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Violence against women in Italy after Beijing 1995: the relationship between women’s movement(s), feminist practices and state policies

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ABSTRACT

Italy, as well as other United Nations Member States, took up the global call to end all forms of violence against women and girls (VAW) embraced in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Through this contribution, we aim to explore the tensions and synergies between the agendas of local women’s rights movement(s) and government strategies to implement Beijing. Specifically, we will analyse the role of women’s groups and feminist movement(s) in shaping VAW policies and interventions, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the relationships between the Italian strand of feminism and VAW policies and practices. Based on original quantitative and qualitative data collected between 2018 and 2019, we will analyse the extent to which feminist thoughts have (or have not) been recognised by Italian institutions in the past 25 years in relation to the approaches adopted to combat VAW.

L’Italie, à l’instar d’autres États membres de l’ONU, a répondu à l’appel mondial à mettre fin à toutes les formes de violence contre les femmes et les filles (VCF) adopté dans la Déclaration et le Programme d’action de Beijing de 1995. Grâce à cette contribution, nous cherchons à examiner les tensions et les synergies entre les ordres du jour du mouvement local (ou des mouvements locaux) de défense des droits de la femme et les stratégies gouvernementales en vue de la mise en œuvre de Beijing. Plus précisément, nous analyserons le rôle des groupes de femmes et du (ou des) mouvement(s) féministe(s) au moment de donner forme aux politiques et interventions en matière de lutte contre les VCF d’un côté et, d’un autre côté, les rapports entre le volet italien du féminisme et les politiques et pratiques de ce pays en matière de VCF. Sur la base de données quantitatives et qualitatives originales recueillies entre 2018 et 2019, nous analyserons dans quelle mesure la pensée féministe a été (ou pas) reconnue par les institutions italiennes durant les 25 dernières années dans le contexte des approches adoptées pour lutter contre les VCF.

Al igual que otros Estados miembros de las Naciones Unidas, Italia aceptó el llamado mundial a poner fin a todas las formas de violencia contra mujeres y niñas (VCM), el cual quedó plasmado en la Declaración y la Plataforma de Acción de Beijing de 1995. En el presente artículo pretendemos examinar las tensiones y las sinergias existentes entre las agendas de los movimientos locales por los derechos de la mujer y las estrategias gubernamentales destinadas a aplicar la Declaración de

KEYWORDS

VAW policies; feminist thoughts; feminist movement(s); anti-violence centres; VAW state institutional approaches

Beijing. Concretamente, analizaremos el papel desempeñado por los grupos de mujeres y los movimientos feministas en la elaboración de políticas e intervenciones contra la VCM, por un lado, y las relaciones entre la variante italiana del feminismo y las políticas y prácticas implementadas contra la VCM, por otro. Empleando una base de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos originales recabados entre 2018 y 2019, analizaremos el grado en que durante los últimos 25 años las instituciones italianas han reconocido (o no) el pensamiento feminista en los enfoques adoptados para combatir la VCM

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, produced a global policy statement – the Beijing Platform for Action – which articulated a vision for the realisation of women’s rights worldwide.¹ In line with that global aspiration, this article is a case study from Italy. Italy, along with other UN Member States, took up the global call to end all forms of violence against women and girls (VAW) embraced in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Strategic Objective D.1 of the Beijing Declaration called on states to ‘take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women’.

Here, we discuss the development of VAW policies and politics in Italy, and specifically explore tensions and synergies between women and feminist movement(s), and the strategies adopted by the Italian state to implement the Beijing Declaration. We reflect on the contribution of women and feminist movement(s) to the development of VAW politics, policies and support services in Italy, as well as the lobbying activities to integrate feminist concepts and practices into such policies over the past 25 years.² We also look in the other direction, assessing how state policies and decisions have affected the feminist movement (s)’ practices and the meanings that activists give to them.

We focus in particular on the following questions: to what extent have Italian VAW politics and policies fulfilled the global call embraced in the Beijing Declaration? Since fighting against VAW is one of the core objectives of feminism(s), what role has(ve) feminism(s) played in shaping state policies and responses to VAW in Italy? To what extent has feminist activism on VAW been recognised as important by the Italian state? What strategies has the state itself adopted to combat VAW? And what impact did Beijing play in the story we are telling of progress over the past 25 years?

