

# To Care and to Control? Lights and Shadows in Empowerment Processes with Women in Violent Relationships

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**To Care and to Control? Lights and Shadows in Empowerment Processes with Women in Violent Relationships.** Care practices are ambiguous arrangements: necessary for society and individuals, they refer to experiences in which the needs and requirements of interdependent subjects are satisfied. At the same time, in care relations the links between vulnerability and its production are closely connected, affecting both those who receive care and those who do it. On the basis of research conducted since 2018 on the Italian system of preventing gender-based male violence against women (VAW), the article discusses some “good practices” of care, namely those framed as “women’s relationship methodologies” by feminist centers supporting survivors. However, even in these care arrangements, dimensions of control and power relations are evident, embedded both in the precariousness of the care-work for professionals, and in some situations of multiple vulnerability experienced by women survivors, particularly when economic precarity and cultural differences are involved.

Sociología 2024, Vol. 56 (No. 4): 369-388

<https://doi.org/10.31577/sociologia.2024.56.4.14>



**Key words:** *Care; vulnerability, precariousness and control; transformative politics; anti-violence system; survivor-oriented practices*

## Introduction

The issue of care is at the core of the scientific debate analyzing the current crisis of the capitalist social order, which is, at once, an economic, cultural, ecological as well as a political crisis (Fraser 2023). Here, “care” is conceptualized both as a hazard, in relation to the consequences of the “care deficit” (Hochschild 2002), and as a transformative potential of care-centered policies and practices (Glenn 2000; Tronto 2013). These issues have become particularly evident in the Covid-19 pandemic, which has revealed the flaws in welfare, health, and education systems across Europe. This has made clear the persistence (and widening) of care gaps after decades of neo-liberal reforms to public welfare policies (Müller 2019). Many questions and critiques have arisen about the ability of public power to take charge of individuals (Pavolini et al. 2021) and the role that care has, or could have, in public or private services has returned to the center of public debate, in relation to both the causes

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and development of crisis, and the potential reforms needed to trigger transformative processes (Alemani et al. 2020).

This contribution focuses on the latter, conceptualizing care not so much as “affective labor,” essential to meet the immediate needs of “explicitly vulnerable” individuals who depend on the assistance of others, but rather as the relational dimension embedded in the social and collective interdependence of each individual: that is, this analysis is based on the awareness of care as a precondition for individual and collective agency, necessary to build the political, cultural, social, material, organizational, and emotional basis to transform the current social (and living) system (Tronto 1993; The Care Collective 2020), or, at least, to imagine radical systemic change (Lynch 2022). Many studies have analyzed communitarian care experiences based on mutualistic practices at the local level, enacted by feminist, anti-racist or anti-capitalist groups of activists (Serughetti – Fano 2022). They have highlighted the two dimensions of this kind of intervention, the one related to the political level and the one related to the services provision level, both oriented to claiming rights and meeting the needs of vulnerabilized groups usually neglected by public power. Following this approach, we analyze a specific care relation, the one enacted in feminist and women’s anti-violence centres (AVCs) in Italy<sup>3</sup>, that follows the “methodologies based on women’s relationships.” These methodologies are evaluated as positive in the Italian system of support for women domestic violence’s survivors (Cimagalli 2014) and considered as good examples also in the debate on reformation of public social services and policies in Italy (Busi et al. 2021). They consist of a whole range of original professional practices and organizational routines specific to most women’s and feminist AVCs and shelters, also in other countries, that results from proof knowledge of violence itself and of the ways of responding to the problem (Bacchi 2009). It is also strongly based on the awareness of social and subjective interdependence and on a relational dimension. Offering a separatist space focusing on women’s safety, sharing experiences and collective empowerment (Lauri et al. 2023), these practices are represented as survivor-oriented, framed by a relational approach among women “users” and women “workers and activists,” able to activate alliances with public and private actors (Pietrobelli et al. 2020). We conceptualized these kinds of practices as care work (Toffanin 2022).

