VAW Policy Regimes in Italy:
An Analysis Across Regional Governments and Women's Centres

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Abstract

The paper analyses the consequences of bureaucratisation processes in the context of violence against women (VAW) policies in Italy. Specifically, the paper proposes an analysis of VAW policies in three Regions (namely, Emilia-Romagna, Apulia, and Lombardy), with the aim to study anti-violence centre (AVC)'s activists and workers' representations of VAW policies in their daily practices. We will focus on the regulation processes of the selected regional administrations, while trying to answer the following questions: to what extent have policies that originated from feminist movement(s)activities and practices ended up in very strict bureaucratisation processes? What are bureaucratisation processes consequences on the activities and practices of AVCs, from the perspectives of the centres' activists and workers?

Keywords: VAW policies, Bureaucratisation processes, Anti-violence centres, Regional contexts.

Introduction

In Italy, the evolution of the State intervention to combat violence against women (VAW) has been linked both to the activities of grassroots movements, namely feminist and women's groups, and to the role of international, supranational, and European conventions and agreements. VAW public policies only started in the mid 1990s, comparatively later than many other European countries (Corradi & Stöckl, 2016). The process seems quite slow, with a few early stages of transformation and long periods of apparent inactivity (Cimagalli, 2014). One of the breakthrough years in terms of policies was 1996, when the law on sexual violence (law no. 66/1996) was adopted: VAW entered the State's political agenda mainly as a "securitarian" topic used to mobilise consensus (Pitch, 1998), but also as an international issue, following the Beijing Declaration (1995) and the

Istanbul Convention (2011).However, the country is still lacking an organic law on VAW at the national level, and the regulations at the regional levels are fragmented and heterogeneous (Virgilio, 2017).National laws[1]have been interpreted as highly referring to the criminal code, asking women to denounce, even forcing their self-determination or producing risks of secondary victimisation or over-victimisation, favouring the penal dimension in defining intervention to support women (Re, Rigo & Virgilio, 2019; GREVIO, 2019). Regulations at the local level do not always adopt a securitarian perspective, providing a framework of principles that supports different regional systems of law enforcement and VAW prevention.

The Italian legislative vacuum on tackling VAW is partly covered by the definition of policy-planning tools and the implementation of intervention programs at the national level. In the recent years, there has been a willingness to regulate the system of services supporting women, through the adoption of National Action Plans (as the current "National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women 2017-2020"[2]) and the approval of the so-called "Agreement between State and Regions on minimum requirements for anti-violence centres (AVCs) and shelters" in 2014[3].

Well before the public administrations, in the 1970s, Italian women and feminist groups became active both in the public sphere and in daily interventions, by supporting women who were experiencing violence[4]. In particular, as of the late 1980s and in the early 1990s, AVCs grew up within women's and feminist groups mainly in the central–northern Regions of the country (Creazzo, Pipitone & Vega, 2011). Totally or partially self-funded, these centres were both political actors, fighting for the public recognition of male VAW as a structural and cultural problem, and women-oriented counselling centres with their own telephone helplines, offering different activities: information provision, counselling, psychological and legal consultancy, employment advice, and, some of them, also shelters. They often shared a working methodology based on a

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[1] See figure 1.

[2] Adopted in 2017. Retrieved from http://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/testo-piano-diramato-conferenza.pdf, April 16, 2020.

[3] DPCM 27 November 2014. Retrieved from https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/02/18/15A01032/sg, April 16, 2020.

[4] In order to avoid secondary and over-victimisations, we do not use the term "victim" to refer to women experiencing VAW (Walker, 1979; Pederson, 2009).

trusting and empathetic relationship between women (Corradi & Bandelli, 2018). They usually avoided proactive interventions, meaning that most of the support was oriented towards aiding women to make their decisions by themselves. By laying their action on the recognition of VAW as a structural problem, their activities politically signify their action, as they are aimed at challenging the patriarchal culture and making power relations and gender inequalities more evident. In recent years, the system of support services for women experiencing violence has become increasingly heterogeneous: State and Regions' interventions, and the consequent allocation of new resources, have been joined by new social actors, both private (not-for-profit) and public. Not all of them have a feminist or, at least, a women-oriented background.