We draw on reflections collected during the research activities of the ViVa Project,³ the first comprehensive study on the existing system of support services in Italy, and the first evaluation of a National Plan on gender based-violence. ViVa is an ongoing project rooted within the implementation of the third National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women,⁴ which was adopted in 2017 by the Italian government Department for Equal Opportunities. The ViVa Project focuses on monitoring, assessing and analysing the activities to prevent and fight VAW. It aims to gain in-depth knowledge on the general and specialised support services in order to improve the protection and recovery of those women who have experienced male violence. The project involves many steps and is programmed to last three years: from December 2017 to December 2020.

In the next section, we offer more information on the specific ViVa research we are drawing on in this article. We then give an account of feminist contributions to the study of VAW in Italy. After that, we analyse the development of institutional politics and policies and their relationships with feminist movement(s), down the years. We look at the complementary and linked roles of anti-violence centres: as feminist policy-making ‘players’, and as practical service providers focusing on prevention and protection. We then reflect on the relationship between the institutions and the feminist movement (s). Throughout our analysis, we trace the relationship between the progress made on VAW in Italy, and Beijing.

Research methodology

We draw here on evidence from a quantitative survey conducted in 2017, in collaboration with the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT),⁵ involving women’s anti-violence centres and shelters. The research involved 335 anti-violence centres, as well as 52 programmes for perpetrators and 264 shelters. The aim of the survey was to map the specialised services that protect and support women who have experienced male violence, while analysing the services they offer, their work as well as their internal organisation of everyday routines. We also employ findings from a qualitative study conducted in 2018. We conducted in-depth interviews with 35 anti-violence centres, six perpetrators’ programmes, and six shelters. We aimed to gain understanding of their daily practices and the symbolic meanings that guide the worker-activists’ activities.

Centres, programmes, and shelters were selected from all over Italy, considering their experience (in terms of years of activities) and the type of management, either public or private. When they were managed by a private body, we also considered whether the ‘managing institution’ worked exclusively on VAW, or was also active in other fields. All the information collected through the qualitative research and in-depth interviews aims to identify strengths and weaknesses of the system of women’s anti-violence support services in Italy, as well as to set out recommendations to improve the system in itself. All data are anonymised to respect the respondents’ privacy.

VAW politics and policy development in Italy: a timeline

In Italy, as well as in other European countries, the issue of male violence against women burst into the public and scientific arenas in the 1970s, with reference mainly to sexual and domestic violence (Toffanin 2019). The debate, both in terms of policies and services, was a direct consequence of the activities of feminist and women’s movement(s), that at the time was (were) strictly connected with the international feminist one. As is well known, it was the time of the first UN conferences on gender equality and women’s rights.

In 1975, the year of the first UN Conference on Women, in Mexico City, Italy was shocked by the Circeo Massacre. The Circeo Massacre refers to the kidnapping and torture inflicted by three upper-class young men on two girls aged 17 and 19, one of whom was killed. The other saved herself by pretending to be dead. Women’s rights activists

mobilised and decided to make a film of the trial, and *Trail for Rape* was broadcasted on national television in 1979. This revealed both the connivance between the judges and rapists, and the victim blaming that went on. After these events, women's rights activists and women's movement(s) started to bring the topic to the attention of the public and debate it (Bandelli and Porcelli 2016). In 1979, a citizens' initiative bill on sexual violence was presented to the government. Indeed, at the time, sexual violence was placed in the broader category of crimes against morality; it would take another 18 years before the passing of a law that would establish sexual violence as a crime against the person and against individual freedom.

Significant steps were made in Italy, at that point, to change perceptions about the phenomenon. The approval of a new family code in 1975 abolished the 'matrimonial authority' which had given the husband the power to apply 'means of correction and discipline towards his wife'. Subsequently, in 1981, two other provisions had been abrogated: the so-called crime of honour, which granted reduced sentences for husbands who killed their wives for reasons of infidelity, and 'corrective marriage', which allowed a man who had committed a rape not to be condemned provided he married his victim. These steps were made possible through feminist and women's activism challenging the beliefs around marriage and the rights of women in the family, using mass protest and demonstrations. However, we need to bear in mind that the first step in this direction was made by Franca Viola, a Sicilian young woman, who, in the 1960s, publicly refused a 'rehabilitating marriage' with her victimiser, after being kidnapped and raped. Her refusal clashed with the traditional social conventions in Italy and the existing code.

The 1980s marked a general shift in the strategies used by Italian women's and feminist movement(s). Instead of the earlier mass demonstrations intended to give great visibility at the national level, feminist activism shifted to work at the local level, creating autonomous cultural centres, feminist bookstores, and libraries (Calabrò and Grasso 2004). Keeping the focus at the local level, at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, groups from the UDI (*Unione Donne Italiane*)⁶ and other feminist associations began to establish the first anti-violence centres and shelters for women in cities such as Bologna, Milan, and Palermo (Bozzoli *et al.* 2013, 28), driven by the need to support women and their children. Local and regional administrations started to deal with VAW policies well before the central administration did: the first regional law dates back to 1989, promulgated by the Autonomous Province of Bolzano.

