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Protecting Protection Programmes or Engaging with People? Conditional Inclusion and Evolving Relational Dynamics in Anti-Trafficking Programmes

Michela Semprebon

Department of Law, Politics and International Studies, Università di Parma, 43121 Parma, Italy; michela.semprebon@unipr.it

Abstract: Anti-trafficking programmes in Italy have been implemented for more than two decades. Yet, little empirical evidence is available regarding their functioning. This paper draws on 56 semi-structured interviews carried out in the period of 2019–2021 with practitioners and beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme. The interviews focused on practitioners' experience working with Nigerian women and on Nigerian women's experiences of the programme upon completion. By building on critical anti-trafficking studies and the autonomy of migration perspective, this contribution looks at the relationship between practitioners and Nigerian women admitted to the programme by addressing the following questions: what is the experience of practitioners and beneficiaries in the N.A.Ve programme? To what extent is the structural violence of the counter-trafficking apparatus reproduced in the relational dynamics between practitioners, particularly Case Managers, and beneficiaries? How do beneficiaries cope with such violence? I argue that the Case Managers' approach builds on "stratified layers of institutional knowledge" and that this concept is useful to highlight how their knowledge derives both from the counter-trafficking apparatus and their social work background. Furthermore, I present evidence that such an approach reproduces structural violence through processes of "conditional inclusion". Nigerian women denounced this violence but also seized the relational capital grown from rapport, calling for more engagement with people rather than programme objectives.

Keywords: anti-trafficking; counter-trafficking; Nigerian women; structural violence; conditional inclusion; Italy; relational capital; practitioners; case managers; beneficiaries

1. Introduction

Anti-trafficking programmes in Italy have been implemented for more than two decades now. To date, few empirical accounts have been produced on how they function and the "structural violence" they produce and reproduce. In line with Farmer's definition (2004), I intend structural violence as violence embedded in structural inequalities that have negative impacts on marginal social groups' lives.

Few accounts are available on the experience of "victims of trafficking"[1] that stress their agency (Marcus and Snajdr 2013), particularly in dealing with such violence. In turn, this paper aims to provide an empirical contribution on Italian anti-trafficking programmes from the perspective of practitioners and programme beneficiaries, specifically young Nigerian women admitted to the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme. Nigerian women have been the main target group of such programmes in several regions in Italy and in the N.A.Ve programme. In the period of 2015–2016, a peak in the number of arrivals was recorded in Europe and Italy as well as in the Veneto region. This number has been decreasing since 2020. Nigerian women are still a relevant target group to date, although arrival dynamics are continuously evolving.[2]

This paper intends to contribute to critical anti-trafficking studies (i.e., Clemente 2022; Marcus and Snajdr 2013; Musto 2010; Walters 2011; Andrijasevic 2010; O'Connell Davidson

2006) and autonomy of migration studies (De Genova 2017; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Mezzadra 2004). Anti-trafficking studies build on the recognition that NGOs delivering anti-trafficking programmes are part of the counter-trafficking apparatus. They are critical of anti-trafficking practitioner work, pointing out that they can paradoxically legitimise and reproduce structural violence enacted by the anti-trafficking apparatus (Walters 2011). The second field looks at migrants' trajectories beyond the structural barriers they face, while acknowledging their impact, and migrants' agency. This paper shares the perspective of critical anti-trafficking studies, being that the counter-trafficking apparatus produces and reproduces structural violence. In addition, it provides empirical evidence suggesting that a distinction must be made between the counter-trafficking apparatus and the several people working in it. It argues that more research should be conducted to improve the understanding of the everyday relational dynamics at play between the practitioners who work in anti-trafficking programmes and the beneficiaries who are admitted to them. I argue that more attention to relational dynamics between practitioners and beneficiaries can shed more light on how structural violence is reproduced, through a process of "conditional inclusion" (de Waal 2020; Hackl 2020). At the same time, it suggests a way forward in critical counter-trafficking debates. It invites researchers to look closer at relational dynamics and how they can contain the seeds of violence but also of relational capital that is strategically used by beneficiaries. The following questions are addressed: What is the experience of practitioners and beneficiaries in the N.A.Ve programme? To what extent is the structural violence of the counter-trafficking apparatus reproduced in the relational dynamics between practitioners, particularly Case Managers, and beneficiaries? How do beneficiaries cope with such violence?

I started working on anti-trafficking programmes in Italy in 2018, with a focus on Nigerian women. I have been working with a research group based at the Università Iuav di Venezia., as will be explained. We were urged by local anti-trafficking practitioners to carry out research that could help them to reflect on their work and explore ongoing trends of exploitation (i.e., on sexual exploitation and exploitation connected to begging). We wrote a joint EU action–research project application that was eventually funded by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). It involved both research and capacity-building activities.[3] This paper reports parts of the research findings. It draws from semi-structured interviews, carried out in the period of 2019–2021, with practitioners and beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme. The interviews focused on practitioners' experiences working with Nigerian women and on Nigerian women beneficiaries' experiences of the programme upon completion.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces the literature on anti-trafficking interventions and structural violence. It highlights that limited attention has been cast on how individuals cope with such violence and explains how this paper intends to contribute to this literature, by looking at relational dynamics between practitioners and beneficiaries. The second section presents the research design and methodology. A short contextualization of anti-trafficking programmes in Italy and the Veneto region follows. The third section discusses the empirical findings, focusing on: the "social inclusion phase" of the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme, the roles of Case Managers and practitioners and how they reproduce structural violence, and how Nigerian women cope with it. It argues that Case Managers' approach with beneficiaries reproduces the structural violence of the counter-trafficking apparatus through a process of "conditional inclusion" by building on what I call "stratified layers of knowledge". It further argues that Nigerian women have not been passive recipients of such violence: on the one side, they denounced it; on the other, they seized the relational capital grown from rapport with Case Managers, calling for more engagement with beneficiaries rather than programme objectives. The final section outlines the conclusions.

