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Unpacking female marginality

Entangled dimensions of care in a female shelter in Turin.

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Viola Mari
Turin, April 19, 2022

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.

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To my families

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Overview of the research

The notion of female marginality is linked with economic deprivation and social exclusion. The condition of homelessness represents the highest degree of economic deprivation and a major factor of social exclusion in Western societies. The rise of the phenomenon is becoming a major public problem in Europe and particularly in Italy. Although official data indicate a high prevalence of homeless men, literature shows that women are highly vulnerable to the risk of poverty, especially single women with children, not employed and not self-sufficient (Saraceno, 2015). Sustained and prolonged socio-economic vulnerability may in fact lead to conditions of poverty, which can exacerbate and eventually cause loss of housing (Freguja et al., 2017).

One of the salient dimensions of female homelessness is invisibility, which contributed to a general paucity of literature. It is still difficult to have a real measure of the phenomenon precisely because women tend to avoid the traditional homelessness channels as well as 'public spaces of street homelessness' (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017), thus failing to portray the complexity and the specificity of women's experiences of homelessness and gendered specific needs. Twenty years later the first reports on the state of female homelessness in Europe , it is still necessary to investigate the trajectories in and out of homelessness and the relational interdependence with caring services (Baptista, 2010). It is extremely urgent to reflect on this issue – albeit from a qualitative, partial and micro perspective – in order to orient the debate and to

address old and new structural problems underpinning gender inequality and discrimination, and to reflect on some of the processes that have affected and are still affecting Western society since the neo-liberal turn of recent decades.

> Women's position in society and the dominant societal perceptions of gender seem to play a role in either increasing or buffering the risk of homelessness among women and in shaping its hidden dimensions. (Baptista, 2010, p. 171)

This research project has been approached through a volunteering ethnography in a female shelter for homeless and vulnerable women in Barriera di Milano, Turin (Italy). Barriera di Milano is a working-class and multicultural neighbourhood situated in the north-eastern corner of Turin, a South-European city. Built between the end of 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, it was absorbed into the city during the industrial development of the last century and has always been an area of immigration (Cingolani, 2018; Pastore & Ponzo, 2012). It is one of the city neighbourhoods with the highest level of internal diversity, hardly hit by the economic and occupational crises that characterized Turin's deindustrialization, and at the centre of the municipal regeneration agenda of the last two decades (Cingolani, 2018; Salone et al., 2017). It is often depicted by the media and the population in stigmatising and negative terms (Cingolani, 2012), that usually give centre stage to issues of crime, violence, and drug dealing. In particular, the shelter consists of a low-threshold centre for homeless women, and a day-centre for vulnerable women. The centre is managed by a non-governmental organisation, but it is part of the homelessness service provision of the city. Users, social operators, and volunteers are all women.

Drawing on the concept of intersecting marginality and the notion of a continuum between severe deprivation and extreme poverty, I tried to keep together the variegated 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. In the analysis produced, I have constantly sought to give centrality to the words, experiences, and emotions of both service users and operators, in order to put into words, the extreme complexity and multiplicity of life within the female shelter.

The centre is here conceptualised as a *relational micro-space of contact* (DeVerteuil et al., 2019), a concept useful to understand how the practices of care affect women daily experience inside the centre. The data collection was intended

to elaborate a critical reflection of the complex internal dynamics that shape and affect different experiences inside the women shelter, in order to question to what extent, the centre operates as a space of care.

Building on the results of the previous focus of analysis, the concept of self-care is investigated as a potential revolutionary act against the neoliberal myth of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility, and in this sense as a form of radical 'liberating empowerment' (Sardenberg, 2008). How can the notion of empowerment be framed in such a deprived context to avoid neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female marginality?

In this attempt to bring together different theoretical literature and traditions, it is appropriate to admit its processual and recursive evolution, characterized by "theoretical shifts and conceptual reorientations" (Hanson & Pratt, 1995). A process that has led me to take several paths, to go back and forth and then, to appreciate the broad and encompassing nature of the main topic of this research, *female marginality*. Each research path stimulates different questions and assumptions, leading to different perspective on women's lives. Using different theoretical orientations has allowed me to put into focus different themes and issues and to be more receptive to fieldwork inputs.

Engaging with feminist geography does not mean anymore to focus solely on women issues and experiences; many feminist scholars' research concerns questions of masculinity, sexuality, trans and queer geography, as well as decolonialism and intersectionality (Blidon & Zaragocin, 2019). As highlighted in a recent special issue of Gender, Place & Culture Journal (2019) feminist geography has no fixed or bounded theoretical and methodological points of reference, nor preferred scales of analysis. This research is indeed a feminist inquiry and grounds its premises on feminist geography tradition, but it stretches beyond it, encompassing critical studies on marginality, on geographies of care and homelessness, and the debate on labour geography and female empowerment.

In conclusion, the political stand of this dissertation is to challenge the liberal and mainstream use of the concept of female empowerment (Sardenberg, 2008), in in order to avoid enabling, even unintentionally, the exploitation of women's work and the political minimisation of women's everyday endeavours. In these terms, I truly think that here lies the difference between a neo-liberal feminist praxis and an anti-capitalistic one. This work takes side against an instrumental use of the language of empowerment and the linked strand of narrative. This is a matter of knowledge production. Language is always a matter of knowledge production and also a 'place of struggle' (hooks, 1989).

> It is in seizing and refashioning the patriarchal language that the 'silenced' voice can be heard. (Ashcroft, 1989)

1.2 Structure of the thesis

After this first brief introduction, in the **second chapter** I will explain how I have structured the theoretical framework of the research and what are the advantages of working with multiple theoretical traditions.

The **third chapter** is dedicated to the methodological approach developed during the fieldwork, with an emphasis on the emotional and intimate journey endured over the course of the ethnographic experience. In this chapter I discuss around the difficulties in undertaking an 'ethnography of proximity' and the difficult balance between the role as a researcher and as a volunteer with all the ethical implications of dealing with private and dramatic details of women's stories.

The **fourth chapter** offers a critical reflection on how female subjectivity is affected in such a gendered, organised, and institutionalised voluntary urban space. In this study, I aim to combine attention to both the material and psycho-social dimensions of the collective practices of care that emerge within this *relational* environment and *micro space of contact,* in order to question to what extent, the centre operates as a space of care. The experiences of the homeless users are variously affected both in terms of *duration* and *goals* of the reception pathways. These two dimensions influence in different ways women's subjectivities and will help to critically reflect on three different elements of the living experience inside the centre, which are i) intimacy, ii) control and self-worth, and iii) conflict and support. Moreover, the chapter investigates how the centre act as a filter between users and public institutions, such the health care system. The conclusion reasons around these accounts in order to highlight the complex, co-constructed, and sometimes contradictory nature of this female space of care.

The **fifth chapter** builds on the conclusions of the previous chapter. The centre as a space of care can be considered a site of material and immaterial resources, that support and promotes women's housing, economic and personal autonomy. The chapter engages with the distinction between liberal and liberating empowerment i) to deepen the function and value of work (or mainly its absence) in the lives of vulnerable women, while ii) questioning the role of the female

centre as a space of female empowerment. The concept of self-care is then explored to challenge neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female marginality.

In the **sixth and conclusive chapter** is structured more as a collection of different reflections around the concept of female marginality and women's encounter with the system of service provision. I intend to summarise the key insights and reflections that have emerged from this study, and, in the end, I wish to critically reflect on the possible implications for policy, practice and future research. The adoption of an 'intersectionality approach' is aimed at recognising the different conditions of marginality and vulnerability of these women and refocusing the public debate on the dramatic political negligence in terms of rights and welfare systems and the progressive commodification of care services.

1.3 Notes on ethnography

The research data consist of field diary and a series of semi-structured interviews with users and social operators, recorded by the end of the fieldwork. In order to be able to carry out the activity of participant observation, I officially became part of the voluntary staff of the centre, covering some of the creative laboratories organised for the users, in particular the sewing course for the group of young migrant women. The social operators, and some of the users, were informed of my research from the beginning and they have been kept informed during the whole process.

The interviews were originally conducted in Italian, and recordings have been transcribed manually in order to grasp and preserve the original meaning of the sentences, reporting errors, misunderstandings, confusing elements. For the purposes of this thesis, the passages used within the speech were translated into English. In this process, since I am not a professional translator, I clearly had to make syntactical and grammatical choices that will not probably correspond to the original verbatim. For this reason, in the various anecdotes or interview segments, some of the original elements have been lost in translation. However, in order to compensate for this, I have chosen to give ample space to the voices of the women interviewed, often reporting long passages in full.

As will be made clearer in the methodological chapter, the biographies and testimonies of the women presented in this thesis belong to some of the users - homeless or not - of the female centre where I volunteered. With the exception of one, Nadia. I met Nadia in another social project organised in Barriera di Milano, Fa bene. Knowing her story and observing her work as project manager has been

for me essential to structure the research work as I present it today. Having focused mainly on the role of the female centre and the practices of care, I repeatedly asked myself whether it was still appropriate to present Nadia's story. In the end, I felt it was essential to preserve this link, not only for the value of Nadia's testimony but also to maintain the authenticity of the research work.

The names of the users are fictitious names to protect their anonymity. For the operators, however, I have obtained permission to use their original names. References to many other users will appear, but in this case, I have instead opted for the name initial solution.

Chapter 2

A multidisciplinary perspective on female marginality

2.1 Introduction

> Poverty is many things, all of them bad. It is material deprivation and desperation. It is lack of security and dignity. It is exposure to risk and high costs for thin comforts. It is inequality materialized. It diminishes its victims. It is also the situation of far too many people in the world, even if the relative number of those who are escaping the worst forms of poverty is also increasing. The number of the world's poor, their destitution, and their desperation now seem overwhelming by most measures. (Appadurai, 2004)

Today, poverty is a structural condition in wealthy nations, and it has increased both in incidence and severity. It consists of the difficulty of adequately satisfying needs and living life according to personal aspirations and capabilities. At present, there is a real risk that an increasing portion of the population will experience poverty due to a lack of material and immaterial resources and an inadequate state protection system. Recurrent pattern of poverty, on the other hand, indicates a persistent economic vulnerability that is unlikely to result in a definitive exit from extreme poverty. In these cases, the risk of material deprivation being associated with real forms of social exclusion is also higher (Saraceno, 2015).

> Coping and surviving in an environment of deprivation with minimal state protections leaves individuals experiencing homelessness and social exclusion to provide for their own needs. (Choy, 2014)

In a such a precarious global scenario, many report "a creeping normalisation and intensification of insecurity for the most vulnerable in society" (Brown et al., 2020). A growing number of individuals experience inequality, poverty and social exclusion which hinder the full exercise of their rights and affect women specifically. In particular, from the 1970s onwards, a process of feminisation of poverty began to emerge, which penalises many women with poor living conditions and constrains their access to the most basic goods and resources. Women's higher vulnerability to the risk of poverty is the consequence of asymmetrical male-female relationships in the division of paid and unpaid work. While usually males assume the function of breadwinner, women are relegated to a subordinate position of economic dependence within the household, where they are responsible for caring for the home and the family. Women are often inactive or unemployed, and if employed they have part-time, precarious jobs. As was also recently reported at national level, women's work is generally the most expendable and sacrificed in crisis situations, thus making women not economically self-sufficient. Thus, the specific interaction between family dependency and social exclusion is the challenge posed by female poverty. Cconomic dependency in combination with the increased fragility of the marriage bond is one of the most explanatory mechanisms of today's gender dimension of poverty: the higher the level of dependency, the greater the degree of vulnerability (Ruspini, 2000).

> La sfida posta dalla povertà femminile risiede proprio nella peculiare interazione tra dipendenza familiare ed esclusione sociale: la *dipendenza economica* in combinazione con la *maggiore fragilità del legame matrimoniale è* uno dei meccanismi maggiormente esplicativi della dimensione di genere della povertà oggi: tanto maggiore è il livello di dipendenza, tanto maggiore sarà il grado di vulnerabilità. (Ruspini, 2000, p. 8)

The notion of female marginality is strictly linked with poverty and vulnerability. In this framework, the condition of homelessness represents the highest degree of economic deprivation and a major factor of social exclusion in Western societies. The rise of the phenomenon is becoming a major public problem in Europe and particularly in Italy. Although official data indicate a high prevalence of homeless men, literature shows that women are highly vulnerable to the risk of poverty, especially single women with children, not employed and not self-sufficient (Saraceno, 2015). Sustained and prolonged socio-economic

vulnerability may in fact lead to conditions of poverty, which can exacerbate and eventually cause loss of housing (Freguja et al., 2017). Studies have identified "poverty as one of the structural factors undermining the capacity of women to establish and maintain independent homes, thus directly contributing to an increased vulnerability to homelessness" (Baptista, 2010).

The research focus lies on the micro and relational entanglements between marginality, women, and spaces of care. This research is based upon an extensive ethnographic enquiry developed in a low-threshold female centre in the City of Turin, and structured through observations, informal interactions, and more in-depth interviews. Having the chance to be directly involved as a volunteer in the space of care, I investigated the complex and contradictory daily relational interactions between users, social operators and volunteers. Through the narration of their life stories, and of the 'creative strategies that people used to stay afloat and even reformulate the conditions and possibilities of their everyday lives' (Katz, 2004), the aim of this research is to bring forth different stories and counter-narratives of female survival and empowerment. I believe it is indeed relevant to build a bottom-up and inside view of the phenomenon of female marginality and its daily consequences; a view that is attentive to the meaning of lived experience, thus giving greater prominence to the deeper structural causes of the challenging living conditions of a part of the population (Capello, 2020). The objective is to develop a nuanced, critical perspective on marginal and vulnerable subjects, able to undermine dominant and biased framings of female marginality.

> The possibilities for rupture are everywhere in the routine. (Katz, 2004)

2.2 Female homelessness, care and the city

> Most of the problems that Continental Western European welfare systems are currently facing derive from the lack of public programmes of social care. Responsibility for care is mostly unloaded onto families, that fulfil this responsibility either by 'self-servicing' or purchasing services on the private market. However, the new risk profiles that emerge in contemporary societies make it increasingly more difficult for families to satisfy their care needs by themselves. (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002, p. 25)

In order to better understand the phenomenon of female marginality and their intersection with the *practices of care* that unfold and intertwine within the female centre, it is indispensable to start from the reconstruction and analysis of the context, nominally the Italian welfare system, which will be briefly outlined in the evolution occurred in the last decades. After this first section, the issue of severe

adult marginalisation will be addressed, focusing on one of its most extreme manifestations, which is homelessness. In the third section, in order to recentre the discourse over female marginality, it will be discussed on what extent female homelessness differs from the mainstream representations of the homeless subjects. Moving from a macro to a micro scale of analysis, the fourth section starts with a short excursus of the evolution of the welfare system through the analysis of the strategy that the City of Turin has developed in terms of counteracting the problem of severe marginalisation. As Bifulco (2015, p. 15) argues, the public response to adult social exclusion incorporates "worldviews, categorising principles, criteria for judging what is right, appropriate, desirable and what is not" and thus can be considered as a mirror of the cultural model underpinning the society (Porcellana, 2016) and its associated values in terms of freedom, justice and equality. Similarly Shinn (2007, p. 664) writes that "social policies do not arise in a vacuum, but reflect underlying social and cultural attitudes".

> Both social policies and socio-cultural beliefs and practices, particularly with respect to social exclusion, are critical to understanding rates of homelessness. Individual characteristics interact with policies and patterns of social exclusion, to influence who becomes homeless. Understandings of the causes of homelessness should guide theories of intervention, however, I will argue that interventions to reduce homelessness at one level (e.g., social policy) can counteract vulnerabilities at a different level (e.g., individual risk factors). (Shinn, 2007, p. 657)

It is extremely important to focus on the analysis of the homelessness service provision in Turin, in order to introduce the social, political, and organisational framework within which the women's shelter on Via Pacini operates. Finally, the concluding section will be useful to set out a reflection on three major point: the issue of the logic of activation, which encompasses all those social inclusion strategies that privilege participation in the labour market; the issue of the duration of the paths, introducing the two main strategies underlying the fight against homelessness (i.e., staircase model and Housing First approach); the issue of discretion and control, questioning the value of social accompaniment projects as activators of rights or instruments of control.

2.2.1 From welfare state to welfare mix

> The rapacity of financial capitalism and the impact it has on state decisions and the fate of citizens, the weaknesses of the European Community project, and the long-standing problems of Italian welfare are just some of the pieces in a scenario that

> is difficult to assess but which must be read as a whole, in its interdependencies as well as its discontinuity. (Bifulco, 2015, p. 11)

The European social welfare apparatus, which has been structured as a universal public system since the second half of the 20th century, was originally designed to guarantee socio-economic security and reduce inequalities. According to the universalist principle, social protection must be ensured "for all citizens as members of the same national community and therefore entitled to the same rights" (Bifulco, 2015, p. 42). While models have developed differently in different European countries, the main and general benefits revolve around health, social security, and welfare systems (e.g., income support in the event of unemployment, disability or poverty). In Italy, for example, the national health system was designed and structured on the basis of the right to health for all citizens (ivi, p. 43).

From the 1990s onwards, a period of profound renewal of public welfare was beginning in western Europe, under the banner of neoliberalism and privatisation (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002; Bifulco, 2015; Gallino, 2012; Porcellana, 2016; Ranci & Pavolini, 2014). The overall aim was to downgrade the European social model through the commodification of the welfare state, as the excessive amount of social spending was deemed to be the main cause of high public debts (Gallino, 2012). The notion of commodification of care, introduced by Clare Ungerson (1997), encompasses a series of processes by which care services are turned into marketable goods. These processes have been carried out "trough the reconfiguration of the welfare state as a provider of monetary transfer rather than services, and increasingly through the outsourcing of care services to private (for-profit and non-for-profit)" (Farris & Marchetti, 2017). The market is thus configurated as the "key operator whose logic permeates the entire realm of care, causing a complete shift in the functioning and understanding of care provision" (*ibidem*). Few authors also argue how the neoliberal reconfiguration of the European care sector has led to a process of corporatization (*ibidem*), which entails not only the adoption of corporate practices but also the use of managerial techniques, procedures, and language in the humanitarian and welfare system.

The effect of these processes of privatisation and commodification leaded to the progressive involvement of the third sector and the private organisations in the provision of services to those in need, for which the state is responsible (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002) but "while there may be substantial economic and organizational advantages to the development of privatization, it may also involve new forms of social and political exclusion" (ivi, p. 5). According to the Italian sociologist Luciano Gallino (2012), these regressive economic and social policies not only undermined the European social model, and thereby the democratic process

within the European Union, but also jeopardised social integration and social stability, increasing frustration, discontent, and conflict among the most affected social classes.

As regards the Italian context, over the years, a series of reforms occurred, both at local and central level, which progressively reduced protections and rights, especially of the most vulnerable citizens. In this process of neoliberal reconfiguration and outsourcing of care to for-profit and non-for-profit organizations, there has been a "rise of more contractual relationships between state and non-profit suppliers" (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002, p. 13). The mechanism of the agreement became increasingly widespread, and was often used by the public administration to make up for the structural shortcomings of the state welfare system by integrating the private sector into the public sector (Porcellana, 2016, p. 35). Local authorities contracted out to non-profit organisations both the provision of services previously in public hands (e.g., elder and child care) and the implementation of new innovative services (e.g., migrant reception) (Ascoli et al., 2002, p. 147). On first analysis, contracting out services to the third sector certainly seemed to guarantee savings in terms of costs and personnel, while offering greater flexibility and more personalised services to citizens (ivi, p. 148). As a consequence, the third sector was required to anticipate needs, to diversify and specialise its offerings, and to take on those sections of the population generally excluded from forms of social intervention (Ranci, 2003).

> In some countries in particular, welfare systems rely on the third sector as a privileged partner of the public sector, assuming that, by virtue of its solidarity-based matrix, it is equipped not only to provide appropriate responses to social demands and issues, but also to increase or promote community cohesion. (Bifulco, 2015, p. 146)

The 2000s saw the introduction of public contracts, a new system for awarding services to third sector entities. The privatisation of social services thus became one of the dominant political strategies, after decades of enlargement and extension of state intervention, while being "presented as the best solution to the crisis of the welfare state, which appeared to have increasingly fewer resources and was less capable responding to the multiple needs of contemporary society"(Ascoli et al., 2002, p. 136). Thanks to the extraordinary ministerial funds allocated by the government in 2000 to the capital municipalities in order to cope with the worsening of social marginalisation, social services were progressively contracted out and privatised – albeit still under the financial and planning control of the public body – "officially sanctioning the transition from a *welfare state* [...] to a *welfare mix* regime" (Porcellana, 2016, p. 44), which is "based on the distinction between funding (state responsibility) and provision (coming, to a

considerable degree, from private providers)" (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002, p. 6). In addition, the creation of a system of economic dependence on the public partner generated mechanisms of competition between the cooperatives, which were forced to undercutting in order to obtain funding and survive (Porcellana, 2016, p. 49). Not to mention that the lack of a clear political agenda undermined the construction of a long-term and organic social strategy against adult marginalisation: legislating and working in a constant state of emergencies, ended up promoting precariousness and uncertainty among both third sector operators and service recipients.

> Although the state and the third sector are heavily dependent on each other in functional terms, this has not translated into any close cooperation in setting goals and planning. […] Such a situation has favoured the growth of a mixed regime with two sectors involved in the supply of services without any clear lines of demarcation and very little cooperation between them. (Ascoli et al., 2002, p. 141)

Lastly, some authors also highlighted how this new managerial model underpinning the welfare mix regime could compromise the original advocacy identity of third-sector organisations, which are now called upon to show entrepreneurial initiative, professionalism and expertise (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002, p. 20).

> There are many who fear that third sector organizations will become 'state agencies' or that as they will have increasingly to compete with each other, they will end up neglecting the weakest social groups; this would be even more serious during the current crisis negating the universalistic paradigm (ivi, p. 21)

In 2001, in line with the principle of vertical subsidiarity, with the reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution the semi-exclusive competence on social policies is finally assigned to Regions, Provinces and Municipalities. The process of administrative decentralisation is thus extended to the realm of social services, giving regional authorities the opportunity to issue guidelines and steer their organisation (Porcellana, 2016), while defining policy priorities action and funding (Gallo, 2007). Bifulco (2015, p. 37) emphasises the potential benefits of the rescaling process in terms of decision-making and financial autonomy for local authorities, of personalisation and expansion of services, and of better communication between citizens and institutions. However, "[w]hile local welfare seemed to be able to respond more promptly to the needs of the territory, the rescaling of social policies at local level risked, in the absence of national programmes and policies and of adequate economic resources, to cut services and

to make the already existing territorial disparities even more evident" (Porcellana, 2016, pp. 65–66).

> Localism evokes unmediated power relations, exacerbated inequalities, wasted development opportunities, and identities built on opposition and exclusion. In our social and institutional fabric, with long-standing fractures that risk never being healed, these are lethal problems. (Bifulco, 2015, p. 40)

As Bifulco (ivi, p. 12) explains, "the flourishing of local partnerships and the territorialisation of programmes against social exclusion are just some of the phenomena" which confirm the relevance of welfare as an object of study and as a space for change. The European *welfare states*, and specifically the Italian one, have undergone profound transformations in recent decades, as briefly seen above. Many scholars agree on the role that the 2008 crisis played in testing the robustness of welfare states, "putting structures and strategies under pressure and exacerbating latent and manifest fragilities" (*ibidem*). In his analysis, Gallino (2012) suggests that "the emptying out of the welfare state in the name of austerity comes to look, in its effects, like a distribution of the costs of the crisis, again to the detriment of those who have already sustained the greatest costs of the crisis itself". As the latest figures show, economic inequality is growing and welfare policies lack effective redistributive power, as evidenced by income polarisation: the middle classes are shrinking, while the poverty line is rising. Regarding the effect of the crisis on the third sector, DeVerteuil, Power And Trudeau (2019, p. 6) observe that "post-2008 austerity in advanced economies has put renewed pressure upon the voluntary sector to do more with less, creating conditions where day-to-day survival is harder to maintain".

Finally, the forms of awarding services to the third sector changed again, with a shift from public contracts to concessions. The aim was to combine considerations of both efficiency and long-term effectiveness in the allocation of services (Porcellana, 2016, p. 98).

> With concessions, a new chapter in the relationship between the public and private sectors in the co-design of services was about to open: they would have guaranteed greater stability and continuity, but would also have required a greater entrepreneurial effort from competing cooperatives, increasing their market-related risks. (*ibidem*)

In conclusion, concessions were essentially introduced to optimise already scarce resources, at a time when the gap between the models adopted and the complexity of social needs was increasingly visible (ivi, p. 183). The lack of a

unified agenda for combating severe adult marginality eventually aggravates an already critical situation, further exacerbating the phenomenon of homelessness.

Concluding, since 2010, a whole series of strategies and initiatives have been promoted at European level with the aim of preserving and relaunching a social dimension, promoting a smart, sustainable, and inclusive development. Nevertheless, it is still evident how economic objectives tend to prevail over social objectives, especially in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe most affected by the crisis, where substantial cuts have been made to the social protection system (Bifulco, 2015). The next few years will also see the short and long-term effects of the new global crisis that Covid19 pandemic has triggered in terms of social risk. For the intents and purposes of this research, however, it is now interesting to explore in more detail what have been the European and Italian strategies – and policies – on tackling severe adult marginalisation and one of its most extreme manifestation, *homelessness*.

2.2.2 The notion of homelessness, between housing and social exclusion

> Homelessness is the absence of the legal, physical and cultural constructions that are used to create a home (Bretherton, 2020, p. 257)

The multifaceted complexity of the phenomenon of homelessness has generated different positionings in the scientific debate, which are also reflected from a linguistic point of view in the terminology used (e.g., *homelessness, houselessness, housing exclusion*). In particular, one of the main motives of confrontation between different positionings concerns the two constituent components of the problem, *housing exclusion* and *social exclusion*. As the sociologist Antonella Meo (2021, p. 8), one of the editors of a recent handbook on the phenomenon of homelessness in Italy, makes clear: "it is precisely the interweaving of the two polarities around which the phenomenon can be articulated, and assume different configurations, that is linked to the most problematic conceptual knot, from which derive the greatest difficulties in terms of interpretation, but also operational policies and intervention strategies".

> The services and initiatives implemented for homeless people therefore also reflect the way in which the problem is represented and constructed at various levels by public opinion, politicians, administrators, as well as social workers and volunteers working in the various welfare agencies, and researchers themselves.(Meo, 2021, p. 13)

In the public imaginary the homeless subject is a single man, living rough on the streets or other makeshift accommodations (e.g., shelters, abandoned buildings, emergency hostels, cars, tents) and spending a lot of time wandering in the public space. This specific, restricted, and highly gendered reading of the phenomenon (Bretherton, 2020), which generally underpins studies focused solely on the causes and psychological pathologies behind homelessness, ended up reinforcing stereotypes and blatant categorisations by anchoring homelessness to the concepts of lack and deviance (Mostowska, 2016). The effects of these narrow representations of homelessness are twofold: on the one hand, governments do not acknowledge the structural character of the phenomenon, denying it political relevance and priority of intervention, and on the other hand, other forms of homelessness and severe adult marginalisation still remain invisible (e.g., female homelessness, family homelessness). For example, some authors point to the total lack of housing arrangements for families (Shinn, 2007) or homeless couples (Leonardi, 2021), not to mention the fact that some studies have observed the existence of romantic relationships between homeless people, who are forced to live separately or to seek precarious and often dangerous living conditions to remain together (Gallo, 2007).

Several comparative studies on poverty and homelessness have shown that the combinations of distressing or problematic events leading to the eventual loss of a safe house can be extremely varied and the cause-and-effect correlations are often unclear. Shinn suggested that "overall levels of homelessness probably have to do with policy factors, whereas the particular people who are most vulnerable have to do with policy (e.g., levels of economic support for families), social exclusion, and individual risk factors" (Shinn, 2007, p. 672). In her multi-level framework (ivi, p. 669) organises individual characteristics, social and more contextual factors (e.g., poor physical health, mental illness, substance abuse) in terms of three interrelated types of capital: economic capital, social capital, and human capital. "Economic capital refers to income and wealth." (*ibidem*). The lack of a secure income is considered one of the causes of homelessness, as well as growing up in impoverished families, because in difficult circumstances there are no available personal or family resources to rely on. Moreover, "[c]hildhood poverty is also related to the opportunity to acquire human capital (education and skills) that provides income in adulthood" (ivi, p. 670). "Social capital refers to both informal social relationships and more formal organizational structures in which people are embedded" (*ibidem*). Loss of parents, divorce, and separation are often associated with homelessness. In addition, the stigma associated with homelessness often leads people to move away from their families, breaking any remaining ties. "Human capital typically refers to education, training, and experience that enable people to secure jobs and incomes, and hence housing"

(ivi, p. 671). Poor education and skills, as well as additional disabilities, represent a limitation to obtaining and maintaining a salaried occupation. Drawing on previous investigations, the author concludes that individual, social, and even psychological factors loose potency when economic resources are provided, given that "[e]conomic capital is likely to mediate the relationships of human and social capital to homelessness" (*ibidem*). Moreover, scholars suggest that "conditions such as depression and anxiety are often caused by the stresses of poverty (social causation), whereas psychotic disorders lead people born into any social class to drift downwards in the socioeconomic hierarchy (social selection)" (ivi, p. 672).

In 2005, a first step was taken on the issue of critically redefining homelessness. The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (Feantsa), a European NGO established in 1989 that works exclusively on the fight against homelessness, proposed a new typology (ETHOS, European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion) "as a means of improving understanding and measurement of homelessness in Europe, and to provide a common "language" for transnational exchanges on homelessness"[1]. Due to the cultural, political, and linguistic differences among the member states of the European Union, the main goal was to provide a notion as comprehensive and broad as possible. The ETHOS classification identifies four main categories of living situations that portray homelessness or housing exclusion: i) rooflessness in the case of people sleeping rough without a shelter of any kind; ii) homelessness in the case of people with temporary sheltering solutions; iii) insecure housing in the case of people threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence; iv) inadequate housing in the case of people living in irregular camps, unfit housing, or overcrowded areas (FEANTSA, 2017). As Marpsat (2000, p. 247) claims, when it comes to housing precarity:

> between the state of homelessness and that of people in [poor] housing there is no sharp division but a continuum of different housing situations. One reason for this is that homeless people tend to move between a succession of squats, hostels, the street, hotel rooms, 'private' dwellings, of varying standards and occupied with varying degrees of insecurity.

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, the value of the ETHOS typology is to have contributed to the identification of three dimensions that concur to defining the concept of home, namely a physical, a social and a legal one (Edgar, 2012), framing the phenomenon of homelessness as lack of access to

[1] https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion

housing (*ibidem*) and "widening the view, traditionally limited to the extreme figures of housing exclusion" (Meo, 2021, p. 9). As other authors have pointed out, a broader definition is "useful in placing homelessness in the developed world in the context of poverty and social policies to alleviate it" (Shinn, 2007, p. 658).

As regards the Italian case, the phenomenon was at first mainly interpreted as a problem of extreme poverty and severe marginalisation. In fact, once the driving force of the economic boom after the Second World War had been exhausted, in the mid-1980s the data began to show an increase in poverty, which soon became a highly visible social phenomenon. Although the issue of housing exclusion was also beginning to become visible in major urban centres, it was framed within a broader and longer-standing problem of marginality and poverty (e.g., unemployment, illness, relational problems) (Meo, 2021, pp. 14–15).

> In synthesis, the attention in Italy has been focused above all on the component of severe marginalisation in the processes constituting homelessness and on some distinctive traits of the dormitory users, ascribable - in short - to the destructuring of the self, the deterioration of motivations and of the capacity for social integration, the flattening of the time horizon, multi-problematicity. The loss of the house and the descent into the street have been read as the final outcomes of processes of marginalisation. (*ibidem*)

A small progress occurred in the early 2000s. The Lisbon Strategy, set out by the European Council in 2000 in order to support employment, economic reform, and social cohesion in the context of a knowledge-based economy, stimulated a climate of interest in the issue of severe adult marginalisation and "placed the right of access to decent and affordable housing firmly in the policy arena" (Edgar, 2012). The stated aim was "to enhance, including through concerted action, inclusive policies that are an integral part of the European welfare state model" (Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale, 2000).

The framework law of November 8, 2000, no. 238 – for the implementation of the integrated system of interventions and social services – incorporates the innovative elements of the Lisbon Strategy. The law introduces the 'Piano Nazionale dei servizi' and the 'Piano sociale di zona', a tool designed to implement welfare policies at the local level (Bifulco, 2015, p. 78).

> The law aims to provide a framework of guarantees and fundamental rights to all citizens in the national territory, while respecting and enhancing local specificities. These basic guarantees include, first and foremost, measures aimed at the most vulnerable citizens: those who, due to age or health conditions, are unable to provide adequately for

> themselves, but also those who, due to biographical events or labour market conditions, find themselves more or less temporarily in a state of economic poverty. (Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale, 2000)

Among those working in the field of countering homelessness, the general opinion is that the law placed too much emphasis on the pursuit of economic growth in social policies, promoting what is known as the 'welfare-to-work' model (Gallo, 2007). In 2015, after the first national surveys on homeless people and services (2011, 2014), the 'Linee di indirizzo per il contrasto alla grave emarginazione adulta', the first official national planning document addressing extreme poverty and homelessness, were drafted (Consoli & Meo, 2021).

In conclusion, from a European perspective Italy was "lagging furthest behind in adopting policies to contrast homelessness and lacked overall strategies and guidelines to bring together the countless actions experimented in local contexts." (Porcellana, 2016, p. 132)

2.2.3 The experience of female homelessness

> In essence, women may be experiencing 'hidden' homelessness at higher rates than men, sleeping on floors, on sofas and in spare rooms, with no legal rights to the space they are occupying, possibly limited control over that space and limited privacy, and while not on the streets or in a shelter, definitely without a home. (Bretherton, 2020, p. 257)

Historically homeless women have been usually categorised as 'deviant' subjects, 'unaccommodated' women, failing to adhere to normalising representations of femininity (Reeve, 2018; Wardhaugh, 1999), which are associated to the "reproductive sphere of home and family" (Mostowska, 2016).

> A woman who is not a wife, mother or carer, regardless of her other characteristics, represents a form of deviance, even if she may be simultaneously viewed as a victim and in need. (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017)

In 2001, Bill Edgar and Joe Doherty edited a book entirely dedicated to the topic of female homelessness in Europe, providing the first comprehensive analysis of the relevant dimensions and trends of this 'hidden' phenomenon[2]. Twenty years later, the peculiar characteristics of the phenomenon are still the

[2] The first investigations into the phenomenon of female homelessness in Italy date back to the early 2000s (Ruspini, 2000; Tosi, 2000), in parallel with the international research (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Marpsat, 2000; Wardhaugh, 1999).

same: although official data keep showing a male prevalence among the homeless population, the number of homeless women is growing, especially among users of dedicated services. Moreover, there is still evidence of a certain change in the composition of the female homeless population, with increasing numbers of young homeless women and migrant women (Baptista, 2010; Edgar & Doherty, 2001).

Nonetheless, to date much of the mainstream literature on homelessness has still little explored gender differentials, contributing to the invisibility of homeless women, despite the alarmingly increase of the phenomenon all over Europe in recent years (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017; Mostowska, 2016). As previously mentioned, the lack of analytical and political attention to female homelessness is mainly caused by the use of a narrow definition of the homeless subject (i.e., single men and rough sleepers). For this reason, the dissemination of new, less restrictive definitions, such as in the case of the ETHOS typology, can contribute to the development of a greater understanding of the high risk of social and housing exclusion for women, shedding light on both the kaleidoscopic complexity of women life experiences and the underlying structural forces (such as poverty, the housing market and the labour market), as well as the institutional system of service provision (Baptista, 2010; Reeve, 2007).

According to the latest ISTAT survey[3] on homeless people (a follow-up of the first survey carried out in 2011), in 2014 there were 7.000 homeless women in Italy amounting to 14.3% of the total (Freguja et al., 2017) and in growth compared to 2011 (FEANTSA, 2018). These are women with an age of about 45 years, who have been homeless on average for 2.7 years. Of these, 54% are foreign women.[4] Compared to previous years, figures on female homelessness are on the rise, as confirmed by social operators, who have observed an increase in the number of women reaching out to shelter services. Moreover, it is important to underline that the survey only considered people who have at least once used homeless services (shelters or soup kitchens) during the course of two winter months, thus excluding women who, although still in condition of extreme poverty, rely to alternative and precarious solutions (i.e., informal support from acquaintances, friends, or family). The survey results confirm that in the specific case of homeless women data still fail to capture and provide a real measure of the phenomenon, precisely because women tend to avoid the traditional channels and services for homelessness, as well as "public spaces of street homelessness", thus failing to portray the complexity and the specificity of women's experiences of homelessness and gendered specific needs (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017, p. 2).