Moreover, in 1984, the year before the Second UN Conference on Women in Copenhagen, the Italian government set up a National Commission for Equality and Equal Opportunities Between Men and Women, attached to the Prime Minister's Office as an independent organisation. The Commission, consisting of representatives of political parties, social partners, and women's associations, functioned as a bridge between the 'ground' and the institutional level, at least until 2003 when it was abrogated.

An activist who ran one of the first women's anti-violence centres told us:

Towards the end of the 1970s, when we were collecting signatures for the law on sexual violence, we organised and participated in many demonstrations. [The women] heard about it ... women

who experienced violence started to contact us. At first, we thought we were dealing with sexual violence, as happened in the Circeo Massacre. However, we realised that women experienced violence in their families, from their partners. We then started to support them, through a group of women, a UDI worker and a psychologist. We trained ourselves, and we started to support them. It was all new: we contacted other associations, which were nearly all from the UDI and feminist movements. We started to create relations around Italy, which then led to the D.i.Re. network,⁷ which we helped found. (Interview, July 2019)

While these first Italian women's shelters and anti-violence centres were opening later than in other European countries, for example the UK and Austria, the number grew quite quickly. In 1986, the Venice Centre for Women opened, and the Committee who had launched the popular initiative against sexual violence in 1979 organised a European meeting, Break the Silence,⁸ to share practices and projects. During the 1990s, around 70 anti-violence centres were set up throughout Italy.

The Beijing moment and its impact

In 1995, Italy embraced the Beijing Declaration. This was a dynamic period for anti-violence discourses and practices, both for women's and feminist groups and for state institutions. A year later, a milestone law on sexual violence was finally adopted (law no. 66/1996).⁹ A women's rights activist and contributor to the law attributed the achievement of the 1996 law to the long years of collective action to bring about change, catalysed by the prospect of Italy being under international scrutiny at the Beijing conference, the final conference in a series of four that had galvanised international feminist action around VAW:

The Parliament took 18 years to decide. Italy had gone through 18 years of demonstrations. A never-ending wait, where no answers were given to women who asked for support. After 18 years, we had the 1996 law, not only because the issue had become unbearable in the country; but also, because, in 1995, at the Beijing conference, Italy presented itself as the only Western country with a penal code on violence that still dated back to the fascist period. We did not give the most brilliant image of our country. Thus, parliamentarians, even from different parties, decided to join forces and promulgate the 1996 law, following much mediation, however. (Interview, October 2018)

In 1998, the Italian government embarked on the European Urban Italy Programme, which involved 25 cities in the first phase (Basaglia *et al.* 2006). The project took off after the 1997 Prodi-Finocchiaro Directive (Decree of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of 7 March 1997), which was the first Italian government document to place VAW as a priority for government actions. This initiative played a crucial role in advancing knowledge about VAW.

The 1997 directive was adopted, on one hand, to fulfil the government's commitment to enact the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. But on the other hand, the Italian government was responding to demands at home, from feminist groups and women's associations. In particular, there was pressure to respond to the need for anti-violence centres and shelters: on this issue, feminist voices were often in synergy with local authorities – in particular with the municipalities.

Six years after Beijing, in 2001, other specific measures and restrictions on domestic violence were implemented (law no. 154/2001).¹⁰ The 2001 law was considered a great achievement of the feminists who campaigned for it. These included a group of lawyers from the women's anti-violence centres and shelters network who had played a big role in it. This law has been recognised as exceptional, owing to the process that informed its drafting. The president of the women's anti-violence centre in Milan has written:

Those were years when things like this still happened: the most accurate and fair laws can only be drafted through shared discussions with those social actors that deal with domestic violence every day, and know its challenges and issues. (Ulivi 2019, 140)

Ten years after Beijing: assessing progress, identifying failings

However, the years after Beijing were years when the relationship between feminist civil society and institutional actors was strained at another level. In 2003, the National Commission for Equality and Equal Opportunities Between Men and Women, set up in 1984, was abrogated by decree. The Commission was changed into an advisory body of the Ministry for Equal Opportunities. The transformation of the Commission was seen by feminists as a downgrading which marked a de-prioritisation of gender equality and women's rights issues. In addition, feminists pointed to a total lack of gender mainstreaming policies¹¹ after Beijing.

