Anti-Violence Centres and Shelters in Italy: Between Resistance and Institutionalization

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Abstract. Anti-Violence Centres (AVCs) are conceptualised as feminist communities of resistance, capable of generating counter-hegemonic knowledge and relational practices oriented toward social transformation. However, this configuration is neither given nor homogeneous: it unfolds within a heterogeneous field shaped by growing processes of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation. Drawing on feminist epistemologies and Bourdieu's field theory, and based on qualitative research – including 35 interviews with practitioners and two focus groups with representatives of feminist networks – this article examines how performance-oriented pressures and administrative standardisation threaten the epistemic and political autonomy of AVCs. The article highlights the strategies enacted by feminist grassroot centres to sustain transformative practices, assert alternative interpretive frameworks, and build alliances within territorial contexts increasingly shaped by institutional actors operating under divergent paradigms. It argues that the survival of AVCs as feminist communities of resistance depends not only on their capacity to counter marginalisation from decision-making processes, but also on their ability to build cross-sectoral solidarities grounded in an intersectional perspective.

Keywords: Anti-Violence Centres, feminism, institutionalisation, situated knowledge, communities of resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist movements have historically played a pivotal role in raising public awareness of violence against women (VAW), combining strategies such as mass mobilisation and the development of concrete responses to the needs of survivors (Htun and Weldon 2012). Rather than delivering services through top-down, expert-driven interventions, feminist social work positions survivors as active agents, validating their experiential knowledge and centring their autonomy and self-determination (Shah and Mufeed, 2023). This relational and participatory approach restores dignity and value to care, reclaiming it from its historically devalued and feminised status (Glenn 2010), and reconfiguring it – through the principles of cooperation, mutuality, reciprocity, and joint decision making – as a space of resistance

to patriarchal culture (Eyal-Lubling and Krumer-Nevo 2016). Moreover, by situating women's personal experiences of violence within broader structures of gendered oppression, this form of caring refuses to pathologize survivors, instead linking private pain to public injustice (Dominelli 2002).

In Italy, these responses materialised in the late 1980s with the establishment of the first anti-violence centres (AVCs), conceived as safe and supportive spaces where women can process trauma and regain control over their lives (Pietrobelli *et al.* 2020; Creazzo 2016). Caring labour in grassroots feminist AVCs are conceived to be inherently political, because it embodies a feminist praxis that challenges dominant patriarchal norms and hierarchical professional-client dynamics (Veltri 2018; Creazzo 2016). Not only AVCs have filled the historical void left by the state, but have also generated situated knowledge that challenges patriarchal culture and the social and institutional complicities that perpetuate the victimisation of women (Guarnieri 2018). To this end, over time Italian AVCs have progressively organised into networks, both to exert pressure on institutions for the recognition of male violence as a structural issue and to promote social change at the territorial level (Demurtas and Misiti 2021).

The extent to which feminist movements have been able to influence national anti-VAW policies has been widely discussed in the literature (Weldon 2002; Corradi and Stöckl 2016). In the Italian context, Corradi and Bandelli (2018) attributed historical delays in state policies to the difficulty experienced by extra-parliamentary feminists in forming alliances with institutional feminist actors – difficulties that were partly due to the rigid configuration of the party system under the First Republic. While such conditions have historically limited institutional responsiveness, international moral suasion has been instrumental in accelerating the development of anti-VAW legislation (Pietrobelli *et al.* 2020). A more coherent and coordinated national strategy only began to take shape after the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Demurtas and Misiti 2021). Since then, legal measures have expanded – though increasingly framed through a security-oriented lens (Curti 2024; Cagliero and Biglia 2016) – and both central and regional administrations have progressively developed measures to prevent and combat VAW, alongside increasing public funding for AVCs.

Complementing analyses of feminist movements' ability to influence national policies, this article shifts the focus to the consequences that the state's intervention to prevent and combat VAW is having on AVCs. As observed in international literature, the state's appropria-

tion of the anti-violence feminist agenda, and its reconfiguration in line with a neoliberal logic, can lead to the co-optation of feminist organisations, influencing their practices and compromising their transformative and political scope (Bumiller 2008; Lehrner and Allen 2009).

