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Carmela Ferrara, Alessandra Sciarra

*L'impatto dell'emergenza sanitaria da covid-19 nell'esperienza di 10 operatrici antiviolenza italiane*

*The impact of the covid-19 health emergency through the experience of 10 Italian anti-violence professionals*

*Abstract*

L'emergenza epidemiologica causata da covid-19 e le conseguenti misure intraprese dal governo italiano per contrastare il virus hanno avuto un impatto non indifferente sui centri antiviolenza e le case rifugio. Le operatrici si sono infatti repentinamente trovate a riorganizzare il loro modo di lavorare nei centri e nelle case e a doversi interfacciare con le istituzioni in una situazione di crisi. In questo contesto, il presente studio ha l'obiettivo di capire la profondità dell'impatto del covid-19 sul lavoro dei centri antiviolenza e delle case rifugio assieme alla percezione delle operatrici rispetto al quadro di crisi. Per raggiungere quest'obiettivo, sono state condotte interviste in profondità a 10 collaboratrici di centri antiviolenza e case rifugio in tutta Italia. Dall'analisi tematica di tali interviste risulta che le operatrici abbiano trovato molta difficoltà ad adattarsi alle indicazioni delle istituzioni sia per la natura del loro lavoro che per mancanza di supporto istituzionale. Inoltre, la situazione ha ulteriormente marcato l'esclusione di alcune categorie già normalmente marginalizzate.

Parole chiave: Violenza di genere, violenza domestica, centri antiviolenza, case rifugio, covid-19.

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*Abstract*

The epidemiologic emergency of covid-19 and the following measures implemented by the Italian government to cope with the virus have had an impact on anti-violence centers and shelters. Professionals in this sector have had to suddenly reorganize their way of working while, at the same time, elaborate new strategies for dealing with institutions in a time of crisis. In this context, the current study aims at exploring the depth of the impact of covid-19 on the work of professionals in anti-violence centers and women shelters as well as their perception of the crisis. For this reason, this study is based on in-depth interviews to 10 professionals working in centers and shelters across Italy. As the findings show, due to the nature of the work normally performed by the organizations and the lack of governmental support, it was particularly difficult for professionals to reorganize in the early stages of the lockdown. Moreover, this situation has further exacerbated the exclusion and invisibility of marginalized communities.

*Keywords:* Gender-based violence, IPV, anti-violence centres, women shelters, covid-19.

*Introduction*

The new coronavirus, officially recognized as a pandemic on March 11th 2020 by the World Health Organization, has prompted many governments to implement lockdown measures. Italy, one of the first countries to be hit by the virus, has been subject to particularly restrictive measures that have effectively made residents unable to leave their house. While the media and the government have repeatedly framed the household as a safe space, the attention of activists and researchers has shifted towards the situation of women affected by domestic violence. Stemming from the feminist literature on the topic of gender-based violence (GBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV), the current study aims at exploring the impact of covid-19 on the work of professionals in anti-violence centers and women shelters, filling some of the gaps in the literature with respect to the impact of external crises on the issue of intimate partner violence. In this context, the concept of crisis is defined accordingly to the WHO as *"a process that cannot be defined in time, and that even spatially can recognize different layers and levels of intensity"* and exemplified with the occurrence of an epidemic. The study is a qualitative research

conducted through in-depth interviews with ten professionals working in anti-violence centers and women shelters in Italy. The authors have engaged in a thematic analysis of the interviews based on an intersectional approach to the issue of GBV and IPV, in order to consider multiple dimensions of discrimination. From the thematic analysis, it emerges that covid-19 did have a profound impact on the organisation of work in the centers and shelters. Moreover, it appears that the respondents have perceived a lack of substantial support from the government and they seem to be aware that the crisis is particularly marginalising for certain groups within those affected by IPV. However, the results of the study must be interpreted carefully and in the light of the literature that will be produced on the impact of covid-19 on GBV, IPV and the work of professionals in the field.

*Theoretical Background*

The measures of lockdown implemented following the covid-19 epidemic have exacerbated the situation of domestic contexts already characterized by intimate partner violence. Since IPV is the specific manifestation of gender-based violence within the context of an intimate relationship, the article starts with a theoretical analysis that considers the importance of an ecological approach to highlight the systematicity of GBV and promote IPV prevention. Examining the literature that studies the effects of recent epidemiological crises on GBV and IPV, it is argued that the impact of such crises on the work of professionals who support IPV survivors has so far been neglected by mainstream research.

