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Normative devices and the Institutionalization of Interactions Among Actors in Anti-Violence Networks

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Abstract

This article examines how normative frameworks shape relationships among actors within territorial anti-violence networks in Italy, focusing on the Lombardy Region as a case study. Since the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, integrated policies and territorial networks have been promoted as key tools for preventing and combating gender-based violence (GBV). While these developments have strengthened coordination and expanded service coverage, they have also introduced tensions between feminist-rooted practices and institutional requirements. The study explores how normative devices define the scope of action for anti-violence centers (AVCs) and shelters (SHs), shaping their practices and influencing the pathways available to women exiting violence. The research combines document analysis with qualitative data from twelve semi-structured interviews and six focus groups conducted with representatives of AVCs and SHs across Lombardy. This mixed-method approach captures both the historical evolution of policies and their implications for the practices and organizational structures of AVCs and SHs, as well as for women's trajectories of exiting violence. The findings reveal how institutionalization processes simultaneously expand service availability and ensure uniform territorial coverage, while also generating tensions that affect women's pathways out of violence as well as the practices of AVCs and SHs. At the political level, these dynamics may further produce a backlash, leading to the normalization of the phenomenon, obscuring its structural causes, and legitimizing depoliticized forms of management and intervention — thereby highlighting the ambivalent effects of institutionalization on feminist anti-violence practices.

Keywords: *antiviolence networks; antiviolence centers; women shelters; normative devices; standardization; depoliticization; subjectification.*

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1. Introduction

Since the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, integrated policies and territorial networks have been promoted as key tools for preventing and combating gender-based violence (GBV). In Italy, measures have developed through a complex interplay of feminist activism, legislative reforms, and institutional strategies. However, while feminist movements were instrumental in bringing GBV to the political agenda, recent institutional responses risk depoliticizing this struggle by translating it into standardized procedures and performance-based interventions. These dynamics resonate with international debates on multi-agency responses to GBV, where similar tensions between institutionalization and feminist practices have been observed (Harvie and Manzi, 2011; Abraham and Tastsoglou, 2016).

This article contributes to ongoing reflections on institutional architectures and policy trajectories in the field of GBV prevention and response in Italy. In particular, it focuses on how normative devices delineate the scope of action of anti-violence centers (AVCs) and women's shelters (SHs).

The indication of the Istanbul Convention is to adopt integrated policies and implement multisectoral and multiagency interventions capable of providing a holistic response to violence against women (Calloni, 2020). Developing such integrated and comprehensive responses requires that actors involved recognize themselves as part of an anti-violence network (Calloni and Belliti, 2023).

In Italy, especially following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 119/2013 on gender-based violence, institutional attention to coordination has intensified. The State-Regions Agreements defining minimum standards for AVCs and SHs, alongside the national strategic plans to combat male violence against women introduced since 2014¹, have acknowledged the importance of establishing territorial networks to deliver coordinated and effective interventions. Within this normative framework, anti-violence networks — similarly to broader social policies — are considered key instruments for shaping policies marked by integration and territorialization (Bifulco, De Leonardis, 2006), with AVCs and SHs recognized as central actors within these networks.

However, in the Italian context, the issue of relationships among actors and networking practices in the field of GBV remains underexplored (Cannito and Torrioni, 2024). Although multi-agency collaboration is widely acknowledged as essential, scientific research has, over the years, focused primarily on its causes than on the functioning of networks themselves (idem). Moreover, most of existing studies tend to focus primarily on service composition and operational aspects, leaving a gap in understanding the institutionalization processes that shape relationships and practices.

¹ The reference is to "Intesa, ai sensi dell'articolo 8, comma 6, della legge 5 giugno 2003, n. 131, tra il Governo, le regioni e le Province autonome di Trento e Bolzano, sui requisiti minimi dei centri per uomini autori di violenza domestica e di genere" (Rep. Atti n. 184/CSR, 14 September 2022 - <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2022/11/25/22A06691/sg>, last accessed on 6 October 2025) and the previous "Intesa, ai sensi dell'articolo 8, comma 6, della legge 5 giugno 2003, n. 131, tra il Governo e le regioni, le province autonome di Trento e di Bolzano e le autonomie locali, relativa ai requisiti minimi dei Centri antiviolenza e delle Case rifugio, prevista dall'articolo 3, comma 4, del D.P.C.M. del 24 luglio 2014" (Rep. Atti n. 146/CU, 27 November 2014, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/02/18/15A01032/sg>, last accessed on 6 October 2025).

