

Article

# Women and Sikhism in Theory and Practice: Normative Discourses, *Seva* Performances, and Agency in the Case Study of Some Young Sikh Women in Northern Italy

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**Abstract:** The paper reflects on the role of women in Sikhism in theory and social practice, starting from a case study in northern Italy. Although the normative discourse widely shared in mainstream Sikhism affirms the equality between man and woman and the same possibility to manifest devotion through every kind of *seva* (social service within gurdwaras), empirical observation in some Italian gurdwaras has shown a different picture, as there is a clear division of tasks that implicitly subtends a gender-based hierarchy. This relational structure is challenged by intergenerational tensions, especially by young women born or raised in Italy, who may want to develop a different Sikh identity, considered compatible also with the Italian social and cultural context. In this initial process of collective identity definition and of agency, the female participation in the religious *seva* within gurdwaras is identified as the tool for change of power relations that cross genders and generations.

**Keywords:** women and Sikhism; Sikh women in Italy; *seva* performances; Sikh youth; Sikhs in Italy; gurdwaras in Italy

## 1. Introduction

It is Saturday night. In a gurdwara (Sikh house of worship, or, “house of the guru”) on the outskirts of Bergamo in northern Italy and housed in a small shed in a primarily artisanal area, a celebration is taking place for guru Nanak’s *gurpurb* in which women are performing “*Guru seva*”; that is, women are carrying out all the rituals of the evening religious liturgy.<sup>1</sup> It is these young women—joined by others from various Italian provinces and regions—who perform *Kirtan*, read *Path* and the *Hukamnama*, recite *Ardas*, wave the *chaur*, distribute *prashad* and who, performing *Sukh Asan*, accompany the Guru Granth Sahib to the *Sach Khand* for its night rest.<sup>2</sup> In a room adjacent to the *darbar*,

<sup>1</sup> “*Guru seva*” is the religious service performed by recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred text of Sikhs, the Guru Granth considered by Sikhs to be their living master. In general, the term *seva* is understood as selfless service that takes place within as well as beyond the gurdwara.

<sup>2</sup> These activities are part of the liturgical process: *Kirtan* is the singing of hymns taken from the Guru Granth Sahib accompanied by live music; *Path* is the recitation of prayers (*Gurbani*) from the Guru Granth Sahib and other texts ascribed to guru Gobind Singh; *Hukamnama* refers to a hymn selected from the Guru Granth Sahib at random, which is then understood as an order or guidance for Sikhs (historically, it was also a decree given by one of the Sikh gurus. Indeed, the terms *Hukamnama* is a compound of two words: *Hukam*, meaning command or order, and *namah*, meaning statement). *Chaur* is the ritual waving of the whisk over the Guru Granth Sahib; *Ardas* is the prayer that frames all forms of worship and also signifies the end of the liturgical process; *Kirtan Sohila* is the night prayer; *prashad* is a sacramental food made of ghee (clarified butter), flour and sugar; *Sukh Asan* is the nightly ritual performance in which the Guru Granth Sahib is wrapped in cloth and *Kirtan Sohila* is recited during a ritual procession that accompanies the Guru Granth Sahib to the *Sach Khand*, the room dedicated to housing “the guru” for the night.

the *granthi* is carrying out the *Akhand Path*,<sup>3</sup> while these young women lead the communal worship for forty men and women. They are discreetly joined by another member of the community, who occasionally intervenes with a few gestures, or a suggestion of a few words during their recitation. This event is taking place for the first time. It is the result of numerous trials and is organized by a group of Punjabi Sikh *amritdhari*<sup>4</sup> girls who were born or raised in Italy. One of these young women explains:

The idea came from us girls ... for some time we wanted to do something like this ... During a [summer Sikh] camp [we girls proposed] ... the idea but [so far] ... we were never able to achieve it ... I was about to graduate ... and I wanted to do something different, unique ... I know my friends have a party, [they give] “confetti” [sugared almonds] ... [I thought] of doing something original that could bring all the girls together ... [I wanted to] do ... something all-female, to be able to put us in the practice of [*Guru*] *seva* too and to integrate and show that we girls are there, to show it not only to ourselves but also to the *sangat*, that has the habit of seeing only male *sevadars* [volunteers].

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

This paper reflects on the role of women in Sikhism in theory and social practice, starting from a case study. The normative discourse widely shared in Sikhism affirms the equality between man and woman before God, the equal possibility of liberation, the opportunity to perform the same roles and functions in religious practice and, for both genders, to manifest their devotion to the guru through the performance of every kind of *seva*.<sup>5</sup> However, observations of other Italian gurdwaras present a very different reality: Men and women hold distinct roles and there is a clear division of tasks that implicitly promotes a gender-based hierarchy. Nevertheless, this relational structure is increasingly being challenged, particularly by young women born or raised in Italy, that is resulting in intergenerational tensions. Compared to their mothers, these young women want to develop a different Sikh identity, one which is considered acceptable and compatible with the Italian social and cultural context. Some of the women I met understood female participation in all types of religious *seva* as an attempt to overcome gender inequalities.

In the next section, I will try to contextualize these developments within the context of the prevailing characteristics of Indians and Sikhs in Italy and, above all, in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy, the two regions in which I carried out my study. I will later refer to some contributions in the literature on women in Sikhism to clarify my initial hypotheses and the questions upon which I concentrated my empirical observations. In the fourth section I outline the methodological choices adopted during this empirical research. I will then present the results of my study and, in the conclusions, offer some final considerations.

## 2. Prevailing Characteristics of Indians and Sikhs in Italy

The Sikhs in Italy have become the second-largest community in terms of their numbers in Europe after Great Britain, according to recent research, and; therefore, the largest Sikh community in

<sup>3</sup> The *darbar* is the room of the gurdwara in which the Sikh community (*sangat*) meets for religious celebrations. It is distinct from the *langar* hall, which is where food is distributed. The *granthi* is the caretaker of the Guru Granth Sahib who is responsible for the performance of a series of daily rituals, while *Akhand Path* is the continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib which is recited over a span of 48 h. *Akhand Path* usually begins at 10:00 a.m. on a Friday and ends on Sunday at 10:00 a.m., during which the worshippers alternate with the *granthi* for the recitation of scripture every few hours.

<sup>4</sup> *Amritdhari* Sikhs are those who have been initiated to the *Khalsa* brotherhood and that follow a precise code of conduct (*Rehat Maryada*).

<sup>5</sup> The role of *panj piare* is a disputed issue within mainstream Sikhism. According to tradition, guru Gobind Singh, during the Vaisakhi festival in 1699, presented himself to the crowd of devotees with a drawn sword, asking who, among his followers, would sacrifice himself for their guru (McLeod 1996). Only five men came forward (known as the *panj piare*) and this is at the origin of the exclusion of women from this role. According to Jakobsh (2014, 2017), this has prohibited women from contributing to Sikh ritual life in significant ways, as *panj piare* must be present in all central rites and ceremonies. Exceptions to the exclusion of women as *panj piare* can be found within groups outside of the Sikh mainstream such as 3HO Sikhs, also known as Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere and others.

continental Europe (Denti et al. 2005). However, numbers differ considerably, ranging from 25,000 to 100,000 devotees, due to the absence of an official census and to the different criteria used to estimate them (Thandi 2012; Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2006; Gallo 2012; Bertolani 2013). Moreover, Sikhism has become part of the Italian religious landscape because most Indian immigrants in Italy come from Punjab, a region where, according to the 2011 Indian census, the Sikhs are the largest religious community, amounting to 57.69%.<sup>6</sup>

Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto (in northern Italy) and Lazio (in central Italy) are the four regions where the historical settlement of the Indians (Table 1) and, consequently, of the Sikhs, has taken place.