*The importance of an ecological approach to analyze GBV and prevent IPV*

Article 3(a) of the Istanbul Convention (2011) defines violence against women as "*a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*". The article shows that the Convention, ratified by 27 States, aims at framing gender-based violence as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The goal is to redefine a narrative which explains gender-based violence as the bad behavior of a perpetrator and

views the woman as a powerless victim (Chiurazzi & Arcidiacono, 2017). In order to understand and prevent GBV, the adoption of an ecological perspective would be more accurate and productive. Consequently, it would be necessary to acknowledge that the social structures that define the political, legislative and cultural realms have a strong influence on the collective construction of the perception of gender-based violence (Di Napoli et al., 2019). The ecological perspective allows us to conduct an analysis of gender-based violence which accounts for the individual, relational, societal and collective actors, delving into the structural and systemic aspects of the phenomenon. In this regard, different perspectives have been developed in order to explain violent behavior and its collective perception. This article will focus on the feminist perspective, which views the conformity to and enforcement of gender roles as the root cause of GBV. GBV should not be considered solely as a private issue, since it is also present in the more general context of social, economic and cultural norms, which reflect and reinforce the inequalities between men and women (Orr, 2007). Gender-based violence is, thus, the product of the permanence of a patriarchal culture that causes and legitimizes violence, by supporting a system that is based on women's submission and domination (Amodeo et al., 2018). In this dynamic, women's body is the fulcrum of the oppression, as it has always been regulated and exploited for reproduction by men (McNay, 1992) and its appropriation has been normalized through popular culture and even interiorized by women (Guillaumin, 1995). Violence is the ultimate instrument through which control over women's body is exercised, since men are socialized to a conception of masculinity which legitimizes their vision of superiority and appeals to violence as an instrument of supremacy (Dworkin, 1990). However, it is necessary to bear in mind that oppression is not homogeneous but varies according to the intersection of factors such as race, religion and social class (Crenshaw, 1989). For this reason, an intersectional perspective should be adopted when analyzing gender-based oppression and violence (Anglin, 2010). In order to prevent gender-based violence, it is necessary to adopt an inclusive approach that takes the issue of masculinity into account. Violence originates from a conception of masculinity which is not monolithic but, rather, hegemonic, meaning that it has managed to impose and strengthen itself over time due to the presence of aspirational cultural models (Conner & Messerschmidt, 2005). In this cultural context, exercising violence is also a way to measure up to the ideal of masculinity (Bender, 2004), which is particularly resilient due to the continuous legitimization made by popular culture (Orr, 2007). Hence, the goal of rehabilitating violent men is not only linked to the individual but also to the

final goal of challenging and questioning the prevailing sociocultural norms (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005) (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2015). Such rehabilitating programs have been implemented mainly towards perpetrators of IPV. Despite being limited by the fact that they only reach a minority of individuals, they have actually proven to be more efficient in the prevention of further episodes of intimate partner violence in comparison to other deterrents commonly implemented such as fines or incarceration (Lewis, 2004). The concept of gender upon which GBV is based underpins intimate partner violence as well, the latter being the manifestation of gender-based violence in an intimate relationship. To believe that gender-based violence is based on gender means in fact acknowledging that socially constructed roles and expectations about masculinity and femininity have an impact on relations and family structures and are a fundamental part of the experience of violence and abuse perpetrated by both men and women (Orr, 2007). Gartner et al. (1990) and Archer (2006) have indeed shown that the level of intimate partner violence is linked to the degree of conformity to traditional gender roles and that, in an intimate relationship, men's sense of entitlement and socialized masculine behavior may lead to the adoption of several violent techniques, including physical, psychological and economic violence in order to exercise control over the partner (Jewkes et al., 2015).

