



The Intermediary Role of Women Workers for the Inclusion of Women Migrants SOGIESC: Between Recognition and Reflexivity

Emiliana Mangone¹ · Giuseppe Masullo²

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Abstract

The intermediary role of women workers in NGOs is very important when lesbian, bisexual and queer migrant women apply for international protection in immigration countries. They are more exposed to multiple forms of discrimination when experiencing the intersection of multiple elements of vulnerability (gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, social class, etc.). Applying the technique of narrative interviewing to women NGO workers in Italy, on the one hand, we will try to understand the role of intermediaries that these women assume in taking care of migrant women who are distinguished by Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) and, on the other, to understand whether these women's activities constitute an opportunity to construct new gendered and sexual imaginaries to the extent that they themselves live a web of experiences that are in some ways similar to those of migrant women. Intermediation enables women workers to acquire a critical capacity with respect to their personal investment in the cause of SOGIESC persons and with respect to the procedure itself for obtaining international protection. Achieving this awareness allows women workers to suggest actions that, inspired by an intersectional perspective, are more appropriate in responding to the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by SOGIESC migrant women in the immigration society.

Keywords Migrants LGBTIQ+ women · Intermediaries · Reflexivity · Italy · LGBTIQ+ NGOs

✉ Emiliana Mangone
emangone@unisa.it

¹ Department of Political and Communication Sciences, University of Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, 84084 Fisciano, SA, Italy

² Department of Human, Philosophic and Education Sciences, University of Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, 84084 Fisciano, SA, Italy

The Multiple Vulnerability of Migrant Women SOGIESC

The UNHCR's latest world report (2022) notes that 89.3 million people have left their country, with this being an all-time high. Of these, 49% are women (3% over 60 years, 26% between 18 and 59 years and, finally, 20% between 0 and 17 years). In the same year in Europe, the number of people displaced "increased by 3% to more than 7 million. This increase reflects newly recognized refugees, who total 288,000, primarily in Germany (79,700), France (51,000) and Italy (21,100)" (UNHCR, 2022, p. 14). In the latter country, which will be the subject of the "exploratory case study" presented on the following pages, 105,131 migrants had arrived by December 2022 (by sea alone), of whom 13% were women (UNHCR, 2023). Furthermore, when considering applications for international protection in 2021 (Ministry of the Interior, 2022), 53,609 applications were submitted and 51,931 were examined (this number also includes applications from previous years). Of these, 58% were refused, while the remaining 42% were divided as follows: 14% refugee status, 14% subsidiary protection and 14% non-refoulement (Art. 3 and 8, European Convention on Human Rights-ECHR). For data on applications for international protection for Italy (but also internationally), there is no availability of data disaggregated by the reasons for the application (political, sexual orientation, religion, etc.); therefore, it is not possible to know the number of migrants (men and women) who applied for international protection by Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC)¹.

If these are the numbers of an exodus that has global dimensions with multifactorial and multidimensional reasons determining it, accompanied by the high number of denials to applications for international protection (as in the case of Italy), what is interesting is the fact that some categories of migrants are even more vulnerable² in the territories of arrival. The latter can be explained by the fact that migrants are vulnerable because not only are they migrants, but they are even more so if in addition to this vulnerability, they also have others: one of these cases is undoubtedly that of lesbian, bisexual and queer women. If the gender dimension in itself leads to vulnerability, this becomes multiple in the case of women who are migrants and have a non-heteronormative sexual orientation.

The aim of this article is to analyse the intermediary role that women volunteers of Italian LGBTIQ+ NGOs play as front offices in accompanying and supporting the integration processes of SOGIESC migrant women. Therefore, of people in need of safeguards and protection because they are persecuted in their countries of origin for

¹ Through the Open Data platform of the National Commission for the Right to Asylum (<https://asylum.opendata.dlci.interno.it/>), it is possible to check the number of applications for international protection submitted in Italy (data disaggregated by country of origin, gender, age group and type of application, first or repeated), but it is not possible to know the reasons behind the application.

² Here, the concept of vulnerability is to be understood as "a state of high exposure to certain risks and uncertainties, in combination with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and uncertainties and cope with their negative consequences. It exists at all levels and dimensions of society and forms an integral part of the human condition, affecting both individuals and society as whole." (UN, 2003: 3).

their gender non-conforming identity (such as transgender people) or people with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation (such as lesbian, bisexual or queer women).