**Table 1.** Indian residents in the various Italian regions and percentage distribution at 31 December 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Italian Regions	Indian Residents	%
Valle d’Aosta	75	0.1
Trentino Alto Adige	2157	1.4
Friuli Venezia Giulia	2260	1.5
Lombardy	46,274	30.5
Veneto	14,693	9.7
Piedmont	4863	3.1
Emilia-Romagna	16,790	11.1
Tuscany	6476	4.3
Liguria	1911	1.3
Marche	4025	2.7
Umbria	1569	1
Abruzzo	910	0.6
Lazio	29,162	19.2
Molise	575	0.4
Campania	7992	5.3
Puglia	3842	2.5
Basilicata	998	0.7
Calabria	4579	3
Sicily	2046	1.3
Sardinia	594	0.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>151,791</b>	<b>100</b>

The opening of the first gurdwara dates back to the early nineties in the province of Reggio Emilia in Emilia-Romagna (Bertolani 2004).<sup>8</sup> This has given impetus to dynamics of religious rooting which have extended—in different ways and times—to other Italian regions, fostering a progressive manifestation of Sikhism in public space (Gallo and Sai 2013). In the last twenty years, a process of gradual institutionalization of the Sikh religious community in Italy has occurred, with the opening of various gurdwaras (today about forty) in addition to the inauguration of two national associations,<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Official data are accessible from the site: [http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Religion\\_PCA.html](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Religion_PCA.html) (last access: 20 January 2020). In Italy, it is estimated that the Italians who converted to Sikhism are minimal, about one hundred, mostly living in the urban areas of Rome and Bologna and generally linked to the “3HO” (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) or Sikh Dharma movement, which was officially founded in the USA by Yogi Bajan (1929–2004) and subsequently spread throughout the United States and Europe through the practice of meditation and *kundalini* yoga (CESNUR 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Elaboration conducted on ISTAT data, accessible from the site: <http://demo.istat.it/> (last access: 23 June 2019). The data are based on citizenship. They do not include the Indians who have accepted Italian citizenship.

<sup>8</sup> A gurdwara is per definition is a place in which the Guru Granth Sahib is installed and can be temporary or permanent.

<sup>9</sup> The “Associazione Sikhismo Religione Italia”, based in Castelgomberto (province of Vicenza), and the “Italy Sikh Council”, established in 2007 and based in Cortenuova (province of Bergamo).

directly tied to Sikh claims for recognition from the Italian State, a request that has not been successful thus far (Bertolani and Singh 2012).<sup>10</sup>

Table 2 shows an estimate of the number of gurdwaras in the various Italian regions.<sup>11</sup> As is the case with the actual numbers of Sikhs in Italy, it is difficult to account for all the places of Sikh worship because there is no official mapping and, above all, because there are regions in which the presence of gurdwaras is precarious and characterized by frequent openings, closures, and displacements, reflecting a characteristic of local Sikh settlements. Furthermore, the number of gurdwaras varies according to the criteria of their definition which may lead to the inclusion or exclusion of certain minorities or movements inscribable in the tradition, but distinct from Sikh orthodoxy, such as the Ravidassi, the Namdhari, the Nanaksar, etc. (Bertolani 2013, 2019; Kaur Takhar 2011; Nesbitt 2011).

**Table 2.** Estimate of the number of gurdwaras in the various Italian regions.

Italian Regions	N. of Gurdwaras
Valle d'Aosta	-
Trentino Alto Adige	1
Friuli Venezia Giulia	1
Lombardy	7
Veneto	3
Piedmont	4
Emilia-Romagna	7
Tuscany	1
Liguria	-
Marche	1
Umbria	1
Abruzzo	-
Lazio	6
Molise	-
Campania	-
Puglia	2
Basilicata	-
Calabria	2
Sicily	-
Sardinia	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>36</b>

According to Ferraris and Sai (2013), in some localities, particularly in northern Italy, Sikhism and the consequent opening of gurdwaras are a resource that has led to increased stabilization and economic and social integration of the Indian minority. This is the direct result of Sikhs being able to elaborate and share two prevailing and coherent narratives of their religious identity with the local communities. On the one hand, Sikhism, as it has been presented to Italians, is a universal religion, respectful of other religions, and is based on the idea of the equality of all men and women before God. The Sikhs present themselves as saint soldiers, ready to fight against injustice and for freedom, democracy and the common good. They refer to their history to support this narrative of their values and their identity, recalling their participation and their sacrifice as soldiers in the British army during the first and second world wars to free the local populations from the oppressors and sustain the birth of the Italian democratic state, similar to local partisans who fought against fascism. On the other hand,

<sup>10</sup> The reasons for the non-recognition are mainly due to the *kirpan* (a curved and small sword), one of the five religious symbols worn by the *amritdhari* Sikhs, since it is considered a weapon by Italian legislation. However, other motivations are also linked to the deep divisions that Italian Sikhs are experiencing and that have so far prevented the creation of a unitary leadership capable of confronting Italian institutions.

<sup>11</sup> The table is based on first-hand information and from the web sites [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhismo\\_in\\_Italia](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhismo_in_Italia), (last access: 26 June 2019) and <http://www.sikhisewasociety.org/templi-sikh-in-italia.html> (last access: 20 January 2020).

Sikhism is presented as a non-threatening religion through a process of ethnicization and reduction to the folklore of practices and objects linked to the *Khalsa* tradition. Daggers and swords, present in religious processions (*Nagar Kirtan*), on the occasion of the religious festival of *Vaisakhi* held every spring, are explained to the Italians as martial symbols and as harmless ritual objects that belong to a religious tradition along with colorful clothes, turbans, uncut hair and beards, spicy food and Punjabi music (Bertolani 2015; Gallo and Sai 2013; Sai 2009).

These positive self-narratives have been used by Italian Sikhs to differentiate themselves from other religious minorities of immigrant origin. As Jakobsh (2015) states, the definition of one's identity is a process which is carried out through the comparison not only with the majority group but also with other minorities in a given territory. The Italian mass media often stereotype Muslims "bad migrants", bearers of cultural and religious traditions that are antagonistic to Christian identity and oppressive towards women (Frisina 2013). In an equally simplistic interpretation, the Sikhs tend to present themselves as the "good migrants" that work hard, pray, fight for justice altruistically and respect women. These representations have proved effective as in newspapers they are often described as a cohesive community of harmless farmers, steeped in a religious dimension of life (Bertolani et al. 2011). Actually, social reality is much more complex. The Punjabi Sikh community in Italy is characterized by profound and multiple internal differentiations that are linked to the rural or urban contexts in their country of origin, caste, social class, migratory seniority, age, and gender, as well as to the resources and socio-economic opportunities present in the various Italian territories of settlement.<sup>12</sup>

In Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, regions in which I carried out my research, the Sikhs are well integrated socio-economically, especially in the agricultural sector. Moreover, they are well organized from a religious point of view, given the presence of numerous gurdwaras in the region that provide religious, cultural, social, and historical continuity. Like Indian Sikhs in other European countries (Myrvold 2011; Jacobsen 2011), there is a strong tendency among the first generation of Sikhs in Italy to combine religious and ethnic elements when organizing functions in gurdwaras, and, to perform services to the Guru Granth Sahib according to ritual patterns that are followed in India. Similarly, Sikhs have maintained the distribution of Punjabi food in the communal kitchen (*langar*) and the practice of voluntary service (*sewa*). The organization of these social and religious activities tends to enact traditional power relations between genders that originate from Punjabi and Indian traditions. These last stem from patriarchal social structures that seem to have little to do with the original message of Sikh sacred scripture.