These were two of many complaints drafted in the Shadow Report on the Italian situation ten years after the Beijing Platform. The report was submitted by an informal network of women's associations to the Commission on the Status of Women, held in New York in 2005 (Shadow Report 2004). But the Shadow Report from Italy dedicated only a short paragraph to VAW, principally focusing instead on women's working conditions, the welfare system and migration laws. The paragraph on VAW was limited to pointing out the positive collaboration between local and regional administrations and anti-violence centres.

At the time, in Italy there were many women's and feminist groups and associations running, among others, archives, libraries, magazines, as well as anti-violence centres and shelters. They were well connected to each other; they also had some conflicts, but they, together, contributed to the development of further VAW legislation at that time. In 2006, a new law (law no. 7/2006)¹² recognised, tackled, and prohibited other forms of VAW, such as female genital mutilation. These groups and associations were also extremely important in relation to the development of institutional practices to support women. In 2008, a network of anti-violence centres and shelters became known as the Di.Re network.

Italy's public national helpline on VAW (1522)¹³ was also set up in 2006: one women's anti-violence centre (LeOnde of Palermo)¹⁴ and a group of social researchers called LeNove¹⁵ together won a national tender to run the helpline. The setting up of a national helpline not only allowed women to have a more accessible instrument to seek help, but let local anti-violence centres and shelters be recognised nationally in a wider network of support services. Again in 2006, the first national research on sexual violence was conducted

by ISTAT, also receiving a positive evaluation in the 2011 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Report: the statistical evidence reported the prevalence of domestic and intimate violence by partners over the other forms of male violence.

The rising tide of right-wing sentiment against migrants since the turn of the century has affected anti-VAW state interventions in Italy. In 2007, a femicide – that of Giovanna Reggiani, an Italian woman murdered by a Romanian citizen – occurred in Rome on 30 October. This triggered a securitarian reaction in the public opinion and in the local and national governments that prioritised emergency and punitive measures over awareness-raising and victim-support ones. Upon the request of the mayor of Rome, and secretary of the main government party at the time, the ‘Democratic Party’, on 7 November the Italian government adopted a security decree that allowed the summary expulsion of citizens of other European Union states if they were judged a threat to public security (Vianello 2012). The feminist movement(s) reacted against this decision with a massive demonstration against the racist and illiberal manipulation of VAW as an emotive topic to further an anti-migration agenda. This demonstration took place in Rome on 25 November 2007, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

Effective partnership around VAW: participatory policymaking

Women’s groups’ actions and requests started to be taken into increasing consideration in the first years of the new century. At this time, some forms of domestic violence began to ‘appear’ in the political debates across national institutions. In February 2009, Italy adopted a law on stalking (law no. 38/2009).¹⁶ As for the 2001 law, the law on stalking was a measure for which women working in anti-violence centres had been waiting for many years, and which they had been working on since 2005, through constant dialogue with the legislator, in a never-ending battle. Precisely because of the law on stalking, and thanks to the political action of women’s groups and anti-violence centres, in particular the Di.Re network, the first National Plan Against Violence and Stalking was adopted in October 2010.

The first National Plan Against Violence and Stalking lasted until November 2013: a year that saw both the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (through law no. 77/2013) and the approval of the so-called law on ‘femicide’ (law no. 119/2013), which called for the definition of a new ‘extraordinary’ National Plan, adopted in 2015 for a period of two years (Extraordinary National Plan 2015). The essential characteristic of the first and second plans was precisely their ‘extraordinary’ approach rather than structural intervention (Lanzoni 2014, 25). Although the government had initiated a process of discussion and exchange with women’s associations and civil society in the years between the first and second plans, the Di.Re network was very critical of the results of these consultations (D.i.Re 2018).

The role and involvement of women’s groups and anti-violence centres increased during the definition of the current 2017–2020 Strategic National Plan, defined through a participative methodology, involving the main stakeholders (national, regional, and

local administrations, relevant non-government organisations (NGOs), women's centres and shelters, labour unions, the National Institute of Statistics, and the National Research Council. Built around the four Ps of the Istanbul Convention of 2011 (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Integrated Policies), the Plan introduces some innovative aspects in the development of gender-based violence policies in Italy. It is based on a commitment to put women's needs first and on an understanding of male violence as a social and cultural issue, grounded in gender hierarchies, power relations, and inequalities, starting from the use of a gendered language.

The Plan also envisioned structural intervention in the development of gender-based violence policies, providing mechanisms for managing the allocated resources, monitoring system, and data collection, and recognising the role of women's centres and shelters. It emphasised the role of general services, in particular the first-line support in the public health-care system, facilitating the definition of the 'Guidelines on Sexual Violence for the Health Sector'¹⁷ in 2017.