A review of recent Italian empirical studies (such as Cannito & al, 2022 and 2023; Cannito and Torrioni, 2024; Tuscany Region, Anci, 2017) combined with annual reports on AVCs and SHs published by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), reveals both the diversity and systemic complexity of anti-violence networks. These networks differ significantly in terms of composition, establishment processes, goals, nature and intensity of relationships, regulatory frameworks (Busi *et. Al.*, 2021; Gadda and Mauri, 2021). All these factors are shaped by a dense interplay of vertical dynamics (along the national – regional – local axis) and horizontal dynamics (Bifulco, 2005) including both collaboration and conflict, as well as tensions and convergences among institutions, general services, AVCs and SHs.

Within this heterogeneity, the hypothesis is that a common denominator can be identified in the institutionalization of relationships among actors through normative devices, social roles, and cognitive frames that "thicken interactions" (de Leonardis, 2001:22). Therefore this study addresses the following research question: How do regulatory instruments shape the relationships among institutions, AVCs, and SHs within territorial anti-violence networks, and what are the implications for feminist practices and for women's trajectories out of violence?

By focusing in the article on the normative devices and on how they delimit the field of action of AVCs and SHs, we explore the emerging repertoires of meaning, the consequences for the subjectivities of AVCs and SHs – understood as political bodies within the anti-violence networks – and the implications for women's pathways out of violence.

To interpret these dynamics, we draw on feminist studies to analyze how AVC and SH practices are channeled through regulatory devices and to highlight the risks inherent in structured interactions among actors. Specifically, we situate these processes within dominant neoliberal frameworks, particularly the notion of neoliberal feminism (Fraser, 2016; Fraser, 2020; Arruzza *et al.*, 2019) - a variant of feminism that has led to the selective incorporation of feminist claims into the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). At the same time, drawing on Butler's concept of performativity (1997b), we conceptualize institutionalization as a process of subjectivation of AVCs and SHs.

Becoming nodes in the anti-violence networks entails a certain degree of submission to cooperative and institutional processes. This can lead to a blurring of differences among AVCs with different histories especially in networks where multiple AVCs coexist, and a blurring between feminist AVCs and more generalist services. These dynamics risk weakening the political and transformative dimensions of practices rooted in the feminist anti-violence tradition.

The article focuses on a specific case study, the Lombardy Region, where belonging to anti-violence networks and complying with certain conditionalities — such as the accreditation criteria for ACVs and SHs — are core elements of its anti-violence policies. Therefore, the Lombardy Region represents an exemplary context for observing the potential consequences of the mobilization of normative resources and constraints on how violence is framed and addressed, on the subjectivation of ACVs and SHs, and, ultimately, on women's trajectories out of violence.

The decision to focus the analysis on regional-level institutionalization processes aligns with the structure of the Italian system for the prevention and combatting of gender-based violence, which is characterized by strong regionalization. On the one hand, these are policies that fall under regional jurisdiction, with the role of the State limited to

defining the normative framework, strategic guidelines, and resource allocation. On the other hand, it was the Regions that, starting from the second half of the 1990s, began legislating and promoting — often experimental — interventions in this field. It was only in the early 2000s that the role of the central government began to consolidate, and even today it remains primarily responsible for overarching regulatory frameworks, guidelines, and funding distribution (Misiti and Toffanin, 2021).

The early activism of the Regions is linked to the role of feminist and women's movements which, since the late 1980s, brought the issue of gender-based violence to the public and political agenda, leading to the establishment of the first AVCs (Corradi and Stockl, 2016). As widely acknowledged, these movements acted as claims makers (Degani, 2018), framing male violence against women as a public and structural issue, and pushing institutions to respond through specific laws and public policies.

The paper is structured as follows: we first outline the methodological framework, then analyze the Lombardy case study, and finally discuss the potential risks of backlash (Verloo and Paternotte, 2018) against feminist achievements in GBV prevention and response.