Focusing on the national context, this article investigates how the progressive institutionalisation of AVCs risks reshaping their operational practices and explores the forms of resistance enacted in response to processes of professionalisation, bureaucratisation, and integration into multilevel governance mechanisms. As discussed elsewhere, since the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the Italian government has gradually increased public funding (Demurtas 2022), leading to the expansion of AVCs, including those lacking the political commitment that has historically characterised feminist grassroots centres.

While rejecting a simplified representation that flattens the internal tensions and strategic ambivalences in feminist organisations, reducing them to monolithic entities (Martin 1990), this article explores how feminist knowledge and practices are defended in the face of neoliberal governance regimes. Conceptualising grassroots feminist AVCs as "communities of resistance" highlights the strategies employed to preserve their situated knowledge and safeguard their ability to counter the oppression of women inherent in patriarchal culture.

2. ANTI-VIOLENCE CENTRES AS COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE

Framing AVCs as "communities of resistance" enables a critical reframing of their struggle for recognition (Fraser 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2007) as sites of collective feminist knowledge production, oriented towards social transformation and the contestation of gendered structures of oppression, in clear opposition to their reduction to mere service providers for survivors of male violence.

Drawing on the traditions of Black and intersectional feminism, it is possible to emphasise how shared experiences of male oppression can provide a foundation for collective resistance. bell hooks describes the margin as the place where oppressed subjectivities have historically been relegated, but also as a creative space. It is precisely through supportive relationships – "one needs a community of resistance"(1989: 19) – that the margin can be transformed into a generative space for situated knowledge and counter-narratives. In this regard, Collins (2019) highlights that oppressed subjectivities and the activists who advocate for them are key players in

the production of resistant knowledge. These forms of epistemic resistance challenge dominant frameworks by contesting who has the authority to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is entitled to produce it, and under what conditions it can be recognised.

In light of these theoretical contributions, framing AVCs as communities of resistance entails recognising them as spaces where the struggle against male domination (Bourdieu 1998) takes shape through opposition to the dominant symbolic order. This resistance is grounded in feminist practices of caring labour and in the relationships between women. Thus, the fact that they are conceived as "places created by women and for women" does not imply self-referential closure; rather, separatism should be understood as an enabling condition for the collective reactivation of women's empowerment at both individual and social levels.

It is worth recalling that Sivanandan (1989) developed the concept of "community of resistance" in explicit opposition to the excesses of identity politics which, by emptying the slogan "the personal is political" of its collective meaning, risked turning struggles for social justice into demands centred on individual affirmation. Similar concerns have been extensively addressed within feminist scholarship. Numerous authors have pointed to the limitations and ambivalences of identity-based politics, particularly when reframed through the lens of neoliberal rationality. Brown (1995), for instance, critiques the construction of political subjectivities grounded in trauma, arguing that such configurations can give rise to forms of protest that are readily absorbed into the very logics of governance they seek to resist. To counter these tendencies, Fraser emphasises the need to link struggles for recognition with demands for redistribution, thereby restoring attention to the material structures of oppression (Fraser 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2007). Building on this perspective, this understanding of AVCs highlights their transformative potential as spaces where collective action, ethical commitment and situated knowledge converge. Drawing on Welch's (2017) reflection, it should be emphasised that knowledge based on feminist praxis is not limited to naming and contesting the power/knowledge apparatuses that reproduce gendered oppression. It also encompasses relational forms of solidarity that enable the development of alternative "epistemes", rooted in lived experience and ethical responsibility. At the core of this vision is the belief that collective practices of solidarity are key to feminist resistance, and that defending the critical, practice-based nature of feminist knowledge is an active form of opposition to the forces of co-optation and depoliticization of dominant thought.

In this sense, defending the epistemic integrity of AVCs – understood as laboratories of counter-hegemonic epistemologies, where feminist critiques of structural gender violence are not only articulated but also embodied and enacted through everyday relational practices – entails resisting the fragmentation, abstraction, and bureaucratisation of feminist knowledge brought about by processes of institutional co-optation shaped by neoliberal rationality.

