



Undoing intimacy, redrawing borders. Dealing with sexual violence in queer asylum support organizations

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses how an organization providing legal and social support to queer asylum seekers' based in a major city in France fights against sexual violence, committed by volunteers on migrants. More specifically, it focuses on the framing processes (Benford and Snow, 2000) of both the organization's action and space. The article highlights how intimacy is produced and understood among the organization, be it sexual and affective relations or a social proximity framed as familial. It shows, however, how intimacy can allow the production of sexual violence. It then focuses on the strategies used to minimize and euphemize this violence, by framing asylum seekers as dangerous and threatening, by drawing on an anti-migrant and racist rhetorics, seemingly paradoxical for such an organization. The article subsequently shows how the strategies to counter these discourses are based on a problematization of the whiteness in the organization: expliciting race, in a context that is apparently colourblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2012), functions as a tool for framing relations between volunteers and asylum seekers. If focusing on the treatment of sexual violence shows how this support organization constitute a continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987), I argue for the necessity of extending this classic notion to encompass their spatial and racial dimensions, which intersect with the patriarchal one. In order to exit the organization from this continuum of violence, volunteers create new intimacy boundaries.

1. Introduction

People fleeing their countries and applying for asylum on SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) grounds face, independently of their national context, several obstacles linked with their multiple minority status (Hamila, 2020). The grounds on which they apply for asylum are numerous, often including sexual violence (or fear of it), perpetrated by members of their close environment up to State organizations (Giametta, 2017; Chossière, 2022). As other migrants, they face similar forms of gendered violence along their migration path (Hiralal and Jinnah, 2018; Sahraoui and Tyszler, 2021; Freedman et al. 2023). In the French context, explored by this article, studies on SOGI asylum seekers focus on the institutionalization of this category of asylum (Le Bellec; Hamila, 2022), the trajectories and difficulties migrants face during their procedure and daily life (Chossière, 2022, 2025) and how their dispositions help them (or not) (Bouchet-Mayer and Ferez, 2024), the way they navigate hostile housing conditions (Stella, 2023), and the ambivalent role of support organizations as “filtering device”, based

both on volunteers' opinions on asylum seekers identities (Giametta, 2020; Cesaro, 2021). The latter is, however, a highly gendered phenomenon, linked to the need of homosexual male volunteers to identify with asylum seekers in order to support them (Cesaro, 2023).

More broadly, studies on organizations providing legal and social support show their importance in providing more solid cases to asylum institutions (Wimark, 2025); however, they are considered “ambivalent spaces” by asylum seekers (Held, 2023). They are embedded in power disparities (Pullen and Franklin, 2025), they reproduce racial violence, notably found in leisure spaces (Held, 2017), and also, albeit only marginally quoted in the literature, sexual violence (Held, 2023). This article aims at filling this precise gap concerning the presence of sexual violence in support organizations. It will show its entanglement with the framing of support practices, and it will explore the ways in which organizations are a site of possible intimacy leading to this violence. Intimacy is here intended as a spectrum of relational possibilities ranging from sexual and affective relations to the establishment of a space that asylum seekers and volunteers inhabit and frame as “familial”. The

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article thus asks how these forms of intimacy can lead to sexual violence committed by volunteers on asylum seekers. The term intimacy is used drawing on Sara Ahmed conception of “belonging to a space” (Ahmed, 1997), in this case an organization that, during the time of an asylum procedure, becomes both a space of socialization and of socializing for asylum seekers. In this space, “sharing of stories [...] forms a central part of the relationship between the service user and the service provider” (Pullen and Franklin, 2025: 1600), which Pullen and Franklin analyse as part of the construction of imagined equality between the groups at play. This article however questions this “belonging” by taking into account how power relationships are reproduced, beyond the already studied “mediat[ion of] the narrative of the asylum claimant” (Pullen and Franklin, 2025: 1596). It is firstly to be noted that in the studied organization these two categories almost never overlap, as asylum seekers seldom – if ever – become volunteers. This comes with a clear power imbalance: on one side, those who possess knowledge and give help, on the other, those who receive them. Therefore, “belonging” almost always means receiving help, and sexual relationships in this context are always entangled in this power imbalance. As Ann Stoler puts it, intimacy can thus be a site of intimidation (Stoler, 2006), especially in post-colonial contexts. As I will show further, this is also the case in the organization, where intimacy can be leveraged as a tool to provide support.