Nevertheless, similarly to other care arrangements, these practices also have a dark side, characterized by a dimension of control and unequal power relations that cross both the precariousness of the care-work for professionals, and

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<sup>3</sup> In order to clarify, we mention that in Italy AVCs and shelters are often separated places: usually, while shelters are residential place, where women survivors can be hosted with their children, AVCs are places where women are welcomed in order to find counseling for GBV cases, but they can also be political labs and cultural centers (Pisa 2017). It should be considered that the issue of hospitality and cohabitation opens to more complexity in maintain woman-to-woman relations in daily practices and organizational routines (Rudrappa 2004).

the experiences of those-who-are-cared-for, in particular when living in situations of high risk and/or of multiple vulnerability, or when engaged in activities aimed at achieving economic autonomy. In this kind of relation between those who help and those who are helped, the dark side of the care appears within the effort to understand the needs of others, and the fatigue resulting from it, recognizing (and assuming) both the condition of human and social vulnerability and the responsibility of interdependence (Casalini 2018). At the same time, even if represented as “woman-to-woman” relation, hierarchical dynamics may appear: survivors may be exposed to control and surveillance, since they are, even if temporarily, in an explicit position of dependence in a relationship that is both emotionally intense and, at least on the surface, inescapably asymmetrical, such as that between the helper and the helped (Bhuyan – Senturia 2005; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005; Toffanin 2015). Many studies on gender-based violence (GBV), mainly those on GBV against women who live multiple vulnerabilizations, have highlighted hierarchical dynamics of control and inequalities, even in AVCs and shelters trying to adopt an intersectional approach (Rudrappa 2004; Gengler 2012).

In the next paragraphs, a reading of the international debate on care work and its role in public policy is proposed, focusing on its dimensions of social, economic, and cultural devaluation. Then, after some methodological considerations, experiences of care work carried out by workers in AVCs are analyzed, highlighting the criticalities for the maintenance of the methodologies of “women’s relationships”. We focus first on some aspects of the working conditions in this particular care-sector. Then, the analysis moves on the risks of control and subordination related to the precarious conditions of those who work in these places and with the situations of multiple vulnerability experienced by some of the survivors who access AVCs to get out of a violent relationship.

### **State of the art: care as political matter**

Care can be defined as the set of material and relational activities required for the reproduction of life both for humans and ecosystems (Ferrante 2022). Similarly, but in a species-specific conceptualization, Tronto (2013) defines care as an intricate network of activities needed to be born and to die, to socialize, for community building, and for the sharing and transmission of meanings and values. In a relational logic, an approach focused on care reveals what gives value (namely, what is important) and leads to claiming the relevance of vital interdependencies, in ways of organizing society (Centemeri 2021). This perspective is not a neutral positioning, as it makes visible power relations and the individualization process (Fagnito – Tola 2021). Care, then, is a political matter. It has been recognized as significant factor in economy, social ties,

intersubjective recognition, as well as in the politics of citizenship and of the contemporary economic system (Bernardini et al. 2018). Care is crucial for both “adult and able-bodied” and “dependent”, vulnerable subjectivities. Yet, it is relegated to the feminized and individualized sphere of women and families, and it does not enjoy neither social nor economic recognition. In Italy, the present public debate on lowering birth rates echoes these dimensions, in a reductive way: built around the burden of care work for “new mothers” and used to claim for more public investment in services for children, time for parents, and subsidies for families, the debate on low birth rates reduces to the topic of equal opportunities the feminist and women’s claims of time to care as both a collective and an individual responsibility, that involves many subjects, not only the mothers (Bimbi – Toffanin 2017). At the same time, this representation denies the recognition that each life is made up of multiple “times”: for work (paid and unpaid, in the public sphere and within one’s own family), for political participation, for sociability, for self (Balbo 1991).

Considering the scientific debate, care has emerged as a topic since the 1960s, thanks to the contributions of feminist, civil rights and liberation groups, and potentials and risks associated with caregiving have been highlighted in these sixty years. Focusing on women’s work in the domestic sphere, attention has been extended to the issue of female participation in the paid labor market, analyzing both the characteristics of women’s work, the tensions of reconciling different times of life, the valorization that differs from male work at a social, economic, and symbolic level. On the other hand, care is analyzed as the practices enacted by families and public or private services (schools, hospitals, kindergartens, rest or nursing homes) towards individuals whose condition of vulnerability and dependence is evident (children, elderly people, people with disabilities). In this sense, the naturalization and sentimentalization of care can also be read as a way of reproducing inequalities in society (Arfini – Busi 2020). Feminist and women’s studies had already highlighted the different valorizations of male paid work and its time (the daily time of education and career) and female unpaid work (the time of care, of political and social participation, for self-consumption). The different temporal structures produced by this distinction are related to the invisibilization of multiple inequalities, crossing the divisions between paid, underpaid, and unpaid work, those related to working conditions and to the vulnerabilities generated by the globalization of care, and, perhaps the most obvious, those related to social gender roles in relation to even the binarism of the heterosexual norm (Gosh 2022). In this sense, the naturalization and sentimentalization of care can be read as a way of reproducing inequalities in society, supporting the social stratifications related to gender, skin color, age, migratory status, and class (Fraser 2023). Diversified assignment of responsibilities to “able adults” turns out to be related to the