2. Methodology

This research, conducted as the first phase of the fieldwork for a PhD project², adopts a qualitative research design to explore the processes of institutionalization and regulation within territorial anti-violence networks in the Lombardy Region. The study focuses on how normative frameworks shape the relationships between institutions, AVCs, and SHs.

The research pursued three main objectives: to analyze the evolution of regulatory instruments at national and regional levels and their impact on service organization; to examine how these instruments influence practices and meanings within AVCs and SHs; and to understand the implications for women's trajectories out of violence.

Building on a socio-historical approach, the research reconstructed the evolution of regional policies in Lombardy, highlighting both continuities and turning points. This phase was based on desk analysis of institutional documentation produced between 2012 – when the first regional policies on gender-based violence were introduced – and 2024. The desk analysis was then enriched with evidence gathered through interviews and focus groups with AVCs and SHs, which offered a critical perspective on political and organizational processes, allowing their historical complexity to emerge.

2.1 Data and Methods

The study combined three complementary data collection methods: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with representatives of AVCs and SHs.

The first step consisted of a systematic review of national and regional laws, policy documents, and administrative acts related to the prevention and response to gender-based violence.

Particular attention was given to documents defining minimum standards and accreditation procedures for AVCs and SHs. To systematically map and retrieve these

² The study presented was carried out as part of a PhD research project in Gender Studies at the University of Bari Aldo Moro, conducted at the University of Milano-Bicocca, which began in November 2023.

normative texts, the LARA database of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) was used³.

A total of twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of key ACVs and SHs operating across Lombardy and accredited by the Region: four with SH managers, three with ACV managers, and five with representatives overseeing both types of structures. The organizations were selected to reflect a diversity of histories and orientations, including centers deeply rooted in feminist movements and historical anti-violence practices, as well as those emerging from generalist social services or broader welfare initiatives. This heterogeneity reflects a wider trend observed over the past decade, characterized by a significant increase in the number of AVCs and SHs alongside the expansion of public funding (Busi and Menniti, 2021). The interviews explored several dimensions, such as governance structures and internal organization, relationships and interactions with local authorities, and the perceived effects of standardization and accreditation processes.

To complement the interviews, six focus groups were conducted with staff members from the same AVCs and SHs, providing opportunities for collective reflection and comparison across different organizations and generating a deeper understanding of shared challenges and divergent perspectives.

All data were anonymized and coded thematically through a coding process aimed at identifying recurring themes and points of divergence. The analysis was organized into three main thematic categories: regulatory dynamics (laws, accreditation rules, governance models), organizational practices, and impacts on women's trajectories.

The research strictly adhered to ethical guidelines for sociological studies involving data collection through interviews and focus groups. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with all identifying details removed from transcripts and reports.

Interviews were conducted at the premises of the anti-violence centers and at the administrative offices of the organizations managing the shelters, thus avoiding direct visits to the shelters themselves and ensuring that their addresses remained undisclosed. The focus groups were held in a neutral location provided by an institution that offered its spaces for this purpose.

3. Evolution of Anti-Violence Policies in the Lombardy Region

The Lombardy Region began addressing anti-violence policies with the adoption of Regional Law No. 11/2012 "*Interventi di prevenzione, contrasto e sostegno a favore di donne vittime di violenza*". This law was introduced as a popular initiative, promoted by AVCs, feminist movements, and women's groups. Its goals were twofold: to promote prevention, protection, and support measures for women who experience violence, and to establish planning tools for regional anti-violence policies.

Following the approval of the law, from 2012 to 2024, the Region has developed two Regional Plans for the prevention and fight against violence⁴. The most recent Plan

³ This database collects regional laws, regulations, and administrative acts related to policies aimed at preventing and combating violence against women, available in regional archives and adopted since 2001. The database is accessed at: <https://lara.viva.cnr.it>. For acts issued by the Lombardy Region prior to 2001, as well as for subsequent additions, a search was conducted on the Lombardy Region's official website.

⁴ The normative references are:

(covering the period 2020–2023) aimed to make the system for preventing and combating violence more structural and stable by reinforcing territorial governance, consolidating AVCs and SHs, and ensuring policies for the prevention of violence against women. In this framework, territorial anti-violence networks were identified as the main governance and implementation devices for regional strategies and actions.