The article focuses on the case of a specific organization based in a major city in France, and how it has progressively dealt with sexual violence. This violence is perpetrated by white upper-class middle-aged male volunteers on black gay asylum seekers, aged around 30 years old and mainly coming from West and Central Africa. It takes place along different dynamics of power (class and administrative status, race, age, gender and sexuality), that some volunteers have progressively pointed out as, to quote Bourdieu, “structured structures predisposed to serve as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1977: 72) of the organization. Otherwise said, the whole process of dealing with sexual violence implied a deconstruction of an implicit *habitus* of volunteer work, namely the socially integrated fact of considering asylum seekers as potential partners at the disposal of male volunteers. The framing of asylum seekers both as beneficiaries, but as well as (potential) sexual and romantic partners is part of a specific sexual script (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) in which sexual and romantic relationships between volunteers and asylum seekers are welcomed, if not explicitly sought after.

To show how this intersectional violence has been committed, discussed, and subsequently how members of the organizations have attempted to develop tools to prevent it and deal with its consequences, the article first revisits the history of the organization. It dwells on the framing processes i.e., “the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613), of both the organization's work and the place intimacy occupies within it. It will focus on racial and sexual power dynamics in particular. As I will show, there are different forms of how intimacy and space interconnect, which are linked to the framing of the actions that volunteers promote, ranging from the possibility of having sexual relationships to consider everybody as belonging to a “family”.

Secondly, it will show how, after clear accusations of sexual violence emerged, a group of mainly young women volunteers has tried to address them, working towards the unmaking of this sexual script. In doing so, they pointed out that the mere belonging to the LGBTQ community of both volunteers and asylum seekers needed to be put into perspective with the racial, administrative and status disparities between these two groups. They attempted at redrawing borders between the groups at play, such as to undo some forms of intimacy, in particular by regulating sexuality in the volunteer space. In doing so, they pointed out the imbalance of power between volunteers and asylum seekers, they underwent a reframing of the role of volunteers *vis-à-vis* asylum seekers, which should ban sexual relationships.

Thirdly, the article shows how asylum seekers' vulnerability is

discussed, and in particular how it is racialized. Racialisation is used as a tool to attempt to invert roles (where victims become perpetrators), and the article overall discusses the limits of using vulnerability to frame asylum seekers. Finally, I argue that apprehending social movements and support organizations through a racial and gendered lens can allow to see and better analyse the different forms of violence that might take place among them.

This article draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted during a doctoral research between 2016 and 2022 in a particular organization based in a major city in France.¹ The data presented in this paper stems from 36 interviews with volunteers (who were the main focus of the research), as well as from ethnographic observations of the daily life of the organisation (interviews with asylum seekers, formal and informal meetings, etc.). As ethnography was my main research method, I have personally been involved in the organisation as a volunteer during the research: both volunteers and asylum seekers saw me as a volunteer, and at the same time knew that I was conducting a research project. As a consequence of my involvement, I was also a part of the reframing process it underwent, actively participating with fellow volunteers to redraw the boundaries of the support relationship. The choice to take part in this process was informed by a “feminist methodology” standpoint (Haraway, 1988; Clair, 2016), which implied to take sides with the victims against the violence which was committed against them in this particular space, and which informs this article, as I will further underline.

2. Intimacy and space: the organisation as a space of encounter

The action of French support organizations, volunteer-based or professional ones, draws on a specific repertoire of social work, arguing for the necessity of social proximity between care providers (be it employed social workers or volunteers, which often undergo the same tasks) and receivers (in this case, asylum seekers), such as to build a relationship based on trust (Astier, 2007). Trust is considered a fundamental condition to minimize social distance, hence making social work more effective. In the case of SOGI asylum seekers support organizations, the fact that both volunteers and asylum seekers are LGBTQ is perceived as a proximity factor, instrumental to obtain the refugee status, as the former are, supposedly, in the best possible position to understand the latter's lived experiences of homophobia and transphobia (Pullen and Franklin, 2025). This form of proximity is thought to produce an approach to support that can be analysed as “representative bureaucracy” (Thielemann and Stewart, 1996). Arguably, though, this form of proximity ignores what differentiates volunteers from beneficiaries: race, migration and administrative status, and access to different economic and symbolic resources – some of the very same elements volunteers provide.

2.1. The sedimentation of a sexual script

Volunteers' involvement has long been marked by their own forms of intimacy, namely sexual and affective relations with foreigners. Many gay men became volunteers as they had met a foreign partner abroad (particularly in West and Central Africa), and were seeking to legalize their immigration status once they returned to France (Salcedo, 2013). Others had met immigrant men in France already involved in administrative procedures, whom they felt they could help. Some others met their partners at the organization, once already involved. While I was initially unaware of this, as my involvement in the organization grew I

¹ All the members, volunteers as well as asylum seekers, I encountered during my research were aware of my double status and agreed, tacitly or explicitly, to take part in it. All the names used are pseudonyms, and ages and timelines differ sensibly from the real ones in order to contribute to the anonymity of the people involved.

learnt that some men volunteers had or still had intimate relationship with asylum seekers. Albeit seldom publicly discussed, this information wasn't secret either, as being in a couple with a person (formerly) engaged in the asylum procedure was often presented as simple facts of life, as this volunteer recalls:

"Yes, I met my partner here. You know, I am not the only one ... I didn't necessarily look for it when I arrived, but it happened, you know, as life happens sometimes [*laughs*]" (Interview with Jean-Marc, June 2017).