[3] Istat. 2015. Le persone senza dimora. Anno 2014. 10 dicembre. https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/175984

[4] https://www.fiopsd.org/donne-senza-dimora/

> Women may be hidden because they try to avoid the increased risks of being on the streets or in specific shelters; because they have managed to secure alternative housing solutions (doubling up, sharing with family or friends); or because they, and their children, are seen as the 'fragile' family elements and therefore are concealed by welfare systems reactive to this condition. As a result, such women are statistically invisible in most existing data systems on homelessness throughout Europe. (Baptista, 2010, p. 167)

A number of recent studies has shown how female homelessness is less correlated to the "interrelationships between housing and welfare systems" (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017), and more with the gendered division of labour in Western societies, and the resulting specific relationship with domestic and non-domestic spaces, thus making women more vulnerable to homelessness. In this regard, it is interesting to note some contradictions within the system. Even though numbers continue to show a prevalence of male homelessness and reception spaces are essentially designed for a male audience, housing accessibility is highly gendered. Some authors (Kuronen et al., 2020; Rosa, 2021) pointed out how the uncritical association between women, vulnerability, and public spaces – linked to a specific idea of femininity – is eventually mirrored by a greater propensity to accommodate women, especially those with children, in dormitories and shelters. In particular, Shinn (2007, p. 662) highlights that "although the socioeconomic situation of women with children in Europe may be more fragile than that of men, this fact is counterbalanced by more amenities", since welfare systems more promptly react to children's vulnerability (see also Brousse, 2009). This contradiction furthermore sustains the invisibility of the phenomenon of female homelessness (Baptista, 2010).

As Reeve (2018) states: "it is the fact that women are more likely to be the primary carers, the part-time and low-paid workers, unable to afford their own family home without assistance that is the 'cause' of their homelessness, although domestic violence may well be the trigger". The few studies therefore confirm that, although the phenomenon of female homelessness is more limited and assumes different nuances than male homelessness, women are subject to the risk of severe marginalisation precisely as a result of the social and economic structures of western societies. This view emerged already in the 2000s, when several authors outlined critical "shifts in the gendered nature" of homelessness, increasing the risks of vulnerability for women (Watson, 2000). As Edgar and Doherty observed:

> the socio-demographic and economic transformations taking place across Europe seemed to be producing opposite outcomes for women: either encouraging female emancipation and autonomy (e.g. the

> changing role of the family and the increased entry of women into the labour market) or increasing their exposure to the risk of homelessness (e.g. the growing number of female-headed households, the feminisation of poverty, the increased participation in part-time/low-wage jobs and the reduced availability of affordable housing). (Baptista, 2010, p. 165)

These studies clearly indicate that "[f]actors such as conditions in the labour and housing markets, public policy measures to help people in difficulty, care facilities for the mentally ill, are among the 'structural' causes that are important in explaining the spread of homelessness. Yet when the homeless themselves are asked to explain their situation they often refer to what they perceive or reconstruct to be the 'proximate' causes" (Marpsat, 2000, p. 254). After an initial triggering event - which in most cases is related to the family sphere (e.g., separation, divorce, death or abandonment by the partner) follows an instability that leads to an aggravation of economic and family problems (Porcellana, 2016, p. 146). According to the literature, there are two determining factors that urge a woman to turn to a shelter for help: lack of adequate material possessions, and an almost non-existent social support network. The experiences that lead to the stratification of these factors are commonly identified in episodes of sexual abuse and violence, family problems or traumas related to motherhood. Furthermore, a number of them suffers from psychological or psychiatric disorders, in some cases prior to becoming homeless but in other cases as a result of prolonged state of deprivation. Although scholars give prominence to different causes underlying female homelessness, many agree on the idea that "when women do approach services, it is quite often only at the point at which they have exhausted these other, informal, options" (Bretherton, 2017).

While literature has brought to the fore the phenomenon of female invisibility since the early 2000s, it is still one of its most typical features. It is therefore relevant to continue investigating the phenomenon from a gender perspective, "focusing among other things precisely "on the experiences and trajectories of homeless women and on their relationship with the services" (Baptista, 2010, p. 176). In fact, "[t]hese routes into homelessness and differences in life experiences may […] also influence the ways in which women experience and respond to homelessness" (Bretherton, 2020, p. 258).

> Homelessness is not merely 'an experience', or a sequence of temporary accommodation situations. Journeys through homelessness are not comprised of a series of disjoined events and experiences, and they are not determined solely by the choices and decisions women make, or the individual circumstances they find themselves in. Rather, homelessness is a dynamic, and non-linear, process. The trajectories

> women take into, out of, and through homelessness are influenced by a complex range of processes, events, actions and interactions. They encounter structural forces (poverty, the housing market, the labour market); institutional bodies and processes (housing legislation, service provision, organisational rules and remits); personal issues and experiences (substance misuse, mental ill health, parenthood, divorce, bereavement); and within this 'landscape' they exercise choice and make decisions. (Reeve, 2007)

2.2.4 Homelessness service provision in Turin

> Adopting an approach that considers identity and poverty as concepts that come to be defined and take on specific forms in the daily relations between the service system and the people who use it means giving centrality to the contexts, interactions and representations that inform such institutional encounters. (Leonardi, 2021, p. 32)

As already mentioned, there is no national political agenda designed to contrast homelessness, so Italian local governments should develop their own strategies in almost total autonomy (Bifulco, 2015; Lancione, 2014a). In Turin, the emergence of the first services for homeless people dates back to the 1980s, following the industrial crisis that in the second half of the 1970s had already hit the city, until then the capital of Italian economic development (Porcellana, 2016). In the same years, the industrial crisis and the transition to post-Fordism pushed the new municipal administration to initiate a process of economic and urban conversion of the city.

Among other scholars, Leonardi (2021, p. 33) highlights that Turin has an established tradition of studies on poverty and individuals in conditions of poverty. Moreover, in terms of services, Turin has one of the longest traditions of intervention in the Italian context. The role of the first social cooperatives, formed at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, was decisive in the emergence of the first dormitories (Porcellana, 2016). Before the restructuring and commodification of the social system, a positive experiment was launched in Turin between the public authorities, the third sector and the private social sector: new social cooperatives were created, some started to specialise and diversify, and new job opportunities opened within the third sector. As Porcellana (ivi, p. 25) well explained, "with social cooperatives, a new actor came into play who would, from then on, play a central role in the provision of assistance services within a welfare system that was becoming gradually less state-run and increasingly mixed". In the same period, the municipality of Turin introduced the Office of Assistance to the homeless, now called 'Servizio adulti in difficoltà' (SAD). This specific branch was created with the aim of providing concrete answers by building a network of

homelessness services and thus to "address the needs of a city in constant transformation, and to bring back into the system those who had left it or been expelled from it" (ivi, p. 28). Over the years, new shelters were opened, and the night itinerant project called 'Boa' was inaugurated. Towards the end of the 1990s, the municipal administration also set up two fictitious addresses[5] to ensure that Italian citizens could enrol in the registry office, thus giving them the opportunity to access and use the services for the homeless available in the city.

While at the national level, the road to decentralisation was completed with the reform of Title V of the Constitution, the progressive experience accumulated by social workers in previous years stimulated the public response to the issue of adult marginality. New partnerships between public authorities and private social agencies stimulated the development of a shared operational framework in which a central role was given to presence on the streets in order to build up a relationship of trust with people. The aim was to build up a path of accompaniment towards services, while respecting people timeframes and requests (ivi, p. 40). Thanks to these new partnerships, became more pressing the need on one hand to expand and diversify the range of services on offer, and on the other to work in a coordinated manner, in order to consolidate interventions without wasting energies and resources (ivi, p. 41).

Porcellana (ivi, p. 46) observes that "[i]f the Turin case showed that the most active local administrations were trying to build an integrated model of services and that the experiments carried out until then together with the third sector could be transformed into public policies, the absence of solutions at a central level and the 'commodification' of the social welfare system were increasingly evident". Meanwhile, by the end of the 1990s, the phenomenon of adult marginalisation was becoming more complex and, as a result of the economic crisis, was progressively extending to new segments of the population, like women and immigrants.

After the approval of the first 'Piano dei servizi sociali', the planning instrument introduced by the framework law of no. 238/2000, the first call for tenders for the provision of all homelessness services was launched for the three-year period 2003-2006. The new call was an opportunity for the municipality to test the new instrument of concessions, in order to promote horizontal subsidiarity, integrate the wealth of experience and resources built up over the past ten years, and also to enhance the entrepreneurial skills of the cooperatives that had hitherto been managing social services. Thus, there is yet another

[5] To date, the municipality has set up three fictitious residences: 'Via della Casa Comunale, 1' for homeless people; 'Via della Casa Comunale, 2' for homeless people who are taken into care by social services; 'Via della Casa Comunale, 3' for foreign people with residence permits as asylum seekers.

reconfiguration of roles: the operators are no longer mere service providers but are now full partners of the city, acquiring more autonomy (and risks) in management decisions. In her analysis, Porcellana (ivi, p. 118) clearly explains how “within a 'quasi-market' approach, the concession went beyond contracting in an attempt to experiment with a more complex and entrepreneurial welfare mix”. Applying a more critical lens of analysis, the shift to concessions translates into a process of state delegation to the private social sector (ivi, p. 140), while the quasi-market approach, that pressures cooperatives to compete with each other, is also instrumental in hindering the building of alliances and strategies among the various third sector actors.

Another milestone in the evolution of the local welfare system in Turin is marked by the establishment in 2008 of the *Progetto senza dimora* by Ufficio Pio, the instrumental body of the *Compagnia di San Paolo* foundation (ivi, p. 93). This marked the start of the so-called ‘second welfare’ phase, which enhanced the mobilisation of private resources in addition to public ones and emphasised the role of private entities not only as providers but also as funders (Bifulco, 2015, p. 147).

In the 1990s, the Boa itinerant service and the socio-sanitary clinic near the Porta Nuova train station - historically a point of reference and shelter for the homeless population - were set up to promote a more egalitarian relationship between operators and users, by meeting them directly on the street. As Leonardi (2021) well explains, a paradigm shift in the reception system has generated a change in the relationship with the territory, which is now also exacerbated by the conflict to define the legitimate uses of public space. This has resulted in a relocation of reception facilities to the peripheries, often housed in old, disused industrial structures. They are therefore repurposed spaces that lack the necessary attention to make them suitable for the delicate functions they host and the needs of the guests (ivi, p. 41). Few structures are made of masonry while in other cases they are containers.

> They do not have their own name but are called by the name of the street in which they are located and from the outside they appear as anonymous as possible and should not be noticed because their presence is often unwelcome. Some of them are located in places that are difficult to reach by public transport, especially in the evening hours (*ibidem*).

In conclusion, the map of services for the homeless turns out to be a complex assemblage of *spaces of care*[6]. The main actor is the Servizio Adulti in Difficoltà (SAD), which coordinates the network of public dormitories, monitors the meal distribution activities carried out by voluntary associations and provides guidance and counselling to people in need. The SAD is also supported by numerous faith-based organisations, which manage a number of private dormitories, soup kitchens, clothing and food distribution points, and some medical centres.

2.2.5 Requirements, duration, and objectives

> The [homelessness] services and the actions reflect the ways in which the phenomenon in question is socially represented in our country. At the same time, they contribute to the construction of the homeless as a social category, establishing criteria for defining needs, beneficiaries, and conditions for access to care services and facilities. (Consoli & Meo, 2021, p. 27)

The institutional mechanism of taking into care by social services was and is still subject to the verification of the person's requirements (nationality, age, residency, possible disabilities or drug addictions) and willingness to follow an individual project of social assistance for the regaining of living, social, and working autonomy. In Turin, a rehabilitation programme based on the 'staircase approach', which entailed moving from a lower to a higher level of service on the basis of a progressive logic, had been pioneered for several years (Ascoli et al., 2002; Porcellana, 2016): low-threshold centres[7] – like the night shelter on Via Pacini – represent the first and lowest tier of the model, followed by first and second level reception services[8], which are smaller residential units with increasing levels of autonomy (e.g., apartment groups, guided cohabitation) intended as intermediate stages before the final assignment of social housing.

The low-threshold centres respond more than others to the logic of emergency and, in this sense, the fact that the majority of public resources are allocated to this type of structures, which offers a minimum service (overnight accommodation in variable size dormitories, with use of common hygienic

[6] For a better understanding of the complex system of services for homeless people in the city of Turin refer to the work of Michele Lancione (2014a, 2014b), Valentina Porcellana (2016, 2019) and Daniela Leonardi (2021).

[7] In the City of Turin night shelters offer free temporary accommodation to Italian, European and foreign citizens in possession of residence permits, between 18 and 65 years old, without income, homeless and in a situation of exclusion and marginalisation.

[8] In the City of Turin semi-autonomous hostels offer temporary accommodation for the time necessary to improve individual skills, with the aim of personal growth and the gradual gaining of independence. Admission is not direct but is proposed by the services responsible for taking charge after the predisposition of an individual project of social accompaniment.

services), reflects the lack of political interest to intervene in an organic and structural manner over the problem of severe adult marginality. From a political and media point of view, it gives the impression of an immediate response to an urgent, impromptu problem whereas, as Porcellana (2016, p. 51) well explains, in reality it complies with the principle of *less eligibility*: welfare services in support of certain vulnerable categories – homeless, drug addicts, immigrants – must "be decent but not attractive to other citizens". Tracing the origins of workhouses from the middle of the 19th century – which "provided people who were poor with some form of support on the condition that they reside in the workhouse and submit to its regulations" – Allen (2012) explains that the 'less eligibility' rule ensured that assistance to poor people was only granted under such strict conditions that no one would deliberately seek it in lieu of work.

The proclaimed objective of state welfare is the social reintegration of the person, provided that s/he is willing to accept the conditions, which are mainly based on "re-education to work and re-territorialisation through residency" (ivi, p. 52). The staircase model is therefore strictly functional to the gradual 'reintegration' of the person into society. The effort of the person, who proves to be able to follow a path towards regaining autonomy – while accepting its strict conditions – is eventually recognised and rewarded by obtaining access to social housing or other alternative residential solutions. As Porcellana (ivi, p. 54) observes "[i]f, on one side, the staircase model seemed to be functional in guaranteeing a gradual regaining of autonomy for the person included in the pathway, on the other side it required the user to be subjected to continuous evaluations about his choices, his actions, his intentions", confirming in fact a paternalistic vision towards people in need, considered incapable of deciding and acting autonomously (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018).

Logic of activation

In these terms, it is evident how the staircase model reflects the application of neoliberal principles to the welfare system. Everything is measured in terms of requirements, results, and objectives. The process of regaining autonomy is understood as a linear path, which if pursued correctly, with commitment and rigour, eventually leads to the expected result, namely the regaining of personal autonomy, and rewarded with the allocation of a home. Porcellana (2016, p. 64) highlights how in this model, individual autonomy is perceived as a source of power and freedom, while any form of dependence is stigmatised and associated with shame.

The logic of activation falls precisely within this neoliberal and individualistic framework, where autonomy and self-sufficiency are core values. For decades, the debate around the issue of activation has been central in the European political

discourse and although each national social protection programme interprets this issue differently, in general this approach refers to the adoption of social inclusion strategies that favour and reward the participation of the beneficiaries in the labour market, in order to counter a passive dependence on welfare (Barbier, 2005; Bifulco, 2015). Essentially, "activation […] has to do with a set of different practices that individuals, institutionally sustained, have to (actively) pursue so that they can themselves improve their employability, identifying the latter as the best way to overcome difficulties and reducing social risks (poverty, exclusion, dependency, etc.)" (V. Borghi, 2011, p. 323).

As a normative policy orientation, it applies primarily to working age individuals, whether active or inactive, to pensioners, and also to 'socially excluded' persons, but it also applies to social protection systems, "deemed too 'passive' and inefficient, particularly adverse to job creation and to labour market flexibility" (Barbier, 2005). As Barbier (ivi, p. 423) points out, "[t]he notion of "activation" can be envisaged as the introduction of an increased and explicit linkage between 'paid work' and social protection". The logic of activation thus introduces conditionality mechanisms, which means that the entitlement to social benefits is conditional on the fulfilment of certain mandatory services, such as demonstrating the active search for employment (Bifulco, 2015, p. 50).

'Work-ready', 'work first', 'work providing' are all different models and programmes linked with the European *welfare-to-work* approach "centred on labour market activation for people claiming welfare benefits" (Bretherton & Pleace, 2019). Scholars assert that the low success rate of this type of initiatives is influenced by the economic context, which is often characterised by a widespread and general lack of labour supply. Not to mention that homeless people are often associated with stereotypes and stigmatisation, which further complicates integration into the workforce. As Bretherton and Pleace (2019) highlight, in general "such interventions both fail to recognise and overcome economic realities" (p. 64), and unless they are part of a comprehensive care strategy (e.g., safe and affordable housing, well-paid work, health and mental assistance) they are unlikely to be a definitive solution to homelessness or severe deprivation.

Although in theory the emphasis in public documents is always on the "high incidence of structural elements on homelessness, in practice the system is based on people's faults and inabilities (Porcellana, 2016), incentivising a stigmatising representation of the homeless subject.

> This particular way of discursively framing homelessness – as a matter of *lacking* something – is the (mainly unconscious) blueprint for the kind of normative practices that the city put in place. (Lancione, 2014a)

Discretion and control

As discussed in the previous section, the lack of a universalistic system of rights to economic assistance leads to a chronic state of extreme poverty and social exclusion. Institutional discretion and the inadequacy of interventions – often targeted only at those in a state of severe distress – not only contribute to longer periods of permanence within the welfare circuits, but also expose beneficiaries to processes of stigmatisation and social devaluation. Emerging from a difficult situation is therefore a process with very uncertain outcomes.

> Where rights are fragile or missing, social protection depends on the discretion of decision-makers. The difference between rights-based and discretionary measures is obvious in the case of economic assistance interventions. (Bifulco, 2015, p. 46)

Those who do not or are not willing to accept the conditions of the reintegration process are inevitably destined to invisibility and marginalisation. In this sense, social accompaniment programmes act as instruments of control rather than as activators of rights (Porcellana, 2016). This applies both to the homeless and to migrants who refuse to be subjected to the rules and times of the welfare system. The staircase model is based on a distortion of the principle of meritocracy: deserving is the one who unconditionally respects the rules, regardless of rights. Moreover, "[b]arriers to formal services were reported. […] There is longstanding evidence that lone adults, including lone women, can face multiple barriers to assistance under the homelessness laws" (Bretherton, 2020, p. 262). Leonardi highlights how people are sometimes required to renounce to their few possessions in order to obtain assistance from the social services.

Duration of care pathways

Another major problem affecting the homeless concerns the time required for intervention. The process of social reintegration becomes progressively more complex as the duration of the experience on the street continues, which leads to a process of chronicisation of the problems (Gallo, 2007). The personalisation of assistance services is designed to focus on the individual and his/her specific needs, but Leonardi (2021) points out that, in reality, it is the user who has to adapt to the times, needs, and resources of the institution. The low threshold numbers are very high but the progression to the next steps of the model is limited and slow (Porcellana, 2016). The long duration of the pathways is also unequivocally linked to the total lack of integration between the health and social systems, one of the main issues that emerged from the conversations with the social operators.

Turin is a city where social services are very advanced in some respects. However, there is an enormous black hole, which is the social and health care integration. It is not enough to say "I take a person under psychiatric care from the level of psychosis upwards" because there are all the pre-psychosis pathologies, which are in any case serious and deeply invalidating. We cannot avoid the idea of creating different structures in which there are social and health personnel for people who present serious disorders, who need therapy, with competent personnel for the distribution of therapy. We are not nurses; we are not here to give therapies. In some very rare situations, we have accepted the responsibility to give therapy because we realised that we absolutely had to help the person to come out of a critical moment, to find a pharmacological balance that would allow the person to live independently and to manage himself independently. If I think about what the cosmic void of the system is, it is this one. On all the rest, I think we are better equipped, and we are also...there is a competent network. This issue, on the other hand, seems to me to be non-existent, non-existent! (Patrizia*, 1/10/2020*)

We have women with psychiatric problems. In my opinion, according to my experience, with a good support, even pharmacological, from the psychiatric department, and with the appropriate educators, these women could somehow find a dimension of normality. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

It is interesting to note, however, that although the decades-long lack of integration between the health and social sectors has led to an overall slowness of pathways, the staircase model remains closely aligned with a 'treatment first' approach. People in extreme poverty are considered incapable of reacting, deciding and managing their own lives, including their homes (Porcellana, 2016).

> Homelessness services fall into two main groups. Housing readiness services are centred on making a homeless person able to live and cope on their own before offering housing, changing supposedly negative behaviours, ensuring treatment compliance and promoting socioeconomic integration, setting targets on the road to a single model of ‘housing readiness’. Housing First and housing-led services, by contrast, provide housing quickly and deliver choice-led support services, coproducing support with homeless people that is designed to promote health, wellbeing and socioeconomic integration (Bretherton & Pleace, 2019, pp. 60–61)

Over the years, it became evident, thanks to the experience gained in dormitories and shelters and to the studies carried out on the issue of homelessness, that housing, health, and work are closely linked. The lack of a job or of a certain degree of economic self-sufficiency is one of the main causes of precarious housing, which, if protracted over a long period of time as is often the case, could lead to an altered and precarious state of mental (and sometimes physical) health. For this reason, one of the most important experiments carried

out, is the Housing First approach. The approach has been developed in the United States at the beginning of the 1990s, but is now dominating the debate on homelessness (Quilgars & Pleace, 2016). The approach is essentially based on the idea that housing is a human basic right and is unrelated to therapeutic care, thus reversing the 'treatment first' approach (Cortese & Iazzolino, 2014). The aim is to speed up the transition from the street to permanent housing (Johnson et al., 2012). In this framework, the house is no longer a prize at the end of a long process within the welfare system.

Over the years, different approaches to tackling severe adult marginalisation have developed and although there is still no strong consensus around the Housing First model, scholars agree that "one of the basic prerequisites for social inclusion is having adequate housing from which to live one's life in the community" (Quilgars & Pleace, 2016). However, if we shift the focus from the response model to the issue of homelessness, to the configuration of the welfare system data suggest that "countries with extensive welfare systems and lower inequality have less homelessness" (Bretherton & Pleace, 2019). The general fact that emerges is that where protection systems are more general and universal, there are fewer mechanisms for producing or reproducing welfare dependency. Thus, a universalistic welfare system provides more guarantees in terms of overcoming the state of deprivation (Bifulco, 2015; Saraceno, 2002).

> The paradox of patience in the face of emergency has become a big feature of the world of globalization, as many poor people experience it. The world has a whole operates increasingly in the mode of urgency, of emergency, of dangers that require immediate reaction and attention. The poor, as refugees, as migrants, as minorities, as slum dwellers, and as subsistence farmers, are often at the center of these emergencies. Yet their biggest weapon is often their patience as they wait for relief to come, rulers to die, bureaucrats to deliver promises, government servants to be transferred, or drought to pass. This ability to hurry up and wait (an American joke about life in the army) has much more serious meaning in the life of the poor. (Appadurai, 2004, p. 81)

2.3 Approaching female marginality

2.3.1 Urban margins and spaces of care

Starting from the study of the concept of urban margin, I was able (as a neophyte geographer) to position myself within a specific critical theoretical tradition and to ground this research on the nexus between female marginality and spaces of care, which till now has received little attention from urban scholars.

According to Lancione (2016), [a]lmost every study that is related to a group, a practice, a cultural trait, a gender, a socio-economic role, a space, and so on – that is not considered to be 'central', 'acceptable', or 'right' – could be defined as a work on marginality".

The concept of urban margin is conventionally linked to its material and immaterial distance from a centre. Urban margins are usually depicted as deprived urban spaces, lacking rationality, urban quality, services, order, safety; sacrificed territories, where economic and social problems are mutually nourished, becoming more and more visible and severe. It is not uncommon to find references about marginality as a condition, a sort of disease that leaves a detrimental mark on both places and people, a *stigma* (Wacquant, 2007). Scholars have usually approach the study of marginality from a specific perspective, emphasizing singular dimensions of the phenomenon – social, cultural, political, material, economic, geographical – in order to provide a solid definition of the concept (Lancione, 2016). Traditional binary representations of the social world tend to put at the centre of the debate the isolation and non-conformity of deprived urban spaces, and their inhabitants, in respect to the dominant and powerful society (Governa, 2016).

> Research on marginality generally assumes a hierarchical relationship between the marginal and the nonmarginal. Usually this relationship is expressed in a Center/Periphery (ore Core/Periphery) model. (Cullen & Pretes, 2000)

Focusing on its social dimension, scholars tend to understand marginality as a social construction. Marginality is then determined by a "power relationship between group viewing itself as a 'center', and consequently viewing all minorities and nonmembers as marginal or 'other'." (Cullen & Pretes, 2000). In this sense, marginalization derives from a difference from a norm or standard – whether based on characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and so on – and that is perceived as a threat to the dominant social groups. As many scholars have pointed out, difference can be considered without a doubt a sustained feature of urban spaces (Fincher & Jacobs, 1998) and it is from decades at the centre of recent developments of contemporary social theory.

Social marginality is moreover usually associated with a spatial marginalization, which can be found in different configurations around the world, where urban poverty and other stigmatized characteristics tend to concentrate in Afro-American ghettos, Latin American favelas, France banlieue. Even if European configurations of marginality have in no case assumed the exceptional traits of US *hyperghetto* (Wacquant, 2008), "in Europe urban deprivation may be

quite significant even without the support of an intense segregation phenomena: it is more interstitial and dispersed."(Governa, 2016)

Certainly it is possible to find numerous definitions of marginality in the literature, however, "due to its very nature, such a multifaceted social phenomenon tends to defy any strict definition" (Aru et al., 2017) and as a concept "lacks construct validity" (Del Pilar & Udasco, 2004). In reality, urban margins are fluid, heterogeneous, ever-changing, and distant from normative narratives, the outcome of imbalanced power relations, thus extremely complex to bring into focus and represent.

> [W]e depart from the idea that the margin is an objective concept defined by idiographic parameters (e.g. distance from the city centre, level of economic development, citizens' social status, number of reported criminal offences, etc.) Rather we define margin as subjective and fluid, uncertain and at the same time heuristically imbued with inputs, evidence and reflections that are both analytically and (most importantly) methodologically valid. (Aru et al., 2017)

A multi-layered, in-between reality (Aru et al., 2017) that offers the opportunity to access to alternative, decentred, and non-hierarchical points of reference to the study of urban life. An attempt to force this heterogeneous phenomenon into strict theoretical boxes would be useless and unproductive. At the same time, casting the light on marginality might reinforce stigmatizing and demeaning representations of places and subjects. For these reasons, engaging with a more critical perspective towards urban margins – and female marginality – requires a renewed research attitude.

Commenting on the rapid increase in poverty in wealthy Western countries, Chiara Saraceno (2015) observes that there has been "a change in attitude towards begging and an attempt to define a behavioural code, both for the poor and for those who help them. This code seems to be inspired above all by a concern for the decorum of spaces and limiting disturbance to those who are not poor. Moreover, by the idea that the poor have a weaker moral fibre than the wealthy, so they should not be tempted to beg, or not to work hard, relying on forms of public or private assistance that do not encourage the activation of personal resources". Poor people should remain invisible, but "at the same time getting busy, to show that they are not content with their situation, to get active, but without being caught breaking the rules" (Saraceno, 2015). In this discouraging picture, it is possible to identify strong tensions in Europe, and particularly in Italy, regarding the management of the phenomenon of adult marginality and homelessness. Although some scholars point out that European member states have developed more moderate, less punitive and criminalising responses than the United States in particular (O'Sullivan, 2012). 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 (Johnsen et al., 2005a, 2005b). It is now common to refer to these spaces, "springing up in the interstices of a more hostile urban environment to offer comfort and care to those excluded from prime city space" (Johnsen et al., 2005a) as 'spaces of care' (Conradson, 2003b). These ambiguous urban spaces of care constitute an assemblage of different services for people in vulnerable life conditions – like poor people, homeless people, people with mental health problems, migrants and asylum seekers, and other minority groups – and have received growing attention in the geographic literature on the voluntary sector in recent years (Lancione, 2014a). The issue of the decorum of public spaces is also strongly associated with the issue of the location of care spaces, often relegated to the outskirts of the city, in peripheral areas and dilapidated facilities.

In conclusion, assuming a critical posture allowed me to face the descent into the field with a renewed and attentive sensibility to the complexity that shape places and subjects of marginality, in order to try to unveil and sketch previously unseen narratives, yet not idealised or romanticised, detached from biased and normative discourses (Aru et al., 2017; Garbin & Millington, 2012; Governa, 2016; Lancione, 2016; Lancione & McFarlane, 2016; Rosa, 2016; Thieme, 2016).

> I am speaking from a place in the margins where I am different, where I see things differently. I am talking about what I see. (hooks, 1989)

2.3.2 Women, vulnerability and welfare system

> We fear those who speak about us who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us because they never want us to speak differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in the voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. (hooks, 1989)

Feminist cultural criticism has usually preferred more autobiographical, situated accounts over quantitative analysis and overgeneralisation (Hanson & Pratt, 1995), however bearing in mind the perfectibility and partiality of each perspective. In fact, knowledge is situated, neither objective nor transparent (Haraway, 1988; McDowell, 1997).

> Doing feminist geography means looking at the actions and meanings of gendered people, at their histories, personalities and biographies, at

> the meaning of places to them, at the different ways in which spaces are gendered and how this affects people's understandings of themselves as women or men. (McDowell, 1997)

For these reasons, this research starts directly from the voices and daily experiences of few users of a female shelter, in order to highlight 'everyday struggle in the face of extreme urban social environments and prolonged precarious conditions' (Thieme, 2016), which till now has received little attention from critical urban scholars, more focus on broader and structural analysis of urban marginality. The work aim is to investigate the micro entanglements between marginality, 'vulnerable' women and everyday practices of care. After a short period of wandering and informal observations in Barriera di Milano, at the beginning of September 2019 I got in contact with two different social projects: *Fa bene* and *Drophouse*.

> Research tends to be a mixture of hard slog, serendipitous coincidences and pure chance. Perhaps we should admit this in our writing. We often write up our research findings and present our methods as if they were chosen after a careful trawl through the complete range of possibilities for the 'best' way to approach the issue under investigation. But this is often not how it happens. (McDowell, 1997)

Even if it was not entirely intentional to get involved with these two different social projects and spaces of care, mainly frequented by women, it proved to be fundamental for the research project and its unfolding. Making myself available as a volunteer over an extended period of time, offered me the chance to build trusted and intimate relationships with a wide and rich group of women, of different age, place of origin, class, working position, family relationship, legal status, cultural and financial background. And thus, women with various dreams, fears, inclinations, expectations, and motivations. There is Nadia, a woman in her fifties, born and raised with her family in a popular house in the neighbourhood of Barriera di Milano. After the death of her partner, she has struggled to reinvent herself as a single mother and as a worker. One of the first beneficiaries of *Fa bene* food assistance project, she is now the local coordinator of the project in Barriera di Milano with a work grant and many ideas on its possible developments. There is Mara, a young Nigerian woman arrived in Turin not so long ago, that is struggling to get herself out of prostitution. Willing to give herself a chance and with not many other alternatives, she decided to entrust herself to the care of the social workers of the female shelter. And then there is Shirin, a young energetic Egyptian woman, married and with three little children. She and her husband arrived from Egypt with a college degree, but once in Italy

he started to work in an Arab restaurant while she decided to stay home and take care of their babies. Shirin is now taking Italian classes and a sewing course at the day-centre, in order to find a little emancipation and opportunities for social interaction.

They are just three examples among all the women that I have encountered in the fieldwork, but their life stories are illustrative of the concept of **intersecting marginality**. They are women, therefore already in a condition of vulnerability and underprivilege, that live and endure in a marginal context, and that face daily countless deprivations, both from a social and economic point of view. As Kuronen and Virokannas (2020) well explain, for women living on the margins of society or in vulnerable life situations it is very common to observe an intersection of several hardships "over their life course, some of which might continue over generations", like poor women, homeless women, women who have experienced psychological or physical abuse, young migrant women at risk of prostitution, women affected by psychological distress. In this sense, marginality is not an individual characteristic but the direct consequence of cumulative structural and individual condition of vulnerabilities. To date, one of the issues that has received most attention globally is violence against women, but as Gómez & Kuronen (2020, p. 39) point out ", there are other vulnerabilities facing women, related to poverty and economic hardship, poor housing, and even homelessness, insecurity, loneliness and lack of social support, drug problem and so on. Many of these intensify in urban environments". Moreover, by applying a feminist intersectional approach scholars and activists tend to frame the phenomenon of violence against women as a direct effect of a patriarchal, machista and capitalistic system, which thrive on unbalanced power relations and the subordination of minorities, and especially women. Male violence is thus just the direct manifestation of an unequal, unbalanced, and oppressive society.

> Although vulnerability is socially produced, contemporary understandings of vulnerability often fail to take into account the powerful social forces that exacerbate the difficulties of those living in the most difficult circumstances. (Brown et al., 2020, p. 22)

At this point, I need to clarify how do I stand in respect to gender and feminist geography. At the very beginning of my fieldwork experience, I did not intentionally choose to exclude men from my research. It has been mostly a coincidence to end up volunteering for the above-mentioned social projects, and especially at the female shelter. But once there, once in the field, focusing primarily on these women became a calculated research choice. In some cases, reference will be made to masculine perspectives on defined issues, like in the case of the homeless literature, traditionally focused on a masculine analysis of

the phenomenon. However, this is not a gendered analysis of life experiences at the margins. Behind this choice there is no assumption of a women's commonality, rather there is the acknowledgment that "not all women are equal, or even similar. […] Women are also positioned differently by their social class, their age and family status, by their sexual inclination, and by whether or not they are able-bodied" (McDowell, 1997). There is now a shared agreement that "gender influences all aspects of our being, our relationships and the society and culture we live in. Gender intersects with other distinctions and inequalities related to age, ethnicity, class, economic situation and so on (Gómez & Kuronen, 2020). However, in certain circumstances and places, ethnicity and class play a much more significant role than the gender in the marginalization and subordination of women, inside and outside the homeplace and in the labour market.

Marginality conditions the experience of being a woman, and this occurs differently in different places and urban margins. Different marginal areas, with different socio-economic and cultural characteristics, affect differently gender identities and female subjectivities, including individual motivations, inclinations, dreams, and expectations. Consequently, they all experience life at the margins in different ways and, in this sense, their subjectivity is variously affected.

> First, subjectivity is conceptualized as a process, continuously inscribed and reinscribed through discourses, cultural representations, and everyday practices. It is inscribed in and through, among other means, urban form. This reading of subjectivity differs from that which seems implicit in earlier feminist geographical work and opens up a richer set of relations between subjectivity and space. (Hanson & Pratt, 2003)

Spaces and places cannot be considered anymore as mere constraints or opportunities, "that allow or disallow individuals to fulfill their preconceived potentials". A processual reading of subjectivity, as Hanson and Pratt argue (2003), "opens the recognition that gendered identities, including aspirations and desires, are fully embedded in – and indeed inconceivable apart from – place and that different gendered identities are shaped through different places.". The category 'woman' cannot be treated unproblematically, otherwise differences in concrete life experiences will be flattened or cancelled, thus renouncing to a critical engagement with feminist theory.

> Recent feminist scholarship has been especially attentive to the multiplicity of social relations that structure individual's identities in interdependent and contradictory ways. The experience of being a woman is very different depending on how one is positioned in terms

> of class, race, religion, sexual orientation, colonialism, etc. (Hanson & Pratt, 1995)

In the light of what has been said so far, it is important to stress that "poverty, the housing market and the labour market [...] exert a strong impact on the landscapes where women live, exercise choices and make decisions" (Baptista, 2010, p. 167). In particular, it is possible to read the phenomenon of homelessness as a chronic and prolonged condition of vulnerability that has its roots in a socially, culturally and economically impoverished context, characterised by high housing insecurity and high unemployment, precarious employment and low wages.

