

# PHENOMENOLOGY AND MIND

## *STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE: REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL GROUPS, IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY*

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# EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY IN ANTI-DISCRIMINATION WORK. REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN NORTHERN ITALY<sup>1</sup>

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## *abstract*

*Intersectionality implies a series of tools to enhance the identification of and interventions against specific forms of discrimination. The article discusses the results of an exploratory study that investigated the extent to which these tools are considered and used by social workers involved in the anti-discrimination sector in some northern areas of Italy. While it is true that intersectionality seems to be a construct still relatively unknown to the professionals surveyed, they recognize how it can represent an added value to their capacity for analysis and intervention. For its full utilization, they highlight the need to overcome the self-referential and fragmented manner in which social services operate in Italy and to rethink the relationship between operators and victims of discrimination, emphasizing the active role of the latter in promoting social inclusion.*

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## *keywords*

*intersectionality, marginality, anti-discrimination, social work, social representations*

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### **Introduction**

In recent decades, the intersectional approach has traversed the boundaries of various disciplines on an international scale. While the concept is increasingly explored within literature across multiple fields, from law to social and anthropological sciences, it is becoming ever more urgent to evaluate the actual responsiveness of this framework in addressing discriminatory events, particularly beyond the US legal and socio-anthropological context. In European and Italian settings, where anti-discrimination efforts are often fragmented and partial, typically executed by both governmental and third-sector entities in a disjointed manner, the effectiveness of the intersectional perspective in anti-discrimination practices remains largely untested. In particular, there is a notable absence of social research on the extent and ways in which intersectionality is integrated into social intervention and practices promoting inclusion.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted as part of the project IN-tersecting GRounds of Discrimination in Italy (INGRiD), this article examines the perspectives and approaches of social workers involved in inclusion-oriented services operating in four regions of northern Italy.

In the first section, intersectionality is introduced from a sociological perspective, emphasizing how it should be associated with an analysis of situations of vulnerability and social marginalization and with a series of possible intervention strategies aimed at uncovering unprecedented conditions of discrimination and promoting inclusion. It is emphasized that its application within the work of social professionals represents an additional testing ground—compared to its implementation in the legal field—to assess its practical feasibility and actual usefulness. The second section presents the main findings from the qualitative research conducted in Italy, which has grasped how situational constraints and professional approaches prevailing among social workers hinder the full adoption of the intersectional approach in anti-discrimination practices. The study suggests the need to support social workers, also from a training perspective, in order to promote a radical revision of both their relationship with assisted victims and their horizontal relationships with other professionals and organizations, aiming for greater complementarity of approaches.

### **1. The intersectional analysis as a valuable tool for social work**

In the last two decades, the concept of intersectionality, which originated within legal theory in the United States in the early nineties, has permeated various disciplines and established itself in international discourse. Although early 20th-century claims about the doubly marginalized condition of Black women had highlighted the “problem of intersectionality” long before it was formally named (Perilli & Ellena, 2012), it was American activist and jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989 and 1991) who brought the term into use. Drawing from the

internal dialogue with Critical Race Theory, Crenshaw incorporated perspectives from Black feminism into the legal debates occurring in the United States at that time, addressing the limitations of equal opportunity policies based on sex and race/ethnicity separately.<sup>1</sup> As is well known, Crenshaw identified intersectionality primarily as a legal tool capable of recognizing the simultaneity in systems of oppression and violence experienced by Black women. This contrasts with legislative measures that combat discrimination based solely on singular categories, such as sex, gender, or class. The legal notion of intersectionality, first theorised by Crenshaw, has since been developed by scholars into various other domains. From a legal perspective, intersectional discrimination is distinct from single-factor, multiple, or compound discrimination due to both the cause (the inseparable nature of two or more factors) and the effects (a more severe violation than that produced by a single factor). Sandra Fredman, in her analysis for the European Commission (2016), defines intersectional discrimination as occurring when two or more grounds operate simultaneously and interact in an inseparable manner, producing unique and specific forms of discrimination.

However, the scope of Crenshaw's work extends far beyond the legal field and connects to developments in other disciplines that study manifestations of discrimination and, more broadly, the complexities of social situations in the modern world. As Kathy Davis (2008) notes, intersectionality offered new potential and perspectives to a wide range of approaches within the social sciences, despite its inherent ambiguity and open-endedness.

Within the sociological domain, intersectionality resonates with various schools of thought. This includes the concept of intersecting social circles developed by Georg Simmel (1908) in the early 20th century, studies on social stratification and systems of power, and recent theories of diversity and super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007).<sup>2</sup>

In broad terms, intersectionality aligns with the basic sociological understanding that identities are inherently plural and that contextual and biographical aspects are crucial for understanding the conditions of individuals and groups. However, intersectionality should be viewed in terms of power relationships and their detrimental effects rather than focusing solely on identities per se (European Commission, 2016). As Bello (2020) emphasizes, intersectionality is a specific form of analysis: it critically examines the conditions experienced by individuals due to the simultaneous interaction of several inseparable identity categories. These conditions result from societal—political, legal, and cultural—structures.