2.1. AVCs in the Context of Neoliberal Governance

To address this risk, it is useful to adopt a perspective that foregrounds the tensions generated by the institutionalisation of AVCs. Through Bourdieu's analytical lens, these centres can be situated at the core of an anti-violence field, conceived as a social space historically shaped by grassroots feminist activism and the accumulation of symbolic capital. From this perspective, the transformative potential of AVCs depends on their ability to safeguard a specific form of capital (Bourdieu and Santoro 2015), rooted in a structural analysis of gender-based violence, feminist working methodologies, a practice-based training and an ethic of care and collective responsibility.

However, it is precisely the institutional recognition of this capital that exposes the anti-violence field to dynamics of heteronomous regulation by the state, operating through an administrative rationality. This intervention materialises through mechanisms such as funding, accreditation, professionalisation, and the standardisation of practices (Bourdieu 2021). While these mechanisms may ensure the survival of AVCs, they also tend to reshape the field by redefining internal hierarchies and subordinating access to resources to compliance with technocratic logics.

What is at stake, therefore, is not only the allocation of material resources, but the legitimacy of feminist knowledge itself. Resistance, in this sense, is not a given condition but a situated practice, continuously renewed in order to assert epistemic autonomy against the normalising pressures exerted by the state "meta-field" (Bourdieu 2021).

Bumiller (2008) clearly illustrates these dynamics, showing how, under neoliberalism, state intervention has progressively redirected the feminist agenda on violence against women towards security-oriented, therapeutic, and performance-based approaches in the North American context. According to the author, knowledge rooted in grassroots feminist practices has been gradually supplanted by expert, technical, and psycho-medical forms of knowledge centred on risk management and outcome assessment. This shift has been facilitated by the sector's

increasing professionalisation and by the involvement of institutional actors – such as the judiciary, law enforcement, healthcare, and social services – whose discourses and priorities often prove incompatible with feminist perspectives. As Hester (2011) argues, the *habitus* of the various actors involved in supporting women and children affected by violence diverge so radically that they appear to operate on entirely separate planets. In everyday practice, the clash between these divergent rationalities produces perverse effects, often resulting in secondary victimisation and ultimately undermining survivors' safety.

These theoretical contributions offer an analytical framework for examining how feminist grassroots AVCs operate within an increasingly regulated and fragmented field. The following analysis focuses on how these organisations navigate the tensions generated by increasing institutionalisation. Particular attention will be paid to how practitioners negotiate their epistemic positioning, how bureaucratic and administrative logics shape working conditions and professional practices, and how feminist knowledge is defended or marginalised. The final part of the analysis examines the case of the State–Regions Agreement as a site of symbolic and political struggle, where conflicting understandings of anti-violence work are negotiated. Together, these dimensions help to understand how the transformative potential of feminist practices is sustained, constrained, or reconfigured within the institutional contexts in which AVCs operate.

3. METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL MATERIALS

The data presented in this article were collected within the framework of the VIVA project, an ongoing national research project launched in 2017 to analyse and evaluate interventions addressing male violence against women. The project has been carried out under an agreement between the CNR-IRPPS (National Research Council – Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies) and the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and has been supported through institutional funding provided within the framework of the National Plans against VAW.

Of the various activities planned by the VIVA project, particular attention has been paid to AVCs. The dual objective is to analyse practitioners' perceptions of their working practices and to investigate the role of AVC networks in defining national policies for preventing and combatting gender-based violence.

With regard to the first objective, data were collected between 2019 and 2020 through in-depth, in-person interviews with practitioners from 35 AVCs selected nationwide. The aim of this research was to explore how they represent and carry out their work. The sample was selected using purposive criteria informed by a national mapping (Demurtas and Misiti 2021), which took into account the legal status of the managing body (public, specialised private, or non-specialised private) and the centre's historicity (historic centres established before 2000; consolidated centres established between 2000 and 2013; and more recent centres established between 2014 and 2017). The interviews were conducted using an ethnographic and dialogical approach, conceptualising the research encounter as a space for co-producing knowledge (Haraway 1988).

As for the second objective, the article draws on preliminary findings from a research activity conducted in April 2025, consisting of two online focus groups with representatives of feminist networks and third-sector organisations managing AVCs. This research activity is part of a broader evaluation study of the National Plans against VAW and focuses on the revision process of the State–Regions Agreement on the minimum standards for AVCs and shelters[1]. The aim was to provide an in-depth analysis of both the processes of institutionalisation and the strategies of feminist resistance articulated within this regulatory framework. Given that the revision process is still underway, the findings presented here should be understood as partial and situated within a specific phase of institutional negotiation.