*The impact of epidemics over GBV and IPV and the shortcomings of the literature*
It has been argued so far the importance of an ecological approach in analyzing gender-based violence in order to explore its systematicity. It was also mentioned how such an approach locates the rehabilitation of IPV perpetrators as the focal point in the debate on the prevention of intimate partner violence. The article now turns to an analysis of the literature that considers the impact of external crises over GBV and IPV, focusing on the consequences of past epidemiological emergencies, such as those of Ebola and Zika. Research has shown that women have been disproportionately penalized both during and in the aftermath of these crises. For instance, in the case of Ebola women's reproductive health was completely neglected, with a subsequent increase in the mortality rate of pregnant women in the countries that registered the highest numbers of infections (O'Brien & Tolosa, 2016). Moreover, during the Zika epidemic in Latin America, countries that already presented a high rate of IPV, like Dominican Republic, have seen a further growth in the phenomenon and in overall levels of GBV (Doctor of the World & Oxfam, 2017). Due to women's higher exposition to violence during these crises, it is essential for governments to take responsibility for the implications of the measures

adopted (Davis and Bennet, 2016). The experiences of the countries hit by Ebola and Zika should have been taken as a warning, since they showed that the adoption of gender-neutral measures, which neglect the structural power differentials between men and women, expose women to disadvantages and higher risks (Bond, 2017). Data gathered by the UNDP (2020) has shown that, since the covid-19 outbreak, domestic violence against women and girls has substantially intensified. Since the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020, several countries all over the world have registered an increase in domestic violence reports and emergency calls. In France there was a 30% increase in the reports of domestic violence, in Argentina, Cyprus and Singapore helplines have registered a 25%, 30% and 33% increase in calls respectively. Moreover, women shelters in Canada, Germany, Spain, the US and the UK have also reported an increase in demand. It should also be noted that little research has been conducted on the social implications of the past epidemics, dismissing the analysis of the vulnerability and risks run by women and marginalized communities (Harman, 2016) or the impacts of such crises on the professionals who work with groups affected by IPV and GBV. In this light, this article aims at contributing to the literature through an investigation of how covid-19 has impacted the work of professionals in the field of IPV. Regarding the covid-19 emergency in Italy, from the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020, the data on intimate partner violence has been alarming. The April 2020 report by D.i.Re (Donne in Rete contro la violenza) underlines that between March 2nd and April 5th 2020, 2867 women have reached out for help to the D.i.Re centers. In comparison to the monthly average registered in 2018, there was an increase of 74,5% in the requests of support. This data seems to confirm the fact that being forced inside has aggravated situations that were already characterized by violence. On the contrary, it seems that the lockdown has prevented new requests from coming. In the examined period, new requests for help represented 28% of the total against the 78% registered during the same month of 2018. Interestingly, only 3,5% of current new requests have reached D.i.Re through the new government sponsored emergency number 1522.

*Methodology*

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The study aims at analyzing the impact of covid-19 on the work of anti-violence centers and women shelters in Italy, in order to understand how a situation of crisis can influence their organization of work and relationship with governmental bodies. In order to answer the research question, a convenience sample was selected by contacting D.i.Re and other anti-violence associations in Italy. A qualitative methodology was chosen, privileging the idiographic approach (Windelband, 1984) which recognizes the centrality of representations of professionals in this field. The study was conducted through in-depth interviews, for their flexibility and acknowledgement of the centrality of data and the interpretative role of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were subsequently transcripted and analysed via thematic analysis, a process that allowed the researchers to closely examine the data with the aim to identify common themes, ideas and patterns of meaning coming up repeatedly. The thematic analysis was obtained through a process of codification achieved through the software ATLAS.ti 8. The support of the software made it possible to assign codes to concepts that recurred in the interviews, outlining the formation of thematic groups and simplifying the analytical process. The authors have chosen to adopt an intersectional approach (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013), in order to gain a more well-rounded understanding on GBV and IPV, considering the phenomena in relation to other axes of oppression such as race, class, gender identity and sexual orientation. The main questions asked during the interviews were the following: what is the impact of the pandemic on your work in the center/shelter? How has the center/shelter coped with the lockdown measures implemented by the government? What was the response of the government to anti-violence centers and women shelters in this context? In which way have the media portrayed the impact of covid-19 on IPV and GBV? Are there groups that have been hit more harshly by the crisis? Is your center/shelter equipped to accept all women inclusively or are there any barriers to get support? In the course of the research, the authors have actively engaged in a process of reflexivity in order to guarantee rigor and transparency while gaining a better awareness of their positionality and their relationship with and influence on the participants to the study (Jootun; McGhee; Marland, 2009).