Contrary to Jean-Marc, other volunteers plainly refused to talk to me about this issue, even though, or precisely because I already knew their partner was an asylum seeker, and that constituted a topic of my research. This is the case of Cyril, a 50-year-old volunteer who during an interview refused to discuss it: "We are not here to talk about my personal life" (Interview, October 2018), he said to me in a lapidary manner, twice, as I tried to obtain some information about a relationship – that he, however, did not, as he could not, deny. Thus, for some volunteers, intimacy and voluntary work are tightly entangled, contributing to the establishment of an ambivalent framing of asylum seekers: they are beneficiaries of the organization, and, to the very least, potential partners. For some volunteers, conjugality and sexual and affective relationships, whether real or projected, presided the support relationship, while for others, it became an overt possibility. As a sexual script, it has also been transmitted to younger (in terms of age and of moments of involvement) volunteers:

"When I first arrived at the organization, I met Cyril, and he told me, extensively, that I could find many sexual partners here, that it was easy for him to do so, and that it would be for me too, if I wanted. It gave me a particular vision of the organization, I thought that everybody was doing it" (Gregory, 28 years old)

This interview excerpt clearly reveals a structuring script of the organization, which, however, appears to be a highly gendered phenomenon. During my research, I never encountered any woman volunteer who had, or wished to have had, sexual or romantic relationships with women asylum seekers. Furthermore, women were highly critical of this situation and contributed to a subsequent reframing of asylum seekers, and thus, of the voluntary space. I thus argue that this particular organization is shaped by a specific kind of orientation, a "matter of how we reside in space, [...] of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed, 2006: 1), dictated by a set of cultural sexual scripts, namely "instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life [which] instruct in the narrative requirements of specific roles [...] providing the who and what of both past and future." (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 98). In script theory, cultural scenarios are the *locus* of sexual norms and possibilities, and the way they intervene in the daily life of this support organization is a pervasive collective sense that sexuality can be a part of volunteer work. This particular cultural scenario can constitute in itself an orientation, which shapes not only the relational possibilities between volunteers and asylum seekers, but the space itself, and how different groups can or can't inhabit it. For male volunteers, the organization is sometimes seen as a legitimate place to encounter partners, which is however not the case for women volunteers, who tend to distance themselves from this position. This script is therefore not only a mere matter of sexuality (gay or lesbian), but about the intertwinement between sexuality and gender: women felt the power imbalance was too strong to hold a relationship, while men did not consider this as a form of restraint. By combining script theory with Ahmed's orientation theory, I argue that the organization is a space greatly shaped by white male volunteers' sexual scenarios of encounter with foreigners – at the very least as they were for a long time far more

numerous than women.² Although cultural scenarios "are rarely entirely predictive of actual behaviour" (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 98), one could argue that asylum seekers might even consent to sexual relationships with volunteers. The literature on humanitarian work and solidarity insists indeed on the fact that a peculiar imbalance of power characterises these relationships (Barnett, 2013; Ticktin, 2011). This can lead to a sense of obligation to have sexual and romantic relationships in order to obtain help, which is something that I have observed and will further detail. For instance, in many occasions asylum seekers asked me if it was necessary to sleep with volunteers to receive help: if I have always pointed that not only that was not necessary, but contrary to both my own, and what I thought to be the organisation's work ethic, one can easily imagine how in other circumstances other volunteers might have answered differently.

2.2. Framing space through the prism of the family

Another way in which intimacy is produced is by framing the organization as a familial space, thus a space of belonging, as previously pointed out. Volunteers and asylum seekers alike use the word "family" to refer to the organization. Usually, volunteers suggest that "we" constitute a "big family" with asylum seekers, within which the latter could (re)discover or (re)build the relationships many of them have previously lost, a so-called "chosen family" (Weston, 1991). For instance, in recent years, every other Sunday is called "Family Sunday", a moment during which both volunteers and beneficiaries meet and greet, share food, and discuss, such as to create a space of exchange not shaped by the mere obligations of the asylum procedure. Some asylum seekers use to say that "we" belong to the same family as both parties are involved in a peculiar relationship, marked by intimate confidences and a certain form of trust, that is, as pointed out, the basis on which the relationship is built. As one asylum seeker once told me, "You are not my father, nor my mother, but this relationship we have, it's like family to me" (Fieldnote, September 2019), to signify the proximity we had, at least from his point of view. One could argue that this trust only needs to go one way, from asylum seekers to volunteers, as opposed to the centrality of loyalty in gay and lesbian kinship found in Kath Weston's work (1991): how then the framing of relationships as "familial" takes into account disparities of power?