> By using the concept of vulnerable life situations, instead of referring to these women as vulnerable individuals or groups, we want to turn the attention towards the society and its institutions, including the welfare service system, which compensate for, but possibly also generate and (re)produce vulnerability in these women's lives. (Virokannas et al., 2020)

Many authors stress the enormous weight of social pressures and expectations that women experience from a young age, highlighting how specific representations of femininity and motherhood "influence the ways these women are seen in society but also as service users" (Kuronen et al., 2020, p. 5). Poor women or women in vulnerable conditions tend to remain a rather invisible subject in the eyes of society and in particular of the welfare system, as we have seen above, increasingly focused on the neo-liberal paradigms of individualism and activation. In Italy, where the levels of female unemployability and unemployment are extremely high, numerous women in conditions of severe marginalisation find themselves completely ignored by the social welfare system. While many of them prefer to rely on their own scarce resources or to deploy dangerous survival strategies, others are often forced to refer to services, such as low-threshold centres, which are often unprepared to deal with gender specific needs. For these and other reasons, it is well known that many women tend to avoid turning to these services for help.

In conclusion, if it is correct to affirm that female marginality and vulnerability are two socially-constructed and context-dependent concepts, studies show that women are facing similar hardships across different countries, due to the inadequacy and over complexity of the social service system, unable to recognise gender specific needs. In a social, economic, and political landscape that tends to relegate gender issues to matters of secondary importance, women who decide to rely on social and care services – agreeing to the strict rules, conditions, and assessments of the system – nevertheless find themselves

embedded in a rigid, unresponsive system, capable of meeting only basic needs, often with great difficulty. Moreover, a system that is highly discriminatory, controlling, and stigmatising. As already mentioned, it is also worth noting that it is actually easier for women with minor children to receive assistance, especially in obtaining more or less stable accommodation. This, however, does not shield them from analogous controlling and oppressive practices aimed more at protecting minors than at satisfying the needs of mothers. Practices that enact "several threats to their parenting role and identity" (Baptista, 2010).

> In order to forge better understandings of vulnerability, rather than seeking a definitive answer to what vulnerability is, we might contribute to a diversity of understandings of vulnerability. Whilst we have positioned lived experiences of vulnerability as of central importance, we would also argue that concepts of vulnerability should never be stripped from the socio-political context or their material constitution. It is only through bringing together structural and personal dimensions of vulnerability with its more discursive or narrative dimensions that we can stand the best chance of understanding how vulnerability is lived and experienced in contemporary society. (Brown et al., 2020, p. 22)

2.3.3 Female empowerment: between theory and rhetoric

> [W]e see a discursive association of equality and empowerment with agency, justice, accountability and human rights. These links, however, too often take place without recognition of the underlying structural connections and the relations of power that produce situations of inequality and discrimination. In the absence of serious discussion about these connections, much of this text and talk, though enticing, remains at the level of rhetoric. (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015)

In the framework of development studies, the concept of female marginality is strictly linked with the concept of female empowerment, which was originally mobilised in the 1980s by feminist scholars from the Global South to promote on the policy agenda the issue of women's rights and gender equality (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997; Sen, 1997). More recently, the concept has received critical scrutiny in order to denounce how, embedded into the neoliberal framework, it has become one of the most vague and abused buzzword (Cornwall, 2016) and it has not survived "as a transformative, revolutionary concept" (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 21).

By adopting an intersectional approach to female marginality, it can be recognised that "[a] woman's level of empowerment will vary, sometimes

enormously, according to other criteria such as her class or caste, ethnicity, relative wealth, age, family position etc and any analysis of women's power or lack of it must appreciate these other contributory dimensions" (Mosedale, 2005, p. 244), as well as its context-dependent nature. In her work, Rawland (1997) solicited for "a more precise understanding of both power and empowerment" (Cornwall, 2016), since "power is central to any conceptualisations of empowerment, and is at the very root of the term itself" (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 19). Rahman (2013) argues that "there is a need to be aware that power can take many different forms", but they all "seem to share a conceptualization of power which becomes visible through the enactment of 'agency' in different ways" (Galiè and Farnworth, 2019).

> To get a better grasp on the concept of 'power' within the word 'empowerment' four definitions of power have been developed over time and are now widely used. They attempt to capture both what the terms empowerment and disempowerment actually constitute, and how they are enacted within, and between, individuals. (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019)

Power over clearly arises from conflict, since it is the ability to force someone or a group to do something against their will and even to prevent someone or a group "from getting to the decision-making arena in the first place" (Mosedale, 2005, p. 249). This power "suggests a social relation of domination or subordination between individuals" (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019).

Power to "is the power to bring about an outcome or resist change" (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019), which "creates new possibilities and actions without domination" (Rahman, 2013).

Power from within "refers to a transformation of individual consciousness which leads to a new self-confidence to act" (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). It refers to "assets such as self-esteem and self-confidence. In a sense all power starts from here – such assets are necessary before anything else can be achieved. The internalization of such feelings of worthlessness is a well-recognized feature of women's oppression and therefore many development interventions seek to bring about changes at this level." (Mosedale, 2005, p. 250)

Power with "is power that results from individuals organizing and acting as a group to address common concerns" (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). According to Mosedale (2005, p. 250), it derives from the acknowledgement that "more can be achieved by a group acting together than by individuals alone".

Among the different interpretations of the concept of empowerment, it is useful here to summarise the main aspects that are found across the various theorisations. Firstly, if one speaks of empowerment, it is clear that a hypothesis

of a lack of power has been advanced. Secondly, empowerment cannot be given but it must be claimed by those who are disempowered. However, “[w]omen’s organisations play a fundamental role in bringing women together for their mutual empowerment” (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 19). Generally speaking, empowerment, which is to be understood as a process and not as a product, implies an understanding of the condition of subordination and of the choices and actions that can be taken to improve and overturn socio-cultural, political and economic constraints. However, in order to achieve transformation at a social level, it is not only necessary to acquire self-esteem and awareness of one's own needs and desires (*power with* and *power from within*), but it is essential to generate and stimulate collective action (*power with*). Cornwall and Rivas (2015, p. 405) highlight how “[f]eminist work from this period emphasises the complex reciprocal relationship between women’s ‘self-understanding’ and ‘capacity for self-expression’ and their access to and control over material resources”. As noted by Stromquist (1995), empowerment is a socio-political concept which can be understood as made of different components, including, for instance, a cognitive, psychological, economic, and political component.

> There was an insistence that empowerment was not something that could be bestowed by others, but about recognizing inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights and acting to press for and bring about structural change in favour of greater equality (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343).

As Cornwall (2016, p. 343) explains, in the first theorisations “empowerment was cast as an unfolding process of changes in consciousness and collective power”, aimed at challenging “the structures – both gender relations and dominant models of development – which were exacerbating [women’s] poverty and exclusion” (Duncanson, 2019). Since then, it has taken on different shades of meaning over the last decades, losing is conceptual “transformative edge” (Cornwall, 2016). From a feminist perspective the term has acquired a signification infused with neo-liberalism and individualism from the moment it “has been appropriated by mainstream organisations and by governments to legitimise policies and practices that, from a feminist perspective, are far from empowering for women” (Sardenberg, 2008). The concept of empowerment should entail "a lasting change in the power and choices women have over their own lives, rather than just an (often temporary) increase in opportunities" (Smee & Woodroffe, 2013), by overcoming the social and cultural barriers to equality and by questioning the existing model of economic development (Sardenberg, 2008). Nonetheless, in the international policy discourse, "there is little emphasis on addressing the underlying structural issues driving discrimination and

inequality" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 398), including unpaid reproductive work, eroded sexual and reproductive rights, and violence against women. As Duncanson (2019, p. 4) highlights "the term has come to mean increasing women's access to jobs in the formal sector, improving the availability of credit for women entrepreneurs and investing in women's human capital, their education and health". Cornwall and Rivas (2015, p. 406) critically underline that "[t]his version of 'women's empowerment' is more appealing to international donors and banks than traditional feminist concerns with the more nebulous inequality and oppression". In this framework, women are seen as a good investment for economic development precisely because of alleged intrinsic qualities that portray them "as more hardworking, more caring, more responsible and more mindful of the environment than men" (ivi, p. 399). This mainstream version of the term has no interest in working towards the removal of the structural barriers underlying the socio-economic system, hindering women's self-actualisation.

> What falls out of the frame are the relational dimensions that were so much part of feminist conceptualisations of gender and that were fundamental to feminism's central focus on transforming power relations. […] Individuals and groups may acquire assets and institutions may improve their governance, but these elements in themselves do not necessarily produce empowerment.(Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 406).

Academic and non-academic literature is rich in narratives of success, stories about rupture and redemption from an economic and social deprived condition to an enhanced wealthy status. That is the reason why some scholars, like Cornwall and Rivas (2015), are claiming the need to move on from a language of empowerment and reassert a language of rights, which they argue are "the higher-order normative principles that underpin feminist engagement with development". Is it even ethically right to talk about empowerment instead of rights? Is not a right to be able to talk and be listen? To have a home, a job, and a fair salary? To be able to make choices and even change mind? To be able to rest when needed, and to have a balanced life? To be able to fail or fall dawn and then to ask for help in times of need? These rights should be granted and not earned.

> [W]omen's empowerment in its liberal version is unlikely to deliver the kind of transformation that would create the more just, more equal and happier world that we would all like to see. (Duncanson, 2019)

For instance, Nadia, a middle-aged woman, born and raised with her family in a popular house in the neighbourhood of Barriera di Milano, would be the perfect example of liberal female empowerment and self-actualisation. She managed,

with little external support, to move from a difficult situation to more favourable life conditions. She was able to win a work-grant, to start paying again for her popular house and now, as local manager of *Fa bene* project, she is able to make her voice heard and count, proposing new ideas to develop the project in the future; with a new (yet small) financial stability she is finally able to provide for her daughter. At the same time, the lack of an academic title and her inconstant curriculum, represents a blatant limitation for her working future, despite her fieldwork experience and natural propensions as social worker.

> [I]f the mainstream international development agenda is about getting more women into corrupt and ineffective formal political institutions, or into low-paid jobs with poor labour conditions, this may bring benefits for individuals but ultimately offers little prospect of transforming the deep structures of inequality or redressing pervasive discrimination. (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 404)

The question arises as to what the real job market prospects are. It is then interesting to pose attention to the material dimensions of women's in/security, referring to the latest Italian statistics on female unemployment, a direct example of the deep structures of gender-based inequality and pervasive discrimination. From a very recent document produced by ISTAT (Sabbadini, 2021), it emerges how the pandemic has worsened the already not very encouraging data on female participation in the labour market. In 2020, the female employment rate increased to 72.7% (-1.7 points compared to the previous year) for women aged between 25 to 49 without children and to 53.3% (-1.9 points) for those with a pre-school child. The level of education is recognised to be a determining factor in female labour participation, both for women without children and for those with at least one pre-school child. The most significant figure relates to women with at most a middle school diploma and at least one pre-school child, with an employment rate of 26.4%. Overall, the employment rate of Italian women aged between 25 to 49 is 15.3 points lower than the European average (58.7% compared to 74%) and is the lowest in Europe. In particular, at the end of 2021, ISTAT released the news that in December, out of a total of 101,000 new unemployed, about 97% were women. In addition to these data on female employment, there is also a further consideration of the issue of female economic dependency. According to a study carried out a few years ago entitled 'Women and family management' by Episteme, 37% of women in Italy do not have a bank account, a figure that rises to 100% for women with a low level of education who stopped their studies after compulsory schooling.

If the solution to women's poverty – and thus homelessness – is to be found within an oppressive system, strongly unbalanced for women in terms of benefits,

guarantees, and rights, it is evident that work takes the form of exploitation through the acceptance of poor working conditions and wages. In this sense, the concept of female empowerment is nothing less than a distraction. “Transforming poor women into poor entrepreneurs” (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 23) cannot in any way represent the overcoming of a condition of severe marginality. From a feminist standpoint, individual participation in the labour market on the terms in which it is being offered to many women does not liberate them, but burdens them with more work, with debt, entrapping women in poorly paid jobs which reinforce gender stereotypes (Duncanson, 2019).

> Just think of the phenomenon of microcredit in Bangladesh, or Nike's various campaigns to educate girls in poor villages in developing countries, which have had the effect of taking many women away from reproductive and rural work in the villages and turning them into either ultra-indebted small businesswomen or super-exploited wage labourers in the megacities of dependent countries. (Farris & Moïse, 2019)

It is then necessary to challenge normative discourse around the notion of empowerment in marginal contexts and for ‘vulnerable’ subjects. It would be therefore useful to critically question the romanticisation and exploitation of conventional female narratives, which are generally discussed in positive and optimistic terms, especially at political and media level. Concepts as emancipation, improvement, achievement are typically deployed, promoting a neoliberal and individualistic paradigm of women’s development. Therefore, there is a need to critically reflect on what it means empowerment in powerless contexts. What does empowerment truly embody for these women?

Trough the raw narration of women’s life stories I refuse to portray an idealised framing of marginality and reiterate an entrepreneurial representation of marginal subjects. In this sense, it would be relevant for a critical engagement with the concept of female marginality to reason around empowerment discourse. Might the claim of female empowerment itself reproduce and reinforce capitalistic and paternalistic forms of power oppression, on one hand, normalizing social injustice by promoting a deeply naïve entrepreneurial view of life and personal fulfilment and on the other, condemning fragility, weaknesses, and mistakes as only reasons behind underprivileged social status? Even Linda McDowell (2016), among other scholars, talks about “contribution” of migrant women to UK economy, in terms of labour, taxes, good humour, and energy. What if there is no ‘tangible’ contribution? Or rather, how could we critically frame the concept of contribution rejecting neo-liberal lenses of analysis? What is the role and value of ‘needy’ or ‘vulnerable’ subjects in our societies and cities?

Engaging with a more critical perspective towards female empowerment, imply to emphasise the broad material and immaterial lacks that many women face in more deprived context, and the resulting ambushes behind this kind of absences. Nonetheless, this is by no means an attempt to reinforce a masculinist thinking that sees women in a position of subordination and inferiority, confined to more static, closed, and localised realities (Hanson & Pratt, 1995). Let alone, an attempt to reinforce and reproduce a static and repetitive image of marginality. This is instead an effort to highlight, once again, the deepest and revolutionary meaning of a critical and radical feminist struggle: we, as women, do not face analogue condition of marginalities and vulnerabilities. For this reason, building on an intersectional approach to social justice, it is necessary to recentre the debate over all the women (and the men) that are repeatedly left behind, disposable women (and men) living in disposable places, dramatically affected by recursive economic and social crisis, that stratify with decades of government negligence and the progressive downsizing of the welfare-state.

2.3.4 Theoretical framework and research questions

In conclusions, holding together feminist theory, relational geographies of care and homelessness, and critical studies on marginality in a sustained and combined conversation, the concept of care has been used as a theoretical lens to approach and unpack the issue of female marginality.

Drawing on a relational approach (Askins & Pain, 2011; DeVerteuil et al., 2019) and an intersectionality theoretical lens to female homelessness (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017), the aim of this work is to answer to the following **research questions**:

i) how do complex and organised practices of care shape women's daily experience of homelessness?

ii) how is care experienced, assembled, and challenged within the women shelter?

By adopting an unusual perspective of women as receiver of care practices, the thesis offers a critical reflection of the complex internal dynamics that shape and affect different experiences inside a women shelter, a gendered, organised, and institutionalised urban space of care. And finally, taking into consideration the ambivalence and ambiguity of such contemporary shelter spaces, the product and tool of neoliberal, exclusionary, discriminatory, and paternalistic welfare systems, the thesis questions:

iii) to what extent does the female shelter operate as a space of care against female marginality?

In order to address these questions, it will firstly be investigated the role of the centre in relation to the local system of care, by drawing on the concept of *relational micro-space of contact* (DeVerteuil et al., 2019). The third sector is the main official channel for the provision of social care services in Europe (Ascoli & Ranci, 2002). As Lancione (2014a) argues, "[p]ublic and private institutions always play a role in shaping individual lives. They set rules, codes, normative behaviours and patterns that we, consciously and unconsciously, follow and challenge. This is true not only when the power of the institution takes the form of physical containment […], but also – as in the case here – when this power is diluted into everyday practices of care". Drawing on Valentine's concept of 'relational zones of encounter', DeVerteuil et al. (2019) advance a more systematic relational approach to the analysis of voluntary spaces of care, that are described as "asymmetrical spaces between a largely vulnerable clientele and a more powerful staff (and diversely-motivated volunteers) that both reproduce dominant power relations and understandings yet also offer the potential for challenging them". Contact zones are described as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1991). Drawing on this first theorisation, scholars have investigating social relations in contact zones, "between and across differences", while focusing on the psychologies of intergroup relations (Askins & Pain, 2011; Torre, 2006). Contact is multiple, complex, and often simultaneous. Contact between users and social operators; between different users; between users and volunteers; between volunteers and social operators; between different volunteers; between users and health professionals (Askins & Pain, 2011).

Collectively, these studies outline the complexity of these caring spaces, "which allow room for the articulation of difference in an environment intended to facilitate the expression of care and distribution of resources" (Johnsen et al., 2005b). A relational approach is thus useful to produce a more complex analysis of these contradictory voluntary spaces, rather than dismiss them as "merely punitive or obscuring" (DeVerteuil et al., 2019, p. 8). Moreover, they represent an entry point to connect individual experiences to wider scales of structural problems, as the retreat of the welfare state.

Moreover, if the centre can be recognised as a site of material and immaterial resources, aimed at supporting and promoting the regaining of women's housing, economic and personal autonomy, is it then possible to question the role of the

female centre as a site of female empowerment? How can the notion of empowerment be framed in such a deprived context to avoid neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female marginality?

iv) to what extent does the female shelter operate as a space of empowerment against female marginality?

Building on the results of the previous focus of analysis, the concept of self-care is thus investigated as a potential revolutionary act against the neoliberal myth of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility, and in this sense as a preliminary form of radical 'liberating empowerment' (Sardenberg, 2008). Moreover, in the current socio-economic framework in which "poverty and inequality are endemic to capitalism around the globe" (Elwood et al., 2017):

v) how can empowerment be framed in such a deprived context to avoid neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female marginality?

In other words, my aim is to investigate what it means for these women to experience a condition of extreme marginality and intersecting vulnerabilities, questioning how their lives are daily affected from social and economic deprivation. 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.

Chapter 3

Methodological notes on volunteering ethnography and its intersectional power dynamics

3.1 'Was this fieldwork?' Doing research in institutionalised spaces of care

> At the time, I know I thought the whole thing was just come in-between time, a passage of social time, an unproductive overheated necessary threshold of time that would get me to the real thing – the 'thing' that really was fieldwork. Of course it was fieldwork, but who knew. (Katz, 2013)

In this chapter, I wish to critically reflect on the methodological challenges that I encountered throughout my fieldwork. This is a narration about doubts, frustrations, silences, chances, and coincidences. It is a highly intimate account of my fieldwork experience, which I truly believe necessary "for developing understanding, challenging current practice and shifting debates" (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018) over studies on marginality and subjects, variously depicted as needy, vulnerable, subordinate. I argue that, for social scientist, being lucidly aware of their own *inexperience* can be a crucial entry point into reflections of positionality, subjectivity and the field, while these reflections may sometimes be taken as givens where the researcher can claim more experience. My experience shows that being aware and reflecting over inexperience and its implications, in

the field and afterwards, is thus essential for nurturing the critical efforts of early career researchers when developing their fieldworks.

> "[O]ur research and writings need to be much less opaque about the complexities and practicalities of method and methodology." (Lees, 2003)

This chapter aim is then twofold; while I will reason on the theoretical, methodological, and (clearly) political positioning of my ethnographic endeavour, I will try to highlight the ethical and intimate challenges – dilemmas, anxieties, mistakes, fallbacks, epiphanies – encountered during the ethnographic fieldwork experience. Methodological matters are not prosaic (Hitchings & Latham, 2020a) but instead pressure geography scholars to question the constitution of the field "as a discursive and spatial practice", infused with "fields of power" (Katz, 1994).

> The concerns associated with *doing* research are usually ignored and accounts are produced from which the personal is banished. However, research is a *process* not just a product. Part of this process involves reflecting on, and learning from past research experiences, being able to re-evaluate our research critically, and, perhaps deciding, for various reasons, to abandon a research project. In short, I see research as an ongoing intersubjective (or more broadly, a dialogic) activity. (England, 1994)

3.1.1 Choosing the field. Timeline of a fieldwork

Time is one of the key and most anxiety-provoking aspects of a PhD. When you start, it seems like you have all the time in the world, and the next day you are pass way through your programme. At the end of the second year, I was stuck. Fieldwork saved my PhD. It gave me purpose, strength, and hope. My biggest regret is that I did not force myself out of the office earlier. I kept looking for papers and books in search of ideas, guidance.

> Most books on the city, except those that involve ethnography, tend to start from the outside in; that is, they want to see the city as a whole and map aspects of it, or they want to see the city as an expression of a larger force. In contrast, we want to see the city from the inside out, not because we are looking for a false sense of intimacy but because cities work from the ground up. (Amin & Thrift, 2016)

I was trying to find a solution for my research project in the wrong place. A very common mistake among inexpert students, as I have discovered through discussions with other PhD colleagues. A naïve idea about geographic research in general. The idea to share here my chaotic experience as a PhD student is then

meant as a deeper and I hope helpful reflection of the methodological challenges for early career researchers in the field of human geography (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017; Hitchings & Latham, 2020a). I fell here the urgency to retrace my fieldwork research, started perhaps late but carried through the very final phases of the PhD Programme, and I will do it starting from myself and my positionality.

I am a young Italian white woman doing research in a female space of care located in one of the most marginalised neighbourhoods in the City of Turin, a Southern European city. In the last decade I have entirely devoted my time and dedication to my studies, mainly thanks to the financial – and moral – support of my stable, middle-class, and very normative family. First with a bachelor's in Architecture and then a master's in Urban Planning. I started this PhD without a clear project in mind and, despite a more technical profile, I ended up talking about female marginality, ethnography, and geographies of radical care. This has meant almost starting from scratch, with no clear theoretical references or deep methodological familiarity. I still remember the difficulties in decoding the language of geographical and social research, which was unknown to me, and how I felt out of place at conferences and summer schools.

Hence, the inexperience I mentioned above. My emotional engagement characterised by uncertainty, awkwardness, and fear was not linked to a culturally diverse or remote research context. Barriera di Milano, the case study chosen together with my supervisor, is certainly not an exotic or remote location; I live ten minutes away from this place. Not to mention the fact that the female centre, where my ethnographic research was spatially and temporally concentrated, is not even located at the heart of Barriera di Milano, often in the media spotlight for violence and drug dealing problems. Turin is not my home-town – I arrived in 2013 from Cagliari to start my master's degree and then stayed – and until a few years ago I did not know the neighbourhood except by hearsay.

As addressed above, during my second year as a PhD student, I kept postponing my onsite research, my very first fieldwork. I had never conducted an interview before, never approached some stranger to ask questions. I kept postponing it with the intent to be more prepared, theoretically and methodologically. I had to really force my myself to grab a pen and a notebook and start exploring the streets of Barriera di Milano. I was more scared of my lack of knowledge and experience in social research and qualitative methods than of the place itself and its negative territorial stigma. Once there, I started to walk around for hours in order to familiarise myself with it and try to find inspiration from what I was seeing and observing.

> It has been just few days now, but I already feel more confident wandering around in the neighbourhood. It is a quite extensive urban area, that kind of works as entry gate to the central areas of Turin. I moved nearby recently so I take advantage of this fieldwork also

to find new points of reference and to orient better myself in the surroundings. I take notice of nice places, murals, stores. [] A lot of shops are closed for holidays...Turin is not the ideal city for spending your summer vacation. It is hot, wet and everything kind of hibernates during August. It is still morning and I am drinking my third coffee of the day, but it is the only way to have a break, reorganise ideas, take some notes, and hopefully freshen up a bit.

(*Field diary, 26/08/2019*)

Being there in the field, outside the wall of my office and far from all those more confusing than revealing papers, was fundamental and mind changing to realise that I wanted to focus my research on a grounded, active, and constructive relationship between urban spaces and city dwellers, in order to bring into focus more nuanced representations of urban marginality (Lancione, 2016). I was bringing with me only one certainty: I wanted to talk about women living in and enduring in marginal contexts. After a short period of wandering and making informal observations in Barriera di Milano, I was desperately trying to find a way in, a specific point of view from which to start giving a less abstract form to my research project. Each lunch, coffee, or bathroom break was a desperate attempt to get to meet someone or to see something 'significant'. The opportunity presented itself in the autumn of 2019 when I finally got in contact with two different social projects, first *Fa bene* and then the Drophouse.

I was already familiar with *Fa bene*, the food aid project with the objective of collecting and re-distributing unsold food surplus or clients' donations at the marketplace, but hanging out at the *Casa del Quartiere*[9] I had the opportunity to closely observe the work of the volunteers and the project manager, Nadia.

[9] Community centre of Barriera di Milano

Figure 1 Fa bene, preparing food packages at the community centre

The encounter with Nadia proved to be fundamental for the theoretical and methodological unfolding of my research. At that moment, making myself available to Nadia and the project as a volunteer not only provided me with the specific vantage point I was looking for, allowing me to take an insider perspective, but above all gave me the opportunity to gradually overcome the anxiety of having to approach people and ask them personal questions which was still holding me back. As suggested by Cloke et al. (2004) "[a] good ethnographer is someone willing and able to become a more reflexive and sociable version of him or herself", though when I decided to embark on an ethnographic fieldwork, I was clearly not aware of the huge impact it would have on my introverted and shy personality. Fieldwork has been a challenge; however, becoming a volunteer, with a fixed routine outside the office, with fixed tasks and duties, it has been truly vital in helping me build up more honest, balanced, interpersonal relationships with research participants. The Wednesdays spent at the marketplace of Piazza Foroni and at the *Casa del Quartiere* on Via Agliè with Nadia, the other volunteers and the beneficiary families were physically draining, due to bad weather conditions or scarce donations, but paradoxically they were mentally regenerating. The interactions between the families and the volunteers were always nurtured by intense solidarity and honest friendship, always enriched with

smiles and laughter, as I tried to recount in an article written jointly with a fellow doctoral student I met in the field (Mari & Vasile, 2020).

This first volunteer ethnographic experience made me realise that I was finally getting on with my research and achieving some concrete results in terms of data collection, while raising inevitable doubts about the "boundaries and blur borders" (Katz, 1994) of my fieldwork. Moreover, I soon started to realise that I needed to find another observation point to obtain an adequate number of women's voices and life-experiences from which to elaborate meaningful critical reflections on the nexus between urban marginality and women's subjectivities.

With the arrival of October, through the advertising of a fundraising campaign for a new social project I came across the Drophouse, the female day-centre located in Barriera di Milano and managed by the non-profit organisation Gruppo Abele. In-Tessere is supposed to entail the creation of a collective popular tailor's shop inside the facility on Via Pacini, an ambitious and complex project for the vulnerable women of Barriera di Milano, structured in two different phases: at the beginning the launch of a sewing school, with expert tailors and designers, plus courses for female entrepreneurs; during the second phase the opening of the tailor's shop where the women put into practice the acquired knowledge and freely use machinery. Once the fundraising phase ended, the project initially suffered a setback, nonetheless the operators proposed me to start volunteering in another sewing laboratory, reserved to young Nigerian migrants temporarily hosted at the female centre, willingly accepting my request to do research inside the day-centre.

As I recall mentioning in my notes, I was not fully convinced that the chance to work with these girls was a perfect fit with my research focus on work as an instrument of negotiation of conditions of female marginality:

> I have to find a compromise. Because of the language, it is extremely difficult to interact more with the Arab women who take part in the food aid project. It is already two months that I volunteer for *Fa bene*, and Nadia is still the only woman whom I got to know better and to ask more personal questions. This project instead is the perfect chance to know numerous women in condition of vulnerability and I need to start somewhere. As Teresa (project manager of the Drophouse) told me in our first encounter, it is not easy to grasp the reality inside a day-centre and dormitory in just few weeks. It is a slow process and I need to start as soon as possible. I am sure that opportunities will come.
>
> (*Field diary, 19/11/2019*)

In the following weeks, I fully immersed myself in this two volunteering activities, gaining some fieldwork confidence both as a volunteer and as a researcher. The first funded phase of the *Fa Bene* project came to an end right before the Christmas break, and while waiting for the promised refinancing, I devoted myself more to the activities of the Drophouse, having the chance to

better understand the internal dynamics inside the day-centre and most importantly to meet several women in different conditions of vulnerability and marginality: young temporary guests and long-term guests at the female dormitory, and women from the neighbourhood attending at least one of the three main classes offered by the day-centre (Italian, sewing, driving theory courses).

Eventually, the outburst of the Covid19 pandemic at the end of February 2020 put my volunteering activity on hold, precisely when I was ready to accelerate and close the data collection with a series of more in depth semi-structured interviews with the women with whom I was most familiar.

> Since February 23, I have not been able to continue following the two projects that constitute my case study. Doing ethnographic research with people in conditions of marginality and profound vulnerability, it is unthinkable to proceed with the interviews through phone calls or other more formal interactions. I still do not know when I will be able to return to the field and I am not sure what awaits me. I am really scared to find a profoundly changed context and to lose all the references built up over months of volunteering. I was already beyond schedule…this is really a nightmare.
>
> (*Field diary, 15/05/2020*)

In mid-June I was given the opportunity to return to the centre and I found immediate confirmation of my fears: everything had changed. The atmosphere was very tense both among the social workers and the guests, and, even worse, the future of the centre was extremely uncertain. I thus decided to focus all my energies – and the little time left at my disposal to finish the fieldwork – on capitalising on all the empirical research done so far by slightly redefining the fields of inquiry. The main purpose then is to investigate if and how a variegated group of women challenge their subaltern and marginal condition and how this process is linked with different forms and practices of care, thus making my experience inside the day-centre the core of my research. Who are these women? What are the reasons behind their presence in the centre? How does the experience inside the centre differently affect their agency and subjectivities? And how do practices of care are assembled, experienced, and challenged in this specific care facility?

The long hours spent within those walls allowed me to move from such a small scale of analysis, a micro-space of contact, to question the role of a female space of care in respect to the surrounding social, economic, and political context. "The sustained and systematic explorations of an urban ethnographer" (P. Cloke et al., 2004) should serve to question and challenge the mainstream representations of life inside the day-centre and, hopefully, cast a light on the reality within the community from an insider perspective. This does not mean that my conclusions and the knowledge produced, although from an inside-out perspective, are not situated, as I will discuss more in the next paragraphs.

Borrowing the words of Cindi Katz (1994), "I am able to tell a story not of marginalisation alone where 'those poor people' might be the key narrative theme", but of more systemic social and economic power structures that harshly affect – yet differently – female condition and subjectivities.

3.1.2 Accessing the field. Marginal subjects and ethnography

Ethnographic methods have been usually associated with anthropological research, traditionally entailing an "extended, intensive and detailed" fieldwork (P. Cloke et al., 2004), generally spent in far and exotic non-Western locations, in order to make better sense of distant Others' lives. Although the ethnographic approach might combine different qualitative research methods of data collection, it is generally characterised by an immersive and extended period of on-site participant observation, in order to study "at *first hand* what people do and say in particular contexts" (Hammersley, 2006). In the literature it is possible to find discrepancies on the role of ethnography in geographical research, between those who consider it "a long-running and distinctive *geographical practice*" and those who instead position the entering of ethnography in the realm of human geography as the "response to the dehumanizing effects of the quantitative revolution in the 1960s" (P. Cloke et al., 2004). In any case, ethnography is currently one of the most widely used methods among geographers (Hitchings & Latham, 2020b) to research a number of variegated critical urban matters, yet generally linked with growing global inequalities (Swanson, 2020).

The attractiveness to the ethnographic method is to be found in its ability to address "the richness and complexity of human life and gets us closer to understanding the ways people interpret and experience the world" (Lees, 2003). Moreover, "[it] is well able to deal with complex concepts like culture" and "[it] believes in the socially constructed nature of phenomena and the importance of language, and it reminds us that the researcher only ever gains partial insight" (*ibidem*).

Ethnographic researchers have deployed different approaches to access the fieldwork and the social environment under study, experimenting various degrees of relational detachment. If some scholars preferred a full immersion by adopting the social role under scrutiny, like Buroway (1979) or Rubistein (1973), others declared the need for a more 'objectifying' distance. In his seminal article, Steve Herbert (2000) argues for an in-between detachment in the field:

> Ethnographers must occupy the perspective of the actors under study *and* the perspective of a theoretically informed and logically rigorous social scientist; one empathetically gathers data, yet engages those

> data in an ongoing, reflexive conversation with comparatively 'cold-hearted' theory.

Ethnography is more about "exploring particular social phenomena than testing specific hypotheses about them" (*ibidem*). Thus, the theoretical structuring and positioning of the research should be built from the ground up, in order to prevent that a priori and rigid categories would blind researcher's ability to empathetically uncover the meaningful interactions and daily negotiations that make up the social world in question. Moreover, ethnography requires being attentive and sensitive to the sensorial and emotional dimensions of people's individual and collective lived experience, which "also implies considering how people perform on a daily basis, how they 'think' with their feet and hands; it means reflecting on their actions, gestures, movement and choices" (Aru et al., 2017).

In particular, ethnographic methods have been applied on studies on marginality and urban poverty, thus raising complex issues of uneven power dynamics between researchers and researched. As a result, the issue of the researcher's positionality emerges strongly, emphasising how ethnographic writings are partial, problematic, incomplete, and subjective representations and not "realities extracted from the field"(P. Cloke et al., 2004). As Swanson (2020) recalls, this self-reflexive turn had a strong impact on feminist geographic scholars, who posed the accent on the many ethical dilemmas entangled with the ethnographic practice, fertilising the discussion around issues of knowledge production, positionality, and reflexivity (Gibson-Graham, 1994; Haraway, 1988; Katz, 1994; McDowell, 1997; Rose, 1997; Stacey, 1988; Wheatley, 1994; Wolf, 1996).

Whereas, ethnography "does not form part of a clear and systematic taxonomy" and emphasis is put on the methodological eclecticism as a key feature of the approach (Hammersley, 2006), I still tend to cautiously use the 'ethnographic' label with reference to my approach in the field, since it has never assumed the spatial detachment or the "immersive and continuous character that represents the ideal of ethnographic research" (Capello, 2020). Nonetheless, I would like to acknowledge the difficulties in undertaking an 'ethnography of proximity' (*ibidem*) in a marginal environment such as that of the women's centre, characterised by specific and complex internal dynamics not only linked to the varied groups of women who live and inhabit its spaces, but also to the more complex system of care and welfare in the city of Turin, of which the centre is a part. The ethical dilemmas were not lacking either in the field or afterwards, as well as my desire to being candid about my methodology, including messiness, colossal mistakes, and failures.

> [F]are etnografia significa esattamente superare i vari ostacoli di natura sociale, culturale ed epistemologica che si frappongono tra noi e il punto di vista dei nostri interlocutori, per riuscire a rendere intellegibili le loro esperienze alla comunità scientifica e alla più ampia opinione pubblica. (Capello, 2020)

Doing ethnography at the urban margins

I will reason on the theoretical, methodological, and (clearly) political positioning of my ethnographic endeavour, starting from two interconnected pressing questions: i) what is the relevance of an ethnographic approach to the study of marginality and marginalised subjects today? and ii) how did I realised that ethnography was, from an epistemological and methodological point of view, the best approach to investigate female marginality?

As I briefly mentioned in the previous section, it took time to find and define my research path. Among others, two texts were fundamental, marking my first impact with human geography and the critical urban theory: *Cities of Difference*, edited by Ruth Fincher and Jane M. Jacobs (1998) and *Rethinking life at the Margins. The Assemblage of Context, Subjects and Politics*, edited by Michele Lancione (2016). From there I started to expand my bibliography, including some cardinal texts from Ash Amin, Nigel Thrift, Cindi Katz, bell hooks, Linda McDowell, Susan Hanson, Geraldine Pratt, Rachel Pain, Kim England, Victoria Lawson, and many others. As Bennett (2004) points out "[e]ven before data collection begins, something about the subjectivities of academics motivates them to engage with issues and adopt particular research agendas". Coming from a left-oriented and working-class background – my parents, two state teachers, were the first graduates in their respective families – I immediately felt attuned to these words and claims for justice, difference, and care, starting to understand at the same time the sense of frustration that I was feeling from reading texts more closely related to the tradition of positivism.

> Personal interests and skill meld, often mysteriously, with collective feminist concerns to determine a particular topic of research, which, in turn, appears to guide the research methods employed in its service. (Stacey, 1988)

Since the 1990s, an interest has developed in the experience and stories of those who have always been excluded and marginalised from political, social, cultural, and economic life. In more recent years the attention of critical urban scholars has increasingly focused on the study of advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2007, 2008) in order to collect "the complex perceptions and experiences of individuals and groups of people who navigate uncertainty and variegated forms of insecurity associated with urban life" (Thieme et al., 2017).