naturalization of the division between production and reproduction, that becomes an institutive act for “autonomous full citizen,” differentiating who is responsible for care, who benefits from care, and who has the privilege of not having to think about it. For that reason, then, the feminization of care can be regarded as a form of symbolic domination (Bourdieu 1998), both normalizing the disadvantage, for women, of having to take charge of care in an individualized and gratuitous way, and misrecognizing that any adult can take responsibility for caring (Casalini 2018). Finally, this naturalization is linked to the invisibilization of the common condition of human and social vulnerability, marginalized in the private dimension of needs (Tronto 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

As said, the care gaps emerging after neoliberal reforms to public welfare policies has given new prominence to the question of the role that care could have in public and private services. Some researchers propose keeping the interpersonal, relational dimension at the center of public policies in the welfare sector, in order to create the political, economic, cultural, and legal conditions necessary to create the caring capacities of individuals, institutions, and organizations (Lynch 2021; Piga 2012). This attempt would open a new, transformative phase in the changes of care work within the capitalist social order, that potentially can open up to new tendencies after the collapse of the three previous ones (Fraser 2023). According to Fraser, indeed, the first shift in the care-story concerns the effects of considering care as a public service, which would at first de-privatize some activities from the family sphere by transforming them into goods and services. The second shift would have seen the commodification of care, through the provision of services by the private market. Finally, as a result of the downsizing of public services and the diversification of the workforce through the participation of women from countries of the global South, these same activities would have undergone further feminization: this feminization refers not only to the predominance of the presence of women in the sector, and to the social representations associated with this type of work, but also to the consolidation of structural forms of precarity and exploitation along gender, racialization, and transnational trajectories (Marchetti et al. 2021). The consequences have impacted both on the services provided and on the experiences of workers (Giullari et al. 2019; Saruis 2015). Well before the Covid-19 pandemic, indeed, the International Labor Organization had called on governments to address the deficit and quality of care work, with the aim of avoiding global care crises and the rise of gender inequality in the world of work (ILO 2018). In the same regard, measures taken by

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<sup>4</sup> For example, according to the “TV quality of work survey” carried out by Inapp in 2015, for 49 percent of employers in Italy, balancing time for unpaid and paid work is not a matter for the company but depends solely on the choices of the employees (Canal – Gualtieri 2017).

EU member states on care activities<sup>5</sup> recognize the need to improve working conditions in the care sector, given the many critical issues present. After some insights on the data collection methodology used, we will describe some of these political issues, referring to care work both at large and in AVCs.

## Methodology

The analysis is based on 38 case studies conducted between 2019 and 2020 in Italy, involving AVCs, shelters, and territorial anti-violence networks as part of a project on the Italian system of preventing and countering male violence against women<sup>6</sup>. Each case study required a desk-research to understand specific context, the genealogy of local intervention against gender-based violence focused both on public power and civil society, the history of AVCs or shelter and the one of anti-violence network, if any. Then, couples of researchers visited each place and conducted interview with staff and volunteers, sometimes in the form of group interviews, involving workers and volunteers, both those that daily meet survivors and those that are in the coordinating group. One researcher led the discussion, while the other recorded the session and made supplementary notes. All participants were female, aged between 30 and 75 years; most of them were white-italian. The interviews focused on the accompaniment pathways activated and practices enacted by AVCs' staff and volunteers, their representations of male violence against women and of the practices activated to prevent and counter it, at the political level as well as at that related to service provision. The interview employed an open-ended and flexible questioning approach, following a non-structured format but covering a wide range of themes. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. The transcripts were anonymized and then coded line-by-line, and a thematic analysis carried out, using an initial coding frame and thematic comparison in order to identify and analyze anomalies and patterns (Naeem et al. 2023; Fereday – Muir-Cochrane 2006, Riessman 1993; Strauss – Corbin 1990). This methodology allows generation of new themes and codes, which are then discussed by the research team. Finally, the researchers engaged in a collaborative discussion to analyze and interpret the themes that had been highlighted.

