

*Anti-violence centres and shelters in Italy: history and meaning of women's struggles against male violence**

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***Summary.** The essay reflects on the lack of studies and analysis on the role of Anti - Violence Centres and shelters in reference to the Italian feminist movement and Italian feminist theory. We will discuss the history of the Italian AVC, their development and how they became a “special” type of social services, explaining the main activities and methodologies they provide to support women who are victims of male violence. The essay points out that, because of their features and processes, Anti Violence Centres represent a relevant tool in empowering and promoting women's citizenship.*

***Key words:** Anti-Violence Centres and shelters, gender violence thought, gender violence contrast, special social services, citizenship improvement.*

The present work seeks to understand the role and meanings of the experience of Italian Anti-Violence Centers (AVC) and shelters, on the one hand from a feminist movement perspective (and in order to develop

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women's citizenship), and on the other hand for improving and enhancing institutions and social services.

Nowadays Anti-Violence Centers and shelters in Italy, are recognized as focal points by the local and national governments, as a sort of "special" social services, but there is a lack of scientific elaboration and empirical research about them.

The same lack we can meet in the academic arena, we can also verify in the feminist analysis: talking about Anti-Violence Centers as "forgotten objects" by the feminist thought (Stella, 1995).

In the refusal to endorse the topic of gender violence, in my opinion, we find a misrepresentation: for many Italian feminists in fact, dealing with gender violence, is seen as leading to perpetuate an image of women as victims, and to see women in a objectified condition instead of empowering them as autonomous individuals.

The essay will explore how Anti-Violence Centers and shelters experiences, in the variety and richness of their processes, have led to opposite outcomes (Dauphin & Farge, 1997).

This paper takes its content from materials and documents self-produced and published by the Anti-Violence Centers, in addition to my personal experience at the "Casa delle donne per non subire violenza of Bologna" and in the national network "D.i.RE" ("Donne in Rete contro la violenza").

The availability of this research and reflections is due to AVCs and the shelters' belief, that the struggle against violence cannot not be conducted without a deep knowledge of the phenomenon (Creazzo, 2003), starting from the considerations of Robin Morgan (1984) about the consequences coming out from the symbolic deletion, which is both social and cultural, of subjects and phenomenon, for which the lack of data and information is at the meantime sign and result.

Italian Anti- Violence Centers and shelters, were born from the conference "Violare il silenzio" that took place in Florence in 1986, where feminist women from the various cities of the country gathered to exchange their considerations and projects in the political struggle against male violence, particularly through the opening of shelters.

AVCs movement from the beginning appears linked to Italian feminisms, looking at the large number of groups, organizations, associations of civil society which supported the creation of the Anti Violence Centers and shelters.

The AVCs learnt from feminism the typical practices of support and protection of women victims of violence, and how these services are strictly connected to a general fight for changing the cultural and public

agenda on violence against women, and on the stereotyped role of women in public and private life.

In fact, the essay points out how AVCs in Italy are not only places to host and support women but also to produce political and critical thought, and thanks to the contributions of the shelters and the women engaged in them, the phenomenon of male violence has changed representation (Romito, 2000). Because of their effort, the scientific literature has validated a new sight on gender violence, originating at the beginning in the Anglo-Saxon countries but now also in Italy, as a very ordinary phenomenon, that concerns every social group and culture and with similar features all around the world.

A specific methodology has been invented and set up by the Anti-Violence Centers; particularly the methodologies of intervention are based on relationships amongst women and on the acknowledgement that the responsibility and guilt of violence is always on who acts on it. This approach is strictly linked with the mission of the Centres in supporting and welcoming women in addition to their political aim of changing culture and public discourse about gender.

We will now differentiate between Centres against violence, and shelters.

The Centres' effort to provide comprehensive assistance doesn't just coincide with hospitality but it also involves a telephone help line, personal meetings, joining support groups and psychological and legal advocacy.

In the paper the connections amongst Italian AVCs are discussed as well as the common features of Italian AVCs, the kind of services they offer, and the importance of making formal links to achieve acknowledgement, in order to be considered by policy makers in the choices concerning the struggle against gender violence.

This part of the paper also concerns the cooperation with public services because gender violence is a complex and traumatic event, that demands different and integrated responses from professionals and agencies to provide not only specialized answers but multidisciplinary involvement. Effective cooperation is fundamental to protect the victims. To work in pairs is also very recommended in order to satisfy all the women needs and to avoid the secondary stress post-traumatic victimisation, which might hurt the health care workers.

Looking at their history and role, Italian AVCs could be defined as "special" social services.

Particularly we point out that the most successful gain of the AVCs, from their origins to the present, has consisted in building a culture of intervention against gender violence based on womens relationships, and

this has meant a continued tension between the work of the centres staff and the women “users”.

Furthermore this approach has conditioned innovation in the field of social politics, institutions and organizations, occupying a place at the corner amongst institutional ties, public order and social politics.

In this way, Centres have become laboratories for women friendly politics and they help to draw and review the assets of social services and public social policies.

Conclusion

Anti-violence Centres are an important resource in a civil society and provide necessary gender based intervention and support. At the same time, the role of women in society has changed, the awareness about violence against women has increases and a new context offers them new challenges. For instance, the promotion of the participation of “survivors” when they finish using the centres services, particularly the women that have lived in the shelter.

An example of a good practice is the: “Stichting Zijweg” project which has been taking place in Holland for four years and this intervention would be valuable to carry out in Italy, because of the effects on improving the involvement of women in realizing full citizenship, and in changing the image of women that have been victims of violence: from a victim to an individual that has chosen freedom.

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