2. Anti-Trafficking Programmes, Structural Violence, and Conditional Inclusion

Thus far, accounts on anti-trafficking programmes in Italy have been mainly provided by the grey literature, describing typologies of implementing agencies (lay social cooperatives and faith-based organisations) and service configurations (outreach, drop-in activities and reception, employment and psychological support, Italian language courses, accompaniment to health consultation, cultural–linguistic mediation, legal assistance) (Castelli 2014). Italian anti-trafficking programmes' declared goal is to protect trafficked individuals, through access to "protected shelters" (ibidem). Scholars in other countries have criticized similar shelters pointing to their violent nature as closed, detention-like facilities (Brunovskis and Surtees 2012; Surtees 2013; Lee 2014). At the same time, shelter reception can eventually lead to further victimization, if not destitution (Nicholson et al. 2019; Beddoe et al. 2015; Gallagher and Featonby 2019; for Italy: Semprebon et al. 2021). Once beneficiaries leave a shelter, they can find themselves stranded without accommodation and employment, because of structural obstacles (in finding housing and employment) but also because of the limited duration of the programmes.

Further violence can be traced by scrutinizing practitioners' approaches that range from harm reduction and tentative empowerment on the one side (Rekart 2005) to "carceral protectionism" on the other (Musto 2010), whereby individuals cannot access nor leave shelters without prior permission. More generally, anti-trafficking programmes are largely criticized for failing to properly assist trafficked individuals (Marcus and Snajdr 2013), while rather reproducing the same inequalities perpetrated by migration policies. Anti-trafficking organisations do not necessarily facilitate access to regularisation unless people collaborate with law enforcement agencies (Brunovskis and Skilbrei 2016; Musto 2010). They tend to prioritise the prosecution of traffickers over the protection of trafficked people (Anderson and O'Connell 2002; O'Connell Davidson 2006; Brennan 2016). Despite the growing sub-contracting of public services, anti-trafficking NGOs have rarely shared their knowledge or challenged the critical aspects of the counter-trafficking apparatus (Clemente 2022). By failing to do so, they have arguably contributed to de-politicising the debate (Andrijasevic 2010), shunning attention away from the experience of and impact on the people concerned and their trajectories. Moreover, they have extended structural violence to protection programmes (Giordano 2014), thus reproducing it, to the detriment of the people they are meant to protect.

While the debate presented above acknowledges the violence perpetuated by the counter-trafficking apparatus, this paper proposes to distinguish the apparatus itself, including migration norms, protection shelters, anti-trafficking programmes and general approaches from the action of individuals, including programme practitioners, but also individuals admitted to programmes. I am not proposing to overlook structural violence, but rather to emphasise relational dynamics and particularly the agency of beneficiaries, who are not passive recipients of anti-trafficking programmes.

Several scholars have interviewed shelter workers in various countries (Asia: Hacker et al. 2015; Europe: Clemente 2022; Semprebon et al. 2021; Cox 2018; Hoyle et al. 2011; the US: Gerassi and Nichols 2018). Fewer have managed to interview beneficiaries and explore their experience of such programmes (Lockyer 2022; Asia: Cordisco Tsai et al. 2021; Hacker et al. 2015; the US: Koegler et al. 2021; Europe: Clemente 2022; Semprebon 2023). The literature has rarely looked at trafficked individuals' agency, because of their widespread stigmatized representation as "victim" (Christie 1986; Hoyle et al. 2011). The literature has often overlooked the fact that beneficiaries of anti-trafficking programmes are situated within a political and social-economic context, which includes both migration and counter-trafficking systems. This context can restrict beneficiaries' freedom of movement (Mai 2016; Andrijasevic 2010), but it does not necessarily deprive them of agency. While their physical and social mobility may be temporarily hindered, they often find ways to cope with such constraints, especially when there are no (better) alternatives for survival (Semprebon et al. 2021). Despite facing structural violence, beneficiaries still make decisions and take action. Some scholars may interpret their actions as merely re-actions to institutional objectives

and obstacles, but they are also consistent with their needs, life plans, and desires (Davy 2015; Baker 2018). These desires and plans persist despite structural violence and can serve as guiding forces for beneficiaries, helping them to navigate through and beyond such challenges.

Building on the autonomy of migration scholarship (De Genova 2017; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Mezzadra 2004), this paper will therefore look at individuals' trajectories throughout anti-trafficking programmes and the structural violence that they face, particularly in relational dynamics with practitioners. Anti-trafficking practitioners find it hard to understand that the challenges faced by trafficked individuals may compare with those faced by migrants in marginal conditions, including obstacles in accessing decent housing and employment opportunities, barriers in regularisation, etc., (Deckert et al. 2018). Failing to listen carefully to beneficiaries can result in the incapacity to understand their actual needs, in the imposition of an ethnocentric conceptions of inclusion (Bearup 2016), and in disempowerment. The latter can also derive from situations of "unwanted protection": beneficiaries sometimes perceive that "protected shelters" are unnecessary for their safety and yet they have no choice but to accept accommodation in these facilities (Surtees 2013). Notwithstanding, the violence of "unwanted protection" can come with continuity of care and support. Beneficiaries value care and support. Both care and support can positively impact on the development of social networks (De Angelis 2014), also following programme completion (Pascoal 2020). The Case Manager has a central role in this sense. They liaise with all programme practitioners, they are the main person of reference for beneficiaries and they can more easily develop rapport with them (Macy and Johns 2011). To what extent can rapport develop in conditions of structural violence? Through a dense description of everyday interactions between practitioners and beneficiaries, this paper will explore their experience in the N.A.Ve programme, the extent to which the structural violence of the counter-trafficking apparatus is reproduced in the relational dynamics between them, and how beneficiaries cope with such violence. As will be argued, relational dynamics are embedded in processes of "conditional inclusion" (de Waal 2020; Hackl 2020; with reference to anti-trafficking programmes: Brunovskis and Skilbrei 2016). These are processes in which access to support is contingent upon migrants' capacity to comply with the ideal of the "good deserving migrant".

