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Induced vulnerability: the consequences of racialization for African women in an emergency shelter in Catalonia (Spain).

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Abstract:

The growing presence of African women (especially Moroccans) in the support services for survivors of gender-based violence in Catalonia (Spain) highlights how the perception of difference in contexts of significant cultural diversity can fuel othering processes based on racialized assumptions, which may ultimately lead these women to experience situations of additional vulnerability.

Through the results of an anthropological study based on African (mainly Moroccan) women, we show how their racialized "otherness" is a cultural construct resulting from a combination of five main variables: gender, ethnicity, nationality, phenotype and religion. One of the most critical consequences of activating this reductionist mechanism is the creation of additional vulnerability for other women in the same situation.

We then analyze how these women mobilize cultural, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic markers, with results that ultimately impede the formation of sisterhood and mutual support relationships, thus increasing their sense of being neglected and their vulnerability.

Keywords:

Racialization, Women's shelter, Gender-based violence, Induced vulnerability, Othering, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION: RACIALIZATION IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE CONTEXT.

When Mali, a Gambian woman aged 25,[1] arrived at the shelter with her two children, there were no other women from sub-Saharan Africa there, most came from Morocco. Upon introducing Mali to the other women, the professionals working there noticed that the women rejected her through their gestures and comments, and also refrained from touching her children. The first day that Mali cooked for everyone, most of the women did not try her food. When asked about the reasons behind their behavior, some stated that she was *African* and when asked about their own African origin, replied: "No, we are not African... besides, she is VERY Black."[2] Nevertheless, Mali ended up being one of the most accepted and highly regarded women in the group: as a practicing Muslim who ate halal food, joined in with Ramadan and wore a hijab, she "resembled" the Moroccan women. Her status as a "*very Black*" woman was unchanged, but other cultural factors now had greater weight.

This account provides an example of the role of "culture" for othered women (Burman *et al*. 2004), in contexts of marked intra-group heterogeneity – of gender, age, ethnic group, etc. – along the lines of what Phillimore (2015: 568), following Vertovec (2007), has described as areas of superdiversity, which transcend racialized conceptions among specific collectives, such as the Moroccan group's conceptions of sub-Saharan people (Goikolea-Amiano & Simour, 2022). Our study is located within a specific context of superdiversity: a residential service aiming to protect women who have been victims of gender-based violence and support their recovery. However, repeated instances of internal oppression have also been observed in this context (Nnawulezi & Sullivan, 2014), as have racialized burdens[3] (Ray, Herd & Moynihan, 2022). This generates additional vulnerability in women whose (apparent) equality as a collective creates – both for external observers and some professionals in the service – an erroneous impression of homogeneity and the expectation they will share a sense of unconditional sisterhood.

[1] See Table 2 for a complete list of the informants cited in this text.

[2] An anecdote on this matter: an educator identified Morocco on a map of the African continent for the women. They were very surprised, as this was the first time they had located their country on a map and they had not been aware that it was part of Africa.

[3] "[a] type of "administrative practice" that normalizes and reinforces patterns of racial inequality in public services, simultaneously reproducing disparate treatment while obscuring discrimination" (Ray, Herd & Moynihan, 2022: 1).

The main objective of this study is to analyze the manner in which these women racialize peers of a different ethnic origin by asserting the superiority of their own cultural background, and how these racialized perceptions trigger induced vulnerability: understood as an increase or exacerbation of certain individuals' or collectives' preexisting vulnerability (due to contextual factors of a cultural, social, political or economic nature that devalue their social status, rendering them unprotected before hegemonic forms of oppression and abuse) in contexts where they are receiving institutional protection. This racialization results from ethnocentric opinions or positions expressed by peers in situations of ethnic and cultural diversity, but such racialization is not the only way of inducing vulnerability, as it may also be exacerbated by the inadequate transcultural awareness of values and behaviors of staff and managers in the service (García-Tugas, García-García & Grau-Rebollo, 2021). Specifically, we are interested in the role racialization may play in everyday relationships between female survivors of gender-based violence in shelters, and in professionals' insufficient ethnographic training in handling cultural differences in this context.

Drawing on Gans (2017: 11), we show how both racialization and self-racialization in this kind of institutional context develop into a particularly perverse form of othering. Situating this process within the framework of a public institution seeking to protect women can help its professionals and civil servants designing protection policies to better understand how horizontal racialization works (between apparent equals and not only directed from hegemonic collectives toward minority groups), as well as these actors' potential role as involuntary instigators of vulnerability.

