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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Gender Based Violence and LGBTQI+ migrants: assessing visibility/invisibility tactics through the Italian reception system<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Persecutions and discrimination based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics-diversity (SOGIESC-diversity) are recognized as reasons to claim asylum. Despite this, data on the impact of gender-based violence (GBV) on LGBTQIA+ migrants are limited, both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view. This sustains an enduring invisibilization of LGBTQIA+ migrants, through migration paths and in reception centers. Using Collins' matrix of domination as a framework, this article provides a qualitative analysis of the experience of the project "MigrAzioni" organised by an Italian Association for the rights of LGBTQIA+ people in the South of Italy. A mixed method approach has been used, collecting both official documentation and the experience of SAI reception centers' operators, LGBTQIA+ right activists and migrants. The article highlights the articulation of visibility/invisibility in the LGBTQIA+ migrants' experience, underlining the different ways the latter is intersected by forms of GBV, institutional processes, cultural and social models, gender stereotypes, but also involving daily tactics enacted in liminal spaces between the subjects and the society.

**KEYWORDS:** everyday tactics, GBV, Italy, LGBTQIA+ migrants, refugees, subjectivities.

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<sup>1</sup> While the article is a result of the authors' shared effort, reflected in the introduction and the conclusion, paragraph 2, 5, 6, are to be attributed to Valentina Fedele, while paragraph 1, 3, 4 to Sabrina Garofalo.

## 1. Introduction

According to the latest data, in 2024 LGBTQIA+ people are directly persecuted in 65 countries in the world, seven of which punish homosexuality by death<sup>2</sup>. Despite the fact that persecutions and discriminations based on SOGIESC-diversity are explicitly recognised since 2008 as a category for applying for asylum, there are no complete statistics on the number of LGBTQIA+ migrants at a global or European level. As Papadopolous *et al.* (2023) point out, research on this topic is still limited, partly because of direct or indirect regulatory obstacles in some countries, which negatively impacts not only data collection and knowledge, but also political decision making, and reception policies (UN Women 2023). This quantitative invisibility is only partially compensated by more qualitative NGOs and international organisations' reports that show GBV<sup>3</sup> as an heterogeneous phenomenon crossing the whole migratory experience of LGBTQIA+ people (IOM 2020), differently articulated according to the social, cultural, and institutional characteristics of both the origin and the host country, as well as of the sociological, cultural and economic aspects of subjective experiences of migration (Alessi *et al.*, 2016; Chynoweth 2017; Hopkinson *et al.* 2017; Miles 2010; UNHCR 2011)<sup>4</sup>.

The article is based on the results of a qualitative analysis of the case-study of “MigrAzioni”, a project run by the ARCI (*Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana*)-Gay association in Cosenza, Calabria, South of Italy, orienting around 60 migrants between 2019 and 2022. The project is of significance, considering its specific characteristics - bottom-up emerging needs, paths of relationships with institutional reception processes, and participatory articulation of spaces and times of intervention. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews and documents new forms of understanding on the impact of GBV on LGBTQIA+ migrants are proposed, intersecting daily practices, institutional processes, cultural and social models and gender stereotypes. The aim of this article is to highlight migrants' subjectivities through the asylum process and how the latter replicates different forms of GBV, affecting migrants' identities.

## 2. Gender Based Violence, SOGIESC diversity and migrations

Recent publications intersecting migration and asylum seeking with the issue of GBV against migrants based on SOGIESC-diversity provide a multifaceted and heterogeneous picture of a phenomenon that concerns different categories of migrants, with different gender identities and sexual

<sup>2</sup>See more here: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/lgbt-rights-by-country>

<sup>3</sup>When talking about GBV we take into account both the definition of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention, 2014, art.3) considering violence “*as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination*” and considering as violence “*all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*”, see <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>.

<sup>4</sup>We define recognition following Honneth's definition (2002), identifying three main stages of the struggle for recognition as the demand for love on the basis of which self-confidence is constructed, the demand for rights on the basis of which self-respect is constructed, and the demand for recognition as a unique person, that is the basis for self-esteem, who's construction is essential for social-esteem and thus social recognition.

orientations, different histories and paths of self-recognition. GBV is prevalent in their entire migratory experience, articulated in different spheres - familiar, religious, communitarian - and taking on different forms - physical and sexual, detention, torture, death, discrimination in access to services, reprobation and banishment (Chynoweth 2017; Alessi *et al.*, 2016; Hopkinson *et al.*, 2017; Miles 2010; UNHCR 2011). Persecution - or the risk of persecution - because of personal SOGIESC can be the main motivation for migrating when certain gender identities and sexual orientation are considered explicitly deviant and, therefore, sanctioned<sup>5</sup> (Higgins & Butler 2012; Pepper 2005; ORAM 2011). When the cultural and/or religious reprobation on which the sanction itself is rooted, determines forms of marginalisation and symbolic violence, it prevents the possibility of freely affirming one's identity and sexual orientation (Alessi *et al.* 2016; Georgis 2013; Miles 2010; Ombagi 2019; Papadoupoulos *et al.* 2023).