### 3. Women in Sikhism in Theory and in Practice

Within the Guru Granth Sahib, both male and female images and metaphors for "Akal Purakh", the divine, are used by Sikh gurus (Jakobsh 2014, 2017). The divine is understood as transcending every binary and category, moving beyond an exclusively masculine-gendered image of a monotheistic,

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<sup>12</sup> To highlight some socio-demographic characteristics of Sikhs in Italy, I will refer to the population of Indian residents, the only one with official data available. The first settlements of Indians in Italy date back to the end of the 1970s. Indian immigration is; therefore, a recent phenomenon and is still unbalanced due to the greater presence of men (about 60%) compared to women. If we consider the employment status of the Indians as a whole in 2016, 52.7% of them between 15 and 64 years is regularly occupied. The main sectors of economic activity for them in 2016 are industry (34%) and agriculture (30%), as for example vegetable growing in Lazio, Puglia, Calabria, and Campania, and bovine breeding and dairy activities in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy. According to official data (MLPS, Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2017), this last rate is particularly high if compared to other non-EU workers (reaching 5%). Nevertheless, Indian employment status is lower if compared to the average of non-EU citizens and this is explained considering the difference between the male (76.2%) and female (18.1%) employment rate. Indian women are, in fact, much less prevalent in the labor market, even when compared to women of other non-EU communities. The low incidence of employed Indian women brings about that the inactivity rate stands at 39.8%, a value that is higher than other control groups. Moreover, 9.9% of Indians in Italy are in the category of the so-called NEET, which includes boys and girls between 15 and 29 years old that are "Not in employment, Education and Training" (MLPS, Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2016). The young Indian women represent 63.4% of the category (while on the total of non-EU NEET, women are 46%); this may be an indication of particularly difficult social integration processes for girls, or of a lack of family investment in favor of secondary and professional training courses that would encourage girls' economic autonomy.

patriarchal God. Sexism and taboos against women, female pollution, menstruation, and sexuality are rejected and the female body is celebrated in its creative power. Apart from these gendered understandings from the Guru Granth Sahib, during the late nineteenth century a process of female identity construction by the Singh Sabha reform movement took place. Trying to distinguish Sikh women from Hindus and Muslims, this reformist effort redefined and re-imagined the role, status, and history of women in Sikhism and provided a narrative of gender equality that seems to have little historical foundation, but which has been widely diffused in the Sikh imaginary, becoming part of an identity representation within the current normative discourse on Sikhism. More recently, the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (the ethical code which was published in 1950 by the SGPC)<sup>13</sup> contains a series of provisions aimed at combating forms of female oppression which can be traced back to the Indian tradition: it bans dowries, prohibits infanticide (especially of females), and allows the remarriage of widows.<sup>14</sup> This code of conduct—by defining Sikh religious identity, correct behavior, proper ways of conducting birth, marriage, and death rituals—also enshrines non-gendered practices and leadership roles. Indeed, women are allowed to serve as *ragis* (musicians) and *granthis* (the readers and custodians of the Guru Granth Sahib) and; therefore, to take on leadership roles within gurdwaras (Jakobsh 2006, 2014). Though their heads must be covered, they can read the Guru Granth Sahib in public, receive initiation into the *Khalsa* through a ritual process that is identical to males, and can also be part of the *panj piare* who administer it (McLeod 1997).

The Guru Granth Sahib, Singh Sabha reformist attempts, as well as the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* are; therefore, radically innovative with regard to the relations between genders. However, they are lodged within a patriarchal social structure, with the consequence that much of their revolutionary reach has been set aside in everyday interpretations and social practices over time (Kaur Singh 2014; Jakobsh 2017; McLeod 1997). This includes the very identity of the divine, conceived initially as without substance or gender and as entirely transcendent, but to which gender identity has been attributed through social practice. Indeed, according to Jakobsh (2014) the use of the term “Sahib” for the Guru Granth denotes a male perspective, as it is an honorary title reserved for men. Furthermore, the Sikh gurus themselves often referred to the divine as “Master” or “Lord”, that is, with masculine epithets. All the gurus were males; although they have clearly refused to divine status, yet due to the authority of their religious message they have often been identified as God’s representatives (Jakobsh 2017). During colonialism, some scholarship maintains that the British produced a hypermasculine male identity by emphasizing the “martial” character of the Sikhs and massively recruiting them in their army (Kaur Singh 2014). This identity was attributed to the *Khalsa* brotherhood, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal social structure and paternalistic attitudes toward women who were considered instead to be repositories of family prestige and honor, and; therefore, as objects of control, particularly women’s bodies and conduct, by male family members. In other words, a masculine identity founded on bravery and prowess in battle and on physical strength was consolidated, while the feminine instead came to be defined by virtues such as modesty and submission, respect, and preservation of male authority. As a consequence, even today, the public and the privileged traditional role of men translates into social superiority, “with the result that male domination is reproduced in the family, home, and Sikh society at large” (Kaur Singh 2014, p. 620). As regards religious practices, and although there is no official priesthood in Sikhism, in India as in Sikh diasporas, women are tacitly discouraged from conducting public ceremonies (Jakobsh 2006, 2017; Singh 2006). They may perform an active role in devotional practices at their homes, or, in all-women gatherings, while men usually lead the main worship services in gurdwaras.

<sup>13</sup> Kashmir Singh’s essay (Singh 2014) explains the role and origins of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), while Fenech (2014) provides a historical perspective on the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*.

<sup>14</sup> According to Jakobsh (2014), this ethical code is much more far-reaching than other early prescriptive texts, that focused for the most part on male identity and ritual life and were contradictory or silent about women’s inclusion into the *Khalsa*. the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* is available also in English at: <http://www.gurunankdarbar.net/sikhrehatmaryada.pdf>.

In recent years, religious studies have engaged with discussions on the existing gap between normative ideals and praxis, referred to as a “lived religion” approach (Nyhagen 2017). Instead of concentrating predominantly on the study of religious institutions and organizations, this approach considers the experience of religious persons in everyday life (Orsi 2003), assuming that people have an active and reflexive role in changing and negotiating their spiritual practices and beliefs, as well as engaging with institutional forms of religion. It also assumes that religion is not merely a private or individual phenomenon. On the contrary, religion is always linked to the social and relational contexts in which individuals live and act, giving its adherents a sense of belonging. This approach allows the study of “what people *do*” with respect to religion (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, p. 94) and to consider people’s agency and reinterpretation, concentrating on praxis as a patterned configuration of action, experience, and meaning.

Starting from these assumptions, I analyzed religious and mundane practices in a number of Italian gurdwaras. In particular, I studied the distribution of *seva* tasks and official roles, both religious and secular, between men and women in gurdwaras (for example the responsibility of *granthis* or presidents and members of the leading committees) and, finally, women’s forms of agency to introduce changes in those social and religious activities. My attention was mainly focused on the processes of collective re-signification of some spiritual practices and of female engagement in them, in overcoming the potential distance between religious norms and their concrete application in the social contexts studied.

I decided to focus my analysis on *seva* in gurdwaras as a central aspect of Sikhism and as a set of activities considered very important by all my female interlocutors. The concept of *seva* can be translated as “selfless service”, which is performed individually or collectively not only in the gurdwara, but also beyond, as means to realizing and manifesting the gurus’ teaching in the social world. *Seva* is also understood as acts of worship as well as a complete surrender to the guru and God (Myrvold 2008; Murphy 2004). Some forms of *seva* fulfill the role of maintaining, managing, and general material functioning of the gurdwara, including offering of service to the community (such as liturgical, the distribution of food in the *langar*, the transmission of Sikh history and Punjabi language and culture), and the overall care of the Guru Granth Sahib, considered a living guru by Sikhs. In the more established Italian gurdwaras, some of these activities are carried out by paid staff (for example the *granthi* who takes care of the Guru Granth Sahib, the cook who guarantees the constant functioning of the kitchen, etc.), while in the smaller ones it is the *sangat* that carries out all the necessary functions. In all gurdwaras; however, devotees are encouraged to participate in religious life through *seva*, according to their capabilities. Therefore, the gurdwara “is entwined with the principle of *seva*” and “the meaning of a gurdwara . . . is in the words of the Guru Granth Sahib, and the practices of the people who put their perception of those words into action” (Canning 2017, p. 69).