The international legal framework points out "public obligations at the core of action to combat VAW: if, on one hand, it calls on states to assume responsibility, on the other hand, it risks encouraging regulatory interventions that force and over-determine women's will and time" (Re et al., 2019). Following Abraham and Tastsoglou's (2016) conceptualisation, state intervention on VAW can mainly be analysed through two intertwined, yet clearly different practices: criminalisation of VAW or regulation through funding. In this article, we will analyse the latter, considering the national and local policies that regulate the activities and practices of the Italian system of anti-violence services. We will focus on those policies at the regional level that plan and regulate interventions to support women, by defining funding mechanisms as well as the intervention criteria and results to be achieved. Namely, by analysing different local systems that support women experiencing violence within the Italian context, we aim to answer the following questions: which consequences does the bureaucratisation of VAW policies have on the activities and practices of AVCs, from the perspective of the AVCs' workers? To what extent has a policy that originated from feminist movement(s)activities and practices ended up in very strict bureaucratisation processes? Since many AVCs build their services on a "women's-relationship" methodology, respecting women's desires, times and confidentiality, do these policies have an effect on this kind of methodology?

Due to the Italian administrative system[5], VAW policies (as well as other policies) are implemented both at the national and regional level: therefore, regional governments and local authorities, following national rules and principles, reserve some autonomy to make decisions on, for instance, how to distribute funding as well as how to formally recognise women's centres and shelters. However, at the same time, they have the power to influence the policy-making debate at the national level. Therefore, Regions are the most appropriate level of observation for VAW policies. It is in fact at regional level that the governmental instruments are identified: mechanisms that bind or encourage different forms of coordination (e.g. plans, protocols), regulatory frameworks (e.g. standards), and criteria for resource allocation (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2004). In order to answer our research questions, we have identified three Regions, specifically Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna in the north of the country, and Apulia in the south. The three Regions have been selected in light of their VAW policy development, since they all have been very active in implementing, particularly in recent years, a system of support services, although with different strategies. Treating the qualitative study conducted in 2019 in thirty-five AVCs and six shelters during the ongoing ViVa project[6], and a desk review on regional documents concerning the topic, we analyse and discuss the representations of the consequences of VAW policies on AVCs' practices.

In the next paragraphs, we will firstly discuss the theoretical approach and the methodology of this study. We will then describe the regional anti-violence policies. Finally, the AVCs workers' comments on anti-violence local networks' coordination and their own methodologies will be analysed in order to depict some of the consequences of VAW policies' bureaucratisation in Italy.

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[5] The Italian Constitution recognises twenty Regions and two autonomous provinces, which are territorial authorities with legislative and administrative power over specific areas.

[6] The ViVa Project "Monitoring, Assessment and Analysis of the Measures to Prevent and Fight Violence against Women" is conducted by IRPPS-CNR in collaboration with the Italian Government Department for Equal Opportunities. The project aim is to gain in-depth knowledge on general and specialized anti-violence support services. It is programmed to last three years: from December 2017 to December 2020. More information available at https://viva.cnr.it.

1. Theoretical framework

Male VAW is recognised, even in international legislative documents[7], as based on historically unequal power relationships between men and women.VAW is often experienced by a woman and is acted by a man close to her (Bartholini, 2013), because of the social, structural, and symbolic power connected to gender (Bimbi, 2014). It prevents the full affirmation of women's citizenship, affecting their freedom and self-determination. VAW impacts on many dimensions at social, economic, and political level; therefore, interventions against VAW require particular instruments (Walby, Towers and Francis, 2014) and solutions, such as jobs, housing, healthcare, and social support, part of, but not limited to, social policies.

The public and private services supporting women who experience VAW can be perceived as tools for empowerment. This term, according to Kabeer (2005), refers to the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them: therefore, empowerment entails change and social transformation. The concept of empowerment, then, incorporates a political meaning, and Italian feminist and women-oriented AVCs often put women's empowerment at the heart of their practices.

For these reasons, we define VAW policies as gender-based and different from social welfare ones, since they cannot refer only to social issues and consequently to social policies. They also affect policies for equal opportunities, citizenship rights and health. Policies against VAW, indeed, involve different levels: combating and preventing the phenomenon, paying attention to both the women's and children's safety, addressing social representations, and working on the perpetrators, as well as different other actors. Therefore, VAW policies are not only wider than welfare ones, but also gender-based specific: they need a strong capability to understand

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[7]At the international level, it is worth to mention: a) The General Recommendation no. 19 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW (1992), which interprets gender-based violence as a "a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men"; b) The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993), which recognises VAW as a human rights violation; c) The Istanbul Convention (2011), which recognisesin its preamble "that the realisation of *de jure* and *de facto* equality between women and men is a key element in the prevention of violence against women".

the complexities of the problem and multidimensional approaches in planning measures. There is the need to recognise the socio-cultural nature of VAW as well as its consequences on women and on society more in general.