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*Participants*

The sample of the study is composed of ten women, who work in anti-violence centers or shelters in eight Italian regions. The average age of the interviewees is 49 years old. Seven have a long experience in the field of gender-based violence (between 16 and 34 years), while the others have been working in the field for an average of 7 years. In this article, the interviewees are identified and referred to as professionals, even though their job is not recognized as a profession in Italy.

*Tab.1 Participants to the research*

| Gender | Age | Profession | Region | Years of experience in the field |
|--------|-----|------------|--------|----------------------------------|
| W | 45 | Lawyer, legal consultant for a center | Campania | 20 |
| W | 56 | Sociologist, coordinator of a center | Campania | 30 |
| W | 69 | Retired doctor, manager of a center | Calabria | 34 |
| W | 49 | Lawyer, legal consultant for a center | Emilia Romagna | 22 |
| W | 36 | Psychologist, professional in a center | Lazio | 7 |
| W | 51 | Teacher, coordinator of a center | Lombardia | 22 |
| W | 58 | Journalist, president of an antiviolence social cooperative | Lazio Abruzzo Molise | 25 |
| W | 35 | Professional in a center | Emilia Romagna | 10 |

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| W | 40 | Professional in a center | | Umbria | 16 |
| W | 46 | Professional in a center | | Umbria | 6 |

*Instruments of research*

The choice of conducting in-depth interviews was made in order to guarantee to the interviewees freedom of expression while responding to the areas relevant to this research. All the interviewees have signed the informed consent, authorizing the recording of the interview. The interviews have been conducted over Skype and Jitsi Meet between April 7ᵗʰ and 17ᵗʰ 2020, during the so-called phase one of the covid-19 emergency in Italy, and they lasted on average 45 minutes. All the interviews have been conducted individually except for the two professionals from Umbria, who have been interviewed at the same time. The transcript of the interviews has been subsequently analyzed with the support of the software ATLAS.ti. 8.

*Empirical Findings*

The interviews have been transcribed and codified and the codes have been grouped in the following themes: "institutional response", "the impact of covid-19 on anti-violence centers and women shelters and the reorganization of work" and "capability of acceptance of groups subject to multiple discrimination". The thematic groups have been identified both ex-ante, through a thorough examination of the existing literature, and ex-post, through the analysis of the thematic content of the interviews. Some of the expected themes have come up in the interviews as well as others which were not purely pertinent to the research question and have thus been regrouped in the section of the article titled "Final Remarks".

*Institutional Response*

When asked about the modalities through which institutions have reacted to the emergency of covid-19, all the interviewees mentioned the economic intervention promoted by the Ministry of Equal Opportunity. The intervention consisted in the allocation of funds which originally belonged to the 2019 budget but became available in

*La camera blu n.22 (2020), Violenza contro le donne nell'emergenza COVID-19/*
*Violence against woman in the COVID-19 emergency*

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2020 in order to address the emergency. Some professionals acknowledged the importance of the measure, but the majority believed that the way it was presented to the public was misleading, since the funds were already targeted to the centers but were actually frozen before the emergency started. All the interviewees have also expressed their disappointment in relation to the ordinary allocation procedure of public funds to centers and shelters. Describing the complex and numerous steps that allow the allocation and distribution of public funds from the State to the regions, the participants were particularly critical of the delays and the lack of a harmonized procedure across the country. The process is per se burdensome and dispersive: the funds have to pass from the State to regions, to local authorities and territorial agencies before reaching the centers. All the interviewees have highlighted the necessity to change and simplify this procedure. They also hoped that at least the emergency budget would be given directly to the centers, avoiding useless and dispersive steps. However, their hope was disregarded when it was decided that even the emergency funds had to be allocated following the ordinary procedure.

All the interviewees were also critical towards the government-sponsored emergency number 1522, promoted by the Ministry of Equal Opportunity. The number, free and available 24 hours a day, is operated by professionals and it also has an app that allows to seek for help via text. However, the respondents have noted that, while this initiative has been strongly promoted in the early stages of the emergency, the work done in the centers and shelters has been and continues to be neglected. There was in fact no governmental plan to increase the availability of resources or the number of professionals operating in the field.