#### 4. Data Sources and Methodology

I conducted qualitative analysis from May to November 2019 in five gurdwaras in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy, precisely in one of the two gurdwaras of Parma, and in those of Novellara and Correggio (province of Reggio Emilia), of Casalecchio di Reno (province of Bologna) and of Covo (province of Bergamo). Thirteen women, including nine *amritdharis*, were involved through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Eight of them were between the ages of 18 and 25 who were part of the so-called 1.5 generation: They were all born in India, emigrated as children, and attended school in Italy. Five of my interviewees were first generation migrants and were around the age of 40. All of them came from villages or rural areas in Punjab. When I met my female interlocutors, seven of them were gainfully employed, four were students, while two women were housewives.

In particular, I conducted the first focus group in the gurdwara of Parma with four young women: They were all between 20 and 25 years old, and three of them were *amritdhari*. The second focus group was conducted at the home of one of my interlocutors in Casalecchio di Reno and involved four women in their forties, two of whom were *amritdhari*. Both focus groups were engaged through a series of open queries and other in-depth questions, aimed at stimulating a discussion on the role of women in

Sikhism, on the importance of *seva* in *gurdawaras*, and on the actual involvement of women in *seva*, starting from the experience of my interlocutors. I also conducted five semi-structured interviews at different times with the president of the gurdwara of Correggio (an *amritdhari* woman in her forties) and four additional young women. Two of them were part of the group that had organized the celebration for the Nanak's *gurpurb* in Covo, while the others attended the gurdwaras of Novellara and Parma.

I selected my interviewees through the snowball sampling technique (Samoggia 1989; Ferruzza 1988). In this case, snowball sampling consists of identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers on to other potential respondents (Cipolla 1991). This type of sample is particularly useful in the case of research conducted on specific populations which are difficult to reach through other sampling techniques, or may be vulnerable or part of an impenetrable or isolated social grouping. It offers the advantage of facilitated initial contact between the researcher and members of the sample and is based on the assumption that the individuals belonging to the group know each other (Atkinson and Flint 2001). In my case, this sampling technique seemed to be particularly suitable, as I wanted to conduct explorative research on a specific group (*amritdhari* and *non-amritdhari* women attending gurdwaras) within a religious and ethnic minority (the Sikhs) in northern Italy. Nevertheless, the nature of similarity within social networks may mean that people who are isolated or have different characteristics are not included in the sample. To avoid this outcome, at the beginning of the construction of the sample, I identified women who were *amritdhari* and *non-amritdhari* of different ages and with different migration backgrounds, asking them to refer their friends, acquaintances, or relatives who wanted to participate in the research. I identified my contacts by going to the gurdwaras. Only in one case, I was introduced to an interviewee by an Italian friend. Data collection was also carried out through participant observation and numerous informal interviews with women as well as men. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and integrated with a series of field notes that I wrote during the whole research period. I conducted a qualitative analysis of the collected material, isolating the recurring themes, the answers to the most important questions, and the exchanges of opinions, even divergent, during the focus groups. Through the qualitative content analysis, I identified two main themes: The participation of women in various forms of *seva* and the varied importance attributed to this participation by women of different ages and backgrounds (first and 1.5 generation Sikh women).

This is an exploratory paper. As such, it does not claim to be representative of the whole reality of Sikhs or Sikh women in Italy, but rather it will present some hypotheses that require further investigation.

## 5. Sikh Women in Italy: Some Considerations Starting from a Case Study

All my female interlocutors described the gurdwara in numerous and positive ways: It is “an important place”, “like a home”, “a meeting and a reference point for the community” where “one feels welcomed”, and part of a wider community. However, they also expressed criticisms concerning the ways that activities were organized, which they perceived as reproducing power relations between men and women and between the “old” and “new” generations of Punjabi Sikhs (Myrvold 2011).

The main area of controversy concerns *seva*. In speaking about the distribution of these tasks between men and women, my informants distinguished *Guru seva* from other types such as *langar seva* and gurdwara management. The first involves a physical closeness and concrete and emotional relationship with the Guru Granth Sahib by the worshipper who is performing *seva* in the *sangat*. *Guru seva* implies a public performativity and, consequently, a community role and a certain degree of symbolic power, religious authority, and personal prestige. To perform this type of *seva* it is necessary to acquire a series of skills, and to know the prayers and all the rituals surrounding the care of the Guru Granth Sahib. Given that in the diaspora there is no official training on these issues, usually the *granthis*—who are in charge of looking after the Guru Granth Sahib—come from India. The members of the *sangat* who wish to perform *Guru seva* must; therefore, learn through practice, supporting the *granthis* during daily rituals. Other types of *seva*—such as cooking, cleaning, serving in the *langar* hall, teaching the Punjabi language or *gatka* to children—are distinguished by different degrees of public



performance. Consequently, although in the official and normative discourse all forms of *seva* are considered to be equally important, in reality they do not seem to imply the same degree of respect. Finally, the management of the gurdwara is another type of *seva* that involves organizational skills and involves significant administrative acumen. The gurdwaras in Italy are generally the headquarters of registered cultural or religious associations which provide for management bodies and formal assignments. The *sangat* periodically elects people who carry out these tasks.

### 5.1. The Participation of Women in the “Guru seva”: Reasons, Interpretations, and Practices

With few exceptions, in the gurdwaras where I conducted my study, I noticed a clear separation of roles between men and women, which also corresponds to a certain separation of space. Men are almost always engaged in the *Guru seva*, alongside the *granthi*, while women are more often occupied in educational roles (for example, they teach children Punjabi) or they are busy inside the kitchen preparing *roti*. Therefore, men are typically engaged in tasks which are in “front” of the *sangat*, while women occupy hidden spaces. Even in the *langar seva*, it is the men who usually serve the food in the *langar* hall, clean it, and remove the dishes, while women generally stay in the background. In other words, within the gurdwaras, numerous physical and symbolic thresholds exist that regulate access to space according to gender. This differentiated access to these spaces reproduces the traditional spatial organization still widespread in Sikh families in Italy, which corresponds to a division of tasks between the sexes: The unpaid work of family education, care, and reproduction in the domestic space is delegated to women, while men perform more public tasks that mirror paid work outside the home. In the gurdwara, this involves the customary separation of genders, starting with the *darbar* and the *langar*, where men and women sit together but are separated by carpets that act as thresholds and delimit space, and where only men may invade the feminine spaces for the distribution of *prashad* or food. This separation is carried out and is even enforced by mothers who are in charge of transmitting norms and values related to Punjabi culture to their daughters. The daughters; however, struggle to understand their meaning, as the social, scholastic, working context, and daily life in general in Italy does not reflect this separation of genders, as one of my young interlocutors testified:

[Sitting separately in the *darbar* is a habit]. It happened to me that once . . . I sat on the side of the boys and my mother told me “But go on the other side!” And I said “Why do I have to go to the other side? I sit here!” And she said “No, here the males have to sit, go to the other side!” I had to move, but I didn’t understand why.

(J. K., 22 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

In the performance of *seva*, the separation between men and women usually determines an absence of mixed groups of *sevadars* and the exclusion of women from certain types of *seva* in the *darbar* and the *langar hall*. This organization seems to reflect the need to protect the respectability of women, traditionally considered to be the custodians of male and family honor (Jakobsh 2015; Mooney 2006). During my research, the issue of the protection of women outside of the physical and metaphorical space that they traditionally occupy to carry out tasks of *seva* is an aspect that was also identified by men:

Usually, [men] make up stories not to let [women] perform [“Guru seva”]. They say] “No, she’s a woman . . . she cannot pray, she cannot be *granthi* . . . ” It’s always a question of respect also towards the woman . . . to leave her alone to practice [this kind of *seva*] when men come and go . . . in the sense that you must also be a little careful from this point of view . . .