I argue here that the use of the term "family" can be seen as promise of closeness, of sociability (i.e., being able to spend time with other LGBTQ individuals) as much as socialization (i.e., to learn and incorporate new norms concerning LGBTQ sexuality, conduct, history, and so forth). The link between family, migration and homosexuality has been explored by sociologist Anne-Marie Fortier, whose work focuses on literature written by gay and lesbians who migrated from a rural to an urban area, or as part of transnational migrations in the global North. Fortier takes a step further from the sole concept of family as a nuclear group of people, and questions how the idea of 'home', understood both as the ties that make up the nuclear family, and a culture to which the various authors are attached, is evoked. She shows that gay and lesbian migrants can claim so-called sites of attachment by refusing to inhabit a particular place (Fortier, 2001). Adopting the idea of refusing to inhabit a given place seems incongruous with the lived experiences of asylum seekers: their trajectories are often marked by forced departures, and they face migration policies whose aim is as much to produce mobility as to create constant mobility to precisely prevent any site of attachment (Schewel, 2020). However, Fortier emphasises how different spaces can function as sites of connection, which "offer the ontological security of being 'at home' in a community's cultural, social or physical space" (Fortier, 2001: 412). In other words, homosociality (Sedgwick, 1985) provides for the sociologist a sense of belonging, thus, as previously

² When I first joined the organization, there were 5 women and around 30 men involved.

underlined, of potential intimacy, reinforced by the idea of security.

However, solidarity practices embedded in familial language can reproduced maternalistic and paternalistic practices and attitudes, linked to colonial representations of migrants as subjects one needs to educate (Sahraoui and Tysler, 2021), in particular to new gendered social norms (Sluijs, 2024). In the French context, familial language has explicitly been used in heterosexual welcoming practices as a way to impose a certain physical and sexual distance: framing private spaces of welcoming and housing as “family” might be a way to reproduce the incest taboo and exclude sexuality from the relationship (Masson-Diez, 2020: 335). However, as anthropologist Dorothée Dussy (Dussy, 2021) points out, the main consequence of the incest taboo is not the absence of the act of incest, but rather the impossibility of speaking about it, leaving victims caught up in a silence that perpetuates itself at the same time as the act. Following Dussy, how should one view the sexual violence that takes place in support organizations framed as “family”? If it means establishing the incest taboo, this does not protect asylum seekers from sexual violence, but rather shifts the problem on the possibility of denouncing it, and being heard. Judith Butler (Butler, 2004) anticipated Dussy's analysis, questioning the role of psychoanalysis concerning incest, and sexual violence: “If psychoanalysis insists that incest is taboo and therefore cannot exist, what loss of analytic responsibility towards psychic suffering is thereby inaugurated?” (Butler, 2004: 225) A similar question can be asked about social and volunteer work: if we insist on the taboo of incest by pretending that support relationships do not involve sexual relations, to what extent it implies a loss of political and organisational responsibility towards those they aim to support?

If none of the violence happening in the organization can be categorized as incest, as there's no actual familial relationship, the use of the metaphor produces homosocial proximity - and therefore, intimacy - rather than distance. Eventually, the familial metaphor can be considered a way of blurring fixed relational boundaries and places occupied by volunteers and asylum seekers (as care-givers and care-receivers). Otherwise said, it can signify the togetherness (Pullen and Franklin, 2025) of the two groups beyond the boundaries that separate them. This can however be ambivalent, as studies already pointed out: “home is not only belonging and safety but can also represent alienation, violence and fear” (Wimark, 2019: 4). Thus, it is certainly a way to signify the belonging to a certain community, but its use arises questions in light of the different forms of sexual violence that happen amid this very same community. In particular, when accusations of sexual violence have emerged, the efforts to minimize this violence have been numerous, somehow reproducing a particular declination of the incest taboo that goes with the familial analogy. At the same time, in order to counter them, a reframing of relationships and the space in which they happened has emerged, as I will further underline.