According to the geopolitical and legislative analysis produced by the International Lesbian and Gay Association, “there are currently 67 UN Member States with provisions criminalising consensual same-sex conduct, with two additional UN Member States having de facto criminalisation. Additionally, there is one non-independent jurisdiction that criminalises same-sex sexual activity (Cook Islands). Among those countries which criminalise, we have full legal certainty that the death penalty is the legally prescribed punishment for consensual same-sex sexual acts in six UN Member States, namely: Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria (12 Northern states only), Saudi Arabia and Yemen. There are also five additional UN Member States where certain sources indicate that the death penalty may be imposed for consensual same-sex conduct, but where there is less legal certainty on the matter. These countries are: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia (including Somaliland) and the United Arab Emirates” (ILGA, 2020, p. 25).

Considering more specifically women with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation (such as lesbian, bisexual and queer), the concomitant action of lesbophobia with patriarchy—which has historically exerted a strong domination over the female body and the expression of female sexuality—makes the condition of the homosexual migrant woman even more complex than that of the homosexual migrant man, since the former, unlike the latter, is more exposed to male domination and violence (Corbisiero, Masullo & Monaco 2021). For all these reasons, SOGIESC migrant women are the ones who have the most difficulty expressing the need to live out their real sexual identity and to a lesser extent turn to anti-violence centres or LGBTIQ+ associations once they have arrived in immigration countries.

It is well-known how the provisions governing the process of obtaining international protection as a SOGIESC migrant are mainly contained in the 1951 Geneva Convention, the subsequent 1967 Protocol and other international conferences that have focused on these issues. In the case of Italy, the SOGIESC migrant woman can apply for international protection at the *Commissione nazionale per il diritto di asilo* (National Commission for the Right to Asylum), after an interview at one of the *Commissione territoriale* (Territorial Commissions) whose main task is to assess the veracity of the story. If international protection, on the one hand, is the goal to aspire to in order to obtain the documents that allow a life worth living (liveable and visible); on the other, it is a further crossing in a “bureaucratic and juridical sea” bristling with inquisitorial interviews (Mangone & Russo, 2020) bordering on the “accusation of lying” about one’s sexuality that sometimes leads to the denial of protection based precisely on the attested falsehood of the self-talk that the applicant for protection is said to have given.

In light of these difficulties, the advocacy function performed by LGBTIQ+ NGOs, and especially those working in them, in supporting SOGIESC migrant women in applying for international protection is therefore of great importance. In this frame, the intermediation role of women volunteers at the NGOs front offices is crucial, both in providing material to support migrant women’s applications before the Territorial Commissions, as well as in preparing them for interviews, making sure that their story is intelligible and truthful (Ferrara et al., 2021). Research in the

social sciences has sufficiently documented these aspects, highlighting the light and shadows of an activity that not infrequently proposes rhetoric and procedures that overlap with institutional ones (Martorano & Prearo, 2020). While, on the one hand, SOGIESC migrant intake desks are activated, on the other, it can be observed how this aspect does not automatically translate into the assumption in the association's mission of the themes of anti-racism and an intersectional perspective in the full and critical meaning that the term assumes. The process of homonormalisation, moreover, combined with a growing homonationalism (Puar, 2017), means that some of these organisations reproduce a perspective in which the SOGIESC migrant woman is conceived as a passive, vulnerable subject, to be educated, in some cases to be “civilized” to the sexual citizenship rights proposed by the host society, not infrequently applying paternalistic and ethnocentric logics.

Narrative Interviews of Women Workers (Intermediaries) in NGOs in Italy: Theoretical-Methodological Framework

In order to present a concrete example of what has been written so far, the following will look at the intermediation processes that take place precisely when SOGIESC migrant women address or only address NGOs in the countries of immigration to start the procedures for international protection or, simpler, integration paths. Particular attention will be paid to women volunteer workers in their role as intermediaries between the needs of the SOGIESC person and the institutional procedures required by the international protection recognition process which, as mentioned above, in Italy takes place through a formal request to the National Commission for the Right to Asylum, after an interview at one of the Territorial Commissions. The experience gained by women working in NGOs enables them to acquire a critical capacity both with respect to the procedure itself with the Territorial Commissions as well as with respect to the organisation of the service in which they offer their time as volunteers in making suggestions to improve inclusive action.

