



Original Research

"I'm Already Autonomous!" Intersectional Ethnography of a Space for Women's Empowerment

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Abstract: This article presents an intersectional ethnography of a women's empowerment space within a socio-educational service in the north of Italy. Based on long-term participant observation and qualitative interviews with women with experiences of migration and gender-based violence, the study examines how autonomy is defined in everyday institutional practice and how it becomes a site of negotiation and evaluation. The analysis situates empowerment within feminist anthropology and decolonial thought, engaging critically with Western standards of desired adulthood that equate autonomy with independence and self-sufficiency. Particular attention is given to evaluation tools and pedagogical dispositifs that frame certain forms of conduct as indicators of progress and success. Ethnographic material documents how participants reinterpret these expectations, at times strategically aligning with them, at times reshaping their meaning through situated claims such as "I'm already autonomous." The article develops a set of ethno-pedagogical reflections grounded in fieldwork, aimed at fostering reflexive and context-sensitive assessment practices. Ultimately, it calls for a sustained and relational reworking of care relations through recognition of structural violence, epistemic asymmetries, and the political dimensions of social work.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Structural Discrimination, Feminist Ethnography, Autonomy, Social Work*

For an Anthropological Critique of Care Relations

This article integrates a feminist and intersectional perspective with anthropological knowledge to develop a critical approach aimed at applying a decolonial lens to professional care and social work relations. Theoretical analysis is complemented by an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the north of Italy within a project for women's empowerment¹ in which I worked for two years between 2021 and 2023. The research has an applied scope and finds among its objectives the formulation of tools for the permanent qualitative evaluation of socio-educational action, allowing for questioning power dynamics, decision-making margins, and spaces of participation for all subjectivities involved in individual and collective paths of change. A multidisciplinary and inclusive approach is applied to the concept of well-

¹While this article uses the term "empowerment" for linguistic accessibility, I remain critically aware of its neoliberal connotations, especially in development and institutional discourses. In my native language, I adopt *impoteramento*—a term introduced by Nadotti in her translation of bell hooks (1998) and embraced by Borghi (2020), who emphasizes a relational and collective notion of *potenza* (potency), rather than individualistic notions of *potere* (power). This linguistic shift reflects a political choice to reclaim empowerment from depoliticized, managerial framings and reorient it toward transformative feminist praxis.

being to prevent any form of discrimination in access to services. The notions of need, empowerment, and autonomy² are problematized to resignify projects, raising awareness of existing asymmetries. By situating empowerment within structural violence, this article extends these frameworks, arguing for a more reflexive and contextually grounded application in practice. The concept is therefore analyzed ethnographically as a field of negotiation between institutional expectations and women's own interpretations of dignity and possibility. This usage allows me to interrogate how empowerment circulates within welfare dispositifs while remaining open to re-signification from below.

The anthropological perspective, combined with a critical and decolonial gaze, aims to challenge a priori assumptions concerning projects built around models of desired adulthood based on Western standards. "The perfect model that all cultures have been trying to achieve throughout history was the healthy-minded and literate Western adult,"³ classic political anthropologist Pierre Clastres wrote in 1974, an insight that can still be applied fifty years later for the understanding of contemporary power dynamics. In Western societies, healthy lifestyles and socially acceptable behaviors are those compatible with the criteria of destination countries of people with migratory backgrounds. With 77,200 applications in 2022, Italy is one of the main European countries receiving first asylum requests (European Commission 2025). The project analyzed in this article is broadly addressed to women, but most of the people intercepted have a migrant background: 54% of the overall beneficiaries and 74% of the women seeking support in finding employment (one of the main services offered and in which I was directly involved).

The contribution of feminisms and the intersectional perspective highlight the ordinary pervasiveness of inequalities and the patriarchal roots of oppressive structures that insinuate themselves within services, permeating the daily practices of professionals who develop and implement care and social projects. In the belief that deconstructing discriminatory hierarchies stems from an important critical work on awareness, this article aims to interrogate the concept of structural violence by investigating different ways in which forms of discrimination can also be reproduced within services dedicated to women's empowerment and the prevention of violence.

Western standards of desired adulthood produce hierarchies even within marginalized categories labeled as "vulnerable." From an intersectional perspective, the conflation of vulnerability with passivity can be challenged by recognizing the liminal nature of subjectivities that diverge from normative representations (Butler 2004). These subjectivities

²Autonomy, as mobilized in many Western welfare and social work frameworks, often presupposes an individualized subject detached from relational obligations and structural constraints. In contrast, this study approaches autonomy as relational and contextually negotiated. I examine how participants articulate autonomy through recognition and decision-making power within historically defined material conditions, avoiding reductionisms that equate autonomy with separation or economic self-sufficiency.

³All translations from conversations and original texts in Italian, French, and Spanish in this work are by the author.

often embody hybrid and resistant identities. Vulnerability here is not treated as an intrinsic trait of migrant women, but as a socially produced and institutionally mediated condition emerging simultaneously from racialized economic dependency and gendered expectations. This article critically examines the dominant framing of women as “victims” and inherently “vulnerable,” advancing a non-hegemonic approach that seeks to deconstruct care and social work relations, making visible how structural conditions shape exposure to harm while leaving room for agency and political action.