3. Bordering intimacy: treating sexual violence as a collective issue

Organizations can be “ambivalent” spaces for SOGI claimants (Held, 2023). They nonetheless think of themselves as a counterpoint to the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987) SOGI claimants endure, i.e. the different forms of violence they live before and along their migration path. This is, however, not always the case. Rumours about not-so-consensual relationships constituted the daily basis of interactions during my fieldwork. This was in particular the case among a group of volunteers composed by young women, who were quite wordy concerning what they categorized as a non-professional behaviour by some older male volunteers, and what they understood as a good way of supporting asylum seekers through a certain professional and physical distance (e.g., always having meetings in the allocated offices of the organization, avoiding physical contact as much as possible, etc.). These rumours were very diverse, ranging from direct testimony based on a particular reading of a situation one had witnessed, to a reproduction of

accounts of older events, always being unclear whether they were true or not. If “sharing rumours allows each of the members of the old group (the established [...]) to assert their “positive charisma” and to stigmatise the negative charisma that would emanate [...] from the behaviour of the members of a new group (the intruders)” (Aldrin, 2003: 129), I have observed the opposite, although the logic of distinction and disqualification persisted: the “intruders” questioned the practices and behaviour, whether real or supposed, of the “established” group, i.e. older volunteers.

3.1. From rumours to accusations

However, rumours soon became clear accusations of sexual violence conducted by volunteers on asylum seekers. Since winter 2018, an increasing number of volunteers were successively accused by asylum seekers of having committed sexual assaults and harassment against them. I will show how the accusations were taken into account, and how this process ended up reframing the organization, i.e. changing its symbolic ideology and material action, and thus the support it provided to asylum seekers.

The first one came from three asylum seekers accusing one volunteer of repeated sexual assault, spanning years. As the information arrived to the organization's board, it reacted promptly: “Despite [the] discomfort about this situation, [the] doubts, we [...] decided not to let it linger, without however acting hastily.” (Field note, November 2018; extract from an email sent by the presidency to the board). Two actions were taken: the accused volunteer was confronted with the testimonies by three people from the organization (two secretaries, and another board member), and a first draft of guidelines for volunteer work, which will become the “Volunteers' chart” was voted to provide a basis for a decision concerning the volunteer's future at the organization. The first draft, adopted after a long debate, stated that volunteers should not act in “sexually ambiguous ways, that could resemble harassment or other forms of sexual violence” (Fieldnote, December 2018). However, following the first confrontation, and the announcement of a suspension pending a decision by the Board, the accused volunteer resigned via email, denying the allegations, and quoting his past engagement as proof of his innocence.

Following this, a lengthy discussion took place. I will report the different positions that were expressed, as they informed the whole process of further regulating sexuality within the organisation. A first group formed, trying to deny the violence and support the accused person, and a second followed, supporting the victims and their allegations – in which I personally took part. The first reaction came from Cyril, who expressed a certain mistrust of the accusations: he argued that we (the Board) knew nothing about what had happened, “not even the identity the victims” (Fieldnote, November 2018). He pointed that the accusers should be present at the meeting and give proof of their claims. He also openly defended the accused volunteer, by pointing out his past activity and commitment, which served as a proof of his moral probity that could, or should, render him immune to such acts of violence, or at least prevent people from believing in it. While attacking the accuser's credibility, he defends the accused one, in a well-known fashion when such situations arise (Romito, 2006).

The second reaction came from Gilles, a 65-year-old volunteer, who aimed to downplay the accusations, while reducing the violence to a private matter that should not be dealt by and within the organization. He thus framed the accusations reproducing the previously pointed out cultural sexual script in defence of the accused volunteer:

“People fall in love and like each other, so it's normal to hit on each other too. If it comes from a deep feeling, there's not much we can say [...] We can't stop people from falling in love, and we shouldn't intervene in this kind of situation.” (Fieldnote, November 2018).

This provoked a harsh reaction from Jean, a 45-year-old volunteer, who tried to reframe the debate. For him, what Gilles had just said was:

"[...] typical of the straight mind: can we have relationships only when there is love? I think that homosexuals have tried to create different forms of relationship, so to hear that "if there's love, it's OK" is very disturbing ... It's so heteronormative, it implies that sex should only take place in a fixed, loving relationship, and that if there's love, there's no violence. OK, maybe in this case there was a misunderstanding between the two of them, it happens between us [homosexuals], but we don't need to talk about love!" (Fieldnote, November 2018).