3. Research Design and Methods

This paper draws on qualitative data collected through a mixed-method research design, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Università Iuav di Venezia,[4] for the conduction, by 5 researchers,[5] of the EU INSigHT Action. The project comprised capacity building and research activities in Italy, Nigeria, and Sweden, aiming to explore the evolution of trafficking trends and how these have affected anti-trafficking programmes in these three countries.[6]

The research presented here is part of one of the three research strands carried out in Italy, aiming specifically to investigate the experience of programme practitioners and beneficiaries in the Veneto region. The main research questions included the following: To what extent do anti-trafficking programmes benefit the people concerned? The research design included an institutional ethnography and semi-structured interviews. The ethnography had the main goal to observe institutions "up" and "across", through the eyes of the N.A.Ve programme practitioners and beneficiaries (Gazit and Maoz-Shai 2010), while highlighting power dynamics. It extended over the period April 2019–April 2020, involving about 300 sessions (3–6 h each) of participant observation[7] in practitioners' coordination meetings, monitoring meetings and assessment interviews with programme beneficiaries, and meetings with N.A.Ve programme partners and relevant stakeholders. Additionally, our research team organised four sessions, with N.A.Ve programme practitioners and the N.A.Ve Programme Coordinator, to share our preliminary insights on the ongoing research and collect their feedback. These sessions were an integral part of the ethnographic process (Mosse 2006). In the period June to October 2020, following the completion of the ethno-

graphic research, 56 semi-structured interviews were organised with all N.A.Ve programme practitioners (except for practitioners working in protected shelters, who were selected based on longer-term experience) and relevant partners (i.e., anti-violence centres, law enforcement agencies, outreach units) to further explore differences in practitioners' approaches across the region's territory. In total, 16 interviews were conducted with Nigerian women, admitted to the anti-trafficking programme, who had arrived in Italy between 2016 and 2019. These allowed us to further explore their experience, as we had limited access to activities involving them during our ethnographic work. All interviews were carried out in Italian and/or English, based on written consent by each interviewee. They were recorded and transcribed with the software Express Scribe 12.6 (NCH Software, Australia). Interviews with practitioners were anonymized by indicating only their role (and in a few cases, if relevant, their gender). Interviews with Nigerian women were anonymized by means of fictitious names. All transcriptions were manually coded, based on categories associated with the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme phases, activities, and roles, as narrated by both practitioners and beneficiaries. They were analysed through content analysis. Extracts were selected for publications following the definition of two main criteria: prevailing themes and narratives exemplifying relational dynamics. The main ethical issue that we faced was the risk of re-victimising Nigerian women. We addressed it as follows: we selected our interviewees in agreement with programme practitioners, who excluded women whose vulnerable conditions suggested that the interview may negatively impact on them; we sent the consent module ahead of the interview and explained it thoroughly; we met the women mostly outside the anti-trafficking programme premises (with a few exceptions); we reassured women several times that we would only ask about their experience within the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme and that no questions about their travel to Europe was planned. We focused on their present and future, unless they asked otherwise, and explained that the interviews were meant to give them a voice on what worked or not in the programmes. Many of them enthusiastically participated in the interview and expressed gratitude when the research publications were shared with them.

Because our access to the fieldwork was facilitated by practitioners, our positionality was clearly affected. On the one side, we could regularly negotiate access to meetings and interviews which would have not been possible otherwise, on the other our access was filtered, particularly as far as interviews with beneficiaries are concerned. At the same time, our presence, on an everyday basis and over an extensive period, promoted a process of "resonance" (see, for example, Wikan 1992) that encouraged practitioners to share their thoughts, experiences, and frustrations, as they felt there was an empathic space for discussion and reflexivity (fieldwork notes, N.A.Ve programme monitoring meeting, 29 May 2019 and 11 September 2020). As far as the Nigerian women are concerned, our everyday presence over time allowed us to familiarize with them and vice versa. It was useful to make it clearer that we were studying the programme but were not part of it, nor responding to the Programme Coordinator and practitioners.

4. Background of the Research

4.1. The Evolution of Anti-Trafficking Programmes in Italy

In 2000, the Italian government signed the UN Palermo Protocol on preventing, suppressing, and punishing trafficking in human beings. However, the Municipality of Venice, leading partner of the N.A.Ve programme until 2022, had already started monitoring street sex work and street forms of exploitation (mainly sexual, but also begging) in 1996. Municipal workers engaged in advocacy work, together with lawyers and NGOs across Italy, thus building expertise. At the wider national level, it led to the writing of Art. 18 of Legislative Decree 286/1998 which provided, for people with ascertained conditions of serious exploitation, the right to (a) a temporary residence permit and (b) admission to a so-called social protection programme (anti-trafficking programme), regardless of their collaboration in investigations to fight trafficking and exploitation. This law aimed to prioritize people protection over the fight against trafficking, but it has not been implemented homogenously

across the country (GRETA 2014; Pascoal 2020; Semprebon et al. 2021), as programme practitioners have repeatedly confirmed. As a result, trafficked individuals have often been put under pressure to collaborate with law enforcement agencies to obtain assistance.