GBV and migration are interlinked in a generalised violent context, within which specific vulnerabilities as SOGIESC-diversities are highlighted. According to the UN Women policy paper "*Migration Experiences of People with Diverse SOGIESC*" (2023), for example, transgender women are particularly at risk of being victims of trafficking and smuggling<sup>6</sup>, and of being sexually assaulted during the journey. Irregular and dangerous routes can often be the only viable route for non-binary identities, lacking regular documents or documents consistent with their gender expression<sup>7</sup>. In this case, identification procedures at the border-crossing to host countries can determine forms of institutional and physical violence, such as body searches.

In host countries, GBV violence against migrants with SOGIESC-Diversity revolves around two main intersecting axes: institutional-political actions and everyday practices. Persecution and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ migrants are considered a motivation for the recognition of asylum and international protection, according to art. 1 of the Geneva Convention (1951)<sup>8</sup> and the note, issued in 2008 by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) specifying that the category "social group" also includes sexual orientation and gender identity<sup>9</sup>.

However, the recognition and protection guaranteed by international organisations do not necessarily have given rise to non-discriminatory laws or practices: in different European countries discriminatory

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<sup>5</sup>On institutional violence based on SOGIESC-diversity in different countries, see <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/lgbt-rights-by-country>. See also [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/policy-paper\\_migration-experiences-people-diverse-sogiesc-en.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/policy-paper_migration-experiences-people-diverse-sogiesc-en.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.ctdatacollaborative.org/story/human-trafficking-and-gender-differences-similarities-and-trends>.

<sup>7</sup>See for example Wachowich (2023) on the experience of transgender women fleeing Ukraine.

<sup>8</sup>The article guarantees the possibility of requesting asylum to those who have "*justified fear of being persecuted for their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion*".

<sup>9</sup>The protection of LGBTQIA+ people against discrimination and violence is also guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, legally binding signatory states, as well as by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Another important reference are the Yogyakarta Principles (2007), specifically concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, while being a soft law instrument, not legally binding human rights mechanism.

laws are enforced, entailing also specific limitations to non-binary gender expressions<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, homophobic and transphobic social norms often lead to discrimination in the labour market – already ethnically segmented – and in accessing social services, regardless of the presence of national laws against discrimination (ILO 2022). Such norms also affect reception facilities, where operators may themselves be bearers of gender-based prejudice and stereotypes and are unprepared to properly receive people not “fitting” in a reception system whose procedures, despite different local and national declinations, tend towards a normative standardisation of differences. In Italy, while there is a lack of both qualitative and quantitative data on the subject (see Rosati et al. 2021), there has been a partial acknowledgment of LGBTQIA+ migrants’ specific needs from national institutions. According to the latest available report from the Minister of Interior (2023), some reception centers have set up dedicated facilities, providing 37 places (out of 2110) divided into 8 structures, plus a control room coordinating and monitoring paths of acceptance, support and inclusions<sup>11</sup>.

The organisation of the spaces (and times) in reception facilities, theoretically conceived as gender-blind, reflect indeed cis-gender logics, with areas conceived according to a traditional view of male/female binarism. This can cause specific difficulties when hosting transgender and non-binary people, sometimes resulting in spatial isolation. Despite being motivated by a protection need, it leads to solitary confinement, involving physical and psychological trauma (Caporuschio 2020; UN WOMEN 2023). Furthermore, forced cohabitation with compatriots - or people from culturally or socially similar geographical areas - can reproduce the same dynamics of condemnation, reprobation and marginalisation that underlie the very choice to migrate, and often cause forms of both physical and symbolic violence, and further invisibilisation of one’s gender identity (Human Rights Watch 2017).

In the experience of LGBTQIA+ migrants, the different articulations of GBV specifically affect the possibility of affirming subjective identity in a public way, mirrored also in the reticence to claim recognition of refugee status due to persecution linked to SOGIESC diversity. This is related to difficulties in the process of self-recognition and fears of community marginalisation, as well as to the persistence of discriminatory and violent procedures connected to the verification of gender identities and sexual orientation within the asylum-seeking process itself. The latter reflects stereotypical readings of western sexuality and gender identities, establishing hegemonic representations, to which the claim for asylum and international protections based on SOGIESC diversities are compelled to adhere to (Akin 2019; Dhoest 2018; Ferreira 2022; Lewis 2014; Marcus 2018; Shakhsari 2014).

### **3. LGBTQIA+ migrants: subjectivities challenging invisibility**

The process of negotiating the borders between visibility and invisibility crosses the entire migratory experience of LGBTQIA+ people. In this regard Ballin and Manganini (2023, 24) identify two kinds of invisibility: a lesser invisibility referring

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<sup>10</sup>According to the ILGA Report (2023) only 17 countries in Europe recognise the right of self-determination to LGBTIQ+ people, tied to a definition of gender based on the sex assigned at birth; while in countries where there is the possibility of legally changing gender, this is often accompanied by invasive practices, such as forced sterilisation, medical interventions or violent forms of mental health evaluations.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Slide-Webinar-SC-Laccoglienza-LGBTQIA-Asp-Arca-Cidas.pdf>

to those who are often acknowledged to be missing or underrepresented in case law and COI<sup>12</sup> on SOGI-related persecution. COI often focuses mainly or exclusively on gay men, by whom the majority of SOGI asylum claims are made, while, as Jansen (2013) reminds us, ‘information on lesbians and trans people is scarce and information on bisexuals and intersex people is practically non-existent’.