On a negative note, no resources were allocated for the Plan's implementation, at first. Three governments have changed since its adoption, and a structured allocation of resources is still lacking. This is a critical and worrying issue, not only because women's anti-violence centres and shelters need to get proper and adequate funding, but also because cultural change is urgently needed in Italy. The Plan also lacked a systematic and structural system of prevention and awareness campaigns and actions: a field where anti-violence centres are the main producers of information and awareness campaigns addressed to women, young people, and citizens, as well as public institutions (Virgilio 2010). According to the ViVa data, 85.4 per cent of anti-violence centres conduct awareness and training activities in schools, and 72.2 per cent offer training for health and social service workers, police, and lawyers at the local level.

The bureaucratisation of VAW in Italy? Challenges facing feminists

While in the 1990s the participation and involvement of women's groups and associations in decision-making processes seemed to be considered valuable by the state institutions that were leading on the project of 'gender mainstreaming' after Beijing, there is evidence of a very mixed record on progress on VAW. The lack of attention to it in the Beijing + 10 report suggests that in this most radical and challenging area of feminist politics, the government was not committed to really delivering for Italian women and girls.

Since the new millennium, women's groups and associations have become comparatively marginalised after the positive influencing and participatory ways of working discussed in the previous section. They now feel they are having less impact on state policies and decision-making around VAW. Although these groups were and indeed are still involved, their participation appears to be 'formal' and tokenistic. Parallel to this, women leaders in state institutions have increased in numbers. Feminists in our research reported feeling lack of recognition for the expertise and knowledge they bring. As an activist wrote recently:

at the governmental level, they invite us to the hearings, they listen to us, but it is only a semblance of synergy, which is invariably disregarded when we read of new legislative decrees, without any warning, that deal with us and with the women we support. (Ulivi 2019, 141)

An example of this marginalising of feminist activists as expert knowers on VAW concerns the services provided by anti-violence centres and shelters. In 2014, an agreement was signed between the state and the regional governments¹⁸ which identified the minimum standards for anti-violence centres and shelters. The women's anti-violence centres, experts, and women's groups were involved and engaged in the drafting of this highly important agreement.

On the one hand, the agreement embraced some of the contributions of the women's groups and anti-violence centre practices, as well as Istanbul Convention principles, such as the formal recognition of the 'women-to-women relationship' approach and the fact that 'women's needs and desires have to be at the core of practices/interventions'. Many of the women's anti-violence centres place women at the core of their interventions, listening to them and respecting their requests, time, and desires: their 'methodology' involves listening attentively to the women, and respecting their privacy and anonymity.

On the other hand, the agreement failed to recognise the role that women's anti-violence centres have in 'promoting the transformation of the cultural system from which violence is generated'.¹⁹ Feminists are well aware of the need to deal with the structural and cultural causes of VAW. While the agreement serves to provide the technical tools for regional and local administrations to verify the ones which can receive national funding, it needs to be improved (Pietrobelli 2018) in order to maintain both the quality of the interventions and the political action for social and cultural transformation.

It is widely recognised that anti-violence centres offer models of 'good practices' in the prevention of violence and in the protection of women, and that they work hard to disseminate positive alternatives to ideas of gender relations rooted in patriarchal thinking. Their methodology favours the empowerment of women's agency and their potential to become active actors of change in their families, and in daily life. Furthermore, they have helped to raise awareness of the need to focus on the complex economic, political, and social gender inequality that perpetuates VAW. But this methodology has often come into conflict with a very different bureaucratic approach to service provision for women, promulgated by state institutions.

Our data from the ViVa Project show a complex system of specialised services in existence today. There are around 335 anti-violence centres, some of them with two or more access points, for a total of 647 access points for women seeking help because of violent relationships. Not all of them have many years of experience: the data reveal that among the 335 anti-violence centres analysed, 32.5 per cent have been actively working since 2014.²⁰ This rise since 2014 can be read in two ways: as an increased consciousness on the topic among those not-for-profit associations that support women, or as a strategic action in order to obtain funding, which has been allocated for these purposes since 2013.

The majority (84.5 per cent) of anti-violence centres are managed by private non-profit associations (Misiti 2019, 3). Although the support and protection of women who

experience violence is a public issue, most interventions are run by private not-for-profit bodies. Moreover, these organisations can survive thanks to the voluntary and underpaid work of activists and receive scarce public funding, usually through annual grants or tenders. The qualitative analysis we undertook in this research revealed that most of the centres are under-financed, and cannot easily plan their activities.

