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Violence against Migrant Women. Reflections on Patriarchy, Migration and Gender-Based Violence

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Abstract
The article aims to demonstrate that the condition of migrant women, analyzed through the lens of gender-based violence, represents the persistence of patriarchy in contemporary societies. Focusing specifically on the Italian case, the analysis shows that migrant women have been invisible in the public debate on migration for decades, and have only emerged in the last twenty years in relation to the phenomenon of gender-based violence. In fact, their representation as victims of violence makes them vulnerable and subject to the public powers of the host state, and reinforces and legitimizes security policies against migrants. The argument proceeds in three steps: 1) A philosophical-political reconceptualization of the nexus between gender, migration, and violence; the argument draws on Hannah Arendt's philosophical analysis of the deprivation of citizenship rights of stateless persons and Toni Morrison's sociological reconstruction of the processes of *Othering*. 2) A critique of international humanitarian law from an intersectional and postcolonial perspective; through Jane Freedman and Simon Turner's theories on vulnerability and victimization, the article aims to demonstrate how discourse on gender-based violence prevents genuine processes of empowerment and escape from violence. 3) The application of this approach to reception practices, starting from *Leaving Violence Living Safe* project, promoted by the anti-violence centers of the D.*i*.RE network in collaboration with UNHCR.

Keywords: *gender, gender-based violence, migration, patriarchy, intersectionality, postcolonialism*

1. Introduction

The condition of migrant women represents a paradigm of contemporary patriarchy. This thesis will be explored in the present article through a philosophical-political critique of the ways in which violence and migration are currently associated in cultural

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representation, political discourse and the administrative management of migration with particular attention to the Italian case. Asylum seeking, refugee, undocumented and with residence permits women – who now constitute a significant percentage of both the migrant population and the overall population – stay in our country for many years, suffering the profound effects of triple discrimination: exclusion from the public sphere as both women and non-citizens; political and social subjugation due to their diverse cultural backgrounds; and violence experienced during the migration process, within families, at work, and in social and institutional contexts.

Despite having been a driving force in migration flows from the beginning, women have long remained invisible to both politics and society, hidden behind their partners or relegated to families where they perform all-encompassing caregiving roles (Coccia, Demaio and Nanni 2023). Their marginalization has legitimized the absence of policies addressing their needs, particularly concerning integration into the labour market, education, and society, and has led to the acceptance of a double standard in the discourse on rights. While public initiatives aimed at gender equality have gained increasing importance in national and local policies, the growing segment of the female population lacking citizenship rights continues to be silenced.

In recent decades, migrant women have gained visibility and an increasing number of regulatory measures have been dedicated to them – but at a high cost: the cost of being victims of violence. The female component of migration is analysed in political discourse primarily through the lens of sexual and gender-based violence as inseparable issues. Migrant women have gained public attention, legal recognition, and social and political action only as victims. This perspective aligns with the security and emergency approach that host countries continue to adopt toward immigration (Belliti 2024). However, the commitments made by states regarding violence against migrant women – without addressing its structural causes – fail to produce meaningful change, as they are inherently insufficient to reduce the phenomenon.

To examine the deep interconnections between patriarchy, the condition of migrant women, and gender-based violence, I will structure my argument in three stages. First, I will propose a philosophical-political reconceptualization of the migrant figure from a gender perspective. Second, I will critic the current public discourse on gender-based violence in migratory contexts. Finally, I will advocate for an intersectional and postcolonial approach, drawing on both theoretical frameworks and field experiences.

1.1. **Data and Methods**

References and data on the condition of migrant women in Italy are drawn from texts on the sociology of migration published over the last ten years. The analysis of the body of international humanitarian law relating to gender-based violence is conducted according to critical theory methodology, with the aim of deconstructing and reconstructing the conceptual frameworks that inspire the norms and practices governing migration policies. Exposing the link between gender, migration, and violence as a structural component of the patriarchal system aims to initiate a transformative process in thinking, law, and the management of migration, both at the political and administrative levels.

2. Patriarchy, migration, violence

My contribution to philosophical research on migration starts from a gender perspective applied to the entire migration phenomenon[1]. I will attempt to demonstrate how today migrants experience a condition analogous to that of women under patriarchy and how migrant women represent the most evident form of patriarchy's persistence in our societies, despite the many successes achieved by white women over the past century.