All materials were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), with the aim of identifying recurring patterns, tensions, and criticalities in participants' narratives.

4. INSTITUTIONAL TENSIONS AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN THE ANTI-VIOLENCE FIELD

This section explores how feminist AVCs navigate institutional tensions and defend their epistemic positioning, while confronting bureaucratic pressures and clashing rationalities.

4.1. Self-representation and epistemic positioning

Challenging a unitary and reductive representation of AVCs, the analysis of practitioners' narratives

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[1] The State-Regions Agreement establishes the national requirements that AVCs and shelters must fulfil to access public funds transferred from the central government to the regions. This instrument explicitly aims to harmonise financing methods and intervention practices of anti-violence centres.

reveals the existence of heterogeneous interpretative frameworks, reflecting significant differences in how the nature and function of the centres are understood. These positionalities unfold along a continuum, with one pole represented by the notion of the "women's house" and the other by the idea of a "specialised service".

In certain contexts – particularly within historically rooted feminist AVCs – the centre is described as a relational and non-hierarchical space, shaped by feminist mutualism, where non-judgmental listening to the survivor and the rejection of symbolic asymmetries are actively valued. «We are a women's house, not an anti-violence centre: that means no one will ever be denied the chance to be heard here. We listen to all women in their struggles. No woman is boxed in» (AVC2). Other practitioners simultaneously adopt the formal definition of AVC while simultaneously asserting a political identity and feminist militancy, consciously positioning themselves within the field as agents of cultural and social change. «The anti-violence centre is not just a place of support – it is a political tool [...] The goal is to change the world» (AVC16).

While both are feminist centres, they articulate their identity through different symbolic and discursive registers. In particular, the term *women's house* is used to challenge the neutrality associated with the word *centre* and to explicitly affirm these as spaces by and for women (Baeri and Parisi 2016; Campani and Romanin 2015). Regardless of the terminology adopted, in both cases practice is inseparable from political action: the AVC is envisioned as a laboratory space, where reflexivity encourage the ongoing development of situated knowledge. « It's a constantly evolving lab, always questioning what we do, what we care about» (AVC2).

On the other hand, a more technical-functional perspective is in place. This view is more prevalent in public services and centres managed by multi-service NGOs, where AVC identity is defined by performance and organisational efficiency. Here, legitimacy is derived primarily from professionalism, outcome evaluation and managerial effectiveness.

> To me, an anti-violence centre should be a service in the truest sense of the word. It must be accessible and useful; it must not be self-referential and it must produce results. But yes, it's a service. Without a service structure, passion can easily turn into personal gratification or freelance activism. The etymology of 'service' is 'to serve': I am here to help someone with a temporary, solvable problem. I need an organisation to ensure this service can be delivered. (AVC10)

This perspective reflects a process of field heteronomisation (Bourdieu 2021), whereby the symbolic capital originally shaped by feminist practices is subordinated to administrative, standardising and evaluative logics. This process is reflected in the marginalization of relational and experiential feminist knowledge, which in some cases is displaced by specialist expertise legitimised through bureaucratic standards and performance metrics. As a consequence, the symbolic capital of the field is redefined, and its epistemic autonomy increasingly constrained.

These models are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they often coexist within the same organisation, revealing the complex nature of an anti-violence field shaped simultaneously by feminist genealogies and by logics linked to its ongoing institutionalization. «We're lucky to have integrated what I'd call the dual soul of anti-violence centres: they're partly a service [...] and partly an ideology» (AVC7).

These self-representations are not merely semantic nuances. While they reflect different strategies of positioning, they also reveal internal tensions that challenge the idea of a unified and cohesive community of resistance.

In this context, invoking the notion of a community of resistance entails critical scrutiny. Regardless of whether practitioners' positioning takes the form of explicit opposition to the performance-oriented logic that characterises welfare services, or of critical negotiation aimed at reconciling divergent logics, what defines a feminist community of resistance is its capacity to assert the political and epistemic autonomy of feminist care work, as well as its ability to forge alliances oriented toward the transformation of oppressive social structures.

