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Unpacking female marginality

Entangled dimensions of care in a female shelter
in Turin.

Viola Mari

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Supervisor

Prof. Francesca Governa, Supervisor

Doctoral Examination Committee:

Prof. Alberto Vanolo, Referee, Università di Torino

Prof. Valentina Porcellana, Referee, Università della Valle d'Aosta

Prof. Luiza Bialasiewicz, Referee, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Prof. Maurizio Memoli, Referee, Università di Cagliari

Res. assistant Elisabetta Cinzia Rosa, Referee, Université catholique de Louvain

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Viola Mari
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Summary

The research focus lies on the micro and relational entanglements between marginality, women, and spaces of care. In recent years, most research has shown how the attempt to manage and control the presence of poor and homeless people on the streets has generated a twofold effect: on one side an upsurge of punitive and manipulative architectural solutions and on the other an increase in the offer of dedicated spaces, such as emergency shelters, hostels, drop-ins, soup kitchens. These ambiguous and contradictory urban spaces of care have received a growing attention in the geographic literature in recent years. In contrast, the phenomenon of female homelessness – the most extreme manifestation of female marginality – has so far received little attention by urban scholars. Even less attention has been put on the exploration of female spaces of care and their impact on female subjectivities and lives.

In the City of Turin, the female centre on Via Pacini emerges as one of the few females shelters and can be described as a space of acknowledgment against female marginality. The centre is managed by Gruppo Abele, a non-profit organisation linked with the Catholic social activism. It is located in Barriera di Milano, a working-class and multicultural neighbourhood situated in the north-eastern corner of Turin (Italy) deeply affected by processes of stigmatization and marginalization. The building hosts two different but complementary services, that constitute an assemblage of care: a low-threshold centre and a diurnal centre. The shelter is a private emergency dormitory, and it is part of the homelessness service provision of the City of Turin. The Drophouse is a day-centre for women in conditions of social and economic disadvantages.

Holding together feminist theory, relational geographies of care and homelessness, with critical studies on marginality in a sustained and combined conversation, the concept of care has been used as a theoretical lens to to approach and unpack the issue of female marginality. By paying attention to the life experiences of few service users and of the relational encounter between women, social operators and volunteers, the aim is to investigate if and how women challenge their subaltern and marginal condition and how this process is linked with different but interconnected practices of care.

I undertook volunteer-based participant observation within the Drophouse for almost ten months, taking part in different daily community moments and in various creative laboratories carried out in the morning and afternoon, like the sewing

course. Towards the end of the fieldwork, the intensive participant observation was complemented by a series of semi-structured interviews with a small group of service users along with the paid staff of the centre. Drawing on the concept of intersecting marginality, I tried to keep together the different stories of the women met at the centre: homeless women, migrant women at risk of trafficking, and migrant women from the neighbourhood. Therefore, the research explores to what extent women experience of marginality are similar and to what extent their stories are instead substantially different.