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RESEARCH ARTICLE

What measures for what politics? Gender-Based Violence Protection and the RDL Policy Gap for Women in Italy (2021-2024)

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ABSTRACT: All forms of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly intimate partner violence (IPV), have intensified with the onset of the pandemic, partly because of closures associated with Covid 19. The pandemic has brought into sharper focus the link between GBV/IPV and economic or livelihood deprivation, highlighting that shelters and helplines for women are necessary but insufficient. The picture is even bleaker for immigrant women. The Italian case is very interesting. The government's decision to adopt a measure to protect women victims of domestic violence, the Reddito di Libertà (RDL) policy, during the pandemic was undeniably innovative, even if a few years later it shows limitations. This article examines GBV from an intersectional perspective and attempts to assess the coverage capacity of the RDL policy among Italian and foreign women living in Italy who are victims of IPV. The findings highlight how the RDL policy seems to have been designed more to manage emergencies than to effectively address GBV. Highlighting the selectivity in the application of the policy, the article concludes by arguing that it is necessary to consider the structural intersectionality that GBV feeds on to plan a more effective and inclusive policy strategy.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19 pandemic, gender-based violence, immigration, Italy, policy gap.

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1. Introduction

International reports indicate that violence against women (VAW) and GBV have surged since the COVID-19 pandemic began (WHO 2020). Lockdowns led to a sharp rise in reports of domestic and intimate partner violence (UNW 2020). The pandemic also underscored the link between increased violence and economic hardship, particularly for migrant and asylum-seeking women. Financial stress, deprivation, and dependence remain key risk factors (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). While shelters and hotlines are vital, the crisis revealed their limitations. Effective responses require states to fulfil their legal obligations (Re, Rigo, and Virgilio 2019), focusing on two core strategies: criminalising VAW and implementing well-funded national policies for prevention and survivor support (Abraham and Tastsoglou 2016).

Addressing the economic risks linked to GBV is crucial, especially given the broader trend of shrinking national welfare policies and their impact on GBV responses. Economic empowerment initiatives are essential to prevent poverty, reduce financial hardship, and strengthen women’s economic security and autonomy. Targeted social protection measures appear to be a promising approach to both preventing and responding to VAW (UNW 2023).

The Italian system offers a revealing example. The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities within the socio-political framework and widened the gender gap. Additionally, COVID-19 intensified the link between GBV and migration, as restrictive immigration policies and inadequate protections left migrant women especially vulnerable. However, the crisis also disrupted Italy’s historically resistant approach to addressing GBV—particularly domestic violence—by challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and prompting policy innovation.

In Italy, GBV—particularly severe for migrant women—worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a combination of a regressive policy legacy and deeply ingrained gender norms that sustain power imbalances. In this context, the Conte II government’s decision to introduce, for the first time, a measure aimed at protecting women affected by harassment and domestic violence was an unexpected development for the Italian public.

Although the RDL—a housing cash benefit designed to help women escape violent family environments—was enacted to address an urgent social need, it was largely perceived as a pandemic response rather than a broader GBV emergency. This is partly due to its severely inadequate funding, which limited its impact on gender-based violence as a general phenomenon. During its first two years, the RDL showed little capacity for policy change and operated selectively, offering uneven protection to Italian and migrant GBV survivors (Gatti, Perna, and Vittoria 2023). Nevertheless, the Italian case provides valuable insight for research exploring the intersection of gender-based violence and migration within the Southern European socio-political framework. Furthermore, Italy provides a useful framework to assess the intersection of migration and GBV, particularly in how the rise of far-right anti-immigrant agendas and patriarchalism have exacerbated the

intersectional nature of GBV as a social issue. A chauvinist-driven policy shift on GBV could deliberately undermine protections for migrant and asylum-seeking women, further deepening the ethnic gender divide.

This article explores the intersection of gender-based violence (GBV) and migration in Italy, focusing on the first four years of the RDL policy. It investigates whether the RDL ensures equal support for Italian and foreign-resident women affected by GBV, and whether its design or implementation produces exclusionary effects, potentially widening the ethnic gender gap. The analysis draws on migration and GBV literature and uses a social policy framework, supported by quantitative data from ISTAT, INPS, and ISTAT-Minint. Native and immigrant women are examined separately, while avoiding the reproduction of stereotypes or the homogenisation of immigrant women (McDonald 1999; Okeke-Ihejirika et al. 2018; Sharma 2001).

The research estimates output gaps in RDL eligibility (target) and effectiveness (take-up), particularly across different social groups. Findings show that the RDL functions as a 'sentinel' policy, responding poorly to victims' needs, and is (in)directly shaped to meet the needs of immigrant women. Although limited in scale, the policy reveals broader systemic weaknesses in addressing GBV in Italy. The article calls for more inclusive and effective measures.

The structure includes: a literature review (Section 2), methodology (Section 3), data analysis (Section 4), and conclusions on the policy's gendered and racialised dimensions.

^[1] As some have pointed out, this type of solution does not always work well, pushing women back into violent situations because they see no alternative, as the choice may be conditioned by the ability to compete in high-cost private rental markets in capitalist systems (see Blunden and Flanagan 2022).

^[2] The National Statistical Institute - a public research body - is the main producer of official statistics. It operates in full autonomy, in continuous interaction with the academic and scientific world. Founded in 1926, the Institute has constantly monitored, measured and analysed the collective phenomena and milestones that have transformed Italy. Since 1989, Istat has played a coordinating role within the National Statistical System (Sistan). See: <https://www.istat.it/istituto/>

^[3] The National Social Security Institute (INPS) is one of the largest and most complex social security institutions in Europe. See: <https://www.inps.it/it/1-istituto.html>

^[4] See: <https://www.istat.it/dati/banche-dati/>

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Defining Gender-Based Violence: Terminology and Focus

The literature on GBV follows international frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (Briones-Vozmediano, La Parra, and Vives-Cases 2015) and the 2011 Council of Europe Convention (Di Matteo 2022). GBV is defined by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNW) as harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, rooted in gender inequality and harmful societal norms. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines GBV similarly but expands that it encompasses harmful acts based on socially ascribed gender differences (UNHCR 2021). GBV includes physical, sexual, and mental harm, threats, coercion, and other deprivations, occurring both in public and private spheres. It includes, but is not limited to, IPV, trafficking for sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation, and sexual servitude. While globally recognized as a major social and public health issue, GBV has primarily focused on domestic violence (DV), especially intimate partner violence (IPV) and feminicides (Park, Mullins, Zahir, Salami, Lasiuk, and