According to Cimagalli (2014), several peculiarities come to light within traditional public policies, related to various aspects. First of all, the political action has to intervene on a social relationship in which many social actors are involved: women experiencing violence, male perpetrators, significant others (children, relatives, friends, colleagues), and institutions. In addition, the problem requires lengthy, non-emergency interventions, which make for a non-linear project involving different services. Moreover, women experiencing violence are often defined by social services as "difficult users", "volatile", or "not aware or determined" (Larrauri, 2008). Women are extremely heterogeneous, with different needs and requiring different services, long and complex paths, constantly adjusted if not interrupted, which are difficult to standardise and difficult to be framed within the organisational/technocratic logic of the social services, increasingly based on the reliability of beneficiaries, typical of "welfare-to-workmodels"*(Mozzana, 2020).*

Thus, analysing the VAW public policy-making process in Italy means taking into consideration, in an historical perspective, the various processes and practices that involve different actors, first of all those self-organised groups that have taken charge of VAW issues, such as women's and feminist organisations.

International comparisons reveal different paths of VAW policy development across Europe, although general patterns can be identified (Corradi and Stöckl, 2016). Public intervention in supporting women experiencing violence, through both funding services and by adopting specific laws, is often connected to women's and feminist movement(s) activities. Studies conducted in other countries (Abraham and Tastsoglou, 2016) have revealed that legislation and policies directed towards funding services may risk distancing AVCs practices from their women-oriented and feminist methodology. The rise in bureaucratisation and regulation processes, as well as the increase in competition for funding among programmes, have resulted in a standardisation of interventions and practices that have de-gendered and de-politicised the discourse on VAW, weakening women-oriented interventions (ibid.). Moreover, as the feminist

debate on bureaucratisation has pointed out, bureaucracy is often hostile to women (Martin, 2013).Without a doubt, a situated and contextualised analysis of each country is needed, combined to the study of related anti-violence policy system (Hearn, Strid, Husu and Verloo, 2016): nevertheless, these considerations seem valid for the Italian debate on the anti-violence system, too.

Furthermore, the distribution of services supporting women throughout the country still seems of great concern. The lack of an organic legislative and policy system in Italy and the VAW policies regionalization risk producing multiple systems of protection and support to escape violence, as a consequence of the fragmentation and heterogeneity of the measures undertaken. If, on one hand, those policies are closer and permeable to the needs of the territories, on the other hand, "risks emerge when, in the logic of decentralization, the rights that only the state's regulatory capacity can guarantee, remain entangled" (Saraceno, 2005, p. 60).

Our analysis is driven by questions that relate to the consequences of "operationalisation" produced by VAW policies on women's centre practices, as well as the relationship between bureaucratisation processes and the risk that AVCs will be merely confined to the role of service suppliers, weakening their goals of social change. In fact, many AVCs propose not only to give hospitality and support to women experiencing violence, but also to promote "the transformation of the cultural system from which violence is generated" (*Emilia-Romagna AVCs Network*, 2014)[8].AVCs are not, neither they consider themselves, mere "services", but they are political actors that try to build a world without asymmetries between women and men and with greater freedoms and opportunities for everyone, challenging the cultural causes of VAW.

As we will describe later, some AVCs believe that some governmental tools and measures risk of technicalizing the discourse, weakening their political action, triggering to re-signify contexts, practices and actors themselves. Despite numerous differences, the bureaucratisation of VAW recalls another bureaucratisation process which involved women's family

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[8] "*Dalle parole ai fatti*". Retrieved from https://centriantiviolenzaer.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/com-stampa-25nov14.pdf, April 16, 2020.

counselling, the other experience born within the Italian women's and feminist movement(s) in the 1970s (Bonichi and Trifiletti, 2018)[9].

The tendency to deal with VAW issue in a de-politicised manner may therefore lead to de-gender anti-violence policies, where "de-gendering" does not only refer "to the practice of using ostensibly non-gendered terms to denote categories known to be gendered" (Hearn et al., 2016, p. 556), but to something deeper that has to do with the primacy of patriarchal culture. Therefore, going back to Abraham and Tastsoglou's (2016) argument, there is a constant need to analyse and challenge the relationship between gender, violence, state and local authorities, and AVCs, bearing in mind the specificities of each context, being it national, regional or local, as we will try to do in the article.