There is another greater invisibility that

describe situations where absence and invisibility itself remains largely invisible. The experiences of these latter groups are thus almost impossible to analyse or discuss beyond the blunt fact of their invisibility. (...) ‘greater invisibility’ is particularly severe in the case of asylum claimants belonging to less familiar SOGI minorities such as trans\* and non-binary gender identities – not to mention sexual orientations other than lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.

Denying one’s SOGIESC also represents a survival strategy in different contexts, challenging institutional, political and social recognition practices for GBV against LGBTQIA+ migrants, especially against trans-homophobic violence. It is a subjective invisibility that represents a SOGIESC political practice through migration. In the hosting country’s reception facilities, the perceived threats of symbolic and physical violence determines a fluid attitude towards one’s gender belonging, forcing osmotic and complementary mechanisms of covering/reverse-covering toward personal identities. Yoshino (2006, xi) defines covering as “*ton[ing] down a disfavoured identity to fit into the mainstream*”, while reverse covering (2006, 22-23) as the mechanism in which individuals are compelled to “*act according to the stereotypes associated with their group*”. Covering and uncovering are not here understood as binary options, but as possible hybrid tactics of resistance and affirmation in the relationship with the institution, implemented differently depending on the circumstances.

From this point of view, across the bodies and the individual experiences of LGBTQIA+ migrants, GBV takes on physical, psychological, economic and sexual forms, but it also shapes the dynamics that prevent dignity and self-determination, incorporating social and emotional features. Its definition is affected by transversal dimensions, encompassing hegemonic representations of gender identity and orientation, structural possibilities and opportunities in the contexts of departure and in the journey, relational dynamics of public and private visibility/invisibility, as well as disciplinary practices. These dimensions act violently on migrant bodies that are polarised and disciplined through the reception processes, denying their gender identities and sexual orientation, compressing their subjectivity itself, unless functional to - and rationalised within - the procedures of international protection recognition.

On the one hand, reception procedures shape how migrants navigate visibility and invisibility, responding to the constraints of a system that - despite its many variations - is built around an individualised, neutral, isolated, ahistorical, acultural notion of the body. Migrant’s ‘acceptability’ is

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<sup>12</sup> Country of Origin Information (COI) plays a crucial role in the assessment of LGBTQI+ asylum applications in EU countries.

explicitly tied to merit-based criteria, as conforming to dominant values and successfully following normative ‘integration’ paths, measured through quantifiable outcomes. These standards ultimately define a migrant's entire experience, framed as their personal responsibility alone (Aime 2020; Atfield et al. 2007; Elia and Fedele 2024; King 2003; Phillips 2006). Covering is a strategy aimed at the presumed gender blindness of the reception system that privileges intervention based on a traditionally masculine identity model, which relegates otherized subjectivities and gender identities to the private space (Crawley 2001). Thus, if asylum must be earned, the migrant is charged with the individual responsibility of deconstructing the very idea of being a false refugee (*bogus refugee*), showing himself as a deserving victim (Mountz 2010; Neumayer 2005; Zimmermann 2014). Gender identity must be accordingly adjusted, performed and mimed in order to resemble the hegemonic model of sexuality in the host country.

Reverse-covering strategies operate in a fluid context of reworking one's own gender subjectivity<sup>13</sup>, in relation to transnational discourses and structures, the country of origin, the experience of the journey, but also to the internal dynamics of the host countries, and the structures, the norms and the people who populate these worlds. It is part of the migrants’ agency, constitutive of the way in which they act in the world that acts on them, generating specific social practices, forms of accommodation and resistance, performed in everyday life. De Certeau (1984) distinguishes two dialectically related modes of daily action in social space: “strategies” and “tactics”. Strategies are characterized by the particular position of the strategic subject, is recognizable, has a defined power, a stable identity and can exercise forms of control over time and space. In other words, strategies are enacted by all those who, due to their position, can structure or influence others’ existence. The space defined by strategic subjects is, nevertheless, crossed by tactical activities which are carried out by unidentifiable subjects lacking their own spaces. Tactics, that de Certeau defines as the ‘art of the weak’, are actions exercised in the hetero-directed space, reinventing and altering paths decided by those in power through strategies, designing unforeseen trajectories. The tactical subject is a subject in mobility who is deprived of a space to manage and implement action that, while often opportunistic, spontaneous, and a product of contingency, holds the possibility of opposing the strategies of the systems, creating new spaces, and therefore holding an emancipatory potential. In the specific case of LGBTQIA+ migrants, these tactics inevitably pass through their same covered bodies, being acted in a space that is transitional, ambiguous, i. e. liminal. According to Turner (1969: 95) liminality is referred to a space in which individuals “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial”. This is a space in which norms and behaviours are suspended, but that can encourage reflection and the agency of liminal subjectivities (Turner 1979). In the case of LGBTQIA+ migrants, liminal spaces, in which every day tactics are enacted challenge their visibility within the reception system, highlighting different practices of covering/undercovering.