Hegadoren 2021). IPV is considered one of the most pervasive forms of violence against women, involving physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by an intimate partner, and is widespread across all settings, socioeconomic, religious, and cultural groups (WHO 2020). Although there is growing awareness that men can also experience GBV (Budd, Burbrink, and Miller 2017; Coker, Davis, Arias, Desai, Sanderson, Brandt, and Smith 2002; Corbally 2015; Emery, Jolley, and Wu 2010; Wallace and Bates 2024), there is general consensus that women face higher rates of sexual violence, and domestic violence has more severe physical, mental, and financial consequences for women compared to men (Brownridge, Chan, Hiebert-Murphy, Ristock, Tiwari, Wing-Cheong, and Santos 2008; Coker et al. 2002; Garcia-Moreno, Watts, Jansen, Ellsberg, and Heise 2003; McDonald 1999). In line with these considerations, this article focuses on domestic violence against women by male intimate partners, using the term ‘intimate partner violence’ (IPV) rather than ‘domestic violence’ (DV). While the definition of DV encompasses other household members as potential perpetrators and victims, as in cases of child or elder abuse, or the abuse in multigenerational families (Kalokhe, Potdar, Stephenson, Dunkle, Paranjape, Del Rio, and Sahay 2015), the term IPV specifically refers to acts of violence by a current or former male partner (WHO 2005).

2.2 Gender-based violence (GBV), intimate partner violence (IPV) and Migration

The European Union and the Council of Europe are addressing the specific challenges of GBV against migrant women (Martinez-Roman, Vives-Cases, and Pérez-Belda 2017; Di Matteo 2022). Migrant status itself shapes women’s experience of violence, as migration often intertwines with their vulnerability (Martinez-Roman et al. 2017, 208). GBV takes on different forms throughout the stages of migration—departure, transit, and destination. Literature typically regards migration as both a result and a determinant of GBV (Tastsoglou and Nourpanah 2019). In some cases, GBV is the primary reason for migration, as women flee persecution, forced marriages, female genital mutilation, or domestic violence. In such instances, migration becomes a means of escaping violent situations. However, in many cases, violence is encountered during the migration process itself and persists upon arrival in the destination country. Women are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence—physical, sexual, and institutional—throughout their migration journey.

State immigration control plays a crucial role in shaping violence against migrants, both at the nation-State’s external and internal borders. The creation of different immigrant status categories reflects a system of power and subordination, amplifying violence against marginalized individuals at these borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Pickering 2011; Stierl and Dadusc 2021). The approach taken by nation-States and the EU toward border and external security policies is rooted in relational vulnerabilities, as well as gendered, racialized, national, and religious inequalities—many of which are legacies of the EU’s colonial past (Sarkin and Morais 2025). Despite the 1951 Refugee Convention [1], the implementation of the global refugee regime in many nations results in different treatment of refugees and asylum seekers based on nationality, race, gender, and religion. These categories directly affect how migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are treated, including the rights and benefits they are granted. As highlighted in the literature, migrants—especially those in vulnerable groups such as forced and irregular migrants—are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing GBV (Tan and Kuschminde 2022). Some studies have highlighted a continuum of violence experienced by migrant women (Pickering 2011; Sarkin and Morais 2024), especially among refugees and asylum seekers. This violence is deeply rooted in the systemic oppression of patriarchy, which often triggers the displacement and trafficking of refugees from various countries. Both structural and cultural violence, originating from States and host communities, significantly contribute to creating conditions in which GBV thrives throughout the migration and refugee process. This results in multiple layers of vulnerability, including socio-legal and

economic marginalization, particularly affecting women asylum seekers. Crises also reshape the boundaries and defences around these issues, with different consequences for the various actors who cross and challenge these boundaries (Stierl and Dadusc 2021; Sarkin and Morais 2025).

This was evident in the crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. To contain the virus, EU member states enacted emergency laws that restricted movement across borders. Italy and Malta declared their ports ‘unsafe’ for migrant arrivals, halted rescue operations, and set up offshore detention facilities. Although these measures were presented as being in the name of ‘saving lives’, they had the opposite effect. Under the guise of Covid, migrants have been subjected to control methods such as refoulement, offshore containment, and abandonment. In contrast, the crisis triggered by the Russian Ukrainian war resulted in ad hoc conditions for Ukrainian refugees. This situation made it clear that EU security policy does not operate in isolation; rather, it is shaped by the relationships and histories the EU shares with other nations. EU border security policies (re)produce inequalities as a colonial continuum, based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion, creating ‘positions of relative privilege or marginalization, always in relation to the specific context and other subject positions’ (Sarkin and Morais 2025, 284).

However, public discourse on violence against migrant women is often marked by cultural relativism. By focusing on violence within migrant communities, the media tend to ‘culturize’ the issue (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2010; Farris 2017), downplaying other significant forms of violence, such as feminicides and domestic violence, especially when these acts are perpetrated by native men (Giomi 2010). This narrative, which portrays migrant women as passive, victimised, and part of a homogeneous group trapped in oppressive patriarchal cultures, has obscured the broader structural conditions producing this violence, reducing its prominence on the political agenda (Abbatecola and Popolla 2020). This issue has been reflected in the research field, where some studies have focused on gender-based violence in forced migration and trafficking, but paid limited attention to domestic violence (Mayock, Bretherton, and Baptista 2016). Other studies have highlighted the significant role that immigration and asylum policies play in creating vulnerability, disproportionately exposing migrant women to violence (Freedman, Jamal, and Network 2008, 14).

Regarding immigrant women, the prevailing orientation recognises how ineffective integration policies lead to downward mobility, straining family relationships and favouring an increased incidence of domestic violence (Cottrell, Tastsoglou, and Moncayo 2009). Furthermore, family reunification policies based on male-dominated family models, which tie women’s legal status to their husbands/partners, reinforce their dependency and depress their ability to escape domestic violence (Tastsoglou, Falconer, Sisic, Dawson, and Wilkinson 2022).