In this form of examination, it is crucial to understand the extent to which individuals themselves are aware of the specific intersectional forms of oppression associated with their condition. This awareness also depends on the type and degree of identification individuals have with the various categories and groups they intersect with throughout their lives (Perilli & Ellena, 2012).

From a sociological perspective, intersectionality emphasizes the importance of referring to social categories to identify conditions of subordination and discrimination for individuals and groups. These categories are never considered in isolation but always relationally (McCall, 2005), and they are never univocal but inherently plural (Walgenbach, 2012). Despite this complexity, categories must be delineated and their contours and intersections traced, at least pragmatically and provisionally (McCall, 2005). As Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) explains, social categories exist not only in terms of social representations, symbologies, and legislation but

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1 Fully aware of the inappropriateness of the term “race” within any scientific discourse and of the stigmatizing effects this concept still produces in political and common language, I intend to mention this term here solely when and as it is used by the bibliographic sources referenced in our analysis.

2 On the relationship between intersectionality and super-diversity, a useful contribution is offered by: Geerts *et al.*, 2018.

also in the way people subjectively experience episodes of inclusion and exclusion, specific aspirations, and identities in their everyday lives. Referring to the contexts, groups, circles, and experiences individuals navigate and identify with in varying ways and degrees is essential. Under this lens, individuals always present a set of disadvantages and advantages, weaknesses and resources, which are played out on different biographical axes and in different contexts of life (Lutz, 2015).

In the scope of this contribution, it is crucial to underline that, as scholars have largely emphasized, intersectionality is not merely a set of theoretical contributions; it is, more genuinely, a project for social change (Collins, 2019). But what are the practical advantages of adopting intersectional analysis, and to what vision of social change do they respond?

Recalling the tripartition proposed by Crenshaw (1991), the intersectional perspective can pinpoint various issues or urgencies that social action and political intervention should address. On a *structural* level, intersectionality examines discriminatory effects related to access to goods and rights, which result from the interaction between social structures, policies, and services that consider different categories. For example, it can highlight the challenges Black women face in accessing women's shelters or aid centers compared to Black men and white women.<sup>3</sup> Intersectional analysis of power structures in specific situations helps make visible experiences of discrimination that would otherwise be overlooked in a single-ground analysis.

On a *political* level, the intersectional approach brings attention to the needs of individuals who do not benefit from strategies and interventions based on a monocategorical approach.<sup>4</sup> It challenges the handling of discrimination in legal jurisdictions and societal perceptions, calling for new forms of political intervention and advocacy (Cho *et al.*, 2013).

Thirdly, at the *representational* level, the goal of intersectional intervention is to achieve effective social representations and counteract stereotyped views and prejudices that dehumanize individuals and groups. As Crenshaw (1991) demonstrates regarding the cultural construction of Black women, intersectional discrimination is perpetuated through negative social imaginaries. These imaginaries are constructed, reproduced and consolidated through dominant narratives on aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity and religion. For example, stereotypes concerning Roma communities and the construction of Roma women result from rhetoric that essentializes their gender and ethnicity, continuing to reproduce a distorted image that sometimes influences judicial arguments (Bello, 2016). An intersectional analysis can highlight how gendered and racial stereotypes interact to exacerbate disadvantages for migrant women, making displaced women and female refugees particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence (European Commission, 2016). Similarly, it can reveal the specific vulnerabilities faced by Muslim LGBT+ individuals, who experience both Islamophobia and homophobia or transphobia (Cho *et al.* 2013).

In this regard, according to Patricia Hill Collins (2019), intersectionality as a project involves the production of knowledge and forms of cultural resistance where subordinate groups highlight new understandings of their own conditions in opposition to the social injustices they experience. The agency of victims is particularly crucial in countering

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3 In regard to the analysis of similar dynamics referring to the case of Roma women see: Corradi 2018.

4 In this respect, it is worth recalling the criticism that intersectionality has awakened regarding the so-called identity politics, often affected by essentialism (Reich, 1987), and the purpose of innovative approaches, such as the notion of transversal politics (Wekerle, 2000). Indeed, the formation of identity groups (such as women's movements, movements of people of color, or, in the contemporary European context, movements of Roma and refugees) continues to have strategic utility in achieving greater protection and social justice, but it has the (not always intended) effect of disregarding the needs of those who navigate multiple such groups.

stereotyped and dehumanizing intersectional representations, which can degrade identity, foster self-disdain, or even lead to what Crenshaw (1991) terms “intersectional disempowerment.”