3.2. Redrawing borders, reassigning places

Jean's comments were apprehended in different ways. Personally, I had the impression that it was aimed at deconstructing Gilles' ones, by making a point about the heteronormative dimension of the link between sex and love, and thus I tacitly supported it.³ It wasn't until later, when I talked to Stéphane, a 40-year-old volunteer, about another accusation a few years later, that he told me how he'd heard Jean's comment at the time: "Frankly, when he started saying that 'It's OK, it happens between fags because all we do is fuck each other anyway', it really pissed me off" (Field note, January 2021). Claire, a 35-year-old volunteers and for a long time one of the few women involved in the organisation, gave a similar opinion: "The whole 'In gay circles we have a different relationship to the body' thing made me want to throw up!" (Field note, July 2019). In these understandings, violence had been euphemised and naturalised through a minority sexuality supposedly immune to sexual violence, as this somehow happens only in heterosexual and heteronormative relationships, and contrary to what recent literature shows (Scodellaro et al., 2024). Back to 2018, bearing his further comments in mind, this reading of Jean's intervention led Stéphane to take a stand against it, again reframing the discussions in terms of racial and class inequalities, that closed the debate as many people, me included, supported it:

"The fact is that it's a systemic thing, and it doesn't matter whether it's rape, violence or harassment ... It's broader than that: we're white, they're black, we help them, they're vulnerable, so we should avoid these situations!" (Field note, November 2018).

Countering the sex-centred, but colour-blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2012) (i. e., a concealed way to talk about difference in race status) discussion, Stéphane mobilised both a racial standpoint ('we are white, they are black'), embedded in the different roles occupied by the two different groups ('we help them, they are vulnerable'). In this way, he parts from a particularising assessment of the case: the problem is how the organization works, and the racial sexual scripts it is structured by. In his discourse, both volunteers and asylum seekers are racialized, which underlines the racially-based status gap as both a spatial and symbolic border, such as to (re)establish the materiality of a sexual boundary. One can thus argue that the latter should not be crossed as the former exists, and this explicit racialisation makes visible what the previous focus on sexual identity rendered invisible. Stéphane's comment, that I, and others, more explicitly supported, is interesting for the analysis of what is at play. Far from avoiding the pitfall of a racialisation that only focuses on those in a dominated position, his narrative emphasises the relational dimension of domination, and counters a form of "white ignorance [that] fights back" (Mills, 1999). This was the case during this meeting, in which the whiteness of volunteers and its "wages" (Roediger, 1991), for instance knowledge about asylum and a position of power, were not

yet underlined. Otherwise said, by piercing the white veil, this statement not only reframed the conversation, but pointed out the organization's structure as embedded in racial power relationships.

Following different other accusations, all leading to the volunteer to be excluded from the organization, other discussions unfolded in order to regulate sexuality within the organization. A key debate happened in 2021, which eventually led to the Volunteers' chart to be renewed in a stricter manner, formally forbidding any form of sexuality between volunteers and asylum seekers. During this debate, it appeared that the former framing of the organization as a space structured by racial and administrative inequalities was not sufficient. Another approach was thus adopted, this time putting the accent on the professional dimension of the voluntary work:

"It's like in school, if you're a teacher you do not sleep with your students, or at work, you do not have sex with your subordinates!" (Audrey, 28-year-old, field note, June 2021)

This approach, while lacking a form of reflexivity on the actual sexuality – be it consensual or not – that unfolds in work spaces (Hearn and Parkin, 1987; Pringle, 1989), aimed at erecting yet another border between volunteers and asylum seekers, a professional one, that should reinforce a sexual boundary. It referenced to voluntary work as a form of professional engagement, in which going beyond certain boundaries – namely sexual ones – can have serious consequences on the person that is receiving support in order to navigate a harsh administrative procedure. It also points out that asylum seekers inhabit the space offered by the organization as particular subjects, not "impossible ones" (Luibhéid, 2008: 171) but rather liminal ones (Wimark, 2019), and that they should be treated as other than sexual objects. This advocates for a "co-presence" (Pullen and Franklin, 2025) of the two groups in the same space and time, in which sexuality should not be a part of the intimacy, intended then only as belonging to a same space. Hence, if their liminality endures (Wimark, 2019), framing the space as professional is a way to recognize their temporary presence, and advocate for reducing the violence they can be confronted with.

In all these accounts and discussions, asylum seekers appear as vulnerable, in a subordinated position, a framing which serve a certain purpose: pointing out the dominant position of volunteers. However, to which consequences does it lead? Is vulnerability an effective framing and which are its limits?

4. The racialisation of asylum seekers' vulnerability

One of the consequences of making a complaint is not to be heard, and to be reduced to a subordinate status with a negative connotation (Ahmed, 2021). Sara Ahmed writes about "institutional violence" as a violence exerted by the institution that comes on top of the sexual violence previously suffered. This violence exposes to the possibility that any complaint will be deflected, used against the person who expresses it, then turned into a tool for discrediting and silencing both the person and the complaint.