Existing literature points out that the problem of immigrant women victims of violence should be framed in a hostile political context, where xenophobic and nationalist sentiments combine at all levels of society (Di Matteo 2022), characterised by anti-immigrant and racist policies (Rajaram, Barrios, Novak, and Rogers 2020; Sharma and Marsh 2017; Bhuyan and Velagapudi 2013). It should also be noted that after arrival, migrants and refugees face direct or indirect violence: incidents of arbitrary deprivation of liberty, physical and psychological violence, and inhuman treatment both after disembarkation and during internal border control operations (Panico and Prestt 2019).

Western national political powers, by filtering and categorising individuals through a gendered and racialised socio-economic classification system, ultimately produce ethnocentric policy planning and welfare services that exclude foreigners, particularly those with irregular status (Di Matteo 2024). This system ends up producing even more serious forms of exclusion for those categories positioned at the intersection of several

axes of differentiation and experiencing multiple forms of dominance and subjugation, as is the case of migrant women victims of gender-based violence, and especially migrant women with a precarious legal status.

The (legal/illegal; regular/irregular) migration status can determine the outcome of the experience of violence in the destination country. Migrant women in a precarious legal status have more limited options to get out of violent situations than migrants with a regular residence permit. Literature has also emphasised the structural barriers to accessing social protection systems within the welfare state (Rajaram et al. 2020; O’Neal and Beckman 2017; Bhuyan and Velagapudi 2013; Briones-Vozmediano et al. 2015; Singh 2010), particularly the difficulties migrant women face in accessing infrastructure and public services dedicated to victims of violence. This remains one of the most problematic policy regimes for combating violence (Abraham and Tastsoglou 2016; Tastsoglou, Petrinioti, and Karagiannopoulou 2021). The literature largely agrees that female migrants—particularly undocumented migrants—experience violence at significantly higher rates than the general female population (Owen 2006). This is due to their heightened legal, socio-economic, and status vulnerability, as well as their exposure to ethnocentric stereotypes (Raj and Silverman 2002). However, when it comes to domestic violence, data remain scarce, and the few studies comparing native and immigrant women have yielded contradictory results (Park et al. 2021).

In the Italian context, unlike other European countries such as Sweden, the national political landscape has historically been shaped by a residual and familistic welfare system, restrictive immigration and citizenship policies, and a patriarchal gender regime that reinforces traditional gender roles in both family and labour market structures. Reflecting these dynamics, Italy scores only 0.682 on the European Gender Equality Index (EIGE 2023) and 0.705 on the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF 2023)—on a scale where 1 represents full equality. As shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3, Italy also combines high rates of IPV and feminicides with a weak institutional framework for both legal and social support for victims (IMPR 2024). Regarding migrant women, data shows an indisputable higher incidence of IPV in foreign female population (Istat-Minint 2023). Despite this, research on domestic violence against migrant women remains limited. Existing studies highlight critical shortcomings in Italy’s anti-violence governance model, citing the ‘absence of a systemic planning of interventions’ and ‘inadequacy of the offer of territorial social and health services’, which hinder pathways out of violence. These issues are evident even at the initial stage of ‘the clinical taking in charge of the foreign woman victim of violence’ (De Pascale and Carbone 2021, 94-95), a situation worsened following Salvini’s anti-immigration decrees in 2018–2019.

Our work seeks to partially address this scientific gap, highlighting how migrant women face multiple disadvantages that lead to exclusion. Access to welfare services follows an exclusionary logic based on citizenship and residency. In some cases, civil society actors (CSAs) provide support for migrant women in precarious situations and offer GBV services to those with uncertain legal status (Di Matteo 2024). Few studies have examined the status and services available to migrant women, particularly those with precarious legal status who are victims of violence (Di Matteo 2024). Due to limited data, our article cannot fully address this gap. Based on this exclusionary logic, the RDL measure, analysed in the following pages, excludes irregular immigrant women, alongside other limitations, such as a lack of resources. Lacking data on undocumented victims, we focus on legally resident immigrant women, questioning whether they have benefited from the measure and whether the policy has been (intentionally or unintentionally) selective, contributing to exclusionary effects or widening the ethnic gender gap.

^[1] Article 3 of the 1951 Refugee Convention provides that States ‘shall apply the provisions of this Convention to refugees without discrimination as to race, religion or country of origin’.

3. Challenges in estimating GBV before and after the pandemic. Assessing the Italian case

The impact of the pandemic on GBV and the diverse policy responses across OECD countries—particularly the effects of COVID-19-related stay-at-home or lockdown orders on domestic violence by intimate partners (Sharma and Borah 2020; Piquero, Jennings, Jemison, Kaukinen, and Knaul 2021; Kourti, Stavridou, Panagouli, Psaltopoulou, Spiliopoulou, Tsolia, and Tsitsika 2023)—has been widely examined in socio-political studies. In Italy, reports of violence and harassment against women increased after 2020. Of the 15,000 complaints received by Anti-Violence Centres (CAVs), 74.4% concerned pre-pandemic abuses (ISTAT 2021, 2). The racialised framing of femicide in public discourse—often reduced to ‘the killer is an immigrant and the victim an Italian woman’—also predates the pandemic, despite being statistically rare (out of 162 murders, only two fit this profile’ (Giomi 2010, 1002; French this issue). These factors illustrate how the COVID-19 crisis reinforced an existing trend: a neo-patriarchal and ethicised narrative of GBV, which had already emerged as a backlash to the 2007 financial crisis (Vittoria 2022). The pandemic has further exposed the inconsistency of Italy’s anti-violence policy cycle, both in terms of legislative initiatives and social agenda priorities. More broadly, beyond the pandemic’s impact on GBV as a global issue, what stands out is the widespread failure of political regimes—not only in Italy but across several OECD countries—despite the elimination of violence against women being a declared goal of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A key challenge for both socio-political research and policymakers remains the lack of reliable GBV data, largely due to inconsistencies in statistical survey systems across Europe and the reliance on survey-based estimations from national and international organizations (Sardinha, Maheu-Giroux, Stöckl, Meyer, and García-Moreno 2022). As Table 1 highlights, survey data on IPV in six European countries—collected by international agencies and organisations (FRA 2014; WHO 2020; UNW 2022)—exhibit significant inconsistencies. At first glance, the data suggest that GBV poses a similar threat in Sweden, Italy, and Hungary. However, longitudinal data on gender inequality—measured through economic, political, educational, ethnic, and health disparities (WEF 2021, 2023; EIGE 2020, 2023)—place Italy and Hungary closer to Global South countries in terms of structural inequalities.