2. RACIALIZATION AND INDUCED VULNERABILITY IN SHELTERS FOR SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gans (2017) describes racialization as an exclusion mechanism that operates through a process of cultural othering, providing insight into how the *perception* of race and ethnicity are culturally constructed in a way that gives them a classificatory function (González-Sobrino & Goss, 2019). In this sense, racialization works through "[…] the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (Omi & Winant, 1986: 111).

Other studies draw attention to certain elements that are inherent to these services: problems with gaining access; the diverse ways in which women view this process of empowerment (Kasturirangan, 2008); and the wide range of experiences inside the

center itself, including the replication of abusive dynamics (Glenn & Goodman, 2015), and even fear that the situation may result in another type of confinement (Pritchard *et al*. 2014).

It is not possible to provide a detailed review of the debates for and against the concept of racialization here (see Barot & John, 2001 or Gans, 2017 for more comprehensive overviews), although we agree with Hochman (2017: 62) that it refers to the social classification of *racialized* groups, rather than race. The concept draws attention to the selection and formation of certain cultural markers to justify giving differential treatment to certain individuals or collectives of distinct cultural origins (Garner & Selod, 2015; González-Sobrino & Goss, 2019). In this subtle process by which difference is transformed into inequality, Gans (2017) has identified two particularly important variables – social class and phenotype – with the implication that adhering to racialized values can act as defense mechanism when subjected to othering processes. This constructed othering can be remarkably intense when it draws upon notions of cultural incompatibilities allegedly caused by the "absolute otherness" of migrant populations (Gil, 2010: 185-186). According to Gil, global frameworks of domination hinge on political stances and "epistemological, economic, spiritual, linguistic, and racial domination" (p: 191). In response to this ideologically projected inequality, spaces of resistance are created that go beyond "immigrant" identity (Martínez-Conde *et al*. 2020).

Verde-Diego *et al.* (2021) demonstrate social services' reduced ability to adequately meet the increased demand for public protection resulting from the enduring consequences of the 2008 neoliberal crisis, despite social workers' support for the public welfare system (p. 3032). However, the commitment of these workers (even those who are not xenophobic) is not always supported by enough cultural knowledge to handle how racialized assumptions impact professional practice (Cappiali, 2022). All this reveals the long-lasting implications of structural racism and systemic inequalities in Spain, as "the idea of race is structurally embedded in social, political, economic, and cultural institutions" (Rodríguez-García, 2022: 3).

Feminist critical approaches to migration and gender pay particular attention to these shortcomings, especially the ideological use of "women", "poor" or "migrant" and the intersectional accumulation of consequences for racialized women (Gregorio, 2012). The use of these concepts shapes governmentality processes which may help include vulnerable women in the social system, but through a perverse mechanism: the

reproduction of power mechanisms and distorted social images that are hegemonic in the host country (Galaz & Montenegro, 2015). Furthermore, some professional training programs inadequately address the political dimensions underlying hegemonic knowledge and power asymmetries, and therefore lack a critical perspective on the professional activity (Montenegro and Pujol, 2022). One of the worst-affected groups are migrant women, who experience the intersectional consequences of gender, nationality, class position and racialized imagery (McIlwaine, 2020). This situation is particularly pronounced in Spain: "an archetypal former colonialist nation" (Rodríguez-García, 2022: 17) with a large migrant population.

Our research was conducted in the context of a residential support service for women who have been victims of gender-based violence in Catalonia. These shelters constitute a protection framework that breaks the cycle of abuse and enables women to make decisions in a safer environment (Adeyemo & Bamidele, 2016). They have also proved to be effective in raising public awareness about gender-based abuse (Heise, 1990), physical and emotional recovery for survivors, and their empowerment (Hughes, 2020; Ben-Porat & Sror-Bondarevsky, 2021), which has made them a key element in the network of resources aimed to protect women.

However, inadequate staff training in how to approach cultural differences can result in subtle displays of discrimination, interpreted in racial terms (Tartakovsky & Mezhibovsky, 2012; Nnawulezi & Sullivan; 2014). Our study therefore tries to overcome shortcomings in prior research on the consequences of inadequate understanding of cultural diversity, while heeding Keskinen (2011)'s caution about the overemphasis of cultural arguments and their formulation in static, homogenizing terms (for other consequences of institutional neglect – and social invisibility – for certain migrant collectives, see Moreras 2024).