4.2. Bureaucratic co-optation and the neutralisation of feminist practice

International literature has shown that state pressures to professionalise feminist social care work often entail processes of bureaucratisation and standardisation that risk neutralising its transformative potential (Bumiller 2008; Burnett *et al.* 2016; Lehrner and Allen 2009). The narratives of the interviewed practitioners provide concrete insight into the mechanisms through which this dynamic unfolds at the organisational level.

A central tension emerges between the formal recognition of AVCs and the conditionality that accompanies it. Regulatory instruments – such as accreditation procedures and minimum requirements for accessing public funding – impose a symbolic hierarchy that privileges what is measurable and reportable according to bureaucratic standards. «Having to calculate everything in advance is difficult. On the one hand, we're bound by the strict requirements of the State-Regions Agreement

[...] On the other, there's no sense of 'giving' in relation to the depth of the situation» (AVC27).

In a funding landscape marked by fragmentation and instability, AVCs face growing challenges in ensuring continuity and strategic planning. Short-term cycles and fluctuating resources generate precarious working conditions for practitioners and increase the risk of burnout. At the same time, funding criteria increasingly promote the homogenisation of intervention models: rigid templates, predefined indicators and timelines can be viewed as incompatible with the non-linear, relational, and processual nature of women's pathways out of violence.

This institutional dynamic not only constrains the practical organisation of care work, but also contributes to its symbolic devaluation. Practitioners report a widespread tendency to reduce feminist care practices to generic support functions, erasing its complexity, relational depth, and political significance.

There's this belief that our work is just about listening and providing emotional support. But it's important to understand that it's much broader than that. It involves risk assessment, sharing lived experiences and building a project, as well as an empowerment goal. (AVC2)

As clearly illustrated by a publicly managed AVC, within an institutionalised framework the practitioner–survivor relationship tends to be reframed as a performance, with outcomes subject to institutional evaluation. Survivors are increasingly expected to conform to externally defined expectations and to achieve formalised, measurable objectives. This is exemplified by the implementation of bureaucratic tools such as the Individualised Support Plan:

With the signing of the Individualized Support Plan, the woman must face her decisions [...] Even if she has no children and doesn't want to report, I still file the report [...] I write that despite repeated advice to file a complaint, the woman refuses, and I have her sign it. [...] In the end, it's also a form of protection for us. (AVC15)

Within this logic of control, an intensifying injunction to individual responsibility displaces the burden of change onto the woman herself, while leaving the structural conditions that sustain violence unchallenged.

4.3. Divergent Rationalities and Operational Compromises

Further risks of neutralising the feminist perspective emerge from the increasing involvement, promoted by the state, of institutional actors and other service providers who do not share the interpretative frameworks through which feminist AVCs understand gender-based violence. Hester (2019) describes the incongruity between divergent perspectives, rooted in different professional habitus, as a "clash of planets" – a dynamic that can produce harmful effects and compromise the safety of women and their children.

A significant fracture emerges in the relationship between feminist AVCs and social services. Here, the feminist emphasis on the woman's centrality – her needs, desires, and agency – often clashes with a logic oriented toward preserving the family unit. The consequences of such an approach are clearly perceived by practitioners in feminist AVCs, who report pressure to promote family reunification: «Social services often ask us to convince women to go back home, even in very serious situations» (AVC11).

Interaction with the healthcare system also proves to be complex. As Bumiller (2008) notes, the progressive involvement of the health sector in the State-led "war" against violence has facilitated the spread of professional discourses and practices that medicalize survivors, reducing them to clinical subjects whose access to support is conditional on institutional protocols: « We had problems with the emergency room: they told us that if there's no medical report, the woman cannot be taken in charge» (AVC9)

As van der Velden (2004) emphasises, the hierarchy between professional and grassroots knowledge generates deep epistemic asymmetries, hindering the formation of transformative alliances between institutional actors and communities. This hierarchy is reinforced through mechanisms of symbolic exclusion that deny legitimacy to knowledge forms not recognised as "professional." Some AVCs practitioners, for instance, reported offering to act as trainers in an attempt to address the critical issues encountered within healthcare and welfare pathways.

However, these proposals were routinely rejected on the grounds of formal eligibility criteria, public procurement regulations, or rigid authorisation protocols: « The local health authority told us that to provide training you need a public call. [...] They don't understand what networking means» (AVC7).