The encounter between these women (migrants and operators), which is also cross-cultural since it allows to observe any similarities and differences in collective and individual values, practices and attitudes, also proves to be an important moment for the operators to question their own way of relating to the needs of people marked by multiple vulnerabilities. An attempt will therefore be made to understand whether these occasions for the “exchange” of experiences lead the women volunteers of the NGOs in their role as intermediaries to the formation of an intersectional reflexivity that passes from the questioning—by the women operators—of their own positioning within the field of care and in recognising common factors of disadvantage. It is well-known how the intersectional approach focuses its analysis on the lived condition of people who experience multiple vulnerabilities related to gender, sexual identity, skin colour, ethnic origin, social status, etc. (Crenshaw, 1991). If the current debate on intersectionality has, in academic venues, shifted the focus of the discussion to the need to translate this analytical strategy into operational terms (Hill Collins, 2015), outside of these venues, this concept has proved interesting in how international organisations and human rights movements elaborate it by recovering

its “original” meaning, that is, of critiquing social inequalities and the need to grasp links between systems of oppression as in the case of sexism and racism (Bernacchi, 2018). Intersectional reflexivity thus becomes a premise in which to invest for a new way of conceiving NGOs as well as the sense of militancy: recognising the same factors of oppression in the intersectional sense of the term makes it possible to think of more inclusive reception services, not only for SOGIESC migrants, but for all categories of the variegated “rainbow” world.

In the following, therefore, attention will be paid to the dynamics that take place between SOGIESC foreign women and the intermediary role of NGOs operators (in this case, women operators) who deal with reception and integration and who, in turn, often experience the same condition of vulnerability as these migrants since they belong to the LGBTIQ+ community. (Masullo, 2019; Masullo & Ferrara, 2020).

The focus, therefore, will be on women volunteer workers to support our reflections on the narrative that they themselves provide of their experiences. We will also outline what can be considered an “exploratory study” that needs to be further investigated, in light of what emerged from its results. In carrying out the exploratory study, the questions that guided the researchers were as follows: (a) How do the women front office workers take on the needs of SOGIESC migrants and what problems arise in taking them on?; (b) How do they relate to the life stories (narration) of SOGIESC women and in how much of these stories do they recognise themselves?; (c) To what extent does “recognising oneself” (by the women who work in the NGOs) in the stories of the SOGIESC women, affect the idea of the service offered, and how does this point of view matured in the “field” relate to the protection and reception actions provided (both by the NGOs and the institutions).

To analyse these aspects, the researchers collected the experiences of three women workers³ at the LGBTQ+ migrant desks of NGOs operating in the Campania Region in Southern Italy, who were identified through personal contacts or a formal request to the NGOs themselves.

The technique used for the collection of experiences was the narrative interview⁴ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008) which, in this case, produced the stories of the women workers’ experiences. The choice of this instrument is motivated by the fact that narration has an inherent potential to bring to light not only the reflexive work emerging from the care relationship, but also the horizons of meaning to which migrant

³ In order to ensure the anonymity of the persons who volunteered to recount their experience, names are omitted and quotations will simply be referred to by the term “Interview: followed by a progressive number 1–3 depending on the reference. For the same reason, the names of the organisations where these women work will be omitted using the generic terms NGO or association. Furthermore, it is clarified that: from the point of view of gender identity, the person of Interview1 recognises herself as queer, Interview2 (born biologically female) recognises herself as a trans Female to Male (FTM) person, Interview3, on the other hand, recognises herself as a female gender person. While respecting these differences, for the sake of linearity of writing we will always refer to the cases using the term “women workers”.

⁴ The narrative interview is characterised by the following phases: (a) the invitation to narrate freely; (b) the main narrative is independently produced even in the case of a biographical-narrative interview; (c) the questions for narrative generation: (1) using the key points noted in phase 2; (b) other questions and finally, (d) the conclusion of the interview.

