to question one's own positionality and avoid unconsciously reproducing inequalities, also considering that a universalistic approach, tailored on "mainstream" responses, can result in being unsuitable or harmful.

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