2. Methodology

This analysis is conducted with data and reflections collected during the ViVa Project research activities.

For this article, we conducted a comparative desk review of documents, laws, regional plans, and legislation from the selected Regions. Simultaneously, we analysed qualitative data collected from thirty-five AVCs and six shelters selected among the 335 AVCs and 264 shelters, mapped in 2018 by IRPPS-CNR in collaboration with ISTAT (Misiti, 2019).These centres and shelters were selected from all over Italy, considering their experience (in terms of years of activities) and the type of management, either public or private non-profit. When they were managed by a private body, we also considered whether the "managing institution" worked exclusively on VAW or was also active in other fields. Through the interviews, we analysed AVCs daily practices and routines, as well as the symbolic representations under pinning their activities. For privacy

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[9] The family counselling, born as political places and territorial intervention services starting from the issue of sexual and reproductive health, but more broadly of women's liberation, seem to have been emptied of their task: if the national analyses evaluate positively the quantitative diffusion of services in the area by number of inhabitants, the budgets relating to the provision of services, the staff employed, and also the decrease in social inequalities in the national territory are seen negatively (Bonichi and Trifiletti, 2018).

reasons, the AVCs data are not recognisable, and their location is mentioned as "Region A, B and C".

The analysis reveals huge heterogeneity in terms of practices as well as the symbolic and political meaning of the interventions and sometimes tensions related to the role of the AVCs, the relationships with public actors, and the women who have experienced violence.

Public regulations and specialised services: national and regional insights

In the Italian evolution of anti-violence public policies, the relationship among women within the public institutions and the feminist movement(s) and AVCs has shifted from periods when there was a sort of "interpretive community" (Collins, 2010), and moments of harsh conflicts. Without a doubt, it is thanks to the women's and feminist movement(s) that Italy made some progress in the decision-making system, both at the policy's and at the legislative level. Over the years, institutions have developed a process, which has led to the definition of planning instruments and of interventions programmes oriented also at supporting women experiencing VAW. The following figure will present the main steps of the legislative and regulatory frameworks (Fig. 1).

In 1975, the approval of a new family code abolished "matrimonial authority", the power of the husband to apply "means of correction and discipline towards his wife". Subsequently, in 1981 the so-called crime of honour and the "corrective marriage" right were cancelled from the penal code. With the adoption of the law on sexual violence (law no. 66/1996) in 1996, seventeen years after the proposal of the citizens' initiative law by women's and feminist movement(s), sexual violence was recognised as a crime against the person and individual freedom: prior to that it had been placed in the broader category of crimes against morality. Furthermore, in 1998, after the 1997 Prodi-Finocchiaro Directive (7 March 1997), the first anti-violence network was established in eight cities, then extended to eighteen, under the framework of the Urban Programme (Basaglia, Lotti, Misiti and Tola, 2006). In 2001, law no. 154/2001 provided some measures against violence in family relationships. In 2006 and 2014 the Ministry for Equal Opportunities financed two country-wide surveys on VAW,

conducted by ISTAT[10]. In 2006 it funded the 1522 helpline for women experiencing VAW[11]. In the following years, and until recently, the national government emphasised the criminal justice system as a response to VAW[12]. At the same time, after the signing of the Istanbul Convention, ratified by Italy in 2013, the government started to put aside funding for specialised support services. Through these acts, as well as with the approval of national plans and laws on gender-based violence, the urge to prevent and combat VAW has become part of the Italian policy-making system discourse, both at the national and regional levels.