(V. S., 20 year-old *amritdhari* man, informal conversation)

According to some of my young interviewees, the control of space and certain types of *seva* in gurdwara reflects a hierarchy of roles and reproduces different degrees of power between genders. Consequently, the gender-based monopoly of specific tasks appears strategic. In some of the gurdwaras, women are encouraged “in words” to engage in the *Guru seva*. In practice; however, it is challenging for them to take part in its performance. On the one hand, there is a lack of availability of men to

teach women prayers and religious rituals; on the other hand, the preservation of personal reputation forces women to interact with other men only in larger groups. In this regard, a young *non-amritdhari* woman noted:

[With a friend of mine] I discussed the role of women within the gurdwara and Sikhism ... [for example, regarding] *seva*. [We were considering the fact that slowly] the girls are becoming a little more integrated, they are giving themselves a boost to be able to do even ... “men’s stuff” ... In my opinion in the *langar* it is much easier to do this, but if you go “up” [upstairs, in the *darbar*, near the] holy book, it’s almost impossible ... They would almost never allow it ... those who are the “*baba ji*”, that is [those who are] around the sacred book, who take turns and everything ... [and who are] however supported by the men who attend the temple ... Because [otherwise] I think that ... patriarchal society would collapse! In the sense that, within each Indian family [as well as in the gurdwaras], the one who commands ... is the man, the father of the family.

(K. K., 23 year-old woman, interview)

Appealing to the sacred texts and the normative discourse that affirms the absolute equality between men and women in Sikhism, some young women I interviewed manifested their agency and tried to regain possession of spaces and roles from which they have been traditionally excluded, distinguishing between religious (indisputable) and cultural (transformable) practices. The desire to perform *seva* in the gurdwara is interpreted and publicly motivated as the religious duty in obeying the words of the Sikh gurus and as an effort that women must make to overcome their own inner resistance and insecurities. While explaining her participation in the public event which took place in the gurdwara of Covo, a young woman says:

The primary motivation [in wanting to do *Guru seva*] is Guru Mahraj ... what he is telling us and teaching us through everyday prayers, with the *Nitnem* and with all the teachings he gave us? The teaching is: women and men are on the same level ... I wonder: am I really? Do I really feel [like men]? And to answer this, I got involved to demonstrate to myself and to respect the order of Guru Sahib ... Because [he] said that we are at par and therefore why not do it? Why not get in it? Why not show the other women, the other girls, that “you too can do it”? ... In practice ... so many girls are afraid [of doing *Guru seva*] ... you must first of all have the desire to do it within yourself, and you must have a path that allows you to practice and perform it during a particular event [in gurdwara] ... I want [this desire] to be born even in the hearts of other girls, [I want] that they don’t feel inferior and that they are involved ... to show that we [women] can also do all these things.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

Thus, in the opinion of some of my young interviewees the feminine commitment to *Guru seva* becomes a quasi-political sphere, an initial activity within the religious community, and a tool through which to promote a new role, a different collective female identity and relations between the sexes based on real equality, not only in the gurdwara but also in the family and society in general.

I hope that women will succeed ... [to integrate] more and more, not only in the part of the *langar seva* but also [in the *Guru seva*] ... because this would go hand in hand ... with the cultural aspect because in Indian families women do not have this power and authority. If they acquired it within religion, perhaps even the family model would change slowly ... The cultural and religious aspects are connected, closely connected, and one depends on the other.

(K. K., 23 year-old woman, interview)

In the aspirations of the young women I met, this goal of equality also means achieving the objectives of a rotation of *seva* tasks between men and women, a sharing of skills in mixed groups of

*sevadars* and common access to all spaces in the gurdwara. In other words, it is precisely in overcoming the physical and the symbolic thresholds in the occupation of all spaces and in the execution of all tasks by women and men that gender disparities can be changed. A young woman explains:

For me this thing . . . that the kitchen is run only by women, I don't really like it. I want there to be men . . . [I wish] that women who are in the kitchen can come in and do "*Maharaj seva*"<sup>15</sup> and [men] . . . who are inside can do *seva* in the kitchen because . . . my wish is to be able to see us women that we can do all the roles, as well as the men because equality means just that.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

According to some of my interviewees, it is the woman who must first authorize herself to perform the "*Guru seva*" in the gurdwara, regardless of what other people may say. Some women who wish to participate in this activity wish to be trained but dare not ask for guidance from those (males) who hold this knowledge. Therefore, they initially may join a group to be able to learn in the company of women, with the hope of then practicing in mixed groups. However, this desire may be still absent among many first generation migrant women who prefer not to raise controversial questions and among young women, who may not wish to be in conflict with their parents. Indeed, when young women insist on playing a more active role in the gurdwara, the differences in views and expectations between mothers and daughters regarding women's appropriate behavior and roles are likely to emerge. One of my young *non amritdhari* interviewees reports:

I asked my mother: Why here in this gurdwara no woman does *Sukh Asan*? And she answers "Of course women can do it, there is no difference!" so why does no woman do it? And she replies: "there are men, [they already do it]!" That's it! . . . It is just a habit, isn't it? [It is like saying]: "They are doing it, that's fine, why do we have to question? . . . Why do we have to tire ourselves?" But I wonder: if both can really do it, why [even women] don't? It's the mentality, isn't it? We are used to it, let's continue like this! . . . [We must] break . . . these constraints . . . Let's say we're equal, but . . . until [we don't do the same things], we don't show that we're [really] equal . . . When there is a change in Sikhism, this is not a change of the system, it is a change in oneself and in saying "Okay, I don't have to think about what other people think . . . it's something I can do, I just do it! . . ." But in my opinion [for me and my sisters-in-law] . . . it will be different in five or ten years: maybe today we wonder: [what will others think of me?] . . . maybe when you are 30 or 35, you don't think anymore about what other people may think . . .

(M. K., 25 year-old woman, focus group)

It would appear that when there is a desire for change regarding *seva* practices, intergenerational conflicts between women may transpire. According to anecdotes from my interviewees, they were "sent to the kitchen with the other girls" by their mothers or aunts when they want to do *Guru seva*, often with the justification of "not being pure enough" during the menstrual period. A young *amritdhari* woman reports:

[This belief blocks women a lot], but I don't think there should be . . . because they put it in our heads that . . . "No, if you are like that you should not [touch the Guru Granth Sahib] . . ." and then one thinks "No, maybe I do a sin, maybe if I do it, maybe this and that happens . . ." Honestly . . . [I hope] that the woman joins the man in all the roles . . . until we let ourselves be heard, nobody tells us "Come on, I'll give you everything ready!" right? [I hope] that one day we will all be able to understand the importance of this thing and we will be able to

<sup>15</sup> The term "*Maharaj seva*" was used by one of the girls that I interviewed to refer to *Guru seva* or the religious service close to the Guru Granth Sahib. Since "*Maharaj*" means "king" or "ruler" and is a political epithet, while guru is a spiritual one, I chose to use the expression *Guru seva* throughout the text.

go on . . . It is true, it is difficult to convince the generations of our parents and wait for the men of this generation to give us everything, but I think it will be much easier [for future generations] . . . .