Since 2019, 27 networks have been established, each coordinated by a local authority, covering all municipalities in Lombardy (Lombardy Region, D.g.r. XI-3029/2020). The establishment of the networks was encouraged by the Region through redirecting national funds allocated for AVCs and SHs: the resources, rather than being allocated directly to AVCs and SHs, were transferred to the local authorities encouraging them to take an active role in establishing the networks.

However, more recently, this governance model has been partially revised through the introduction of a role for the Health Protection Agencies (ATS) giving them responsibilities for guiding, supervising, and monitoring anti-violence activities (Lombardy Region, D.d.u.o. XII-2621/2024). These functions mirror those the ATS already perform in the social and health services sector. At the same time the Region introduced an accreditation process for shelters, modeled on the system used for health and social care services (Lombardy Region, D.g.r. XII-1073/2023).

This shift is also in line with what was established in the 2020–2023 Regional Plan, which, alongside the strengthening of networks, identified the socio-assistance and healthcare accreditation model as a tool to qualify the anti-violence system by standardizing the interventions provided to women. In other words, according to a model based on a health and social care service delivery approach, accreditation becomes a prerequisite for the provision of standardized services. At the same time, while the Region has structured the anti-violence system over the years as autonomous and independent from health policies, some elements of ambiguity have always been present, both at the legislative level and in the planning tools — although they had not been fully implemented until now. In fact, some references to the social-health accreditation model were already present in Regional Law No 11/2012, as well as in the first Anti-Violence Plan 2015–2018.

These developments laid the foundation for reshaping both the structure and the practices of AVCs and SHs, as discussed in the following section.

3.1 Structuring Relationships through Accreditation and Standardization

We can identify two main effects produced by the accreditation procedures: on one hand, the numerical growth and consolidation of AVCs and SHs, on the other, the adoption of performance-based procedures aligned with the principles of New Public Management, which have long inspired the regional social-healthcare system. The combination of these two effects reinforces the depoliticization of both the framing of gender-based violence and the responses to it — a trend already observed in previous analyses (Pitch, 2022).

It is important to highlight how this ongoing process in the Lombardy Region — of standardization, and depoliticization of anti-violence policies — accelerated significantly

- Lombardy Region, D.c.r. No. X-894/2015 - *Piano quadriennale regionale per le politiche di parità e di prevenzione e contrasto alla violenza contro le donne 2015-2018*.
- Lombardy Region, D.c.r. No. XI/999/2020 – *Piano quadriennale regionale per le politiche di parità e di prevenzione e contrasto alla violenza contro le donne 2020-2023*.

following the 2022 national definition of minimum requirements for AVCs and SHs⁵. For Lombardy Region, these standards provided an opportunity to implement a regional accreditation model (Lombardy Region, D.g.r. XII-1073/2023). While recognizing the value of experience and expertise in the prevention of violence against women and the centrality of a relationship-based approach among women, as well as the importance of confidentiality and anonymity, a different framework is simultaneously introduced that defines AVCs primarily as accredited service providers. This framework tends to marginalize the political, preventive, and culture change activities that have historically characterized feminist-based AVCs.

In terms of the number of AVCs and SHs, the accreditation procedures introduced by the Lombardy Region have favored the entry of new managing entities, reinforcing the ongoing trend of numerical growth. As of May 2024, there were 53 accredited AVCs and 37 accredited SH management entities, managing a total of 131 facilities (Lombardy Region, D.g.r. XII-2346/2024) — a significant increase compared to the previous decade. In 2013, the AVCs and SHs operating across the regional territory numbered 21 and 11, respectively (Lombardy Region, D.g.r. XI-3029/2020). Unfortunately, the number of facilities managed at that time is not available. This growth has also been facilitated, as previously mentioned, by the availability of national funding aimed at supporting the establishment of new AVCs and SHs.

This numerical expansion has enabled the Region to achieve its strategic goal of ensuring full territorial coverage, with at least one AVC in each local network. However, it has also raised concerns regarding the nature and mission of the managing entities now entering the field. Moreover, the high number of facilities managed by single organizations suggests a growing process of professionalization — one that often entails practices and values far removed from those historically promoted by feminist movements.