Structural tensions profoundly impact the relationship with law enforcement. A key concern raised by some practitioners from feminist AVCs is their struggle to be recognised as legitimate interlocutors in a context that is often dominated by hierarchical logics. «Not all police departments recognize us as interlocutors. Some shut us out» (AVC24).

In particular, some practitioners criticise the police for lacking the conceptual tools necessary to interpret

domestic violence, which is often downgraded to a mere family conflict (Johnson, 2006). This interpretive gap not only denies the experiences of survivors but also undermines the legitimacy of AVC practitioners accompanying them, whose knowledge is dismissed as partial: « The police sometimes tell us: it's just a family quarrel. [...] They belittle us» (AVC21).

To this devaluation is added a paradoxical demand: while law enforcement claims it is unable to intervene in the absence of a formal complaint, it simultaneously offloads the responsibility onto the AVCs. This puts pressure on the AVCs to persuade women to file charges, which directly contradicts the feminist relational methodology grounded in respect for women's self-determination and timing. «They say that if the woman doesn't report, they can't do anything. [...] But then they criticize us if we don't convince her» (AVC13).

Of all the institutional domains, the judicial system appears to be the least open to feminist knowledge. In their daily operations, courts and public prosecutors tend to apply a formal legal rationality based on the supposed neutrality of laws and the measurability of evidence. However, feminist legal struggles have long demonstrated that patriarchal representations and mechanisms of secondary victimisation lie beneath the surface of legal formalism – a phenomenon that is still evident today in judicial decisions (Senato della Repubblica 2022). The result is a form of re-victimisation, whereby women are expected to behave 'reasonably' within an inherently unreasonable context. «A judge once told us: if there's only one report, it's not violence» (AVC23), «Judges always ask: why didn't she leave him sooner? [...] They don't understand how violence works» (AVC3).

In this configuration, the situated knowledge of practitioners is systematically excluded and devalued in favour of technical expertise, which, by contrast, can contribute to secondary victimisation within judicial proceedings. «In the expert assessments, women are described as manipulative, hysterical, unstable. [...] It's institutional violence» (AVC10).

As Hester (2019) has underscored, judicial practices are often driven by a reconciliatory rationality aimed at preserving the father-child relationship – even at the cost of ignoring violent dynamics: «Family courts want the woman to cooperate with the father. Even if there's violence» (AVC16).

These practices reveal the persistence of a normative hierarchy that prioritises family unity over the physical and emotional safety of women and children. In the name of a false neutrality, the justice system displaces responsibility onto the woman, who is required to "step back" in order to ensure coexistence – even in the presence of severe violence: « It's a total burden on the woman: she's the one who has to leave with the kids, change cities, reinvent her life» (AVC9).

The findings highlight how the tension between practitioners' situated knowledge and dominant forms of expertise – legal, medical, and administrative – can result in the progressive marginalisation of the feminist perspective. Territorial networks involving AVCs and other actors do not simply function as neutral spaces for technical coordination, but rather as arenas where cognitive and symbolic asymmetries are reproduced. Within this context, the participation of AVCs can be understood as a form of epistemic resistance aimed at preserving situated knowledge, relational practices, and structural understandings of violence – making institutional recognition a crucial stake in the struggle for epistemic and political legitimacy.

While this paragraph has focused on the criticalities emerging from collaboration within institutional networks, it is equally important to stress that AVCs actively engage in overcoming these tensions. Field research highlights the central role they play in promoting awareness and providing training to institutional and territorial actors – an effort that constitutes a key strategy for transforming operational cultures and fostering more effective and feminist-informed responses to violence. From this perspective, AVCs' work extends beyond the provision of individual support for women: it entails the construction of contextual conditions that encourage prevention and systemic change through sustained engagement with local networks (Cannito and Torrioni 2024; Demurtas and Misiti 2021).

5. THE STATE–REGIONS AGREEMENT AS A FIELD OF REGULATION AND CONFLICT

This section examines the State–Regions Agreement on minimum standards for AVCs and shelters as a paradigmatic site of institutional regulation and epistemic struggle, based on findings from two focus groups. Initially adopted in 2014 and revised in 2022, the Agreement marks a turning point in the institutionalisation of the anti-violence field. It reflects the state's attempt to govern AVCs through standardised criteria linked to public funding.