It is also important to note that sexist, classist or racist stereotypes derived from cultural ideologies about gender or maternity incorporate notions of adequacy (Reppond & Bullock; 2020). These ideas can lead women who need to enter a shelter to internalize stereotypes that cause self-blame or self-denigration (Bowker, 1998; Towns & Adams, 2016) and erode their self-esteem. The acceptance of these stereotypes perpetuates systems of oppression through the psychological control exercised by dominant groups (Nnawulezi & Sullvian, 2014).

We should not lose sight of the fact that stereotypes are not only a form of ideological reductionism, they also assign certain attributes to entire collectives (Phoenix, 1987;

Burman *et al*. 2004). To tackle this homogenization, it is important to place each woman at the center of her process, and pay attention to variables such as the degree of emotional harm she has experienced, the reasons behind her admission, and any onward referral that she is given (Ben-Porat & Sror-Bondarevsky, 2021).

Such misinterpretations are usually the result of long personal histories of ideological othering. The connections between migration, gender and racialization are well-established in post-colonial research (Erel & Reynolds, 2018), as is the homogenization of racialized collectives and the discriminatory effects that result (Goldberg, 2006). Similarly, Phillimore (2015) and Gans (2017) have shown how superdiverse social contexts present a challenge to welfare state providers, due to their considerable heterogeneity, and the role played by self-racialization in othering mechanisms. According to Gans: "When new immigrants arrive in their new country, they also enter into its class and racial system, and if they are racialized as well, they most likely react in some way" (2017: 8). On the same issue, Phillimore recognizes that: "Professionals were themselves not supported to understand the needs, rights and entitlements of migrant women" (2015: 575).

In this context, we contend that additional, unanticipated vulnerability may be created in institutional protection services, the context upon which this article focuses. This results both from the influence of ethnocentric assumptions and a lack of intercultural understanding between peers, and from professional practices (due to a lack of suitable tools for managing cultural diversity, which subjects the women to additional vulnerability by creating an ideological bias in the service provided: see [García-Tugas, García-García & Grau-Rebollo], 2021). The weight of individuals' own cultural configurations can be such that the situation descends into one of transcultural incomprehension, limiting the effectiveness of welfare provision measures, or eventually resulting in open displays of racism (Oliveri, 2018). It is therefore crucial for institutional practitioners to eliminate simplistic and reductionist images, which originate in distorted discourses that may result in paternalistic or even charitable interventions (Agrela, 2004).

We support Oliveri (2018)'s assertion that this incomprehension is rooted in the omnipresent influence of the idea of *backward culture* and, specifically, how an underlying ethnocentrism prompts the intentional use of racialized markers by peers to magnify internal differences within contexts of multiple vulnerability (that related to economic factors, social support, violence, etc.). Our study is an investigation of

induced vulnerability that may subsequently be applied within the framework of intersectional research on gender, migration and racialization in the Iberian Peninsula, in order to expand our knowledge about encounters between African and European populations in Afro-Iberian postcolonial historical contexts (Aixelà-Cabré, 2021,2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

Observation of the women's daily life by the professionals is an integral part of how this service operates, but the confidential nature of a service providing protection to women makes learning about practices and dynamics a challenge, resulting in evident gaps in previous research, particularly concerning the routines of the women in these shelters (Hughes, 2020). Our study helps to fill this gap by providing information about the dynamics of everyday relations between the women using the service.

To achieve this, we conducted qualitative research by means of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation in a women's shelter in Catalonia,[4] in addition to regular conversations with nine professionals working in the service, informal interviews with 41 women originating in several countries (Morocco, Senegal, Gambia and Nigeria), and open-ended interviews with six of these women, all of which took place on the service's premises (Table 1).[5] Observations focused mainly on daily interactions between the women and their relations with shelter professionals, paying particular attention to reactions to staff interventions, as well as opinions and narratives in both groups. Considering how to ask questions was important, since women might feel that they were being interrogated (or controlled), meaning that structured interviews were not an appropriate ethnographic tool. Hence, questions arose from ethnographic observation, exploring the motivations for their decisions and behaviors (e.g., a woman who avoided physical contact with a Black child but touched others) and were put to participants in informal spaces when possible.