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<sup>5</sup> We refer, for example, to Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and caregivers, oriented at reducing gender gaps in reproductive work (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1158/oj> – consulted on 15 October 2023), but also to the European Strategy for Care, with the slogan, “It’s time to care about care,” aimed at increasing the services for children in the age group 0-6 years and at improving access to long-term care services for elderly subjects, also by increasing professional services and support for informal care. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip\\_22\\_5169/IP\\_22\\_5169\\_EN.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_22_5169/IP_22_5169_EN.pdf) (consulted on 15 October 2023).

<sup>6</sup> The ViVa Project was conducted by the National Research Council – Institute of Research on Population and Social Policy between 2017-2021; a second phase of the project is ongoing (2022-2025). Description and results of the project can be found at [viva.cnr.it/en](http://viva.cnr.it/en).

The cases analyzed do not constitute a representative sample but are the result of a reasoned choice aimed at involving AVCs that differ in terms of type of legal personality (public services, private sector ones devoted to combating VAW, or private sector actors not specialized in VAW), geographical localization and historicity, in order to collect different experiences, also in terms of settled practices (Busi et al., 2021).

In this analysis, we focus in particular on those 25 experiences where the AVCs explicitly (in public presentations, leaflets, flyers, websites or during the interviews with workers and volunteers) refer to their methodologies as “feminist or women’s movement approach of woman-to-woman relation”. This focus can be considered a limit for this study, but we are not proposing an exhaustive description of all the existing experiences on the Italian territory: we observed a heterogeneous universe rich in virtuous experiences, which, precisely because of this, and because of the self-reflective capacity of the women workers interviewed (Madison 2005), allows us to focus attention on critical aspects, often recurring, even in very different local realities. In the impossibility of a comparison between very different professional styles, contexts, and work sectors, the aim of the analysis is to offer insights for possible cross-contaminations between areas of public policy in which the relational dimension is crucial, also in terms of self-representation (Hochschild 2002). In the next sections, then, we focus on some narratives of feminist and women’s AVCs’ activists and workers about their professional practices and organizational routines, in order to understand some dimensions of care-work and of working conditions in AVCs’ in Italy, tracing them back to structural and organizational aspects of the anti-violence system, on the one hand, and to the type of intervention activated, on the other, also in terms of the sustainability and continuity of the services provided themselves. Betting on the (self)reflexive capacities of these interviewees, we will then discuss possible elements of victimization and control and some strategies to minimize them.

Another limitation of the study concerns the absence of women using AVCs’ services among the respondents, considering the focus on hierarchical dimension of this care-relation. This absence limits also the possibility of going deeper with intersectional analysis (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2019): observing only the representations of those who are placed in a position of (relative) advantage, the risk is to leave many issues in the shadows (Toffanin 2024).

### **What kind of work is care work? Feminization and invisibilization between gratuitousness and recognition**

We have already defined the woman-to-woman practices activated in AVCs as a type of care-work, as they are based on a reciprocal relational dimension, oriented at keeping the decisions of the women at the core of the interventions

(Toffanin 2022). The adoption of an egalitarian and inclusive decision-making process, at least at a narrative level, is one of the results of the knowledge on violence developed by feminist and women's movements (Lauri et al. 2023). Both for political and methodological reasons, considering that an effect of intimate partner violence is the dispossession of autonomy, freedom and agency for its victims, the accompanying pathways to exit violence must be built on the active role and protagonism of survivors, keeping their choices, decisions, times, desires, goals, and needs at the core of the (re)construction of their autonomy (Kasturirangan 2008). It should be remembered that in Italy, at the beginning, during the 1980's and the 1990's, the work done by AVCs stemmed from the political, personal, and voluntary commitment of activists geared to the social and cultural change necessary to remove the structural causes of violence itself (Pisa 2017). Even now, in the feminist-led AVCs, this is an activity that consists of many dimensions: "the ideal is to combine the professional, cultural part with the political part" (AVC 6).