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<sup>13</sup>Subjectivity is here understood as the set of positions that the subject simultaneously occupies within a matrix of discourses and social structures that influence, but do not determine, the subject himself, who in a given social, cultural, economic and political context can identify, resist or transform the different possible positions (Moore 1994, 2007; Ortner 2005; Pinelli 2013).

#### 4. Methodology and research

In order to place LGBTQIA+ migrants' subjective experience at the centre of a reflection on GBV against migrants based on SOGIESC diversity, we adopt Patricia Hill Collins' matrix of domination. The latter, in the framework of a broader reflection on the processes of empowerment of subjectivities, provides tools for analyzing the intersections of multiple forms of oppression and for valuing marginalized subjectivities (Collins 1986; 2004). The matrix enables us to examine the specific structural dimensions of violence—how oppression is organized within society—across both sending and receiving countries. At the same time, it highlights the contextual constraints that shape individual and collective paths toward emancipation, as well as the opportunities and potential strategies for resistance and challenge.

Collins' matrix, thus, enables us to take into account both the structural and the disciplinary organisation of oppression, that is institutional practices managing power relations and controlling social groups, but also hegemonic legitimation they are rooted in traditions, culture, and beliefs, normalised as common sense. This approach helps to identify in the analysis both direct and indirect institutional and community control devices against LGBTQ+ migrants, but also the representations and the construction of gender stereotypes that act on their bodies at a transnational level, as inherent to GBV based on SOGIESC-diversity.

Moreover, Collins's matrix also reflects on the need to transform social, normative, and cultural institutions, and thus considers processes of self-determination, self-definition, and the various ways the self can be represented. It suggests that, through everyday interactions within social structures, individuals actively construct or challenge models of subordination related to marginalized identities. These dynamics operate within a relational framework of recognition and misrecognition (Honneth 2002; Siebert 2003), which can, in turn, initiate processes of individual and collective empowerment.

The application of the article's theoretical framework to the field of analysis has involved identifying the reference group by recognizing subjectivities exposed to experiences of discrimination or socially positioned under the expectation of experiencing it. These subjectivities remain invisible also due to the mono-categorical lens through which identities, social structures, and social representations are interpreted, overlooking the intersectional positions occupied by LGBTQIA+ individuals. An intra-categorical analysis (highlighting individual subjectivities) has been applied, along with an inter-categorical approach (examining the relationships between LGBTQIA+ migrant and the institution through the lens of the discrimination-equality dialectic), and an anti-categorical perspective (emphasizing subjective experience in order to understand at the micro level identity construction processes, and to reinterpret at macro level the position of groups within the social system).

The research adopted a mixed method approach, collecting quantitative data - mapping anti-discrimination centers in Calabria and their users - and subjective data, as the perceptions and representations of both migrants and associations' operators.

The case study analysed is "MigrAzioni" project of Arci-gay, the main association in Italy militating for the rights equality, self-determination, and the overcoming of stereotypes and prejudices against LGBTI people and any form of discrimination, operating in the city of Cosenza (Calabria). The project, part of the broader activities of the Association at a national level aimed to network and coordinate the activities to orientate LGBTQIA+ migrants, has been in place from 2019-2022. It has reached out to 60

migrants, out of which two women, mostly hosted in the SAI<sup>14</sup> centres as asylum seekers, coming from the 125 municipalities of the province of Cosenza. The project is a response to a spontaneous need that had arisen in the previous years and its designing and practices are themselves to be considered as forms of organisation of daily strategies that react to the dynamics of violence and oppression constraining the liminal and fluid migrant identities. These practices have produced documentations - in the form of reports to be submitted to the Italian Territorial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection<sup>15</sup> (hereinafter Territorial Commission) that traces the individual paths of migrants, collecting their life stories and translating complex identity processes into discursive forms. This documentation is one of the sources for this study, as it represents a narrative of migrants' path, their experiences in the origin countries and through migration. It also refers to the process of insertion in Italian reception centers, giving an account of daily life and of the relationship between migrants and operators. Concerning the latter, their voice is included in this documentation, as they are involved in the evaluation of migrants' forms of coping with the paths of inclusion reception centres propose. By analyzing all these elements, it is possible to grasp the full range of the migrant's subjective experiences.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews have also been collected, involving 5 operators and 5 LGBTQIA+ rights activists. Three in-depth interviews have been implemented with LGBTQIA migrants. The interviews have been transcribed *verbatim* and have been anonymized as Operator (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), activist (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ), and migrant (1, 2, 3). This tool has been chosen in order to protect the identities of the interviewed, taking into account the relatively small territory in which the project has been implemented.