Table 1. List of cited participants (n=): 5

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Age	Marital status
Samina	Morocco	21	Married
Labina	Morocco	30	Married

[4] For reasons of confidentiality and concern for the women's protection, we are not able to provide contextual data that might enable the service to be identified.

[5] Quotations are included from the five most representative interviews in this article.

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Age	Marital status
Abe	Nigeria	23	Divorced
Mali	Gambia	25	Married
Haraf	Morocco	32	Married

The lack of official data, combined with the reduced number of studies on this subject in Spain and the difficulty in collecting (and sharing) structured information to compare this service with others, has prevented us from conducting in-depth statistical analysis and made it inadvisable to administer questionnaires or engage in other quantitative data collection strategies.

All the names in this research have been anonymized to protect the participants' identities, and the use of any other identification data has been avoided. While this may seem excessively cautious, some earlier studies have highlighted how crucial it is to exercise the strictest confidentiality in such protection contexts, to avoid enabling people from the participants' home settings to discover their whereabouts and thereby significantly increasing the risk to which they are exposed (Torrubiano-Domínguez & Vives-Cases, 2013).

While the service takes in women of any place of origin, nationality, ethnicity, religion, culture or age, who have been victims of any type of gender-based violence, we focused our research on the relations between African women, primarily from the Maghreb area, since women from this region have been the largest group in the service in recent years. The most recent official statistics show that women in Catalan shelters accounted for 9% of the total female population using such services in Spain (Table 2). In the period we studied, from 2016 to 2021, of the total number of women who used the service (we were not authorized to provide this number), 44.7% (34) were of Maghrebi origin:[6] a much higher percentage than the second largest collective of African women, who were from sub-Saharan Africa (7). These figures illustrate the use of this service by women originating from the geographical area upon which our study has focused (Table3).

TABLE 2. Shelters attending female survivors of gender-based violence.

	Catalonia	Spain
Centers	6	99

[6] Of the total population of non-Spanish women in Spain between 2016 and 2021, the average proportion with Moroccan nationality was 14.2%, but this figure was as high as 18.2% in Catalonia (INE, Spanish Statistical Office -https://www.ine.es-).

	Catalonia	Spain
Capacity (spaces)	134	2041
Staff	69	736
Women using the services	157	1744
Foreign-born women using the services	93	967
Dependent children	126	1448

Source: Government Office for Tackling Gender-based Violence (DERA 2020).

TABLE 3. Characteristics of the Moroccan (n=34) and sub-Saharan women (n=7):

	Moroccan women		**Sub-Saharan women (*)**	
VARIABLE		**NUMBER**		**NUMBER**
AGE	18-20	1	18-20	0
	21-25	6	21-25	2
	26-30	5	26-30	0
	31-35	8	31-35	2
	36-40	8	36-40	3
	41-45	5	41-45	0
	46-50	1	46-50	0
NUMBER OF CHILDREN	Pregnant (**)	3	Pregnant	0
	0	4	0	0
	1	11	1	1
	2	6	2	2
	3	8	3	0
	4	2	4	2
	≥ 5	2	≥ 5	2
MARITAL STATUS	Married	24	Married	3
	Divorced	8	Divorced / Separated	3
	Single	2	Single	1
ADMINISTRATIVE STATUS	Regular (ID)	21	Regular (ID)	4
	Irregular	12	Irregular	3
	Spanish nationality	1	Spanish nationality	0
PROFICIENCY IN SPANISH	None	15	None	4
	Limited comprehension	5	Limited comprehension	2
	Complete comprehension	14	Complete comprehension	1
SUPPORT NETWORK IN SPAIN	None	19	None	4
	Siblings	9	Siblings	0
	Parents	1	Parents	0
	Other kin	4	Other kin	1

	Moroccan women		Sub-Saharan women (*)	
VARIABLE		**NUMBER**		**NUMBER**
	Friends	1	Friends	2

Source: Data gathered by the authors.
(*) Their countries of origin were Nigeria (2), Senegal (3) and Gambia (2)
(**) Two pregnant women already had children.