Thus, the significance of ethnography – for a critical and engaged geography – to the study of life at the margins lies on its "rich potential to unravel myths and challenge assumptions and stereotypes" (Swanson, 2020). Doing ethnography at the urban margins means "to promote an analytic of the urban margins that, without diminishing the importance of structural elements, is able to grasp the nuanced process of assemblage and makeshifts that (re)produce and challenge marginality on an everyday basis" (Thieme et al., 2017).

Building on feminist and postcolonial paradigms, this research "advocate[s] an integrative, trans-disciplinary approach to knowledge which grounds theory contextually in the concrete realm of women's everyday lives" (Stacey, 1988) while trying to capture the texture of women's "fleeting and mundane" (Latham, 2010) daily interactions in a female space of care and questioning to what extent the centre operates as a space of care for these women "in an objective yet truly reflective way" (Garthwaite, 2016).

> Are you really going to resolve disputes that have dogged the social sciences for a century from your study of a drop-in centre? Perhaps not, but you may be able to respecify what appear to be overpowering abstract problems into worldly, ordinary practical problems. (Clifford et al., 2010)

Viscous field and volunteer ethnography

Maestra, Yellow (!), Viola, Violet, Vivi. These are in order some of the names by which I was called during the sewing laboratory and that somehow reflect the progressive evolution of my relationship with the Nigerian guests of the centre, which in turn reflects my changing and fluid approach to my role as a volunteer/researcher. To date only a limited number of geographers have focused their efforts and reflections on the subject of volunteering ethnography and the peculiar role and experience of the volunteer ethnographer (Bourlessas, 2019; Darling, 2011; Garthwaite, 2016; Williams, 2016). In order to provide new insights into this specific form of ethnographic engagement, this section lays out the main methodological and ethical challenges that emerge from the enactment of volunteering ethnographic research "with groups who may be positioned to some degree as vulnerable" (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018), stressing the various layers of complexity of the research practice.

One of the aspects that has a significant impact on the research project and, thus, must be carefully considered is the fact that doing research with and about marginal and vulnerable subjects usually "involves a more complex network of actors" (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018) usually in the form of an institution, which manages and shapes the field site (Bourlessas, 2019). As will be discussed further in the following chapter, the centre is managed by a non-profit

organisation and employs professionals from a wide range of educational and social disciplines. My presence as a volunteer/ethnographer in such a regulated space of care was not hindered by specific limits or parameters imposed by the well-trained social workers (who act as gatekeepers), but I cannot deny that I experienced on some levels the viscosity to which Bourlessas refers (2019). My research moves, especially at the beginning of my 'training', were driven by the desire to fit in, gain social workers' trust and prove my commitment, which translated meant always being available for shift changes or last-minutes requests, willingly accepting to be left alone among 15 high demanding girls, as well as a progressive assumption of more responsibility (i.e. to accompany a few service users to the hospital or to help with activities for children). This attitude allowed me to develop an insider perspective while becoming a familiar face to service users and staff, but it generated inevitable side effects. During this one-year commitment, as Garthwaite (2016) vividly illustrates, "I have developed a deep attachment to the organization, along with experiences of discomfort and guilt about analysing and presenting findings from the research". Similarly, Gilmore and Kenny (2015) emphasise how this form of ethnography involves the collision between the academic world, to which the researcher already belongs, and the new organisational world, to which the researcher strives to enter, giving rise to a number of tensions, conflicting demands and expectations.

One of the ethical challenges I faced on the fieldwork was related to the interviews with the homeless women. Deciding whether to ask for permission from the gatekeepers (social workers) was a very mixed up and anxious moment, with concerns of undermining my relationship with the organisation (or some of its staff) and in parallel of overshadowing my researcher's role and all its ethical and methodological requirements. The meaning of asking for permission is twofold: on one hand I am recognising the formal (institutional role) and informal (expertise) authority of social workers, but on the other I am creating a filter, allowing social workers to influence the choice of participants and most importantly undermining women's willingness to voluntarily engage in my research, sustaining a well-known paternalistic approach to 'vulnerable' people.

> Today I found out that Simona is going to move to new housing arrangements, having run out of time at the other women's dormitory. I think this is the perfect chance to ask her if she wants to talk to me about her story and her experience inside the centre. Nonetheless, I am not sure I can directly ask her for an interview. I mean…there is nothing wrong with it and she knows that I am a kind of researcher. But, I really do not want to put at risk my relationship with the other social workers and I would like to avoid stepping on any toes…or maybe one or two! To be fair I will ask Teresa first.
>
> (*Field diary, 07/02/2020*)

On the part of the social operators, I have never experienced "a paternalistic desire" to protect the guests of the dormitory by inhibiting interactions between them and me (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2018). Moreover, in contrast to other researchers' findings (Bourlessas, 2019), I have only rarely recorded social workers underlying or hinting at guests' mental health, despite the fact that, due to an overloaded social and health-care system, it is not uncommon for the centre to have to take charge of serious cases of mental illness, in spite of a lack of adequate medical instruments and personnel. On the contrary, the health workers often took the trouble to help me understand how to better orientate my research, showing themselves willing to be interviewed and helping me with the other interviews, thus lightening a bit the load of ethical cause for concern.

In summary, despite the complexities illustrated above, the unique and sometimes ambivalent role of a volunteer ethnographer, in addition to being a rewarding experience from a personal point of view, was beneficial in terms of my research goals for three main reasons:

(i) Taking part in different moments of community life gave me the opportunity to reflect on the day-to-day interactions between the guests of the dormitory, the volunteers and the social operators, and on "the negotiations of relationships, practices and emotions" (Garthwaite, 2016) inside and sometimes outside the day-centre.

(ii) Building a relationship of trust with the operators gave me more freedom – and opportunities – to move and research more easily. The progressive assignment of more responsibilities and tasks granted me a full and multi-coloured experience inside the day-centre, with all its positive and negative aspects: the nervousness, arguments, heated fights, loneliness, and disorientation, along with the laughter, the jokes, the hot tea in the morning, and the espressos in the afternoon.

(iii) Finally, volunteering and researching in a *safe* space designed for women – among women – certainly helped me overcome my initial anxieties, making me feel at ease and giving me the opportunity to gain confidence in my volunteering and research practice. After some time, I can say that I understood how to be a (better) researcher by learning and practicing my volunteering skills, and thus helping me reconcile my two roles of volunteer and researcher.

In conclusion, while ethnography reflects an approach of critical geographers towards life in general and the field, and an attention to "the tenuous and fragile encounters, negotiated power relations and the politics of representation that take place between researchers and 'marginalised' subjects" (Thieme et al., 2017), volunteer ethnography further challenges researchers in the exercise of empathy, putting ordinary needs of others before everything else, even research

contingencies. If “I am always, everywhere, in ‘the field’” (Katz, 1994), I could bring these lessons with me in my personal and public life. This is what volunteer ethnography has truly meant for me, a less anxiety-inducing form of activism, a more individual and daily form of political engagement, that challenged me “not to just expose power relations but to overcome them” (*ibidem*) while “framing questions that are at once of substantive and theoretical interest as well as of practical significance to those with whom we work” (*ibidem*).

A last note of caution is due here to provide a full contextualisation of the findings. Even if I considered data collection officially over at the end of October 2020, out of a personal and ethical need I decided not to unplug or distance myself from the fieldwork in order to preserve what I have built in almost one year of field research, both in terms of social relations and volunteering experience. Moreover, in spite of the material need to give highest priority to the analysis and re-elaboration of what has been collected on the fieldwork, I felt that closing this chapter represented an act of desertion and selfish appropriation. The volunteer activity is now part of my routine, a physically and mentally essential occupation at a time when the uninterrupted health emergency has drastically cut the number of social interactions and the need for volunteers is yet dramatically high. In light of this, it is clear that some of the reflections presented here may be in some measure affected by moments subsequent to the events narrated in this thesis.

3.1.3 Doing the research. What I actually end up doing!

From the first period of settling in the field, I tried to use different methods to collect the research material: participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, due to practical issues related to the evolution of the pandemic only at a more advanced stage of the fieldwork I decided to focus the work on my voluntary activity within the female centre in Via Pacini. Therefore, a portion of the material already collected and produced, although not directly and explicitly used within this text, was however decisive to structure the research questions and to organise and codify the material collected.

The desire to give extensive prominence to women's stories has been the basis for the construction of the conceptual framework of the research and fieldwork, from the very beginning. The analysis of the material collected, although perhaps not entirely sufficient, was useful in placing the personal stories within a general research framework. The stories are the starting point within a broader narrative that analyses the interrelationships between the centre, the service users and the local care system, in an attempt to critically investigate the role of the centre as a space of care and as a site of empowerment.

Participant observation and fieldnotes

> The reason we ought to have formal discussion of methods is that it allows others potentially to check our work by repeating the research we have done. Even if they never do, this exercise in transparency is important for assuring the quality of research. Being explicit about our research practices forces us to be reflexive about them – for example, to question why we use a particular method or data set. (Lees, 2003)

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I started volunteering at the female day-centre twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday afternoon, mainly focusing my participant observation and interaction with the Nigerian guests of the dormitory. At first we were always three or four in the sewing room – the social operator (Giusy), E. (middle-aged volunteer) and Paola (former service guest and volunteer) and me – with only two of us able to speak in English. After a while, we gained Giusy's trust and after few weeks, E. and I ended up being alone with a variable number of ladies to teach to. As I will discuss in more detail below, the sewing room was one of the privileged places of observation. Although I never directly interviewed the Nigerian girls, especially after the first lockdown I had the possibility to enrich the participant observation activity. The temporary suspension of the ALFa project gave me more time to get to know the few remaining girls, and in some cases I also managed to chat about some personal topics.

Figure 2 No more headbands!

Figure 3 Marta knows how to do it...Ask her!

Over time, I started to participate in many of the other activities carried out at the day-centre on a regular basis: collective lunches, coffee breaks, other courses for the ladies of the neighbourhood or for other homeless women. I have often had moments of informal chatting and more intimate moments of confidentiality with service users and social operators.

From a strictly practical point of view, I never took written notes directly on the field, but the phone was useful for quickly noting down certain names, paradigmatic phrases, or reception-related procedural issues. The few photos included in this text were always taken in a candid manner, aware of having to protect the privacy of the guests and not wanting to upset their sensitivities.

Interviews

During the last official months of fieldwork, strongly emerged the necessity to complement the work of data collection with a series of semi-structured interviews with social operators (7), and service users (5). All interviews were recorded with a mobile phone, only after explicit consent, and took place within the female shelter premises, ensuring a high degree of privacy in all cases. Interviews with social operators variously lasted between 30 and 80 minutes, while those with the service users – 2 previous long-lasting guests of the night shelter and 3 users of the day-centre – lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

The interviews were recorded over a period of two months – with the exception of the first interview with the project manager of the Drophouse dating back to January 2020 – but mainly concentrated in October 2020, when the use of surgical masks and the respect of safe distances were already a consolidated practice but no less impactful on a level of empathy and social interaction.

The interviews with the 3 users of the day-centre were organised thanks to the collaboration of the social operators, who were aware of my desire to meet and talk to few migrant ladies from the neighbourhood in contact with the centre. The possibility of the interview was proposed to the ladies by Serena, Drophouse worker currently in charge of the whole service, who chose from among the possible names, women who are generally very present at the centre and have a good level of Italian. In particular, I had already got to know two of the three ladies through the summer school camp provided by the Drophouse in the last August, during which I had helped their children with their homework.

As regards the other two previous long-term users of the night shelter – Paola and Simona – we met at the beginning of my fieldwork and over time we build a very good relationship. I had already got to know some of their personal stories and exchanged some confidences, so during the interviews it was easier to go into more detail on some more sensitive issues.

> Today I finally asked Simona if she would like to talk to me about her experience in the dormitory and at the Drophouse. She seemed enthusiastic about it straight away and we exchange phone numbers. She is a very sensitive girl and needs external confirmation. In fact, she asks me if she can keep my number after the "interview" (I used the term chat, reminding her that I do research at the university and that I deal with women's stories) and then she proudly goes around telling the others about the interview.
>
> (*Field diary, 10/02/2020*)

While the interviews for the service users shared more or less the same structure and questions, for the interviews with the social workers, the questions were elaborated according to the different roles held within the centre and were also adapted, incrementally, to any doubts that may have emerged from previous interviews. The interviews with personnel were also a moment of confrontation regarding the findings of my research. Interviews were constructed taking into account the need to elaborate a flexible canvas, both because of the sensitivity of the topics dealt with and because of different levels of confidence with the users and the operators. The interviews were then fully transcribed manually, in order to allow the most exhaustive analysis possible not only of the accounts, and therefore of the words of the users, but also of the interactions between the two interlocutors (interviewee and interviewer) which obviously have an influence on

the construction of the discourse and therefore on the production of the text to be analysed.

The initial objective was to be able to interview at least two or three current users of the dormitory, but in October 2020 a number of cases of Covid19 were recorded in the centre, which, in addition to the long series of health checks and waits for all the guests, social operators, volunteers, led to the definitive physical separation of the two services, the dormitory and the day-centre. The latter being transferred to the first floor of the building, while the dormitory significantly reduced the number of accesses other than the service staff, thus making it impossible to carry out the last scheduled interviews.

3.2 Contaminating data with emotions. The (in)experience of fieldwork

As academics, we need to question our own privilege and place in the world, by analysing the limits and benefits that our positionality produces on research practice, thus breaking "the silence surrounding the practice of fieldwork and its inherent constitutive power relations" (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017). Being reflexive about researcher's positionality in relation to the context and to the researched subjects, is usually advocated as a strategy to situate knowledge, and thus avoid false pretences of neutrality and objectivity (Rose, 1997). Kim England (1994) well clarifies that "reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher. Indeed, reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions". But this does not make the task of being reflexive any less complex. I recognise that, as a woman, doing research in a female space of care to some extent granted me more access to knowledge, by making women more comfortable around me during the laboratories, other moments of community life, and the final interviews. As a male volunteer/researcher, I would not even been granted access in the first place. Nonetheless, as Valentine (2003) attributes to many early feminist writings, it would be quite naïve to "focus solely on the effects of the researcher's gender on field relations at the expense of other important axes of power" (Wolf, 1996). Drawing on Gibson-Graham (1994) words, "I am a unique ensemble of contradictory and shifting subjectivities", but each research context forces women researchers to choose or accept different facets of the self, "finding themselves in different and shifting power constellations. On the one hand, their gender and perceived lack of authority and maturity in the local society are sources of vulnerability. On the other hand, their high level of education still incarnated privilege" (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017).

For me, seeking an alternative in the research practice, more critical and less exploitative towards research subjects, entail not to distance myself from emotions. In fact, "[a]llied to this growing recognition of the way that research positions are fashioned through interactions is a new awareness of the need to acknowledge the role of emotions in shaping, and being shaped by, research encounters" (Valentine, 2003). The academic norm imposes, or at least imposed, a close correlation between scientificity, legitimacy, authoritativeness, and distance in the field as well in the text. According to the positivist paradigm, knowledge or a text can be considered scientific if it is neutral, objective, and distant, purged of all traces of emotions. As England (1994) writes, "[y]ears of positivist-inspired training have taught us that impersonal, neutral detachment is an important criterion for good research. In these discussions of detachment, distance, and impartiality, the personal is reduced to a mere nuisance or a possible threat to objectivity". Hence the insecurity and hesitation of those who assume a feminist, situated, reflexive, and decolonial epistemological positioning, who instead call attention to the role of the self and of emotions in geographical research and practice.

There is a growing acceptance among Western scholars of emotions "as complementary to, and indeed, according to some, necessary for, rationality and human experience" (Jones & Ficklin, 2012) and this radical change of direction "challenges objectivity and detachment in the social science" (*ibidem*). It is in the doing of ethnography that researchers realise how important are emotions for connecting, cognitively and emotionally (Gilbert, 2001) with research participants and how important is to note and use researcher's emotional reactions in the research unfolding. As Jones and Ficklin (2012) point out, empathy, in particular, is significant for shaping researcher's approach with the researched subjects (as well as gatekeepers), for determining how to conduct interviews, and afterward how to analyse and writing the findings. The authors trace back the centrality of empathy in the research process to the "questions of inequality, injustice, deprivation, vulnerability, and oppression" (*ibidem*) that are embedded in geographic research. Emotions are linked to the objective and innate character of critical research to the point that on this matter can be found a wide range of publications within the social science, despite the lack of clarity around a definition of what is meant by emotion.

> For me, the role of emotion is central to activism, and I would argue that most accounts of activism touch upon 'sense', 'feeling', that inexplicable desire to 'do something' in some way. (Askins, 2009)

In this chapter, I address and question my methodological approach through the lens of emotions, focusing on the shifting positionality, multiple subjectivities

and power dynamics surfaced in my fieldwork experience, thus affecting and contaminating (England, 1994) the processes of data collection and analysis. Drawing heavily on my experience in the field I will attempt to use the issues of reflexivity and positionality to investigate limits and benefits of gender (and other axes of difference) in my grounded practice.

3.2.1 Being a young, female and (shy) early career researcher

F.: Where are you from? You do not look Italian.
T.: Are you Chinese?
F.: No. She looks more like Arabic. Your hair is beautiful!

(*Field diary, 19/11/2019*)

Without even have the possibility to say no, they were already braiding my hair. Even if I was internally screaming in pain, I stood still enjoying the unexpected show of interest. It was the first day of my volunteering experience inside the centre and I still remember the enthusiasm of telling the story to my fiancé while trying to take a picture of the braid. I was totally unprepared to their engaging energy, thus forcing me quickly outside of my shell.

Figure 4 Me, in the elevator, trying to take a picture of my new braid.

Being young and looking even younger

It is a cultural issue…you are young for them. You are young! Thus, you cannot tell them what to do. It is a question of age. This is how it works in Nigeria…the oldest person is in charge. They are really at odds over this.

Teresa, project manager of the Drophouse (*Interview, 17/01/2020*)

During my volunteering practice, I soon realised that although the average age of the operators is quite low due to a large number of former civil servants who at the end of their service have recently remained working for the organisation, the centre generally relies on older women for its voluntary work. A widely documented and common dynamics within non-profit associations. The women, temporary and long-term guests of the night shelter, are used to middle-age or even elderly volunteers with different attitudes and approaches.

After the anecdote narrated above of my very first positive interaction with the Nigerian girls, I found myself in the field, dealing with about fifteen girls at the same time, sometimes even alone. And I was dissatisfied. In these moments, I clearly felt the awareness of not having any idea of my role, neither as a volunteer, nor at least as a researcher. My walking on eggshells around the girls, was more dictated by the anxiety of having to act as a researcher than by the thought that building a relationship, of any kind, between people, requires time, presence, and effort from both sides. For the girls I was just another volunteer, probably the latest in a long list of volunteers and social workers.

Today was the first day I found myself alone with the Nigerian girls, because T. (another volunteer) had to help out on another activity. So far it has been the most exhausting day ever, mentally and physically. Despite arriving early to prepare enough materials for everyone, the girls started working immediately and since they are not particularly patient, I had to rush to prepare the necessary materials for each of them. Not easy, not at all. I don't really know what they think of me. I had a hard time loosening up a bit today. Also, because I don't really understand what the limits are in my relationship with them. I would like to chat a bit, to build a more personal relationship, not just explain to them how to do something. I understand that they have other references with whom they can talk, but I still really suffer this depersonalising way of doing things. The non-construction of a relationship. I often understand that they are talking about me between them, but I cannot understand, and maybe it is better this way.
Sara, their educator, however, reassured me that if they found someone with little pulse in front of them, they would have no problem putting their feet up. “You do not have to worry, because they are very attentive to a person’s character. They would have already push you around if they did not respect you. They have worked and have been quite calm. Do not worry!”. I really want to find a way to shorten the distances.

(*Field diary, 03/12/2019*)

With time, I had to improvise my disposition towards them, trying to demonstrate through gestures and words and in the daily practice of our meetings,

the difference in approach between me and the other volunteers. A difference that I have always tried to put into practice by putting their emotional responses, rather than the practical results of our lessons, at the centre of my work as a volunteer.

I really like that they love to receive compliments on the things they make. B. even picks up on the phone "to remember how to do the things". I ask her if she's in a bad mood and she asks me in amazement how I could tell. "A bad mood? How do you understand it?"
(*Field diary, 12/02/2020*)

In hindsight I would like to think that being young, and looking even younger, has allowed me to build a much more symmetrical relationship with them.

Learning Pidgin English and correcting "broken Italian"

My decent knowledge of English is one of the other factors that helped me build a more intimate relationship with the Nigerian girls, also affecting my role and positionality on the field. English-based Pidgin (or 'broken English') is a mixture of English and local languages and is one of the most widely spoken languages across West Africa, including Nigeria. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of Pidgin is: "a language containing lexical and other features from two or more languages, characteristically with simplified grammar and a smaller vocabulary than the languages from which it is derived, used for communication between people not having a common language". It is Nigeria's lingua franca, and it is generally incomprehensible, especially to an untrained ear.

On the way back, although I meet Faizah on the road, I continue alone because she is on the phone. I find myself feeling relief. It is always very difficult to communicate with the girls. Sometimes I think I've started to understand the way they speak in English and then, suddenly, I find myself having to ask them to repeat the sentence over and over again. And I know that sometimes they make fun of me. This is the other aspect of cross-language volunteering. Sometimes you communicate well, sometimes you don't…and sometimes you are aware of private conversations going around you. It is frustrating.
(*Field diary, 12/02/2020*)

Adanna today decided to teach me how to say a few things in Pidgin English. "How you dey?", "I dey fine!". There is a word that they say all the time…it something that sounds like [hi:dja] and she explained to me that is an exclamation and it means "Mamma mia!". She said it in Italian, laughing out loud. And then they started repeating the phrases they hear at the market, or on the bus: "Prossima fermata: Porta Palazzo".
(*Field diary, 28/08/2020*)

Adanna is making a lot of progress with Italian. I was a bit late and when I arrived, I found her writing some sentences on the board. Sometimes she tried to say something

more complicated, mixing English and Italian, and I started to say that she is speaking in 'broken Italian'.

(*Field diary, 19/10/2020*)

Moreover, my English knowledge occasionally and temporarily restructure power dynamics between Nigerian girls, social operators, and me. Among the staff, only Sara (who is the one in charge of the ALFa project) can really speak English. Other operators are maybe able to say few words but nothing else. In this sense, my role as volunteer can occasionally shift when one of the social operators needs to talk to them and Sara is not present. A comparable dynamic has been observed by some researchers in the relationship between immigrant families and external services, in which, for linguistic reasons, minor children act as intermediaries, temporarily reversing the power dynamics. Like when I had to help with the reception of a new girl (*Field diary, 15/01/2020*), translating for her all the rules and duties she was supposed to accept entering the shelter. Teresa was insisting on the absolute importance of respecting the rules, penalty being immediate expulsion from the project, and as soon as she leaved the room, I tried to reassure the girl by explaining that she would get on very well with the other girls, that I had seen some good friendships forming. I was uncomfortable with the rigidity of Teresa's words, while I was conscious of Mara's discomfort. This provisional inversion of power, between me and the social workers, contributes to complexify the relationship with the girls and the social operators.

Handling conflicts

To conclude this short analysis of how my different positionality affect the complex system of power dynamics inside the day-centre, I will turn now to describe how the conflict on the fieldwork can instead temporarily fix and accentuate my role as a 'teacher' and the unbalanced power relations. At the turn of the summer 2020, because of Covid, the project with the Nigerian girls was put on hold, and the girls were staying at the centre much longer than the usual 30/40 days. Moreover, they had fewer opportunities for relaxing outside the centre, the overworked workers were more nervous, as were the other guests of the dormitory. The sewing workshop was supposed to be a time to breathe, but within a few weeks a series of episodes occurred, in particular with one of the latest girls arrived, which made the atmosphere serious and full of tension. In this first of a series of anecdotes related to a brief situation of tension with the girls, it emerges how the management of the time spent in the sewing room was sometimes structured as an instrument of power. Accustomed to working well beyond the established lesson time, asking them to finish working on the sewing machines and tidy up the room at a precise time was for me an attempt to protect myself

emotionally in uncomfortable situations, which however inevitably meant the imposition of a hierarchy, which I was constantly trying to question.

> Today, we were all nervous. I had a little discussion with Adanna, and I was very sad about it. To call it a discussion is questionable, since as soon as she gets nervous, she closes the communication channels, starts talking in Pidgin and refuses to communicate with me. Today I wasn't particularly in the mood, and I immediately shut down, stopping talking to the girls except to help them with the machine and finishing everything at the right time.
>
> (*Field diary, 07/09/2020*)

> Yet another day of sewing. I must be honest, maybe it's the not-so-pleasant atmosphere that has been created, maybe I'm tired for other reasons and I find the work we're doing uninspiring, but it weighs more and more on me to do these hours in the sewing room. They just talk to each other and only make requests. Lately I have come to think that it is largely S. responsibility for the climate in the room, and I am longing to see her go.
>
> (*Field diary, 11/09/2020*)

> Wow. S. is leaving. Today was her last day. I'm happy. I'm ashamed to say it, but I'm happy. I am not so glad I raised my voice, though. I scolded her, that's exactly what I did! She spent the whole afternoon doing nothing but teasing J., and at 4 o'clock she started picking up before the others finished what they were doing. "S. stop! We still need those things. Put them back!" and she just glanced at me, saying nothing.
>
> (*Field diary, 14/09/2020*)

In that precise moment, I felt all my power as a volunteer, as a teacher, and probably as a white woman. This also leads me to emphasise that the relationship of intimacy is not indefinitely acquired, but is fluid, unstable and constantly changing, "negotiated out of the warmth and friction of an unfolding, iterative process" (England, 1994). It is enough to skip one lesson, or maybe not to be in the mood to chat or being patient. It is not always easy to leave your personal staff out of the sewing room, for them as well as for me, proving how the dialogical nature of the research practice is affected by both the researcher and the researched (*ibidem*).

3.2.2 Between action and research

If in the previous paragraph, I introduced and discussed the complex role of the volunteer ethnographer within an institutionalised space of care, in this section, through the narration of several examples and extracts from my field diary, I will expand more on the most significant aspects of my journey, with all its leverages and drawbacks. A number of issues will be addressed in particular related with my personal relationship with the Nigerian girls (the research subjects

with whom I spent the most time), and also how this intimate relationship has affected my interaction with other volunteers.

Volunteering as a privileged activity

In January 2020, if my guts was still suggesting me to take things slow, my time was running low and I had to accelerate my work of data collection, in order to successful complete my fieldwork and my PhD within the time available. I started going to the centre just two afternoons a week, and then I ended up going almost every day, spending a lot of time with the female guests (long-term and temporary ones), with few other volunteers, and of course the social workers. I gained their trust, being present and proactive, and thus acquiring an easier access to field information. Although not always, at times I also had the opportunity to take part in meetings, albeit more informal, between staff, thus becoming aware of more private and delicate matters. Nonetheless, my volunteer endeavour was not comparable with the amount of work asked to social workers. My responsibility and effort with the guests ended the moment I closed the door of the sewing room or the main hall behind my back. I was able to cancel or postpone my activity (even if rarely happened), or to leave the field anytime. I was able to ask for help if something was not going as planned, or to consult and confront with one of the social workers, although I never considered it necessary. More importantly, in just ten minutes I was back at my apartment, decompressing from a stressful afternoon, immersed in a familiar everyday reality.

For all these reasons, I value my volunteering research experience a highly privileged activity, and I tried to counterbalance this privilege with a concrete commitment.

Volunteering as means to give back

> First actual day of volunteering at the Drophouse. There were a lot of girls today, like 15. Some sleep at the centre, others at SERMIG. Today was quite disorienting. I did not know the other two volunteers, Paola and E., and I was not sure what to do either. My sewing skills come from countless self-taught attempts, and I had a bit of difficulty helping the girls, even if we were working on very easy things. We worked on the African hairbands. Some of the girls did not seem particularly interested in participating in the class. Some of them were isolated with the phone in hand, or others were resting on their desks. The room is definitely too small for all these people!
>
> (*Field diary, 22/11/2019*)

The proposal to devote two afternoons to the sewing course turned out to be the winning solution. Working with 15 girls was not easy, but at least I was spared the discomfort of continuing to propose colouring mandalas to them, or other boring activities. The hair-band phase soon came to an end. The girls were

immediately enthusiastic about being able to use the sewing machines, even more autonomously. It became a challenge to convince them to switch off the machines and put everything back in place. I began to anticipate my arrival, to place the machines on the tables, refill the thread spools and check that machines were working properly. The girls also started to compare and help each other, see who was better at machine sewing and who had the best ideas.

I took my role as a volunteer very seriously, even too much according to the operators. I was truly committed to share my time and a little of knowledge, which consists in few notions of sewing and a little predisposition to manual work. Over the months, I watched dozens of YouTube videos in order to find new ideas and techniques; I often asked my mother for some tips and suggestions. I started taking notes, always arriving with new proposals, and bringing at home things to finish or fix.

Aisha: Vivi, please! I need three different masks…one for the church, one for when we go around on Sunday, and one for the Italian class.
Viola: Three?!
A.: Yes, Vivi! Please!
V.: …what colour do you want them to be?
A.: You choose! Maybe just use two different fabrics!
V.: Ok!

(*Field diary, 19/10/2020*)

I spent a lot of time reflecting on the role and meaning of my activities with them: helping them and knowing that we were doing, together, something that they would have carried with them. After the first nationwide lockdown, the city shelters obviously limited the interactions with external people, so I ended up volunteer alone with only 3 or 4 girls. We started to spend more time together, getting to know each other better. The girls started to bring in their own garments to be adjusted or modified. With time and more freedom of action, I started to realise that we were co-constructing the meaning of those hours. I was never in total control, not even at the beginning of my experience, but distant from the operators and from the other women who live in the dormitory, we were building the rules of that space together. I tried to become an instrument in their hands, not a volunteer, not a 'teacher'. It was my attempt “to engage in acts of reciprocity” (Wolf, 1996), trying to put more emphasis on their needs over mine, sometimes even to the detriment of research.

Saida: I was sad before coming in here. Now I am happy!
Viola: really?
S.: yes, it makes me happy being in here!
V.: why you were sad before? Something happened?

S.: no, I just think too much. At night I can't sleep…because of the noise…and I end up thinking about a lot of things.
V.: …I am happy that you like being in here S.!

(*Field diary, 05/10/2020*)

They always entered the sewing room with a huge baggage of emotions. You noticed immediately if they were nervous, if they had quarrelled, if they were tired or lethargic. You heard them singing, dedicating a song to you in laughter. Sometimes, I even found the courage to dance with them. But even after months of volunteering, after months of practice I was still not able to ask them (intrusive) questions, paralysed by emotions. For these reasons, I tried to compensate by paying endless attention to their gestures, words, and silences.

Volunteering as an emotionally charged experience

In this final section, I would like to go over at some of the occasions that have structured my voluntary work as an emotionally charged experience. Listening, reading, or overhearing women's dramatic life experiences or events. Assisting to mental breakdowns. Dealing silently with occasional use of demeaning and commanding language toward women, as well as with severe comments on service users' physical appearance. These are just the main disturbing circumstances that have caused me contrasting feelings. Building on two different episodes, I will try to express the wide range of more negative emotions that can affect volunteer ethnographic practice.

The first episode refers to an extra activity occasionally carried out in support of the social workers:

Today it was my turn to accompany Adanna to the hospital for checking the wound on her right arm. After a first misdirection with the bus, we arrive at the Don Bosco Hospital. While we queue up, I couldn't help but check the medical records Sara entrusted me, discovering that she has been injured by glass (how?). During the examination I realise how serious the situation was. The wound runs all along the inside of her forearm, splitting some of her numerous tattoos. It looks very deep and painful.

(*Field diary, 07/02/2020*)

Reliving that moment in the check-up room with Adanna lying on the examination table and stiffening as the nurse tried to remove her stitches from the deep wound across her forearm, the sense of discomfort, of impotence still hits me hard. I only found out later that she got injured by throwing herself against a window, during her escape from her jailor, immediately before arriving at the shelter. This one was probably the most shocking moments, a wake-up call for me. I was volunteering for young girls, young migrants, with atrocious stories behind them. And I felt completely powerless and inadequate.

The second episode, less crude, refers to a confrontation that took place with a volunteer almost towards the end of the data collection period. From the moment I started volunteering again after the first lockdown, as I mentioned above, I found myself volunteering alone (except in rare occasions) for the Nigerian girls during the sewing workshop. In October 2020, after months of absence (I think for family reasons), the volunteer E. returned to the sewing room, finding a completely changed situation. The girls moved autonomously between the machines and the fabrics, occasionally asking for my help. They were deciding what to sew and how to sew it, and precision was definitely not their prerogative. It never was, but over time I had come to the conclusion that it was not important, but E. had some concerns.

E.: listen, Viola! I really don't think this is the way to do things in here. Look at how they use fabrics, how badly they sew. We are here to teach them something and this is not ok.
(*Field diary, 02/10/2020*)

After a pause, necessary to collect my thoughts, I tried to explain to her that for me, seeing them work like that, happy, satisfied, and proud of themselves was the ultimate purpose of the workshop. Girls who had never been to school, who had been denied the will, were deciding what to do and how to do it all by themselves. They were able to finish a garment completely on their own. Closing the stitches perfectly well was really not essential, in my opinion. The project had restarted so I was not sure how much time we had to work on a more comprehensive course. In that moment, I felt something really close to jealously. A stranger was trying to enter a relational and emotional space that was not hers. A space whose rules and value she did not know and was not able to recognise.

Qualitative research, and ethnography in particular, may elicited strong emotional reactions. In the next section, I will highlight how important is for the sake of the research to strongly built on these intimate reactions – on the field and out of the field – and which instruments I used to deal with such an emotionally charged experience.

3.2.3 Ethnography and social anxiety

As remarked by Diane Wolf (1996), [a]lthough we cannot hide our race or gender, there are other aspects of our identity that may be less obvious". In my case it is my anxiety. It is not easy to engage in an ethnographic enquiry, while fighting a constant fear of bothering people. Furthermore, the awareness that I was dealing with women from traumatic pasts certainly heightened my fears in carrying out the research. Retrospectively, I might say that the urgency to bring some results from the fieldwork and the constant support from my therapist and

few fellows (and friends) doctoral candidates were fundamental to break and overcome these kinds of mental constructions. Practical strategies of emotional self-care that I used to deal with my anxiety and promote reflective thinking (Rager, 2005). As other ethnographers have previously testified, my academic journey would not have been possible without a deeper and intimate journey, in which I found a reconciliation between my multiple and shifting positionality (e.g., student/researcher, volunteer/researcher, urbanist/geographer).

Here, I radically choose to talk and expose myself as a *vulnerable researcher* as a political declaration. I choose to dwell on the emotional dimensions of the research process (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017), not only revealing my positionality but also attempting to weave my emotional experience into this scientific text (R. Borghi, 2020).

> "A volte c'è la paura di mettersi a nudo, altre volte il freno del pudore. Qual è, infatti, il limite tra l'autocelebrazione e la condivisione della tua esperienza?" (*ibidem*)

All the words spent so far would otherwise lose their meaning. I am a white, South-European, middle-class, and highly educated women, and I am located in a specific context (the space of care), speaking from and to a specific position (Italian academy). Even if it is certainly not enough to erase my privilege and power – and it will never be – my emotional vulnerability and my care put me in the condition to find a connection, even a small one, with the women met in my journey. In this relational, controversial, and fragile connection, I found the value of my feminist research endeavour. As Joanne Sharp (2005) observes, "[i]t is not just the processes through which data is collected then that make it feminist, but also the way in which projects are conceptualized and how we as researchers act as people (ethically, politically, emotionally) while engaged in the process".

3.3 About trust and subjects' wellbeing

> One goes to the field as a kind of "stranger" and draws on that status to see difference and ask questions that under other circumstances might seem (even more) intrusive, ignorant, or inane to those who answer them. The answers, and what one makes of them, have currency in other sites of enunciation – journals, classrooms, conference halls – that the ethnographer travels to with the scholarly equivalent war stories. (Katz, 1994)

By drawing on the concept of *fields of power*, Cindi Katz (1994) raises a number of crucial questions that "deserve critical scrutiny in the conduct of field research.". While in the preceding paragraphs I have discussed issues of

positionality, reflexivity, and emotions, I will here try to address the issues of power – "whose power, where, and under what conditions?" – and ethics in the research practice. How I have interacted with these women as a volunteer/researcher on the field and how I have interacted with these women as a researcher/volunteer after the fieldwork, in my writings, are not separate issues, but complementary.