The interviews and the documents collected have been analysed by cross-referencing the tools of the Critical Discourse Analysis and Thematic Analysis. The choice of using a double methodology of analysis is due to the need to bring out subjective experiences and to find commonalities in the experiences collected. Considering language not as a mirror but as a tool for the construction of reality (van Dijk 2001), Critical Discourse Analysis helps to detect subjective expressions that have been relevant in the analysis of documentary sources: both associative reports and court ruling are transposition of what the speech acts theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1974) calls performative utterances - sentences that not only describe reality but also change the same social reality they are describing. In the specific case the document analysis seeks to influence (in the case of reports) or determine (in the case of sentences) a given reality. At the same time, in order to find commonalities through subjectively diversified experiences Thematic Analysis has been used, as "*offering insight into patterns of meaning*

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<sup>14</sup>SAI – Reception and Integration System- was created in 2020 (Decree-Law no.130 of 21 October 2020, enacted as Law no.173 of 18 December 2020), taking the place of the former system named SIPROIMI. Its reception is provided for refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied foreign minors, foreigners entrusted to the social services on reaching majority age; it can also host victims of disasters, migrants with "special civil value", holders of a residence permit for medical treatment, or with special-protection residence permit (as victims of domestic violence or labour exploitation), see <https://www.retesai.it/english/>.

<sup>15</sup>In Italy, the only authority responsible for examining asylum application is the Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection, part of the Italian Ministry of Interior. While priority is assigned to people with special needs (children, the elderly, the disabled, pregnant women and victims of violence) any applicants for international protection have the right to be heard by a Commission. The Commission may grant refugee status, or subordinately, subsidiary protection. It is possible to appeal against the Territorial Commission's decision at an Ordinary Court, and later against the ruling of the Ordinary Court by protesting to the Court of Appeal, and against the latter's decision to the Court of Cassation; see <https://help.unhcr.org/italy/faq/>; see also <https://integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it/en-gb/Altre-info/e/4/o/11///id/20/Recognition-of-international-protection-applications>. There are eleven territorial commission in Italy, one of them in Crotona (Calabria) is the reference for two regions (Calabria and Basilicata), see <https://euaa.europa.eu/questura-crotone>.



(...) *This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities*” (Braun and Clarke 2012, 57). The thematic analysis has taken into account Yoshino’s (2016) categories of covering and reverse-covering, in relation to the social and institutional visibility / invisibility of LGBTQIA communities, rearticulated on the experience of migrant, asylum seekers and refugees. Those categories have been crossed, compared with emerging daily tactics configuring political strategies of self-affirmation, challenging gender norms and stereotyped devices for categorising.

## 5. Covering identities: visibility/invisibility tactics in LGBTQIA+ people migration

As underlined, the link between SOGIESC and migration has to be framed considering diverse push and pull factors, compared to both the way gender identities and sexual orientations shape the cultural subjectivities and the individual choices (Halperin 2012) and the way in which they are perceived by the closest circles and by the society as a whole (Chauvin and Lersch 2016). In this sense, the “additional development task”, the declaration of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, is both a process for self-acceptance and a construction of a positive LGBTQIA+ identities, defined as a multidimensional evolutionary process of explication of a conscious and authentic belonging, also through the construction of an “us” in a collective recognition (Baiocco et al. 2023; Riggle *et al.* 2014).

Therefore, the coming out constitutes an “act of language” as it produces a public identity (Chauvin e Lersh 2016: 86). This identity is fluid and suspended: located in the migratory space and time, gender subjectivities must necessarily undertake paths of recognition that cannot be described only as linked to an evolutionary path. Analysing migrants’ life stories, situations of denial emerge, on the border between the lack of recognition of one's own gender identity and forms of tactical denial, linked to the awareness of the inherent risk. In this case, dissimulation is “*a mutilation imposed by the conditioning of a homophobic society*” (*ibidem*), a way of coping with institutionalised, and socially normalised, violence.

They are paths of continuous censorship, continuous violence. They have never declared their homosexuality in their country of origin, except in a couple of cases, nor during the journey (Operator 1).

Censorship in this case is a tactic of resistance, showing how formalised or threatened violence is not only a pivotal, but also a modality of expression. It includes the annulment of LGBTQIA+ migrants subjectivities located in a relationship of power, it is a social force that appropriates concrete bodies in order to transform them into pure abstract and imagined identity models.

GBV in the countries of origin can be analysed as political violence, in specific cases as state and institutionalised violence, justifying limitations to personal freedom, detention, punitive measures but also private violence, controlling bodies and behaviours.

They put them in prison, they lock them up, they push them away, they isolate them. Even in countries where homosexuality is not illegal, the social reprobation is heavy. Families do not let them out: one of them was even locked in a bedroom in his own house by his parents for a long time; after having declared his homosexuality and he was forbidden to meet his boy and the boy was also violently beaten by the family (Activist 2).

These experiences are at the intersection between the structural – the illegality of homosexuality – the hegemonic and the (denied) relational dimension of violence, and determines an approach to one's homosexuality that an operator describe as “*surrounded by anger and fear*”, shaping in specific ways the same choice of migrating:

you discover that there is the possibility of leaving... my thought is to live myself in a territory in which myself is not considered illegal... but I join another type of migration. I put in my backpack all my condition, my poverty, my desire to grow, my homosexuality (Migrant 2).