4. RACIALIZATION AND INDUCED VULNERABILITY

4.1. The shelter and characteristics of the women using the service

The women's shelter is located in Catalonia, in a city where 20.5% of the population are non-Spanish nationals, of which 28% are of African origin. The shelter's professional team providing psychological, social work and educational support consists of White women of Spanish origin, except for one woman of Moroccan origin. The Moroccan women who use the service have Arab and Berber backgrounds and are mostly from rural areas. The women from sub-Saharan Africa originate from a diverse range of countries and linguistic, ethnic and religious groups. Taken together, the women from the two collectives come from markedly androcentric environments, with strong links to their kinship group in specific spaces: the family and the home.

When they join the service, these women are in situations of multiple vulnerability: few sources of support, no (or severely limited) knowledge of the language, an irregular administrative status, etc. Additionally, entering the shelter entails dealing with the consequences of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), as the women encounter norms of cultural behavior and care that are markedly different to their own, both among the other women, and in the institutional rules and the actions of the professionals working there. Added to their immersion in this unfamiliar context is the fact that they are uprooted from their family and social ties: most do not have social or family networks in Catalonia and their networks in their place of origin – both their own family and that of their spouse – pressure them not to separate from their husband, for social, cultural and economic reasons. There is a further element that can result in additional, induced vulnerability in these women: their recourse to the service's professionals as a means of protection. As several preceding studies have demonstrated (Tartakovsky & Mezhibovsky, 2012; Vives-Cases & Parra, 2017), when it comes to asking for and providing support, the extent to which people are predisposed to trust in formal and informal mechanisms of assistance is extremely variable and may depend largely on cultural differences. This situation is

particularly evident in the markedly diverse context of these services, and staff's training in effectively managing it is often limited.

4.2. Mechanisms of racialization rooted in self-perceived ethnic identity

A range of personal, social and cultural factors influence how a certain group of women perceive other women, and prejudices derived from each individual's sociocultural constructs play a part in this (including those of the professionals themselves), as do strategic relations of adaptation to the service and its staff.

For example, some Moroccan women prefer to relinquish the care of their children to the staff over other women.

Our research shows that, as a result of the prior experience many have had with social services or family support teams, as well as the distinct childcare norms in the service, the women may come to feel judged by the professionals as "bad mothers": "*I don't want any trouble: you all think I'm doing it wrong*" (Samina, Moroccan, 21 years old, married). Many women live in the fear that social services will take their children away and, despite the fact that they are victims of violence, it is the women who are subjected to professional, social and legal scrutiny. No children are actually removed from their mothers. In fact, the center works to prevent such extreme measures, and some social workers suggest women join shelters to avoid children being taken away because of violence in the domestic environment. Some men threaten their wives, saying that leaving them will result in their children being taken away, as they are "bad mothers" and poor. Hence, fear and mistrust are common feelings among women in protection, and professional contact usually creates friction. That is why specific knowledge on properly managing cultural diversity is crucial.

Further, living alongside other women makes childcare customs visible, and this setting seems to heighten differences and lead to harsher judgments about the other women's customs and practices, which are sometimes interpreted as direct attacks on their actions as a mother. Many women refer, in this context, to the pressure that was exerted on them by their mother-in-laws and sister-in-laws.

While one might imagine that the women would unite as a group in opposition to the staff to achieve their objectives, their positions tend to be individualistic and they seldom join forces for a common goal. The rare moments of union usually coincide with temporary conflicts and reveal the formation of groups related to nationality or ethnicity. For example, non-Moroccan women formed alliances against a staff member of Moroccan

origin, accusing her of favoring her "peers" during the Feast of the Lamb (Ramadan) as they were able to talk to each other without others understanding. The factions that come together in these cases are founded on the supposed superiority of some women over others, related to certain attitudes conveyed by the service, accompanied by an assertion of the value of their "racial" identity based on their geographic/ethnic origin, clothing, language and cultural affinities. Furthermore, intergroup solidarity is not activated by empathy with just any other women, but with those perceived as equals (often, in a racialized sense). They might unite to ask to honor their religious or social obligations, for example. On some occasions, they may even show more distrust toward other women (those not perceived as equals) than professionals, believing that staff may have less reason to harm them.

Therefore, the activation of racializing mechanisms between the women is signaled by a specific set of variables, as detailed in the following sections.