2.1. **What is Patriarchy?**

Patriarchy can be defined as a specific form of social organization that places women "in a generalized condition of servitude and subordination to male power, in every area of public and private life" (Facchi and Giolo 2023: 10). Regarding its origins, three main theories have attempted to provide an explanation. The first is the anthropological theory, which traces the foundation of patriarchy to the violence that men have historically exercised over women to satisfy their instinctive desire for mating. According to this view, men – anatomically predisposed for penetration and the conquest of the female body – forced women into submission to a father, brother, or husband in exchange for protection from other males (Brownmiller 1975). This hypothesis suggests that patriarchy dates back to the dawn of humanity, rooted in a presumed natural difference between the male and female sexes, with the former considered the universal and neutral One, and the latter the Other – destined to be dominated and included within the One (de Beauvoir 1949).

The second theory emerges from the materialist conception of history from a Marxist and Engelsian perspective, which argues that patriarchy began with the institution of private property. According to this view, as productive labour performed by men outside the family became increasingly central to subsistence, it overshadowed reproductive labour, which was entirely assigned to women within the domestic sphere (Engels 1884; Dalla Costa 1972; Mies 1986). In this sense, capitalism has significantly transformed and reinforced patriarchy, as women's reproductive labour – essential yet unpaid – contributes to the continuous and large-scale accumulation of capital.

The third theory, rooted in political theory, defines patriarchy as the result of the social contract that underpins the modern state, from which women are excluded because of a natural right – rooted in religious, cultural, and symbolic traditions – that grants men power over the public sphere while relegating women to the private sphere (Pateman 1988). However, even within the private sphere, a contract exists – the marriage contract – which designates men as the heads of their families.

2.2. **Non-Citizen Women**

For this reason, scholars have spoken of women's original exclusion from citizenship and their delayed and reversed path to acquiring rights compared to men. According to classical citizenship theories, the recognition of rights has historically progressed from civil rights to political rights and, finally to social rights (Marshall 1964). In contrast, the first rights that women gained access to were social rights, particularly those related to

[1] These reflections draw on Italian studies carried out so far on human rights and migration (Calloni, Marras and Serughetti 2012; Boiano and Serughetti 2021) and on philosophy of migration (Di Cesare 2017; Cavalletti and Solla 2020).

work-life balance, which preceded political rights – such as voting and electoral participation – and civil rights, which were later expanded to encompass new gender-related claims (Facchi and Giolo 2023: 69).

On a symbolic, social, and political level, women represent the Other/Difference, as opposed to the One/Male Identity, which defines the normative order. They are associated with the female gender – linked to bodies, nature, and emotions – in contrast to the male gender, which is aligned with the mind, culture and reason that uphold the anthropocentric order. For centuries, women have been the "angels of the domestic hearth," excluded from the public sphere – namely politics and full citizenship as realized within the state order.

2.3. **Migrant, the Otherness**

Now, let us examine the condition of the migrant. Having left their community of origin, the migrant becomes the Other in relation to the Self of the national community – a human being with no status beyond mere survival. The only rights they possess are human rights which can only be protected within a state authority that inherently discriminates between citizens and non-citizens.

Arendt spoke of bare life in reference to stateless persons – individuals who, deprived of a homeland and citizenship, lack all protection and recognition to the extent that they can be illegally yet legitimately confined in internment camps. She also extended this concept to minorities, such as Black people, who, recognized only as such within a community, lose "with the right to equality that freedom of action which is specifically human" (Arendt 1955: 204).

Without citizenship and excluded from the public sphere, the migrant experiences a condition of exclusion and domination akin to that suffered by women under patriarchy. The only difference lies in the nature of their otherness: while women exist within the community and their otherness is defined by gender, migrants come from outside, and their otherness is marked by race.

This is precisely what Toni Morrison highlights in her analysis of the mechanism of "alterisation". Morrison states: "Race has been a constant arbiter of difference, as have wealth, class, and gender – each of which is about power and the necessity of control" (Morrison 2017: 3). However, it is within the community that the process of alterisation leads to exclusion. Those who arrive after renouncing the citizenship of their country of origin are no longer *hospes* – a sacred guest to be welcomed – but *hostis*, an enemy, someone who threatens order by being illegal by definition.