From Feminisms to Intersectionality and Beyond

Gender is a cultural construct and a relational concept that transversally concerns contemporary patriarchal societies, delineating power relations that legitimize discrimination against a multitude of subjects who do not conform to the dominant model. Gender-based violence fits into this context because its legitimization is broadly normalized and feeds on common sense. This implies that it is particularly difficult to recognize, permeating deeply into individual and collective everyday lives and subjectivities, without exempting professionals of services dedicated to survivors or violence prevention. Gender is the result of a system of polarization between masculine and feminine, entailing constraints that derive from such a dichotomous categorization of socially assigned roles.

I will call this the “sex/gender system.” A “sex/gender system” is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied. (Rubin 1975, 159)

Including a gender perspective in the social sciences has brought to light the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women of different ages, backgrounds, social statuses, economic positions, ethnicities, and nationalities. This has established the need to speak of women in the plural, in order to acknowledge this diversity. Although the concept of gender was initially criticized by some strands of first-wave feminism, it has provoked a fundamental transformation in how the subordination of women is conceptualized. Today, it is widely understood that such subordination is neither immutable nor the result of a presumed natural or divine order. Rather, it belongs to the cultural and social sphere, emerging from a system of relations that assigns differentiated positions within society—positions that are inextricably linked to other axes of identity such as ethnicity, class, age, and origin. Studying gender identities and relations as historically and culturally constructed opens the possibility for their transformation. The concept of gender has underpinned a wide range of feminist struggles, allowing for the analysis of subordination processes while anchoring these critiques in concrete political projects.

Throughout history, a myriad of movements have converged within different feminist waves, advancing diverse claims and forms of action—sometimes in tension or open conflict with one another. Non-Western feminisms—including Islamic, African, Indian, Black, and Indigenous perspectives—have radically challenged traditional feminist ideals rooted in ethnocentric and hegemonic assumptions, which often prioritize economic inclusion and political participation. This is not to minimize the importance of economic discrimination or exclusion from formal political systems, but rather to highlight that patriarchal power structures intersect with other forms of oppression, such as racism and colonialism. Postcolonial feminisms from Asia and decolonial antipatriarchal movements from Latin America, for example, advocate for global solidarity among differently situated oppressed groups, emphasizing the need to consider race, class, gender, and sexuality when analyzing systems of domination. These feminisms have articulated political alternatives to address the poverty and exclusion experienced by Indigenous women, promoting self-organization and the revalorization of suppressed traditions and communal values—not as folkloric remnants, but as living sources of meaning and frameworks for imagining collective and sustainable forms of *buenvivir*.

The term intersectionality was coined in 1989 by activist and lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw to illuminate the multiplicity and simultaneity of oppressive systems affecting African American women—not only as women, nor only as Black individuals, but specifically as Black women. Both Crenshaw and Davis critique Western feminist movements for centering the experiences of White, Western, heterosexual, and highly educated women, thereby reproducing dynamics of exclusion and oppression against Black women and limiting the movement's overall effectiveness. Davis's (1981) analysis assumes that gender oppression cannot be understood or challenged as an isolated phenomenon. Black and migrant women may experience oppression simultaneously based on their gender and racial identity. Intersectional feminisms seek to raise awareness about the necessity of including all women and subjectivities who experience overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of oppression, which complicate the identification and contestation of violence. Regarding the politics of oppression, Crenshaw (1991) discusses "state violence" as a form of violence that is "permitted by the state." Beyond gender, the intersectional perspective emphasizes a plurality of dimensions—including economic resources, class, migratory status, sexual orientation, and physical and mental ability—that operate at multiple levels. For Davis (1981), any attempt at liberation, to be truly universalist, must consider the history and stratification of the experiences and needs of the various subjects involved, taking into account the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Intersectionality transforms practices of resistance and serves as an analytical tool to deepen our understanding of interconnected oppressions that cannot be reduced to the sum of separate discriminations. The concept was expanded by Collins (2000) in *Black Feminist*

Thought, particularly highlighting how simultaneous forms of oppression reinforce existing power structures. Within this framework, inequality is examined through the effects produced by the intersection of social stratifications, both in terms of oppression and discrimination, as well as privileges that sustain and reproduce social hierarchies. Subjectivities are socially categorized to construct a sphere of normativity, which inevitably generates forms of exclusion with specific consequences for different subaltern groups. All forms of discrimination must be understood as interconnected and oriented toward maintaining a particular distribution of privilege. The intersectional perspective is especially valuable for "breaking the uniqueness of a single subject" (Crenshaw 1991), counteracting the "danger of a single story" (Adichie 2009), and opening paths toward a nuanced understanding of people's lives and social relations.

This study is guided by three interrelated analytical lenses: (1) intersectionality as a framework for examining how gender, migration status, class, and institutional positioning co-produce vulnerability and constraint; (2) feminist anthropology's critique of universalized developmental and neoliberal autonomy models; and (3) decolonial perspectives that interrogate how welfare practices reproduce epistemic hierarchies rooted in Eurocentric norms. Together, these lenses allow for an understanding of empowerment initiatives able to deconstruct assumed neutral interventions, centering them as cultural and political sites where autonomy and deservingness are negotiated and contested. The ethnographic material is interpreted through this framework, tracing institutional rationalities alongside women's situated acts of reinterpretation, between strategic compliance and resistance.