Table 1 - Survey-data on intimate partner violence (IPV) and gender equality indexes in six EU’s countries

	<i>IPVs 2020</i>	<i>Global Gender Gap Index 2020 (2023)</i> <i>[by rank on 146 countries]</i>	<i>Gender Equality Index 2020 (2023)</i> <i>[by rank on 27 countries]</i>
Hungary	6 %	105 (99)	26 (=)
Italy	6 %	76 (79)	14 (13)
France	5 %	15 (40)	3 (6)
Sweden	5 %	4 (5)	1 (=)
Germany	3 %	10 (6)	12 (11)
Spain	2 %	8 (18)	8 (4)

Source: Data on IPV are from WHO 2020 and UNW 2022, mostly replying those of the 2014’s survey by European Union Agency for Fundamental rights (FRA 2014) and, for Italy, those from ISTAT multi-scopes survey administrated in 2014 (ISTAT 2015). Data refer to the share of interviewed women declaring to have been abused by partner during last 12 months. The *Global Gender*

Gap Index (GGGI) is developed by World Economic Forum respectively for 2020 (WEF 2021) and for 2022 (WEF 2023) and it includes the five sub-indexes of Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment. The score for these years was: Sweden (0.820; 0.815), Germany (0.787; 0.815), France (0.781; 0.756), Hungary (0.677; 0.689), Italy (0.707; 0.705) and Spain (0.795; 0.791). The *Gender Equality Index* (GEI) is a more explicitly intersectional index developed by European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which includes work, health, knowledge, power, and time as markers (EIGE 2020; EIGE 2023). The score for these years was: Sweden (0.838; 0.822), Germany (0.675; 0.708), France (0.751; 0.757), Hungary (0.530; 0.573), Italy (0.635; 0.682) and Spain (0.720; 0.764). Both GGGI and GEI do not include violence itself as a marker.

These inconsistencies can be understood by examining two key factors influencing the governance of GBV: the legal framework—which determines a woman’s ability to report violence and seek protection—and social protection schemes for IPV victims (Table 2).

Table 2 - GBV’s Legal frameworks and Welfare regimes (social protection schemes by areas of social policy) in six EU’s countries

	<i>IPVs 2020</i>	<i>Legal framework</i>		<i>Welfare regimes</i>			
		<i>IPV as criminal offense by itself</i>	<i>Special law on IPV/GBV</i>	<i>Social assistance</i>	<i>Social insurance</i>	<i>Housing</i>	<i>Labour Market</i>
Hungary	6 %	Not	None	None	None	None	None
Italy	6 %	Yes	None	None	Domestic violence and Parental leave	Yes	Yes
France	5 %	Yes	Yes	None	Job insurance	Yes	None
Sweden	5 %	Yes	Yes	Cash transfers, Subsidies	None	Yes	None
Germany	3 %	Not	None	None	None	None	None
Spain	2 %	Yes	Yes	Cash transfers, Subsidies, Public work programs	Job insurance, Widowers’ pension	Yes	Yes

Source: Data on IPV are from FRA 2014, WHO 2020, and UNW 2022. Legal frameworks’ data are from EIGE 2024. Data about welfare regimes are retrieved from IMPR 2024. The social protection scheme quotes Cookson, Fuentes, and Bitterly 2024.

Policy responses to GBV differ significantly across the six countries. In Germany, where most measures are implemented at the local level, national policies do not fully account for IPV prevalence. By contrast, Spain presents a more consistent model, having taken a political turn in addressing and preventing GBV under Zapatero’s left-wing government. This demonstrates how legal frameworks and welfare regimes interact differently to protect victims. Notably, Southern European countries are attempting—albeit with varying degrees of success—to combat GBV by combining social policy measures with legal-criminal approaches.

The persistent challenge for scholars and policymakers in formulating strategies to tackle GBV remains the data gap. Currently, neither comprehensive data nor a consolidated model exists to reliably estimate GBV on a large scale. However, as empirical studies suggest, understanding the true magnitude of the problem and supporting policymakers in addressing violence against women requires a focus on IPV. Establishing a baseline for global, regional, and national prevalence estimates is essential, but this is only possible by moving beyond traditional measurement methods, which still show significant variations across surveys (Sardinha et al. 2022, 804). In this regard, the Italian case is particularly revealing. The inability to accurately estimate “the large, submerged part of the violence experienced by women in everyday life at home” has long affected the entire policy cycle on IPV and GBV in Italy (ISTAT 2021, 1). For instance, between 2002 and 2020, the

average number of femicides stood at 155 per year—an alarming indicator of a much broader social phenomenon (ISTAT 2020). Given these limitations, the only viable starting point is data on reported violence, classified by the Investigation System of the Ministry of the Interior (ISTAT-Minint 2023). While this dataset offers coherence and longitudinal completeness, it remains a deliberate approximation, as criminal data on IPV alone do not fully capture the scope and complexity of GBV as a social phenomenon (Williams and Walklate 2020).

Table 3 presents absolute values for four categories of mistreatment against family members and cohabitants, including persecutory acts, beatings, and sexual violence in Italy between 2014 and 2020. At first glance, a notable inconsistency emerges: while 6% of women reported experiencing some form of violence in the 2014 survey (WHO 2020; ISTAT 2015), the annual average of all reported violence against women between 2014 and 2022 stands at approximately 35,000 cases.