This has prompted resistance from feminist AVCs seeking to defend situated practices and safeguard the field's political autonomy from managerial logics. The original version was criticised for its bureaucratic language and failure to acknowledge the political identity of AVCs (Demurtas and Toffanin 2024). While the 2022

revision introduced some improvements, it also revived tensions with public institutions.

Far from being a neutral policy tool, the Agreement has become a site of symbolic struggle over competing visions of anti-violence work. At stake is the definition of the field itself: who holds epistemic authority, which practices are legitimised, and how anti-violence interventions are publicly defined.

5.1. A Subterranean Process

The revision of the State–Regions Agreement is formally presented as the result of a dialogue between institutions and feminist organizations engaged in the fight against violence against women (Busi *et al.* 2022). However, feminist associations have described the process leading to its revision as opaque, fragmented, and lacking in genuine participation. Rather than functioning as spaces for dialogue, the institutional roundtables, which have been held intermittently since 2017, were perceived as mere platforms for presenting established positions, rather than as spaces for meaningful deliberation or negotiation over the significance of key concepts.

> *The construction of positions on a chessboard that does not allow for relationality or the pursuit of shared objectives is not a debate; it is merely positioning.* (Intersectional feminist association).
> *The regions worked in complete autonomy with selected actors, without involving all organisations operating in the territory.* (National AVC network 1)

Despite a formal openness to dialogue, feminist AVCs experienced the so-called "participatory" process as a limited consultation, highlighting what they perceived as the State's substantial closure. In their view, the discontinuity of decision-making and the lack of transparency pointed to a political rationality impermeable to relational logic and unable to acknowledge the epistemic value of those working on the ground. «At a certain point, the process became subterranean – it disappeared, and then re-emerged with the outcomes [the 2022 Agreement], but without the participation of those who had originally promoted the process» (National AVC network 1).

From the perspective of feminist networks, the process that led to the revision of the State–Regions Agreement was not simply a missed opportunity for participatory governance, but a mechanism through which epistemic hierarchies are reproduced. In their view, the situated and relational knowledge developed by feminist practitioners was systematically excluded from the insti-

tutional grammar of deliberation, relegating them to the margins of the decision-making process.

5.2. Semantic Neutralization

One of the main criticisms levelled at the 2014 State–Regions Agreement concerned its definition of professional roles within AVCs, particularly the exclusion of reception workers (*operatrici di accoglienza*) – a figure central to the feminist methodology. Although not affiliated with formal professional bodies, reception workers embody the woman-to-woman relational practice at the core of feminist interventions. Their expertise, developed through internal training and experiential knowledge accumulated in the field, was disregarded by a text that recognised only roles tied to academic credentials or professional registers. This exclusion has been seen as emblematic of a broader trend towards depoliticization and professionalisation.

The 2022 version of the Agreement introduced an explicit reference to the reception practitioner, thereby partially acknowledging the demands raised by historic feminist AVCs during the revision process. However, the adopted definition remains only partially accepted.

> *The only thing we focused on is this expression 'reception practitioner'; maybe something could be added, because 'reception practitioner' is a bit... not very politically or culturally grounded [...] It's a bit vague. (National AVC network 2)*
> *The anti-violence practitioner has a specificity that goes beyond reception. (AVC manager 1)*

From the perspective of feminist networks, this constitutes a clear example of the appropriation of feminist language. In the absence of any meaningful participatory process, key terms are stripped of their original meaning and reduced to technical-administrative categories. This process of "semantic neutralisation" is particularly evident in the definition of the approach required for AVCs – the feminist methodology based on the relation between women (*metodologia della relazione tra donne*) – which several associations describe as vague, tautological, and disconnected from its feminist roots. In this context, the symbolic capital accumulated by feminist AVCs is rearticulated through a technocratic lens, deprived of its transformative potential and stripped from its situated epistemology.

> *By removing that part [on feminism], what remains is a vague articulation of certain concepts – like the reception methodology. [...] Without the underlying political and cul-*

tural reference, they lose effectiveness in relation to reality.
(Intersectional feminist association)

5.3. The Injunction to Perform as a service

By their very nature, the texts of the State–Regions Agreement introduce structural and organisational requirements that AVCs must meet to access public funding. Among these, however, are several criteria typical of public service provision, which are fundamentally misaligned with the nature of AVCs. As a result, AVCs risk being reconfigured as generic service providers, subject to compliance requirements, time-bound procedures, and standardised training metrics.