"I'm Already Autonomous!" Voices from the Field

This article is the result of an effort to decolonize research practices as well, leaving as much space as possible for the *emic*⁴ perspective of my interlocutors. Although impossible to eliminate, this strategy limits the risk of an excessive arbitrary translation or interpretation of meanings. Data collection is based on qualitative methods and includes informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, analysis of documents and project materials, and twenty-four months of participant observation in the field. The ethnographic method is characterized by an important self-reflexivity toward the choices that lead and determine research paths, constantly questioning and reevaluating research strategies along the way. The tools applied were therefore subject to changes at any time, deliberately open to the necessary flexibility to adapt to evolving circumstances. Interviews were conducted in person, using a template with indicative open-ended questions that could be modified according to the

⁴ The *emic* perspective (Pike 1954) in anthropology emphasizes how local people think, categorize the world, express thoughts, and interpret their experiences in their own terms. In contrast, the *etic* framework allows researchers to describe and analyze phenomena in ways that can be compared across different cultures, using categories and concepts that may not be part of the studied culture but are meaningful within the scientific community.

specificities of each participant. A dialogical approach was applied, stimulating not only answers but also questions, with the intention to deconstruct—at least partially—the classical asymmetry between research subjects and objects. Participant observation in the ethnographic method is, by definition, extensive and prolonged over time. The goal is to increasingly become part of that environment and to understand it from the perspective of the people you interact with, actively including yourself in what you observe and experience.

The project analyzed here was born out of the initiative of a big Italian nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to women's rights that had already opened similar services in many other cities. In this case, the creation and management of this specific project was delegated to a local cooperative already active in the territory in different social sectors. The aim was to create a welcoming space of socialization and aggregation where women could meet, build trust relationships, experience personal growth, and emerge from situations of vulnerability. It also focused on prevention/emergence and addressing gender-based violence within the major scope of promoting women's empowerment.

To achieve its goals, the work was articulated in three main areas of intervention:

1. Psychophysical well-being and cultural growth, with the aim of increasing self-awareness.
2. Social life and enhancement of relational skills.
3. Employability and active citizenship, understood as the ability of women to seize opportunities for greater personal fulfillment.

Several women with migratory backgrounds are considered by the professionals to be particularly exposed to risks of isolation and social exclusion, especially women from countries professing the Islamic religion. The lack of knowledge of Italian is a factor that is often negatively emphasized by professionals, especially when women have been living in the country for several years, and it is attributed indiscriminately to a generalized condition of social marginalization, without delving into economic conditions or level of education.

Among weekly activities, every Monday morning, a meeting for new mothers was organized, in collaboration with a local Family Counseling Center managed by the same cooperative. They were conducted by a healthcare assistant from the center and the local educator who, speaking about healthy eating, considers that mothers with migratory backgrounds are more likely to feed their children processed foods:

Many foreign women arrive in Italy and receive all those advertisements for snacks that say that "they are nutritious" and they take it...why shouldn't they believe it? Indeed, they feel guilty if they give them bread with jam or their stuff, almonds...because "I can't buy him sweets, snacks, chips"...I remember a woman who—poor thing, with a low cognitive level—those few euros she managed to save,

she used them to buy those things. Then we did a sort of re-education, but it was very hard. (Personal conversation with a colleague, social educator, May 17, 2023)

Another series of meetings on nutrition had been previously organized, led by a dietitian. The need identified by the cooperative was to raise awareness among participants about a healthy and balanced diet through a revisitation of so-called "traditional" recipes from the countries of origin of each woman in a healthier way. Evidently, the determination of which ingredients were considered "healthy" was made by an Italian dietitian trained at an Italian university according to the criteria of Mediterranean cuisine and Western medicine. These examples allow us to observe characteristics attributed to ideals of health, well-being, and motherhood and the ethnocentric roots underlying the construction of such standards.

If we want to talk about migrants, we encounter a strong need for socialization, there are many women who may have been living in Italy, in Milan, for many years, have never left the house, the husband does everything, he even initially takes them here because they don't know how to move autonomously with public transports, and they are very oppressed in the role of mother and taking care of the household. We discussed this among colleagues because we said: well, yes, this one comes now, but what empowerment can we do starting from this level? (Interview with the national coordinator of the project, March 3, 2023)

An element of complexity when conducting interviews was the difficulty of using uniform language for all interviewees: with some beneficiaries or colleagues from other services, using the term "empowerment" would have implied the need to provide a definition that would have inevitably influenced their responses. Therefore, I preferred to alternate empowerment with autonomy, aware that they can express different meanings depending on the framework of reference. It is interesting to note how different actors in different contexts attributed a plurality of meanings to the suggested words.

The majority of the women we deal with actually have little awareness of what empowerment means and probably do not realize they need it. So, even though the goal is shared, it's shared on something concrete. [...] Many gradually assimilate this concept of empowerment along the way. (Interview with the national coordinator of the project, March 3, 2023)

The term empowerment highlights an evident asymmetry regarding the possibility for beneficiaries to position themselves and co-construct the projects that concern them. The question arises about how to actively participate in a process when the meaning of the guiding concept that gives purpose to the service is a prerogative of the professionals in charge.