In 2000, the Department for Equal Opportunity published a tender to provide annual funding in support of regional anti-trafficking programmes. These have been operating since. In the same year, the Municipality of Venice activated the first anti-trafficking programme in the region.

4.2. The Evolution of Anti-Trafficking Programmes in the Veneto Region

In 2016, a unique intervention chain was established that resulted in the creation of the N.A.Ve network. Partners have comprised municipalities, social cooperatives, and over 50 stakeholders including regional authorities, local socio-health authorities and districts, trade unions and workers' associations, law enforcement agencies, asylum officials, universities, and juvenile detention centres. Three annual projects were carried out by the network from September 2016 to May 2020. The fourth project was launched in 2021. It was renamed the N.A.Ve network. The leading partner is now the Veneto Regional Authority (Semprebon 2023).[8]

The new network was relatively small. In the period 2016–2020, it admitted about 66 to 124 people to the anti-trafficking programme, the large majority being adult females (Semprebon 2023).[9]

The N.A.Ve programme is structured in 6 regional units who regularly organise coordination meetings: the Outreach Unit, the Crisis and Evaluation Unit, the Social Inclusion Unit, the Reception Facilities Unit, the Socio-Legal Unit, and the Cultural–Linguistic Mediation Unit. Adding to these, the Labour Inclusion Working Group, and the Working Group "Psicologhe a bordo" (Psychologists on board) (ibidem) were created more recently. For the sake of clarity, the N.A.Ve programme workers will be called practitioners—I will refer particularly to those working in the Crisis and Evaluation Unit—and Case Managers, whose role will be explained below.

Social protection programmes include six phases. The "outreach phase" includes street outreach activities. The "fuga" (literally "escape") is the phase in which the Crisis and Evaluation Unit assesses beneficiaries' conditions and exposure to risks of exploitation and violence. If beneficiaries are facing an imminent risk, practitioners offer them a place in a protected shelter. In the "reflection phase", beneficiaries are asked to reflect on whether they are willing to progress to the social inclusion phase and enter the social protection programme. If they decide to do so, they proceed to "phase zero", a transitory administrative and organisational period in which the Crisis and Evaluation Unit practitioners transfer responsibility to an assigned municipal social worker, a Case Manager. The "social inclusion phase" is the central and longest phase of the social protection programme that terminates with the phase of "sgancio" (literally "unhook"), a final period aimed to accompany beneficiaries towards the completion of the programme. Social protection programmes last on average 18 months, although the actual length can be extended and it was often extended during the COVID-19 lockdown and the subsequent pandemic period (for more details, see Semprebon 2023).

5. Empirical Findings

5.1. Case Managers' "Stratified Layers of Knowledge" and the Violent Imposition of an Ethnocentric Social Inclusion Approach

This section delves into Case Managers' approach and their relational dynamics with beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve programme. It shows how they reproduce the violence of the counter-trafficking apparatus on an everyday basis. As social workers, they aim to accompany beneficiaries in their path to autonomy but justify the missed achievement of this objective based on cultural factors, that is to say Nigerian women's vulnerable profile. The violence of their approach becomes evident in the formulation of ethnocentric pre-set programme objectives, arguably building on "stratified layers of knowledge", deriving

from their social work mandate, on the one side, but also from a counter-trafficking vision of victimhood, on the other. The latter is inspired by Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners' standard assessment and expectations on "victims" and their attitudes towards the programme and practitioners.

Case Managers are assigned a central role in the N.A.Ve programme. They are the main referent person for beneficiaries, during the central phase of the programme: the social inclusion phase. Their guiding principle is beneficiaries' autonomy, which is measured with the following indicators: regularization, access to a regular job and to a decent housing solution, fluency in Italian (interview, Case Manager, female, 19 May 2020).

All the Case Managers that we interviewed shared this view, not only concerning people admitted to anti-trafficking programmes but to all the beneficiaries of local social services. This vision is coherent with the mandate of Italian social workers: *Social workers promote opportunities to improve the living conditions of people, families, communities and all social groups; they put to value their autonomy, subjectivity and their capacity to take up responsibilities, by supporting them in the use of their own resources and those available at societal level, to prevent and deal with situations of needs and disadvantage while at the same time favouring processes of inclusion* (Title II, art. 10) [my translation from Italian].[10]

Case Managers set individual objectives with each beneficiary. To do so, they are guided not only by their social work approach but also by the general framework defined by the N.A.Ve programme (interview, Case Manager, female, 26 May 2020).

It is Case Managers who have the main responsibility for the achievement of beneficiaries' autonomy. Compared to programme practitioners, they have more time to work with beneficiaries, as the social inclusion phase is the longest of the programme. Yet, the latter has a limited duration of about 18 months and Case Managers are under considerable pressure. In their opinion, autonomy is hard to reach (interview, Case Manager, female, 26 May 2020, and 24 June 2020) and they have grown frustrated since the N.A.Ve programme offers abundant economic and human resources (compared to other projects on migrant inclusion).

> *The N.A.Ve programme gives many good resources [compared to asylum seeker reception projects] that makes you think you have everything you can achieve a lot of goals with people. Usually, when you work with local authorities, you have zero resources, you have no internships for example, therefore you must be hyper-creative with possible solutions. In the N.A.Ve programme, you have (...) a really rich and professional package of resources, but sometimes not even this is enough and then you ask yourself: "Is it me who is doing something wrong or do we have to re-calibrate our goals?"* [my translation from Italian] (interview, Case Manager, female, 19 May 2020) (Semprebon 2023, p. 134)

Arguably, to counter their frustration, Case Managers mobilize cultural variables, particularly the supposed homogenous vulnerable profile of Nigerian women. During our interviews, they comparatively recalled working with Romanian women who experienced conditions of even worse exploitation and victimisation. However, all Case Managers repeatedly stressed the particularly fragile conditions of Nigerian women that make it more difficult to accompany them towards autonomy.