The relevance that one's sexual orientation and gender identity has in the choice of fleeing is therefore itself denied, together with the persecution linked to SOGIESC-diversity, despite self-awareness. Even when violence is physically expressed, sexual orientation and gender identity are not explicitly recalled as linked to violence itself:

They told us of the sexual and physical violence suffered during the journey, which however was not because they were homosexual, it was simply violence. This, anyway, led them to hide their sexual orientation... So when they arrived in Italy they were even more intimidated, so there was hardly a coming out upon the entry, at the time of the first reception (Operator 2).

Violence suffered during the journey is not considered as a form of GBV, but becomes a further obstacle to self-affirmation, violating the intimate sphere, in a way that cannot be expressed into discursive and declarative forms, reinforcing migrants' motivations to closet. The latter are then heterogenized in the context of reception, constructed through control devices, limiting the process of recognition and self-recognition, as “*they live this phase of maturation within a territory where they are in any case illegal*” (Operator 1). In the reception facilities, a humanitarian approach is often adopted, rooted in cultural stereotypes, considering SOGIESC diversities as pathologies:

We have found a pitying attitude from receptions' operators, “uh but you're gay!”... you make feel like it is an illness, a problem, a vulnerability (Activist 1).

As underlined, sometimes this determines practices that associate isolation with protection, but also the violation of the complexity of the coming out processes.

maybe they isolate them, they start to come out and talk about an individual's sexuality in a completely inappropriate way. In one of the SAI, a boy came out to a worker, and when the boy left the group, this worker told all the other boys about his homosexuality. Maybe she did it to protect him, maybe... but this created a risk, because at the end there were homophobic boys...these homophobic boys started making jokes and further discomfort was created (Activist 2).

The interpretation of the concept of protection is, therefore, affected by a hegemonic and hetero-directed vision that contributes to limit migrant self-fulfilment, reinforcing also dominant expectations relating to gender roles. In the case of female homosexuality, for example, not only is it less recognised,

but further risks emerge in the hegemonic male need to control female sexuality:

Another risk is in the case of female homosexuality, which is underestimated, and even within the SAI there can be violence and advances towards lesbian girls by boys who would like to correct them (Operator 3).

From this point of view, covering strategies are not so much linked to denial, but to a conscious and tactical choice with respect to one's own path. Nonetheless, as migration itself identifies a rupture in this path, from the choice to leave, through the journey, to the context of reception, new spaces for experience emerge, liminal spaces (Holle, Rast and Ghorasci 2021) at the crossroad between structural, hegemonic and relational dimensions, that can be places for the acting of new practices of self and hetero-recognition.

## **6. Reverse covering: performing gender identity within and through institutions**

The institutional devices related to the recognition of SOGIESC-based right to asylum or international protection specifically act on the liminal spaces of experience. The process entails procedures aiming at “proving” and evaluating the “significance and truthfulness” of the persecutory situation. The proof of danger and the evaluation of risk are, thus, inherent in the process of private or public recognition of gender identity or sexual orientation. The responsibility for the proof itself is again on the migrants who have to find forms and methods of showing their sexual orientation, before even demonstrating the conditions of risk in the country of departure. As one operator emphasises:

you don't have to prove that you have suffered violence, you have to prove your orientation, you have to demonstrate that you are homosexual, for example, and this is a perverse mechanism. It is a violation of the integrity of the person.

The legal discourse is strongly influenced by imaginaries of gender and otherness, often rooted in colonial memory, adopting an interpretative model that considers identity and sexual orientation as a path with evolutionary stages, referring to a white, middle-class Italian gay man. This approach does not take into account migrant subjectivities in their biographical dimension, through the different positions they assume in their personal experience, or the structural dynamics acting on them and the construction of public discourse both in the country of origin and in the country of arrival. Moreover, migrants sometimes hold a certain degree of information and awareness concerning both the reception procedures and the representations informing them. This pre-socialisation has a specific impact on the articulation of the discursive and performative relationship between LGBTQIA+ migrants and the asylum-seeking procedures (Carnassale 2020). The need to dispel the doubts about their SOGIESC-diversity, and show themselves to be real (and deserving) refugees gave rise to the “MigrAzioni” project itself. In the years before its activation, the ARCI-gay association had been contacted by lawyers accompanying migrants in the asylum application process, asking for the release of the association's membership card. The not

so latent request's aim was 'proving' their clients belong to the LGBTQIA+ community during the interview procedures at the Territorial Commission.

A simple membership card becomes a certificate of one's being. It sustains the idea that migrants' sexual orientation and gender identity needs an external device - in this case delegating the recognition to a militant association - to be legitimated. An operator says:

Initially one or two boys arrived or one or two lawyers who unfortunately suffered from a lack of experience and information on how to manage the practices of a migrant who declared himself LGBT... and therefore, how to manage this type of asylum request or this type of difficulty? The lawyers' approach was strange, so we were initially contacted by one or two lawyers who asked us for documents in which we certified that they were gay boys... for which we had first to train the lawyer, explaining to him that the famous gay radar is complete nonsense!

