6. Female alliances against the proximity violence

by Ignazia Bartholini

1. Introduction

Today, the overestimation of the migratory flows – also called the "refugee crisis" – has meant that Italy, as a politically strategic borderland of Europe, coincides with a battlefield between sovereign impulses and solidarity tensions.

As Italy as the European Union, moved, aiming from opposing political views, collide in identification of the reception' levels of migrants and the criteria by which minors, and women victims of violence should be considered refugees. The restoration of systematic checks at national borders and the suspension of the application of the Schengen rules have produced unacceptable costs in terms of human lives as well as violation of fundamental rights, widely and repeatedly documented by humanitarian organisations. Reductions in the overall numbers of arrivals is not accompanied by a corresponding drop in the numbers of women and minors arriving here. According to the UNHCR, UNFA and WRC report (2015), "women travelling alone or with children, pregnant women, nursing mothers, teenage girls, unaccompanied girls, girls victims of early marriages, people with disabilities and the elderly, are among the people most at risk and require a coordinated response and adequate protection".

Migrant women are often victims of proximity violence which is accentuated in contexts with a high rate of vulnerability such as migration. The lack of alternative ties to parental ones, and of points of reference other than those of one's fellow countrymen, means that the vulnerability of personal situations facilitates the use of violence and make permanent the resulting condition of oppression.

The following pages will describe the phenomenon of proximity violence, which by the author of this article is considered an umbrella concept that takes on different forms of violence against women.

In fact, migrant women are often exposed to parental violence that denies their very subjectivity as women and human beings. It becomes even more tangible precisely in their condition of vulnerability associated with their status as asylum seekers/refugees.

The migrant women hosted in the shelters are a macro-group, vulnerable by definition emphasising the asymmetrical dimension of forms of subordination attributable to customary, moral and collective attitudes rooted in values of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998), religious beliefs, practices handed down historically which normalise abuse, especially in situations where weaker subjects are particularly exposed. It is, therefore, a matter of "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (Istanbul Convention of 2011).

Secondly, it will explore the contribution of the female stakeholder and the elements that connote their gaze towards otherness and the support tools used, in order to focus on its distinguishing features of a female relationship in order to support migrant women victims of proximity violence.

To testify the importance of female agency in the empowerment process of migrant women victims of proximity violence, I refer to the research carried out in 2019 that was financed by the European Commission.

2. Proximity violence

One element that characterises the contemporary migratory phenomenon is proximity violence of which women, in particular, are victims. The proximity violence highlights as the perpetrator is not either an extraneous or neutral subject, but "the" person or "one of the" persons, legitimized by the tradition, culture and religious believes, to dominate the victim herself (Bartholini, 2013; 2020). The contextual reasons that legitimize male power towards the victim are mainly two. The proximity violence is made possible if the perpetrator enjoys a special type of habitual proximity with the victim for:
• reasons of *jus sanguinis* (a father or a close relative), because of being a consort (partner);
• due to *causa simulandi* (that is simulation whereby the perpetrator "makes believe", "pretends").

Both the proximity violence perpetrated by right of blood or by fictitious right belong to the cultural bedrock of patriarchy and considered "a woman's destiny" in migratory contexts (Bartholini, 2019).

Furthermore, it is appropriate to highlight how proximity violence perpetrated because of *causa simulandi*, is a degeneration of the former because

it incorporates justifications typical of a patriarchal system accompanied by manipulation of the victims and pretence by means of which immunity and rights over the victim are acquired with the consensus of the victim herself.

For both these perspectives, proximity violence is a mode of expression, a product of masculine power legitimises and justifies every form of oppression, symbolic and physical, towards migrant women.

As demonstrated, established vulnerabilities are not only those inherent to the victim, normally grounded in age, illness, gender and poverty, but also those socially created and that to strength the potential vulnerability in a victim. Therefore, the persistence of the victim within a condition of subordination cannot be attributed solely to relationships based on domination and violence (Bartholini, 2020b). Rather, to the smallness of the relational capital available to him outside the circle of her relatives and compatriots.

We are talking about forms of violence that are often linked to genealogy and intimacy, but which just as often testifies to a pact of sale by the same family members who "hand over" them to traffickers. Parental authority, or presumed as such, marks the fate of most refugees/asylum seekers by virtue of proximity violence considered normal. For some of them, the sexual violence they are in at worst has become a practice connected to corruption, if not extortion, to cross a border crossing, which always sees close men as main actors in the exchange of the sexual victim.

3. The alliance in the relationship between operators and women hosted in the reception centers

Since the abusers are almost always husbands, brothers, cousins, and friends – real or presumed – of the victim's, it is not easy for the operators to recognise abuse/violence hidden within the folds of parental relations or grounded in affective involvement, treat it as "real imbalance between vulnerable victims and abusive persecutors" and take the victims into charge.