In order to analyze some characteristics of the care-work as professional practice acted in Italian AVCs we considered the studies on other labor sectors based on relational work, such as the ones of social work, health care, welfare, and education. Studies on the transformations of these sectors during the last 30 years have highlighted some specificities of the professional skills that characterize the kind of jobs there enacted (Ranci – Pavolini 2015; Gingrich 2011; Cesareo – Pavesi 2019). The job is not separate and separable from those who carry it out nor from the relationships that are established in it and that involve caregivers and users and family members, colleagues(s), professionals from different fields (Fine – Tronto 2020). From an organizational point of view, the activities produced by care work are neither compressible nor relocatable. They require time and contacts, often in-person and synchronous; skills in different fields; mental and emotional forces; because of these aspects, they are a kind of cost that is difficult to reduce (Glenn 2000; Gosh 2022). Furthermore, the regulations and reforms of the past four decades in these sectors were oriented particularly to standardization of tasks and services, also through the fulfillment of bureaucratic tasks. Professional routines were often re-organized by intensifying the speed and pace of work, increasing the succession of deadlines and workload, and often imposing longer shifts: the principles of "competitiveness," "austerity," and "financialization" that have guided these processes have been considered as responsible for eroding time for relational work, which is considered necessary for the co-construction of useful and effective interventions for users; at the same time, these processes have devalued voluntary human commitment (Fine – Davidson 2018). These reforms, indeed, end by impacting on the quality of both the service provided and the living and working conditions of workers (Giullari et al. 2019).



In the Italian anti-violence system, the bureaucratization and standardization process is still ongoing: at national level, public power started a re-organization, through funding and definition of minimum standards, in 2013. We already discussed some of the effect of this process on AVCs, and namely on the practices of women and feminist AVCs (Pietrobelli et al. 2020; Toffanin – Misiti 2021). Some risks for feminist and women’s methodologies are similar to the ones registered in other contexts (Rudrappa 2004; Lauri et al. 2023): the professionalization of AVCs’ activist works, associated with time constraints and defunding, appears to be associated with the de-politicization of the objectives of social change, the dis-empowering of care-relations, the prioritization of the interest of institutional efficiency and longevity of AVCs’ organizations themselves to the detriment of horizontal practices supporting co-construction of decisions and women’s choices.

In addition, in Italy the expansion of funding base is associated to the increasing of AVCs’ number: from 2013, the number of AVCs has grown, and AVCs managed by actors without a gendered or feminist approach, have appeared (Demurtas 2022). So, similarly to other national contexts, other professional style appears as well as demand for paid staff, certifications, standardized evaluation processes, threatening the earlier feminist commitments (Busi et al. 2021).

Considering job condition, the work in women’s and feminist AVCs in Italy is characterized by a high rate of informality, with some of the female workers working as volunteers and others contracted. This situation is related to the political and personal commitment of many of the workers, as well as to the underfunding of the anti-violence system, which is characterized by a discontinuous, fragmented, and scarce disbursement of funds by public power, to the point that the continuity of support for women in situations of violence is guaranteed only through the unpaid labor of the workers. It should be considered that 85 percent of AVCs in Italy are managed by private social entities, i.e., third sector associations or cooperatives<sup>7</sup>, and even among those that are publicly managed, many institutions contract out some of the activities (such as, for example, psychological counseling) to private social entities (Busi et al. 2021; Demurtas 2022). That means that even in some AVCs run by public actors, that usually guarantee, in Italy, regular (although low) wages and stable working conditions, workers may be hired on periodic calls, for only a few months and with long breaks between one contract and the other. It thus

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<sup>7</sup> The legal status of AVCs has effects not only on the working conditions of those who work in them, but also on the internal organizational structure and decision-making processes: for example, consider that in AVCs that are “associations” there is no provision for the remuneration of members by law, and therefore it may happen that a AVC run by an association makes use of external, paid employees who, at least formally, are excluded from the planning and definition of the general guidelines of the AVCs itself, made within the assembly that they are not allowed to participate in, as they are not legally member of the association but “only” workers.

becomes evident how the issue of public funding is closely connected to that of the (partial, intermittent, or insufficient) remuneration of the AVCs' workers and, consequently, also with the continuity and sustainability of the support for women in situations of violence. Many workers, both in the private sector as well as in the public one, are paid for only a portion of their actual working day, and the rest is due as their voluntary work:

All of us (activist-workers) must ensure our survival and the stability of what we do for women. (...) We work so many hours of our working day for free... we put it down as voluntary commitment, but it sounds like a contradiction: if we claim our expertise and specialization we must also clamor for economic recognition of our work. (...) There is also a problem of precarity and insecurity: very often a fake volunteerism hid the precarization of younger workers, also in our places. (AVC 32)

The quote highlights how the issue of remuneration is also related to the recognition of both the professional skills acquired, developed, and continuously updated by AVCs, and the need for public power and society to take charge of countering male violence against women through adequate funding:

From a political point of view as well, we believe that our work is highly specialized and very demanding: therefore, it must have also an economic recognition. If we say that violence is a public problem and the public power and the society must take charge of it by demanding public resources to run the anti-violence centers and homes, we believe that those of us who work during the night, on Saturdays, during holidays, with dedication and expertise, are entitled to be recognized for the work they do. (ib.)