Thus, the migrant is effectively thrust back into a state of nature, where one is inherently exposed to violence. However, unlike in the Hobbesian state of nature – where violence is a constant threat among individuals who are free and equal by natural right – here, violence stems from an inequality of status. This violence can be private, when carried out by native citizens fueled by hatred and intolerance, or public, when exercised by the state through the exclusion of non-citizens. In this case, the migrant is subjected to the violence of sovereign power, which deems such exclusion both permissible and necessary.

In the relationship between migration and violence we find another analogy with gender relations. Violence against women stems from a male power that, in order to assert its dominance, must subjugate the female Other; similarly, violence against migrants serves to reaffirm state power with respect to the foreigner, who is Other from us by race. This is why violence against migrant women cannot be abstracted from the context of structural violence that connotes migration as such, determined by that mechanism of

"othering" typical of the patriarchal organisation of society. Gender violence in migration is grafted within violence in migration tout-court, as the result and consequence of discrimination, oppression, relations of domination based on gender, race, and any form of otherness.

Finally, another element reinforces the link between patriarchy and migration: the legacy of colonization, which was built on the intensive, extractive, and predatory exploitation of territories, populations, and animal species. Ecofeminism firstly highlighted the triple dimension of violence exerted by patriarchal capitalism – on women, the peoples of the Global South, and nature (d'Eaubonne 1974; Merchant 1980; Mies 1986). Today, this violence dangerously extends across the entire planet through climate change, the depletion of natural resources and the unsustainability of demographic pressures. In this sense, migration represents the inevitable *nemesis* of the chain reaction triggered by the overlapping of all capitalist forms of oppression, exploitation, and violence.

2.4. **An intersectional analysis on gender and migration**

Being a migrant is thus one of the consequences of the patriarchal system and an exemplary manifestation of *intersectionality*, a concept defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as the interweaving of different forms of domination and oppression, which together create a unique, particular, and subjective condition of subjugation. Migration itself constitutes a distinct axis of domination, characterized by the condition of *naked life* – a life deprived of citizenship and exposed to the violence of established powers. Analysing sexual and domestic violence, Crenshaw (1991) identifies three different levels of intersectionality. The first is *structural intersectionality*, shaped by the intertwining of race and gender as fundamental axes of domination. The second is *political intersectionality*, which marginalizes and renders violence against racialized women invisible – both within anti-racist discourse (which primarily focuses on men) and within anti-sexist discourse (which predominantly centres on white women). The third is *representational intersectionality*, referring to the cultural constructions produced by these same axes of domination and oppression.

Within the interplay of these intersectional dimensions, violence against migrant women has entered public discourse. The violence resulting from the intersection of race and gender is framed within the migrant's process of *alterisation* and confined to their culture of origin. This framing allows such violence to remain excluded from anti-racist discourse – where acknowledging it might contradict political, social, and cultural inclusion efforts – and from anti-sexist discourse, where it is neutralized through cultural stereotypes imposed on non-Western societies. Finally, violence against migrant women is often instrumentalised within neo-colonial narratives, reinforcing the stereotype of the "violent foreign man" and the "victimized foreign woman" – an ideal construct used to legitimize anti-immigration policies.

3. Contradictions of humanitarian law

Migration thus entails a form of *structural violence* rooted in the patriarchal organization of our societies – one that also encompasses violence against migrant women. Separating the latter from the former serves to reinforce securitarian policies and border rejection strategies, which distinguish between *foreigners* (the unwanted and

disturbing Other) and *victims* (the *others* – deliberately written in lowercase – who are deemed ready to be rescued from the misfortune of their origins and assimilated into our culture).