4.1. Denying complaint and inverting the victim role

Following the complaints lodged within the organization, I was able to observe a fairly similar dynamic. I'm going to consider the last of the complaints that was brought up in which I took part as a member of the organization, against Cyril. The peculiarity of this complaint is that Cyril confirmed the sexual act, but denied its coerced dimension. However, the victim clearly stated that he had "felt forced to do it" and that he thought this was "the price he had to pay to get help" (Fieldnote, January 2021), clearly demonstrating the power that volunteers can exert in the support relationship. After defending the assailant on the basis of his strong commitment, Gilles spoke out in defence of Cyril: "25 years for them is not 25 years for us, they are much more experienced than we think" (Fieldnote, February 2021). He essentializes them by

³ I didn't intervene vocally in this precise debate, as it was very animated and there was little room for other than older volunteers to talk. As a matter of fact, no woman intervened, and only older volunteers shared their position. However, as noted, women and younger volunteers, of which I was a part of, tacitly, and then explicitly supported the victims.

placing a single person within a fantasized collective, opposing him to another group, *us*, whose boundaries and characteristics are no clearer. This separation and double essentialization is not only group-based but also geographical, in that it asserts that 'over there', at 25, one is already much more an adult than 'here'. This idea echoes the politics of assessing unaccompanied minors, who always seem older than they say they are (Carayon et al., 2018), and therefore the politics of assessing their age. What is at play here is a racial stereotype about the supposed maturity of black people, used to assert that, despite the fact that the victim is much younger than the perpetrator, they are not actually that young, and that they were perfectly capable of defending themselves if attacked. We see here the racial adultification (Bolin and Applegate, 2016) of a rape myth which asserts that "a healthy woman not wishing sex will resist to the utmost or to an undefined lesser degree, with the result that intercourse will not occur" (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1974: 20). Subsequently, Gilles reversed the positions. Based on the text messages exchanged between the volunteers and the asylum seeker, that he had read, it seemed that it was the latter who most often initiated contact with the former, and that he made sexual advances towards him. Given the asylum seeker's administrative situation, this appears to be in line with his statements, i.e. that sleeping with a volunteer is the price to pay for getting help. For the volunteer, however, it could mean something quite different: "You could even say that it was he who assaulted the volunteer" he stated. Not only, as mentioned above, can the victim not refuse to consent, because of his sexual maturity, but it may even be that he is the aggressor as he had made contact with Cyril on several occasions. Subsequently, the denunciation becomes slanderous and dangerous, as the words of a second person show:

"We see a lot of vulnerable people whom we don't know, and we know that some are under the influence of networks or other people, and that some are not homosexual, and I wonder whether by communicating on this subject we're not exposing ourselves to a danger, that people will come out and say things, that there will be false accusations." (David, 48 years old, field note, February 2021)

Through age, a supposed gap in maturity, and carefully setting aside what the claimant himself says about his perception of sexual relations as an obligation, it clings to the hypersexualization of black people and mobilise the myth of the 'black rapist' (Davis, 1981). In this case, instead of attacking white heterosexual women, they are attacking white homosexual men. In the first case, it is necessary to ensure the purity of the race and its reproduction; in this case, they are concerned about the reputation of the organization and the risk of it being tainted by false accusations. Secondly, it can be analysed as the reactivation of a cultural homophobia (Jenicek, 2009) script: if they are not *real* homosexuals, then they are straight, and as foreigners, inherently homophobic, and thus trying to endanger the association.

The disappearance of the person's vulnerability is immediate, and the person is assigned to a group to which they are supposed to belong. Secondly, the complaint is reversed, and the victim becomes the perpetrator. However binary this categorization might seem, it is to be noted that every account of sexual violence followed the same logic: asylum seekers denouncing volunteers, the latter profiting from the former vulnerable status. Vulnerability which, when conceded, might however be turned against the institutional space: asylum seekers go from being vulnerable to being a threat. Race intersects with migration: if their vulnerability is provoked by the living conditions imposed by the asylum application, they represent a threat as they are suspected to make slanderous denunciations. Vulnerability if thus mobile: when present, it can be a threat, when absent, it renders the victim an aggressor.

In this case, asylum seekers are no longer such, nor LGBT individuals, but 'migrants' (I stress the reification of this division based on the discourses I report), either vulnerable or not at all. This uncertain dimension of vulnerability, its mobility and removability, makes it a secondary tool of identification: what is emphasised is that they are above all

threatening. If "to be heard as doing a tiresome complaint is being heard as being tiresome" (Ahmed, 2021: 2), complaints and complainants can be atomised, which means ensuring that the next complaint is caught up in such a discourse, and therefore isolated and prevented.