Requesting the association's membership card is therefore a hetero-directed strategy, often involving conscious and direct forms of outing, when legal practice takes the place of a path of awareness and self-determination: *"In many cases there was not even a coming out... there was only the request for the card by the boy or by the lawyer. It was the lawyer who was making an outing..."*. In some cases, concerned migrants have no information or awareness about the association and the meaning their membership would have in the asylum seeking process. Once informed by the association's operators themselves, some of them reacted badly, showing denial or even a violent refusal toward the possibility of being recognised as a person with SOGIESC-diversities or the opportunity of starting a process with the aim of declaring their possible sexual orientation. An operator says:

they didn't know that they were coming to Arci-gay to declare their sexual orientation, and so in some cases we found ourselves in quite violent situations, when we explained... "this card that we give you declares your membership to an association of homosexuals, lesbians etc... it's as if you say in court, I am homosexual". Some guys started shouting, even being violent because they said, "in our country this is illegal!" "It's not true that I am gay" "you can't say this, I have two wives, I have four daughters" ... and some gave up.

The membership card, however, is only a part of the evidence that the Territorial Court needs in order to recognise asylum, while the construction of the proof takes on a specific frame of meanings linked to authority and control. The experience collected testify how in this process, bodies of LGBTQ+ migrants are staged, moving from being invisible, silenced throughout the migratory journey, to being visibilised as exclusively sexualised. This sexualisation is constructed around a male cis-heterosexual logic for which the definition of sexual orientation is declined only in physiological terms. An operator says:

We have lived absurd experiences that at the beginning left us shocked: they were shown porn films, direct questions were asked, images were exposed to understand if there was sexual arousal.

Such dynamics reduce LGBTQIA+ migrants to sexualised bodies in a more general process of reduction of the intimate and affective sphere to instinctual aspects that do not respect the integrity of the person, nor the SOGIESC articulations. Migrant subjectivities involved can internalise stereotyped

forms of identity appearance, assuming characteristics and attitudes that in the homophobic imagination fall within the stereotyping of homosexuality, implementing voice distortion, mocking specific body postures, reproducing ‘othering’ narratives.

These experiences highlight forms of violence linked to practical, disciplinary and hegemonic dimensions. The request for the membership card implies the reduction of the individual experience to a material object, considered capable of representing the belonging to a community and consequently one's subjective identity. Furthermore, the conceptual reduction of LGBTQIA+ bodies as exclusively sexual bodies takes up categories and conventions linked to pathological and deviant aspects with respect to the binary heteronormative system, becoming a violent practice that considers bodies in terms of bio-politics and bio-power. The very mechanisms that allow the recognition of gender and sexual minorities within the political discourse, and their taking charge in legal and institutional systems, also determine their labelling (Ballin and Manganini 2023; Spijkerboer and Jansen 2011). The latter trace gender and sexual identities back to precise models of self-recognition and sexual behaviour, challenging the visibilization and the legal, institutional and social recognition of those identities that do not fit into the gay man/lesbian woman binary.

## **7. De-covering the self: liminal spaces and gender identity affirmation**

At the intersection of different forms of violence on the institutional, social, hegemonic level, migration can still mark new forms of affirmation and articulation of the self. The feminist reading of migrant experiences underlines (bell hooks 1998; Bonvicini 1992; Campani 2000; Fleury 2016) that by deconstructing the very concepts of emancipation, migrations can represent an opportunity for empowerment, a chance to break and rework community, traditional and familiar bonds, in new geographical and social spaces, offering the opportunity to build autonomous paths. From this point of view, the daily tactics that are political strategies, can lead to innovative forms of affirmation of positive LGBTQ+ identities. The latter, in order to be positive, need to go through a process of collective recognition, the construction of an “us” (Baiocco 2023; Riggle 2014). This dimension emerges in the experience analysed in relation to the design of the project and the activities to be implemented. An ARCI representative says:

At a certain point we asked ourselves “are we doing it right?” .... With the support of the national federation, we decided to better structure these interventions. So the requests arrived, we asked for an interview with the boy and before issuing the membership card, we started chatting and then they had three or four meeting with us, before obtaining the membership card ...to understand better, to understand their story, their experiences, their life and their journey and to understand if we were also able to get to a veiled coming-out, because at that point the card was used to declare the homosexuality of the person.

This reflection on the needs expressed by migrants themselves in meetings with association's operators, the will to put migrant subjectivities at the centre of the project, considering his/her individual experience, the processes intersecting the self and the social recognition of one's sexual and gender identity, has driven the activation of practices within which LGBTQIA+ migrants could start to “say” their self. Literacy workshops – because as an operator says “*even giving a name to what you are can be a problem. It is impossible to find the words if you come from a context in which they forbid you to even think about it*” – spaces for mutual knowledge and education on emotions, workshops dedicated to

online dating activities, have allowed not only the emergence of specific experiences, but also the construction of relationships, of an “us”. Strategies and forms of conciliation between the culture of the country of origin and the host society have been highlighted, starting from the deconstruction of having a different sexual orientation as a fault or as deviance; a bridge has been built between the sphere of the self, the private one, and the public one, implementing different ways of performing oneself in everyday life, in full autonomy, relating to institutions and external actors. In some cases, the path of "self" and "social" recognition has been translated into the involvement of the participants themselves in activities of orientation and peer tutoring. This overlapping with the same mediation function of the association restored a sense of “us” not only in the dimension of sexual orientation and gender identity, but also in the dimension of the migratory experience.