women refer in their social action. Reflecting, therefore, on the experience of suspension experienced by these women seeking international protection in the host territories requires the adoption of a “certain gaze” (Dal Lago & De Biase, 2002), loaded with knowledge not necessarily codified in a vademecum or other written text but capable of observing and grasping marginal, unusual or little-known aspects of the surrounding reality. Social identities and actions, on the other hand, are narrated and are not just a form of social life imposed on individuals through language (Somers, 1994), but constitute a representation of it. As is the case for social researchers who “are ordinary human beings who have dedicated their lives to create knowledge” (Valsiner, 2017, p. 25), women practitioners find themselves in a dual role as observer and observed, as members of the LGBTIQ+ community and as intermediaries, which entails the use of numerous adaptation strategies. In this sense, it is interesting to take up Ricoeur’s (2013) considerations on the hermeneutics of migration. For the scholar, understanding the other proceeds through a simultaneous recognition of the other’s difference and their similarity to us (mirror question): If there are differences that cannot be eliminated, there is also a “how” that puts us in dialectical connection with the other, and without which any differences become indifference. The study approach to the dynamics between migrant women and women workers therefore requires a method focused on the multidimensionality of the relationship expressed through the encounter between the theoretical framework and subjectivities.

The encounter with an unfamiliar place leads to complex processes of adaptation, which in a migratory journey often translates into a process of reworking subjectivities, which is diluted between the personal (the self) and the social (what they are not), in which the mediator between the different cultures (the operator) allows for a dialogue between self-reflection and intersubjectivity. An ongoing self-reflection (May & Perry, 2017)—which is also the operator’s—to try to draw a trajectory in which identities are generated in social practice, avoiding a homologation of themes and perspectives, to highlight the complexity and variety of the lived experiences of both migrant women and women operators.

The narrative thus becomes a relevant analytical tool, given the possibility of observing the subjectivity of both parties involved as a passion that seeks to be narrated (Ricoeur, 1984/1983), as “*narrative mise en place*” (narratives take place). It does not merely provide us with models of experience but is the structuring principle of identity that is produced by the reconfiguration of time through the narrative itself. For this reason, in this contribution, in support of the reflections presented, excerpts from the experience of women workers in providing support and assistance to migrant women belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community are reported. This is since individuals narrate many times a day, and they start doing so as soon as they decide to put words together to create a narrative discourse (Bruner, 1991). In other words, what becomes fundamental to the narrative is the presence of an event—in this case, the encounter between the migrant woman and the woman worker—which Polkinghorne summarises in this way, “narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole. Thus, narratives are to be differentiated from chronicles, which simply list events according to their place

on a time line. Narrative provides a symbolized account of actions that includes a temporal dimension.” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18). On the other hand, narrative analysis in the social sciences is essentially developed between two domains (Ewick & Silbey, 1995): the epistemological one, according to which narratives have the capacity to reveal truths about the social world that are often reduced or neglected due to the use of more traditional methods in social research, and, the political one, according to which narratives have a potentially subversive or transformative significance for social life, the latter aspect of which fits in well with the critical potential expressed by the intersectional approach.

This theoretical-methodological framework makes it possible to further the intermediation role of women operators to obtain a “reading” from another point of view, that is, the point of view of those who must support and accompany integration processes. Observing the point of view of women operators corresponds to the need to adhere to a paradigm shift that is taking place concerning ways of conceiving inclusion and integration processes. These are no longer seen in a unilateral way, from the perspective of including without integrating, but on the contrary must value not only the point of view of those who are often in a vulnerable condition and because of their cultural references intend to integrate in the country of arrival, but also the role of those at the front office of NGOs who voluntarily make their time available to dedicate to the integration of LGBTIQ+ migrant women.

The Intermediation of Women NGOs Workers in Southern Italy: Between Recognition and Reflexivity

The women who took the time to recount their experience present a varied background of knowledge regarding the SOGIESC migrant’s condition and state that they acquired this kind of training in the field and only later conducted specific readings and in-depth studies. All of them were either selected or self-candidates to volunteer in the NGOs’ front offices in favour of migrant women because of their previous experience in the field of migrant reception or their skills in language and cultural mediation (foreign women almost always present difficulties in relating to the customs and languages of the country of immigration).

Before going into the details that emerged from the narrative interviews of the women operators, there is a general element that they have in common, which concerns the so-called “selection of cases” to be actually sent to the Territorial Commissions for the evaluation of the request for international protection. With respect to the “selection of cases”, there is always a difficulty that is both cultural and technical (mainly highlighted by female volunteer lawyers with specific legal skills) and binding for the needs of the Territorial Commissions. The selection procedures consist of an initial interview with the woman to understand her history and assess whether she presents the characteristics required for SOGIESC international protection. The initial interviews are held not only to gather evidence of the persecution and violence suffered by the migrant woman, but also with the aim of understanding the degree of awareness of her sexual orientation.