More generally, contributions that emphasize the use of intersectional analysis to foster social change often highlight the prominence of subordinate subjects and groups in utilizing this approach. One might recall Mari J. Matsuda’s (1991) idea of coalition development in the struggle for rights. These contributions argue that the direct participation of subordinate groups in social actions is necessarily linked to the agency of individuals involved in processes of subordination, a concept commonly referred to as empowerment (Crenshaw, 1991; Matsuda, 1991). As Bello (2020) notes, attention is paid to the role of oppressed groups in raising demands linked to their collective and situated conditions.

The utility of employing the intersectional approach finds a crucial testing ground in the domain of social workers, who regularly encounter situations of marginalization and oppression in their social interventions. Some contributions point out that intersectionality as a tool can foster social workers help approach for excluded individuals and groups and adopt a multi-dimensional form of advocacy to empower them (Joy, 2019; Birbeck & Houston, 2021). It might allow a deeper understanding of how privilege and power affect individuals by considering the wider systems and structures they interact with (Van Impe & Arteel, 2018). Van Impe and Arteel (2018) argue that social workers can empower clients by promoting their experiences and stories, addressing multiple levels of oppression and their interactions (Simon et al., 2021). However, its ‘fuzziness’ (Davis, 2008) affects both research and emancipatory practice. Social work professions must engage with the concept both theoretically and empirically, paying attention to its manifestation in real-life narratives to clarify multi-layered discrimination (Birbeck & Houston, 2021).

### 2.1. Methodological note

The literature suggests the potential utility of intersectional analysis for individuals and groups at risk of or experiencing discrimination in various contexts. It has been highlighted that employing this tool can reveal experiences of discrimination that would remain hidden if a mono- or multi-categorical analytical approach were used. The value of intersectional analysis, in this sense, can emerge in any observation aimed at understanding the social conditions of marginalized individuals and/or groups, as well as in interventions addressing specific situations.

This section presents the results of an exploratory study that examined the possible application of intersectional analysis in social work within the Italian context, focusing on the experiences of organizations providing anti-discrimination services in the northeastern areas of the country. The study investigated social workers’ awareness of the intersectional approach, their evaluation of the utility of intersectionality in addressing the discriminations they most frequently encounter, and the set of constraints and resources related to implementing intersectional analysis in the work of the consulted organizations.

The following considerations are based on the results collected through qualitative research activities within the project *INtersecting GRounds of Discrimination in Italy* (INGRiD). INGRiD is a research and action project funded by European Commission – REC (Rights, Equality, Citizenship) Programme 2014-2020 and aimed at tackling discrimination according to an intersectional approach within a general European experience and the Italian reality.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. The recourse to the intersectional analysis and approach in anti-discrimination interventions: an explorative study in northern Italy**

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<sup>5</sup> See the website: <https://www.projectingrid.eu/>.

The whole project and the research activity presented here covered the territories of the regions of Liguria, Veneto and Trentino-South Tyrol.

In a context where research on discriminatory phenomena from an intersectional perspective is still in its infancy, the study included in the INGRiD project proceeded through the use of the qualitative method, according to an exploratory approach with a micro-sociological slant. Firstly, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with official contact persons with a chairing or coordinating role of some of the INGRiD partner organisations.<sup>6</sup> Even if different in nature and mission, the consulted organizations commonly pursue the monitoring, prevention and contrast of exclusion and discrimination against gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin or nationality, disability, age, religion and personal beliefs. The interviews were conducted online between February and March 2021. It should be noted that, being involved in the project, these organisations and the persons heading them held, at the time of the interview, a certain knowledge of the notion of intersectionality and an inclination to recognise in this set of tools an opportunity for development for the work of their organisations. These interlocutors were asked to reconstruct the framework relating to discriminatory phenomena in the area and in their spheres of intervention, to indicate cases and examples of conditions in which the intersectional lens may prove fruitful in bringing to light unprecedented forms of discrimination and, finally, to express considerations on the possibilities with respect to the systematic implementation of the intersectional method in social work. In order to distinguish the reflections of these interlocutors reference will be made to them in the presentation of the results, specifying that they come from the *key informants*.

The interviews were also integrated with the examination of the documentation shared by same organization regarding the research and intervention activities they have conducted in the previous ten/five years. These documents mainly supported the reconstruction of the scenarios regarding the phenomena of discrimination and marginality in the investigated territories.