> A care ethics approach to research design also asks us to take seriously the ways in which our work is "for others" and to build connection and responsibility as key values in our research approaches. (Lawson, 2007)

3.3.1 A low-key researcher

Clarifying and being honest about the variegated nature of my work of data collection, it is useful to illustrate one of the main peculiarities of this fieldwork, that is the constant search for a balance between my role as a researcher and my role as a volunteer. Even if I repeatedly tried to make clear how my presence was linked to my research activity, I had quite soon lucidly admitted that for most of these women, especially the ones I spent a lot of time with (i.e., the Nigerian girls), I was merely a volunteer. Due to this, I tried to focus on my volunteer duties while trying to be always receptive and attentive to the relational dynamics and to their own words, gestures, and even silences.

On my way back home, I walked with Faizah. She was headed to Sermig, the other association where the girls spend the evening, and we had some time to chat. It is not the first time that we walk the road together and I can see that she is starting to trust me. She talked about how she does not like the food at the centre: "Too much pasta! Everyday!". Then, I asked her how long she had been living in Turin and if she had lived in other Italian cities before Turin. […] So, I thought "This is my moment. We are already sharing. I can tell her that I am a researcher, and I would like to ask her few questions about her past experiences.". It took me about three or four times to try to explain her that I work at the university and that in my research I talk about women in need…it is still very difficult to communicate sometimes.
V.: I just would like to make you few questions about you and your life.
F.: Go on, then…ask!

(*Field diary 05/02/2020*)

We were standing at the corner of the street, and I froze. I just went blank. I did not know what to ask her anymore. In that moment, her answer made me realise that I would never be able to imagine the depth of their traumas and thus, asking directly about their life and their migration stories would have made me deeply uncomfortable.

> I see fieldwork as a dialogical process in which the research situation is structured by both the researcher and the person being researched. (England, 1994)

I kept asking myself if I could have been more honest about my role and presence with the Nigerian girls, especially in the end when there were just few of them and we had more time to chat and get to know each other. The act of reading their reports – going through the most personal, dramatic, and abusive details of their life – was certainly an act of appropriation, that even if is considered 'an inevitable consequence of fieldwork' (England, 1994) by many human geographers and feminist scholars, it did not seem or felt less wrong! The reasoning can be extended to the act of transcribing those stories and then reporting them in this text. How much details are fair to share? I started writing the sections, where I introduced the subjects of my research, right after the official end of my fieldwork in October 2020. The doubts that accompanied me in the transcription of the other interviews and fieldnotes were nothing compared to the shame and unease that I felt assembling the paragraph on the life stories of the Nigerian girls.

I probably should not have been granted such a privileged access in the first place; but I did realise that all my concerns about the ethics of my actions inside the centre were not shared by the social operators, at least not in the same way. The following anecdote, a small abstract of the first moment of confrontation with the Teresa (the Drophouse manager), clearly shows this divergence:

Viola: for me, seeing different groups of women is super interesting. I started with an idea of research in mind, but then I realised that I have to go with the flow. And it is more interesting this way…I see the women that live here at the dormitory or that follow the activities, the ladies from the neighbourhood, and the girls of the FAMI project. So, if the goal is to try to identify and highlight few issues through the narration of these women's personal stories…how should I approach them? Because not all of them know that I am here as a researcher, and this is critical from an ethical point of view.
Teresa: yes, but you are going to tell your side of the story, not theirs. The story you are going to tell is always something that you have elaborated in your mind…
V.: of course, it is my representation, but somehow…
T.: you are going to use invented names…
V.: yes, but when a researcher is starting this kind of methodological approach, it is up to him/her to declare his/her own role. It is not ethical to hide it.
T.: so, you are telling me that you would want to declare this thing?
V.: yes!
T.: because you would want to do an interview? I mean…it depends on which kind of instruments you are going to use…

V.: I want to make clear that I am here as a researcher. If some of them are going to confide something to me, I will maybe use it in my research if they have nothing against it. Anonymously, etc...
T.: we could advise them that you are a volunteer, but you are also doing research within this community service. It depends on what you will write, if you will report a phenomenon linked to the service or report the story of one of these women. If you want to use a questionnaire, of course you need their written consent. If she will tell you her story instead, it is different. This is what you are going to collect here. All the volunteers that have worked here carry with them the stories heard in here. They all become word of mouth. Each woman has a unique story, deeply strenuous, but you will find out that some elements are repeated and probably you are going to tell a story that is a collage of different stories.

As Stacey (1988) lucidly states, "[t]he lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power". These two anecdotes allow me to retrospectively reflect on my low-key researcher role, which I was never able to get out of due to a number of intimate and contextual contingencies. There are many things that I wish I have done differently in my research practice, and most of them are related to the dilemma of disclosing my role.

3.3.2 Filtering their voices

> In our rush to be more inclusive and conceptualize difference and diversity, might we be guilty of appropriating the voices of "others"? How do we deal with this when planning and conducting our research? And can we incorporate the voices of "others" without colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination? Can these types of dilemmas be resolved, and if so, how? (England, 1994)

All the ladies that I have met have names and faces for me; I got to know them, obviously not all of them with the same level of intimacy and confidence, but I dedicated them time and attentions over almost a year of fieldwork (even if abruptly interrupted for few months by the pandemic outbreak at the end of February 2020). It was not easy for me to enter their life and to find a way to give them a voice, while dropping the idea of being intrusive or disrespectful. It took me a lot of time to find the courage to ask them questions about their personal life. Most of the material collected and presented here, derives from direct interviews or more informal conversations, while in the specific case of the Nigerian guests of the female centre, I had to ask their social worker (Sara) about the most private details of their past stories of immigration. They were all carrying the aftermaths of a difficult immigration history and seeing them twice a week during the sewing class over a course of 30/40 days – the average duration of their permanency at

the shelter – did not facilitate the dialogue around personal and traumatic details. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge "the unequal exchange that it is inherent in many research relationships, given that the researchers receive information that produces their own knowledge (and reproduces their academic position), whereas informants often come away with only a vague suggestion that the findings might make a difference to their lives" (Valentine, 2003).

How have my interviewing style and practical interviewing experience shaped the analyses that I present? What kind of relationship I tried to create with these women?

At the beginning of each interview, I could not avoid saying and highlighting the fact that if one questions made them uncomfortable, they should have expressed the discomfort and avoided answering. None of my research participants ever say a thing about that and I have never had the feeling of overstepping the mark. In any case, my lack of mastery of the interview instrument and my shyness certainly contributed to establishing a supplicating relationship.

What else can I do beyond state that I am the interviewer, interpreter, and translator of their words?

Regarding interviews with Arab women, they were originally conducted in Italian, and recordings have been transcribed manually in order to grasp and preserve the original meaning of the sentences, reporting errors, misunderstandings, confusing elements. For the purposes of this thesis, the excerpt used within the speech were translated into English. In this process, since I am not a professional translator, I clearly had to make syntactical and grammatical choices that will not probably correspond to the original verbatim. In the case of the interviews with the two Italian homeless women, the translating factor is not secondary, but here the focus is more on the fact that, especially in one case, I had to reorganise the flow of the interview better, which was a bit confusing in some sections.

For these reasons, in the various anecdotes or interview segments, some of the original elements have been lost in translation. However, in order to compensate for this, I have chosen to give ample space to the voices of the women interviewed, often reporting long passages in full.

3.3.3 Afterward

> The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections

> called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. (Haraway, 1988)

I have repeatedly paused to reflect on how I could give back the results of my research to the people whose lives I am sharing in this work, people that I have observed for months and that, unfortunately, are not always completely aware of my research interest. According to Stacey (1988) one of "the major area of contradiction between feminist principles and ethnographic method involves dissonance between fieldwork practice and ethnographic product. […] In the last instance an ethnography is a written document structured primarily by a researcher's purposes, offering a researcher's interpretations, registered in a researcher's voice". This is why "feminism calls for forms of writing that are available to readers who might not be conversant in or trained to translate the jargons of specialized scholars" (Wheatley, 1994).

How to transpose my ethnographic fieldwork, my confused half Italian, half English fieldnotes, my vivid memories, my perceptions, my thoughts, and my questions (doubts) in the text, has been the subject of long reflections and attempt to find a writing style able to give centrality to the extraordinary ordinary life of these women, avoiding any kind of exploitative romanticisation or banalisation. I am well aware that it will be very difficult to bring back and make accessible this work inside the centre, to the women who have inspired it, because of its academic form, its specialised language, and the use of English. Nonetheless, I consciously choose a less academic writing style, in order to be able to narrate and disseminate, in a meaningful way, the burden of the emotive and personal stories of female marginality that I have collected.

In this text, I therefore decide to assume a posture of non-distance from the text, just as in the field I tried to shorten, to reduce, the distance between me and them. Them as operators, trying to cancel that omnipresent feeling of inadequacy. But above all, they as guests, precarious inhabitants of a space of care in a city in the North of Italy. A choice that "is necessary in order not to start with that confidence in writing and enunciation which is yet another form of coloniality" (R. Borghi, 2020).

I also choose to stop obsessing about the quality of my writing, which is often just an anxiety for complexity. I decided to deliver a simple text, which would also help me to keep my exaggerated paralysing perfectionism at bay. If the choice of simplicity will certainly not jeopardise my position or authority within the academy – privileges generally denied to those who, like me, occupy the lowest rung of the university system – thus giving me more freedom to experiment in writing (and obviously in practice), it may, however, according to the same criterion, deny dignity and truthfulness to the work of research, which,

although perfectible, has in any case colonised the last four years of my life. A risk I feel the weight of, but which I decide to run out of honesty.

If how "we investigate and write about the urban is not detached from our capacity to imaginative alternative urban politics" (Thieme et al., 2017), it is crucial now more than ever, at a time when the health emergency has acted as powerful accelerator of poverty and social injustice, to find a way to give voice to marginalised subjects, like the women that we will have the chance to meet in this work.

> "The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rationale conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history." (Haraway 1988)

Chapter 4

Practices of collective care in a female space of care

4.1 Introduction

By framing care as an ethics of encounter, Conradson (2003b, p. 508) conceived a space of care "as a socio-spatial field disclosed trough the practices of care that take place between individuals". These institutional and voluntary sites of care provision constitute an assemblage of different services for people in vulnerable life conditions, like poor people, women fleeing violence, homeless people, people with mental health problems, migrants and asylum seekers, and other minority groups. Scholars have been careful to avoid uncritical romanticisations of these relational spaces, bringing forth their ambiguous and contradictory nature (Darling, 2011; DeVerteuil et al., 2019). Caring practices, such as listening, offering free meals, providing shelter or therapeutic and burocratic support, have "the potential to facilitate or promote [people's] well-being" (Conradson, 2003b).

In this chapter, I wish to expand the analysis of the various practices of collective care produced inside the female centre in Barriera di Milano, drawing on the ethnographic research carried out between November 2019 and October 2020, with a forced pause during the first Italian lockdown due to the Covid19 pandemic (from March 2020 to June 2020). I undertook volunteer-based participant observation within the female day-centre for almost ten months, taking part in different daily community moments – lunches, coffee breaks and cleaning – 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 and the centre's paid staff.

In this study, I aim to combine attention to both the material and psycho-social dimensions of the collective and organised practices of care that emerge within this *relational* environment (DeVerteuil et al., 2019) and *contact zone* (Askins & Pain, 2011; Lawson & Elwood, 2014). Drawing on geographic scholarship on geographies of care (Bartos, 2019; Conradson, 2003a, 2003b; DeVerteuil et al., 2019; Johnsen et al., 2005a; Juhila, 2009; Lawson, 2007) and recent literature on female homelessness (Bretherton, 2020; Mayock & Bretherton, 2017; Reeve, 2018), this chapter offers a critical reflection of the complex internal dynamics that shape and affect different experiences inside the women shelter, in order to question to what extent the centre operates as a space of care. This analysis, therefore, expresses the need to take a closer look at the daily reality of homeless women because now more than ever, they risk remaining invisible – and at times disposable – subjects of our modern cities.

As Reeve et al. (2007, p. 4) argue, "engagement with a homelessness service does, or does not, result in a change (for better or for worse) in a women's current temporary housing situation. And the housing situation in which a woman lives can impact on her capacity to work, to study, to address personal difficulties such as drug dependencies, and so on". Not to mention that, as we have seen in the theoretical chapter and as we will further explore in the next chapter, the time between being taken into care by the social services and obtaining social housing or alternative housing solutions tends to be very lengthy.

The chapter is organised in the following way. In the first paragraph the case study of the research will be examined in detail, presenting the internal spatial distribution of the shelter and two specific projects developed and carried out within the structure, in addition to its activity as a dormitory: the female day centre, Drophouse, and the special ALFa project for migrant women. The third paragraph deals with the ethos of the organisations and its material enactment through the practices of care performed in the female shelter. In the third paragraph, some of the main protagonists of this research will be introduced by tracing their path leading towards entering the dormitory. In the fourth paragraph, as one way of providing a more in-depth and critical account of the material and psycho-social dimensions of the relational practices of care, the everyday encounters between social operators, service users, volunteers, and other visitors will be examined. Paragraph five, analyses how the centre act as a filter between users and public institutions, specifically the health care system. The conclusion reasons around these accounts to highlight "something of the complex, and at times fragile nature of co-constructed" female spaces of care (Conradson, 2003b).

4.2 Via Pacini, a female low-threshold centre

Here I am. I found the centre easily and now I just have to ring the bell. At number 18 of Via Pacini there are two different intercoms, one says "Centro Crisi" and the other one "Drophouse". I am quite agitated. Patrizia was super friendly on the phone, but I do not really know what to expect from this meeting. I have prepared a whole speech to explain what kind of research I am doing and how the women's centre could be an excellent case study. The fact remains that this is the first time I have entered such a space and I feel unprepared.

(Fieldnotes, 08/10/2019)

In the City of Turin, the map of services for the homeless population is a complex assemblage of different public and private spaces, coordinated by SAD (Servizio Adulti in Difficoltà), the special municipal office in charge of organising the network of public dormitories, monitoring the meal distribution activities carried out by voluntary associations, and providing guidance and counselling to people in need. The female centre on Via Pacini managed by the Gruppo Abele association emerges as one of the main shelters established to help women experiencing marginalisation, inequality or alienation[10].

Like most of the facilities dedicated to homeless people, the analysed female shelter is located in one of the most problematic peripheral neighbourhoods of the city – Barriera di Milano – specifically in an old, disused industrial structures. As it stands today, the centre, located on Via Pacini 18, is the result of architectural adaptations and compromises. The whole block in which it is located was planned in the 1940s in order to establish a factory unity used for the production of tyres. At the end of the 1970s, the plants of the factory began to be dismantled and a few years later the Turin municipal authorities acquired the whole area, with the intent to approve a detailed plan for the development of hundreds of social and subsidized housing units[11].

[10] https://www.gruppoabele.org/chi-siamo/

[11] Piemonte, I. R. E. S. (1995). Cento progetti cinque anni dopo: l'attuazione dei principali progetti di trasformazione urbana e territoriale in Piemonte. *Rosenberg e Sellier, Torino*.

Figure 5 Satellite picture of the ex-industrial complex. Source Google Maps

Figure 6 Front view of part of the public housing complex in front of the centre

Nowadays, the centre occupies what were once the offices of the old factory, while the rest of the block has been converted to contain a branch office of the Fire Department, the Registry Office, a public library and other care services[12]. As declared by the social workers themselves, the building – although more comfortable than other temporary refuge shelters (i.e., container camps) – is in a

[12] http://www.museotorino.it/view/s/7773d7a0f2c44b2497c6e8fe93914291

dilapidated state, presenting numerous structural problems, and it would need major restructuring and perhaps a rethinking of the internal spaces.

Figure 7 A view of the dormitory from the street

Although the building in which the centre is located was originally built for a different purpose, as is the case with countless other public dormitories, the structure is made of solid brick and its interior, overall, shows a welcoming side. The entrance is directly on the street, and after passing through a short corridor you enter the large central hall, which functions as the social and spatial fulcrum of the centre. The hall is overlooked by the rooms and toilets for the service guests, the kitchen and the storage area, the laundry room, the office and bathroom for the staff. The large hall is in part subdivided into different areas: immediately after the entrance corridor, two corner sofas and bookcases create a relaxation area; in front of the glass wall of the office there is a coffee area with a computer, where one of the operators is usually present. In the middle of the large hall there is a long wooden table, while the chairs are neatly arranged in a corner, ready to be used when needed. On the walls, painted in a bright orange, are often hung some of the drawings or paintings made by the service users and several photos showing operators, service users, and volunteers, in memory of some collective celebrations. Around the perimeter of the hall there are several storage

cabinets, which contain much of the material used during the creative laboratories. The environment is also enriched by the presence of numerous plants and a small aquarium with few fishes, whose well-being is often the subject of conversation during the coffee breaks. A second glass door leads to the spacious garden, which is shared with the other services housed in via Pacini (Drop-in and Crisis Centre). Although it cannot be defined as a landscaped garden, it is certainly welcoming and full of plants, which are often taken care of by some of the dormitory guests. Along the right side of the garden there is a wooden shed with a series of benches around a large table, often used for staff meetings in the summer. Across the garden, there is a parking area and the access to the stairs leading to the second floor of the centre, which contains another large hall used for Italian courses and a sewing room, recently renovated.

The building hosts two different but complementary services for vulnerable women, that constitute an assemblage of care: an emergency night shelter and a diurnal centre, which share and use the same spaces and in particular the main central hall. The dormitory runs from late afternoon until 8 am, while the day centre activity occurs between 9 am and 2 pm[13]. The night shelter is part of the network of dormitories of the City of Turin although it is run by a non-profit organisation. The centre is a highly professionalised service that employs social workers, educators, cultural mediators, graduates in psychology, and a child neuropsychiatry specialist for a total of 10 employees distributed between the day-centre and the dormitory, plus a couple of Civil Service[14] trainees. To the present day the paid staff has been made up of only female operators, as well as the volunteer staff. This makes the service to all intents and purposes a space just for women. The staff has several roles and responsibilities, including reception and hospitality, monitoring of individual well-being and of collective atmosphere, beyond more administrative activities. Furthermore, the day-centre promotes numerous social activities of community support for the women of Barriera di Milano while offering refuge and assistance to homeless women or women in need, with or without proper documentation. As has emerged several times from the words of the social workers, the night shelter is like the last resort before the

[13] Since April 2020, at the request of the municipal administration, the female centre has pushed to extend the working hours of the dormitory, that it is now required to function as a full-time hospitality house. This has had a major impact on the planning and organisation of the two complementary services, forcing a rearrangement of the spaces and the two teams, to reinforce the dormitory's services. This also meant a rethinking of the activities and time schedule of the shelter.

[14] In Italy, the Universal Civil Service is an opportunity offered to young adults to undertake a few months of their lives in the promotion of the founding values of the Italian Republic, through actions for the community and the territory. The main areas of intervention of the volunteers revolve around the field of care, civil protection, conservation of the environment and requalification of the historical, artistic, and cultural heritage.

street, while the day centre – the Drophouse – was created years later to help the women living on the streets while giving them respite.

4.2.1 The night shelter

The shelter is a private low-threshold dormitory and part of the network of dormitories of the City of Turin, for which the main purpose is to accommodate women in emergency conditions. As a low-threshold centre, the only access criterion is to be a woman (or to identify oneself as a woman), to be of legal age (between 18 and 65 years old) and not to have severe addictions or dependencies, meaning that admission to the dormitory is not tied to the activation of a project with the social services. It has a total availability of 25 beds per night; 20 beds are reserved for women that are in possession of legal documents, while other 5 are reserved for women without the proper documentation. In particular, during the last years, these 5 beds have been assigned to a special project for potential victims of sex trafficking (ALFa project).

As confirmed by the yearly direct experience at the female centre on Via Pacini, it is possible to distinguish four main categories of women representatives of different homelessness experiences:

i) women who spontaneously chose to distance themselves from their affections and live on the streets;
ii) women who lost their house due to an eviction, or because they have been kicked out by their own families;
iii) migrant women experiencing disorientation in an unfamiliar territory;
iv) women who are temporarily experiencing precarious living conditions, who usually rely on relatives or friends.

In addition, it is possible to consider a last category, made up of women of Maghrebi origin in the neighbourhood, who frequent the centre to attend Italian courses or other activities. As we will see in the following section, many of these women live with their families in near-poverty conditions, which puts them in an extremely precarious and risky condition. Some of them, in the past, have also been guests with their children in the centre following difficult separations from their husbands.

The stories and the needs of the women passing through the dormitory are very different. Many were single or divorced women, who were in search of a refuge after losing their job and their home. Among these more ordinary stories, a few stand out for gravity, like in the case of one of the guests of the centre, held captive for ten years who has gained back her freedom after finding the support of

another man on a social network. Thus, women's help requests can be very different, and they might be limited only to hospitality. As it emerges from the words of social operators, it is not uncommon for some homeless women to use the night shelter only as a temporary support, since they are not interested in applying for social services and they are willing to work autonomously for their well-being. "They still have their own social support network, and they tell you that they are just passing through. This is evident in the case of some Eastern European women working as in-home nurses or maids. These women usually find full-time caring jobs. They usually do not have housing stability and when their contracts end, they suddenly found themselves asking for help and assistance while waiting to find another job. These are women that have a very different history compared, for example, to women from North or Central Africa" (Lucia, *06/10/2020*).

4.2.2 The Drophouse

The Drophouse, founded in 2008, stems from the need to offer homeless women that are staying in the shelter at night, a safe space and respite from cold during the day and especially in the winter season, as Teresa, project manager of the Drophouse, explained. In fact, one of the main rules of the network of dormitories of the City of Turin forces the guests to live the premises of the shelters very early in the morning and to wait until late in the evening to get back.

Over the years, the project of the Drophouse has developed and led to a full differentiation of the two services and care teams hosted on Via Pacini, 18. The Drophouse started to work also with the women – with or without children – living in the neighbourhood, promoting educational and community engagement activities, while offering assistance and guidance through the complex system of social services, and at the same time still working with those few homeless women willing and able to focus on a process of 'empowerment'. Over the years, the range of services has been increased not only to better address basic needs, but also to provide tools for orientation and social reintegration, as well as to support and increase social cohesion (Morrone & Reynaudo, 2011).

Due to the limited capacity of the centre and insufficient personnel on hand – alongside Teresa there are only four other social workers employed at the day centre – only a dozen of homeless women might take part in the morning activities of the Drophouse in the main hall on the ground floor.

Sara, one of the colleagues at the dormitory, identifies the women that are willing to enjoy such a structured moment, because it is not obvious. For a woman, asking for a bed in a night shelter is kind of a last resort. It means that she has no other options or solutions; she is usually very exhausted, distrustful, and sometimes aggressive. She is

very angry…disoriented. So, she needs a lot of time to figure out if she really wants and is ready to get back on track and trust social workers. Sara helps them make this leap of faith. (Teresa, *17/01/2020*)

Therefore, while it is not necessary to be taken into care by the social services in order to be hosted in the dormitory, only homeless women who have already started a process of social accompaniment are involved in the activities of the Drophouse.

A social worker [Sara] is in charge of social accompaniment. She consults with the dormitory staff and together they decide whether there is potential to start a pathway inside the Drophouse. We are very demanding...we mark out the day, there are schedules. there is the preparation of the meal in one way, the cleaning has to be done in one way. We follow them in everything…in personal hygiene, in the hygiene of the house. And therefore, not all can enter or could be inside. We make observations, we see how the women move, we explain what we do and then the project develops over time. Other women come from the social services. They know us as Gruppo Abele and ask us if we have room. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

Teresa and Giusy (manager and social worker at the Drophouse) underline two different aspects, mirroring the nature of the day-centre. On the one hand, they stressed the state of extreme vulnerability of the women who ask for hospitality at the dormitory. On the other hand, they shed light on the regulatory aspect of the day-centre. Not all homeless women who spend the nights in the dormitory are invited to take part in the activities of the Drophouse, either due to clear organisational issues (i.e., to guarantee the best possible assistance, it is necessary to make a selection) and because attendance requires the acceptance of a series of rules, of a time schedule in which not all of them are interested.

The other hall at the first floor has been arranged to host the Italian courses, held every morning and afternoon from Monday to Thursday. Every year the day-centre receives more than one hundred applications mostly from women immigrants from Arab countries. The Italian course is held in collaboration with the CPIA, the Provincial Centres for Adult Education of the City of Turin[15], where most of these women study to obtain the middle school license, fundamental in order to obtain the residence permit. The class hours that the women follow at the centre are accredited by the CPIA and for these women it is much easier to follow the lessons at the day centre for many reasons: they can leave their children with Maddalena, the social operator in charge of the baby care

[15] http://www.cpia2-torino.it/

room, and since the centre is meant only for women, for cultural reasons, they feel more comfortable.

> For us, the Italian classes have been the very first engagement moment with the women of the neighbourhood…along with the baby care room. These women have at least one child and it would be impossible for them to follow any course without having someone that takes care of the babies. In terms of trust, this is really important, because if they have difficulties understanding what you are saying but they are confident enough to entrust you their children…it is done! And for them, these Italian classes are fundamental in order to be able to move around the city and to stay in Italy. We take care of the children from 0 to 3 years old and a few times a week there is also Akima, our cultural mediator. They trust her and she acts as a filter. (Teresa, *17/01/2020*)

4.2.3 The ALFa project for young migrants

As mentioned in the previous section, a limited number of the available beds in the female centre have been recently allocated for a specific project aimed at sheltering young migrants who are potential victims of trafficking. The ALFa project, cofounded by the European Programme AMIF (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund) and by the Italian Ministry of Interior, is meant to ensure immediate and adequate protection to vulnerable people and in particular to foreign women legally residing in Italy but potential victims of sex trafficking[16].

> In order to avoid that, upon entering Italy, vulnerable women and potential victims of trafficking are sent to reception centres lacking specialisation in the management of this type of issue, thus running the risk of being hooked by trafficking circuits, the project intends to act at an early stage i) by approaching potential victims as soon as they arrive in Italy and therefore before they are initiated into prostitution or other forms of exploitation; ii) by launching social inclusion and observation paths in order to assess the real condition of women; and iii) by accompanying them towards the most suitable reception structures. (*PROGETTO ALFa – Accogliere Le Fragilità*, 2018)

The ALFa project started in 2019 and has been developed on a regional scale, by networking different centres and communities dislocated throughout the Piedmont Region. It has been designed in conjunction with another project, Anello Forte, which is meant for acclaimed victims of sex trafficking. As Sara, the social worker in charge of the project at the Drophouse, clarified during an interview, the network connects numerous third-sector associations with decades

[16] http://www.piemonteimmigrazione.it/progetti/item/1465-alfa-accogliere-le-fragilita

of experience in the care sector, like Gruppo Abele. The type of facility varies from emergency shelters, as in the case of the Drophouse, to safe houses (*casa di fuga*, a protected community whose address is unknown) or semi-autonomous houses.

Since November 2019, I have met around forty girls between 19 to 25 years old on average, mainly of Nigerian origin. Even if the project does not specifically deal strictly with girls from Nigeria, over the months of my voluntary work I have met only two girls from other countries (Brazil and Ghana). Most of the women arrive at the centre by word of mouth, easily explained by the fact that Barriera di Milano hosts a large part of the Nigerian community in Turin, which regularly attends the numerous Pentecostal churches distributed in the neighbourhood. It is certainly interesting to add the other different modalities in which these young women come into contact with the Association and the centre and get involved in the ALFa project:

> The project entails a series of actions, which includes both the study and monitoring of the phenomenon of prostitution in the City of Turin and the first hinterland…for example I recently started to work with the street-unit (*Unità di Strada*). I am with a driver and a cultural mediator, who is the one that makes the initial contact with the girls. And then, there is a telephone hotline…it is used not only by women in need, but it can also be used by clients of prostitutes or people who would like to report a particular situation or to point out a specific area. Or it can even be used by law enforcement…maybe they have raided a place, or they have met a girl and they would like to know if we have a free spot. The choice between the ALFa project or the Anello Forte really depends on the situation. If we are not sure that the girl is or has been a victim of sex trafficking, because maybe she sounds very confused, or her story is not clear…we can start with the ALFa project in order to start a first period of observation and then decide what is the best for her. It is not always the case to include a girl in the Anello Forte project…yes, maybe in the past she was a prostitute but now she is totally out of the business, and she just needs help or assistance. In this case, we prefer to include her in the ALFa project. (Sara*, 28/08/2020*)

These girls usually spend around 30 to 40 days at the centre, during which they are asked to take part in some activities, like the Italian course in the morning and other more practical and creative laboratory in the afternoon. These courses are meant for Sara to better observe these girls and their attitudes towards the project. After this first period of adjustment to community life, with all its rules and routines, it is Sara's responsibility to prepare a report for the Prefecture, which will contain some recommendations for the continuation of the journey. The report might contain some suggestions in terms of territorial relocation and thus, during the first month, it is extremely important for the scope of the project to understand and determine the potential dynamics and geographies of street prostitution in order to minimise the risks for the girls.

One of the main objectives of the project is to help the girls reprocess traumas and dramatic events. It is directly from the reports that I had the opportunity to learn something more about their personal stories and the most painful and complex details of their immigration journey.

We have a month to observe and to try to understand. The person that arrives here does not tell you her story right away…or maybe she tells you a fanciful version of it. They have a migration route that generally includes a passage through Libya, where they have been usually tortured or abused. So, it is very unlikely that they arrive here and open up with the first person that asks them a testimony. But it is ok…we are here to listen but together we have to decide what you want to do, what is your help request and then we work together to reach the goals that we have set. (Teresa, *17/01/2020*)

After the first period in the centre, most of the girls were taken into the first and second level communities of the ALFa circuit, spread throughout Piedmont. In this case the scale of the project changes and, if a real danger with respect to the Piedmont area is ascertained, some girls may even have to move regionally. Others, for whom a real danger was not verified, were instead received in some CAS (*Centri di accoglienza straordinaria*) or SAI (*Sistema di accoglienza e integrazione;* ex-SPRAR)[17].

4.3 A micro-space of contact: organisational ethos and caring practices

The centre is managed by Gruppo Abele association, an NGO founded in 1965 in Turin by Father Luigi Ciotti, known in Italy as the "street priest" and exponent leader of the Catholic social activism (Governa & Lancione, 2010). Although it cannot technically be considered a faith-based organisation, the religious and political background of its founder clearly emerges in the organisation's mission, which is i) supporting people who are going through a difficult time, accompanying them in a pathway to regaining a place in the society which has marginalised them, while ii) promoting culture and proposing concrete actions for change by giving voice to those who are the most vulnerable (Gruppo Abele, 2020).

The Gruppo Abele association has a special value. Who gets in touch with the Gruppo, who works here…I do not know how to say it. It is a strong sentiment. Those who do not have this kind of feeling leave after a while. Whoever stays is very committed... we try to do everything, even if it means challenging the social services. We try to make them understand our point of view. Even if, as educators, we are worthless. We are nothing to

[17] https://www.openpolis.it/parole/come-funziona-laccoglienza-dei-migranti-in-italia/

the services. But we do our job anyway. Nothing and nobody can stop us. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

According to Johnsen et al. (2005a), the moral ethos of an organisation, and its guiding principles, are one of the central dynamics which affect – in tangible and intangible ways – experiences and practices inside *spaces of care*. In the same vein, DeVerteuil et al. (2019, p. 7) note that "an organization's ethos maps onto its internal spaces that structures interactions with clients". However, Cloke et al. (2005, p. 386) warn against uncritical readings of ethos statements that are "designed for external consumption" and are "not necessarily carried through into the spaces of care which are formed by the activities of the organisations and those who are served by them". In their analysis of the ethos of homelessness provision services in Britain, Cloke et al. (ivi, p. 387) identify "new forms of selfless responsibility, freedom, and resistance […] expressed for the benefit and inclusion of homeless people, in the form of recognisable collective action, fuelled by ideological, charitable, spiritual, and volunteering motives". In contrast to Cloke et al., Lancione (2014b, p. 3065) argues that it is naïve to assume that services for the homeless population can exist on a non-interventionist basis: "[t]he urban contexts where these practices of care take place are indeed produced through relations that sometimes are symmetrical, sometimes not, but they always demand an exchange: of materialities (bodies), emotions (fear, joy, etc.), moral discourses (of agape, but also of stigmatisations), points of view, assertions, passivities, and so on". It is also possible that voluntary organisations except "homeless people to raise their own levels of self-responsibility, reflecting an ethos of care in return for deliverable changes in lifestyle and attitude" (P. Cloke et al., 2007). These discourses are also valid for non-religious organisations, as in the case of the private dormitory and day-centre on Via Pacini.

Conflicting framings of the nature of the symbiotic relationship between the third sector and the vulnerable population have been advanced in the literature (DeVerteuil et al., 2019). More critical and pessimistic positions read this relationship as predominantly parasitic, aimed at controlling, punishing, and 'invisibilising' the subjects, thus shadowing and partnering with the neoliberal state: some voluntary spaces can generate fear in their users (Johnsen et al., 2005a) while others can implement coercive care practices (Johnsen & Fitzpatrick, 2010). Other positions emerge, however, which emphasise the development of "a more ambivalent relationship within these 'contact zones', one that could be commensal for clients, in that the voluntary sector helps to sustain them without the latter necessarily benefiting from the relationship, or even mutualistic, where both sides benefit from services rendered in terms of care and citizenship" (*ibidem*). Therefore, paying close attention to the relationality of voluntary sector spaces, homeless shelters could emerge as potential and genuine

spaces of care, sites of assistance, sustenance, and social protection for vulnerable subjects and their impoverished individual capital.

There is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with this theme, but these spaces are generally depicted as spaces of material and immaterial assistance that provide security and stability (Cooper, 2001), therapeutic encounter (Conradson, 2003b), and performative licence towards unconventional behaviours (Parr, 2000). For other authors, they are also places of storytelling within scenarios of social exclusion in which emergency shelter services are often the only response to the physical and relational needs of the homeless population (Morrone & Reynaudo, 2011). Without a doubt, they are a privileged observation point for violently hidden realities, a crucial research medium to recognise and intercept needs, disadvantages and denied rights.

As illustrated previously, the centre on Via Pacini offers refuge and assistance to homeless women or women in need while promoting numerous social activities of community support for the women of Barriera di Milano. Thus, the centre is here conceptualised as a 'micro space of contact' for a diversified group of women, with different stories, vulnerabilities, and disadvantages. As a low-threshold centre, access is open provided that specific requirements are met, including non-addiction to alcohol or drugs. The permanence period for homeless women might vary significantly depending on the residence, the possession of documentation and whether women decide to follow a project of social accompaniment. As regards the day centre, the operators regularly work with the same small group of homeless women and a wide and various group of women from the neighbourhood.

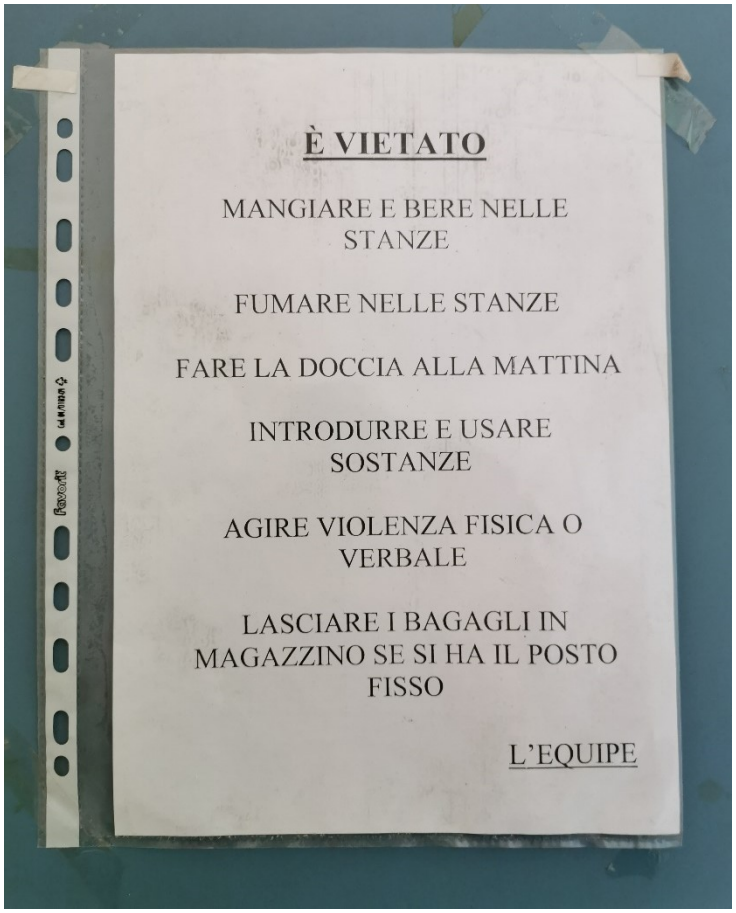

Figure 8 The sheet with the dormitory rules hangs on the various room doors

By drawing on a broad notion of care, Conradson (2003a) conceived it "as the proactive interest of one person in the well-being of another and as the articulation of that interest (or affective stance) in practical ways", such as assisting, supporting, and also listening with empathy (Conradson, 2003b). As other drop-in centres (Burns et al., 2002; Parr, 2000), the shelter provides "opportunities for the care of the 'nearby other' (that it, those who are spatially proximate, but socially distant from members of 'mainstream' society)" (Johnsen et al., 2005b). In this sense, care is constructed as a relational practice. Drawing on a feminist ethics of care and geographical literature on the voluntary sector, the chapter provides a relational understanding of the female centre as a space of care.