While many of the women we encountered during our research experienced situations of vulnerability, we found that Case Managers' descriptions of their profile reproduced stereotyped discourses of trafficking. Arguably, their vision is influenced by Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners, who meet and work with beneficiaries *before them*, as soon as beneficiaries approach the programme.

During the so-called phase zero, they share with Case Managers the work they did with women. In passing "responsibility" to Case Managers, Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners bring in their counter-trafficking knowledge, deriving from their standard assessment of beneficiaries. Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners are deemed as experts on trafficking. This affects Case Managers' approach that builds on "stratified layers of institutional knowledge", deriving from their social work understanding of social protection, but also

from sedimented counter-trafficking victimhood discourses highlighting Nigerian women's vulnerability (interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Coordinator, female, 28 May 2020).

Such an ethnocentric vision (see also Bearup 2016) shows how structural violence is perpetrated throughout the programme, by combining pre-set objectives that are considered adequate for homogenous target "victims" with the difficulty of actively listening to their wishes. The many resources available in the N.A.Ve programme can be beneficial to individuals admitted to social protection. They can push Case Managers to eagerly activate several support activities. At the same time, Case Managers can fail to provide sufficient space for individuals to express *their* needs and share *their* migratory project, convinced as they are that social protection is their best opportunity at hand. A Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner explained this well during our interview:

> *This is the new challenge: how to offer a dignified life and a form of integration that makes sense (. . .) We need to understand the needs expressed by people. We need to understand where they want to start from, we can't impose ourselves with our views, we need to consider their migratory project.* [my translation from Italian] (interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Coordinator, female, 28 May 2020) (Semprebon 2023, p. 123).

Time has been described as a precious resource favouring active listening and making a difference in the trajectories of some women. This was the case for women who arrived in the programme before turning 18 and whose permanence in the programme was longer. It gave Case Managers the possibility of meeting them over several months, or even years, not only to monitor their project objectives but also to spend time together, familiarize, and develop rapport (fieldwork notes, N.A.Ve programme monitoring meeting, 29 May 2019, and 11 September 2020).

Developing rapport is a central element of protection programmes both for Case Managers and beneficiaries, as will be explained later. Rapport requires trust, but trust must operate in both directions. On one side, Case Managers are aware that Nigerian women find it particularly hard to trust them. Many women recall negative experiences, particularly with law enforcement agents, prior to arrival in the programme. As further confirmed by Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners, they tend to assimilate these actors with any other institutional subject; hence, they rarely trust anti-trafficking practitioners (fieldwork notes, N.A.Ve programme monitoring meeting, 11 September 2020). Case Managers, on their side, have often been prejudiced against Nigerian women, because of sedimented victimhood discourses, building, partly, on episodes reported by Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners. In the period 2016–2017, practitioners started observing a tendency, on the side of Nigerian women, to contact their office to set an appointment for regularisation. Appointments are organised only by the *Questura* (the local headquarter of the National Police Authority), while anti-trafficking practitioners provide legal support. Following up on some cases, Crisis and Evaluation Unit practitioners realised that *madams* were pushing women to speed up the process of regularisation, not in view of favouring their access to a programme of social inclusion but to prevent the risk of deportation while continuing to practice sex work under conditions of exploitation (fieldwork notes, 15 April 2020).

Similar episodes did take place, but they cannot be considered as a "typical trend" applicable to all Nigerian women calling by anti-trafficking offices. Yet, it justified the filters applied upon entry and assessment, pointing to a form of structural violence. Moreover, by focusing on the *madams* and their alleged strategy, Case Managers and practitioners seem to concentrate on fighting trafficking, thus losing sight of "victims' protection". They contribute to reproducing the inequalities of migration policies (see Brunovskis and Skilbrei 2016; Musto 2010), by creating obstacles in women's regularisation. Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners see women's request for regularisation as "instrumental" to permitting the undisturbed exploitation by *madams*. This vision obscures two aspects: first, regularisation is central for inclusion hence for any meaningful protection programme; second, "victims" may not necessarily ask for protection (Surtees 2013), but for specific support services only.

5.2. Conditional Inclusion and the Experience of Nigerian Women in the N.A.Ve Social Protection Programme

In this section, I will draw from the interviews with Nigerian women, to highlight the structural violence they have experienced with Case Managers. I will discuss how it takes the shape of "conditional inclusion" (de Waal 2020; Hackl 2020; with reference to anti-trafficking programmes: Brunovskis and Skilbrei 2016), starting with the "filtering role" of Case Managers and Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners upon entry and termination of the programme. It is them who decide who can enter and when they can leave, resulting not only in forms of structural violence but also disempowerment. I will also explain how Nigerian women cope with such violence by "testing" how reliable are practitioners, by challenging their discourses and further by seizing the relational capital that can be derived from meaningful relationships.

This section will be organised in three parts, corresponding to three temporal phases of women's experience in the programme: entry, exit, and permanence in the programme.

5.3. Entering the Programme

Individuals do not easily make up their mind about entering the social protection programme. It is a decision they may mature over several months, if they mature it at all, following multiple contacts with programme practitioners. Our interviewees explained that decisions are often motivated by the absence of (immediate) alternatives. In addition, they are often taken with high expectations of positive life changes. Other factors are relevant, as will be explained, all pointing to structural violence.