Currently, the issue of the social and economic recognition of AVCs workers' professional activities is highly debated in Italy, as it is linked to the debate over the requirements and standards for accessing public funding: as said, the stakes are many and high, as the need to standardize the support for women within the public system faces that of maintenance of the specific methodologies developed by AVCs, which are quite unorthodox in the public social and care services routines (Pietrobelli et al. 2020; Busi et al. 2021).

Finally, similarly to other care-jobs, also the one in anti-violence system is "emotionally demanding" (Hochschild 1983): workers must manage social relationships in emotionally intense situations, where subjects are often suffering, frustrated, angry or sad, with respect to their present and future living conditions. Many studies of anti-violence system have shown how women in violent situations are considered "difficult users" by services providers: their needs merge a multiplicity of dimensions such as those related to the public health system, law enforcement and the judiciary, psychological assistance,

support for the women's children, or issues related to jobs, housing, economic affairs; moreover, their suffering results in an additional emotional fatigue for helpers (Villalòn 2010).

Hochschild (2002) described how caring is also usually associated with practices considered of low value, regarding social, professional, and economic dimensions. In her opinion, for this reason care is represented as a feminized activity: women indeed would enact "innate" skills that result from personal aptitudes and that are given out of a sentimental, and free, bond. These activities would be a kind of gift: this means that the professional and technical dimensions of caring are minimized and therefore not to be associated with claims for a living wage and "worthy" work (Lynch 2022). In feminist and women's methodology of woman-to-woman approach the political, mutualistic, and symmetrical dimension of the relation sustain a part of this gratuitousness: nevertheless, workers and activists are cognizant that this way to act is far from being innate and it requires training in order to be applied.

In Italy, the role of an anti-violence worker is not a recognized profession, neither socially nor legally: there is no professional order or register, nor dedicated academic degree course, and many AVCs are against the professionalization of the role, through the formal recognition of specific profession or sectorial competences. This does not mean that AVCs' workers and activists are not trained: specific skills, methodological competences as well as proof knowledge about violence as gendered are obtained through specific initial training and continuous updates, often organized by AVCs themselves or their networks. The training help to establish the specific professional skills and organizational routines, in which relational and (self-)reflexive skills are acted upon, allowing workers to act flexibly, adapting to the context, personalizing pathways, and initiating multiagency and integrated responses to the survivors' needs in order to implement the goals of supporting awareness and autonomy (Busi et al. 2021; Toffanin 2022). This kind of training, and in particular the group-meeting and supervision are considered useful to maintain (or gain) awareness of the power dynamics within care relations, offering to workers and volunteers the possibility to mitigate the risk of burnout, victim blaming, loopholes of empowerment approaches that characterized the experience of informal supporters described by Gregory and colleagues (2017). Nevertheless, the hierarchical dynamics existing also in these care relations are not removed by this approach, as we describe in the next paragraph.

### **Care, vulnerability and control**

As said, the dark side of care is not related only to precariousness and emotional fatigue of jobs involving the responsibility of interdependence and the relational dimensions, but also to the dimensions of control and surveillance