An analysis of accredited organizations shows that most have little or no connection to feminist movements. Instead, they primarily originate from the general social services sector. In particular, some SHs are managed by organizations with experience in operating “mother-child homes”, facilities based on assumptions and practices significantly different from those recommended by international guidelines for SHs⁶.

3.2 Tensions involving AVCs, SHs, Women’s Trajectories, and the Political Level

The introduction of accreditation procedures based on the socio-healthcare model represents a turning point in defining the scope of action of AVCs and SHs, with consequences not only for their practices but also for the way gender-based violence is addressed.

On one hand, the regional accreditation criteria (Lombardy Region, Dgr. XII-1073/2023) explicitly include, in their formal definition of AVCs, a reference to the methodology of relationships among women — a core principle of the historical feminist AVCs as outlined in the National Agreement. On the other hand, from a more substantive perspective, these same criteria also introduce mechanisms that risk undermining

⁵ The minimum standards for AVCs and SOS centers, defined in a State-Regions Agreement in 2022, are currently being applied on an experimental basis and are expected to undergo further revisions.

⁶ For an overview of international standards and guidelines, see Pietrobelli, M. (2021), “Centri antiviolenza e case rifugio: spunti e riflessioni sugli standard europei e italiani”. In Demurtas P. and Misiti M. (eds.), *Violenza contro le donne in Italia: Ricerche, orientamenti e buone pratiche*. Milano: Edizioni Angelo Guerini e Associati, 101-118.

methodology, pushing AVCs toward a more standardized, service-oriented conception and performance-based approach.

This tension raises key questions about the extent to which the feminist principles of relationships among women, anonymity and confidentiality can be reconciled with the requirements of accredited facilities operating under the socio-healthcare model, which rely on inspections, controls, and compliance with operational rules shaped by performance-oriented service delivery logics — requirements that sit uneasily with the ethos of feminist anti-violence practices.

Focus groups, despite involving AVCs with different histories and orientations, revealed that this methodology «*is based on respecting the timing and narrative each woman brings with her*» (ACV m1), where «*mutual knowledge is built [...] starting from listening in order to construct something together*» (ACV m5), and where «*there is no standardized intake interview: each woman brings her own story, her own needs*» (ACVm4). Reception is therefore also understood as a «*welcoming posture that characterizes the practice of the CAV*» (ACV m3).

A clear example of these tensions can be seen in a specific requirement of the accreditation rules: the obligation for the AVC team to develop an individual plan for each woman. This plan must include "short and medium-term objectives, necessary actions, methodology, timeline, and outcome indicators" (Lombardy Region, Dgr. XII-1073/2023 – Annex:26). While such a structure may be appropriate in healthcare or welfare settings, it poses significant challenges in the context of anti-violence intervention. The process of exiting violence is inherently non-linear and complex, making it difficult to standardize or measure. As a result, this approach clashes with the methodology of relationships among women, which emphasizes flexibility, attentive listening, and respect for each woman's unique timing and journey.

Another critical area of tension concerns the requirement for women entering shelters to sign a "co-responsibility agreement", in line with the institutionalized expectation model typical of neo-liberal welfare systems (Honneh and Hartmann, 2004). This model implies a representation of the woman as a victim to be protected and made responsible.

Within this framework, women are simultaneously framed as victims to be protected, and individuals responsible for their own process. Responsibility thus becomes a precondition for accessing services, with potential consequences in term of secondary victimization. These dynamics shift the focus from the collective and structural causes of gender-based violence to an individualized model, where women must demonstrate compliance with expectations and accountability in order to receive support.

The issue of shelter confidentiality highlights a broader area of tensions where feminist practices clash with institutional requirements, reflecting different operational understandings of secrecy: either as a prerequisite for safety or as a tool of security control. For feminist organizations, secrecy is not merely a technical necessity but a foundational and political principle. Historically, it has been central to creating women-only spaces where safety and autonomy could be collectively built. These shelters are conceived as transformative spaces of resistance and care, where the claims and visions of feminist movements remain alive (Cooper, 2016; Cossutta, 2023). As one focus group participant explained: «*I refer to the kind of space women originally needed to speak about violence: secret places where only women could guarantee safety, and where both their stories and their experiences were protected*» (SH m1).