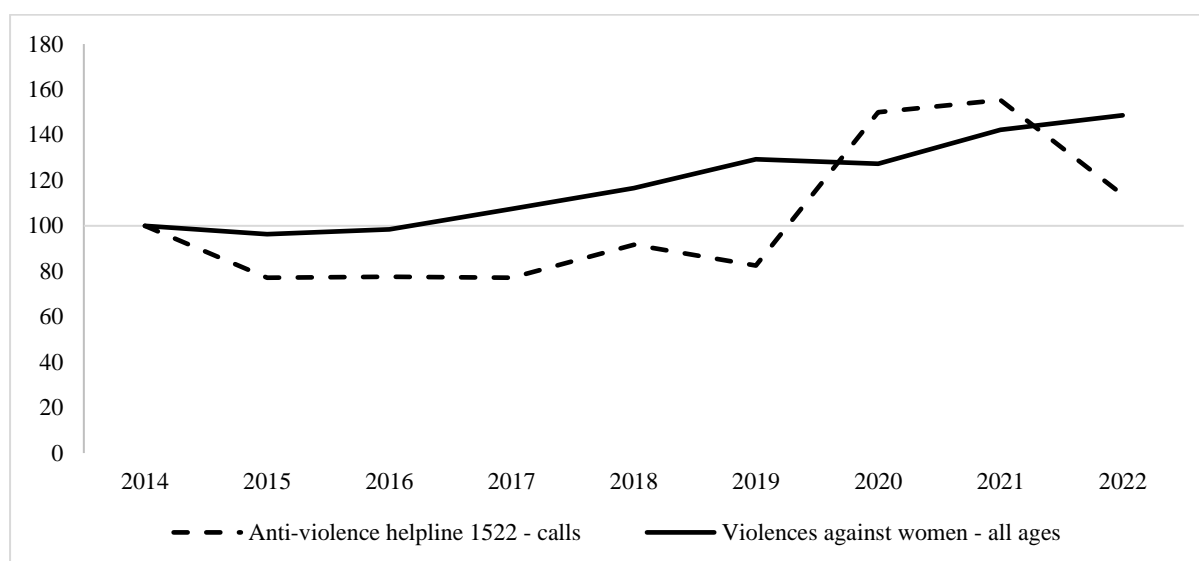
Table 3 - Italy. Denounced GBV crimes against women, and helpline calls at 1522 (2014-2020)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<i>Violences against women - all ages</i>	31,274	30,125	30,783	33,584	36,481	40,426	39,817	44,485	46,484
<i>Violences against women - aged over 18</i>	28,922	27,861	28,303	30,863	33,664	37,537	36,857	40,854	42,289
<i>Only native-born (NBW) - aged over 18</i>	22,124	21,553	22,330	24,771	27,067	30,189	29,402	32,827	33,918
<i>Only foreign-born (FBW) - aged over 18</i>	6,798	6,308	5,973	6,092	6,577	7,348	7,455	8,028	8,371
<i>Violences*1000 NBW - aged over 18</i>	1.30	1.26	1.31	1.45	1.59	1.77	1.73	1.93	1.99
<i>Violences*1000 FBW - aged over 18</i>	3.49	3.24	3.07	3.13	3.38	3.77	3.83	4.12	4.30
<i>Anti-violence helpline 1522 – calls</i>	10,474	8,082	8,125	8,085	9,602	8,647	15,708	16,272	11,909

Source: Denounces and crime data are from ISTAT-Minint 2023. Data on female resident population are from ISTAT 2023: these ones consider the official census of 2021, which has been used as baseline to elaborate *Violences*1000* – lines 5 and 6. FBW count the migrant women with a residence permit. Data about 1522 helpline to denounce violences are from ISTAT 2022. *Note.* All data aggregate the four categories of mistreatment against family members and cohabitants (IPVs), persecutory acts, beatings, and sexual violence.

Moreover, the ratio of violence suffered by native-born (NBF), and foreign-born (FBF) women has more than doubled, disproportionately affecting the latter (Table 3, rows 4 and 5). This trend is particularly significant for scholars and policymakers addressing VAW as a social phenomenon, considering two key-aspects. First, reports made through anti-violence helplines represent only a fraction—approximately one-third to one-fourth—of the actual violence experienced (Table 3, row 6). As previously noted, Italy’s anti-violence network and infrastructure face significant limitations in both monitoring and addressing GBV. As Figure 1 illustrates, the pandemic likely disrupted this trend: between 2019 and 2020, particularly during lockdowns, the hotline became, for many victims, the only available means of seeking help or escaping domestic violence.

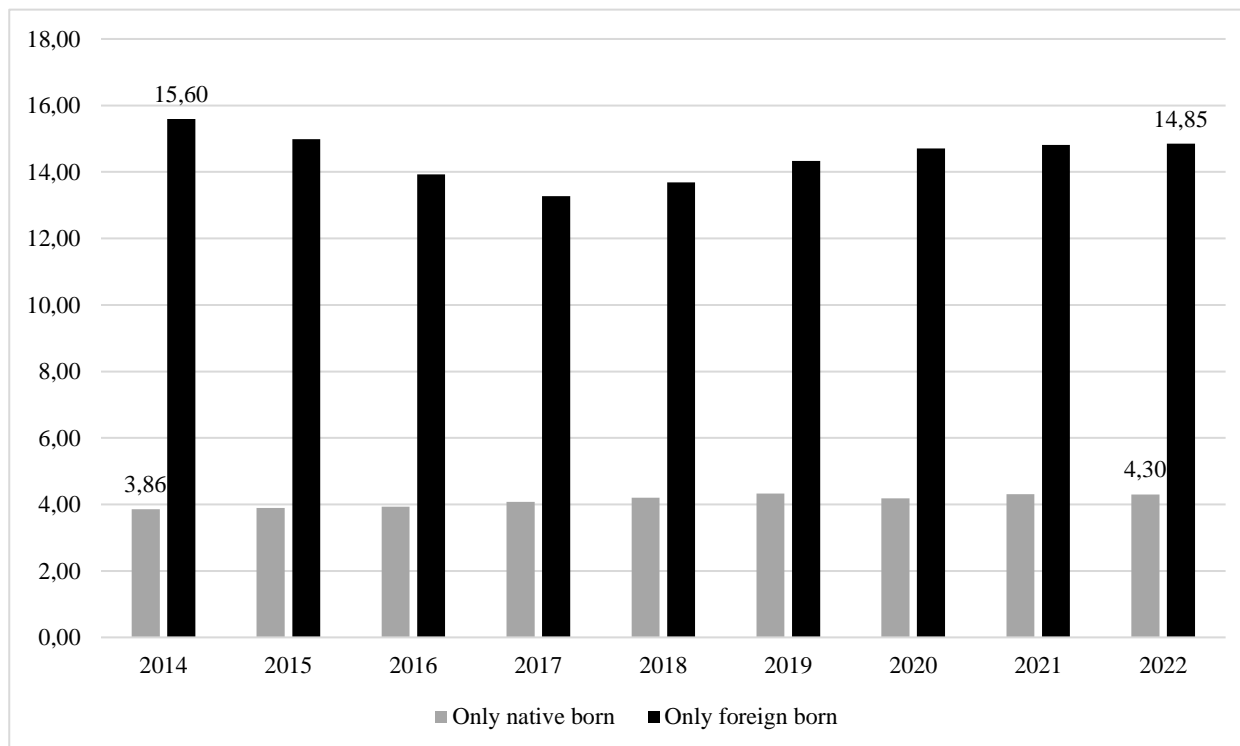
Figure 1. - Italy. Trend in denounced GBV crimes against women and in helpline calls 1522 (2014-2020)



Source: Elaborations on ISTAT 2022 and ISTAT-Minint 2023 data. Baseline 2014=100.