embedded in vulnerability that are present in a relationships that appear structurally asymmetrical: on the one hand, there is a subject who is the bearer of a need, and on the other, there is a subject who can “help” him or her to meet it. This conceptualization highlights how vulnerability is related not so much to conditions of marginality or social positioning, but to relational situations and contexts themselves (Held 2010). Kittay (1999) has already highlighted the risks associated with paternalistic (or maternalistic) controlling and power-based behaviors inherent in everyday caregiving practices associated with professional or family routines. If we consider the system of services and individuals who support vulnerable people such as women in situations of violence, it emerges how much the risk of (re)producing victimizing and inferiorizing relationships is quite high, with serious effects if connected with the pre-existing degree of dis-empowerment caused by violence suffered in the family or in intimate relationships. Aware of this risk, as well as that of social and subjective interdependence (and mutual vulnerability) among subjects, feminist and women’s knowledge in anti-violence centers and shelters have produced specific practices for preventing and combating gender-based violence and supporting those who suffer it: the objective of these activities is to maintain the centrality of the “users” in women-oriented, and not service-oriented, interventions. (Cattaneo et al. 2021). Although in the Italian anti-violence system these modes of intervention are recognized for their relational imprint that tends to be nonsymmetrical, based on mutual recognition (Deriu 2014; Pisa 2017), hierarchical dimensions and control dynamics are still present. In particular, studies on migrant women have already focused on the risks of acting out controlling practices on those who are considered “victims,” and who embody multiple vulnerabilities: national and international literature on gender-based violence has identified the difficulties, for actors seeking to maintain women-oriented practices, of keeping to their methodologies: stereotypical culturalized representations, barriers to accessing the labor or housing market, lack of linguistic and intercultural abilities, and the limitations of migration policies, different models of gender identities and displays (Toffanin 2015).

In our research, it has emerged as a critical issue in relation to women in multiple vulnerability situations, particularly when related to a condition of economic precarity, in situation of high risks, with children involved and, often, if the woman is a migrant or, more in general, someone who embodies a cultural difference perceived as self-evident. In particular, it seems that the resilience of tendentially nonsymmetrical care practices enacted by workers is highly challenged within the intervention for economic support when the provision of grants or loans comes into play. Indeed, workers often find themselves in the position of “bringing back to reality” women’s projects and, when money is involved, it appears more difficult to limit controlling practices:

We give the money to the women, but we have to account for the output. So they have to give us receipts. This is heavy work. It is an additional control you have over the women. It is an additional dependence they have on us that is not easy to handle. The relationship with money is difficult. These are sensitive things that also affect the relationship. (AVC 24)

Sometimes we ask the woman to prepare a shopping list ... that means that in reality we ask her: "Are you capable? What do you buy?" [...] It is a sort of test to say: what needs did you put first?". (AVC 14)

Control over money, in fact, is not only related to reporting requirements, which are necessary given that these disbursements are often traceable to external funding. While many interviews reveal the awareness of the women workers with respect to the delicacy of these relationships, in some narratives the control is described as empowerment-oriented, almost a kind of "home economics education" with respect to those who are supposed not to have been previously able to practice margins of economic autonomy, precisely because of the violent relationship in which they lived. According to this portrayal, these women may not be able to spend money in an "adequate and proper" manner without guidance; there was no way to delve into what expenditures are considered "adequate and proper," and according to what parameters. Also, in these kinds of interventions, there strongly emerge, also, on the one hand, the dimension linked to the conditionality of interventions, and on the other hand, that of the desirability of user behavior in the carers' perspectives (Leone et al. 2017, Dentale 2022). In these care relations, finally, assessments of the practices activated by survivors emerge: they act as a tool for the control and prevention of behaviors defined as unacceptable, that refer to socially shared cultural repertoires that are defined from the carers standpoint and that can be different from those of the cared-for. This ends up clashing with the drive to respect the decisions and desires of the "others" (Leone et al. 2017). Even in these cases, indeed, those who live economic precarity, the poor and/or the migrant, are at risk of experiencing moralizing interventions (Jouve 2006):

The provision of an income is embedded in a personalized project on the woman, undertaken by the AVC that has to do the monitoring (...) Money goes straight into the woman's bank account, but she must demonstrate how she spends it. And then the Region (the authority that gives the funding) has imposed a work of responsibility so that at the end of the day you almost say: "Ok, we give up." (...) For instance: shopping. I know that some AVCs give some money to the woman, and she is free to buy what she wants. It is not our case. We go shopping for them, or they describe to us their menu... and this is also a type of work, also because these are public moneys, we cannot... I mean, we need to see: she must

also eat well, and it is not possible that she goes and she buys frozen food!  
(AVC 17)

However, often the worker interviewees recalled the internal tensions within the teams, the confrontations, the discussions that arose precisely in relation to the ways through which to manage the relationship in the cases of economic interventions, denoting an attempt to decrease the risk of too unbalanced relationships.