However, as institutional regulations become increasingly detailed and control-oriented, secrecy risks being reframed in securitarian terms. This shift is evident in the everyday rules governing life inside shelters. A staff member described how, during emergency reception, «*women are not allowed to leave unaccompanied, clearly for their security. For the same reason, they cannot use the phone, except in special cases*» (SH m3). Even in semi-autonomous housing, restrictions remain, shaping the daily lives of women and children: «*The children would ask their mothers if they could invite friends over to play. Things that are completely normal in the daily life of any family are, of course, not possible in a shelter context*» (SH m5).

Rules initially designed to protect women may thus evolve into mechanisms of surveillance and responsibilization, subtly shifting shelters from spaces of feminist politics to disciplinary devices (Foucault, 1977). As one staff member reflected: «*We try to understand how the woman is adhering — or not adhering — to the rules of the shelter that she herself agreed to upon entering*» (SH m2).

The findings reveal a clear acceleration of a process that had already begun — though more cautiously — in previous years: the depolitization of gender-based violence. Increasingly, violence is framed not as a structural and systemic problem, but rather as an emergency issue to be addressed through technical and measurable responses. This shift is closely linked to the attribution of the status of “victim” to women who have experienced violence. Following Butler’s perspective, this can be understood as an interpellation (1997b): an act that, far from merely describing an experience, actually constructs the subject itself.

On the one hand, this dynamic produces an essentialist construction of the “victim”, which, by obscuring the diverse experiences of women shaped by intersecting axes of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989), facilitates the implementation of standardized, performance-driven logics. On the other hand, it promotes the individualization of problems and responsibilities, fostering a depoliticized reading of gender-based violence that overlooks the broader power dynamics at play (Pitch, 2022; Serughetti, 2019).

4. The Institutionalization of Interactions as a Backlash Against the Achievements of Feminist Movements?

The analysis presented in the previous paragraphs has highlighted several key processes currently underway: the legitimization of entities whose histories and origins are far removed from feminist movements to operate as AVCs and SHs; the centrality of standardization and a performance-based approach, with time-bound operational procedures; and the emphasis on women’s responsibility for their own pathways out of violence.

These processes risk leading to what Segato (2018) describes as an ”amnesia of origins”: a loss — or rather, an erasure — of the memory of the struggles and processes that first pushed institutions to recognize violence against women as a public issue. In turn, this process risks taming and normalizing the issue, obscuring its structural causes and legitimizing depoliticized forms of management and intervention.

Drawing on Verloo and Paternotte (2018), these trends indeed suggest the possibility of a backlash against the achievements of feminist movements and historical AVCs in the field of preventing and combating male violence against women. As seen in the case of the Lombardy Region, these policies and regulatory devices tend to channel the work of AVCs

and SHs — and, consequently, women's pathways out of violence — along trajectories shaped by socio-healthcare models.

These policies tend to inform practices through frames, approaches, and strategies that are distant from those of feminist movements and historical AVCs — the very actors who, paradoxically, were instrumental in mobilizing Regions and the State to legislate and develop anti-violence policies (Corradi and Stöckl, 2016; Toffanin et al., 2020; Degani, 2018). Here, paradoxically — following Giddens (1994) — refers to a specific contradiction: the concrete pursuit of an original intention ends up distancing it from the likelihood of its realization. In this case, the commitment of feminist movements and historical AVCs to addressing violence against women — including by tackling its systemic and structural causes — now clashes with public policies and regulatory frameworks. Paradoxically, these frameworks are developed by the very institutions whose involvement in addressing the phenomenon was actively sought by those same movements and AVCs.

Principles such as activation, individualization, and self-realization — central to social policy within institutionalized models of expectations (Honneth and Hartmann, 2004) — risk becoming guiding principles for anti-violence interventions as well. These principles intersect with neoliberal feminism, and its mainstreaming gender perspective, which "tames" feminist grammars (Fraser, 2016 and 2020). By privileging problem framings rooted in individualism and personal responsibility, they risk reinforcing the invisibilization of the structural causes of violence, and supporting and reproducing the victim status. This dynamic can lead to consequences such as increased responsibility placed on women, the hierarchization of bodies, and the categorization of identities (Strippoli, 2024).