In a second stage, professionals from a broader number of public and third-sector organizations have been reached. The attention was paid to organizations that work for and with different target groups: people with disabilities, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, (ex) prisoners, elementary, middle and high school students, women (victims of violence), religious minorities. Three focus groups have been conducted to collect and put into dialogue their opinions and experiences regarding the adoption of the intersectional approach in their daily work. All the participants in the focus groups were operators or coordinators of programs and services for the contrast and prevention of discrimination and for the direct support of victims.<sup>7</sup> These interlocutors were asked about their familiarity with the concept of intersectionality, the cases in which this approach could prove useful and the concrete conditions necessary to use intersectional analysis and intervention in their daily work. With regard to this second type of interlocutors it should be pointed out that the notion of intersectionality was not necessarily

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, this research activity has involved official representatives for: ARCI Liguria, Veneto Lavoro, the Antidiscrimination Desk of Trento, De Marchi Foundation (based in Trentino), Alexander Foundation Langer Stiftung (based in South Tyrol).

<sup>7</sup> In particular, for the Liguria region the following organizations have been involved: ARCI Liguria, ARCIGAY Liguria, Islamic community of Genoa, Liguria Region, Centro Antiviolenza Mascherona. For Veneto: GEA coop. Sociale, CESTIM, Associazione Le Fate, Associazione Stella, Cooperativa La Esse, SOS Diritti, Liquidambar, Veneto Lavoro, ASSIST. For Trentino: Centro Astalli, Liberalaparola, ANFASS, Sportello Antidiscriminazioni di Trento, Forum trentino per la pace, Osservatorio Interreligioso contro la Violenza sulle Donne, Islamic community of Trento, Docenti senza frontiere, Il gioco degli specchi, Dalla viva voce, Tavolo delle appartenenze religiose di Trento, Casa Circondariale di Trento.

known to them at the time of the interviews. On the contrary, to a large extent this concept was alien to the toolbox possessed by these professionals. This aspect, which is already a research result of interest, required, for the continuation of the survey, that a preliminary part of the focus groups be dedicated to sharing basic information and quick access to the definition of intersectional discrimination in use in the INGRiD project. In the following presentation of the results, these interlocutors will be referred to with the label of *social workers*.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the focus groups were followed by in-depth interviews with some participants who brought significant examples of multiple and intersectional discrimination to the discussions.

The data collected were analyzed thematically, so to identify shared ideas, arguments and approaches as well as distinctive aspects at the local scale.

The following two paragraphs discuss the overall results collected through the different research activities and techniques, organizing them around two main thematic areas. First of all, the results referring to the area of investigation concerning the possibility of intersectional diagnosis are presented: to what extent is it possible in the situations of hardship and social marginality that are the object of intervention to have cases of intersectional discrimination? What obstacles and possibilities show up in relation to this objective?

In a further paragraph, results are reported that can be referred to a second major question, namely the possibility of intervention from an intersectional point of view: what tools and what limits are found with respect to the possibility of implementing actions to prevent and combat intersectional discrimination?

## *2.2. How to assess intersectional discrimination? The problem of the cases emergence and traceability at the local level*

In Italy structural inequality and discrimination are persistent phenomena. The methodology used for the monitoring of discriminatory phenomena on the national level, mainly entrusted to the National Office Against Racial Discriminations (UNAR), on the basis of reports submitted to its Contact Centre by individuals and/or associations, doesn't allow for to assess the spread and recurrence of cases of intersectional discrimination. Indeed, the taxonomy of discrimination is modeled in accordance with the international and European law and the Italian jurisprudence and consequently follows the traditional ethnic and racial issue without highlighting different connections that can arise for people with multiple minority status (e.g., migrant women).<sup>9</sup> As of 2018, UNAR includes data on multiple discrimination in its annual reports to Parliament. For example, data on discrimination resulting from the sum of the following grounds are presented: ethno-racial and religious or belief-based; ethno-racial and disability-based; ethno-racial and sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Please note that in Italy the term "social worker" refers to a specific profession (*assistente sociale*), which is subject to the completion of a specific training course and passing a corresponding State examination. In this study, the term is used to refer to professionals generically involved in prominent public and third-sector social and anti-discrimination services. This choice is due to the recent transformation of the Italian local welfare system which, in accordance with the principle of externalization and subsidiarity, has seen associations and third-sector organizations gradually become the main producers of social services. These organizations employ professionals of various kinds, such as educational operators and cultural mediators, whose roles are essential to any study aiming to investigate the approaches used in social interventions in Italy.

<sup>9</sup> The general resistance of jurisprudence in the use of intersectionality within pronouncements on personal rights actually responds to the model with which Italian anti-discrimination law has gradually been constructed. In it, in fact, the protection of subjects who complain of direct or indirect discrimination is based on single categories or identity factors, scarcely communicating with each other and functioning according to the principle of similarity/difference. See in particular the report discussing the juridical analysis conducted within the INGRiD project: Ferrari *et. al.*, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Reports to the institutions on an annual basis are published by UNAR, see: <https://www.unar.it>.