3.1. **The naturalization of women's vulnerability**

Migrant women, depicted as inherently vulnerable, as victims incapable of autonomous redemption, become the focal point of the paradox of humanitarian intervention. Examining the condition of migrants in refugee camps, Michel Agier had already observed how "these adrift and waiting creatures" were forced to survive solely on humanitarian aid. He questioned whether humanitarian agencies, while striving to protect people from harm, were in fact unwittingly assisting the *perpetrators of ethnic cleansing* – functioning as low-cost agents of exclusion and, more significantly, as mechanisms designed to offload and placate the anxieties of the rest of the world. In doing so, they absolve the guilty, soothe the conscience of the scrupulous, and defuse the sense of urgency and fear surrounding contingency. In the same vein, Bauman wrote: "Putting refugees in the hands of aid workers and closing one's eyes to the armed guards in the background seems the ideal way to reconcile the irreconcilable: the irresistible desire to dispose of these human refuse, while at the same time gratifying one's burning desire for moral rectitude" (Bauman 2005: 96).

It is within this humanitarian response that the discourse on violence against migrant women is framed. They embody a triple dimension of otherness in relation to the native white man: they belong to another gender, another race, and lack citizenship. Yet, unlike migrant men, they can be subjected to both private and public violence without necessarily being publicly hated. They can be invisible behind the role of breadwinner of their partners, prevented from emerging in the illegal paths of trafficking (Abbatecola 2018), reabsorbed into family relationships or enlisted in cheap care services (Garofalo Geymonat, Marchetti and Palumbo 2023), if not drowned in the Mediterranean (Schmoll 2022). These forms of violence can be both private and public. Private violence is inflicted by criminal human trafficking organizations, exploiters of illegal labour, and those who commit rape – whether driven by sheer desire or in exchange for basic necessities. Public violence, on the other hand, arises as a consequence of border rejection policies and the failure to conduct sea rescues – practices that have been widely condemned as acts of violence and violations of human rights (GREVIO 2022: 161).

When migrant women enter the public sphere, they are portrayed as victims – defined solely by the violence they have endured since their departure and categorized as a vulnerable group. This constitutes a form of public and institutional violence, exercised by a state that wields exceptional powers. It imposes rigid assistance pathways, sets unattainable formal requirements for obtaining residence permits or international protection, and often conditions their legal status on judicial cooperation (GREVIO 2022: 147-148).

3.2. **Humanitarianism as state of exception**

Migrant women bear the full weight of the ambivalence of humanitarian law. On one hand, it applies to those who have lost everything and been reduced to *bare life*, ensuring only their mere survival. On the other hand, it restricts freedom of movement and stifles autonomy. Humanitarian aid for vulnerable groups is granted only on the condition of submission to the *state of exception* – administered within controlled spaces and through

regulatory practices that continuously reaffirm state power. According to the Italian Cutro Decree[2], only those from the humanitarian corridors and those declared vulnerable during their stay in temporary reception facilities (minors, unaccompanied minors, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, people with serious illnesses or mental disorders, victims of trafficking and violence) are then brought into the reception and integration system. There is therefore first a passage of ascertaining vulnerability, not codified by the law and therefore subject to the discretion of those working in the temporary structures, and then insertion into paths that guarantee basic assistance and orientation services, while the procedures for the recognition of forms of protection and asylum take place. The physical and psychological displacement of migrants in a state of vulnerability reflects all the ambivalences of humanitarian law. It oscillates between a relative privilege – when compared to those subjected to expulsion and clandestinity – and a persistent stigma that reinforces their otherness within the host community.

Jane Freedman (2019) highlights how the classification of vulnerability for both groups and individuals is shaped by racial biases and gender stereotypes. Rather than being understood as a condition that arises from specific contexts and relationships, vulnerability is often perceived as a fixed, objective reality – defined from an external perspective that labels certain situations as inherently dangerous.

"Vulnerability is not an intrinsic condition but a relational one, meaning that individuals may find themselves vulnerable at certain moments in their lives due to specific personal circumstances. Women who have experienced sexual violence, for example, are not necessarily vulnerable *per se*, but they may be *made* vulnerable – or their vulnerability may be exacerbated – by being forced to share spaces with unknown men or by being pressured to recount their experiences to a male immigration officer. Conversely, those not typically considered vulnerable – such as women traveling with husbands or family membersmay – in reality can be victims of violence and face even greater risks precisely because of the assumption that their husbands will protect them" (Freedman 2021: 240-241).

The automatic association of vulnerability with migrant women not only strips them of agency but also creates conditions for further discrimination and marginalization, even within spaces meant for refuge and protection.