Yet, the prevalence of violence among FB is also significant by considering the additional barriers migrant women face in accessing support services for victims of violence (Tastsoglou et al 2021). To obtain the most reliable estimate of its incidence in Italy, it is possible to start with survey-based data on women who reported experiencing violence (6%, ISTAT 2015) and with official population census data (ISTAT 2023) as a baseline. This allows for a projected estimate of incidence of IPV cases among native-born and foreign-born women between 2014 and 2024. According to these projections, the number of IPV cases increased from 1,812,671 in 2014 to 1,925,441 in 2022, with an incidence per 1,000 women over the age of 18—both native- and foreign-born—rising from 6% to 6.37%. However, as Figure 2 highlights, the most concerning trend is the disproportionately high rate of violence suffered by immigrant women, which remains three times higher than that of native-born women. Although this rate has slightly decreased over the period, from 15.6 to 14.8, the data clearly underline the spread of gender-based sexual violence in Italy since the economic crisis, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a more severe impact on the most vulnerable groups, particularly immigrant women.

Figure - 2. Italy. Denounced violences by ratio*1000 female: native (NBW) and foreign (FBW) born (2014-2022)



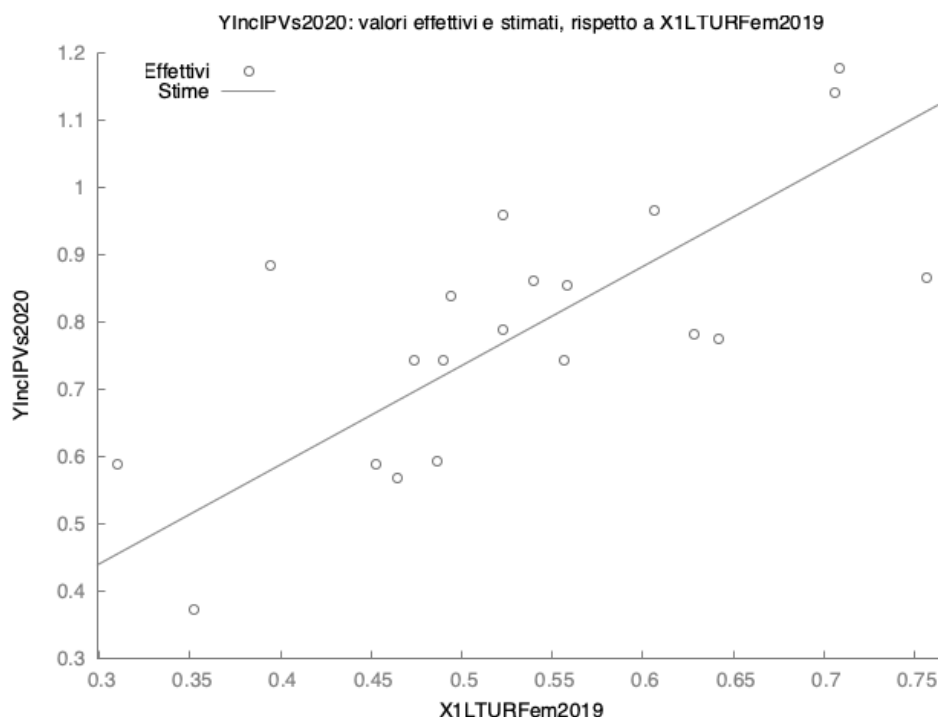
Source: for denounced violences, ISTAT-Minint 2023; for population (baselined on 2021 census), ISTAT 2023.

The pandemic presented policymakers with a dual challenge in addressing anti-violence measures: first, the urgent need to map the phenomenon comprehensively, and second, the necessity of formulating responses that prioritise the structural inequalities and marginalization in which violence occurs—particularly affecting immigrant victims. This represents a twofold priority on Italy’s policy agenda. On one hand, a) it requires bringing the true scale of violence to light, a fundamental precondition for developing institutional frameworks capable of effectively combating GBV and supporting victims. On the other hand, b) it necessitates designing policy responses that acknowledge the intersectional nature of GBV—specifically, how structural inequalities shape its dynamics. This includes recognising the disproportionate impact of GBV and IPV on immigrant women and addressing the systemic barriers they face in accessing legal assistance and social security support.

For instance, to understand how ‘structural intersectionality’ (Durfee 2021) operates as a key driver, Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the female long-term unemployment rate and the incidence of IPV at a regional level in Italy. Both policy priorities must begin with a fundamental assessment of the fragile anti-violence governance network within the Italian system. As widely acknowledged, violence against women thrives in a context of cultural normalization (Lagarde 2006), which significantly hinders its visibility. Despite progress over the past two decades, the current governance model—structured around territorial networks led by Regions and Autonomous Provinces (CONFREGG 2021)—reveals structural weaknesses. These are reflected in the inadequate funding and limited capacity of CAVs and shelter homes (Case Rifugio, CRs), which are responsible for providing immediate support to women escaping violence (DIRE 2021; MAP-1522 2024). Regarding the second policy priority (b), the deficiencies in the institutional framework further exacerbate the intersectional gap between native-born and foreign-born victims. Immigrant women particularly

face bureaucratic discrimination and linguistic-cultural barriers that obstruct their ability to report violence or access initial support.

Figure 3 - Italy, Regions. Relation between IPV*1000 female aged over 18 (both native- and foreign-born) in 2020 and Long-term female unemployment rate in 2019.