4.2.1. Relations between the women and the professionals

All the women using the service perceive the relationship between their status and that of the staff as one of structural inequality, which creates an initial sense of mistrust towards those professionals. This is accentuated if the woman enters the shelter after a recent migration process, and has not yet learned about how social relations and, particularly, socialization, work in the destination context. This was the case for Samina, who arrived with her five-year-old daughter. Her husband had locked her in their home and subjected her to continuous physical, sexual and psychological violence. To avoid being subject to the scrutiny of the other women, she preferred not to ask them to look after her daughter when she was not able to, and have the service's educators care for her instead, despite the mistrust she felt toward the team. This case shows how mistrust concerning staff members' perceived power, due to their privileged social position, may be overcome by strategic interest (e.g., when service-users' allegations of discrimination do not prevent them requesting help with health-related procedures).

The Spanish professionals are perceived in terms of the position of power they hold. The level of trust established with each woman is determined by various factors related to both parties (age, place of origin, language, etc.). The educator of Moroccan origin has a complicated role, both in relation to the non-racialized women (some of them have accused her of giving favorable treatment to the Moroccan women, or have rejected her

interventions because of her background) and the Moroccan women, due to factors such as her dress (she does not wear a hijab) and the fact that she is a working mother.

The application of rules by the shelter's professionals leads both Moroccan and sub-Saharan women to accuse them of racism in certain circumstances, since they are seen to abuse their power on the basis of racial difference. They feel this abuse of power when they are prevented from deciding on practical aspects of everyday life, which have already been organized by the staff. Several family nuclei coexist in the center and share all the common spaces, except bedrooms. There is only one kitchen, so shifts are necessary if everyone is to cook autonomously. As a measure to promote intercultural coexistence, the management decided that one woman would cook for everyone at each mealtime, but the Moroccan women did not want to eat food that "a Black woman" might have cooked.

4.2.2. *Relations between the women using the service*

Racialization leads to an "informal hierarchization", which is observed in the dynamics and interactions between women of different nationalities and ethnic origins. The proportion of women that make up each group also has an influence on this hierarchization and the exercise of power. For instance, women who speak the same language as the professionals (Latin American women, for example) or are more familiar with Western customs are perceived by the others as being of higher status (Martín Díaz *et al*., 2012). The same is true for Moroccan women, who perceive themselves as "non-African" and therefore higher up the social hierarchy. We support Aixelà-Cabré (2008)'s observation that there are several variables (ethnicity, level of education, social class, etc.) driving individuals to intentionally construct these differences, which result in the othering of women living alongside them in the same situation. These variables reinforce identity-based bonds, linked to subjective perceptions of racial identity – self-racialization, as Gans (2017) describes it – and emphasize the empathy, understanding and acceptance of peers. In this way, certain life events – such as giving birth – act to bring together women between whom any personal quarrels carry less weight than their sense of ethnic unity. This sense of obligation may even occasionally be conveyed to women of distinct ethnic origins: "as a Muslim, if you come across a woman in that situation, it's your duty to help her*"* (Labina, Moroccan, 30 years old, married).

When several women of Moroccan origin come together in the service, they feel themselves more entitled to intervene in the others' lives. For example, two women may tell another how she should cook, or others may tell a woman who has just given birth

what to do, even if she has already had other children. Being subject to such "interference" is felt by the women to be a very negative experience, increasing their sense of vulnerability.

4.2.3. Phenotype as a factor involved in racialization

Of the variables related to ethnic origin, physical appearance is one of the elements that most influences the racialized construction of otherness among peers. Drawing on Jenkins (1997: 65), both phenotypic traits (eg. Skin color) and cultural constructions related to them (eg. Stereotypes) can feed into the crystallization of certain aspects of the other's worldview. In the shelter, we observed how skin color plays a significant part in the differentiated, hierarchical manner in which the women are viewed. This hierarchy was evident in the most everyday tasks, as the following example illustrates. Abe (Nigerian, 23 years old, divorced) picked up some bags that the social worker was dragging along the floor and, when the professional commented on her strength, Abe replied: "Of course, I'm African." This supports the observation made by Gans (2017) about how phenotype-based racialization can increase cohesion in racialized collectives, potentially becoming a means of defense against the perceived disrespect of others.