The introduction of the 24/7 requirement (H24) for the availability of a dedicated phone line is particularly emblematic in this regard. Many associations interpret it as a sign of the ongoing reconversion of AVCs into emergency outposts, functionally and conceptually assimilated to health or crisis response services. «Anti-violence centres do intervene in emergencies, but they are not emergency services – so the emphasis placed on 24/7 operation is something we absolutely do not agree with» (National AVC network 1).

Given that services dedicated to 24/7 support or emergency protection already exist, AVCs instead assert their role as structures that accompany women along their path out of violence and toward autonomy. This accompaniment requires practitioners, on the one hand, to adapt to each woman's timing, needs, and choices; and on the other, to build local alliances with civil society actors, institutions, and services – thus reinforcing the transformative function of AVCs through relational and political proximity to the territory.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued for the analytical relevance of conceptualising feminist AVCs as *communities of resistance*. In line with international debates, it has examined the risk of neutralisation inherent in the institutionalisation of a field that originated in grassroots feminist practice and is increasingly subject to pressures of professionalisation.

A key area of resistance concerns the nature of AVCs. Since their inception, feminist care practices have had an explicit political significance, because supporting survivors is closely linked to the broader goal of social transformation. However, the process of heteronomisation of the anti-violence field has brought significant shifts. The analysis has revealed the coexistence between symbolic capital rooted in feminist genealogies and performance-oriented logics promoted by institutionalisation. This tension generates organisational and epistemic conflicts that affect the definition of care, the configuration of professional roles, and the criteria for institutional recognition. The field thus appears heterogeneous, marked by divergent positionalities: on one side, AVCs committed to feminist and transformative politics; on the other, services shaped by efficiency, measurability, and bureaucratic accountability. Between these poles lie hybrid attempts at reconciliation, not without friction.

The neutralisation of feminist knowledge should not be understood merely as a top-down imposition, but rather as the effect of a broader systemic process tied to the state's appropriation of the feminist agenda on violence. This has led to the involvement of an increasing number of institutional actors, who operate through professionalised perspectives. As a consequence, epistemic hierarchies have emerged, whereby institutionally recognised forms of knowledge tend to marginalise the experiential and relational knowledge developed within feminist AVCs. Faced with the risks of marginalisation and conflicting paradigms, AVCs adopt differentiated strategies. On the other hand, many AVCs invest in building territorial alliances aimed at transforming the interpretive frameworks of other actors. Through training, awareness-raising, and dialogical engagement, they work to shift professional cultures and institutional approaches, while also fostering broader societal change. These efforts require sustained commitment and represent concrete strategies for disseminating feminist perspectives and reinforcing the political and educational role of AVCs.

Framing AVCs as communities of resistance also necessitates a more rigorous analysis of their capacity to forge alliances with other insurgent political subjectivities. Several practitioners interviewed for this study explicitly articulated intersectional and transfeminist commitments, demonstrating a nuanced awareness of the complex entanglements of gender, sexuality, race, class, and citizenship that shape experiences of violence. While many AVCs already confront these interlocking systems of oppression in their everyday practice, the articulation of broader, transversal alliances emerges as a critical political horizon. In this regard, Bourdieu (1998) underscores the subversive potential of alliances between feminist and queer movements. Though historically and politically distinct, these movements share a structural marginality within the dominant symbolic order, a positionality from which collective mobilisation can more effectively resist political ghettoisation and activate

transformative processes. Within the field of anti-violence work, this insight suggests that the continued vitality of AVCs as communities of resistance increasingly hinges on their ability to serve as spaces of convergence, dynamic platforms that interweave plural, situated struggles, united by a shared rejection of patriarchal, heteronormative, and neoliberal domination.

Such an orientation toward intersectional solidarity does not dilute the feminist genealogy that grounds AVCs; rather, it affirms and radicalises it, extending their political and epistemic project across multiple, interconnected fronts of resistance. The transformative potential of AVCs thus lies not only in safeguarding feminist memory, but also in their capacity to activate strategic solidarities across difference, grounded in a shared horizon of social justice.

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