Key informants and social workers were asked to provide a picture of the discriminatory phenomena that are widespread in the territories and social spheres in which they work and of the spread of situations that could be analyzed from an intersectional perspective.

Firstly, a large majority of respondents, especially among key informants, complained about the lack of systematic data on cases of discrimination at both national and territorial level.

This deficiency is mainly explained by recalling the low investment by the government institutions in national and local research and the weak connection between the national institutions in charge of monitoring and the external—mainly third-sector—bodies that can assist in this activity. Some of the key informants explain how their own organizations have tried to make up for it through targeted surveys, which are, however, crafted with different methodologies and therefore do not allow the accumulation and comparability of data. ARCI's ten-year working experience with the Liguria Region and UNAR<sup>11</sup> is an emblematic case in point: an intermittent collaboration that has seen the alternation of propulsive phases, under the direction of governmental bodies and with the activation and coordination of branches on the territory, and phases in which, instead, institutional disengagement prevailed. A similar path involved the Veneto context, one of the Italian territories with the highest number of foreigner residents, in which, especially by the obtaining of external funds<sup>12</sup>, the association Veneto Lavoro has gradually taken on the coordination of the Regional Anti-Racial Discrimination Observatory, established in 2013 through a memorandum of understanding between the Veneto Region and UNAR.

Overall, the research carried out by the organisations consulted and their own data on discriminatory phenomena provide an articulated picture of discriminatory incidents in the territories. Issues concerning migrants are more widespread. With respect to cases in which the racial discrimination issue appears, the following have been listed in the interviews as the most concerning: the housing issue, the relations with the Public Administration (hence PA) and job placement. Other criticalities regard health services—hospitals, emergency rooms, counseling centres, etc.—where a discriminatory behavior of staff has shown frequently. As recalled by an organization in South Tyrol, a tendency to medicalize the psychological distress of asylum seekers seems to deprive them of the possibility of accessing adequate forms of support, not necessarily of psychiatric nature.

A fieldwork carried out by Veneto Lavoro between 2016 and 2018<sup>13</sup> also highlighted the diffusion, in the regional territory of Veneto, of forms of discrimination by the part of law enforcement agencies, as for the practice of ethnic-profiling as well as the resort to racial, ethnic and religious stereotypes when it comes to intervention; on board of public transports, through the selective control of the ticket travel by controllers at the expenses of immigrants or presumed immigrants; and in the context of the provision of financial services by the banking institutes. Finally, with regard to the school system, episodes of racism have been reported already in the context of primary school. During the interviews and the focus groups, the professionals from Veneto have remarked that teachers seem to lack of attention

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11 Arci in Liguria was the leader of the network of third sector entities whose experimentation led to the establishment of the regional centre for prevention and contrast discrimination (2009-2015), based on the Memorandum of Understanding between UNAR (National Body against Racial Discrimination) and the Liguria Region.

12 Reference is made to the RECORD project - Territorial network for emergence, contrast and the detection of ethnic-racial discrimination, FAMI 2014 - 2020 - OS 2 - ON 3 - letter I) - year 2016-2018.

13 Here the reference is made to the research report by the Territorial network for the contrast and detection of ethnic-racial discrimination (RECORD), edited by Cristina Cominacini and Francesco Della Puppa, kindly shared by Veneto Lavoro during of the collection of materials on the investigated territories.

to gender issues and to be often unable to adopt an approach completely free of prejudices towards students with a migratory background. Several participants reported the important issue of culturally oriented textbooks, in which stereotyped images are reproduced, and the problem of prejudice-based teachers' guidance to students' school choices.

In Liguria the emphasis is placed on the structural and institutional dimension of discrimination intertwined with political and cultural climates. According to the interviewees, obstacles to inclusion are related not only to the relationship between migrants and administrative services, but also to the diffusion in society of negative imaginaries associated with migration. Some of the participants in the focus group in Trentino who are committed to contrast extreme social marginality, as for homeless people, evoke that the visibility of the discomfort combined with the theme of urban deterioration leads the resident population to reactions of an expulsive type.