This work is preparatory to what the SOGIESC person will have to face before the Territorial Commission. As one of the women states, this aspect is rather problematic, especially because of the difficulties migrants (in general) have in relating to meanings and imaginaries related to sexual identity that are typical of Western society. They do not take into account the ways in which homosexuality is experienced in the contexts of the countries of migration. This rigidity in conceiving the dichotomous languages of mainstream sexual identity discourse renders problematic the stories of women and men who, in referring to their sexuality, do so under forms that are not always intelligible, as in the case of bisexuality, which from the point of view of Western society is seen more as a symptom of identity uncertainty than of a genuine sexual preference accorded to both sexes. Migrants' adherence to the dichotomous languages of mainstream sexual identity discourse is very problematic. If this is read in parallel with the account that one of the female operators gave of her personal experience in describing her sexual identity to male migrants, then it can be understood that for a female migrant this account is equally difficult:

I have a gender expression that doesn't conform to either of the mainstream genders and at the time I was also 15 kg lighter so I was very androgynous (...) at the time everyone was male (...) and the English-speaking group looked at me with particular curiosity, especially the Gambians and let's say the 'leader' of this group asked me: 'I have a question: are you a boy or girl?' And for me this was a surprise, it was young and, so, I responded as a western activist saying 'sometimes I am a boy, sometimes I am a girl, I am a no binary person' and explaining what gender identity, sexual orientation and biological sex was. They just wanted to understand what I had between my 'legs', I think, at the end of this (totally inappropriate) explanation of mine they replied 'OK, European staff, in Africa these things do not exist' (Interview1)

Once the veracity of the story has been established, and the user has been taken in charge, the whole preparatory phase of the hearing before the Territorial Commission is initiated: an attempt is made, with the collaboration of the migrant woman, to reconstruct her story making it intelligible to the members of the Commission. This gives rise to what Martorano (2020) refers to as the process of "re-subjection" which is based on the need to "perform" in the sense of rewriting the migrant women's story in relation to the expectations of the Territorial Commission.

If this constitutes the moment of first approach, it is interesting to observe the concrete action of the women workers in relating to the experiences of migrant women. In other words, their personal perspective on the stories and experiences of discrimination and violence suffered in their countries of origin. From the analysis of the narratives, different orientations emerge, also partly linked to the "vocation" for which one has chosen to serve at the migrant desks. These profiles can be distinguished as follows: (a) from an investment linked to a need for professionalisation; (b) from a desire to respond to the needs of vulnerable people for purely humanitarian purposes; finally, (c) from militancy for LGBTIQ+ movements and rights. The latter profile is the most "critical" not only towards the main actors in the asylum

recognition process (the commissions), but in some cases towards the governance of the NGOs and the policies they pursue in providing this type of service. One of the women front-office volunteers, for example, pointed out that the poor access to the service by migrant women is motivated by a “male-centric” approach of the NGO for which she works:

There were too many whites, too many males, you could hear this. There were no other black women (...) very few lesbians, so there is also a work on communication: what kind of image do you give of the association if you always put it in masculine terms? Who do you expect to come if you only ever talk about condoms? If you never talk about women’s sexual health, ... condoms are also important for bisexual women, and also for hetero, trans women, but if you really look at the information campaigns, there’s a fabulous 20-year-old muscular guy who takes an HIV test (Interview3)

The researchers’ attention, therefore, focused on the intertwining of the migrant woman’s experiential dimension and that of the woman worker, not only as a person who plays a role within the specific NGO for which she offers a service, but also in relation to the fact that she herself is a person with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. She has also experienced at first hand the concomitant action of several vulnerability factors (being a woman, lesbian, precarious, disabled, etc.). From the analysis of the narrative interviews, it emerges that, particularly with this type of worker, one generates—starting precisely from the discrepancy between “what one does” and “what one should do”—that fundamental attitude typical of those who embody the intersectional approach in its fullest sense: reflexivity.