> [A] feminist ethic of care begins from the centrality of care work and care relations to our lives and societies. Care ethics begins with a social ontology of connection: foregrounding social relationships of mutuality and trust (rather than dependence). Care ethics understand

> all social relations as contextual, partial, attentive, responsive, and responsible. (Lawson, 2007)

Thus, the female shelter as a whole is here conceptualised as a 'micro space of contact' for a diversified group of women, with different stories, vulnerabilities, and disadvantages. The central hall is the main place where service users, social operators, and volunteers meet and clash, producing and reproducing complex and conflicting caring relations. By drawing on the concept of relational micro-space of contact (Askins & Pain, 2011; DeVerteuil et al., 2019), it is possible to advance a more systematic relational approach to the analysis of such spaces of care, that are described as "asymmetrical spaces between a largely vulnerable clientele and a more powerful staff (and diversely-motivated volunteers) that both reproduce dominant power relations and understandings yet also offer the potential for challenging them" (DeVerteuil et al., 2019, p. 7).

Being able to observe the unfolding of the daily practices of care (taking into account both the *care receiver* and the *care giver* perspective) is then useful to compare the political aim of the association, and its linkages with the local system of care (tensions and ruptures), with the lived experience of the service guests. In particular, I will try to answer to the following three main questions:

i) how is care assembled, experienced, and challenged within the women shelter?

ii) how do complex and organised practices of care affect women's daily experience of homelessness?

iii) to what extent does the female shelter operate as a space of care against female marginality?

4.4 Accessing the dormitory

> When I first arrived here, I was in real struggle. I was not willing to ask my siblings for help, and this place was the only place I could think of. During our first conversation, S. (municipal social assistant) asked me: "Do you have any bad habits? Drugs, alcohol?" and I said no. (Paola*, 06/10/2020*)

Paola is one of the first women that I met at the day-centre. Previous guest of the dormitory, she now lives on a disability pension and works as a volunteer for the shelter. She is a woman in her early sixties originally from southern Italy. From her birth, her large family started to travel back and forth from Naples to Turin until she turned 9, when they finally settled in Turin. She worked for 33 years as a team leader in a mechanical engineering company producing car

headlights. Her life story was deeply affected by profound psychological frailty, which in 2011 forced her to quit her job. In 2018, she entered the night shelter on Via Pacini after losing her home due to a critical family condition with her former partner. It was not her first experience inside a shelter, given that twenty years ago, she had to find refuge in a family hostel after her ex-husband abused her children. Paola explained how her mental health condition has deeply affected her life and relationships with her children, whit whom she has recently rebuild a healthier relationship. During the last ten years, she has spent some time in three different psychiatric hospitals. Her experience in the dormitory lasted five months.

> I have no problem telling you this. I finally got through the challenging part […]. I was homeless because I had some issues with my ex. We were living nearby on Via *. My problem with him…I started having some problems with my mind. And it has lasted ten years…different mental hospitals. I had no home…that is why I found about the Drophouse. I thought about coming here for almost a year…I was still managing. And finally, I came here one day. It was a Tuesday morning, and it was full of people. Serena [operator of the day-centre] was here, and I asked her for some information, and she suggested that I return or call in the evening to talk to someone from the dormitory. I did not call that evening [sighs and laughs]. It was difficult for me. I called the next day, and Lucia [operator of the night shelter] answered the phone and told me to come here. At 8 p.m., I was here. I was a bit scared to tell you the truth. And that first night, I had an argument with M. [founder and long-time volunteer]. I do not remember everything, but I remember this. I was sleeping in the biggest room. There were six of us, and I could not sleep, and I moved to one of the couches in the hall…and she yelled at me. It was a bad experience [laughs]. But after that first day, I have never had a fight, and I found myself well. (Paola*, 06/10/2020*)

In the story of the arrival of Simona, a long-term homeless woman, it is possible to identify the intertwining of several different issues. Simona is a previous guest of the dormitory, and, unlike Paola, her experience of homelessness has been longer. She is a 35-year-old woman of South Italian origin, and she has spent the last three years between the two female dormitories of the city, Via Pacini and Via Ghedini. Simona's story complexifies after losing her job due to the non-renewal of a cleaning contract at the Ciriè Hospital. Returning home with her parents, with whom she already had a complicated relationship, aggravated her anxiety states, and she ended up being admitted several times into a psychiatric department in Turin. In order to better cope with her psychological distress, Simona voluntarily chose to leave her home and her family, shortly afterwards being admitted into the reception system. Simona has been granted a 90% disability pension for the past six years, which consists of a modest economic support. Shortly before the pandemic outbreak, she was offered the

possibility to move from the dormitory to a semi-autonomous flat, shared with other three women.

I arrived in the dormitory because there was a conflict with my mother and brother. I was taking medication, and sometimes I got sick. But my mother did not understand that. People did not understand my situation. I could not say that I was sick. Every time I came home [after a hospitalisation], the situation was back to where it started. I did not want to stay at home. […] I had to sleep with my mother in her bedroom; I did not have my own space or anything. I could not listen to music; I could not do anything! [...] We had some fights, and before it all went wrong, I left. I told myself that sooner or later, someone would help me. Before I left, I checked on the Internet, hoping to get a place either at Pacini or Ghedini [another female shelter]. The first evening I arrived at 8 o'clock and rang the bell. The operator had to check if they could give me a place with the Boa...I waited a bit and then they gave me a sleeping place. I have to say that the place was quiet, even if there was some bickering from time to time. But I enjoyed the service in both dormitories. […] Sometimes I think about the dormitory because if it had not been for the dormitory, who knows where I would have ended up? Many let themselves go; they do not take care of themselves. I used to be shabby because of my mother. But now I seem to be okay. (Simona*, 08/10/2020*)

After Simona was taken into care by the social services, she got a regular place at the dormitory in Via Ghedini and, despite an initial reluctance, she started attending the activities at the Drophouse day centre.

The stories of Mara and Gina, two young Nigerian migrants, are very different from the previous ones. As in most of the migration stories of the girls of the ALFa project, more than psychological distress or family problems, emerge stories of exploitation, violence, abuse, lack of any support network both in Nigeria and in Italy, and at the same time an incredible fortitude. After a series of traumatic events, they both decided to join the ALFa project.

Mara[18] was born in 1993 in Benin City (Nigeria), where she lived with her parents and siblings. After graduation, she attended a baking course, and she occasionally worked as a hairdresser. In 2015 she was forced to run away from home to avoid some form of genital mutilation, and she found hospitality at a friend's house, where she stayed for few months. It is her friend who suggests leaving. Mara says that she left Nigeria in 2016 and travelled with a woman and a man for around six months, stopping in a ghetto in Sebha (Libya) for half of the duration of the journey, where she suffered violence and abuse. She arrived in Italy in October 2016, and she was included, with the woman she was

[18] As mentioned in the methodological chapter, the biographies of the girls of the ALFa project were collected from the reading of the girls' personal reports, made available by the operator in charge of the project. In the methodological chapter, I addressed the ethical aspects behind this choice, highlighting the associated doubts and discomforts.

travelling with, in a reception centre in Milan, where she applied for the asylum. After a month, the woman revealed to Mara that people were looking for her to force her into prostitution. Once again, she ran away and started sleeping in the street for a few months, since a girl met on the street offered her hospitality. At the beginning of 2017, she met a few compatriots who invited her to a religious event in Turin. Their role was fundamental when Mara got kicked out of the house and asked for their help; she thus moved to Turin and started sleeping at the Pentecostal church until another girl offered her hospitality in 2018. She then started to attend the classes at the CPIA, and in May 2019, she carried out the first hearing at the territorial commission of Milan, which recommended her for the ALFa project.

Gina was born in 1994 in Ekpoma (Nigeria), where she lived with her grandmother and her younger sisters since the premature death of her parents. For economic reasons, she decided to interrupt her studies after middle school, and she started to work at a gas station, the sole source of sustenance for her family. She said that she has always played football and that she was pretty good at it; therefore, one of her clients proposed moving to Europe to become a professional footballer. Gina decided to leave, but once in Dirkou (Niger), the man forced her to take an oath to repay the debt by working as a prostitute. When she refused, he sold her to another man who took her to Ubari (Libya) to a *connection house*, a sort of brothel usually run by human traffickers where women are forced and initiated into prostitution. Once again, Gina refused to prostitute herself and was sold to another Nigerian man who got her arrested. She stayed in prison for a long time until she asked another man to buy her freedom. With no other options, she gave up and started working on the streets to save some money and escape. Chased by her creditor but unable to return to Nigeria, she embarked for Italy, arriving in Lampedusa in 2016. After a few months in a reception centre in Catania, she ran away to Napoli and then to Potenza while still working for a while as a prostitute. In Potenza, she entered a reception centre where she stayed for three years till November 2019. Meanwhile, she found herself pregnant. Scared by one of her previous traffickers, she decided to join her fiancé in Germany. The police stopped her at the Swiss border, and after a short period in a reception centre, in January, she got back in Italy and slept few nights at the Ivrea train station. Unfortunately, she felt sick and was taken to the hospital, where the social worker recommended her for the ALFa project.

If for Italian women who access the reception system, entering a dormitory represents a moment of a decisive break from their previous life, for foreign women, the fact of using the dormitories does not necessarily make them 'homeless', apart from the persistence of the housing problem (Porcellana, 2016, p. 147). As Reeve (2007, p. 3) “homelessness is a dynamic, and non-linear, process. The trajectories women take into, out of, and through homelessness are influenced by a complex range of processes, events, actions and interactions. They encounter structural forces (poverty, the housing market, the labour market); institutional bodies and processes (housing legislation, service provision, organisational rules

and remits); personal issues and experiences (substance misuse, mental ill health, parenthood, divorce, bereavement); and within this 'landscape' they exercise choice and make decisions."

Although the night centre is designed as an emergency service, where access should therefore be largely guaranteed, the long and slow procedures for admission to the dormitory undermine its nominal universal nature. The character of discontinuity and precariousness clearly emerges from the words of Lucia, social operator of the night shelter, while explaining how the system of access used to work before the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic at the end of February 2020:

> The admission to the night shelter was free…people could just show up during opening hours of the service and ask for hospitality. Then we used to have a preliminary chat to understand the legal status…if they are regular or irregular in the territory. We had an availability of 20 beds managed in agreement with the Municipality of Turin, 3 of which were vacant and reserved for women in irregular administrative condition and for emergencies. These three beds were managed by the municipal service called 'Boa', a night mobile service with the scope to monitor the city's streets and promptly respond to help requests from homeless people. One of the main accomplishments of the 'Boa' service has been to network the dormitories in Turin in order to be able to speed up the procedure and assign the beds early in the evening, reducing long waits in the cold. Recently, those beds were usually assigned in the evening due to the high number of persons waiting. If a woman arrived here and requested shelter for the night, we placed her on a waiting list, and then we assigned a bed based on residence. If a person's last residence was in Turin, she could be hosted for 30 nights in a row. Otherwise, just for seven days. If her last residence was outside Turin, or if she only had a residence permit or just the application for a residence permit…we could host her just for seven days. At the end of the 30 or 7 days, the women were supposed to re-follow the same procedure, but it is easier to find a free bed once you are registered on the list. (Lucia, *06/10/2020*)

As anticipated in the previous paragraph, the caring activity of the night shelter is now coupled with the Drophouse project, the day centre founded in 2008 in order to offer homeless women a safe space and respite from cold even during the day. The homeless women who participate in the activities of the day centre are chosen by the referents of the SAD (Servizio adulti in difficoltà) or recommended by the operators. As Teresa explains, they cannot be more than 15 for a matter of space and "quality of relationship" (Porcellana, 2016). Small numbers ensure that things can be done collectively. Women are then no longer forced to leave the building early in the morning and then move from one place to another, looking for a place to eat, rest, or hide, waiting to re-enter the shelter in the afternoon.

During the winter season, which lasts from mid-November to mid-April, women have to stay outside in the cold for many hours. So, in 2008 we decided to open this new space to let them in again from 9 a.m. till 2 p.m. and, thus, start individualised projects to obtain housing self-sufficiency. In 2008 there was not an emergency, like now. People arrived here; there was not a long waiting list, so they were immediately taken into care by us and the social services…so it was possible to start and finish individualised projects in a very short time. Over time, the emergency has exacerbated more and more…hitting especially the generation of children of those who immigrated here from the South during the economic boom[19]. Eventually, the parents died, and they found themselves alone in a big city amid an economic crisis, with no relatives, no strong neighbourhood networks. So, this place had become like a parking spot for those poor people, that were just waiting for the shelter to open. Moreover, the other female shelter, once at the other end of the town, moved closer to Via Ghedini to prevent dangerous movement in the middle of the night. (Teresa, *17/01/2020*)

[19] Teresa refers to new situations of impoverishment that emerged in the years following the 2008 economic crisis among Italian women over 45 who, although not in situations of extreme social or psychological distress, found themselves in conditions of absolute deprivation, together with migrant women in conditions of extreme poverty and severe marginalisation. (Morrone & Reynaudo, 2011, p. 133)

Figure 9 Women in line at the entrance of the night shelter on Via Pacini[20].

Bourlessas (2018) vividly illustrates how forced mobility could be destructive and wearing on the homeless subject, both from a physical and psychological perspective. It is then interesting to observe how the caring work produced inside the day-centre tackles the character of discontinuity of the night hospitality project reserved to homeless women. The Drophouse was opened to offer a respite during the long and freezing winter nights; furthermore, it created the conditions to grant these women a therapeutic routine over an extended period (Conradson, 2003b), thus affecting their homeless experience and subjectivity.

The day-centre is therefore attended both by some of the homeless women housed in the dormitory (or in one of the other dormitories in Turin) with a process of social accompaniment already in progress, and by the young African girls, part of the special project who stay in the centre for about a month. For the former, in the morning less structured creative activities are organised (making jewellery or decorating buttons) and they are offered lunch, after which they must leave the centre. The latter follow an Italian course in the morning and other creative activities (sewing course) in the afternoon. In the text, it will be useful to refer to the former as long-term service users and to the latter as temporary service users.

While it is not necessary to be taken into care by the social services to be hosted in the dormitory, only a dozen of homeless women might take part in the morning activities of the day-centre, who are chosen on the basis of their willingness to follow an individual project of social assistance. In this sense, the day-centre reproduce and reinforce the exclusionary nature of the Italian welfare system based on the 'staircase approach', which entails moving from a lower to a higher level of service on the basis of a progressive logic. The staircase approach is strictly functional to the gradual 'reintegration' of the person into society, who should prove to be able to follow a path towards regaining living, social, and working autonomy – while accepting its strict conditions and rules – and who is eventually recognised and rewarded by obtaining access to social housing or other alternative residential solutions.

From the foregoing, it appears that the permanence period at the night shelter might vary significantly depending on the residence, the possession of documentation and whether women decide to follow a project of social accompaniment. From the point of view of the association and its social operators, the scarcity of economic and human resources of the centre makes it essential to make a selection both among homeless women who have been longer in the care

[20] Image copyright owned by Gruppo Abele Association

circuit and among young migrant girls, in order to be able to offer a welcoming, attentive, safe, and therapeutic space to the service users, in order to successfully support the process of social accompaniment.

4.5 Living

In this paragraph, as one way of providing a more in-depth and critical account of the material and psycho-social dimensions of the relational practices of care that emerge within this micro space of contact, I will critically reflect on three key issues: i) intimacy, ii) personal engagement and self-worth, iii) conflict and support. Bringing forth the voices and experiences of few research participants will help to emphasize how the experience of homelessness in such a highly gendered and regulated space can be diverse. The experiences of the homeless users are variously affected both in terms of *duration* and *objectives* of the reception pathways, two dimensions that influence in different ways their subjectivities and the everyday encounters between social operators, service users, volunteers, and other visitors. In fact, homeless women's pathways are different, given different degrees of material and immaterial deprivation, both in terms of duration and in terms of opportunities, prospects, needs, and desires.

4.5.1 Experiencing intimacy in collective space

The women arrive at 9 a.m. They gather around the small table in front of the staff office, where Giusy (social educator) usually prepares a flask of hot tea and few biscuits for everyone. The shift between the night staff and the day staff happens gradually between 8 and 9 am, and a chorus of greetings welcomes every new arrival. The creative laboratories for the homeless women slowly start around 10 am and are hosted in the main hall on the ground floor. According to the day of the week and which volunteer is present, boxes full of jewellery, cardboards, or buttons invade the long wooden table. These morning laboratories are usually held by few elderly middle-class women who have been attending the centre for many years. Two of the most committed and long-standing volunteers are two retired doctors who have a strong connection with the social operators and some of the women. During the morning, the doorbell rings more than once, anticipating the arrival of some of the Arab ladies from the neighbourhood that attends the Italian courses on the first floor or other social operators of the association that bring food or other useful donated stuff.

Around noon, the table is cleared to set the table for lunch. Lunch at the Drophouse is one of the most interesting moments, which provide variegated insights into the life inside this specific space of care. During weekdays, the Drophouse offers a free lunch to all the women who take part in the morning

activities. In the evening and on weekends, the space operates merely as a night shelter, meaning that it is managed exclusively by the night service workers and meals are not provided to service guests, who must rely on other homeless services (i.e., soup kitchens). Lunch is entirely offered to the service guests, in part thanks to the numerous relations created with some local businesses that supply the centre, in particular with bakery products, fruit and vegetables. Giusy usually asks two or three of the women attending the activities of the day-centre to take care of the lunch, which is served to around twenty people. It is up to Giusy to decide the daily menu but, it often happens that one of the women gives ideas for a special meal, making herself available to cook.

I was not planning to drop by the centre today, but the girls invited me for lunch on Friday, and I could not miss it. When I arrive around 11.30, Gina and A. (another long-term guest of the dormitory of Nigerian origin) are in the kitchen preparing one of their typical dishes, *jollof rice*. I stop by to say hello, and Gina seems happy to see me. With her apron on, she looks a little more adult than she usually does. She looks in charge. On Friday, I accompanied her to look for the necessary ingredients, and she took me from one ethnic shop to another to find a special tomato paste. You can see that she cares a lot, and at the table, she gets many compliments from the guests and operators.

(*Fieldnotes, 10/02/2020*)

The lunch is one of the moments where some of the older ladies from the dormitory, few homeless women who attend the day-centre activities, the group of Nigerian girls, social operators, some volunteers, join around the same long table in the middle of the hall. The collective and social nature of the lunch at the Drophouse is not always a tension-free moment, though. These different groups come together, releasing all the nervousness, misunderstandings, antipathies, and specific cultural differences. The anecdote below illustrates one of these relational conflictual encounters between long-term users and temporary guests:

At lunch, we were pretty quiet, almost tense. The Nigerian girls still do not appreciate the food. They do not complain out loud, but they keep whispering between them. It is not difficult to understand their negative mood. Unfortunately, some of the more sensitive women suffer this kind of attitude, making them feel insecure about being the object of the murmur. As usual, the tension blows up after lunch, when the women are asked to clean the hall and the kitchen. They start arguing and it usually ends with someone arguing or bursting into tears.

(*Fieldnotes, 31/01/2020*)

In such a collective and restricted space, it is problematic to handle intimate moments of vulnerability privately. To find one's own space to let off steam or simply to be alone for a while becomes difficult. The main hall is like a stage; no one can retreat backstage (Porcellana, 2016, p. 104). During the day, only

Nigerian girls who share one of the large bedrooms overlooking the central hall are allowed to stay or enter their bedroom. But typically until 2 pm, when the service of the day-centre ends, the main hall is always crowded. At the end of the cleaning phase, some of the women prefer to retire to read in the quiet on one of the sofas in the relaxation area. The others gather around the table in front of the office to chat while they sip their coffee and perhaps enjoy some sweets.

In addition to this, in the collective space, it could happen to assist to moments of crisis, even mental breakdowns, which can be emotionally overwhelming for the other guests.

> G. has arrived just a few days before. She was struggling to accept her new condition, and it was not difficult to feel her sense of disorientation and sometimes disgust towards the situation. “I never thought I would end up in a place like this…in a situation like this!”. In the middle of the morning, the doorbell rang, and Giusy warned us that it was M. She was disoriented, and during the morning activity, she kept talking to herself and repeating the exact two or three confused phrases. While the other women and the volunteer seemed not to pay attention, G. immediately appeared very frustrated and uncomfortable, taking these negatives feelings to lunch.
>
> (*Fieldnotes, 17/01/2020*)

The centre is characterised by a significant presence of women in severe conditions of psychological distress. The impact of sharing a space with other women affected by states of paranoias, anxieties, schizophrenias is not irrelevant, primarily when the personal space is restricted and continuously modified. The social operators can act as emergency figures, buffering and managing situations of risk and conflict, but in any case, they cannot replace the professional help of a psychologist or a psychiatrist.

> The dormitory is technically defined as a low-threshold service. It is a service that is already historically very vulnerable. It takes in people with severe problems from a psychological perspective, which Psychiatry does not deal with because it has no staff and no resources. In this type of service, there should be a great synergy between the health system and the public system, a synergy that has never been achieved over the years. The fact that the dormitory is open 24 hours [post-covid] a day means you have to keep people with severe, if not very serious, problems in the facility. These situations inevitably become truly unmanageable. We do not have staff, psychiatric nurses... we do not have people trained to follow such severe and complicated situations. (Patrizia*, 1/10/2020*)

An ultimate reflection on the impact that community life, and lack of intimacy, can have on homeless subjectivity is underlined by the experience of Simona. Just before the pandemic outbreak, Simona was offered the possibility to move into a house shared with four other women. Given her emotional sensibility,

she found immediate relief in this new housing stability. During our interview, she refers several times to her new autonomy; beyond the more predictable gratification of being able to use the toilets without having to queue or keep to certain time schedules, she expresses her happiness at being finally able to manage her own meals, thus regaining more control over her diet and health.

> The Drophouse gave me the strength to go on. Thanks to them, I have changed a lot. Now, I am much calmer because I finally have a home. I can mind my own business…I can cook, clean. It is a whole different thing, even if there are four of us. But you want to put forty women against four? I get up in the morning before the operators arrive. Then we clean the house. We take turns. Some cook, some dust, some do the laundry. Tonight, it is my turn to cook. We help each other. (Simona*, 08/10/2020*)

The lack of physical and spatial intimacy that characterises the centre, plus reduced autonomy, inevitably translates into feelings of frustration, nervousness, and estrangement from such site of care provision, that the women are forced to live in daily, especially when the duration of stays in the dormitory tends to be long-term, or now that the rules are stricter due to the emergency state. From this point of view, the group of Nigerian girls is in a better situation because, even if for a short period, girls share the same room. This spatial arrangement allows them to form bonds faster and have a privileged space where they can retreat without being disturbed by the other users.

4.5.2 Engaging with organised activities

One of the main features of the centre is the organisation of activities both of maintenance of the collective spaces (e.g., cleaning, cooking) as well as the creative and recreational type (e.g., sewing course), intended for the recovery of personal and imaginative skills and for the recognition and enhancement of individual resources (Morrone & Reynaudo, 2011).

In Via Pacini, the daily maintenance activities of the social spaces (e.g., main hall, kitchen) are asked to the women attending the day centre, both long-term and temporary users of the centre, while the professional cleaning of the rooms and sanitation services is entrusted on a rotation basis, through work grants, to some of the women of the centre, chosen from among the dormitory guests and some of the Maghrebi women attending Italian courses. Leonardi (2021) reports how, in many low-threshold facilities, the cleaning of rooms and the provision of food are often delegated to external suppliers, thus causing a progressive loss of what can be defined as domestic skills. As already mentioned, in order to partly overcome the impossibility of taking care of their own meals and of cleaning their own spaces, the day in the Drophouse is structured in such a way as to divide the tasks of cooking and cleaning the common areas among all the women guests of the day

centre. Among them, some stand out as excellent cooks, as in the case of R., who is occasionally asked to prepare special dishes, such as lasagne. Apart from arguments concerning the division of tasks, there are also dynamics around the issue of self-worth, particularly among the long-term guests. During the interview, Simona explicitly refers to how the proper handling of these activities has given her newfound self-confidence, despite what she had been told by her abusive family for years.

> My mum used to get angry all the time. She said I was no good. How come I can do things here and nobody complains? On the contrary, they tell me I am hardworking. My mother was never happy with anything and so sometimes in my mind I tell myself that she was the problem. When they offered me to start cleaning the dormitory of Via Pacini with a work grant, no one ever complained about me. I was always on time. (Simona, *08/10/2020*)

However, it is interesting to observe how the question of self-worth has two clashing sided. Many of these women are middle-aged, originally from southern Italy, grown up in families characterised by a rigid and traditional separation of roles. Some social operators often comment on how important it is for women to be able to manage these simple activities, such as cooking and cleaning. Although done to stimulate the women to take care of themselves from these basic domestic skills, and there is no explicit intention to reaffirm static and oppressive gender roles, in such a gendered environment some of these women place excessive importance on obtaining recognition and verbal appreciation from the operators and volunteers. Also considering the element of discretion that characterises the operators of the care services (Leonardi, 2019, 2021), it is legitimate to think that for the guests this need to obtain appreciation from the operators is in some way the result of the internal mechanisms of the social support system.

With regard to the creative and recreational courses, due to the limited capacity of the centre and insufficient personnel on hand, only a dozen of homeless women might take part in the morning activities of the day-centre, both for space constraints and for ensuring a proper qualitative relationship between social operators, volunteers and dormitory guests. For these reasons, social operators have to make a selection by choosing the participants on the basis of their willingness and capability to focus on a process of empowerment. During the interview, Giusy specifies more explicitly the value of this manual activities in relation to the social accompaniment pathway:

> We work from Monday to Friday, from 9am to 2pm. Our workshops are short, but they have to be short because they don't...a lot of women need to be concrete. They are already autonomous, and you cannot keep them making earrings for 8 hours. Workshop must be

short. Other women cannot keep their attention, so the workshops serve to help them get used to it. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

Concerning the workshops, the girls from the ALFa project are guaranteed a wider range of services, with the Italian course in the morning and some more creative courses few afternoons per week. Especially in this case, it is interesting to reflect on the value of these activities for the purpose of the reception project, since the ALFa project can be considered still in its experimental stage. Control is certainly made explicit from the beginning: the operators commit to provide assistance on condition that the woman complies with the rules, such as following the centre's schedule, not using violence against the operators or other users, and participating actively in the proposed activities. In particular, in the case of the Nigerian girls the organisation of a series of activities is aimed at observing the girls (excessive use of mobile phones, inadequate outfits, participation in the activities). As Teresa clarifies during the interview, "the prefecture asks us to draw up a report in which we point out suspicious behaviour, excessive use of mobile phones, inadequate outfits, whether they participate actively in the activities and are cooperative" (Teresa, *17/01/2020*).

During one of my first volunteering afternoon, I assisted to a small fight between two girls of the ALFa project, one from the centre on Via Pacini, one from the Sermig. Commenting on this incident during the interview, Teresa clearly expressed a concept that expressed control:

"If I ask her name, she knows that is not good for her! That I will report her attitude to the other associations."

However, this incident has contributed to the reorganisation of the creative laboratories. The scarce availability both of skilful volunteers and resources often obliges to propose repeatedly the same activities, which from being a moment of leisure end up becoming a source of discontent.

Today, for the umpteenth time, I had to propose to the girls to colour some mandalas. After a while, F. came up to show me her work and from an exchange between her and B., I understood that the mandala issue is a bit critical. B. pointed out to her that the centre does not care about their drawings, "It is just to keep us busy". I think my embarrassment was evident from the expression on my face.

(*Fieldnotes, 12/02/2020*)

Soon after, I started to understand and reflect on the negative impact that such unorganised and nonconstructive activities were having on the girls. Hence, in agreement with the social operators, attention and resources have been redirected towards a more structured sewing course, an idea that has since proved successful. From the moment when the other volunteer and I were left alone to work with the

girls, the proposals from the girls began to multiply, galvanised by our willingness and commitment. The girls were enthusiastic about using the sewing machine, even fighting among themselves for the exclusive use of the chair in front of the machine. The girls also started to compare and help each other, observing who was better at sewing and who had the best ideas. Hats, masks, and tunics were the means by which the girls were recovering (or re-discovering) a sense of personal satisfaction. Adanna must have accumulated a dozen different hats over the months[21]. Not only did she manage to acquire the whole process of creating the object from the start, but when new girls arrived, she was the first to propose and help them doing their craft. Within a few encounters, even those who had never seen a sewing machine before were able to acquire a certain amount of autonomy. In this configuration, the girls managed to reposition themselves as autonomous and creative subjects, rather than 'apprentice'. In this process, they have changed and re-appropriated the original function of control and observation of the laboratory.

Figure 10 "Practice makes you perfect!"

In her introduction to *Gender, place & Culture* special issue, Bartos (2019) points out how "care is not always good, positive, or hopeful. In fact, care can also result in harm, violence, pain and suffering". Care can also be in the form of control, especially in collective spaces and communities. According to Juhila (2009, p. 135), through the 'repertoire' of control, social operators "monitor [homeless women] whereabouts and movements, they intervene in their habits and appearance and attempt to normalize them, they set disciplinary limits on

[21] During the pandemic, the paths of all the girls were frozen for several months. Adanna, as a matter of fact, stayed at the centre for almost a year.

their behaviour". These controlling and regulating dynamics were also reported by Simona:

> After five months of being in the dorm, I was offered to go to the Drophouse so I would not mess around and get into trouble. At the beginning I showed up and everything but then I was not so convinced...and honestly, I gave up everything. I did not want to waste time, to do stuff...on nice sunny days. Honestly, I did not like it. But my supervisor asked me for explanations, warning me that I could risk my place in the dormitory. So, I got worried, because if I lost my place in the dormitory I would have nowhere else to sleep. So, I thought about it for a few days and then I returned to Via Pacini. They asked me if I was sure this time and I told them: "Yes, I'll come this time!". I must say that I did not have a bad time with the operators, with the volunteers. It is a quiet place, there is a peaceful environment. (Simona*, 08/10/2020*)

Building on Tronto's concept of responsiveness, Bartos (2019, p. 773) states: "the attention and responsibility of the care-giver is fundamental to providing good care, [but] it is also important to pay attention to the way the care recipient is *receiving* care".

> In conventional understandings of care-giving relationships, one person is in need of care (e.g. the child, the elderly, the disabled), but if the care they are given conflicts with what they truly need or is, in fact, the opposite of what they need, then the care is flawed and often harmful. (*ibidem*)

This shared construction of caring practices can be seen as dynamic, contested, and provisional while being "closely dependent upon mutual effort and trust" (Conradson, 2003b). Undoubtedly, the activities within the centre are conceived as an instrument of observation and control, nonetheless, the co-construction of these shared moments and the willingness of the women to become a recipient of caring initiatives play a significant role in the assemblage of caring practices. In this sense, it is their willingness that actually assembles the Drophouse as a space of care and the social operators as caregivers. "Spaces of care are shared accomplishments and, in reflection of this, may at times be socially fragile" (Conradson, 2003b).

4.5.3 Handling conflict and support

> Wider caring relations are immersed in webs of power that are often inherently underlined by conflict. It is important to critically unpack these conflictual relationships to better understand how care can lead to harm. (Bartos, 2019)

As emerges in the words of social operators, caring relations are imbued with asymmetrical power and, hence, conflict. Referring to the care model proposed by the centre, Giusy commented:

> This model must be flexible, but it works. I am one of the senior social operators and I am used to work in a certain way. I observe a lot and I am very impulsive. My interventions are harsh and confrontational. I know that sometimes it might seem that I treat people bad, but I think that in certain situations they need to follow my guide. In the end, it is the only way to put them in the condition to elaborate, reason and understand the intervention. I am always clear and honest about my work and with them. If there are some things that I cannot promise or guarantee, I will say them. If they ask me to keep something private, I tell them if I am allowed or not. This is the way I work. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

In the previous sections, important insights have been provided to illustrate how conflict is an unavoidable and inherent component of this relational environment. The relational encounter, the contact, between different personal stories and often chronic problems is often problematic. For a newcomer, it could be difficult to accept her new homeless condition if she starts confronting herself with other critical situations, especially if it is her first experience in low-threshold services. In light of this, it is also fundamental to emphasise the relevance of a strong support component. As Porcellana (2016) points out, women often need more personal attention than men. Each woman brings with her personal experiences, bureaucratic, legal, and health issues. Time, space, and staff are never sufficient to ensure that each woman is properly cared for.

In addition to occasional and impromptu moments of confidence with the social operators, individual and collective meetings with the women are organised, but power dynamics also develop around this caring practice: not all women are always asked to join the meetings. As Giusy explains, some topics can be more sensitive, or some women do not appreciate this kind of intimate time.

> Once a week I organise discussion groups. Sometimes the topic is free and sometimes I bring things to discuss together. They are also useful to give women a chance to get to know each other. For me, the groups have this value...to work out critical issues and put them in a position to help each other. Those who have been here longer can help others to familiarise themselves with services, soup kitchens, where to catch the bus if they are not from Turin. […] Of course, I also have to make a selection, because we also have very problematic situations in the Drophouse, women that would not be able to cope with group work. Some women are able to process, while others, unfortunately, cannot. It is their limitation; we help them to process in a different way. With the daily routine, individual interviews. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

Usually, weekly listening groups deal with different topics, depending on what has emerged in the previous days in talks, lunchtime chats or coffee breaks. Counselling and workshops affect women in various ways, and not always positively. The social educator emphasises the possibility of making mistakes, of failing in the method of approach with some of the users.

Here there are both educators and psychologists, we are a mixed team. This is the winning aspect; it is a fortune. We rely on external services in cases of great distress, but it is important to have a specialist figure here. We support the woman with individual counselling. Every week we hold meetings, you point things out, make them think... this is what we do. But if we are in difficulty, we have doubts or there are things we cannot understand, we hold team meetings to untie the knots a little. We are lucky because not all associations or cooperatives have this possibility. But we make mistakes and when you do, you need to take a step back, reorganise the type of intervention. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

The next anecdote is instead useful to stress how the practices of care provided within the centre go beyond bureaucratic endeavours and tasks – reception and hospitality, monitoring of individual well-being and of collective atmosphere – encompassing a deeper grade of attentiveness and concern on the part of the social workers, even outside structured support moments.

We have just finished lunch and Giusy is preparing the table for the coffee break, while the others are finishing to clean the main hall and the kitchen. Carmen, one of the homeless women usually present in the morning activities of the Drophouse, was absent for the whole morning and Giusy has noted it.

> Giusy: "I am worried about Carmen. Generally, if she does not even show up for lunch, something has happened. Let me call her!"
>
> (*Fieldnotes, 05/02/2020*)

This is true both for the homeless women, guests of the day shelter, and for the women of the neighbourhood that attend one or more laboratories. It is very unlikely that Serena, the social worker in charge of the courses, will forget the name of one of the Arab ladies, despite the language difficulties and the high numbers of participants. She remembers which course the lady is attending, if she has children and how many. Most importantly, she knows if someone is going through a rough period because some of the ladies confide in her.

If care is conceived it "as the proactive interest of one person in the well-being of another and as the articulation of that interest (or affective stance) in practical ways" (Conradson, 2003a), attentiveness appears to be a central caring dimension in this specific women's shelter: social workers recall women's names, situations, appointments, and they habitually pay attention to women's daily

attendance to activities as well as their health or emotional disposition. Moreover, it is worth noticing how the supportive and compassionate ethos of the organisation is embodied into different practices of care, such as listening, remembering, and even touching. Along with being attentive, staff members and volunteers do not remain distant, they are both mentally and physically involved with the guests. Giusy, for example, complained about all the rules that they have started to follow due to the pandemic.