Finally, the interviewees also criticized the joint action of the Ministry for Equal Opportunity and the Ministry of the Interior, which recommended the police to actively collaborate with the centers in looking for new, safe accommodations. According to the professionals, the collaboration never even started, and the centers had to deal with the issue on their own. In some regions, they were able to find extra accommodations through conventions with hospitality umbrella organizations. However, the main problem remains being able to guarantee the guests in these extra accommodations the necessary support, as an increase in the number of guests should correspond to a proportional increase in professionals' wages.

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From the very beginning of the emergency, anti-violence centers in Italy registered a drastic decrease in the number of new help requests. The interviewees have seen the calls diminish from three or four a day to one every two days. For some, the reason could be found in the general shock caused by the unexpected lockdown, while for the majority the decline was due to forced cohabitation, which made asking for help impossible or too risky.

The initial uncertainty given by the spread of the pandemic has destabilized the work in centers and shelters. The legal support offered by the centers was particularly affected as a measure suspending all legal proceedings was implemented. The measure foresaw the suspension of all ordinary legal activity during the pandemic, except for several proceedings viewed as essential and for the most part related to cases of IPV (for instance, the removal of a violent person from the household or the implementation of a restraining order). Despite being formally exempted from the suspension, these proceedings were not carried out, especially in the early days of the lockdown when many courts completely shut down causing the postponement of numerous cases. Some interviewees have pointed out that the suspension measure has resulted in the penalization of women who are affected by forms of violence that lack physical evidence, negatively impacting women's rights as a whole.

Concerning the work inside the centers, the emergency has forced a change in the way of conducting counselling, with physical meetings occurring only in a case of emergency. In this way, a fundamental part of the methodology used by the centers, consisting in empathic listening, is currently unavailable, being extremely difficult to operate in the absence of a one-on-one encounter in a safe space.

*For the centers, it is particularly difficult to support the victims as it is not possible to receive them and, thus, an important part of our methodology - the so-called emphatic and non-judgmental listening - is unavailable. The emphatic and non-judgmental listening is based on the idea of the necessity of building personal relations in order to make the woman feel immediately believed. It is possible to meet on Skype or on any other platform, but it will never be the same thing since there is no real contact, no in person conversation.*
40 years old, Umbria, 16 years of experience

The counselling and support activities that had already started before the lockdown have continued through online platforms. Similarly, the work in the shelters adjusted to the measures reorganising many activities online. The guests in the shelters have been subject to the lockdown while the professionals have continued their work, but hospitality was only guaranteed in case of emergency. While in lockdown, women in the shelters have started to produce surgical masks to cope with the lack of protective equipment. Since the equipment was not provided by the government, each center had to purchase it using its own budget, adding a further economic strain. Speaking of the situation in the shelters, the theme that emerged the most was the lack of beds. The interviews confirmed a piece of information which was already reported by WAVE, Women Against Violence Europe, according to which the beds available in women shelters in Italy are about 600, whereas the standards set by the Istanbul Convention recommend an availability of about 6000. The expectations and fears for the aftermath of covid-19 concerned the possibility of a peak of requests in relation to the centers' lack of resources. Considering the fact that the interviews were conducted in the midst of the emergency, all the interviewees have reported feeling uncertain about the future but also hopeful for a radical change of the current economic and productive system.

*We learnt that this system does not work, we understood that it is not a coincidence if we are in this situation… it this due to bad political choices, if we are in this situation it is because there has been a cut in welfare, a cut in healthcare, because profit has been privileged over health, because governments have no longer invested in prevention. I have no illusions that we are suddenly going to break a super-driven capitalist and liberalist socio-economic system, but I think we all have to reflect and start by staying united.*

56 years old, Campania, 30 years of experience

The majority of the participants to the study believed that a capitalist profit-driven system is to blame for the dismantling of the welfare state. The interviewees highlighted the problems arising from the privatization of care services, such as the implementation by local authorities of competitions to allocate public funds. This system leads to a race to the bottom between competitors or, alternatively, results in the allocation of resources to charities that do not have experience in the field of GBV or IPV but offer lower prices.

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*Capability of acceptance of groups subject to multiple discrimination*

The interviewees underlined how, during the emergency, both public authorities and the media have perpetuated a specific image of the household, represented uniquely as a bourgeois safe space, neglecting to consider other, more complex, realities.