As mentioned above, only 15.2 per cent of the centres are directly managed by public institutions. The centres run by private non-profit organisations are often specialised exclusively in VAW (55.1 per cent). Many centres were and still are actually managed by feminist activists. They represent a political place where women can meet, find qualified help, debate, and mobilise in order to change Italian society. Two views are quoted here from the ViVa research:

We are a women's centre, not just an anti-violence centre. This means that we will listen to every woman who comes here. We will listen to all the women's problems. The anti-violence centre is a laboratory of thoughts ... We are still leading in the direction of stimulating the world outside the women's centre to change the cultural representation of gender relationships. A laboratory that is constantly evolving and constantly checking what we do, what we are interested in. (Interview, July 2019)

We are a place of women, of freedom, of possibilities, and of resources. We started as a political movement, and we are now increasingly combining our professional skills with political action. We are a professional and social 'workshop'. But we are also a complex place, which must be chosen. (Interview, July 2019)

From the interviews conducted, we found out that even the practices and approaches of some of those centres with 'more bureaucratic' features, like the public ones, seem to have been influenced by feminist thought. This may be because they were run (in the past) by feminist women's NGOs or by feminists who were also public servants and managed to get their local institutions to work on VAW. An interviewee from a public women's centre told us:

This has been a women's centre since 1994. It was public: the municipality allowed women and feminist groups to open a library. It was a place where women could meet and talk about everything, including violence ... It was a place of comfort, where discomfort was embraced. Access to the anti-violence centre was through the library; therefore, the women's privacy and safety were guaranteed. We were living in difficult times, with no laws, no multi-agency approach, and women who experienced violence were constantly blamed and stigmatised. It was also a project lab. (Interview, June 2019)

Putting women's needs at the core of the anti-violence centres' practices seems to require a non-standardised intervention, as it is widely recognised that women's needs can be different depending on the person, time, and manners of action. As two interviewees from non-profit private centres put it:

An anti-violence centre is not a [standardised, ed.] service ... Everything depends on the woman's aim, which cannot be established in advance. Each woman has her own time, her own needs. Our goal is women's self-determination. (Interview, July 2019)

Standardisation is useful for workers. They know how to act and how to behave. However, we think that every intervention has to be individualised, based on each woman's time and desires. They can decide to stop, to go back at any time. We build the intervention with them. (Interview, July 2019)

As these quotations reveal, non-profit anti-violence centres represent their practices as more focused on women's needs than the centres run by other actors, which are driven by different objectives, missions, and other organisational and professional logics. In many cases, the process of state bureaucratisation has involved a shift to a service-oriented and technical approach to running anti-violence centres and shelters offering standardised and measurable services. This has changed the services offered in these centres and shelters. In contrast, many anti-violence centres base their practices on feminist approaches focusing on personalised interventions with women, bearing in mind that different women face different obstacles on their way out from violence. Feminist practices embrace an understanding of all VAW as rooted in patriarchal gender roles and relations that need challenging.

Present and future developments: some reflections

This account of VAW policies adopted in Italy over the last 25 years shows a complex picture of the mutual, two-way influences between state institutions of central and local government and municipalities, and women's and feminist movement(s). Although we have witnessed stages of reciprocal recognition, with great visibility of the mobilisation and lobbying activities, this relationship is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated. New stakeholders periodically appear, and the balance of powers as well as their demands and orientations keep changing.

The global call to 'take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women'²¹ embraced in the Beijing Declaration has been the 'guiding light' for VAW politics and policy development in these past 25 years. Its fulfilment is constantly kept under scrutiny by women's groups, feminist movement(s), and civil society organisations more in general. But it is important to register that this account of progress starts 20 years before Beijing, at the start of the UN Decade for Women in 1975 – itself an outcome of second-wave feminist activism. At this point, just like today, activism fed into international initiatives, just as international initiatives in their turn inspired more activism.

In Italy, as we have seen, some improvements in the legislation around VAW have been pursued, the social norms that back VAW have been challenged, and the terms of the debate entirely changed over the past five decades. The provision of services for the survivors of VAW is still patchy, and financing for it is a constant challenge, but provision does exist to some extent. There have been some great accomplishments. As we discussed, state and local laws, to some extent, recognise anti-violence centre activities (at least the services they offer), and they try to make an impact on gender-based violence, although, often, through a securitarian approach.