There are other cases in which it appears difficult to respect the protagonism, decisions, and timing of “users,” for example in the high-risk situations, particularly when children are involved. Consent, (re)construction of autonomy, and protagonism appear suspended in such cases:

If it is a situation that is assessed as “is a high risk” or there are children involved, the situation changes, because we have a responsibility which we cannot disregard. [...] You try... I’m not saying to force her hand, but to make it clear that the situation is serious, and that there is a responsibility of ours, of the AVC, and also of herself... and that it does not fall on her alone, so she has to follow the path. (AVC 31)

The risk is that of a “moralizing” interpretation of anti-violence policies, almost as if interventions are contingent on the willingness, or the ability, of a survivor to demonstrate “to what extent they are willing to say: ‘No, I don’t want to be with a person like that anymore, because he hurts me, me or my children.’” (Shelter 4).

Empowerment and responsibility are demanded. It means they have to do psychotherapy. And if they have children under 18, the AVC has to report to the juvenile court. And also they will activate an internship, based on the need. These are also all elements that will help her get out of the violence. If these commitments are broken, protection also stops. If she is not in the covenant, protection is not done [...] It is a process of awareness and realization. (AVC 15)

These ambivalences show, on the one hand, the complexity of care work carried out while maintaining a horizontal dimension, capable of keeping the “users” protagonists of their decisions. In this, self-reflective skills and the relational dimension that runs through even the confrontations between caregivers can allow controlling dynamics to be kept in check, even if they are not fully avoided.

## Conclusions

Gender, feminist, and women's studies can contribute to the debate on public policy transformations, which appear increasingly imperative. In this context, the debate on care seems to offer keys to rethinking the role and modalities of public intervention in responding to the needs and requirements of interdependent subjects, rethinking them as citizen-agents and not as fully autonomous citizens (Casalini 2018). This is a radical, transformative shift in the debate on public policy reformation, oriented for decades by key words such as "innovation," "efficiency," "merit," and "externalization" (Fine – Davidson 2018). In this regard, we have read some theoretical contributions on care highlighting its ambivalences: it is an activity that is necessary for society and individuals, but at the same time misunderstood, and in which the links between vulnerability and production of vulnerability are closely connected, affecting both those who receive care and those who do it. The methodologies of intervention developed by feminist and women's knowledge to support women in situations of violence reveal how, even in care practices that aim to overcome hierarchical organization in the helping relationship, some aspects attributable to such vulnerability persist. These are risky elements because they are connected to situations of precarization, but also, potentially, to dynamics of control that appear to suspend the possibility of an intervention methodology that tends to be horizontal, relational, and capable of personalization. However, the analysis reveals how these elements are connected more to structural conditions of the anti-violence system itself, rather than to the work of care in this sector *per se*: we refer to the paucity of resources and funding, in a context with multiple tendencies toward bureaucratization and in which professional styles and organizational missions are also very different from each other, linked to the heterogeneity of the actors that animate the system (Pietrobelli et al. 2020). Despite these structural conditions, however, there are glimpses of the possibilities for practicing care in ways that allow these risks to be acknowledged and, perhaps, reduced, through, once again, relationality, self-reflexivity and confrontation. Workers and activists described their strategies for minimizing risks associated with possible elements of victimization and control. Through training and confronting, also within anti-violence networks and with funding subjects, they try to make decisions with women, and not for women, in order not to dis-empower their autonomy. In particular, in some AVCs, survivors participate in each meeting where their decisions are discussed by workers and activists and also by other professionals of anti-violence networks. The AVCs that have rules and regulations for the relations between workers and survivors, usually discuss with the women on their application, explicitly recognizing the existence of a hierarchical dimension.

From the analysis on the Italian context, and on the ongoing regulation process, furthermore, some opportunities appear to be present in order to experiment horizontal care relations: in this sense, the alliance between AVCs and feminist and women's movements could keep open the possibility of recognition of their specific knowledges, expertise, methodologies and socio-cultural interventions in order to remove GBV causes themselves. That is: try to find new ways for feminist and women's ACVs' political voice to be heard.

Furthermore, the scientific debate can go back to the definition and conceptualization of violence against women, considering the interpretative potential offered by studies on digital dimension of gender-based violence as well as by the intersectional approach. In particular, further analysis will have to delve into the ways in which social stratifications related to the genderization of care practices, roles, and responsibilities are reproduced, as well as the removal of intersubjective vulnerability: the intersectional posture, only sketched here, could contribute to the production of knowledge necessary for a debate oriented toward the construction of a less unequal society, through, also, the politicization of care.

#### **Acknowledgments:**

We are truly grateful to Maura Misiti for her pioneering work in opening the field of study on anti-violence system in Italy.

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