It was especially the women’s movement that paid attention to the “situated” character of the observer and prompted reflection on how knowledge claims that present themselves as absolute and universal in practice end up reproducing and reifying existing power relations (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987). Reflexivity, in this case, is meant to be a tool to unmask and deconstruct “universal” knowledge claims, showing their “partial” nature, their inevitable dependence not only on the characteristics and interests of the observer but also on the structural conditions and power relations that order the field of research and the position (in it) of the observer.

Elements in support of this are evident in several passages of the stories, which are more typical of those women workers whose vocation is undoubtedly more inspired by the value of “militancy” than by humanitarian or professionalising logics. A first example of this aspect can be understood from the empathic and identification process that takes place between the parties, especially where the woman worker in relating to the migrant woman sees many traits of herself, problematising her own self in an intersectional sense.

For me, it was very significant as a lesbian to have to deal with other lesbian migrants and it clearly prompted me to a whole series of reflections on my person, my life, thoughts with respect to my privileges and how lesbian relationships can be structured and thought of (Interview1).

This ability is seldom the result of specific training or education, of previous intersectional readings, but more the outcome of a process of recognising oneself in the migrant woman's history and in the same situations that the woman helper herself has had to face as multiple vulnerabilities (not only because she is a woman and a lesbian but, for example, also because of her social class and ableism).

One of the women workers thus expresses herself regarding the difficulties related to mainstream sexual labels and how these should be contextualised in an intersectional sense, i.e. taking into account how they reflect structural positioning, linked to the habitus of specific social classes.

We tend to define in a very specific way various parts of sexual identity: gender identity and romantic and sexual orientation, etc. In short various (...) I can't help but think about the question of class, generational, ethnic... In the same way, I am an Italian person (...), I always say, I am queer, I am this and that, but in the building where I grew up, 'io sono masculone' [I am a tomboy]' full stop. In short, it's the same thing! (Interview1).

The acknowledgement on the part of the woman worker of the possibility of being considered "other" depending on the contexts in which she moves, depending on the habitus she crosses, which are in turn the result of the social positionings she possesses, allows her to get closer to the feeling of the migrant woman, to share with her the personality traits that Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) defined as "*Mestiza*". Of a person who lives on the borders of social and cultural affiliations, who has to manage the complexity of a multiple identity by crossing places in which she is never completely included (Masullo, 2018). Acknowledging the same axes of oppression—as in the case where both the woman worker and the migrant woman were victims of abuse and violence suffered by men, and more generally by the patriarchal and sexist regime—has in some cases fostered empathy with the foreign woman, as in the following case:

Vivan, she was someone I was very close to. She looked for me (...) I think the fact that I was not a man was important (...) she had come to ask for international protection and she told us her story; very dense and full of violence, of rape, and she obviously could not have known that I had had a similar experience. We had prepared her for the meeting with the Commission, but suddenly - she contacted me to ask me to meet her, and I gave her an appointment. We had to talk about her Commission and we had a good talk about each other's history, a little in Italian and a little in French. She hugged me and told me that it had been very useful for her to hear my story, it was a very friendly conversation (...) I always made an effort, but inevitably the fact that I was western and white put me in a situation of superiority. There the studies had little to do with it, there was the woman me, who was a victim of violence who at some point questioned how much we think we can teach them, to speak for them (Interview1).

Reflexivity here becomes intersectional, not only because the woman worker recognises her own privileges, but it is intersectional insofar as the approach also

considers common factors of disadvantage. The reflexivity promoted by feminist thought, by denouncing the partiality of all forms of knowledge and the dependence of what can be known on the position from which it is observed, is a “political reflexivity” that invites existential identification with the most marginalised. It must take a position from the margin (Hooks 1991), the position of those who are placed on the margins, since the margin is a position of marginality but also a position of distance from the logics of power and the given-for-granted on which the status quo is based. The margin should not be understood as a limit, because it is impossible to define and encircle limits univocally, they “extend and pierce” (Balibar, 1997) cutting across everyone’s life experience. The margin can be understood as a change of perspective to produce an alternative narrative on both migration phenomena and sexual identities. It is “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. [...] as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way of lives” (Hooks, 1998, p. 20).