Kate⁵ is a woman just over forty who arrived from Nigeria twenty years ago, a mother of five children, three of whom live with a former violent partner who led her to turn to a local Anti-Violence Center, a service with which we collaborated closely and directed her to us for support in rebuilding her autonomy and seeking employment. She has a degree that is not recognized in Italy and has worked for many years in the restaurant sector, also managing her own business. For several months, she has not seen her youngest children, as her ex-partner managed to obtain temporary custody. Kate narrates her suffering by providing numerous technical details regarding the judicial process, expressing a profound knowledge and awareness toward a situation she recognizes and describes as deeply discriminatory, not only regarding gender but also and foremost her geographical origin, added to the specific privileges held by her ex-partner: an Italian White man from the South who works in law enforcement and belongs to a particularly wealthy family. Our work with Kate focused on creating a space where she could feel safe, welcomed, heard, and respected, while supporting her in looking for a job. Kate experienced structural discrimination that cannot be eliminated by working on her perception of self-efficacy. Indeed, she already recognized having many resources and considered that the possibility of putting them to use had been denied to her.

I wanted to tell him that I am a foreigner, but I am not stupid.

If I could, I would do other things too. (Interview with Kate, June 21, 2023)

Women with a migratory background are often represented as mothers and wives, confined to domestic life by their husbands and caregiving responsibilities. They are constructed as “vulnerable,” doubly marginalized—not only as women but also as migrants. These processes of victimization are enacted by professionals but are sometimes internalized by the women themselves. As a result, these women are perceived—and perceive themselves—as passive subjects, reproducing a gendered dichotomy between active masculinity and passive femininity. Simultaneously, this same *great divide* (Latour 1993) is constructed between the Western “modern” world and “traditional” societies, which remain relegated to a Rousseauian state of nature, portrayed as needing to be saved and enlightened by the purportedly emancipatory power of the wealthy.

Ethno-Pedagogical Tools for Monitoring and Evaluation

The current monitoring and evaluation tools of the project are based on both quantitative and qualitative indicators collected monthly, in addition to a progressive understanding of the target audience. Their purpose is to “adapt subsequent programming to the reality encountered and the needs identified.”

⁵ To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms have been used.

Three main tools are used:

1. Beneficiaries Matrix: it gathers information regarding each individual beneficiary, including how they arrived at the center, personal data, and participation in the organized activities. The project emphasizes the importance of "monitoring personal progress in the women's journey from their first access to the conclusion of their path toward autonomy" (project reporting document).
2. Satisfaction and Empowerment Questionnaires: the former are filled out at the end of workshop sessions to anonymously evaluate the activity. The latter are customized based on the type of program undertaken, with some questions appearing only for individuals who select certain boxes related to the reasons that brought them to us. Both use rating scales (e.g., from "not at all" to "very much") to assess the activities.
3. Project Progress Report: it is compiled by each coordinator (with support and revisions by team members) every six months.

The specific questionnaires aimed at evaluating empowerment underwent a revision process during the period of the research, led by a university research center in charge of the external evaluation in order to standardize monitoring and evaluation methods for all projects nationwide. Two researchers from the center, trained in economics, visited each service for half a day to meet with the workers and some beneficiaries, with whom a workshop was organized to gather information to further develop the questionnaire. The result was an individualized questionnaire of eight pages divided into two sections: the first to be completed by us as professional social educators and the second by the beneficiaries.

The objectives to be achieved were divided into six categories:

1. Well-being
2. Participation, autonomy, and use of time
3. Relationships
4. Parenthood
5. Work/training
6. Access to services/resources

The logical framework (a common tool in international cooperation projects) was applied, and predefined responses were provided for each objective (e.g., "recognize my qualities," "feel safe," "feel autonomous," "feel more involved"), and respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement: "no, same or less than before," "somewhat," "very much," or "I don't know."

Empowerment was categorized into four dimensions, and the level achieved was quantified using numbers 1 to 5:

1. Awareness and inner strength
2. Knowledge of one's rights
3. Ability to rely on a network
4. Economic independence

This is a primarily quantitative written evaluation tool. Of the thirty-seven questions across the four pages aimed at the beneficiaries, only two were open, allowing for responses not predetermined by the creators of the questionnaire. Access to the questionnaire requires an internet connection and a digital device, preferably a computer, and it had been translated into French and English. Women who may not be willing or able to complete the questionnaire autonomously (in the case of the women I followed, it was the majority) were invited in person at the center and we completed it together, making them dependent on the presence of the social worker and a device that some of them may not be able to afford. The choice to use this evaluation tool reflects the profile of beneficiaries that the service is targeting: a woman with a sufficient level of education, able to understand Italian or another dominant European language, possessing the resources to access technological devices, and sharing the moral principles and criteria of "well-being," "health," "autonomy," and "freedom" typical of contemporary Western societies in general and of the Italian context in particular.