As Osasenaga testifies, Nigerian women hardly trust practitioners, at least in the first instance. They fear the pressure to report to the police which can in turn result in repercussions for them and their family. They also fear assessment interviews, a precondition of admission. Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners assess individuals' exposure to risks of exploitation, therefore acting a "selection filter": only whereby they identify risks, they will propose individuals' admission to the programme. Such assessment looks at current risks, but it consists of an interview covering all phases of individuals' travel to Europe and arrival in Italy, thus becoming one of the main nodes of admission. People are scared to tell their story—or ill-disposed to tell it because they wish to forget. Rather than facing assessment, some individuals prefer not to ask for assistance (see also Brunovskis and Surtees 2007). Assessment often results in re-victimisation. Practitioners often underestimate the tension between the institutional times of the programme (and the counter-trafficking apparatus) defining set times for assessment and the biographical times of people, who may not be willing to undertake any assessment, at least not upon entry or in the short term (see Semprebon 2023).

> Before you start the project there is a "hot seat". This is the big question. They want you to say your story but not everybody wants to say it. (...) Some fear they may be arrested, they are really scared, not ashamed, no, they are more scared. Some of them think the operatori [Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners] are [colleagues of] the police and will ask for information [on exploiters]. They confuse them because for them it is all government staff. (...) Some people do not want to report [to the police]. I did not want to report as I had already paid [my debt] and I wanted to start a new life and forget about it. (interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20)

Osarobo recalls she was looking for reassurance by practitioners. She wanted to ensure that the programme would truly be beneficial in concrete ways. Similarly to other women, she experienced practitioners' help several times, before considering them as trustworthy interlocutors. Her decision to enter the programme was encouraged by the perception that the practitioner she contacted was genuinely motivated to help *her*, rather than the police (in fighting trafficking). She seized her help and took time to test her reliability. Time proves again essential, confirming Case Managers' views.

There are feelings that people are afraid of sharing, you know. You may have those feelings deep down in you. Maybe you feel pain and you don't want to say it to people, those feelings can hurt. (. . .) So it is hard to tell your story. It is hard to trust people you do not know. (. . .) Yes, it was a little hard [for me too to trust the practitioners]. You have to see, trust and believe. You need to see first, because someone entering the program, you know, if you don't know what is inside that programme, you do not know what to do, it takes time to decide. (interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2020, 17 years)

Our findings highlight that time is important in strengthening the relationship between Case Managers and the women. It can help in developing meaningful relations, but these cannot be taken for granted, they must be built over time. Only when this happens, women start perceiving Case Managers as a referent person, as Ehi suggests.

Yes, yes, I call her [the Case Manager] whenever I need something. I always call her. She has done many things for me. She helped me understand, she gave me the chance to explain myself and ask questions on what I did not understand. I have known her for a long time now, I know her better than other people in the programme. If I need help I know I can call her any time and she will answer the phone. (interview, Efe, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, +20 years)

Time is crucial, the regularity of meetings and their continuity are crucial, rather than their frequency, as well as the ease of access to (some) Case Managers. The importance of time is particularly evident in the trajectories of younger women who encountered the programme before turning 18 and whose work with Case Managers extended over several years. These women stressed the importance of a significant relationship in the overall protection trajectory as it provides with strong ties. It is a treasured outcome of the programme, even whereby pre-set programme objectives are not achieved. In fact, it can become even more important after the completion of the programme itself, whenever it consolidates into social capital to count on.

They are very very hard. When your time is finished they say you have to leave. If your time is up, you have to leave. But when you arrive to the programme you want to change your life. If you complete the programme and do not have a job immediately, what can you do? I know of people that went back to the street to do prostitution. How can you survive? I think that the programme should first make sure that all people in the programme are settled and then start taking other women in. people join the programme to change their life. If the programme does not change their life, what is it for? (interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20 years)

5.4. Exiting the Programme

All the women we interviewed confirmed they received support both for accommodation and employment. When leaving the programme, they all had a place to stay (various solutions ranging from a shared flat, to accommodation in NGOs facilities, to accommodation with a family) and had undertaken one or more internships. Some had a regular temporal job (often resulting from an internship), others were renewed in the internship further. All of them still had several barriers ahead for full inclusion (Semprebon 2023).

However, as anticipated, exit from the programme is "filtered", like entry. While the standard duration of the programme is one year and a half, it is Case Managers that ultimately decide when beneficiaries should leave. They consider whether women have found a job and an affordable housing solution, in short whether they are "autonomous". Both entry and exit are discussed with beneficiaries, but the predominant decision power is in the hands of Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners and Case Managers who decide who "deserves" to entry and who is "ready" to leave. Beneficiaries have challenged their views and their implicit violence. They addressed them during our interviews, stressing how social protection can not only fail to favour autonomy, but also lead to destitution. As Osasenaga explains, looking for housing and regular employment is difficult due to the specific characteristics of the housing and employment markets in Italy (i.e., limited regular

and stable job opportunities, unaffordable rental sector, inadequate and inaccessible public housing sector). The limited duration of the programmes is generally insufficient for any inclusionary goal to be achieved. As a result, beneficiaries can be exposed to forms of exploitation after the completion of the protection programme, the same programme that several women enter with the expectation of a radical life change.

Omosigho told us that exit comes with the fear of finding herself alone. She was afraid of being incapable to find her way without continuous support, questioning the effectiveness of the programme in terms of empowerment: beneficiaries, at the end of the programme, can find themselves in a situation (that they perceive as) even worse than prior to entry (fieldwork notes, 19 October 2020).