The approach, therefore, ceases to be something to be applied to the other in order to keep power asymmetries in the care relationship under control, to embrace a broader discourse that takes into account—while respecting differences in positioning—the fact that both parties (migrant women and women caregivers) have experienced multiple vulnerabilities and oppression. On more than one occasion, the axes of oppression do not only concern the issue of gender identity, sexual identity, race or social class, but may overlap due to other factors, as in the case recounted below:

born female, Ukrainian, survivor of sexual abuse, for me it was so heavy, she was a person who needed acceptance but because she also had mental problems she was not taken seriously, so, there is also an issue of ableism because very often mental health is something unavoidable if you are a survivor of abuse (...) if you are an asylum seeker, the trauma of the journey, of the Commission, you become a ‘walking trauma’, mental health is definitely something compromised (Interview2).

The women workers who thematised these issues are highly critical of the recognition process of the right to asylum of SOGIESC migrant women adopted by the Territorial Commissions, precisely in the light of their experiences in the services. While being aware of the need to prepare migrant women for the interviews, and to meet the commissions’ expectations, the operators with an “intersectional reflexivity” confront the migrants’ doubts, sharing with them their perplexities about the way the interviews are carried out, about the difficulty of adhering to the sexual imaginaries proposed by western society, imaginaries on which the commissions’ work is based. This kind of attitude, at least on the level of discourse, allows the operators to build through trust a relationship of exchange and sharing with them. This aspect reflects what Marilyn Frye defines in terms of complicity, the latter being understood as resistance to “Heteropatriarcal forms of social organizations keep women apart from women, separate women from women” (Frye, 1995, p. 157). An example of this can be seen in the following passage, where the worker, returning to an exchange with a woman asylum seeker, meticulously describes the words used to prepare the migrant woman for her interview before the territorial commission,

the Territorial Commission I can liken it a bit to a court, I am a survivor of sexual abuse, and very often they are very bad. You are an older woman than me, you are stronger than me, but you are in a country that is not yours, you are in front of people you don't know, (...) I have a similar experience, and know that my experience is this: they asked me this and this, and they could also ask you these things. She hugged me, and I told her: let's talk about you. And she told me that it had been very helpful for her to hear my story, so it was a very friendly conversation (Interview1).

In the light of these “intersectional reflections” matured in the mutual recognition of having been victims of situations of multiple oppression, these women necessarily understand the sense of their mission, and become spokespersons in the NGOs for initiatives aimed at increasing the inclusion and empowerment of migrant women. The narration of their own vocation in the light of this “recognising themselves in their other selves” takes on, as mentioned above, a potentially subversive character, a critique of their own work, a critique of services designed by white, privileged middle-class people, of the fact that migrant women, even those who collaborate in front office work, are not sufficiently valued:

I was alone, it was really a parallel activity, and I was a member of the board and I was trying to bring to the board these reflections, I involved a colleague of mine, a Brazilian transwoman whom I made my colleague at the counter, also trying to get her a minimum remuneration, also because you know activism is a privilege (...) Paternalism, and a sense of superiority, there is a resistance from the governance of the associations (...) (Interview3).

Obviously, not all women workers mature this awareness which depends on different factors; an orientation to volunteering of a humanitarian as well as a professional kind, combined with different conditions of experience from a structural and identity point of view hardly overlap with those experienced by migrant women, while it increases significantly in women workers who, in addition to sharing multiple factors of disadvantage, have chosen front office activities as part of their associative vocation. Women belonging to the latter profile see LGBTIQ+ movements, associationism, as necessary paths for the recognition not only of sexual citizenship rights, but of a more general desire for a more equal and inclusive society. The value of militancy is not only invested in intersectional reflexivity, but also intersects with references typical of postcolonial critique (Mohanty, 1984; Brah, 1996; Spivak, 1999), which, in addition to constantly questioning its own positioning, is critical of all forms of ethnocentric paternalism:

Then I would like to conclude by saying something important, there is a phrase you hear a lot ‘give voice’ (...) you don't have to give voice to anyone, that's really the key, there was a picture on Instagram that said ‘You don't need to be the voice for the voiceless, just pass the mic’ [in English in the interview]. It is that, passing the microphone, listening, stepping back, and that in general with white cis males, but it is in a general discourse, and just pass the microphone! (Interview2)