When completing the empowerment evaluation questionnaire with the beneficiaries involved in the research, discontinuities emerged with their experiences, as their self-perceptions did not find space in the available responses. For example, questions aimed at assessing the level of autonomy include the ability to travel within the territory, assuming that the woman does not have a driver's license, does not drive, or does not own a car. The inability to drive is implicitly attributed to the woman's insecurity or to a partner's control that restricts freedom of movement. However, the women I worked with did not fit into any of these categories but simply did not have the economic resources to afford a vehicle. "Driving license? I have it, but I don't drive because I don't have a car. However, if they want to give me a car, I can drive," states Kate while we are filling out the questionnaire (personal conversation with Kate, June 21, 2023).

Another criterion for assessing the level of autonomy is participation in the social life of the local community. Among the examples provided, you could find places such as churches, sports clubs, and associations. None of the women I interviewed expressed a desire to spend their time in such places and struggled to understand the connection with their own perception of autonomy, often explicitly asserting a free conscious choice not to attend church or engage in sports. The result is a widespread use of the "not applicable" column, as these women do not recognize themselves in that specific model of autonomy and empowerment.

All the professionals I had the opportunity to interact with agreed on the need to organize training sessions for staff on preventing violence and promoting women's empowerment. I had the opportunity to share preliminary results of the research with

colleagues from similar projects, which led to interesting proposals on how to expand the work beyond the current focus on individual autonomy and promote territorial networks potentially capable of impacting discriminatory broader contexts. Four main intervention areas were proposed: companies, schools, services, and neighborhoods, along with various action strategies including prevention, awareness-raising, research, advocacy, and training. These actions are considered necessary and inseparable from the daily work with the beneficiaries, as it is perceived that acting solely on women's skills without attempting to address discriminatory life contexts could result in a partial and much less effective intervention.

Among the issues identified, we found the lack of economic guarantees for women taken in charge by Anti-Violence Centers, as they will not be discharged until they find a home and a job. Those two elements are considered the ultimate goal toward autonomy, but services are systematically unable to support women in finding dignified and permanent solutions. This problem is equally observed among all the women involved in the empowerment project, regardless of their potential violent past: in the best-case scenarios, they find a precarious job without a fixed schedule that barely allows them to make ends meet and complicates the conciliation balance between work and parental responsibilities. Most vulnerable situations might get access to public low-income housing, keeping them dependent on the aid of social services, but the offer is dramatically limited and the demand overwhelming, leaving behind endless waiting lists. People who are not White and do not have Italian citizenship find it almost impossible to access the private housing market, especially with a precarious job. Women from Anti-Violence Centers in the territory are mostly single mothers, and if they come originally from another country, they often do not have any family to support them. If they do not find an acceptable solution, they risk going back to the violent ex-partner purely for economic reasons.

Many women come with the goal of finding work autonomy, and we enroll them in the tailoring course...but who manages to work in it afterward? (Social worker during a national meeting, June 22, 2023)

The empowerment project willingly avoids facilitating a direct insertion into the labor market (through specific agreements with companies), in the conviction that it would preclude the learning process, prevent the woman from "doing it herself" and, therefore, developing the skills she supposedly needs to be autonomous. This focus on soft skills and individual empowerment minimizes and conceals structural discriminations, creating the illusion that autonomy depends mainly on personal efforts and ultimately attributing to the beneficiaries the responsibility for institutional failures and even for the structural oppressions they experience. While liberal and capability-oriented approaches to empowerment might have expanded access to rights and resources in certain contexts, these frameworks assume that expanded choice automatically translates into emancipation,

overlooking how racialized precarity and institutional gatekeeping condition the very field of available choices. Empowerment trajectories are built on a welfare logic that seeks answers to previously identified needs while striving to guarantee self-determination. Access to the project is open and free; it can be spontaneous or mediated by professionals from other services. Public social services are among the main partners, sending us many women who are provided with financial support, in the hope that we will help them regain economic independence from the state. These services need to evaluate the level of “adherence” and compliance with the projects they propose. In these situations, the choice to participate in the empowerment project is not spontaneous; it becomes induced or even a condition that ties the recognition of fundamental rights to bureaucratic dependency. The ethnographic material presented here suggests that empowerment cannot be assessed only through the expansion of options, since the conditions under which choices are made remain unevenly structured.

Moira is a woman with a history of substance abuse whose child had been placed in the custody of child protection services, which strongly advised her to participate in our project with the aim of building “positive relationships” (in opposition to the ones it is assumed she established in the past). While she was waiting for the court decree that would determine the possibility of regaining custody of her child, Moira regularly attended the service, only to promptly stop coming once the decree was issued and her son returned to her. This episode is indicative of the difficulty in determining the actual freedom of choice to join a service that is apparently openly accessible because it is free. People who are in particularly difficult circumstances may not be free to access it just because they wish to, and this can influence their hopes for emancipation. At the same time, this example highlights the agency of the beneficiaries, capable of developing strategies and negotiating margins of action against normative and prescriptive tendencies of the system.

Structural Forms of Violence and Embodied Oppressions

In our social, relational, and professional lives, we inevitably create categorizations to distinguish people, which can be useful when making sense of the complex reality that surrounds us. These categories can also be functional to recognize specific needs and identify strategies to address them. The risk arises when we allow these categories to fossilize into labels and become absolute, thus reductive, simplifying, and exclusionary. Not even professionals working in the social and educational field can be exempt from power mechanisms, especially considering deep-rooted inequalities in our society.