One recent example stems from one of the last provisions adopted, the so-called 'Red Code' (law no. 69/2019). The Red Code intensified the sanctions for crimes of stalking,

sexual violence, and domestic violence, increased the applicable sanctions for aggravated circumstances, and introduced new offences (forced marriage, the deformation of an individual's appearance through permanent facial injuries, and the unlawful dissemination of sexually explicit images or videos). Some anti-violence centres we interviewed criticised this measure, since it does not allow women enough time to decide how to move forward, because institutions (such as police and social, health, and other general services) intervene and overshadow them. For this reason, the role of the feminist movement(s) was and still is crucial in the development of such politics and policies.

Nationally, this activism was rooted in the politics of the 1970s, and developed in the 1980s and early 1990s, through the everyday work of support services. As we have shown, Italian women's movement(s) have often clashed with the institutional actors on approaches, methodologies, and strategies. However, over the years and through different governments, Italian associations and feminist civil society have played a constant and active role in shadowing and reporting on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

In the new millennium, it appears that women in leadership and bureaucratic positions in central and local government have gained more confidence, voice, and power inside state institutions. This seems to be an outcome of 'gender mainstreaming' and of wider progress in gaining more women in leadership and higher decision-making roles in public institutions. But this has left women's and feminist groups marginalised. The relationship between women in the state and women in civil society generates discussions, but also tensions and conflicts. Women's and feminist groups often do not feel they have proper recognition from the state. Their existence is sometimes not even recognised, let alone the expertise and knowledge they bring.

The importance of the involvement of feminist civil society organisations in the process of defining new policies or improving the normative framework is underlined in several international documents, from the Beijing Declaration to the Istanbul Convention (Articles 7 and 9). However, our research shows that if the involvement serves only to abide by international declarations/conventions, without properly understanding the value or the power of listening to women's interests and taking them into consideration, the approach to VAW risks being formalistic, technocratic, and legalistic.

On a positive note, the engagement of women's groups in the definition of the anti-violence centre and shelter standards, as well as the last National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women (2017–2020), has brought some feminist concepts into the language and rhetoric of public institutions. First of all, the woman-to-woman relationship is now recognised as being at the core of specialised service interventions, as well as respect for women's needs and desires. Secondly, both documents identify a multi-agency approach in the support and protection of women and their children, as well as in the definition of such interventions.

We can detect a certain promotion of feminist thoughts and practices in these 'broader' policy planning documents. However, women's and feminist interests are not so thoroughly taken into account in practice. Therefore, we argue, attempts at mainstreaming VAW policies from above, using a technocratic and legalistic approach, are not changing

the *status quo* and will not challenge VAW and its causes, which are rooted in gender inequality. As long as VAW is not understood as a structural phenomenon (GREVIO 2020), but as an emergency, no social transformation will be easily achieved.

In the last few years, in Italy as in other countries, the feminist movement(s) has(ve) been active in a new wave of global struggles. Examples include the movement against the abortion ban in Poland in 2016, the Argentinian *Ni Una Menos* movement in 2017, and the #MeToo campaigns against gender-based violence. At a national level, the Italian feminist movement(s) have mobilised to organise discussions on the definition of the last National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women (2017–2020).

In 2019, the feminist movement, and specifically *Non Una Di Meno*, together with the D.i.Re network, called on the civil society organisations to firmly oppose the proposal of the ‘Family Law Decree’ (the so-called ‘Pillon Decree’). Although the decree did not pass owing to the change in government, its content brings to the public discourse some arguments about the ‘father’s rights’ used by the European Catholic Right movements. Such obscurantist thoughts and rhetoric were also presented during the World Congress of Families in Verona in March 2019, where anti-feminist, anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ discourses were addressed and, even more worryingly, sustained by some ministers of the government at the time. The feminist movement(s) took to the streets and organised a very well-attended demonstration against it.

These recent events reveal the extent to which women’s and feminist groups are central to the defence of women’s rights, still in 2020, still in a so-called civilised and Western country. For this reason, there is an urgent need for both the institutions and feminist movement(s) to challenge the structural nature of VAW constantly. On one hand, there will not be any change in institutional practices and norms unless they are supported by social movement activism on gender equality and are subjected to the ongoing critical scrutiny of feminist scholars and activists. On the other hand, by combining the sociological understanding of ‘gender as a social structure’ (Risman 2004) with the political one of ‘society as a gendered structure’, ‘contemporary Italian feminist movement(s) continue to push beyond the concept of equality, or to use it as a negative term of reference, in order to expand and radicalise their scope of action’ (Arfini and Busi forthcoming).