3.3. **The neocolonial perspective of the humanitarian law**

The same stereotypical representation of vulnerable groups would transpire from the acts and norms of international humanitarian law dedicated to gender-based violence in migratory contexts. According to Simon Turner (2017), the emphasis that international authorities and agencies are now placing on this issue is based on politically and culturally prejudiced assumptions, such as the claim that the displacement of masses of people generates social and moral chaos, which in turn triggers violent male sexuality by black men.

"Such assumptions about sexual and gender-based violence tend to be based on, as well as reproduce, orientalist and neocolonial representations of sexualities and violence in the Global South ... Apart from such assumptions on violence obscuring our understanding of the mechanisms of violence, they may also add harm to damage because

[2] https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legge:2023-03-10;20.

they reinforce gender and race stereotypes, constructing the male refugee of colour as a threat to humanitarian care and human rights" (Turner 2017: 45).

This humanitarian approach, which looks at women as necessarily victims of violence perpetrated in their countries of origin and by male migrants, on the one hand tends to reinforce the choice of repressive and rejectionist policies, and on the other neutralises the figure of the migrant woman, denying her political subjectivity and access to public discourse. The country of arrival deresponsibilises itself by taking charge of the problem of violence, without guaranteeing the victims the economic, social, and cultural resources necessary to build an autonomous life project. The consequence of this approach is the lack of a data control and monitoring system and the absence of coordinated social inclusion policies at the national level. As an example: the Department of Public Security of the Italian Ministry of the Interior does not monitor migration data by gender[3]; the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies breaks down the data by gender, but the latest update dates back to 2021[4]; the latest analysis of gender-based violence by ISTAT (the National Institute of Statistics) dates back to 2014, and data on migrant women published year after year is collected from D.i.Re reports[5].

4. Decolonising the view

If humanitarianism is conditioned by a neo-colonial vision that limits itself to acting on the effects, it is necessary to adopt a gender-sensitive and multidisciplinary approach to female migration (Freedman, Sahraoui and Tastsoglou 2022; Di Stasi et al. 2023; Salehin 2024) and decolonise the gaze; only in this way grasping the roots of violence in migratory contexts is possible.

4.1. **The coloniality of gender**

According to some postcolonial (Duraccio 2021) and decolonial feminisms (Torre, Benegiamo and Dal Gobbo 2020), understanding the condition of migrant women requires going beyond the intersectional approach itself. The different axes of oppression and domination related to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc. should be analysed not as distinct from each other, but as all generated by the same process of conquest and colonisation that the West has imposed on the rest of the world: gender would also be, like race, a product of colonialism. Lugones (2010) speaks of a "modern colonial system of gender"[6], based on a multiplicity of dichotomies: from that of human/non-human, which discriminates populations on the basis of the concept of race, to that of man/woman, which is the foundation of the concept of gender and the consequent patriarchal and heterosexual order. The "coloniality of gender", which recurs in migration, can only be overcome by acting out an alternative and resistant form of life to the dichotomous colonial one, expressed in a "historicised and embodied intersubjectivity"

[3] https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2025-10/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_06-10-2025.pdf

[4] https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/it-it/Dettaglio-approfondimento/id/45/Le-comunita-migranti-in-Italia-Edizione-2021

[5] https://www.istat.it/statistiche-per-temi/focus/violenza-sulle-donne/il-fenomeno/violenza-dentro-e-fuori-la-famiglia/il-numero-delle-vittime-e-le-forme-di-violenza/

[6] Lugones quotes Quijano, who defines the concept of coloniality as that specific form of domination and exploitation that is constituted in the world capitalist system of power (Quijano 1991).

(Lugones 2010: 746) capable of critiquing gender oppression and transforming the social sphere, where the everyday life in which women act takes place. On the other hand, Rita Segato argues that gender pre-existed the colonial order in the form of a *low-intensity patriarchy*, which capitalism then radically transformed, intensifying its oppressive and violent dimensions. Like Lugones, Segato criticizes the Eurocentric notion that merely extending existing rights frameworks is sufficient to uphold the rights of non-white, Indigenous, and Black women in colonized regions – framing such efforts as an attempt to present modern civilization as having overcome its patriarchal structures (Segato 2016). However, unlike Lugones, Segato views gender as a critical resource capable of generating autonomous subjectivity.