Romito frames institutional violence as a pervasive phenomenon that contributes to concealing various forms of violence and sustains “the maintenance of the status quo, privileges, and male domination.” The reproduction of such a discriminatory system does not necessarily require the “awareness of the actors involved” (Romito 2005, 57). Assigning gendered roles produces social hierarchies and establishes normative boundaries. Both

perpetrators and survivors may consciously or unconsciously overlook these roles and their underlying causes. Tactics of concealment of structural violence function to “defuse awareness of oppression and potential rebellion” (Romito 2005, 86). Such invisibilization does not imply intentional awareness; rather, these are socio-cultural constructs through which reality is shaped and given meaning, often generating self-stereotypes that serve as mechanisms of self-defense.

These are mental operations—ways of seeing, conceptualizing, and naming reality—which materialize in behaviors, sediment as common sense, become ideology when they converge with the interests of power, and can be “institutionalized” in various ways, such as laws, scientific or pseudoscientific theories, social and judicial work practices. These institutionalized forms influence and sometimes determine how we perceive reality, and therefore our reactions, feelings, and behaviors. (Romito 2005, 56)

Working in the social and educational sector trains experts in relational skills who engage daily with people labeled as “at risk,” “vulnerable,” or “disadvantaged.” Social marginalization reflects varying degrees of failure to conform to established norms—those “civil” norms that Freud (2005) argued challenge individual freedom. Becoming familiar with others’ suffering and problems is an implicit horizon of professional social work when building pedagogical and care relationships. However, a healthy dose of skepticism is necessary to avoid uncritically accepting normative categories that reproduce exclusion. Constant efforts are made to reduce the distance between those who offer aid and care and those who receive it. Although fostering reciprocity is important, it would be naive and pedagogically irresponsible to assume that asymmetries can be fully eliminated. In this context, awareness of power relations embedded in institutional roles is a fundamental condition for ethical professional care and social interaction.

Creating spaces for the expression of multiple subjectivities allows beneficiaries to actively participate in shaping evaluation tools. Accordingly, quantitative methods should be complemented by qualitative and ethnographic approaches, such as unstructured interviews with open-ended questions that enable interlocutors to co-create dialogues, interact, ask questions, and organize collective discussions or workshops. Beyond analysis by external evaluators, internal tools for continuous evaluation can be developed, enriched by elements of participant observation. While not aiming for the depth of full ethnographic fieldwork, these observations should be based on long-term, sustained presence within the service. This internal perspective offers the advantage of facilitating meta-reflection on one’s own practices and creating opportunities for critical thought and discussion that the daily routine rarely allows.

In the effort to include my own work in a critical re-examination of educational practices, I found it challenging to analyze emotional dimensions separately from the ideological and analytical levels. I experienced a persistent tension between the anthropological analytical

perspective and pedagogical action aimed at creating conditions for transformative experiences. This article precisely aims to question the dichotomy between the educational and the anthropological domains. I was never able to shake the feeling that wanting to change people's behaviors can represent a neocolonial act that problematizes their current existence. Self-reflection becomes possible through the emic interpretation of one's work, by listening to how people themselves describe the ways things are done.

Enríquez (in Tramma 2003, 129–130) formulates different “ghosts” of educational work, among them:

- The Midwife: inspired by the Socratic method, seeking to bring out the potential of people considered naturally “good and talented.”
- The Militant: who wants to change the world, believing all evil is external and that beneficiaries are inevitably victims.

Both risk acting exclusively toward changing the context while renouncing work on people themselves. This tendency is the opposite of what empowerment projects promote, which focus on individual skills. This research made me aware of the need to create space simultaneously for both the anthropologist's and the educator's perspectives, allowing them to contaminate one another and legitimize their mutual existence for a richer understanding of reality that does not forgo the possibility of transformation.

Toward a Permanent Decolonization of Care Relations

Many of the anti-Westerners are typically Western themselves. (Esteva 2022, xii)

Esteva considers Quijano the “legitimate founder of decoloniality” and compares the “decolonial school” to a “collective agenda” rooted in Latin American history, nourished by dependency theories, liberation theology, Black Caribbean thought, indigenous feminisms, Black feminisms from Chicago, and epistemic innovations such as those proposed by the Zapatista revolution in Chiapas. He attributes to decolonial thought the capacity to update traditions, promoting an “epistemological revolution that involves both colonizers and the colonized,” calling for the “decolonization of state institutions and everyday life, as well as of minds and hearts.” Drawing on Mignolo and Walsh, the author emphasizes the need to distinguish decoloniality as a mere “academic trend” producing “useful analytical tools” from its application as an “instrument of struggle” (Esteva 2022, 134).