Source: IPV are from ISTAT-Minint 2023 as elaborated from the Authors; long-term female unemployment rate - the ratio of female aged over 15 at regional level searching for a job for more than 12 months – is from ISTAT 2024b. On the Y axis we got the incidence of IPV at regional level as an Authors’ elaboration (YInciIPVs2020) and on the X axis the long-term female unemployment rate in 2019 (X1LTURFem2019). Coefficient is 0.147***, standard error is 0.058 and R^2 is 0.971.

Furthermore, the provisions for enhanced legal protection of migrant or displaced victims of violence—outlined in Articles 59-61 of the Istanbul Convention—were originally designed to prevent the racialization of GBV. However, these protections have been significantly weakened by shifts in the national political landscape over the past five to six years. In fact, the rise of far-right, anti-immigration parties (Vittoria 2023) have led to increasingly restrictive immigration policies, from Salvini’s security decrees (2018-2019) to more recent measures enacted by Meloni’s government. These policy changes have further deterred immigrant and first-time immigrant victims from coming forward, effectively suppressing reports of GBV within these communities.

4. IPV Responses During the Pandemic: Evaluating the RDL’s Policy Coverage for Native- and Foreign-Born Women

In recent years, Italy has taken steps to implement international guidelines on gender equality and the fight against gender-based violence, including the Istanbul Convention and the United Nations 2030 Agenda. The RDL measure, introduced in response to the international socio-political emergency and shaped by the national regulatory context during the Covid-19 pandemic, was designed as a housing-related social income policy to help IPV victims escape domestic violence. Approved in 2020 under the Conte II government and implemented in 2021 by the Draghi-led technical-emergency government, the measure sought to address key gaps in victim support. Despite limited data from the Central Institute of Social Security (INPS 2022; INPS 2023), an assessment of the RDL and its policy outcomes can be attempted based on its design. Two key assumptions emerge: 1) the RDL was conceived primarily as a sentinel measure rather than a long-term social recovery policy, aiming to provide immediate support to domestic violence victims; 2) its design failed to account for the infrastructural barriers faced by immigrant victims, despite their significantly higher exposure to IPV compared to native-born women. Approved for the first time in May 2020 and confirmed by Law 77 of 17 July 2020, the RDL was allocated its budget through a Prime Minister's Decree (December 2020), which defined the criteria for regional resource distribution. Designed as a housing-based social policy response to domestic violence, the RDL provides a monthly cash subsidy of 400 euros for up to 12 months to female IPV victims aged 18 to 67. For foreign women, eligibility requires legal residence or political refugee status, a coverage weakened by the security decrees introduced by Salvini in 2018 and 2019. As a response to domestic violence, the RDL targets a substantial number of potential beneficiaries. Based on estimates, the average annual number of victims between 2014 and 2022 was 1,862,370. However, the policy is marked by significant design flaws. First, the funding is grossly inadequate: 3 million euros in 2021 and 9 million euros in 2022, amounting to about 600 beneficiaries in 2021 and 1,800 in 2022, compared to over 16,340 victims reporting in 2020 and 18,056 in 2022, of whom 4,082 and 4,394, respectively, were foreign women (ISTAT-Minint 2023). Second, the cash benefit is inadequate as it likely discourages demand and reduces take-up. As a result, the policy is prone to high selectivity in its implementation. In short, a single year of financial support would not enable a victim to escape the cycle of violence.

The final issue concerns the accessibility of the RDL benefit. It overlooks the weaknesses in the interinstitutional network responsible for its implementation and how these affect the women most impacted by IPV: immigrant women. The design of the benefit's access makes the policy output highly selective and almost chauvinistic, even though migrant women's protection is central to the 2021-2023 Strategic Plan, which aims to protect 'migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee women, particularly exposed to gender-based violence before, during, and after the migration process' (DPO 2021).

Despite the lack of data, an initial empirical evaluation of the RDL's impact allows for testing the two hypotheses about the policy priorities in the fight against gender-based violence: Is it truly a sentinel policy? Is it working selectively and in a chauvinistic/racialized manner towards immigrant victims?

Between December 2021 and April 2023, there were 5,039 RDL applications, of which only 53% (2,673 applications) were accepted (INPS 2022; INPS 2023).

The efficacy of the measure is not only limited by its coverage but also by its general take-up, which is similarly low. With an average of 17,198 denouncing IPV victims between 2020 and 2022 (ISTAT-Minint 2023), the measure reached only 29.3% of its intended social target. Moreover, when considering the estimated average of 1,862,370 actual victims in the same period, the measure addresses only 0.002% of the target population. Even if the RDL is considered a sentinel policy, these results are not promising. Among the four regions (Basilicata, Emilia-Romagna, Molise, and Sicilia) in the upper tertile for IPV prevalence (*1000), both

overall and for immigrant women, only Emilia-Romagna is also in the upper tertile for RDL application rates (Table 4, columns 3, 4, and 6).

This region stands out for its strong local governance, well-developed social security services, and a lower bureaucratic gap for immigrant women compared to other parts of Italy.

Table 4. - IPV's (denounced crimes and ratios) and propensity in demanding RDL benefit at national and regional level. Native- and foreign-born females

	<i>IPVs (2020)</i>	<i>IPVs*1000 (W)</i>	<i>IPVs*1000 (FBW)</i>	<i>D_{RDL} 2021-23</i>	<i>Propensity (D_{RDL} *1000 W)</i>	<i>Cashed benefits on requested (%)</i>
Abruzzo	357	0,85	2,07	96	0,153	54
Basilicata	174	0,97	4,37	26	0,094	88
Calabria	483	0,77	1,74	117	0,112	69
Campania	2.192	1,14	2,14	545	0,197	46
Emilia-Romagna	1,261	0.89	2,25	648	0,224	68
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	214	0,57	1,46	100	0,165	45
Latium	1,835	0,96	1,91	411	0,146	59
Liguria	351	0,74	2,18	103	0,055	57
Lombardy	2,378	0,74	1,93	793	0,181	52
Marche	286	0,59	1,80	144	0,164	42
Molise	83	0,87	3,84	12	0,052	100
Piedmont	1,172	0,86	2,28	404	0,217	42
Apulia	1,017	0,78	2,02	528	0,292	32
Sardinia	417	0,79	2,08	122	0,159	54
Sicily	1,891	1,18	3,03	325	0,130	64
Tuscany	873	0,74	1,63	282	0,160	51
Umbria	232	0,84	1,91	101	0,246	35
Veneto	922	0,59	1,78	274	0,112	73
Italy	16,340	0,85	2,03	5039	0,170	53

Source: Authors elaboration on INPS 2022-23, Istat 2023 e Istat-Minint 2023. *Note:* data concern RDL's budget for 2021 and 2022, and requests for eligibility to RDL (D_{RDL}) for 2022 and 2023. In grey, the Regions with IPV's and propensity to demand RDL over the national average, Trentino Alto-Adige and Valle d'Aosta have been counted due to a former institutionalization, inside the two Regions of a local policy supporting GBV victims.