The gap between feminist theory and institutional practice, and the conflicts between feminist concepts and values and the broader ideological framework of neoliberalism intrinsic to institutions, are still at the centre of the VAW politics and policies developed in the country. The risk that institutions will favour a technocratic and legalistic approach to VAW, instead of a gender-based and intersectional one, is real. Therefore, we argue that there is a need to keep politicising gender equality and VAW, in order to develop a framework that constantly looks at women’s interests, while avoiding the marginalisation and instrumentalisation of feminist thoughts and intentions.

Conclusion

The Beijing Conference and Declaration played a part in shaping the trajectory of VAW policy and practice changes in Italy over the past 25 years. But as can be seen, they were

just one element in a wider picture that has developed over a longer period. We started our account in 1975, the year of the First UN Conference on Women in Mexico City; we could have gone further back or started more recently, but there is some truth in the idea that second-wave feminist movements in the 1970s and the First Conference were catalysts to the progress we see over this long period.

In the past few years we have seen international, cross-border discussions and actions to challenge gender inequality and VAW. Once again, we see a wider picture, within which the actions of states are important elements within national and global activism. We are witnessing debates and consciousness-raising on new topics relating to VAW, recognising the marginalisation of the knowledge and experiences of specific groups. Examples are migrant women and LGBTQI+ people. Such debates and actions are being advanced by feminist and women's movement(s) all over the world. They are not dependent on state-led deliberations or processes. However, UN conferences and events gain international attention. The current process of reflection after 25 years of the Beijing Platform will certainly help push forward on women's rights issues. In our ongoing struggle to end VAW, we need the perspectives and expertise not only of women's rights activists, but from state institutions.

Notes

1. Adopted in September 1995, available at www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf (accessed 16 December 2019).
2. We will focus not only on 'the politics of state and the politics of social movements, but also the politics of language, the politics of exchange, and the politics of representation' (cited in Krook and Childs 2010, 4).
3. More information is available at www.viva.cnr.it (accessed 11 December 2019). The project has two main aims and is divided into six working packages: (1) mapping support services for women victims of violence and treatment programmes for perpetrators, through both quantitative and qualitative research; (2) supporting policies to prevent and fight VAW, through *ex ante* and *in itinere* analyses of the current National Plan on VAW (2017–2020) and *ex post* evaluation of the previous National Plan (2015–2017).
4. Adopted on 23 November 2017, available at www.pariopportunita.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/testo-piano-diramato-conferenza.pdf (accessed 11 December 2019).
5. See www.istat.it/it/violenza-sulle-donne (accessed 11 December 2019).
6. More information is available at www.udinazionale.org/ (accessed 11 December 2019).
7. 'Donne in rete contro la violenza', national network of anti-violence centres and shelters. The network of women's and feminist associations working to provide anti-violence centres and shelters became the D.i.Re. association in 2008 (<https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it>, accessed 11 December 2019).
8. See www.cittadegliarchivi.it/pages/getDetail/sysCodeId:IT-CPA-SN0001-0000032#contenuto (accessed 10 February 2020).
9. The Italian name of the law is *Norme Contro La Violenza Sessuale*.
10. The Italian name of the law is *Misure Contro La Violenza Nelle Relazioni Familiari*.
11. Gender mainstreaming was defined as 'the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels' (ECOSOC 1997).

12. The Italian name of the law is *Disposizioni concernenti la prevenzione e il divieto delle pratiche di mutilazione genitale femminile*.
13. See <https://www.1522.eu> (accessed 11 December 2019).
14. See <http://www.leonde.org> (accessed 16 December 2019).
15. See <https://lenove.org> (accessed 16 December 2019).
16. The Italian name of the law is *Conversione del decreto in materia di sicurezza, misure anti-stupri e stalking*.
17. The Italian name of the measure is *Linee guida nazionali per le Aziende sanitarie e le Aziende ospedaliere in tema di soccorso e assistenza socio-sanitaria alle donne vittime di violenza*, available at www.trovanorme.salute.gov.it/norme/dettaglioAtto?id=62811&completo=true (accessed 24 March 2020).
18. The Italian name of the measure is *Intesa relativa ai requisiti minimi dei centri anti violenza e delle case rifugio, prevista dall'art. 3, comma 4, del DPCM del 24 luglio 2014*, available at www.regioni.it/download/news/390501/ (accessed 11 December 2019).
19. Emilia-Romagna Anti-violence Centres Network, *'Dalle parole ai fatti'*, 2014, document available at <https://centriantiviolenzaer.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/com-stampa-25nov14.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2020).
20. Many centres opened before 2013, just 9.6 per cent before 1993.
21. Strategic objective D.1., Beijing Declaration (1995).

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