Viveiros de Castro (2014) calls for a “permanent decolonization of thought” to avoid incorporating alterity within typically Western-centric criteria, thereby swallowing irreducible differences in the name of integration. At the same time, he qualifies as “paternalistic” the theses accusing anthropology of pursuing “the sordid interests of the West,” arguing that they deprive “the so-called others” of their agency, reducing them to passive “objects” of study within a

“victimizing” dynamic (Viveiros de Castro 2014). Drawing on Spivak and Foucault, the *Lausanne Manifesto* warns against the “neoliberal dissemination of knowledge” and “epistemic violence” due to its failure to recognize subaltern categories as having a “legitimate enunciative position.” Anthropology has represented, along with other human and social sciences, “a system of classification of alterities that led to their reification” (Saillant et al. 2011, 115–119). The authors of this text, “for a non-hegemonic anthropology,” argue for an urgent critique of “expert knowledge” to mitigate its instrumentalization toward social control. As anthropology feeds on the “imaginative powers” of the societies it investigates, educational work is nourished by the forms of “disadvantage” and “vulnerability” it seeks to address. Beyond simplifying narratives that argue for the dependence of aid and care interventions on the problems they pretend to solve, it is important to remain aware of the risk of reproducing inequalities and forms of exclusion. It is also relevant to underline the subtle boundary between care practices and processes of social normalization or even “pathologization”—to say it with Fanon (2008)—aimed at reinforcing dominant patterns of standardization.

Non-Western subjectivities and bodies are particularly pressured to conform to dominant societal reference models. Those who do not fit within the expected norms of the system risk exclusion. People occupying different positions of power have certain privileges, internalized in the very construction of needs. Even in caregiving relationships, those involved—both professionals and beneficiaries, consciously or not—reproduce discriminatory models legitimized by binary categories such as “modernity” and “tradition,” “progress” and “backwardness,” “success” and “failure,” “autonomy” and “dependence,” “activity” and “passivity,” upon which an entire history of colonial and neocolonial domination is structured.

Anthropology has delved deeply into the concepts of culture and identity, considering cultures as true “symbolic constructions” or “fictions” to which definitions of individual and collective self are attributed, “continuously reinvented by interaction” depending on context and circumstances (Malighetti 2020, 356). According to Remotti (2001), identity is always a product of construction, both socially and individually, based on two fundamental actions: separation and assimilation. Starting from this premise, every identification represents a “renunciation (at least partial and temporary) of multiplicity, an acceptance (enthusiastic, forced, or concealed) of particularity” (Remotti 2001, 19). This process, combined with the universalistic and hegemonizing drive of Western perspectives and values, often results in rejection, a sense of superiority, and even denial of differences. The possibilities for change hinge on overcoming a colonialist posture toward other identities. It requires problematizing one’s own positioning without elevating it to a universal and normative paradigm and recognizing—without assimilating—the identity molecules represented by migrant and other non-conforming subjectivities. These are necessary premises for a decolonization of thought. This will only be possible with an awareness of one’s privilege and the power axes that cut across society, as well as by restoring voice, self-determination, and decision-making power to the subjectivities targeted by socio-educational interventions.

Burgio considers that, in approaching people with migratory backgrounds, the model of cultural assimilation has given way to a form of multiculturalism that amounts to a “one-way tolerance,” which “folklorizes” and “tames” difference, thereby obscuring the “power asymmetries that persist in the encounter between cultures” (Burgio 2015, 104). Sexism and patriarchy reify and disempower female bodies, “disciplining” them (Foucault 1975), while people with disabilities face multiple forms of discrimination that desexualize and infantilize their bodies. Racism and ethnocentrism, in turn, attribute to racialized others the need for emancipation through the salvific intervention of those who hold knowledge and resources. This dominant knowledge is socially constructed in opposition to other ways of knowing and doing that, under the label of tradition, bear the stigma of alterity. The masculine, able-bodied, Western, heteronormative model of desired adulthood thus establishes a hierarchy even within marginalized categories considered “vulnerable.” Benasayag (2008) argues for the need to free ourselves from the “terrible and painful label of normalcy” in order to embrace and inhabit the multiple dimensions of fragility. To achieve this, he insists, we must become aware that we are “not just performing and functioning machines” and that it is precisely the constitutive fragilities of human beings that make us capable of engaging in collaborative, participatory, and solidarity-based pathways.

The equation between vulnerability and passivity can be challenged from an intersectional perspective that values the liminal character of all those subjectivities that deviate from the dominant model. In attempting to de-essentialize differences, the horizon proposed by interculturality aims to “conceive culture itself as a product of hybridization” (Burgio 2015, 105). The identities of migrant women challenge structures of domination and oppression. Migrant bodies embody the limit precisely at the moment they open cracks in the walls we erect to separate ourselves from alterity (Khosravi 2010). Among the main strategies for preventing any form of violence, it is vital to recognize every human being as an active political subject, endowed with intentionality.

The very concept of interculturality “emerges as a Western academic discourse” (Burgio 2015, 117) that does not eliminate that “we” opposed to non-Western alterities around which and on which knowledge is constructed. Anthropology and postcolonial studies have long questioned the ethical implications of knowledge production regarding discriminated and subaltern subjectivities, which are always objects of fascination for many studies in the humanities and social sciences. Making them agent subjects has become the mission of many academics concerned with not “transfiguring the so-called others into fantasies of the Western imaginary without a say” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 4). Experiences of opposition to constituted powers by women, migrants, people with disabilities, and other non-conforming subjectivities “express practices of self-organization and self-representation” that participate in the slow process of redemption, still in progress, to make them “full-fledged political subjects” (Burgio 2015, 117).