Participation in the association's activities represented for some people the possibility of being able to freely affirm their sexuality, a space of trust in which to appropriate and express their sexual orientation and gender identity, and learning the words to do so.

They asked for information, they asked to read books, to know how to use dating apps... to decode some terms and some requests. We also had some workshops that finally allowed us to shed light on their experiences. After a long time, some came out during the activities (Operator).

For others, this participation represented a process of active citizenship that accompanied the association's activity to the construction of intimate and personal relationships "*We had a case of a boy, who then had asylum recognised, who told us that he had started a relationship once in Italy, we met his partner...*". Starting from these paths, the political action of the association itself, its relationship with the legal system has changed, taking on new forms and activating new methods of accompaniment:

We were also called to testify during the hearings and our speech was far from the speech about membership cards. We also experienced moments in which we had to explain to a judge, a lawyer, a court that you are not gay because you get an Arci membership card (...). But we started to write specific reports for each one of them, talking about their active participation, to say that if these people come to us it is not for the membership card, but because they have relationships, they have interests (Operators).

These procedural practices have triggered a broader process of change in the perception of the association and of LGBTQIA+ migrant identities in institutional devices, starting a path of innovation from the everyday to the institutional (de Certeau 1984):

after the institutionalisation of the project, lawyers became fewer and fewer... migrants came directly, some after having been contacted by the lawyers. But perhaps they [the lawyer] had become more sensitive because they said to them: “if you contact the association, you have to go through a process”... In short, it was no longer just the membership card. And then there was the access of people who did not need the membership card but only to live in a space... both people with a residence permit, and in the circuits of irregularity. They did not want the membership card, they were there as homosexual people in a safe space (Activist, 2).

While strategies of *covering* and *reverse covering* take place as influenced by institutional strategies, tactics of *self-de-covering* are enacted in the liminal and marginalized spaces that as spaces of affirmation become *safe spaces*. The latter are characterized not only by the elimination of actual situations of discrimination, but also by the weakening of the expectation of potential discrimination, giving rise to paths of empowerment and self-determination.

## 8. Conclusions

The study of LGBTQIA+ migrant personal and political trajectories from the country of origin to Italy hosting country, has allowed to highlight useful perspectives for the deconstruction of different conceptual and analytical categories both compared to the study of contemporary migrations and to the analysis of GBV against people with SOCIESC diversity, in their normative, institutional and relational dimension. From the point of view of migrations, the testimonies collected have highlighted the limits of the classic frames of reception, focused on a constructed model of individual migrant, marginalising both familiar and communitarian relationships and the cultural, social, religious and gender belonging, identities, expressions. The latter are taken into account in the reception system only insofar as they relate to situations of danger or vulnerability, problematized, categorised, simplified in a single dimension. The entire process determines an articulation between invisibility and visibility that responds to the very needs of controlling migrant bodies, inherent to the mechanisms that formally and informally regulate contemporary human mobility (De Haas, Castles, Miller 2020).

The fluidity of migrants' subjectivities often proves to be irreducible to predetermined paths, models and processes. In the specific case of LGBTQIA+ migrants, Ballin and Manganini (2023, 23) emphasise that

queer resistance to categorisation is a political project but it is also an inescapable consequence of the inherent fluidity and non categorisable nature of (queer) identities, which are lived as fluid, often not entirely definable, ever-changing, blurred, intersecting, and unruly. While categories expressed in law may be fixed, (queer) identities as lived and experienced in the world generally are not. The consequence of such dissonance between the asylum legal system and the realities (...) of fixed categories vs.fluid identities.

From this point of view, the analysis has shown how at the intersection between the systems of hegemonic, relational, practical and structural power, alternative spaces emerge - often in the daily life - within which unexpected tactics of construction and affirmation of LGBTQIA+ subjectivities operate, which creating fluid dynamics of self and hetero-recognition.

The study has highlighted how SOGIESC violence and discrimination have a peculiar transversal dimension with respect to Collin's matrix of domination. In this case, violence is determined through migrant bodies acting on multiple and heterogeneous levels with contrasting evolutions: the same recognition of violence and its visibility is articulated between practices of hetero and self-denial, sometimes connected to specific strategies linked more to the experience of migration, rather than to that of violence. The experiences analysed through the prism of LGBTQIA+ migrant subjectivities bring out new areas and forms of gender violence in reception practices - from body-searching upon arrival, to forced neutrality in asylum systems, to the denied dimension of the autonomous affirmation of one's gender identity (coming out VS outing) - in the categorised sexualisation of bodies in the courts, in the denial of the right to full citizenship, in the exclusion from the narrative itself on migration. At the same time, however, the subjective dimension highlights spaces of resistance, emerging possibilities for the recognition of one's being and one's experiences of violence, challenging victimising dynamics and rhetoric, drawing from a multiple repertoire of tactical positioning that reinterprets the construction itself of LGBTQIA+ subjectivities.

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