(A. K., 29 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

However, these statements should not suggest that only young women want to engage in the *Guru seva*. As I noted earlier, I attended a service at a gurdwara led by women. It took place in the gurdwara in Covo during the celebrations of Nanak's *gurpurb* and was organized by a group of girls who, for months, trained together and prepared themselves to conduct prayer and to perform rituals in front of the *sangat*. According to some of these girls, it would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of a group of first-generation Sikh migrant women, who gathered weekly in the local gurdwara to pray and perform *Guru seva*:

They gave us a lot of support, [and urged us to go on] . . . we [young women] are still a little inexperienced, they gave us experience because every Wednesday [in Covo] . . . all these ladies gather to do *Path*, the *Sukhmani Sahib Path* . . . They are five or six [women] . . . and they do everything: *Ardas*, *Hukamnama* . . . and this is something that has been going on for two or three years . . . Not many people come because it is on Wednesday afternoon . . . [due to work commitments, most of the *sangat*] cannot come . . . Every evening there is a family who brings food for the [*granthi*] who lives [in the gurdwara] . . . On Wednesday it's the turn of one of these ladies. With this excuse, they say: "while we are here, we do *Path*" . . . that's why ladies who live in the surroundings come.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

These words testify to the fact that some Sikh women of different ages are trying to build up their spaces in the gurdwaras through their lived religious practices, in search of compromises amid the normative discourse, traditional customs and their desire for change. The main difference between the first migrant women and the young devotees I interviewed seems to be, above all, in the willingness of the latter to engage in the *Guru seva* not just as an intimate or restricted religious practice for a small group of women, but rather as a collective event to be performed in front of the whole *sangat*, together with the male *sevadar*. In this respect, the *Guru seva* becomes for them a practice of equality between the sexes with a religious as well political import.

In addition to the event in Covo, I also witnessed the participation of women of all ages in the recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib during the *Akhand Path*, *Sukhmani Sahib* and even, though rarely, in the recitation of *Ardas*. In general, according to my observations, female involvement in the performance of the *Guru seva* has always been minimal and has only occurred in the smaller gurdwaras (like that of Covo, Parma and Casalecchio di Reno) that do not have a full-time *granthi* and where there is a lack of organization with regard to gurdwara activities. In all these cases; therefore, female participation is indispensable for the performance of normal liturgical functions and *amritdhari* women are generally involved if no men are available.

Female participation in *Guru seva* also depends on whether women were *amritdhari* or not. A tacit and implicit hierarchy seems to exist in that only *amritdhari* devotees are permitted to do *Guru seva* in front of the *sangat*. This criterion is the same for women and men and was vigorously defended by some young women, though much less often by first-generation Sikh women. It was justified by the belief that being *amritdhari* offers certain guarantees of higher "purity" due to a precise conduct of life. In this regard, a young woman explained:

*Guru seva* . . . [like performing] *Sukh Asan* or reading *Gurbani* in *sangat*: these [things] can only be done by an *amritdhari* [person], simply because an *amritdhari* has a daily routine and conduct that can allow him [or her] to go there. Let's say [that this] gives a sort of guarantee that it is not a person who smokes . . . who does not go to steal . . . if you are *non-amritdhari* it may be that you eat meat or other things that do not allow you to go to the *sangat* and to do

this *seva* ... In the gurdwara, where it is also about giving an example to the children ... [If you are not an *amritdhari*, the fact of doing *Guru* *seva* in front of the *sangat* takes away the value of the *amritdhari* person, so it absolutely must not happen.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

This distinction was not questioned by the *non-amritdhari* women themselves, even by those who reserve an important place in their lives for religion:

She [indicating her *amritdhari* friend] can read [the *Guru Granth* in the gurdwara], I cannot ... because I'm not *amritdhari* yet ... [I don't feel like doing it]. At home, I read the *Path* ... *Japji Sahib*, *Sukhmani Sahib* ... but there [in the gurdwara] ... I feel that it is a place only for *amritdhari* [people] ... .

(D. K., 38 year-old woman, focus group)

In fact, the distinction between *amritdhari* and *non-amritdhari* seems to resume the exclusion thresholds claimed by some men towards women, according to which—to perform the *Guru seva* in the gurdwara—the devotees must know how to read the *Guru Granth Sahib* and know specific rituals, a skill-set which is more common among *amritdhari* Sikhs. At the same time, this distinction adds to the differences between genders and generations, increasing the degree of complexity within the Sikh community.

## 5.2. Women's Participation in Official Roles in Gurdwara: Obstacles in the Relationship between Genders and Generations

In addition to *Guru seva* and *langar seva*, I also observed another type of service, particularly with regard to the management of gurdwaras and the distribution of official roles between men and women. This includes, for example, taking on responsibilities as *granthis* or as presidents and leading members of committees. Women were not in charge of these official assignments in most of the gurdwaras I encountered, except for the Sikh temple of Correggio, whose president is a woman. This is perhaps the only example in all of Italy because women are unlikely to get involved in this type of task. According to the narratives I gathered, the reasons are many. On the one hand, in speaking of first-generation migrant women, they prefer not to come forward in gurdwaras as they know they will encounter some ostracism by the *sangat*, mainly by older men imbued with a traditional mentality. As a first-generation *amritdhari* woman explains, highlighting the commonly divergent views between Sikh women of different generations on the issue of power relationships:

Our guru has given more importance to women, but [some] men think that man is more important ... [During meetings in gurdwara] even if men talk, I intervene to say my opinion, I don't care! ... What is right, I say it directly, even if they think badly of me ... because I want to tell the truth ... Then, some say "But no, you're a woman, let men talk!" What does it matter if I'm a woman? It does not matter! What I see well, I say it well ... At home ... I am the same as my husband, and I am not "woman" ... [I am] like him because I work, I have a scooter and I go where I want ... Now the new generation ... does not behave like the first generation that thinks men are superior and women ... should be "submissive" ... [Young women] say ... "If women can go to work outside the home, why can't they do the same things men do?"

(S. K., 40 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

On the other hand, those who take on formal roles often encounter opposition from their own families, which are anxious to preserve the honor of the family as well as the integrity and respectability of the woman who finds herself acting in predominantly male contexts. A first-generation *amritdhari* woman who is the president of the gurdwara of Correggio explains:

When I was [elected] president [of this gurdwara], my family was very angry with me, yes! "Why are you doing it? Now you go among men! Then you will have lots of things to do! Many bad words will come out . . . " But the members [of this committee] respect me a lot, this didn't turn out to be a problem . . . My family [was worried], but I wasn't. I go when I want, and that's it!

(S. K., 38 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

However, the main obstacle in taking on formal responsibilities in gurdwaras seems to be linked to the rigid division of labor within the family. Domestic chores and the raising of children are almost entirely the responsibility of women, even when they are working outside the home. They consequently complain of not having enough time or of not being able to afford absences from home:

Many times they told me that "Look, we will put you in the gurdwara committee . . . " I say no, I don't have time because I have to think about the needs of the family, the children, the work . . . if I had free time maybe I would do it . . . A man does not have to do housework, he does not look after his children . . . [who does it?] It is the woman, isn't it? Then [men] have more time . . .

(S. K., 40 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

For the same reasons, it seems virtually impossible for women to become *granthis*, as noted by a 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman:

"The woman has never managed to free herself from all these . . . [family duties] [it is easier for a man] because this means just living in gurdwara *sahib* and always being close to [Guru Granth Sahib] to do *seva* . . . ".

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

Many first-migrant Sikh women experience a drastic reduction in their autonomy once they are reunited with their husbands in Italy, compared to the relatively autonomous conditions in which they found themselves in their country of origin. These women play an important role in the migratory project of the first Sikh migrants in Italy: Through their care and educational work they support family reproduction and their (unpaid and hidden) work allows for male economic success outside of the family. Most of the first migrant women I met have rural origins in India. In Italy, they settle in the countryside since their husbands are engaged in agriculture, particularly in breeding and cow milking, activities that are related to the production of Parmigiano Reggiano or Grana Padano (two products of Italian gastronomy). Migration and isolation in Italian rural areas favor a loss of autonomy for these women; the absence or scarcity of public transport services and the difficulty in reaching and attending Italian language courses are factors that further limit their chances of movement, self-determination, and acquisition of skills useful in the migration context, increasing their dependence on their husbands. For many first-generation migrant women, the prevailing social environment becomes the gurdwara; in many cases, they do not speak Italian correctly even after many years of residence (Bertolani 2011; Provincia di Cremona 2000). Therefore, for some of them, their arrival in Italy has led to a reduction of personal independence and the strengthening of the division of roles in the family. Some young women I interviewed describe their mothers as much more autonomous in India, where they moved about freely and interacted with the outside world on their own, even if their primary role was that of a housewife. From the perspective of these young women, the difficulties that their mothers are experiencing in Italy are one of the causes that prevent first-generation migrant women from engaging in the formal management of the gurdwaras.