Within this framework, the very term victim plays a crucial role. Following Pitch, it evokes "a single action by individuals" (Pitch 2022: 32), with a double effect. On the one hand, it individualizes problems and responsibilities; on the other, it constructs a group identity based solely on the shared experience of violence. This risks erasing differences related to class, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and other intersecting axes of domination (Serughetti, 2019).

Finally, regarding the processes of subjectivation of AVCs and SHs, it is useful to consider the tensions between the two dimensions of performativity that Butler (1997b) invites us to see as inseparable: on one hand, the processes by which AVCs are constituted and acted upon (being pre-constituted and shaped by norms and linguistic acts), and on the other, the conditions of possibility for action (the ability to act and re-signify). Normative frameworks, by defining the field of action, can weaken the political and transformative potential of feminist practices. This may lead to blurred distinctions between AVCs and SHs with different histories, and between feminist centers and general social services.

Returning to the case of the Lombardy Region, it is also possible to find some concrete examples of resistance. Some organizations have chosen not to accredit all the SHs they manage, communicating and sharing this decision with other actors in their local networks, particularly with the other AVCs and SHs.

This choice functions as a strategy to preserve spaces of freedom and experimentation beyond the regulatory frameworks imposed by the Region. By communicating and collectively reflecting on this decision, these organizations create opportunities for the emergence of alternative alliances and interactions that can generate new meanings and challenge the dominant interpretive repertoires shaping institutionalization processes. In

doing so, they not only resist the forces of depoliticization but also keep alive the potential for transformative feminist practices, even within highly institutionalized contexts (Butler, 2015).

5. Concluding Reflections

This article has examined the role of normative devices in structuring relationships within territorial anti-violence networks, focusing on the Lombardy Region. It has explored how these instruments delineate the scope of action for AVCs and SHs and how they shape organizational practices, women's trajectories, and the positioning of AVCs and SHs as political actors within the anti-violence system.

By analyzing laws, accreditation processes, and governance arrangements alongside qualitative evidence gathered from AVCs and SHs, we have shown how processes of institutionalization of the interaction among actors simultaneously strengthen expand "service" coverage and uniform territorial coverage, while also fostering depoliticization, standardization, and the responsibilization of women within interventions addressing gender-based violence.

Our findings highlight three interrelated levels at which these dynamics manifest.

At the individual level, these dynamics shape women's possibilities for embarking on pathways out of violence. The standardization of support processes and the expectation that women take full responsibility for their trajectories intensify the risk of secondary victimization. Moreover, there is a danger of reinforcing a narrowly defined and essentialized victim identity based solely on the experience of violence, at the expense of an intersectional understanding that considers intersecting axes of oppression and of approaches that pluralize women's experiences of violence (Gago, 2022).

At the organizational level, tensions emerge between feminist-informed practices and institutional requirements, affecting the subjectivities of AVCs and SHs. Accreditation processes risk transforming these organizations into service providers rather than political actors, thereby weakening their capacity for advocacy and their transformative role within the networks.

These dynamics may also generate a backlash at the political level, leading to the normalization of the phenomenon, obscuring its structural causes, and legitimizing depoliticized forms of management and intervention. This process risks resulting in what Segato (2018) calls an "*amnesia of origins*" — that is, the erasure of the memory of the struggles and processes that first pushed institutions to recognize violence against women as a public issue.

Nonetheless, our findings also reveal spaces of resistance. Some organizations actively experiment with alternative practices — for instance, by refusing to accredit all their shelters or by forming informal alliances to preserve feminist spaces and relational methodologies. These acts demonstrate the potential for alternative forms of institutionalization that embrace diversity and foster transformative action rather than depoliticized standardization.

This study is limited to a single regional context and a specific set of regulatory frameworks. Future research should include comparative analyses across regions and countries to explore how different governance models shape feminist practices and women's experiences. Nevertheless, it highlights the value of analyzing institutionalized interactions among anti-violence actors as a lens for understanding broader trends in anti-violence policies. Such an approach can illuminate the tensions, ambivalences, and transformative possibilities that characterize the field today.

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