The ruling classes implement forms of indoctrination and adaptation to a specific social reality, often through projects and interventions that fail to include or consider the representations of people who are “target” of services: at the receiving end of aid relations. This contributes to the passivation of subjects and reproduces dynamics of oppression. A “pedagogy as a practice of freedom” requires the pursuit of “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988) and dialogically constructed educational practices capable of problematizing reality, precisely because they are built relationally, rather than by imposing pre-established criteria. Even when promoting the fulfillment of others’ aspirations and their *conscientization* (Freire 1970)—so that each person can develop and apply a critical consciousness regarding their own condition of oppression—it is crucial not to replicate dominant and exclusionary models of autonomy and independence, which are often rooted in dichotomous logics that ultimately sustain the status quo. The “disciplinary apparatus” (Foucault 1975) domesticates subjects, reifying their experiences and relationships, rendering them passive, and transforming them into educational objects—tools of social normalization. Inequalities and power asymmetries erode the freedom of self-determination, especially with respect to freedom of thought, aiming to produce uncritical individuals, passively adapted to the logic of consumerist civilization. A pedagogy that aspires to promote autonomy and redistribute power must be critically aware of the marginalizing processes embedded in educational models and institutions, as well as of pervasive forms of oppression. It must actively resist these dynamics by fostering experiential processes capable of generating possible alterities rather than “individualized homogeneities” (Foucault 1975).

The ethnographic findings highlight the limits of evaluation models that focus primarily on participants’ behavioral change while leaving institutional assumptions embedded in program design unexamined. Greater reflexivity regarding how autonomy and deservingness are historically and culturally defined may open space for more dialogical forms of assessment. Participatory feedback mechanisms can reduce subtle coercion, provided they are not reduced to procedural formalities. In this sense, enhancing epistemic justice depends less on new instruments than on sustained critical reflection within existing practices.

Discussion and Conclusions

Applying an anthropological perspective to the socio-educational work analyzed here reveals social atomization as a key issue that cuts across helping and caring relationships, often resulting in an exclusive focus on the individual. In social, health, psychological, and educational contexts, interventions primarily target individuals. The socio-cultural context to which they belong is only indirectly addressed, typically mediated by the presence of the beneficiary’s subjectivity and shaped by their lived and ongoing experiences. The design and implementation of interventions tend to focus on singular needs and only tangentially engage with communities. Territories are rarely conceived as active agents capable of shaping

life paths and future possibilities and thus are infrequently considered direct recipients of intervention. Social education (Tramma 2019) and community psychology have long grappled with these limitations, seeking to weave constant and multidirectional connections between work carried out with individual subjectivities and engagement with territories, which are themselves educative. The construction of alternative futures and sustainable worlds necessarily requires educational practices that are also directed at contexts—aiming to foster interactions between the various forces that shape each person’s capacity to transform their existence. Beyond fostering internal changes in individuals—such as enhanced self-efficacy, empowerment, or the ability to imagine alternatives—educational intentionality must also target environments and institutions (and the professionals within them). It should illuminate the potential for learning and transformation that territories themselves must activate, given their role in generating disparities, privileges, and therefore, experiences of marginalization and discomfort.

In this sense, a critical perspective must be continuously directed in multiple directions, interrogating power relations, and creating experiential contexts even for those individuals and collectivities not traditionally recognized as subjectivities “in need.” The possibility-oriented approach driving educational projects should permeate all contextual dimensions too often regarded as beyond operational reach—taken for granted, relegated to a passive background role to manage rather than seen as living, dynamic realities with which to engage and transform.

In our effort to categorize and make sense of alterity, we receive a reflection of our own actions, of our ways of positioning ourselves in the world, and of interpreting it. We have no choice but to take responsibility for our partiality, knowing that simply by being present we are transformed through the very act of looking, which nourishes and expands our horizon of meaning. To prevent any risk of perpetuating discriminatory dynamics, it becomes urgent to cyclically question who defines whose needs and by what criteria. How should we address the inevitable asymmetry that arises between the professionalism of services and the people who seek our support?

It is necessary to insert it into a political design of resistance and opposition to a power that is never comfortably outside of us, in some other room, but around us and inside us, camouflaged in that instinct of possession that we must isolate and leave outside the educational relationship. (Mantegazza 2021)

It is necessary to restore dignity to the notion of hospitality, a principle that has long been a companion on the journey of care and social workers. Recognizing the centrality of hospitality means becoming, and helping others become, sensitized to complexity, difference, discomfort, and suffering. Grounded in the conviction that creating educational contexts requires a willingness to transform ourselves and to weave threads of meaning across past

experiences, present conditions, and possible futures. The connection between practice and theory allows us to make sense of events and to reshape our field of observation through fluid, situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). Our professional trajectories are marked by terms such as diversity, illness, care, recognition, vulnerability, and pain. We become, in this sense, accomplices in a shared journey, where reflective engagement opens the space for transformation. Social work and educational interventions thus become tools that reveal the partial and situated nature of existence. Those who work on the front lines—within communities, institutions, or everyday relations of care—have the opportunity to unearth, in the seemingly repetitive and familiar, a disruptive and generative dimension of growth and unrest, one that ultimately reflects a deeper quest for freedom.

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Informed Consent

This study was conducted with the informed consent of all participants, who were engaged in an open and respectful dialogue about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. As anthropologists, we prioritize building trust and fostering mutual understanding throughout the research process, ensuring that participants' voices and perspectives are fully honored and valued beyond formal consent.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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