To be president [of a gurdwara] you must be able to go to the bank, be able to go to the accountant . . . all these things, which are things that so far our women [did not manage to learn because having to take care of the family] . . . they couldn't get out [of the house] . . .

But this doesn't mean that in the future a girl . . . cannot become president, on the contrary! . . . I think that in India women are more autonomous because . . . for tasks like bringing the child to school, talking to the teacher, going to the bank, going to the post office, to the market, to the supermarket: in India women have no language problem . . . .

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

As far as second-generation women are concerned, many of them would have the necessary skills to perform roles in committees, yet they still do not feel authoritative enough to be able to confront their male elders. For some of my young interviewees, the comparison between their behaviors and those of Italian women in similar situations leads to criticism of their female identity. In their opinion, unlike many Italian women, they still do not view themselves as behaving equally to men, even if they are living in a social and cultural context which is different from that of the country of origin.

If I went [to committee meetings], nobody would stop me, but it would be difficult to take the floor between them because maybe they are already discussing things they know better than me . . . If I think of Italian [women] in a meeting, they say what they think, maybe we [Punjabi] women sometimes don't speak out what we feel because we say "Oh well, what [old men] say is right" . . . this is not something related to Sikhism, it is just a . . . mentality typical of the Punjabi culture . . . today for a woman it is difficult to express one's point of view in a committee . . . and then again here in Italy it is different, if we think in India . . . this thing simply does not exist, that a woman goes to a meeting!

(M. K., 25 year-old woman, focus group)

Although there are many differences within the Punjabi Sikh community, there seems to be a double cleavage that concerns, on the one hand, the hierarchical relationship between the genders and on the other, between generations. In the second case, sometimes it is the mothers themselves who—for fear of the community's judgment on their maternal role and their daughters' respectability—may adopt traditional models of evaluation and behavior, reproducing a patriarchal order.<sup>16</sup> This can generate conflict with regard to the role of women in the gurdwara as well.

I'd be curious to know the answer to a question like "Why can't a woman be a *granthi*?" Because . . . I would like my father to change some things, because maybe sometimes . . . he says "No, other people don't do this!" It's not right that if others don't do, he must necessarily imitate them, right? . . . Things will change a lot from our generation onwards . . . because we . . . also want to contribute . . . The desire for change [in us] must be so much to overcome these little things . . . We are already a different generation [from that of our mothers]. Our mothers . . . their answers are very different [from ours], because in any case they lived both in India and here, and therefore there is a difference . . . .

(M. K., 25 year-old woman, focus group)

Some young women experience a generational gap; unlike their mothers, they have studied in Italy, know the Italian language, work, drive cars, and aspire to non-traditional roles in the family and the gurdwara. At times they feel that they are not living up to the expectations of their parents and relatives, as they continue to develop a female identity that challenges the "Punjabi mentality". These expectations

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<sup>16</sup> It should be remembered that the *granthis* that serve in the Italian gurdwaras have normally been trained in India in the educational Sikh institutes that are almost exclusively designed for men. On the issue of the training of *granthis* and "Sikh preachers" in diaspora see (Myrvold 2012). The questions of separation of the sexes, of the inopportunities for a woman to live alone in a building like the gurdwara to perform the functions of *granthi* and of the need for men to protect the female reputation and honor are only hinted at here and they deserve a separate study. For an overview of these issues, see (McLeod 1997).

may take on the appearance of implicit forms of coercion, which are difficult to detect and define. While trying to elaborate original kinds of agency and change, these young women are also concerned about not losing their place in the family and the Punjabi Sikh community at large (Thapan 2015).

### 5.3. Women's Agency

Evans (2013) and Wilson (2013) argue that the concept of "agency" is strongly imbued with liberal assumptions related to western culture and male gender ideals. There are in fact preconditions of individualism, self-sufficiency, voluntarism, and free action underlying the idea of agency or autonomy. These assumptions run the risk of devaluing the initiative of women living in oppressive social contexts and judging them incapable of owning their own agency. According to Madhok (2007, 2013), this idea of autonomy and agency suffers from an "action bias" since it focuses solely on the action preferred by the individual, in isolation from the context in which it should be enacted. It also emphasises individual sovereignty and emotional separateness, ignoring other value codes which allow and even favour interdependence and relationality. The sociality of persons in their real-life context is therefore disregarded. Madhok (2007, p. 344) suggests that "persons do not always act in accordance with their preferred desires or preferences" and, considering the process of action, we have to "shift our focus from the act itself to the reasons behind the actions". This shift enables a redefinition of concepts of agency and autonomy in relational terms, starting from the idea that people's identities are made up of several contextual factors. This conceptual shift allows for the recognition of implicit forms of coercion. It is these implicit forms, according to Evans (2013), that affect women at a time when, for example, the pursuit of their personal aspiration might mean abandoning those relational bonds or cultural practices that make up an individual's sense of identity. In the stories of the young women I interviewed, the wish for equality between women and men goes hand in hand with the need to continue being part of meaningful relationships. The actions taken to pursue one's desire are; therefore, always subject to compromises and incremental objectives. This includes concerns regarding the role of women in the gurdwara, but also outside of it. A young woman noted:

In our house [in the rural village where I come from] ... my grandfather still commands ... So ... [this summer when I returned to India and] I told my grandfather that I didn't want a dowry ... because [usually] the girls get the dowry and the males a piece of land and I asked for a piece of land ... He was a bit shocked! ... because I told him that "I will never marry, so I want a piece of land." This discussion became a problem in the family! Everyone started telling me ... my uncles, my aunts ... that this is not beautiful, that this is not according to our culture and tradition, etc. I had no support from anyone ... It's like this in a family ... Women continue to practice the same rules ... they cannot get out of this circle ... In India it's impossible ... there in the village, I too had to do what they said ... For my safety and my well-being, I had to do as men said, which was not good for me ... [for] the Western part in me.

(K. K., 23 year-old woman, interview)

Some young women I interviewed took the opportunity afforded by this research to manifest their agency. Those who were involved in the focus group at the gurdwara of Parma transformed their participation into an occasion to continue discussions among themselves. The external gaze of the researcher allowed them to relativize consolidated and taken for granted practices. They raised difficult questions regarding the discrepancies between theoretical statements and social practices of Sikh women to trigger collective dynamics of awareness-raising, self-criticism, elaboration, and cultural change. They used research participation as an opportunity to make some claims within their community and to challenge the religious practices established in the gurdwara regarding *sewa*,



trying at the same time not to generate a lacerating and destructive conflict with their families. All this resulted in an unexpected request.<sup>17</sup> I wrote in my field notes:

At the end of the focus group in the gurdwara of Parma one of the participants told me to leave her the sheet with the questions I asked them, as she wanted to ask them to her father. Moreover, some of the participants proposed that I organize another meeting that could be extended to the rest of the *sangat*, to talk about the same issues with older women (especially with their mothers) and with men who should be “more experienced” from a religious point of view. My impression is that the discussion in the group has brought out a desire for change that has been mutually legitimized in this small group, but which now needs a broader authorization, between genders and generations. My position as a researcher has generated a need for clarification on some issues, indeed one young woman said that “sometimes . . . it is an external person who points it out [things we had not thought about]”. Shortly after, in the corner of the *langar*, I found one of the participants talking animatedly with her father. The urgency of the confrontation highlighted the need to find answers and to ascertain that she had not been deceived by her parents as regards the issue of equality between men and women in Sikhism. There was a need to look for a plausible explanation for the discrepancy that exists between the theory and the order of things.