5.5. Dealing with Rules and Roles of the Programme

Next, I will provide some further examples of how everyday structural violence is enacted in the programme. During the social inclusion phase, all the Nigerian women we interviewed were hosted in protected reception facilities characterised by a strict "closed-shelter policy". Such policy remains one of the most critical aspects of social inclusion, in line with the criticism advanced by the international literature. All of the women mentioned it. When they first enter the programme, they are not allowed to leave the facility for about a month or two, nor are they allowed to use their own smartphone to stay in touch with friends and relatives, unless authorised by the practitioners working in the shelters. Esewi, as several other women we talked to, did not understand the rationale of this and other rules imposed onto them, rather the contrary. She thought the rationale derived from practitioners' misinterpretation of women's conditions and safety and failure to account for the fact that they never asked for protection in the first place. During a monitoring meeting, she asked for authorisation to attend the Sunday service in the local Nigerian church. Both the Case Manager and Reception practitioners expressed the fear that her *madam* could reach out for women in the church and threaten them. Yet, Esewi explained that, in her experience, once a woman is in a reception programme, *madams* restrain from any contact with them, in order to prevent practitioners from calling the police (fieldwork notes, Esewi, 9 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years).

Our interviewees challenged practitioners for overlooking how rules are harder to accept when their rationale is not shared. They described practitioners as mostly focused on *measurable* programme objectives (i.e., finding a job and accommodation) and for their insufficient consideration of how such rules impact on women's wellbeing particularly that of women who lived autonomously before entering the programme, like Isowa (interview, Isowa, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years).

Further critical observations of our interviewees point to limited consultation on decisions *regarding them*. Esewi lamented the "triangulation" of responsibilities among Case Managers and practitioners, resulting in long multiple procedures to obtain authorisations for undertaking activities (i.e., outdoor activities in the free time).

> *I do not like it when I ask for something and the [Reception] practitioners forget or take endless time to reply to you. When I asked for the mobile phone for example, they never talked about it again. They always say: ok, let's see, we will talk with the Case Manager and then the Legal Guardian and this and that and you never get to the end of that request. It takes forever.* (interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

Triangulation was referred to by several women when recalling the role of Mediators. These professional figures are involved to help practitioners and beneficiaries in communication. Most Case Managers and practitioners describe them as precious collaborators who facilitation linguistic and cultural communications as they share the same background of beneficiaries and can best interpret cultural values and frames. Many of the women we interviewed agreed they can be very useful and reassuring, upon entry in the programme, and appreciate their linguistic help.

> *When I first arrived in the programme, I meet a Mediator. I was having trouble with the police then. When the police found me in a flat that I was sharing with other Nigerian people she also arrived and she came with me to the Questura. I could not speak Italian at all, I only spoke English. I was given the possibility to speak to her and understand well. She helped me when speaking to the police but also the practitioners. She never came to the camp [reception shelter], but she helped many times to understand things. It was an essential help for me all throughout the programme.* [my translation from Italian] (interview Efe, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, +20 years)

However, some women, like Esosa strongly called for intermediation-free communication, because of bad experiences with Mediators, on the one side, and the willingness to be considered as a legitimate adult interlocutor on the other (see Brunovskis and Surtees 2008; but also more generally Malkki 1996).

> *I talk to her for regularisation and passport issues. When I meet the Case Managers, she is always present, but by now I can speak Italian and can manage by myself. To be sure we understand each other, Case Managers and practitioners always call a Mediators, but I am happier to do it by myself now, as I can understand well. The Mediator that helped me is really good, but I am a grown up!* [my translation from Italian] (interview, Esosa, 8 September 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

6. Conclusions

Drawing on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork notes, this paper aimed to provide an empirical contribution on Italian anti-trafficking programmes and the experience of practitioners and young Nigerian women admitted to the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme.

The paper gives an overview of the functioning of the N.A.Ve programme, operating in the Veneto region since 2016. It contributes to the critical counter-trafficking literature, specifically with evidence on the Italian context, which has been largely explored by the grey literature.

While the paper shares the criticisms raised by critical counter-trafficking studies, particularly the structural violence produced and reproduced by the counter-trafficking apparatus, it argues that a distinction must be made between the apparatus and the several people working in it. It encourages more empirical research to shed light on the everyday relational dynamics between practitioners and beneficiaries.

It focuses on the social inclusion phase, the central and longer phase of the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme, and looks at the relational dynamics between Case Managers and Nigerian women beneficiaries. The following questions were addressed: What is the experience of practitioners and beneficiaries in the N.A.Ve programme? To what extent is the structural violence of the counter-trafficking apparatus reproduced in the relational dynamics between practitioners, particularly Case Managers, and beneficiaries? How do beneficiaries cope with such violence?

The empirical data confirms Giordano's (2014) view that the state's violence is reflected in the social protection programme in the form of structural violence (Farmer 2004). The apparatus produces structural violence, comprising closed-shelter facilities, reproduction of the inequalities perpetrated by migration policies and difficulty, if not failure, to properly assist trafficked individuals (Marcus and Snajdr 2013). In turn, Case Managers reproduce structural violence by building on what I call "stratified layers of institutional knowledge". I discussed that that this concept helps to explain how Case Managers' approach is guided by an ethnocentric concept of what social inclusion means, drawing from sedimented counter-trafficking victimhood discourses, shared by Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners, but also from their mission as social workers.

During our research, I did witness the capacity of Case Managers—as well as other practitioners—to self-reflect on their work, but I also often observed how they were "stuck" in their roles and institutional vision of what inclusion and protection should entail. They are focused on pre-set programme objectives that do not necessarily coincide with beneficia-

ries' needs and aspirations and that often clash with their biographical times. Beneficiaries are supported in view of achieving pre-set goals, based on the (normative) belief that entering a social protection programme provides beneficiaries with their best chance for inclusion. Whenever such goals are not achieved, Case Managers tended to bring forward cultural explanations, particularly the allegedly homogenous vulnerable profile of Nigerian women. Rather than contributing to improving assistance, such an attitude justified their frustration for not achieving goals.