It is not easy to understand, for example, what the deepest and most intimate needs of newly arrived women may be. Their weariness and prostration tend to be attributed to what has surely been an extremely tiring journey across the desert first, the sea, then, though this is often not the most remote and profound cause of the tiredness and exhaustion "visible to the eye". Even if the specialised medical assistance, psychological assistance and legal aid are provided at the first reception centres, in the opinion of the operators, it is extremely difficult to grasp the needs of those coming from countries where they are "exposed" to male alterity because they are women belonging to

segregating cultural systems, and therefore, victims of rape and psychological abuse considered "normal" by their communities.

Recognizing and receiving refugees-asylum seekers victims of proximity violence both in the contexts of origin and during their migration route to Europe, is a theme that requires a broader reflection not only as regards the situations and conditions that allow a suitable reception, but as regards the creation of relationships of trust between reception operators and asylum seekers.

The difficulty in establishing a helping relationship with such victims is often aggravated within the reception systems, which are not sufficiently structured, on level of management protocols, to manage these situations effectively and flexibly, so much so as to be considered problematic the same identification of victims of trafficking (UNHCR, 2017).

Other times, the same recognition of the migratory violence victims occurs in a problematic context, due to the extreme resistance to self-recognition of an experience of oppression and violence.

Wherever violence is normalized by those who suffer it, the possibility of recognizing it as such becomes an extremely difficult operation (D'Ignazi, Persi, 2013).

Therefore, success or failure of the work of a multidisciplinary team depends on the alliance that is created in the individual relationships between the migrant women hosted in the shelters and the operators. It allows the recognition of the violence of which asylum seekers are often victims already within family contexts (Macioti, Pugliese, 2010; Tognetti, Bordogna, 2012; Tizzi *et al.*, 2018).

The possibility of transforming the relations between operators and refugees/asylum seekers victims of proximity violence into authentic alliances will subsequently depend on the implementation of the most appropriate interventions, aimed at the effectiveness of individual inclusion paths, capable of achieving a change of perspective in the women hosted in the hosts of reception centres.

With PROVIDE (Proximity on Violence: Defence and Equity) project[1] we conducted some focus group and 68 qualitative interviews professions in facilities of different types or in different institutions, for the most part, identifiable as first-stage reception centres (CAS), second-stage reception

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[1] Is one of the projects funded by the European Community through *The Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020*, "that contributes to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons, as enshrined in the Treaty, the Charter and international human rights conventions, are promoted, protected and effectively implemented" (https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/ opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/rec).

centres (SPRAR for adults, SPRAR for minors), facilities made available by the Municipal Authorities and by the Prefectures, anti-violence centres and Hotspots with professionals and representatives of the anti-violence centres and CAS (temporary reception centres) and SPRAR.

Most of the female professionals interviewed agree that the quality of the relationship with the migrant women hosted in the reception facilities depends by the trust in the relationship among women. It permitted the migrant women to tell the story of the episodes of violence they had experienced. This bond of trust fostered communication, at least after some time, according to about 70% of the participants. It was precisely about the importance of preliminary relationships to the "charge taking" of migrant victims, that it was mandatory to highlight three elements of the reception circuit.

The first concerns the structure the horizontal structure of the third sector, by its network, whose pieces no longer depend on roles, but on bonds and social "worlds of life", the configuration of which can predict the behaviour of social actors (Di Nicola, 1998). The concept of a "network strategy" emerges as a marker of the adaptability of the social actor.

The second, closely linked to the first one, concerns the importance of the human capital incorporated in the very make-up of the third sector, particularly in the fiduciary effects that reverberate within the relationships. Social capital, from this angle, rests on a double theoretical-empirical matrix (Bagnasco *et al.*, 2001; Andreotti, Barbieri, 2003; Tronca, 2003; Donati, 2004). If, in one sense, as Putnam (1993; 2002) intended, social capital is a collective resource (produced by a sense of belonging, rules, trust and civic commitment), of which the community and its institutions take advantage, on the other, according to J. Coleman (1990), social capital is a function of the very structure of relatively stable social relationships which permit individuals to attain goals they could never reach on their own behalf.

Another crucial element is cultural mediation and multidisciplinary work, two phenomena indispensable to female operational staff. The figure of the cultural mediator was deemed indispensable as a support to staff dealing with migrants victims of proximity violence and while they accompany them during their complicated pursuit of the recognition of themselves.

The last one concerns the prevalence of female over male operators (Walby, 2005; Tiessen, 2007). If it is true that care has traditionally been entrusted to women as a "less important form of commitment" (Rao, Kelleher, 2003), and if working with migrants who have been subjected to proximal violence and affected by forms of motivational deficit is their task, one may observe that "women are able to help other women" (Bartholini, 2020a). Compared to the critical issues, most of the operators during the workshops

reported that working with women was more difficult than working with migrants in general.