In the following weeks, a meeting took place with the rest of the *sangat*. In my field notes I wrote:

I am struck by the spatial arrangement in the room: One of the girls who participated in the focus group and I are asked to be seated in front of a row of adult *amritdhari* men. I feel her tension, while she translates for me from Italian to Punjabi. The other women, children, and young people sit in a group on my left and listen in silence. I feel as though I am in front of an examination board. I introduce myself and ask my questions: Can women be *granthi* in Sikhism? Can they do the *Guru seva*? Are there women in this gurdwara who do it? I am assured that women in Sikhism are equal to men, and it is; therefore, possible for them to do all the functions, except for being *Panj Pyare*. The reason lies in the fact that “no woman stood up when guru Gobind Singh asked for the five heads at the time of the founding of the *Khalsa*.” A man who normally helps the *granthi* in his duties; however, objects that to perform the *Guru seva* one must know how to read the Guru Granth Sahib, be *amritdhari*, and must have studied and possess specific skills. I ask if the women who already participate in reading shifts during the *Akhand Path* in the gurdwara meet these requirements. At this point, the men begin to discuss among themselves in Punjabi. Then, I am told that it is not necessary to have “attended a school” and that, if women so wish, someone can teach them how to do *Guru seva*. Five *amritdhari* women timidly raise their hands. They say that they would like to “do everything”: The rituals of the *Sukh Asan* and the *Prakash*, the recitation of the *Path*, the *Ardas*, the *Sukhmani Sahib* and the *Hukumnama*, as well as the managing of the *rumallas* (clothes) that cover the Guru Granth Sahib. The meeting ends. Later, in the *langar*, one of the women tells me that she is very satisfied and surprised, because she did not think that “men were so open-minded.” A few days after this meeting, one of the young girls tells me that the *granthi* has gone. I still wonder if my questions and the answers that have emerged in the *sangat* have contributed to his leaving the gurdwara.

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<sup>17</sup> My position as a woman researcher, white, Italian, older than the young women I interacted with, who involved them in a research on the role of women in Sikhism in Italy, where the language of communication was Italian, are all conditions that initially defined a power relationship with my interlocutors. The focus groups and; therefore, the interaction in group; however, allowed these women to advance their own agency, asking me to organize a subsequent meeting extended to other members of the *sangat*, in some way reversing the power dynamics which are inherent in the research process. On the subject of reflexivity, see also (Singh Brar 2015).

## 6. Conclusions

According to the women I interviewed, each type of *seva* has the same value and importance from a religious point of view. However, in social practice, the *Guru seva* becomes a device of maintenance and affirmation, within the Sikh community in northern Italy, of a power based on gender, and is generally controlled by first-generation migrant *amritdhari* men. This control by male *sevadars* is based on two implicit and tacitly accepted rules, which define symbolic thresholds of inclusion/exclusion: Being *amritdhari* and being able to deal with the Guru Granth Sahib, with little concrete possibility on the part of the women, even if *amritdhari*, to be able to learn the rituals in their gestural and material aspects, precisely because they are scarcely involved in their direct practice. In fact, some women already perform these same religious rituals at home because they have created a domestic gurdwara where they take care of the Guru Granth Sahib or the “Pothi Saroop”<sup>18</sup> every day, performing *Prakash* and *Sukh Asan*, and reciting *Ardas* and all other prayers. Therefore, in practice, these *amritdhari* women may perform *Guru seva* within the family and in the privacy of their home, but rarely in the gurdwara. If this does take place, it is usually between women and not in mixed groups. As noted earlier, women are also more involved in this type of *seva* in small gurdwaras, recently opened and still relatively unstructured, because in this context, their participation is essential for the performance of religious functions. There is instead an almost total absence of women in covering more institutional management roles. In no gurdwara I visited in Italy so far have I ever met a woman who served as *granthi*.

As in other contexts of the Sikh diaspora (Myrvold 2011; Jacobsen, 2011; Qureshi 2013), in Italy questions highlighting inconsistencies between Sikh ideals and Sikh practices concerning the status of women appear to be of significant concern, especially among young women. In this paper, I have described some outcomes that emerged during my exploratory research. They raise numerous other questions which deserve further analysis. For example, all the Sikh women who contributed to the study showed some interest in women’s engagement in religious practices. Therefore, I have not dealt directly with those who have no interest in participating in religious activities because they wish to avoid the conflict that would then arise through questioning some social and religious customs. My sample did not include those women who think that Sikhism is a marginal aspect of their identity, or who believe that to integrate fully into the host society they must adopt a secular behavior, one that might be considered more compatible with the general Italian lifestyle. However, as far as I could see, the local social environment was an essential factor in defining women’s religious engagement. For example, speaking about the importance of getting involved in *Guru seva* by women, one of my female interlocutors said:

The teaching [of our gurus] is: “women and men [are] equal. We now come here to a society where we are asked for this, whether in your [Indian] society this happens or not . . . ”.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

In this case, the perception of the Sikhs by Italian society is evoked instrumentally to carry forward the desire for a change. According to the interpretation of this young woman, it is not so much the abandonment of religious identity but rather its fulfilment (for example, being able to put religious dictates into practice by overcoming cultural boundaries) that would allow Sikh women to be in tune with “Italian culture”, considered fairer in the male/female relationship than the Punjabi one. This result would also confirm the prevailing narrative on Sikhism which was mentioned at the beginning of this essay and that is normally promoted in Italian public discourse by Sikhs, according to which Sikhism is respectful of both men and women, and, considered equal by God.

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<sup>18</sup> The “Pothi Saroop” is the Guru Granth Sahib published in two volumes.

Another question that deserves further research is whether the *amritdhari* identity may promote a stronger feminist consciousness among Sikh women. The fact that among my female participants there is a greater number of *amritdhari* women might suggest that this is the case. However, as I noted earlier, many differences also emerged within this group regarding the desire to actively engage in *Guru seva* and the meaning that was attributed to this devotional act. On the other hand, at least three of the non-*amritdhari* women who joined in the research expressed a strong feminist awareness and a critical attitude concerning the role of women in Sikhism. However, it can also be safely said that when young *amritdhari* women did manage to participate in *Guru seva*, the support (and authorization) of the first-generation migrant *amritdhari* women was a decisive factor.

A few weeks after the end of my fieldwork in some of the gurdwaras that I visited, the involvement of women in the act of *Guru seva* seems to remain on an occasional basis. In one of them, the *granthi* has changed. The new *granthi* appears to be open to women's religious training, though this training has not yet begun. According to one 18 year-old *amritdhari* girl, "the *granthi* is very good and he is also kind, but among women none has the courage to start new things." Yet, another young *amritdhari* woman attending the gurdwara of Covo asserts that "the [*Guru*] *seva* . . . continues very well . . . slowly we girls . . . are routinely trying to do as much *seva* as possible, so as to learn more and more, therefore [on Sunday we are practicing in] mixed groups. Then it always depends . . . on when we are [in gurdwara] or not."

If only concrete results were looked at, it would seem that little has changed, or that each gurdwara is acting on its own terms. Thus, according to each specific context, women's desires to be involved in the *Guru seva* find different degrees of realization. However, from the perspective of lived religion and women's agency, it is clear that these forms of agency are not intended as rebellion or action in the strictest sense, regardless of the relational and identity repercussions on the people involved, but instead as varied positions and negotiations that come to the fore through religious practices. These are slow changes that are only gradually accepted and implemented. They derive from a female awareness that is contextual, progressive, and subject to continual reinterpretations.

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