*In politics we have noticed how the first decrees implemented by Conte always mentions home as a safe space, not only forgetting about the problem of intimate partner violence, but also neglecting homeless people, immigrants in reception centers… all those situations which are different from the bourgeois vision of the household and the family.*

58 years old, Lazio, 25 years of experience

It clearly emerged from the interviews that centers and shelters struggle with welcoming subjectivities different than cisgender women. All the interviewees have admitted the lack of inclusivity of transgender women, an issue that is even more enhanced when resources are scarce, such as during the covid-19 emergency. Some professionals have mentioned the need to find ad hoc spaces for the reception of transgender women in order to avoid complaints from other guests. The majority of the respondents has admitted being uneducated and blamed the lack of inclusivity on ignorance and inexperience, whereas a few have shown a more political view on the issue, not fully recognizing transgender women as women. Thus, it seems that the centers tend to only work with females who are also afab (assigned female at birth).

*We work less with trans women because we did not know the specifics of the trans experience. For a period, we had a trans girl hosted in one of our shelters and it was not easy to tell the truth. Although she was a woman - mtF, therefore born male - she carried within herself* a *series of dynamics that came from the education she had as a male... I don't know how better explain.*

51 years old, Lombardia, 22 years of experience

On the topic of inclusivity, some interviewees have explained that if they receive requests from members of the LGBTI community, they automatically refer them to the local LGBTI association, explaining that the centers do not have the right competences to assist LGBTI people. However, LGBTI associations often do not have the resources to take on

such requests and may even not be present on the territory. Thus, it appears that the lockdown made the situation of certain groups that are normally penalized by the system even more extreme.

*A gay boy who experienced a situation of abuse within his relationship had also turned to us and we welcomed him by phone. The dynamics were the same, that is, a disparity of power between partners, and, without neutralizing the gender issue of males who are violent towards females, it needs to be said that this is also a matter of acting prescribed roles. However, we referred him to an LGBTI association, because we are not prepared.*

35 years old, Emilia Romagna, 10 years of experience

Finally, interviewees have also mentioned their work with migrant women and asylum seekers. If an irregular migrant seeks help in a center, they are entitled to a special residence permit. Since different regions adopt different regulations, sometimes a certification by the center is sufficient for the woman to receive the special permit. However, in some instances, the permit needs to be granted by a penal court but, given the length of legislative proceedings in Italy, the migrant is often at risk of remaining irregular for years. In the context of the covid-19 epidemic, it should be noted that the suspension measure mentioned earlier is likely to delay even more the granting of such special permits, exposing irregular migrant women to a further marginalization.

Examining the interviews, it emerges quite clearly that the centers and shelters struggle in guaranteeing an intersectional approach that would account for all the different dimensions of discrimination. In these regards, the covid-19 emergency has only contributed to further accentuate inequalities among women affected by intimate partner violence.

*Final Remarks*

In-depth interviews were a powerful tool to assess the impact of covid-19 on the work of anti-violence centers and shelters and investigate the professionals' perception of the crisis and of the governmental response. The interviews also showed how the subjective experiences of the participants in relation to their beliefs, work and activism have helped them cope with the covid-19 emergency. Interestingly, the idea of political activism has

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emerged frequently in the interviews in relation to the work of professionals and the function of the centers. The centers are not seen as mere services, they are identified as places of political activation and growth and, for this reason, they need to continue their work in spite of the crisis. This narrative is particularly strong amongst the more experienced participants who have been part of feminist movements during the 1970s and, for this reason, have a more politicized approach. Contrarily, younger professionals, who have had a less politicized formation, resulted in having a more pragmatic approach. Regardless of their formation, masculinity, in its hegemonic conception, is unanimously acknowledged to be the root cause of GVB and IPV, which do not only affect heterosexual cisgender women but, rather, a plurality of individuals. In the experience of some of the participants to the study, the identification of male and female is not exclusively related to biological factors but also to cultural, societal and environmental aspects. Since gender-based violence was acknowledged by all the participants as a systematic issue, they also repeatedly brought up the importance of working within the education system in order to deconstruct the current gender stereotypes and construct new models. Some participants habitually work with primary and secondary schools through "relational workshops" that aim at having the students question the paradigm of patriarchy. Beyond their work with students and women, three out of the ten interviewees have also stated that working with violent men is essential for prevention of IPV. Overall, the participants have expressed the hope to be back to their normal activities soon, as they view their job as a vocation and a mission necessary in society.