Racism was also used as a tool for dialectical confrontation, as the women classed any of the service's positions or rules to which they objected as racist. It was not uncommon for a woman to say to her child when an educator refused to give him or her something: "she's not going to give it to you, because you're Black." Once, a woman was overtly rejected by other women, who made many complaints about her bodily hygiene. A Spanish team member discussed the case with her and explained that this could cause her problems when sharing accommodation and looking for work. The woman remained silent, but later told the educator of Moroccan origin that Muslims' distinct body odor is well known and that there was clearly a "racist" attitude behind the comment. As this illustrates, the racialization of cultural customs on the basis of phenotype is commonplace. During an informal conversation, Abe commented to us that: "You act different because you're White [...] "Black people are explosive, here, I'm learning another kind of relationship." On another occasion, a Moroccan woman who had given birth to her child during her time in the service asked whether White women gave birth in the same way as them: she wanted to know if "Western women" [*sic*] suffered during labor like Moroccan women and if they got "stretch marks."

4.2.4. *Self-attribution of identity*

Based on what we observed during our time in the service, the sub-Saharan women considered themselves: firstly as African, regardless of their country of origin; secondly, as nationals of their country of origin, and thirdly, as members of their ethnic group. In contrast, the women from Maghrebi countries basically self-identified in terms of their region of origin (eg. The Rif) and reserved the category of "African" for the Black women.

Additionally, as Aixelà-Cabré (2012) has noted, clothing is one of the factors that can reinforce identity by forming groups and discriminating between people. In the shelter, we observed how the way women dressed and their use of make-up was associated with certain "races" and whether their behavior was considered suitable or not. Haraf (Moroccan, 32 years old, married) described how distressed she felt by her sense of being criticized by the others, who treated her like a "prostitute" because of how she dressed (leggings, t-shirts, etc.). She told an educator wearing a vest top how lucky she was, because if she dressed like that other women would speak badly of her. To avoid this, she started to wear the hijab. In other words, she "normalized" her dress to meet the standards of acceptability held by other women, thereby realigning her identity with that of the group (Aixelà-Cabre, 2012).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research accepts Gans' (2017) definition of *racialization* as a mechanism of exclusion, taking on board Hochman (2017)'s reminder that we are not talking about racial groups, but *racialized* ones. Our research was conducted in a women's shelter that constitutes a superdiverse environment (Phillimore, 2015), where racialized meaning is often applied to the perception of differences by means of five key variables: gender, ethnicity, nationality, phenotype and religion. Our study has attempted to shed light on areas that have received little attention, such as the practices and routines of women living in these shelters (Hughes, 2020). We have thereby tried to address the shortcomings of previous research on the potential role of racialization in everyday relationships between female survivors of gender-based violence in shelters, professionals' insufficient ethnographic training in handling cultural differences in such contexts, and the consequences of inadequate understanding of cultural diversity (Tartakovsky & Mezhibovsky, 2012).

To this end, we looked at some of the everyday relational dynamics between women in shelters, and the consequences of the racializing ideas they projected onto others in their interpersonal relationships. We have shown how staff's inadequate training in managing cultural differences and their misunderstanding of women engaging in specific cultural patterns of organization and care generates additional vulnerability for women during their time in the shelter. This escalation also results from the confluence of structural (economic, linguistic and administrative) vulnerability, the disruption of women's relational environments, and their lack of effective social ties.

Racialization then crystallizes into reactions that stem from fear and distrust. The service users may make accusations of racism related to center decisions or rules they do not understand – or agree with – or professionals' behaviors, which women perceive as abuses of power since the staff are not "like them" in a racialized sense (as White Spanish women with different religious practices). Among survivors, the value of their own "racial" identity is reinforced, compared to peers of diverse ethnic origins, religions, or phenotypes, thus strengthening an internal hierarchy resulting from this racialization mechanism and a corresponding differential attribution of prestige. This supports Nnawlezi and Sullivan's findings on strategic self-representation (2014), as well as their call to expand the scope of research on this form of representation.

However, we observed some ambivalence in women's expressed distrust toward the center when they perceived strategic benefits (e.g., help with administrative procedures) or wished to avoid peer scrutiny, which reinforces Keskinen's (2011) warning about the risk of overplaying cultural arguments without considering other contextual strategies.

Finally, researchers exploring this phenomenon by which some service users may place increased value on their identity should remember that racializing dynamics are not rooted solely in an overemphasis of ethnic factors; rather, an intersectional approach is needed, incorporating variables such as gender, age and social class.

ETHICAL STATEMENT:

Ethical issues were duly observed during the research, and participants were adequately informed about the aims and nature of the project. Explicit consent was given to the researchers by the participants in this study.

The Research Ethics Committee (CERec) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona confirmed that the research met all ethical requirements.

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