Discussion and Conclusions

Aware of not being able to generalise about all the women NGOs operators involved in the reception and integration of LGBTIQ+ migrant women, what did emerge from the analysis of the narrative interviews (described above) which, as stated at the outset is an exploratory study, highlighted a number of interesting aspects that can form the basis for a further and broader study on the position of NGO women workers and their relationship with migrant women. Among these, there is the awareness, for these women workers, of the importance of their role as intermediaries in facilitating the process of obtaining international protection for SOGIESC migrants. Intermediation activities are deeply marked by experience and, in particular, by the many different situations of vulnerability (marginalisation, violence, racial, gender, cultural stereotypes, which often correspond to a process of dehumanisation) that characterise the lives of migrant women but sometimes also those of women operators due to their mere belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. This path presents itself as a *narratable self* (Cavarero, 2000), not a simple conscious exercise of remembering one's experience, but a spontaneous self-narration of its memory. It is delineated through the narratives of its protagonists (the women workers), whose performative narration favours the creation of a social collective that allows the question of being an LGBTIQ+ migrant woman to be inserted into a socio-political dimension. It is a narratable and non-narratable self because what is essential is the familiar experience of the *narratability of the self* which, not surprisingly, is always perceived in the other, even when one does not know his or her history at all (in this case SOGIESC migrant women). The narratable self is part of what can be identified as a relational ethics of contingency, by similarity it represents what happens within the interactive scene that Arendt (1958) calls "politics"—recognition of plurality through praxis (action). At the centre of the narrative scene is a "Who" who is not closed in autobiography, but embedded in a relational matrix in which she expresses and receives an unrepeatable story in the form of a narrative (the encounter between the women operators in their role as intermediaries and the migrant women).

The analysis of the way women workers relate to each other in the service sheds light on different ways of understanding the vocational mission, intersectional thinking and how to concretely apply it from both a relational and institutional point of view in the role of intermediaries.

Resuming the first of the research questions (*How do the women front office workers take on the needs of SOGIESC migrants and what problems arise in taking them on?*), it can be argued that it is evident that these women working in front offices play a central role in helping migrant women along the process of asylum recognition, attempting to stem the difficulties posed by having to interface with institutions that are not always able to include their needs (as seen from the interviews, they are complex and are not limited only to those related to international protection). In fact, not infrequently, their role is not only limited to accompanying them along this path, but also to supporting them in the search for housing, work and all those conditions that favour their wider social inclusion.

Regarding the second question (*How do they relate to the life stories (narration) of SOGIESC women and in how much of these stories do they recognise themselves?*), the answer lies in what we have defined in this article in terms of reflexivity. Reflexivity undoubtedly constitutes a central aspect in dealing with foreign women, to the extent that (women operators) through it question their own privileges, fully embodying the very meaning of “reflexivity” as a practice that allows them to mitigate their power in the helping relationship. Women operators’ reflexivity is configured; however, as “intersectional reflexivity” in the sense of their ability to recognise in the migrant woman’s history, the same situations of multiple vulnerability experienced, albeit linked to factors that are not always superimposable. This “mutual recognition” is a precondition for the formation of what we define as *sisterhood intermediation*, which is typical of those intermediary women workers who, in the name of intersectionality—in recognising the common state of oppression, as well as the connection between patriarchy, racism and heterosexism—join forces to achieve the goal of a reality free of inequalities (Evans & Lépinard, 2020) and more inclusive for all.

Women with this intermediary profile therefore criticise the Territorial Commissions in charge of granting international protection to migrant women SOGIESC (this allows us to answer the third question, namely to what extent *the “recognising oneself” in the stories of the SOGIESC women, affect the idea of the service offered, and how does this point of view matured in the “field” relate to the protection and reception actions provided both by the NGOs and the institutions*). For women working in the front office, this dynamic reproduces an imagery aimed at belittling traditions, cultures and languages of the “other” with the aim of subjugating them both symbolically and materially (Hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 1984). This critique also extends to the NGOs insofar as the action in favour of SOGIESC migrant women is based on a system of responses purely centred on the issue of sexual orientation and not instead on the complexity of the needs they express as persons with multiple vulnerabilities.

The intermediation activity that these women workers carry out, therefore, is configured, as in the cases described, as an action that goes beyond the micro-relational dimension alone. It is reflected, depending on the role women workers occupy in the NGOs, in their ability to influence the definition of reception policies and services that combine the objectives and demands posed by LGBTIQ+ movements and those of anti-racism and/or other movements that combat factors of common oppression and, therefore, transversal to the “supposed” categories they belong to.

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