4.2. **"Faculdad" of the margin**

Whether through gender or other embodied identities, migrant women must mobilize that particular *faculdad* described by Anzaldúa (2012) – an acute awareness that "communicates through images and symbols," a *sensibility* unique to those who are "extremely open to the world". This heightened perception belongs to those who endure the most attacks: "women, homosexuals of all races, dark-skinned people, the renegades, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreigners" – all those who inhabit borderlands, existing at the crossroads of bodies, identities, cultures, and oppression.

This *faculdad* aligns with what Freedman terms the "strategic use of vulnerability" (Freedman 2019: 10) – a reversal of the victim's position into that of an agent who has consciously chosen migration. Such individuals navigate both the opportunities migration presents – whether economic advancement or the pursuit of freedom, which may mean escaping oppression, gender-based violence, or other forms of subjugation (Brambilla et al. 2022: 17) – and the inherent risks of encountering further violence.

4.3. **An example of postcolonial approach**

The meaning of this faculdad has been well understood by the anti-violence centres of D.i.RE national network, which in 2019, in partnership with UNHCR, developed the *Leaving Violence Living Safe* project[7] aimed at providing appropriate responses to the welcomed foreign women.

The encounter between migrant women and native women working in the centres was possible thanks to the transformative power of mutual recognition between culturally different subjectivities. The handbook on reception methodologies, that was published at the end of the project (D.*i*.RE 2019-2020), returns an intense process of deconstruction of stereotypes and reconstruction of a shared space, in which welcomed women and operators put themselves on the same level to compare, from their respective points of view, the meaning of the language of reception. The operators aimed to develop and solidify an intersectional methodology by engaging in *decoloniality exercises*, acknowledging the privileges, benefits, and advantages inherited through "color and epistemological positioning", and actively working to avoid reproducing *us/them*

[7] https://www.leavingviolence.it/en/. The project aimed at training for the centres' operators, mediators, experts and lawyers, networking with other territorial actors dealing with violence and migration a methodology of reception practice, awareness-raising for asylum-seeking and refugee women, advocacy for institutions at all levels.

dichotomies. Their goal was to rethink relationships beyond "paradigms and assumptions in which women do not recognize themselves" (Carbone 2022: 190), thereby enabling the creation of pathways out of violence and life projects that align with the imaginaries and desires of those affected.

D.*i*.Re's experience shows that decolonizing and depatriarchalizing thought and language is essential to addressing gender-based violence among migrant women. This experience can and must be replicated within local anti-violence networks and the reception system. Gender-sensitive training, requested by GREVIO for social and reception operators (GREVIO 2022: 154-160), must be accompanied by socio-cultural training capable of communicating with migrant women. This is a real challenge for a new welfare system that needs to change its organization, services, and staff skills in response to the phenomenon of migration. Firstly, the reception system, in conjunction with the territorial commissions for the recognition of international protection, must be able to coordinate with the territorial anti-violence networks through the presence of dedicated and trained staff. Secondly, all services in the network must be trained in a socio-cultural perspective, with the qualified presence of linguistic-cultural mediators. Social and health services, legal and psychological assistance, and volunteers at anti-violence centers must share a holistic approach, communication methods, and risk assessment, capable of building relationships of listening, empathy, and trust with migrant women. The ability to recognise their resources and capacity to escape violence and build their own freedom on the basis of their culture, their life plans and their interpretation of reality is a prerequisite for combating gender-based violence in migration.

Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate how humanitarian law and migration policies are shaped by the production of the *Other*, a process deeply rooted in patriarchal societies with colonial legacies. This mechanism of *othering* operates with the highest degree of humanitarian ambivalence when applied to migrant women.

To really assert the rights of migrant women, who are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, a perspective shift is essential. A gender-sensitive approach – understood in its broadest and most inclusive sense – has to be adopted to recognize gender in migration as both a marker of historical oppression and a site of situated experience for women and other marginalized subjects. The challenge lies in extending the relationship of mutual recognition, already fostered between native and migrant women in the anti-violence centres of the D.*i*.Re network, to institutional and social contexts within the reception system and local anti-violence networks.

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