Regional variations in local institutional frameworks and welfare systems have clearly impacted the policy's implementation. However, it should be noted that other similarly designed cash-benefit social policies tested in Italy — and much more central to the agenda — such as the Citizenship Income (RDC), a national social policy based on a minimum income scheme approved in 2019 and recently abolished by Meloni's right-wing government, did not achieve a similar high result (61%) in their first year of implementation. In any case, if

our first hypothesis is that the policy design is a sentinel measure, a slightly more encouraging take-up might have been expected.

The empirical assessment of the second hypothesis is clearer, suggesting that the measure was designed, in terms of application, access, and implementation, in such a way as to potentially depress the demand from immigrant victims, who, as mentioned above, suffer IPV at nearly three times the rate of the general female population. From this perspective, what can be briefly said is — as Table 4 shows — that only two of the Italian regions most affected by IPV rates among foreign-born women (the upper tertile), Emilia-Romagna and Piedmont, exhibit high demand for the cash benefit proposed by the RDL. However, regions like Molise, Sicily, Basilicata, and Liguria, where immigrant women are the most affected by IPV, show a strikingly low propensity to apply for the RDL.

The persistent bureaucratic barriers faced by immigrant women seeking to escape violence highlight a limitation in the implementation design of the RDL as a social policy. It could be argued that the selectivity and difficulty of accessing the RDL are not only due to the scarcity of available resources but also to the restrictive politics underlying the policy design and, overall, its implementation. In fact, the two governments responsible for executing it have interpreted the process in a restrictive and bureaucratic way regarding RDL eligibility (as seen with the Draghi government), or have quickly replaced the RDL with a neoliberal, hyper-conditional policy — the Microcredito di Libertà, aimed at promoting victims' self-employability through low-interest financial grants.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Despite the advancements witnessed in the realm of preventing violence against women, the prevalence remains high, and policy responses continue to fall short of expectations in terms of adequacy and inclusivity, particularly about the differential access to these measures by diverse social groups. As our analysis indicates, foreign women derive significantly less benefit from these measures than their Italian counterparts. Women from foreign countries, already subjected to multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, face greater barriers in accessing dedicated services.

The analysis indicates that the Italian policy framework and the institutional network designed to prevent and combat violence against women remain inadequate. The RDL, initially conceived as an emergency response during the pandemic, had the potential to serve as an effective policy solution if it had become structural, adequately financed, and revised to ensure greater inclusivity. However, as it stands, the policy suffers from issues related to the adequacy of benefits, eligibility mechanisms, and coverage of social demand. The policy's most significant shortcoming is its inability (though not entirely intentional) to provide substantial support to a considerable proportion of its target group: immigrant women who are victims of IPV and GBV. The present study finds that the RDL is an unsatisfactory sentinel policy, functioning inadequately in response to the demand from immigrant women victims of violence. Data from RDL applications between 2021 and 2023 confirm that the anti-violence policy has been designed in such a way as to effectively exclude some victims on a masculinist (Keskinen, Norocel, and Jørgensen 2016) and racist (Farris 2017) basis, particularly because the bureaucratic challenges faced by immigrant victims were not considered in the design of the implementation. While the residence requirement did allow foreign women to access the measure, it is crucial to note that the lack of legal residency remains a significant barrier, leaving irregularly residing women outside the scope.

Whilst this is not the primary focus of the present discussion, it is important to emphasise that the RDL provides an opportunity to broaden the conversation on the differentiated impacts of state policies on the migrant female population. The application of the RDL gives rise to questions concerning the pivotal role that state institutions, policy measures, and dedicated services play in reinforcing internal and external boundaries, and in influencing who is entitled to protection, safety, and freedom from an abusive partner.

As suggested by other authors (Segrave and Vasil 2025), conditional eligibility based on financial limitations (Vasil 2023) ends up establishing ‘the borders of belonging’ through the ‘patrolling of the borders of law’ (Weber 2013, 144). This intertwines the system of combating GBV with the border apparatus, as it limits or denies the rights and access of part of the population of victims of violence. In the context of financial constraints, policymakers must devise strategies to circumvent the ineligibility or differential eligibility of female victims of violence, ensuring access to various forms of support, including housing, for all individuals based on their genuine needs.

Recent studies have confirmed the entanglements that all policy responses to GBV have with a wide range of factors (Rauhaus, Sibila, and Johnson 2020), due to the intersectional core of the social phenomenon of gender-based violence, which influences its structural outcomes (institutional framework of prevention and surveillance, data collection on violence) and its sociocultural factors (welfare regime of care support and social equity, ‘culturalization’ of violence in public discourse).

As recently argued (Durfee 2021), it is possible to reconsider how inequalities respond to gender, ethnicity, or citizenship in VAW, in general, and DV and IPV starting from ‘structural intersectionality as theory and method’ (21). Considering the findings of this study and in consideration of Italy’s evolving multicultural landscape, it is asserted that intersectionality should serve as the fundamental tenet guiding the formulation and execution of efficacious anti-violence policies.

Adopting an intersectional perspective on violence against women, acknowledging the inherent interconnectedness of gender with other categories of social differentiation and oppression, such as class and ethnic origin (Crenshaw 1994), would facilitate the development of more effective anti-violence measures.

To this end, legislators must cultivate a capacity for policy learning and an intersectional vision (Crenshaw 1994; Bacchi 1999; Burman and Chantler 2005; Lombardo and Agustín 2016), enabling them to conceptualise targeted and more inclusive prevention measures, calibrated on different social groups, such as foreign women (including irregular ones).

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