In this context, coherently with the autonomy of migration approach, I observed that young Nigerian women do criticise the structural violence of which they fall victims, but also find ways to cope with it and move beyond it. Violence is evident in roles and decision-powers: it is Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners and Case Managers who decide who can enter the programme and when they are "ready" to leave it. Nigerian women challenge the representation of trafficked individuals as "victims" (Christie 1986; Hoyle et al. 2011) and its implicit violence in forms of re-victimisation. They "test" practitioners on their reliability and the capacity to address their needs—and the inequalities produced by migration policies. They denounce the risks for social protection programmes to lead to disempowerment and destitution, as their duration is short. They lament the insufficient attention that is placed on their wellbeing, because of the prevailing attention on measurable goals of social inclusion, which are not always achievable. However, many women that experienced longer permanence in the programmes and longer relationships with Case Managers have seized the relational capital that can derive whenever meaningful relationships develop. Relational capital can arguably produce "weak" but also "strong" ties (Granovetter 1983). Weak ties develop throughout the programme, when women start trusting Case Managers (and practitioners), and after its completion. They are valuable to facilitate access to information and opportunities. Timid signs of strong(er) ties also emerged in Nigerian women's narratives, whereby they felt supported and cared for.

Although this paper focuses on the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme, its findings offer insights and opens up questions relevant for anti-trafficking programmes in Italy, as many share similar organisational patterns, including programme phases, practitioners and Case Managers' roles. As I explained above, despite their role in the counter-trafficking apparatus, NGOs have rarely shared the knowledge they have produced or challenged the critical aspects of the counter-trafficking apparatus (Clemente 2022), thus de-politicising the debate (Andrijasevic 2010) and shunning attention away from the experience of and impact on trafficked individuals. Many of the practitioners we interviewed expressed concern over the violent dimension they could themselves recognise in their practices and asked for a continuous role of the university in organising spaces for practitioners' self-reflection.

I strongly hope that the counter-trafficking apparatus will be overcome by a universal welfare regime recognising entitlements to rights regardless of people's stratified legal status. In the meantime, I suggest that practitioners continue working towards improved flexibility and individualisation of programmes, by engaging more with beneficiaries, thus prioritising their expressed needs and aspirations over the fight against trafficking. Some programme improvements emerged during our research, including for example the development of "territorial projects", in collaboration with asylum seeker reception projects, to overcome the closed-shelter policy (see, for example, Semprebon 2023). Yet, the risk is still evident for Case Managers and practitioners to focus on protecting protection programmes rather than engaging with people to focus more on pre-set programme objectives and their achievement rather than on beneficiaries' life plans. The need remains to monitor structural violence in social protection programmes, besides their outcomes and impact on people's lives, beyond programmes' completion. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, I cannot stress enough the importance of longitudinal participatory ethnographic approaches. They have the merit to promote the involvement and engagement of all participants and to offer multiple occasions for knowledge sharing and self-reflection, as the interviewees themselves called for.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. The paper acknowledges that the term "victim" is normative in nature. It is used in policy discourses, but it has been widely criticized in scientific debates. It represents people as powerless "victims", in association with discretional procedures (for a reference to the debate, see Clemente 2022). I will occasionally use it, in inverted commas, whereby it was used by interviewees, in the literature, or in norms. Otherwise, I will prefer the terms Nigerian women, women, and women admitted to the anti-trafficking programme. The paper also acknowledges that the term "beneficiary" may misrepresent the people admitted to the anti-trafficking programme, whereby such programmes can rather disempower them. I do acknowledge the term must be problematised, as it involves an implicit assumption that such programmes are (entirely) beneficial to people. Hence, I will use this term only when used by practitioners, with reference to roles.

2. Arrivals of Nigerian women (and men) in Italy have been reported since the 1980s (Monzini 2002). However, attention on these flows grew towards the second decade of 2000, with increasing focus by European and Italian authorities on trafficking and exploitation. A peak of arrivals to Italy was recorded in 2015, 2016, and 2017 (Frontex 2018). Looking at the country of origin of the people registered as victims of trafficking in the EU, Nigeria was the first non-EU country (European Commission 2018), confirming trends in 2010 (Eurostat 2011). EU Commission data (2020) suggest arrivals have been decreasing since 2020, although these data does not account for movements within Europe, nor do they provide evidence of changing routes. Nigerian women have represented the main target of the N.A.Ve anti-trafficking programme (according to internal reports provided by the N.A.Ve professionals for the period 2016–2020). The same can be said for other anti-trafficking programmes in Italy (as confirmed by unpublished 2016–2020 internal data by the Osservatorio Interventi Anti-tratta in Italy).

3. For information on the project see the following website: https://www.insightproject.net/.

4. Details of the Research Ethics Committee approval are reported in the Institutional Review Board Statement at the end of this paper.

5. Two worked in Italy (Serena Caroselli, Serena Scarabello), together with the author, one in Nigeria (Oluwafemi Abe Moses), and one in Sweden (Isabelle Johansson).

6. More information is available at the link reported in Note 3.

7. From March to September 2020, most of the observation was performed on the zoom platform, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. For more details on the anti-trafficking programme in the region, see Semprebon (2023).

9. These data draw from the annual reports compiled by the N.A.Ve professionals for the Italian Department of Equal Opportunities. These data are underestimated. They do not include the people who received some partial form of support by the N.A.Ve programme and who did not enter the full programme.

10. Full text available at this link: https://cnoas.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Il-nuovo-codice-deontologico-dellassistente-sociale.pdf Last access: 27 December 2023.

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