It also emerged that communications between the female operators and female beneficiaries of the reception facilities is the only possible solution. In this case, relationships based on a commonality of gender defies the objective criteria of scientific management and is typical of many "mature" care-providing professions, that is, those involved in mature construction of professional relationships that do not disregard the need for empathetic rapports between beneficiary and operators (Fig. 1). It is a matter of mechanical rationality and affective neutrality that yields to the trusting and empathic modality based on relationality and empathy that is, on an "emotional kind of work" required to address the complexity of migrants' needs and requiring a suitable amount of time and proper ways of building it up.

Figure 1 – How would you rate your relationship with the migrant women you work with? (%)
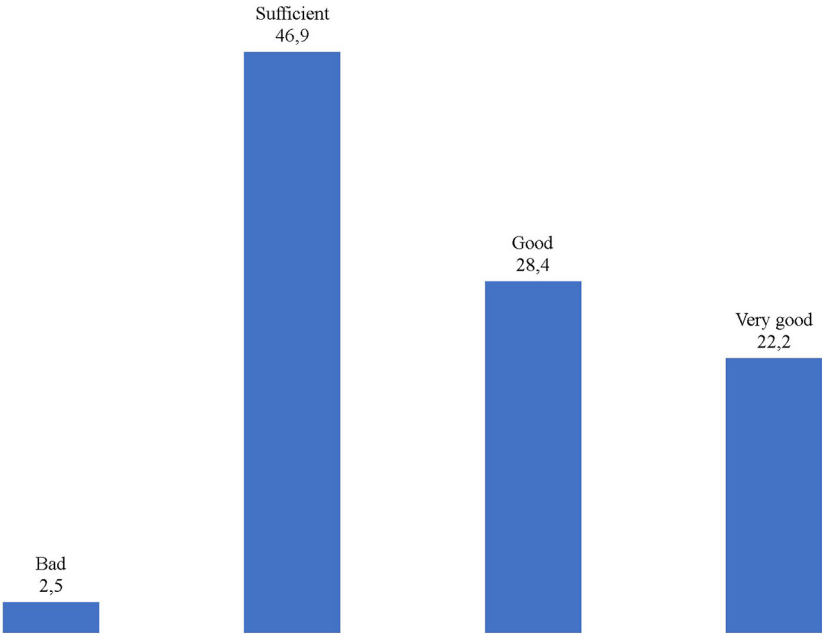
Source: own elaboration

Gender fatigue (Kelan, 2009) which still seems to "persecute" women in many professions – and which coincides with real forms of gender segregation – becomes a veritable advantage within the context of the migratory

circuit and of trust relationships thanks to the use of skills more closely related to emotional and gender intelligence. Gender-sensitive connotations are, therefore, accompanied by gender professional, relationship-promoting skills.

4. Conclusions

The relationship among refugees/asylum seekers victims of violence and professional is an important, crucial milestone for a female alliance. The ability of the operators – to communicate with other and to take care him – facilitate the acceptance by migrants of the opportunities offered to them. The network made up of teams of professionals favors and strengthens the strategies for accompanying victims, precisely through the "safety belt" that the female operators themselves create in the gender alliance with migrants. These are women – professionals – who can recognize proximity violence, to flush it out by making it visible. It is also about women – refugees seeking asylum – who, through sisterhood, transform their vulnerability into agency.

The institutional reception system turns out to be a privileged analysis laboratory, because it seems to favor a double relationship between migrants and professionals and between women. A relationship of subjectivation, which, in the best experiences we have been told, passes from the degrees of suspicion to that of recognition in gender homogeneity and participatory agency.

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NEWCOMERS AS AGENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: LEARNING FROM THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

A Recourse Book for Social Work and Social Work Education
in the Field of Migration

Edited by
Hannah Reich, Roberta T. Di Rosa

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Cover image: *Il canto della sirena d'Occidente*, by Francesco Piobbichi

Images in the text by Francesco Piobbichi

Welela
Chi salva una vita salva mondo intero
3 ottobre
Noi e loro
È il capitalismo bellezza
Tu!
Ciao mamma, sono vivo
Esodo
Senza nome (onorare la memoria)

A special thanks to Francesco Piobbichi, who has made drawing his weapon against the indifference and violence that permeate the world of migration in the Mediterranean and, unfortunately, sometimes also the reception system. He, a witness to the times in which we live, with a notebook and his pencils, offers us chronicles and memories of stories that the sea has bequeathed to us, so that they are not completely lost in that sea.

Thank you, Francesco, for generously sharing your drawings, and for helping us to honour the lives and memories of so many people we will never know.

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