Overall, limited access to opportunities for disadvantaged groups and hostile social climates towards certain identities are the broader themes in which, according to several interviewees, discrimination processes occur in the areas under consideration. In this context, the research participants were asked to identify cases of intersectional discrimination where a mono-categorical intervention proved inadequate. First, the interviewed professionals acknowledged the difficulty in identifying cases of intersectional discrimination or, in other words, situations where an intersectional analysis would enable a more effective intervention for protection and support. Some of the examples the interviewees report are more properly cases in which multiple factors overlap in increasing vulnerability, as for the frequent coexistence, in homeless people's condition, of drug addiction, mental distress and previous experiences of detention. This situation, mentioned in particular by some social workers from the Trentino area, tends to be overlooked by local social services, which approach homeless merely in relation to their housing condition. Similarly, the interviewees identify a general lack of intersectional sensitivity in the way mainstream social intervention relates to the vulnerability affecting sex workers, in which migration status, gender, sexual orientation and social stigma often interact. Representatives from an organization devoted to the inclusion of disabled people also highlighted that "disability is often combined with other types of vulnerability, such as being a victim of gender-based violence. However, organisations dealing with disabilities often fail to consider this aspect" (social worker, Trentino). The cases of proper intersectional discrimination reported by the interviewees include: difficulties in accessing work or housing based on the intersection of ethnicity and migration status (Black migrant workers are less likely to obtain employment or rent a property than white migrants); and obstacles in obtaining identity documents and employment due to the intersection of gender and religion (at the expense of Muslim women who wear the Islamic scarf, as reported in Trentino); obstacles in accessing family services on the basis of the intersection of gender, migratory status, educational level (e.g. with reference to the enjoyment of childcare services, such as paediatrician allocation, and/or maternity allowances in the case of foreign women, especially those with low language skills).<sup>14</sup> More subtle forms of intersectional discrimination are associated, especially by social workers in Veneto, with the overlap of age and migration status, in relation to school orientation, which more frequently directs students with migrant backgrounds towards vocational training programs compared to their Italian counterparts. As pointed out by some interlocutors, however, the

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14 In such a case, it is properly intersectional discrimination since the intertwining of gender and religious affiliation gives rise to a discriminatory condition that would not occur outside it (Ferrari et. al., 2022; see in particular the Case Study: Intersection of Gender and Religion).

absence of an established methodology and protocols for the collection of data capable of indicating situations of intersectional discrimination leaves social workers with the burden of identifying, in the individual cases tackled, whether such discrimination actually exists. In the interviews and during the focus groups the possibility of analysing the cases on the basis of the first-hand information given by the victims who come to anti-discrimination contact desks or are intercepted by social organisations was largely discussed. It emerges how the two perspectives that confront each other in these first dialogues, that of the operator conducting the interviews with the victims and that of the victims, must become the subject of reflection.

With respect to the social workers' approach, as highlighted in a number of studies (Joy, 2019), the interviewed interlocutors emphasise that intersectional analysis requires engaging in reflexive practices (Schon, 1984) that deconstruct cultural and subjective filters—and with them, the procedures in use. This might mean to ask questions that consider the interactions between a person's multiple identities and the ways in which they could both provide opportunities or oppress in various contexts. However, in a social worker's own words: "Not having first systematically adopted an intersectional perspective to assess cases, practitioners should re-analyses them with new eyes" (social worker, Veneto). More in particular, according to the majority of the interlocutors consulted, "training is needed in order to culturally strengthen an 'immune system' against the risk of approaching the victims in a stereotyped way" (social worker, Liguria). As literature suggests, for intersectionality to be part of a practitioner's repertoire social work courses need to incorporate the theory into their curricula (Bubar et al., 2016). As it has been identified by some participants, it is particularly listening skills that need to be rebuilt, as well as dialogical skills capable of enhancing the discriminated subjectivity according to the idea of victims' empowerment. On the other hand, with regard to the possibility that victims themselves highlight, in the reconstruction of their experiences of oppression, aspects that point to the intersection of multiple grounds, the social workers suggest considering that subjective interpretations can hinder the emergence of coherent narratives and of intersectional elements in them.

The interviewees emphasise that the very awareness of having suffered discrimination is often absent in the people they assist. They stress the problem of the emergence of discrimination starting with the reluctance of people to report cases that they have personally experienced or witnessed: 'we notice a deficit of awareness whereby people find it difficult to define their experiences in terms of discrimination' (social worker, Liguria). This seems to occur more frequently, as also indicated in other studies (D'Ancona, 2017), among victims who are less culturally equipped, or whose condition in relation to power (*positionality*) implies a constraint with respect to the possibility of reporting. This interpretative key seems to some interviewees particularly appropriate in the case of the limited emergence of labour discrimination episodes involving migrants, considering that in Italian law the residence permit is associated with the possession of a work contract: "We see that the need to work often comes first [compared to reporting discrimination suffered in access to housing] and we wonder whether to lead the person to accept compromises or not. In this, perhaps, we operators are part of the problem" (social worker, Liguria).