*Conclusion*

The empirical findings of this study inform about the impact of covid-19 on the work of professionals in anti-violence centers and shelters in Italy. The thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews highlights the profound impact of the lockdown measures, which have discouraged new help requests and substantially reduced one-on-one interactions between professionals and women already receiving support. Where possible, counselling and mutual help groups have been scheduled via online meeting platforms and shelters have guaranteed hospitality only in case of emergency and upon quarantine.

To respond to the critical situation, the government has sponsored the emergency number and phone app 1522, in order to guarantee a channel for women seeking help. Moreover,

the Ministry of Equal Opportunity has granted centers and shelters emergency funds, which were actually part of the 2019 budget but had remained frozen until the emergency started. In relation to this last measure, the interviewees have shown disappointment as they were expecting to receive more resources and support. The study also highlights the participants' criticism towards the ordinary procedure of allocation of public funds, which is considered slow and dispersive, and the fact that it was followed even during a context of emergency. Moreover, the provision of suspension of some legal proceedings has led to the penalization of women who are affected by forms of violence that lack physical evidence and is overall seen as a setback for women's rights. The results also show that the normal approach of centers and shelters is only able to take into account some dimensions of discrimination besides gender (such as race and social class) but struggle in dealing with subjectivities that are different than cisgender women. In particular, they completely neglect transgender women and are not always able to support LGBTI people.

Finally, the participants fear the future, as they foresee a peak in the requests for help which they are not going to be able to meet with the current resources.

In the light of the empirical findings presented in this study, it is possible to draw some recommendations. Being the scarcity of resources one of the main issues for centers and shelters, policy makers should provide ad hoc responses for emergency situations, such as the disbursement of funds on an extraordinary basis, in order to allow anti-violence organizations to adjust rapidly and effectively to a context of crisis. Moreover, it seems clear that anti-violence centers and shelters should work in order to make safe spaces more inclusive, providing support and accommodation also for transgender women and LGBTI people, since gender-based violence is a phenomenon based on gender rather than on sex, and, thus, it does not only concern cisgender women. In conclusion, this study provides an initial assessment of how the covid-19 emergency has impacted anti-violence centers and shelters across Italy, contributing through a qualitative analysis to the investigation of the centrality of representations of the professionals in this field. However, this study presents limitations regarding the impacts of the pandemic over the medium term, as it was conducted during phase one of the covid-19 emergency. Furthermore, despite the efforts made to guarantee geographic representativeness, the study failed to shed light on the territorial specificities of Italy. Given that regions in Italy have the prerogative to distribute funding to anti-violence centers and women shelters, it would be interesting to delve into how each region chose to allocate the emergency

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funding, considering also the political and gender composition of regional governments across the country. In sum, more research ought to be produced on the topic in order to gain a better understanding of the impact of external crises on GBV, IPV and the professionals who work in this field.

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Dr. Carmela Ferrara, Junior Research Associate at the British think tank GenPol - Gender & Policy Insights. Her research focuses on: gender, sexuality and migration, gender-based violence, social inclusion of minorities through an intersectional approach and with specific regard to urban and territorial planning policies.

Dr. Alessandra Sciarra, Junior Advocacy Officer at the British think tank GenPol - Gender & Policy Insights. Her research focuses on: gender dynamics, economic inequalities, migration and exploitation of the female body in the informal labor market, with a specific focus on the agricultural sector.

Dr. Carmela Ferrara, Junior Research Associate presso il think tank britannico GenPol – Gender & Policy Insights. La sua ricerca si focalizza su: genere, sessualità e migrazioni, violenza di genere, inclusione sociale delle minoranze attraverso un approccio intersezionale, con un'attenzione alle politiche della pianificazione urbana e territoriale.

Dr. Alessandra Sciarra, Junior Advocacy Officer presso il think tank britannico GenPol – Gender & Policy Insights. La sua ricerca si focalizza su: dinamiche di genere, disuguaglianze economiche, migrazione e sfruttamento del corpo femminile nel mercato del lavoro informale, in particolare nel settore agricolo.