As it had happened previously, the reactions arguing for the invulnerability of asylum seekers (or even the danger they could represent) were once again met with opposed perspectives:

"I don't understand how anyone can say that, and think that a relationship or an act of intercourse can be consensual. They are so dependent on us, so vulnerable. How can you think that in such a situation there can be consent?" (Jean-Philippe, 60-year-old, field note, February 2021)

This perspective, focusing on the power dynamics at play, quickly won over the majority of those present at the meeting. The emphasis here is on the dependence of asylum seekers on volunteers, due to a vulnerability and marginality linked to their status and their living conditions (Tschaeler, 2023): the organization suffers from it as the dependence is above all due to a vulnerability produced elsewhere. Thus, consent is considered impossible precisely because of this vulnerability. The reference to age, while not explicit, is expressed symbolically: SOGI applicants are framed as paradigmatically vulnerable. A similar observation taking into account the paradigmatic vulnerability of a group (Piterbraut-Merx, 2020) has been done in other work environments, for instance scholars and doctoral students, where the latter are never minors but always seen as highly vulnerable, and the strong difference in status and reputation as what allows violence to happen (Deruelle, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This article has shown how intimacy is at the core of volunteer work towards SOGI asylum seekers. First, it has brought forward how forms of symbolic and material intimacy are produced through the sedimentation of sexual scripts peculiar to the studied organisation, and by its framing as a familial space. However, the first part raises questions about how this intimacy can produce forms of racial and sexual violence, analysed in the second part of the article. This part dwells into how the space is progressively reframed, in order to redraw racial and professional borders between volunteers and asylum seekers such as to reinstate a sexual boundary between them. In this part, vulnerability emerges as a core item in debates over whether or not volunteers and asylum seekers should engage in forms of intimacy involving sexuality. Following this, the third part of the article points out the limits of vulnerability once the racialisation of asylum seekers and their complaints are taken into account: they suddenly become threatening subjects, and go from victims to potential perpetrators. This part dwells into how racial stigma – and in particular that of the black rapist – can be reproduced in communitarian spaces, questioning the borders of vulnerability.

The article aims at filling a research gap concerning sexual violence in migrants support organizations, which has been overlooked until now. What I show is that not only sexual violence "says something about the gender order" (Fassin, 2009: 313) and constantly reinstitutes it, but also about the racial order: it is an apparatus for assigning people to and drawing violence from positions of gender, race, and age and what they produce in terms of status. Thus, the article moves towards an analysis of both the gendered and racial dimensions of volunteer work, in order to understand the different forms of violence and domination it produces – and the ways in which they can be countered. For instance, the redrawing of borders in order to counter certain forms of intimacy (namely sexuality), which in this case-study is a highly gendered phenomenon, needs to be thought as well in terms of whiteness. More precisely, it can be considered as moving away from a certain form of "white ignorance", which consists in the fact that "whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills, 1999: 18), an ignorance which is not passive, but active, and which is

also gendered. Reframing intimacy in volunteer work, thus going from the family trope to the workplace one, implies removing the possibility of incest within it, but in no way it excludes the possibility of intimacy and violence. However, despite these limits, progressively pointing out the relational dimension of knowledge and ignorance implied a reframing of the action from one generation of activists to another. This movement is marked by the development and implementation of various tools and strategies in order to fight against sexual violence, and a problematization of the power relationships that structure the associative space.

Subsequently, the article argues that maintaining silence around sexual violence means not letting it be known that something happened to those who come after; it is the production of ignorance about what the associative space can produce as forms of gendered and racial violence. To speak about it, it is to break a *continuum* of silence and violence, but also a direct address to those who have previously maintained silence. Otherwise said, it is as much speaking “about” as speaking “to”: it is an occupation of the space by another orientation (Ahmed, 2006), which in turn contributes to the reframing of a space – which becomes more welcoming of such complaints. It also is a way to make space for asylum seekers in a network, produced by the sedimentation of their migration and by the space the organisation offers (Massey et al. 1999), that can be considered “safer” (Roediger, 1991) by those who claim belonging to it.

Lastly, the article makes a point about how the *continuum* of violence works, which is here not only a *continuum* of the forms of violence asylum seekers endure, but as well a geographical and racial one, against which some activists – again, mainly lesbian women – try to fight against. Reframing the organization racially and professionally means resignifying a space in which sexuality could disturb the functioning of volunteering – as literature on sexuality at work has already shown (Hearn and Parkin, 1987), and in which violence should not happen despite – or precisely because – the imbalance of power due to racial and administrative differences between volunteers and asylum seekers is important, and should be taken into account.

Declaration of competing interest

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