To overcome barriers in the emersion of intersectional discrimination, some representatives remark on the importance to give rise to moments of collective sharing among the target persons, e.g. through the focus group technique. In some experiences reported by operators in Veneto, the focus group technique proved to be particularly useful in developing victims' awareness and their empowerment. In the case of the Trentino area, instead, the absence of a unique system of interception of incidents of discrimination and the fragmentation of local initiatives have solicited the birth of the Anti-Discrimination

Desk, today engaged in the passage from spontaneous forms of mobilization by activists to professionalized shape.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the ongoing experience in the Ligurian context, where services with ARCI are innovating approaches to discrimination precisely in the direction of incorporating the intersectional perspective. The representative of ARCI underlines how this awareness was nurtured “bottom up” through a dense series of meetings with targets, especially women. This investigation has led to the establishment of a legal desk for LGBTQIA+ in La Spezia city, which have contributed to make some cases of intersectional discrimination—e.g. regarding the interaction between the status of refugee and homosexuality—emerge. This experience puts in evidence that the emergence of intersectional discriminations may depend also by the establishment of services and desks already imprinted to the intersectional logic.

### *2.3. How to approach cases of intersectional discrimination? Limits in organizational logics and professionals' approaches*

As the second main thematic area of investigation, possible modes of intervention to address real cases of intersectional discrimination have been discussed both during the interviews with the key informants and throughout the focus groups with social workers. As was emphasized in the first section of this contribution, in fact, intersectionality recalls not only a specific form of analysis of situations of oppression and discrimination, but also some possible strategies for combating intersectional discrimination. From the production of bottom-up co-knowledge about conditions of oppression and forms of cultural resistance (Collins, 2019), to the promotion of visibility of unseen situations of discrimination, to the promotion of better conditions for access to rights and goods, also through advocacy actions, to the dismantling of negative stereotypes constructed and reproduced on the basis of dominant narratives about aspects of identities such as gender, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Crenshaw, 1991).

According to a vast majority of interviewees, the difficulty of undertaking this perspective in preventing or combating discrimination mostly derives from the self-referential way in which the third-sector organizations proceed in the fragmented scenario of the Italian social policies and services. This aspect should also be understood as a reverberation of the aforementioned legal system that continues to work for mono categories (or grounds) of discrimination and determines the availability of partial and sectorial instruments for protection. In the words of a social worker: “It is not always easy to understand what matters most and how the grounds of discrimination are intertwined in stories and cases. Not least because the laws have continued to go in the opposite direction, namely that of the singularity of statuses that determine the discrimination” (social worker, Liguria)

Networking among public and third-sector services is considered by our interlocutors a fundamental precondition for the multidimensional and intersectional care of vulnerabilities. With respect to the public services sector, the key informants point out that some obstacles to the reticular approach originate from the internal logic of the governmental institutions. Among them, the political discontinuity is mentioned, as well as the ambivalent implication of the widespread outsourcing of services to the third sector, which exempts the public sector from cultivating specialized skills useful for network collaboration. In the words of a social worker: “The partiality of interventions in the public sector is evident, for example, in the functioning of Mental Health Centres and Pathological Addiction Services, which take on cases separately from their area of responsibility” (social worker, Alto Adige).

By contrast, the profiles interviewed attribute to the procedural logic of non-governmental organizations and third sector companies a greater flexibility and propensity for cooperation (Brandsen et al., 2008). However, even the third-sector does not appear free from difficulties

in implementing a proper reticular approach. Indeed, obstacles to horizontal cooperation derive from the fact that the third sector is typically faced with complexity and indefiniteness of social demand; by the competition generated by the need to achieve scarce resources and to promote their identity and reputation; and by the multiple constraints arising from relationships with the public administration, both as a regulator of the system and client of services (Orlandini and Andersen, 2015). In spite of these limits, some social workers suggest the need for greater courage by the part of third-sector organizations and professionals themselves to revisit their *modus operandi* in accordance with the reticular asset, judged to be the only one that allows a response to intersectional discriminatory phenomena. In this regard, openness to “contamination” between different practices but also between different fields of knowledge is recalled, together with the need to question the idea of sectorial responsibility, which exempts from an enlarged view of discrimination. The potential of networking for intersectional intervention is also remarked by an interviewee in regard to the case of Muslim women and to the absence of collaboration between third-sector organizations and Muslim communities—which are fragmented over the territories and therefore not easily approachable.

Confirming this, in our study it emerges that only a narrow minority of the organisations consulted systematically collaborates with religious minorities on their respective territories. In the reflection of a social worker who reported the case of migrants hosted in reception centres whose freedom of worship is hindered by the impossibility of going to places of prayer, “Religion is a thorny topic in social work and reception centres. It is a component that is not taken into account to avoid conflict. On the contrary, the need emerges among the guests and remains unmet” (social worker, South Tyrol).