> Covid forced us to change. If we used to be able to express affection, we can no longer hug a woman in pain, even if she is crying. Between the mask and everything, you cannot get close. We elbow each other, but it feels awful. For us and especially for them. We try to experiment with new ways of making our closeness felt. (Giusy, 31/08/2020)

Social operators are no longer allowed to have physical contact with the guests, despite the shared moment of extreme vulnerability, thus affecting the crucial physical proximity between care-recipients and caregivers (Bourlessas, 2020; Vaittinen, 2015).

4.6 Experiencing life outside the centre

Gina and I are standing at the bus stop, chatting. I am accompanying her to buy some special rice for Monday's lunch. She and Mara have offered to prepare a typical Nigerian dish, the *jollof rice*. She tells me that she has found out that she is expecting a baby girl and seems very happy. In front of the stop is one of the last large discount stores to be built around the perimeter of Barriera di Milano. The marketing strategy involves a giant billboard with a panoramic photo of Turin on the side facing Via Bologna. The Mole Antonelliana, the major landmark building in Turin, is in full view. I notice Gina looking at the image.

> G.: Hey, Viola…What city is that?
> V.: That's Turin! Don't you recognise the huge building?
> G.: No!
> V.: It's in the city centre. Have you never been there?
> G.: No, this is my first time in Turin, and I haven't seen much!
>
> (*Fieldnotes, 07/02/2020*)

Figure 11 The billboard on Via Bologna

In this section, I would like to focus the analysis on how the centre affects the relational entanglement between users and institutions. The centre on Via Pacini, as a low-threshold service, is, in fact, the first point of contact between women living in situations of severe marginalisation and public institutions. The centre acts as a filter between its users and the bureaucratic apparatus, the social services, and the health care system. In this section, through the narration of some anecdotes, a positive reading of the filtering function will be proposed, especially in the case of the migrant women of the ALFa project, who in many cases, as the field extract shows, have a direct familiarity with the city of Turin limited to the areas directly surrounding the centre.

One of the main tasks of the social operators is to connect the women with the social and health services, guiding them through a highly complex system. Some of the migrant users who live in the neighbourhood often need help obtaining documentation or looking for a job. Inas's experience of her first pregnancy, which was already in progress when she arrived in Italy, is extremely significant in stressing the fundamental supportive role social workers play in improving the relationship between women and the public institutions, in this case, the health authorities. Inas, with no knowledge of Italian, found herself alone in the delivery room at the end of her pregnancy. It was such a traumatic and overpowering experience that she sought a course to learn Italian shortly afterwards.

I arrived in Italy already pregnant. The day of delivery was very hard for me because they did not let my husband in with me. In the beginning, at the emergency room, they told us that I had to go in alone. My husband explained that I couldn't even say a word, but they told him, “No, it's OK. We'll take care of it". I walked in and said, "look, I only speak French and English!". Because I know basic English and also French. I found someone who spoke a little English but even when I went in to see the doctor, they would not let my husband in. Good thing the doctor spoke French. For the three days, I was there, when someone came in the morning, the doctor, to ask or say something, I did not understand anything. Even the other ladies who came to ask me what I wanted to eat. I was in the first bed in the room, and when they went to the other bed, I heard "pasta", and I said, "Ah here, they are talking about eating!" [laughing together]. (Inas, *22/10/2020*)

Some of the girls from the ALFa project arrive at the centre pregnant, and social operators accompany and support them during all specialist appointments and check-ups to ensure optimum health of mother and baby. It is not rare for the operators or other volunteers “to advocate for them towards authorities” (Juhila, 2009). For example, Faizah was mistreated simply because she had previously contracted the chickenpox virus. On their return, the volunteer tells us heatedly how when any other health worker entered the room, the doctor kept warning them not to touch the girl at all. “Faizah has long since recovered, as you can see from the chart. And she is perfectly capable of understanding the unpleasant way you are treating her” (Chiara, Civil Service trainee). While in many cases experiences are highly alienating and disempowering (*Fieldnotes 31/01/2020:* Gina started crying when she came back from picking up a report because she could not read Italian and complained about the lack of an English translation), on a few rare occasions the encounter with the health system is rather positive (*Fieldnotes 07/02/2020*: Adanna was able to communicate directly in English with the orthopaedists at the hospital during check-ups on her arm).

Sara, the operator in charge of the ALFa project, after one of my first experience of these encounter between the girls and the health system, tells me how this kind of situation often occurs and how a social worker must be able and ready for anything. A reflection of this kind is therefore also functional to understand how these care spaces and operators are indispensable to ensure women an interaction with external services as human and comforting as possible. Moreover, it highlights how necessary it is to intervene on the health-care system, which is extremely unprepared to manage the needs of a society increasingly at risk of social exclusion.

4.7 Conclusions

La cura in altri termini non è solo un principio morale […] ma è anche, appunto “lavoro”, impegno capillare e concreto che

> implica, oltre al coinvolgimento emotivo dei soggetti, la capacità di mettersi in gioco nella molteplicità delle situazioni in cui essi si trovano ad agire; e la volontà di ottenere effetti, di raggiungere obiettivi. (Pulcini, 2019, p. 123)

This chapter has investigated "the relationships and meanings between interpersonal, proximate encounters and the materialities of everyday lived spaces within wider policy contexts" (Atkinson et al., 2011), in order to understand how such a structured and gendered space affects the experiences and subjectivities of the homeless women hosted both in the night shelter and in the day-centre. As many authors have outlined, formal spaces of care provide a complex, dynamic, contested environment (Burns et al., 2002), "at times supporting individuals and facilitating their well-being; at times breaking down and leaving significant gaps; and often requiring very significant amounts of efforts" (Conradson, 2003a). The female centre on Via Pacini can be described as a space of acknowledgement against female invisibility and homelessness. It provides essential services for homeless women, but within this environment caring and uncaring practices coexist and intersect. As we have seen caring might entails control and conflict, but also support, attentiveness, concern, and effort.

The significance of facilities entirely dedicated to women is crucial in order to allow homeless or severely distressed women to come out into the open and ask for help, without having to rely on survival strategies anymore (Porcellana, 2016, p. 148). If the streets, at least from a perception point of view, are considered more dangerous for women (even more so for homeless women), it is evident how the centre is structured as a protected, safe space. In particular, the day centre offers the possibility for a small group of homeless women to spend the first part of the day in the centre, doing some creative activities with the volunteers and enjoying a meal together. This represents a substantial change in the daily routine of a homeless person who is no longer forced to move from one homeless service to another, which fosters the development of a more familiar, supportive, and therapeutic climate for the women, easing the burden and stress of shelter life. In addition, the (voluntary) choice to start a social accompaniment programme, although often long-term, provides women with more support in dealing with bureaucratic procedures, from obtaining benefits to obtaining social housing. For some women there is also a real possibility to proceed to the next levels of the staircase model, obtaining a bed in more autonomous housing solutions. Some of these flats are directly managed by Gruppo Abele, thus facilitating the maintenance of a certain linearity in the social accompaniment project.

Weekly listening groups are organised for the women guests of the day centre, dealing with different topics on a weekly basis, depending on what has emerged in the previous days in talks, lunchtime chats or coffee breaks. Another fundamental

element is the organisation of lunch: the Drophouse offers a free lunch to all the women who take part in the morning activities from Monday to Friday, except for weekends when the space is managed exclusively by the night service workers. This not only makes it possible to create a fundamental moment of community around the food, including all the people working in the centre (operators, volunteers, visiting guests), but also takes the women away from the strenuous search for a meal in one of the city soup kitchens. Thus, the centre can be considered a site of resources (Johnsen et al., 2005b), offering meals, hot drinks during the winter months and fresh snacks in the summer. Moreover, social operators offer advice and assistance regarding the necessary steps to obtain welfare benefits or to apply for social housing, complementing the work of the social services in the social accompaniment process. Women are also supported in their relationship with the complex health care system. Notably, the day centre contributes in practical ways in reinforcing and enhancing the work of the dormitory, in an attempt to make the centre a space that does not perpetuate the invisibility of homeless women, but that promotes their well-being and social inclusion in line with the ethos of the organisation.

> Historically, resources are scarce. Social services are suffering in terms of numbers, personnel and economic investment. The problem is that, as always, when a serious problem is not taken care of, the problem does not disappear... at best, it gets worse. It gets bigger and bigger, it becomes an avalanche. If I think of this centre, in the case of the dormitory we are already talking about adults whose conditions are already the result of this way of working. These are stories of voids. It is obvious that there are the individual lives of people, individual choices. Pain, suffering and marginalisation are part of human history, but this does not exempt us, as services and as a society, from putting everyone in a position to benefit from an opportunity. (Patrizia, *1/10/2020*)

Nonetheless, it is necessary to highlight how in the daily interactions between service users, social operators, and volunteers it is possible to observe traditional ideas about femininity and womanhood at work, that might affect women's self-worth and confidence, while reinforcing subordination.

It is then useful to question "the effectiveness and appropriateness of homelessness service provision regarding the needs of homeless women" especially in the light of recent changes in the composition of the population of homeless women, which, as already mentioned, is characterised by an increasing proportion of young women and immigrants (Baptista, 2010, p. 176). Referring to the experience of the women's shelter in Via Pacini, for example, a good percentage of the guests (even though part of temporary projects) are young African women who are victims of violence and at risk of prostitution. Often with little knowledge of Italian, communication between the guests and the operators is difficult, which makes their stay in the centre even more frustrating. Many of the

daily activities offered to them are also designed for older homeless women, often fatigued by prolonged deprivation, and in some cases suffering from chronic and debilitating disabilities. In this sense, it is imperative to work on a profoundly differentiated system of service provision, capable of addressing the different needs of users, in particular by providing continuous training for social workers, who are called upon to deal with increasingly complex and diversified needs.

Moreover, it was highlighted how the *duration* and the *objectives* of individual projects are two dimensions that variously affect the experience of homelessness in a formal space of care. By analysing the structural characteristics of the centre and its role within the broader system of social care services, it is then possible to comprehend how these two dimensions are relationally negotiated within the complex system of care provision, between the homeless women, the shelter, and the social services. In a context characterised by the absence of universal assistance rights, it is the system of care that, in a discretionary manner (Bifulco, 2015; Leonardi, 2021), determines who is eligible for more proactive and incisive interventions, thus contributing to set the duration and the objective of the path, and consequently shaping the experience of homelessness inside the centre. The systematic neoliberal restructuring of the welfare system has deeply affected the system of care, now characterised by discontinuity and precariousness and focused on the promotion of the logics of activation and self-responsabilisation typical of neoliberalism (Bourlessas, 2018; Porcellana, 2016). Nonetheless, "in a neoliberal polity where welfare transactions are increasingly instrumental and output focused, the significance of such places for marginalized citizens should not be underestimated" (Conradson, 2003b).

> When I was in need, my whole family disappeared. I was always the one available to everyone. That is the most beautiful thing I have in me, in my opinion... I always tried to help all the people who needed it. Everyone in my building knew me because I brought food to everyone. That is what I asked for when I left, that I did not want to leave this place. Because, you know, when you are at home the family is the point of reference... now my point of reference is here. (Paola, *06/10/2020*)

In conclusion, this analysis was neither intended to produce a priori criticisms of the centre as a space of care, nor to romanticise its function. As Bartos (2019, p. 774) argues, "[e]mploying a more critical care ethics could encourage research that challenges our theoretical frameworks and longstanding normative claims, and enables the space for productivity and insight to arise from discomfort. Certainly, care may be good. But care may also be contentious. Keeping these contradictions in mind offers many avenues forward to help stretch care's boundaries", which can assist in the creation of spaces of care as a concrete, safe,

therapeutic solution to the conditions of distress of homeless women, rejecting paternalistic, controlling, abusive, and unsafe care practices.

Chapter 5

Practices of self-care against social exclusion. Questioning female empowerment narratives

5.1 Introduction

Nowadays, homelessness represents the highest degree of economic and social deprivation in Western societies and is widely recognised as a widespread phenomenon throughout the developed world. This evidence should pressure policy makers to stop treating it as a "temporary anomaly" (Shinn, 2007, p. 674), also considering that "homelessness persists despite general improvements in housing quality for the majority of households in the West" and "while there is no overall shortage of housing in the European Union" (Meert & Bourgeois, 2005). Generally speaking, the type of services created to combat severe adult marginality (e.g., services for unemployed people and for the homeless population) share the idea that vulnerability – whether housing, economic or social – is a transitional socio-economic condition and therefore services should be designed to support this transition towards a state of 'normality' (Edgar, 2012, p. 162). Conversely, a substantial body of research has demonstrated that homeless people "are structurally caught in a closed circuit of deprived neighbourhoods and poor housing conditions" (Meert & Bourgeois, 2005, p. 122), thus undermining the very idea of a transitional state. From this perspective, it is possible to affirm that homelessness exists "within a *pattern*" of severe precarity and deprivation (Bretherton, 2020, p. 265). Sustained and prolonged socio-

economic vulnerability may in fact lead to conditions of poverty, which can exacerbate and eventually cause loss of housing (Freguja et al., 2017), and women are highly vulnerable to the risk of poverty, especially single women with children, not employed and not self-sufficient (Saraceno, 2015). Only recently, scholars have investigated the phenomenon of female homelessness, as it is less visible and less connected to the use of public spaces. Although it is correct to frame homelessness as structural in Western advanced societies, characterised by profound inequalities in rights and access to resources, it is important to stress that the phenomenon of female homelessness is extremely complex and multifactorial, and therefore it raises some further questions about how women might be experiencing homelessness (Bretherton, 2020, p. 266).

> The experience of homelessness may be shaped or influenced by gender. Here, the point is not that women′s homelessness will necessarily always be distinct from that of men, nor that women and men will always take differing pathways through homelessness that can be broadly associated with gender. Instead, the argument is that women′s experiences, characteristics, situation, needs and choices mean both their routes through homelessness and the help they need to exit homelessness may be different from those of men (*ibidem*)

In recent years, international homelessness research has drawn the attention to the problem of the housing dimension, and it has focused extensively on the innovative and promising approach called Housing First, briefly mentioned in the literature review (see paragraph 2.2.5). Social operators, activists, and scholars state that the mission of the Housing First model is "to end homelessness for people with complex needs", while calling for policies aimed at "alleviating poverty, facilitating recovery, and promoting social inclusion" (Pleace, 2011; Tsemberis, 2012). Although in emergency and welfare contexts, the housing aspect is strongly characterised in terms of gender, it should be recalled that scholars attribute a greater risk of poverty and housing hardship to women precisely because of the subordinate role of women's labour. Consequently, there is a need to recognise and tackle "women's subordinate position in the labour market, their lower participation rate and higher share of part-time and precarious contracts relative to men" (Gómez & Kuronen, 2020, p. 41).

For the purposes of this research, then it seemed interesting to address the question of work especially within the perspective of female marginality, which sees women often relegated to precarious, occasional, part-time jobs and unpaid or poorly paid care work, as the figures on female unemployment and financial autonomy indicate (see section 2.3.3). As Shinn (2007) illustrates, disparities in employment are one of the main mechanisms behind processes of social exclusion

and homelessness. It, therefore, seems worth focusing this second empirical chapter on deepening the function and value of work (or mainly its chronical absence) and how it relates to issues of empowerment and self-care in the lives of women experiencing a condition of vulnerability. If the female shelter stands as a site of material and immaterial resources, aimed at supporting and promoting the regaining of women's housing, economic and personal autonomy,

iv) to what extent does the female shelter operate as a space of empowerment against female marginality?

Moreover, in the current socio-economic framework in which "poverty and inequality are endemic to capitalism around the globe" (Elwood et al., 2017):

v) how can empowerment be framed in such a deprived context to avoid neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female marginality?

To that end, the chapter uses the distinction between liberal and liberating empowerment (Duncanson, 2019; Sardenberg, 2008) in combination with concepts from geographies of care to reason around the issue of self-care as a revolutionary act against the neoliberal myth of productivity and personal responsibility, and in this sense as a form of preliminary yet unavoidable radical empowerment.

Drawing on the concept of a continuum between severe deprivation and extreme poverty, it seems useful – in addition to the testimonies of homeless women – to bring the testimonies and experiences of some of the migrant women from the neighbourhood who attend the day-centre. Central to this chapter is to provide an analysis of how the work narratives fit into these ladies' perspectives and stories and, especially, how they differ one from another. In this chapter, I have chosen to use italics to emphasise the importance of certain passages in the conducted interviews.

5.2 Working a way out or moving in circle?

> If I had to say what these women lack most, it is opportunities. (Lucia, *06/10/2020*)

In the theoretical introduction, the argument of the withdrawal of the social state and the progressive delegation of welfare services to voluntary and third

sector actors was widely discussed, highlighting the progressive and alarming reduction of both direct and indirect welfare funding, such as income support tools. The neo-liberal wave has been increasingly emphasizing the role of the free market, financial deregulation, and the promotion of individualism, rejecting an active role for the state in regulating the market and the social provision (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006). Saraceno (2015) well explains how even at the level of public discourse a narrative takes hold "that conversely blames the generosity of welfare and individual moral weakness as the causes of poverty".

In this framework, the responsibility for poverty and unemployment lies with the individual, not the market, which implies individualising social problems and their costs. People's vulnerability in relation to the labour market is interpreted as the effect of their shortcomings in terms of competences and willingness to work, and of alleged distortions in the incentive system, such as economic benefits and subsidies that are considered too generous because they induce excessive welfare dependency (Giangreco, 2008). Emphasis is therefore placed on urging individuals to "be self-sufficient and actively living, with this goal being achieved primarily through participation in the labour market" (Gualmini & Rizza, 2011, p. 216). Similarly, Choy (2014) notes that "citizens are expected to become 'self-regulating', 'active citizens' responsible for their own welfare", thus reinforcing the neo-liberal distinction between deserving and undeserving poor.

> This distinction is, at one level, a moral one; the 'deserving' are those who require assistance through no fault of their own (largely widows, the sick, the elderly and children, particularly orphans) and the 'undeserving' are those whose own behaviour is responsible for landing them where they are (drug takers, gamblers, drunks and the lazy). Those who have too many children to support move from 'deserving' to 'undeserving' depending upon their marital status and as social attitudes to birth control shift. (Allen, 2012, p. 163)

In this climate, in the City of Turin, the aggravation of the housing emergency is manifest, with a growing number of citizens, both Italian and foreign, applying for social housing (Porcellana, 2016, p. 69). At the same time, the activation paradigm is deeply embedded within social assistance practices, thus binding the obtaining of benefits to specific requirements, such as the active search for work. As Porcellana (ivi, p. 70) well explains, "[t]he citizen had to undergo the assessment of need and the subsequent evaluation of his willingness to become active and empowered with respect to his state of indigence to then, eventually, obtain the benefit or subsidy". In theory, the social and political need to move from a selective to a universalistic welfare system is declared. Still, in practice, more and more constraints are added to qualifying for most of the instruments of

assistance and support to the person (e.g., economic subsidies, welfare income), continuing to feed the rhetoric of the unproductive poor maintained at the expense of workers and taxpayers. In a recent ethnography on the condition of the unemployed in the city of Turin, Carlo Capello (2017, 2020) points out how within the spaces aimed at active reintegration into the labour market – such as the employment centres that provide support, advice and technological tools to job seekers – the paradigm of activation nurtures a type of narratives and practices that is perfectly in tune with the neo-liberal and individualist ideology, which ends up being introjected also by a large section of the unemployed population. This individualistic revision of unemployment (as well as of homelessness) brings with it an implicit stigmatisation of the unemployed, a construct from which one can only escape by outlining a condition of disabling psychological distress (Capello, 2017, p. 15). This kind of rhetoric, although in slightly different form, emerges occasionally in some discourses heard within the centre. The contextualisation of each sentence is important, but it is evident that operators are not totally exempt from expressing concepts and thoughts partly aligned with such rhetoric.

Giusy: If you are here, it is because you have made some mistakes in your life! This place is about understanding and processing which mistakes you have made so that you do not make them again.

(*Fieldnotes, 15/01/2020*)

Bretherton and Pleace (2019) point out that "[t]he idea that an exit from poverty and integration into society is best achieved by getting a paid job is a mainstay of European social policy". Work, both at the institutional level and in the discourse of social workers, is continually promoted as a formula against severe adult marginalisation to achieve the individual's social integration or re-integration (Porcellana, 2016). In other words, participation in the labour market is promoted as the ideal instrument of social inclusion, which could replace welfare measures, and labour exclusion is tackled through the implementation of policies aimed at making citizens directly responsible for their personal and professional well-being. A recent report by fio.PSD[22] (Federazione Italiana Organismi per le Persone Senza Dimora) on the services for the homeless shows that almost all organisations offer a set of interventions that include actions of integration into the labour market, through the activation of apprenticeships, workshops for the development of skills, accompaniment in the search for work

[22] https://www.fiopsd.org/chi-siamo/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA3rKQBhCNARIsACUEW_YnegcoW1thWcQRZY82Yq_iKwp5wInh3aFnaxkW6YP8IkYWwg31iSAaAidAEALw_wcB

and experimentation of work placements through workshops and work-grants (fio.PSD, 2021).

However, it is important to stress that the discourse on the activation and individualisation of responsibilities arrived at the centre partially weakened. There is a shared resignation and awareness that that these women's paths are unlikely to lead to autonomy. Social operators work on basic needs, aware that many of these women are unlikely to obtain social housing or to gain enough economic independence to be able to leave the care system. Many authors also point out that there is a certain resignation to the idea that without the support of the services many women will soon be back to square one. Social operators at the female shelter have worked in the years following the economic crisis of 2008, and, more recently, they had to manage such service in a climate of serious health, social and economic emergency. Thus, from the stories and insights collected in the field emerges a serious and widespread lack of job opportunities, security, and stability. In some cases, it is possible to detect a progressive worsening of the mental and health conditions in which the women find themselves as their housing conditions exacerbate, which has an even greater influence on the narrowing of opportunities to enter or re-enter the labour market and, eventually, on the overcoming of a condition of vulnerability and marginality.

> Times have changed, and it is not easy. For people who have difficulties, it is even more complicated to find a job. If they have resources, partly through connections and partly through luck, they might be able to find something. Maybe after an apprenticeship, they are hired. In the past, all the associations and cooperatives, and we were the first to do so, had people who looked for work directly within the association. We had a lot of contacts in companies, factories, and bakeries. In those years, when there was a lot of money, these work grants were activated. But in the end, very few of them resulted in employment. It is challenging for our women. Few are physically burdened, fatigued, unhealthy. They would not be able to handle an actual job of six to eight hours. There is citizenship income, but it is not enough. It is difficult to find a job. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

For the users of the shelter service, finding a secure, stable job with a decent salary is hardly ever a feasible or realistic option. The current structure of the labour market, which is increasingly flexible, competitive, and the precarious health or mental conditions, make it more challenging to enter or re-enter the labour market. There is, however, a widespread opinion among the operators that in a more favourable economic situation, and within a social service system that focuses on real integration with the health system, which should translates in a more holistic – and prompt – social accompaniment support, many of these women would be able to work and exit homelessness.

They all ask for work. Many are able and ready. After three years on the street, exhausted by the heat and the cold. Between dormitories and soup kitchens. They want to get out because they cannot take it anymore. However, for others, you realise that it is not yet the moment...they are not in the condition. And you, as a social operator, must avoid another failure, another delusion. It is necessary to proceed one piece at a time. The factors are many, too many. (Giusy*, 31/08/2020*)

Research shows that homeless women are more willing to approach local authorities and welfare facilities (Fitzpatrick, 2005) but, "accessing service-led accommodation does not mean that women engage in a sustained trajectory out of homelessness, as they often circulate between this type of accommodation and different hidden situations (Baptista, 2010, p. 170). The duration of permanence in the female centre is very variable and a lot depends on the type of response offered by the services. Homeless women arrive in shelters after having exhausted other alternative solutions, in conditions of deprivation that are already very advanced and severe. For these reasons, entering in low threshold facilities, without adequate practical and motivational support, leads to a slow process of chronic deprivation (Morrone & Reynaudo, 2011, p. 131), which is likely to prolong homelessness indefinitely. Therefore, it is necessary to start reflecting on the type of support the services can offer, assuming in any case that this should be as prompt as possible (Porcellana, 2016, p. 147).

Many authors agree that better living arrangements does not automatically translate into a constructive trajectory out of homelessness. According to Reeve et al (2007, p. 44), "engaging with services, or accessing temporary accommodation, is rarely the end of the story" since exiting homelessness is not always sustainable in the long run, from the moment that many of these women endure financially challenging situations and extremely precarious life (Bretherton, 2020).

Scholars and social operators report cases of women returning to the dormitory due to further relapses. One of the main explanations for this dynamics is the fact that some of these women throughout their adult life exist in a near constant state of financial and housing precarity (Bretherton, 2020, p. 265). For all these considerations, there is a compelling argument for developing more holistic intervention policies that develop both prevention and alleviation strategies, taking into account the idea of "monitor[ing] those who are at risk of homelessness and those who have been re-housed due to homelessness" (Edgar, 2012, p. 222). Therefore, the idea of an aftercare assistance has been developed, a sort of "longer-term 'outreach' supports in order to ensure that gains made at one point are not undercut later on." (Klodawsky et al., 2006, p. 433).

As seen above, the staircase approach was developed to manage the problem of severe adult marginality. The idea of a linear process, by consecutive phases, of

exit from homelessness and of a gradual reacquisition of a multidimensional autonomy is however widely challenged by the empirical reality of social services, highlighted by numerous studies and evidence. To continue reasoning in metaphors, some authors associate the path of entry and exit from homelessness as moving in a circle (Bretherton, 2020) or entering a liminal state, something that is not homelessness "but not a comfortable distance away from homelessness either" (Bretherton & Pleace, 2019). In the following anecdote, one of the day centre operators briefly illustrates the situation of some of the most constructive paths she has followed in recent years, from which, however, all the elements discussed so far emerge.

Regarding the period of permanence, the women that are part of a support project with the Office of Assistance to the homeless [SAD, Servizio adulti in difficoltà] no longer roam between dormitories. They have a permanent place at the shelter. The project lasts until the woman obtains the citizenship income, finds a house, and a job. Some of the Italian women who have been here at the Drophouse are now in a situation of semi-autonomy in a few first and second level accommodation. They continue to be followed by social services to organise internships and obtain social housing. They have small jobs or can count on citizenship income, a subsidy or disability pensions to be able to pay a little rent and expenses. When they obtain some sort of housing stability few decide to continue attending the Drophouse but often they prefer to stay in the community. It is more like a home dimension, doing their own things, looking for work. They enter a more normal, healthier dimension. (Giusy, *31/08/2020*)

The situation is not much brighter for the poor migrant women living in the neighbourhood. Many of them still do not understand Italian properly. They have very young children to care for due to a still very rigid division of caring responsibilities in the family. They have little educational or professional training, and some have never worked in their country of origin. For all these reasons, once they arrive in Italy, they do not feel like facing an even more repelling labour market. Inas, one of the three users of the day-centre that I interviewed at the end of my fieldwork in October 2020, summarises perfectly the difficulties outlined above. She is a young 31-year-old Moroccan woman, mother of two children, a boy of 7 and a girl of 3 years old. She joined her husband in Italy in 2013. She has been attending the day-centre on Via Pacini since 2014 when she started taking her first Italian course. Now that her children are a little older, she hopes to find work. In the meantime, she occasionally helps the operators to manage the baby care room.

I graduated in Economics in my country, but here in Italy, it is like I did nothing. My studies are not worth anything here. I got my middle school diploma in 2016 by taking courses at CPIA, and I had a really good time. The maths teacher had suggested to me to

continue, not to stop at middle school. When he saw that I was capable, he told me to continue until university. But I would have to do my studies all over again, but university with children… [laughs]. I am looking for work, but it is difficult. Every time I mentioned something that I did in Morocco, they tell me that they need some working experience here in Italy. I would like to do what I studied for, something in accounting perhaps, like the commercial. At least a secretary or a cashier at the supermarket. But I do not think I will find something like that because I think of the Italians who have studied here and cannot find work. What can I say, as a foreigner, that I came here with my studies, which are not even valid here? (Inas, *22/10/2020*)

5.3 Liberal vs liberating empowerment

In the previous chapter the centre was investigated as a space of care, trying to highlight which elements, practices, and discourses intertwine within this relational micro-space in the development – or rather not – of a safe, caring, welcoming and therapeutic environment. However, I would like to move further whit the analysis takin into consideration the role that low-threshold centres play within the welfare system of the City of Turin, which as we have seen is based on a staircase model of social support. The aim of these spaces is in fact to assist women in a process of regaining autonomy, understood in a multidimensional sense as financial, housing, and personal autonomy. Although the concept of autonomy is declined in different ways both at the policy level and in public debate – the concepts of autonomy, emancipation, independence, self-determination, and empowerment are often used interchangeably – in theory it always implies overcoming the various vulnerabilities (structural and individual) and expanding the set of material and immaterial resources available. In particular, obtaining social housing (or at least entering a semi-autonomous residential unit) and looking for employment are the two main concrete objectives of social accompaniment projects for homeless women attending low-threshold centres or other housing solutions. Moreover, as a day-centre for the women of the neighbourhood, the series of activities (e.g., kindergarten, summer camp, clothing distribution, food distribution, bureaucratic support) and courses offered, particularly the Italian ones, are also aimed at promoting the autonomy of the women of Arab origin, in this case also linguistically.

As mentioned in the theoretical chapter, the concept of women's empowerment was initially developed with reference to the context of the Global South during the 1980s and 1990s in order to highlight the imperative need for a radical transformation of power relations in favour of women's rights, social justice and the reform of economic, social and political structures (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Female empowerment is thus understood as the ability of women to

take control over their lives, realising their desires and aspirations. Clearly, the emphasis is on the agency described as the ability to set goals, make strategic choices and act to achieve desired outcomes (Kabeer, 1994).

Sardenberg (2008) distinguishes two basic approaches in the conceptualisation of women's empowerment: a 'liberal empowerment' and a 'liberating empowerment'. In the first approach, through a process of depoliticization the focus lies uniquely on the individual growth, and mainly on the resources and tools needed to gain individual empowerment (e.g., educational and training courses, women's microcredit projects). This implies that the concept of radical and holistic empowerment has changed to encompass only the economic realm (Duncanson, 2019), with the aim of "making women work for development, rather than making development work for their equality and empowerment" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 398). As Malhotra and Shuler (2005) suggested, resources are enabling empowerment factors and they are a necessary, but not sufficient prerequisite for empowerment (Kabeer, 1994) if power is ruled out of the framework (Sardenberg, 2008). In this discourse, "[e]mpowerment becomes an individual resource to be maximised for efficiency" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Moreover, this way of framing empowerment "gives no space for changes in the existing power relations, nor in the structures of domination that are responsible for exclusion, poverty and disempowerment in the first place" (Sardenberg, 2008).

In contrast, a liberating empowerment approach focalises on the issue of power and is "consistent with a focus on women's organising, on collective action, though not disregarding the importance of the empowerment of women at a personal level" (Sardenberg, 2008). In this sense, empowerment is conceived as "a multi-dimensional process that perforce entails social relations among individuals, groups of people, and institutions" (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). The critical and radical objective is to "question, destabilise and, eventually, transform the gender order of patriarchal domination" (Sardenberg, 2008). In this sense, empowerment is not neutral, nor apolitical and "it will engender conflict" (Sardenberg, 2008).

> The first is that empowerment is fundamentally about changing power relations. It is not just about improving women's capacities to cope with situations in which they experience oppression or injustice. It is about enabling women to question what they might previously have considered 'normal', and to begin to act to change that reality via the acquisition of a collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of 'we can'. (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015)

For the purposes of this research, it seems interesting to try to analyse this tension between the liberal and liberating versions of empowerment, in respect to the relational context of the female centre. Indeed, if we imagine liberal and liberating empowerment as "points on a continuum rather than discrete categories" (Duncanson, 2018, p. 6), it may be possible to frame some practices and initiatives as a first move towards a more radical version of empowerment. In this framework the female centre – both as a dormitory and as day-centre – stands as a source of material and immaterial resources for poor and homeless women. In the pages that follow, it will be discussed to what extent the female shelter operates as a space of empowerment against female marginality, by analysing two different issues. Firstly, I will analyse the role of the centre as an amplifier of material and immaterial resources, through the design and development of a project aimed at acquiring tailoring skills that involved some of the women of the neighbourhood.

5.3.1 Empowerment as resources

> I wanted to capture, in their own words, women talking about their jobs, their hopes and fears and their agency in their everyday life, as they struggled against disadvantage and discrimination, as well as their energy and their joy in doing a job well. (McDowell, 2016)

The women from the neighbourhood that attend one of the courses offered by the day-centre are generally young women, with at least two or three children to care for, unemployed, Muslim, residing in Italy for less than ten years and with little familiarity with the Italian language. Most of these women come into contact with the centre precisely to enrol in an Italian course, often supplemented by a course to obtain the middle school diploma. Most of them arrived in Italy through family reunification, but some are without documents. The centre pays particular attention to about forty of these women and their families, providing clothes for the children, food packages, assistance in the process of obtaining documents and support in finding work.

Jamila and Saida are two of the three users of the day-centre that I interviewed at the end of my fieldwork in October 2020. Jamila is a young 36-year-old Nigerian woman, mother of two children, a boy of 5 and a girl of almost 4 years old. She arrived in Italy in 2004 at the age of 20 years old, and after having been to other Italian cities, she settled in Turin. After meeting Patrizia, she decided to take the Italian course at the day-centre on Via Pacini and to get her middle school diploma at the Cpia on Via Bologna.

I have never worked in Nigeria. Recently, I took the tailor's course that they organise here at the centre. Let's say I am now working as a seamstress...I started here and then I did an internship as an assistant seamstress. *Now if someone needs something, I make it with the machine I have at home*. For two years I have been kind of working like this. *Before the pandemic broke out, I found a job as a trainee cleaning in a hotel, but they left me at home*. *I have never worked as a carer because it is a full-time job and with children at home it was not possible*. I am a mother. *I need to work also to help my partner*. It is not fair that he does everything. *I would like to work*. Hopefully, this pandemic will end soon so I can look for something. (Jamila, *22/10/2020*)

Saida is a 38-year-old Moroccan woman. She has a 7-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son. She arrived in Italy in 2007. Specifically in Calabria where she worked as an in-home nurse. Saida is among the group of women who are most closely supported by the Drophouse staff. She also received a lot of help in obtaining documentation. Saida worked as a carer until the pandemic broke out, when she had to stay at home to look after her children. Between August and November 2020, the centre offered her a work grant to clean the dormitory in order to support her in obtaining the documentation. This type of grant is used on a rotating basis to give some of the women the opportunity to work, albeit on a temporary basis.

In Morocco, I used to sew. I did that as a job. I sewed t-shirts. I started when I was about 16/17 years old, and I worked for about 2 years. *Then I had to take care of my grandmother.* When I was 24, I moved to Italy. *When I arrived in Calabria, I immediately found a job as an in-home nurse, but I was not able to speak Italian*. The families I worked for helped me and I remained close to them. I learned quickly because I listen a lot. I arrived in Calabria in 2007 and I stayed there until 2010. Then I came here in Turin, but before getting married I worked in Moncalieri, always as an in-home nurse. *I have been going to the Drophouse since 2015, when my youngest son was born*. A friend of mine told me about it because she was also attending courses here at the centre. The first year I took the Italian course, and then the second year I studied for the middle school diploma. *In Morocco I only went to primary school and writing is a bit difficult for me*. I learned to speak Italian but reading and writing is a bit more difficult. *Over the years I have improved a little*.

Recently, the Drophouse has managed to set in motion a tailoring project, In-Tessere, for which they had launched a public crowdfunding in Autumn 2019. Although the pandemic slowed down and disrupted the plans a lot, the funds raised allowed the activation of a few semi-professional courses for some of the women attending the day centre. Because of their strong links with the centre and their experience in sewing, Saida and Jamila were chosen to take the course with a fashion designer, which will be held over a period of 12 weeks. The aim of the

course is not only to give the women comprehensive training, but also to create a collection of ladies' clothes, designed, labelled, and made directly by them with the support of the professional seamstress. In perspective, the idea is that the three women can then take over the project and the realisation of the collection of clothes to be sold to the public. The sale of the clothes is intended to finance, in a vicious circle, the opening of a popular tailor's shop in the centre of Via Pacini.