Finally, the organisational fragmentation that denotes the field of social work reverberates at the level of the possibilities for action of social workers, impoverishing the available cognitive and procedural resources. In several cases the participants share the fear that a “blank response” or “sense of helplessness” undermines the willingness to recognize the legitimacy of episodes of discrimination that are presented to them, feeding a certain detachment due precisely to the perception that it is not possible to intervene in a concrete way: “Between understanding and reporting the case, we often lack clarity on what kind of guidance and concrete support we can give” (social worker, Trentino). This disorientation concerns especially those organizations that, while pursuing purposes related to the social inclusion of vulnerabilities (e.g. job placement of migrants), are not “on the front line” in handling with cases of discrimination. In this sense, there is a need for a transfer of knowledge that, at the territorial level, originates from the institutions and organizations more directly involved in the response—such as the information and legal desks—in order to spread within the variegated fabric of social realities involved in combating exclusion.

It is therefore important, as remarked by one interviewee, that the adoption of a logic inspired by intersectionality “does not disempower intervention, but leads to work on models of community organisation that combine the capacity for radical criticism and tangible intervention” (social worker, Liguria). It means “allowing the person, through networking, to access an articulated set of interlocutors and forms of support” (social worker, Trentino). Significantly, as for the problem of the emergence of intersectional forms of discrimination, also with regard to the intervention, some of the interviews emphasise the need to strengthen the agency of the victims and their propensity to act collectively. Some of the interviewees’ reflections recall the concept of coalitions in the struggle for rights (Matsuda, 1991) and the role of oppressed groups in raising demands linked to collective and situated conditions (Bello 2020). According to a social worker from the independent project *Libera la Parola*—an open laboratory of use of the Italian language and construction of relationships generated

by the experience of the Centro Sociale Bruno of Trento—the intersectional approach should provide marginalized people with tools to become protagonists of their own struggle against discrimination, without over determining the forms of oppression to which they are subjected. The practice that makes possible this approach is, according to this interviewee, the collective organization in which experiences and points of view of discriminated subjects can emerge in a relational way.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the interpretation of intersectional intervention as a form of mediation between conflicting demands, suggested by an independent professional participating in the Trentino focus group with an important experience in combating marginality. Pointing at the difficulty of having an impact with the usual interventions in sensitizing citizens and counteracting hostile social climates, the reflection brings to the forefront the need to rethink the position of the social worker towards, in this case, the possible perpetrators of discrimination. Being normatively oriented—inspired by defined value options, such as inclusion and equality of rights—, cultural intervention against discrimination must strengthen its credibility at the eyes of those interlocutors who may find these normative references controversial; exactly those individuals that it is most urgent to reach: “Trying to raise awareness for the demands of our users I experienced many failures. I was silenced because I was seen as biased. The big job then is also to take on the perception of those citizens who are more hostile, who express a discomfort together with anger” (social worker, Trentino). A greater credibility of social workers would come through their capacity to show themselves open to the recognition of—sometime radically—different points of view.

Being a form of analysis of marginalized conditions and a tool for protection and empowerment of vulnerable individuals and groups, intersectionality might foster social workers resources to handle with complex social situations (Joy, 2019; Birbeck & Houston, 2021). However, specific opportunities and constraints for the implementation of the intersectional logic in social work in different contexts largely remains to be explored. The study conducted as part of INGRiD project indicates that intersectionality is a construct still under examination by Italian social workers. It tends to be broadly identified with the idea to consider simultaneously the multiple identities of the victims and with the awareness that, especially in severe marginality, there are a series of problems that cannot be addressed separately. However, the lack of expertise and established methodologies for the intersectional analysis and intervention makes it difficult for the social workers reached in the study to identify cases in which this approach is actually more effective than a mono-categorical one.

The intersectional approach to inequality is in contrast with the Italian fragmented policy scenario in which, above all, there is a disconnection between anti-discrimination measures, still mainly addressed in categorical terms, and measures for the promotion of equality, inspired instead by a more comprehensive approach. Beyond the structural impediments it seems necessary to orient social work toward a greater ability to grasp the different social and cultural categories that can interact creating unprecedented forms of vulnerability and discrimination.

Employing the intersectional approach in the field of social work challenges the often a-problematized relationships with victims, requiring the de-construction of operators’ stereotyped representations of vulnerabilities and the valorization of victims’ subjectivity and agency, as well of their collective and political mobilization. Furthermore, adopting the intersectional logic implies a radical interpretation of networking and the integration of complementary professional knowledge and roles.

Given the constraints of the system, which is not conducive to cooperation between sectors, and given the complexity of the social scenario, for social work it is crucial to

## Conclusions

proceed by attentively selecting relevant interlocutors—profiles with specific competencies, organizations, social movements and communities—for the achievement of specific objectives (Luhmann, 1995).

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