Figure 12 In-Tessere project. First lessons

Figure 13 In-Tessere project.

The centre is conceived as a site of material and immaterial resources, but obviously the margin for manoeuvre is limited, not only with respect to the difficult socio-economic and welfare context in which it is embedded, but more directly with respect to the association's potential for action. This is true both in terms of financial and planning skills. The implementation of the In-Tessere project required the mobilisation of significant creative and managerial resources, as well as the ability to adapt to unforeseen changes in the environment. The Covid pandemic forced a substantial rethinking of the project structure. Therefore, it is fair to think that the project works mainly on the dimension of resources, which, as we said before, are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the pursuit of empowerment. The project is in its early stages, and it is therefore difficult to give an evaluation, but it is certainly essential in stimulating and supporting Saida and Jamila in an extremely delicate and precarious phase. From the interviews it emerges a strong desire to work, to obtain or regain, as in the case of Saida, a working autonomy that can offer them the possibility to have a role other than that of mother outside the domestic context. The entry of their children in school is an opportunity to free them from the private dimension of care, but Covid has resulted in a clear reduction of working opportunities.

5.3.2 Empowerment as self-care

This paragraph explores potentials geographies of care in relation to the self. In this framework, the concept of self-care is investigated as a revolutionary act against the neoliberal myth of productivity at all costs, and in this sense as a form of preliminary yet unavoidable radical empowerment.

In relation to the geography of care and of health geography, the concept of self-care – understood as care for the body and care of mental health – is generally discussed within that strand of research interested in the study of the practices that people put in place to manage and cope with the daily experience of a chronic disease (e.g., diabetes, cancer, HIV). In particular, to this first group of studies we owe the conceptualisation of self-care as "a practice with the potential to foster and reinforce the autonomy of individuals" (Atkinson et al., 2011). Other scholars have worked on the concept of self-care in disaster research, while, within the critical studies on marginality, self-care practices in marginalised community and social groups have been analysed (Rosa, 2019).

According to Tronto (1993), self-care is “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web”. Moreover, in an interesting online reflection on the concept of self-care as a form of resistance, Emma Manion (University of Bristol) writes that “self-care is posited as activities which a person does to improve or maintain their physical and mental health and well-being. It involves the cultivation of habits and behaviours which are perceived to be good rather than destructive, and emphasises the importance of personal responsibility. However, self-care as a concept and as a performed activity is vague and contradictory. It is at once empowering, radical and conservative” (Manion, 2016). In the current neoliberal framework, the concept of self-care is generally commodified as a practice aimed at achieving and maintaining physical and mental well-being in order to best fulfil one's role as productive subject (Welsh, 2020). However, self-care can be understood as a practice through which individuals can assert their existence and their human condition of vulnerability and hence their right to receive support, in a world where some subjectivities are marginalised, abused, invisibilised, and stigmatised. In this sense, “self-care is resistance and it can produce ways to be other than the neoliberal subject” (Manion, 2016).

Moreover, as the Italian philosopher Elena Pulcini (2019, 2020) argues, the traditional and restricting identification between care and women “has confined women to the subsidiary function of guardians of needs and expectations of the

other". However, if we free the concept of care from the "rhetoric of altruism", the idea of care would be complemented by a "selfish awareness" of self-responsibility and self-care, recognising themselves as "subjects of care".

Therefore, it is possible to understand how the concept of self-care converges with the concept of *power from within*, discussed above in relation to the four theorisations of power within the concept of empowerment, which refers to a transformation of individual consciousness leading to a new self-esteem and new self-confidence and to act. The individual recognition of self-worth, along with a care for the self, and the rejection of a victimising understanding of vulnerability, it is a precondition for stimulating collective action and achieving radical transformations at the social level.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Paola has been a user of the night shelter for a short time. She recounts that she has worked all her life and started at a very young age. With a family history of abuse, neglect and violence, Paola explains her decision to leave an important job in a company in the metalworking sector because of a worsening of psychiatric problems.

I have worked thirty-three years in a company. I worked from the age of sixteen and a half. I started in '79, and I finished in November 2011. I used to work in the metal sector. We made headlights for the machines. But then when I had an accident and I was ill, I have been to some...well, three psychiatric clinics! I was no longer able to do the work I was supposed to do. I was a team leader, so I had to manage people. When I could not do that anymore, I started to hate it. So, I quit. (Paola, *06/10/2020*)

Paola has stayed at the shelter for five months, after which an old friend and now her current partner offer her hospitality in an apartment which he had available. After leaving the centre, Paola has offered herself as a volunteer, making herself available 2/3 times a week and offering her creative and cooking skills. She now collaborates on the sewing course, and she helps social operators on many occasions, both in the day-centre and in the night shelter.

I have spent 5 months at the dormitory…then I met a person. I mean…we already knew each other. I knew him and his mom for years. We were friends and they did not want me to stay here. They did not understand why, with all my family here, I was forced to sleep in a dormitory. *But this was the only place where I could have taken care of myself. Because I was unwell…mentally*. I was going again into depression […] and I needed help. *I never asked for help…I am always the available one but when I needed it, my family disappeared* […]. *Here I found some great people. Maybe it is because I have a nice attitude or maybe because they are really good…it was fine here*. Now I take my pension. Because with the disability they managed to give me a pension. This makes me feel more secure. (Paola, *06/10/2020*)

During the interviews and in more informal moments with both the service users and the operators, the awareness that within the centre there is the possibility to develop bonds of friendship, trust, and even gratitude often returns. In particular, for Paola (whose experience of homelessness was actually short) the centre gave her the opportunity to regain control of her life through practical activities such as sewing or cooking. Paola emphasises several times during the interview the need to feel occupied, to do something and this is achieved by creating objects, both in her new home and as a volunteer at the sewing courses. Several times during our meetings she proudly showed me her latest creations on her phone. Referring to her current bond with the centre, she states:

When I was sick the only expectation, I had was to be well. I did not have any expectations. I wanted to feel good about myself. And I promised myself that I do not want to relapse again, because the worst thing is when you are sick, and you do things that you do not realise. I want to control myself. You do not know how many times I have cut myself. But I never realised. Because if you realise it, you do not do it. *Coming here makes me feel good and till I die, I will keep coming here*. Because that is how it is. Before the pandemic I used to come two or three times a week. Also, because I have nothing to do, what can I do at home? *I need to do something*. In fact, even if I do not come every day, I have things to do at home. In fact, now I am making masks to sell at the market. (Paola, *06/10/2020*)

Speaking about her life before entering the dormitory, Simona explains more about the difficult family situation she was experiencing, a situation that followed the loss of her job and her independence, and the end of her romantic relationship.

I used to work as a cleaning worker with my ex-boyfriend. I worked in the GTT car parks, at the Ciriè Hospital. We were paid well at the hospital but then the contract ended, and we were not kept on. *They left us at home*. *I went back to my mother's house* but, for goodness' sake! *She did not want me*. My father was sick, he was in hospital every other month. *Obviously, I was not well either, because at home there was tension, anxiety, panic attacks*. Every time I had to go home, I got anxious. The social worker told me that I did right to leave because something bad could happen. *She told me to rebuild my life because I am still 35 years old*. (Simona*, 08/10/2020*)

Simona, shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic, got a place in a semi-autonomous flat with three other women, for which she pays a small monthly fee. She is on the list for social housing but was offered the possibility to stay in the flat indefinitely. As Paola, she receives a disability pension while hoping to get some work grants or internships. Simona's story is one of the examples of the staircase approach to social accompaniment. After three years of living in a low-threshold facility, Simona manages to move to the next step, obtaining a bed in a

semi-autonomous accommodation unit. Although she continues to be assisted in her search for a job and in the daily management of expenses, Simona clearly expresses a newfound calmness, which allows her to better face her condition of vulnerability.

> I cannot forget when they have called me to make an appointment for the interview and to visit the flat. *I am more serene now*. *This is what I wanted*. […] People are shocked when you tell them that you were staying in a dormitory. *I am not ashamed to say it*. *They helped me*. There are people that stay in a dormitory for years, ten years, without wanting to be helped. But I wanted it. […] If I apply in November, they might even give me the house because I spent three years in the dormitory. *But now I am in a service, and it is better for me to stay here*. Sometimes there are some arguments, but the operator is there until 7.30 pm, so *if I have any problems I can ask*. They are looking for another work grant, but it is all blocked because of Covid. […] In the new flat there are rules, but they do not forbid me to go out. *I am autonomous, I make my own rounds*. I even bought a bicycle for my birthday. My mother would have told me that I did not need it, that it was not necessary. (Simona*, 08/10/2020*)

The stories of Paola and Simona's entry into the dormitory are in some ways similar. From the interviews emerges an awareness of wanting and needing to seek help to overcome a condition of great psychological vulnerability. Both chose to rely on the care work of social operators. As regards the exit paths, the two stories give us the opportunity to observe different trajectories, but both strongly characterised by self-care and attention. Paola, thanks to an unexpected external support, was able to find her own housing independence, exiting from homelessness. However, she remains emotionally attached to the centre. She recognises that the centre plays a fundamental role in the process of recovering a psychological balance and it is within this framework that she has chosen to continue to attend the centre as a volunteer. Keeping busy, feeling useful is for her an essential condition for mental health. Simona, on the other hand, although not officially exiting homelessness, was finally able to achieve a certain peace of mind, which had been denied to her for years by her mother. In Simona's and Paola's experience, attending the centre played an extremely important part in the acquisition or reacquisition of self-esteem and confidence in their own capabilities. In addition, the construction of more positive relationships with the operators has contributed to promote a process of reflection and progressive acceptance of an extremely complex family relationship.

Inas, although not in a condition of extreme poverty, certainly has a richer pool of material and immaterial resources than Paola and Simona. Her husband works, except for short periods, and this gives her more freedom to choose if she

wants to work and which job to do. She knows what she would like to do and to this end she is taking courses and studying. All while raising her two little children, a challenging caring work due the cultural and linguistic barriers. Her account reveals many details that open up further reflection on the weight that a complex migration path leaves in the lives of these women, who depart from their families (often as soon as they reach adulthood) to start a new life in a foreign country, where their only reference is their male partner. In this case, Inas's husband has been in Italy for many years, which makes her feel even more isolated. In the case of Inas, the centre and the offer of Italian courses also reserved for young mothers with children, represents the first opportunity to regain partial autonomy in a foreign country where the partner has already found his personal and professional dimension.

I came to Italy because my husband was here. He has been here for 25 years. *It was a difficult choice*. I left everything there, my family, my job, everything! I said "No, I'm going there! I will start another family, look for another job, finish my studies". My husband also told me that there was so much in Italy, that I could finish my studies, do so many things. But it is different, it is not true [laughs embarrassed]. *When I came here, the first year was hard for me because I did not know anything, I did not know Italian.* When I was going out, if my husband were not there, I could not say a word. It was a hard time, especially because I came here already pregnant. […] After the birth I decided, "I can't stay like this. We go many places together but sometimes I have to be alone. How can I do it? We have to do something. Either I go to school to learn, or I go back to my country. There I feel safe, I can speak my language, I can find work, many things. My family is there too. *I cannot stay like this*." He was not convinced at the beginning, but then he said yes. We looked for a school together and we chose this one, because it is a place where they also take children. There are many places but there is no babysitting. *When I come here to study, I do not have to worry*. (Inas, *22/10/2020*)

The experience of Inas provides another opportunity to explore the concept of empowerment as self-care. She does not want to settle for jobs that she does not like. She has a precise idea of what kind of work she would like to do and what she would be willing to do in order to make her previous education count and not have to do care work for someone other than her family. She would also be willing to go through another phase of migration and move to France, where it would be more feasible to make her studies count.

I actually have some free time now, from this year. *I am also looking for courses, maybe computer science, accounting*. For me, even if I only do one course, that helps me, a good course...not only Italian. I really want to do a course that helps me find a job, and I cannot find it. *Some people are just looking for a job*. *I am not looking for a job as a cleaner, or as a carer or those things.* I do this at home with my children...*I do the cleaning at home*.

I do not want to do it in other places, in other houses. *Back in my country, I wanted many things. When I came here, I was blocked. I cannot do anything*. Sometimes I tell myself that if I had gone to France, where my titles are valid…if I had gone there, at least I would have done an accounting course, a training and then I would have found a job. Not here...I also did another course of family assistance and last year I took the exam to do the course as a mediator, but I did not succeed because it was a very difficult exam. Not because of the Italian, but they ask questions about everything. They are not grammar or Italian questions...they are cultural questions. It was difficult. *I hope they will redo it this year because I want to do it again*. (Inas, *22/10/2020*)

Finally, I would like to refer again to the experience of the Nigerian girls. Having had the opportunity to talk to a few of them about the reasons that drew them to the centre, I realised the instrumental value of their choices. The centre guarantees them a place to stay for more than a month, a place that can provide them with material and immaterial support, at a time when they are almost all waiting for documents, without work, and without a stable and secure housing solution. Some of them, still trapped in the network of prostitution, find shelter and protection, as in the case of S., who is forced to limit her movements to the area immediately surrounding the centre. Moreover, in a context that is not favourable to them. Work is scarce, many of them are pregnant, and their health conditions are not always adequate. This gives them the possibility of being supported in their pregnancy and thus ensuring a better life for their children. The choice of having to abide by rules is instrumental in obtaining this support and, in the absence of anything else, represents a valuable opportunity. Theirs is not a surrender. They recognise their vulnerability, and for their well-being and self-care, they entrust themselves to the care of social workers. Moreover, for girls who have suffered violence, abuse, and exploitation in their past, the centre is a safe place to stay and is useful in terms of breaking free from the prostitution market. During the time spent in the women's centre, there is a progressive change in attitude towards the operators and volunteers, as well as towards the other service users. The initial levels of mistrust and detachment tend to rapidly decrease, and by the time the project ends the joy of moving forward does not delegitimise the value that the centre has held for most of them.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that none of the respondents ever expressed self-pity or a sense of blame regarding their current condition of vulnerability or marginality. Paola focused on her mental health, quitted her job and sought external help as she cannot rely on an absent family. Simona decided to move away from the abusive family in order to take care of herself, identifying in the familiar dynamics one of the main causes of her psychological suffering. Inas, in order to acquire more independence and build her own daily dimension away from the figure of her husband, committed herself to attend Italian courses

and to obtain secondary school diploma, while waiting to find a job in line with her college degree. In the two women with an experience of homelessness there is a clear awareness of an individual condition of vulnerability linked to a compromised state of mental health. In the women from the neighbourhood there is an acknowledgement of a condition of structural vulnerability, linked to a hostile socio-economic context.

Therefore, if activation cannot be considered a feasible and practicable strategy for anyone in a vulnerable condition, in the light of both the structural problems of the labour market and personal vulnerabilities (mental illness, physical disabilities), it is possible to read the personal choices of the women interviewed – homeless or not – as self-care practices against social exclusion and against a position of subordination. From the words of the women emerges a powerful awareness and consciousness of their condition of marginality and vulnerability and their life choices strongly reject a type of victimising and infantilising narrative.

5.4 Conclusions

> In the future I would like to be a free woman, a woman who can do everything. In life it is important to have multi-skills because you can work with one thing or another. I would like my children to go to school and if I have the possibility, to send them to university. I hope in the future to have a better life than the one I am living now. If it continues like this it will be difficult. Without work, it is not a life. I would like to find a job. (Jamila, 22/10/2020)

The biographies and personal stories of Paola, Simona, Inas, Saida, and Jamila bring to the front the other side of mainstream empowerment narratives; they are stories of loss, struggle, displacement. These are not stories of empowerment per se, at least not in a life-changing perspective. There is a lot of pain, poverty, psychological distress, lack of family relationships and social connections. Material and immaterial absences. Women that have been constantly and repeatedly challenged and put to the test, and not only once in a lifetime. All of them used to sacrifice, self-denial, and some familiar to physical and psychological abuse, and even violence. In few cases, there could be also self-pity, auto commiseration, sometimes rejection or manipulation of reality. However, these are stories of survival and unrelenting challenges. Many of these women worked in their past, before losing their home or start having psychological problems. In the case of the Arab ladies from the neighbourhood, they are in charge of the care of the family and few of them work as cleaning lady

or in-home nurse. As Lucia explains, “there is a lack of work, but women ask for it. And it is a demand also present in people with serious psychological and psychiatric difficulties. As if it was a concern that remained active” (Lucia, *06/10/2020*).

In the introduction it was questioned to what extent the centre, as a space of care, can also be configured as a site of empowerment. Drawing on the concept of liberating empowerment, it is not possible to recognise the centre as a site of radical and transformative empowerment. Nevertheless, it is a site of resources, which “are enabling factors for empowerment and are the medium through which agency is exercised” (Kabeer, 2005; Malhoutra and Schuler, 2005; Sardenberg, 2008). Empowerment can be accomplished only if a women have enough resources for the exercise of empowerment, but it is not a sufficient condition. The centre promotes and supports women, through moral and material resources. It is an “assistentialist means to women’s empowerment” (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 23), however it brings women to work on their self-esteem, and to make choices based on self-care. As many authors argue, “the work of external actors and interventions, then, may be conceived not as empowering women but as clearing some of the obstacles from the path and providing sustenance for women as they do empowerment for themselves” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 405).

As it has been discussed, in feminist thinking there is some debates around the notion of a real liberating empowerment. Nonetheless, I argue that if we strive to frame the notion of self-care as a practice of empowerment and a strategy of everyday resistance against social exclusion, a strenuous and ongoing process that women deploy to cope with a condition of vulnerability, it is then possible to move beyond neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female homelessness and marginality.

> It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre – but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (hooks, 1989)

Chapter 6

Conclusions. The radical potential of vulnerability

6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter is structured more as a collection of different reflections around the concept of female marginality and women's encounter with the system of service provision. I intend to summarise the key insights and reflections that have emerged from this study, and, in the end, I wish to critically reflect on the possible implications for policy, practice and future research. The adoption of an 'intersectionality approach' is aimed at recognising the different conditions of marginality and vulnerability of these women and refocusing the public debate on the dramatic political negligence in terms of rights and welfare systems and the progressive commodification of care services.

The research focus lies on the micro and relational entanglements between marginality, women, and sites of care provision. This research is based upon an extensive ethnographic enquiry developed in a low-threshold female centre in the City of Turin, and structured through observations, informal interactions, and more in-depth interviews. Having the chance to be directly involved as a volunteer in the space of care, I investigated the complex and contradictory daily relational interactions between users, social operators, and volunteers. Through the narration of their life stories, and of the 'creative strategies that people used to stay afloat and even reformulate the conditions and possibilities of their everyday lives' (Katz, 2004), the aim of this research is to bring forth different stories and counter-narratives of female survival and empowerment. I believe it is indeed relevant to build a bottom-up and inside view of the phenomenon of female

marginality and its daily consequences; a view that is attentive to the meaning of lived experience, thus giving greater prominence to the deeper structural causes of the challenging living conditions of a part of the population (Capello, 2020). The objective is to develop a nuanced, critical perspective on marginal and vulnerable subjects, able to undermine dominant and biased framings of female marginality.

6.2 Unpacking female marginality

Today, poverty is a structural condition in wealthy nations, and it has increased both in incidence and severity. It consists of the difficulty of adequately satisfying even basic needs and living life according to personal aspirations and capabilities. A growing number of individuals experience inequality, poverty, and social exclusion which hinder the full exercise of their rights; in this social, cultural, and economic framework women are specifically affected. From the 1970s onwards, a process of feminisation of poverty began to emerge, which penalises many women with poor living conditions and constrains their access to the most basic goods and resources. It is therefore obvious that the notion of female marginality is strictly linked with poverty and structural vulnerabilities.

Notably, the condition of homelessness represents the highest degree of economic deprivation and a major factor of social exclusion in Western societies. Sustained and prolonged socio-economic vulnerability may in fact lead to conditions of poverty, which can exacerbate and eventually cause loss of housing (Freguja et al., 2017). The rise of female homelessness is becoming a major public problem in Europe and particularly in Italy, although the phenomenon "appears to be captured inadequately in current data and previous research, and in more recent years has generated an increase interest on investigating female homelessness", in order to capture and portray the complexity and the specificity of women's experiences of homelessness and gendered specific needs. Female homelessness is considered an invisible phenomenon precisely because women tend to avoid the traditional channels and services for homelessness, as well as "public spaces of street homelessness" (Mayock & Bretherton, 2017, p. 2). Moreover, researchers have recently identified a change in the composition of the female homeless population, with increasing numbers of young homeless women and migrant women (Baptista, 2010; Edgar & Doherty, 2001).

Such invisibility "is also linked to how welfare systems respond to women's homelessness" (Bretherton, 2017). It is interesting to observe how "social policy illustrates tensions between care and control in the management of vulnerability" (Brown et al., 2020, p. 15). The *activation paradigm* emphasises personal responsibility while the *care paradigm* emphasises personal vulnerability. Institutional responses to the problem of severe adult marginality combine these

two approaches within the welfare system which therefore appears schizophrenic and contradictory. On the one hand, there is a widespread process of categorisation and stigmatisation of individuals as vulnerable, unable to take care of themselves and therefore subject to control. On the other hand, there is a constant reference to the concept of activation and autonomy. Ignoring an overall critical analysis of the economic macro-conditions and, as a cascade, of the real job opportunities for marginalised groups and especially women, a strongly neo-liberal narrative continues to be pursued, which identifies as deserving of help those who, in reality, already have the material and immaterial tools to get out of a situation of contingent vulnerability. In this scenario, vulnerability only has value as a stage in a story deemed successful in retrospect. Vulnerability once again as an opportunity to bring out the strongest, the most resilient, the hungriest for success. The vulnerability of those who do not have a successful story is perceived as a failure, to be blamed and condemned, generating in the person a loss of confidence and self-esteem, a greater distrust in own personal resources and in own possibilities, nourishing over time also psychological stress. For these women, failure is twofold. On the one hand, many of them have failed in their traditional role as mothers, wives, or daughters in a patriarchal and misogynistic society. On the other hand, as non-working, non-autonomous women, they have also failed as individuals within a society devoted to production, capitalism, and individualism. Rosa (2021) discusses how this double constraint reflects contradictions in society's expectations of women, trapped between the maintenance of gender roles in the private sphere on the one hand and the ideology of independence in the public sphere on the other.

Failure culminates in seeking help from a care service such as the female centre on Via Pacini, Torino. If economic (and therefore housing) dependence on the income of the male partner is socially accepted and legitimised, dependence on the welfare system is much less so (Ruspini, 2000). The transfer to the community of tasks and costs that, on the other hand, would naturally fall to the family is perceived as a 'bad' dependency (Saraceno, 2002). It is therefore crucial to underline how the activation paradigm, and the associated workfare frameworks, exacerbate once again the reproduction of asymmetries of power and privilege, contributing to the blaming and stigmatisation of the most vulnerable groups.

Historically homeless women have been usually categorised as ‘deviant’ subjects, ‘unaccommodated’ women, failing to adhere to normalising representations of femininity (Reeve, 2018; Wardhaugh, 1999), which are associated to the “reproductive sphere of home and family” (Mostowska, 2016). According to the literature, there are two determining factors that urge a woman to turn to a shelter for help: lack of adequate material possessions, and an almost

non-existent social support network. The experiences that lead to the stratification of these factors are commonly identified in episodes of sexual abuse and violence, family problems or traumas related to motherhood. Furthermore, a number of them suffers from psychological or psychiatric disorders, in some cases prior to becoming homeless but in other cases as a result of prolonged state of deprivation. Although scholars give prominence to different causes underlying female homelessness, many agree on the idea that "when women do approach services, it is quite often only at the point at which they have exhausted these other, informal, options" (Bretherton, 2017). In fact, homeless women tend to rely on informal supports and coping strategies, in order to avoid sleeping on the street or having to ask for help from social services.

For these reasons, it was relevant to explore the phenomenon of female homelessness and to investigate the relationships that homeless women establish with the service provision system.

Centre as a space of care

i) how is care assembled, experienced, and challenged within the women shelter?

ii) how do complex and organised practices of care affect women's daily experience of homelessness?

iii) to what extent does the female shelter operate as a space of care against female marginality?

In the first empirical chapter, I analysed the various practices of collective care produced inside the female centre in Barriera di Milano. The chapter "underline[s] the complex negotiations of trust, disclosure and vulnerability that are centrale to giving and receiving care" (Conradson, 2003a, p. 453). In the analysis, I strived to explore the complex nature of the female centre, avoiding generalised conceptualisations of such social place "as either caring or careless". In particular, I combined attention to both the material and psycho-social dimensions of the collective and organised practices of care that emerge within this *relational* environment (DeVerteuil et al., 2019) and *contact zone* (Askins & Pain, 2011; Lawson & Elwood, 2014), in order to offer a critical reflection of the complex internal dynamics that shape and affect different experiences inside the women shelter, and eventually in order to question to what extent the centre operates as a space of care.

Being able to observe the unfolding of the daily practices of care (taking into account both the *care receiver* and the *care giver* perspective) was useful to compare the political aim of the association, and its linkages with the local system of care (tensions and ruptures), with the lived experience of the service users.

The centre is structured as a protected, safe space. In particular, the day centre offers the possibility for a small group of homeless women to spend the first part of the day in the centre, doing some creative activities with the volunteers and enjoying a meal together. This represents a substantial change in the daily routine of a homeless person who is no longer forced to move from one homeless service to another, which fosters the development of a more familiar, supportive, and therapeutic climate for the women, easing the burden and stress of shelter life. In addition, the (voluntary) choice to start a social accompaniment programme, although often long-term, provides women with more support in dealing with bureaucratic procedures, from obtaining benefits to obtaining social housing.

The centre can be considered a site of resources (Johnsen et al., 2005b), offering meals, hot drinks during the winter months and fresh snacks in the summer. Moreover, social operators offer advice and assistance regarding the necessary steps to obtain welfare benefits or to apply for social housing, complementing the work of the social services in the social accompaniment process.

However, recent changes in the composition of the female homeless population (younger women and migrants victims of prostitution) have brought to the surface a general unpreparedness of the service and the operators to deal with extremely complex situations: difficulties in communication between guests and social workers; problematic management of situations of conflict between the different groups hosted in the shelter; inadequacy of the creative activities proposed with respect to the needs of the service users.

In conclusion, the female centre on Via Pacini can be described as a space of acknowledgement against female invisibility and homelessness. It provides essential services for homeless women, but within this environment caring and uncaring practices coexist and intersect. As we have seen caring might entails control and conflict, but also support, attentiveness, concern, and effort. Moreover, in the daily interactions between service users, social operators and volunteers, traditional ideas about femininity and womanhood intersect caring practices, which in turn have the potential to affect women's self-worth and confidence, while reinforcing subordination.

Centre as a space of empowerment

iv) to what extent does the female shelter operate as a space of empowerment against female marginality?

v) how can empowerment be framed in such a deprived context to avoid neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female marginality?

In the second empirical chapter, I have addressed the issue of work within the perspective of female marginality, which sees women often relegated to precarious, occasional, part-time jobs and unpaid or poorly paid care work. As Shinn (2007) illustrates, disparities in employment are one of the main mechanisms behind processes of social exclusion and homelessness.

From the stories and insights collected in the field emerges a serious and widespread lack of job opportunities, security, and stability. For the users of the shelter service, finding a secure, stable job with a decent salary is hardly ever a feasible or realistic option. The current structure of the labour market, which is increasingly flexible, competitive, and the precarious health or mental conditions, make it more challenging to enter or re-enter the labour market. There is, however, a widespread opinion among the operators that in a more favourable economic situation, and within a social service system that focuses on real integration with the health system, which should translate in a more holistic – and prompt – social accompaniment support, many of these women would be able to work and definitely exit homelessness.

For the purposes of this research, it seemed interesting to try to analyse the tension between the liberal and liberating versions of empowerment discourse, in respect to the relational context of the female centre. Indeed, if we imagine liberal and liberating empowerment as "points on a continuum rather than discrete categories" (Duncanson, 2019, p. 6), it may be possible to frame some practices and initiatives as a first move towards a more radical version of empowerment.

The aim of these spaces is in fact to assist women in a process of regaining autonomy, understood in a multidimensional sense as financial, housing, and personal autonomy. The concept of autonomy can thus be intended as an empowering process, through which overcome various vulnerabilities (structural

and individual) and expanding the set of material and immaterial resources available.

The centre is thus conceived as a site of material and immaterial resources, but obviously the margin for manoeuvre is limited, not only with respect to the difficult socio-economic and welfare context in which it is embedded, but more directly with respect to the association's potential for action. However, some of the activities developed inside the centre are essential in stimulating and supporting the poor women from the neighbourhood in an extremely delicate and precarious phase, offering them the possibility to have a role other than that of mother outside the domestic context. For other service guests the centre gave the opportunity to regain control over their life through practical activities such as sewing or cooking. Many recognise that the centre played a fundamental role both in the process of recovering a psychological balance and in the acquisition or reacquisition of self-esteem and confidence in their own capabilities.

From the words of the women emerges a powerful awareness and consciousness of their condition of marginality and vulnerability, but it was interesting to note that none of the respondents ever expressed self-pity or a sense of blame regarding their status. Moreover, all women show a desire to receive help in order to overcome a condition of great psychological or economic vulnerability. Although it emerged from the interviews that women's lives took different trajectories, they are strongly characterised by self-care.

Therefore, if activation cannot be considered a feasible and practicable strategy for anyone in a vulnerable condition, in the light of both the structural problems of the labour market and the personal vulnerabilities (mental illness, physical disabilities), it is possible to read the personal choices of the women interviewed – homeless or not – as self-care practices against social exclusion and against a position of subordination.

Drawing on the concept of liberating empowerment, it is not possible to recognise the centre as a site of radical and transformative empowerment. Nevertheless, it is a site of material and immaterial resources, which "are enabling factors for empowerment and are the medium through which agency is exercised" (Kabeer, 2005; Malhoutra and Schuler, 2005; Sardenberg, 2008). Empowerment can be accomplished only if a women have enough resources for the exercise of empowerment, but it is not a sufficient condition. However, it brings women to work on their self-esteem, and to make choices based on self-care. The individual recognition of self-worth, along with a care for the self, and the rejection of a victimising understanding of vulnerability, it is a precondition for stimulating

collective action and achieving radical transformations at the social level. As many authors argue, “the work of external actors and interventions, then, may be conceived not as empowering women but as clearing some of the obstacles from the path and providing sustenance for women as they do empowerment for themselves” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 405).

In conclusion, I argued that if we strive to frame the notion of self-care as a practice of empowerment and a strategy of everyday resistance against social exclusion, a strenuous and ongoing process that women deploy to cope with a condition of vulnerability, it is then possible to move beyond neo-liberal, stigmatising, and infantilising representations of female homelessness and marginality.

6.3 For an alternative politics of care

What would it mean for a female space of care to reclaim the concept of empowerment in its original and most radical meaning? What kind of possibilities could emerge from the development of care practices based on the specific needs of women, both at the individual and collective level? Thus, promoting an empowerment no longer understood merely in individualistic terms as the reacquisition of housing, economic and personal autonomy, which tends to depoliticise and weaken the role of these social spaces. Instead, an empowerment understood as a process through which overcoming the notion of individual vulnerability and promote a collective resistance. In the light of what has emerged so far, it seems crucial to move towards the reacquisition of a more political role for sites of care provision, whether publicly or privately managed. For this reason, I have developed a kind of memorandum of action to stimulate, through an intersectional feminist lens, the ethos and practices of the associations that address female marginality.

> The challenge, then, may lie less in finding new ways to make gender equality or women’s empowerment matter to those engaged in the shaping of policy in mainstream development bureaucracies. It may instead be in creating new possibilities for alliance building that can take feminist engagement with development out of those cul-de-sacs and onto pathways taken by fellow travellers with a shared concern with social justice. But, to do this, we need new words and frames. (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 408)

Given the severity and urgency of the problem of female marginalisation, it is time to produce new policies that recognise that “current methods of addressing homelessness, such as more shelter beds and affordable housing, are less effective

than removing the barriers that sustain the condition of homelessness" (Eisenmann & Origanti, 2021, p. 1). "Homelessness can be prevented and it can be resolved, and women's other issues and difficulties can be addressed to enable them to move on positively in their lives" (Reeve et al, 2007), but it is crucial to work on the rethinking of service provision, which should firstly work on prevention, alleviation and resettlement (Baptista, 2010).

Alleviation means designing prompt, flexible and appropriate services based on the varied and complex needs of poor and homeless women, while encouraging a process of awareness and development of their own capacities, needs, and aspirations. Alleviation also means to provide clearer and quicker routes through the service systems, avoiding shifting responsibility from one service to another, while valuing the idea of a holistic care service system (Reeve, 2007).

Community means to give emphasis to the building of relationships based on trust and alliance among service users. Numerous studies show how, also with the help of therapeutic group practices, it is possible to stimulate a spirit of mutual trust, easing tensions and discontent among service users, and at the same time it is possible to critically reason about fears, frustrations, expectations, family and social pressures, but also dysfunctional thoughts, anxieties and depressive states (see for example Plasse, 2002). As mentioned before, "*power with* refers to collective action, recognising that more can be achieved by a group acting together than by individuals alone" and, consequently, it stresses "the importance of creating opportunities for women to spend time with other women reflecting on their situation, recognising the strengths they do possess and devising strategies to achieve positive change (Mosedale, 2005, p. 250).

Resettlement understood as the construction of an aftercare support system, competent to follow in the long term the path out of a condition of vulnerability in order to avoid or prevent relapses into a condition of extreme housing hardship. To this end, it would be necessary to promote not only the creation of structures more in line with the Housing First paradigm but also the development of alternative and diversified services, redesigned on the basis of women's needs and requests, accessible and inclusive.

Prevention implies a paradigm shift from an emergency approach to a preventive approach. Prevention also means going beyond the boundaries of action of the centre itself. If the phenomenon of homeless women is still submerged, invisible, multifaceted, it is necessary to make sure that information

also reaches women outside the assistance circuits, in precarious or abusive conditions, while rejecting stigmatising representations of vulnerability.

Network means working on the dissemination of best and pioneering practices in the field of service provision, in order to rethink care activities and to fill them with purpose. Building a solidarity network of exchange and collaboration between all associations and local realities – public and private – engaged with the issue of female marginality is essential. In particular, it would mean giving prominence to the already extensive group of associations that have been actively working for some time on the implementation of practices and policies aimed at empowering women (anti-violence centres, female activist groups, critical researchers' groups outside and inside the academy).

Education means the construction of a space in which power relations are less asymmetrical and in which a collective effort is made to overcome the, often unconscious, implementation of ideas of femininity derived from an order of patriarchal domination, which often translate into controlling and pathologising care practices. It also means promoting a less judgmental and blameful approach, valuing women's traumatic pasts and individual strategies for coping with trauma. It is therefore essential that social workers (and volunteers) are held accountable for their actions and their sensitive role, while acting as facilitators of this process that promotes critical thinking. Social operators are therefore required to be attentive and responsive to women's feedback and needs.

Dissemination focuses on the need to expose the tendency of the Italian state to shift the focus of the welfare debate from governmental to individual responsibilities. The time is ripe to push strongly towards a real personalisation of services and also towards a structural reform of the neo-liberal and individualistic configuration of welfare services. In spite of a politics that seems more and more blind to the growing social demands, a greater sensibility and awareness of gender issues has recently developed, also from an intersectional point of view, in an attempt to connect the different instances of marginalised groups. This leads us to conclude that it is essential to build a united front against the main discriminations and inequalities in order to progressively and definitively overthrow a neoliberal, patriarchal and oppressive system.

And finally, **research** since the complexity and specificity of the phenomenon of female homelessness requires the development of qualitative investigations from below and from within the system, in order to relate the meaning of life experiences to the wider structural causes of female marginality. The progressive change in the composition of the female homeless population (younger women,

migrants) entails an objective diversification of the landscapes of homelessness (Reeve et al, 2007) resulting from the reciprocal interplay between personal circumstances, interaction with the institutional care system and housing conditions. Beyond the similarities in the paths, it is in fact necessary to bring out the differences linked to gender, class, and race from which different experiences of marginality emerge, as well as needs, desires, and expectations.

In conclusion, drawing on Batliwala's conceptualisation of empowerment, it is possible to imagine empowerment as "a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing activities and outcomes" (Mosedale, 2005, p. 248). As various experimentations have shown, the service provision system is not an unchanged and unchangeable structure. In the City of Turin itself, the administration has for some time been engaged in a rethinking of services with the support of the University of Turin, and already in some facilities new ways of imagining the homelessness experience and the role of the services themselves have already been developed (Porcellana, 2019).

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