Fig.1 – Legislative and regulatory framework's evolution at the national level: main steps
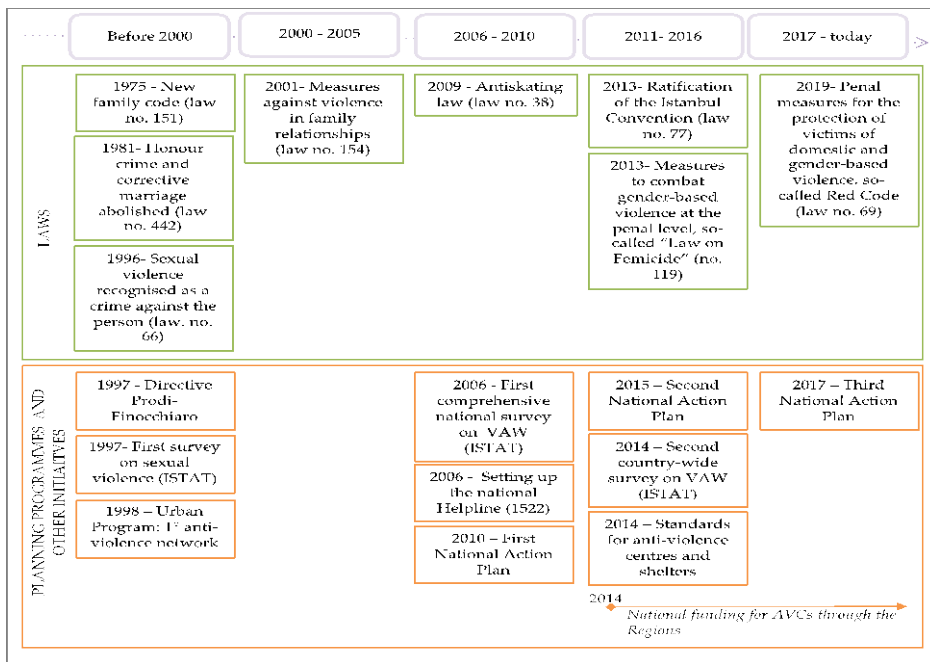
Source: ViVa project, 2017-2020.

Since 2010, Italy has adopted three National Action Plans (NAPs) to combat gender-based violence. Differently from the previous, the last NAP

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[10]https://www.istat.it/it/violenza-sulle-donne/il-fenomeno/violenza-dentro-e-fuori-la-famiglia/numero-delle-vittime-e-forme-di-violenza (accessed on 16 April 2020).

[11]https://www.1522.eu (accessed on 16 April 2020).

[12]Law no. 38, on stalking, in 2009; law no. 119, the so-called "Feminicide law", in 2013; law no. 69, the so-called "Red Code", in 2019.

(2017-2020) was defined through the involvement of several administrations, actors, and civil society organisations.

The funding allocated after 2013 by the State to support and promote specialised AVCs was not directly allocated to women's centres and shelters, but through the regional governments, according to the so-called "Agreement between State and Regions" signed in 2014, which established the standards for women's centres and shelters. When it was approved, it embroiled the anti-violence system in a huge debate, since, as already mentioned, some AVCs believed that it imposed unacceptable requirements and it undermined the political work of the centres, weakening their capacity to operate as actors of change within the society.

Despite the definition of three National Plans and standards for AVCs and shelters at the national level, we are facing a strongly fragmented and heterogeneous panorama. As already discussed, both the state and regional governments contribute to VAW decision-making and policy-making. It is worth mentioning that some regional administrations started to deal with the topic well before the state did: the first VAW law at the local level dates back to 1989, in the autonomous bilingual province of Bolzano, promulgated because of women's and the feminist lobby's activities. Over twenty-five years, all twenty Regions and two autonomous provinces have adopted either laws or regional documents on the topic. The three selected Regions are not an exception to this, although there are some differences among them.

Before moving on to the analysis of the regional institutional contexts, we present some data about the presence of anti-violence centres in the three Regions, collected during the ViVa project[13]. Out of the 335 AVCs mapped all over Italy, in 2017, 28 AVCs were working in Apulia (1,6 AVCs per 100.000 women above 14 years old); 21 in Emilia Romagna (1,0) and 47 in Lombardy (1,0) (Misiti, 2019). Considering the intertwining between regional policies and the opening of new AVCs at the local level, we can identify some differences in the three observed contexts. Indeed, while only two new AVCs have been opened in Emilia-Romagna since 2014 (out of a total of twenty-one), both driven by a public promoter, in Lombardy and

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[13] Although the data refer to 2017, very few differences have occurred in the last years in the three Regions involved in this study. Only in the Lombardy region the number of anti-violence centres increased from 47 in 2017 to 52 in 2019.

Apulia the definition of the regulatory framework and criteria related to funding has been supported by the opening of about one third of the currently active AVCs. Moreover, in all three Regions there is a greater diversification among actors that deal with violence, and many of new AVCs are promoted by actors that do not deal exclusively with VAW.

Fig. 2 – Main laws and regulatory measures at the regional level on VAW
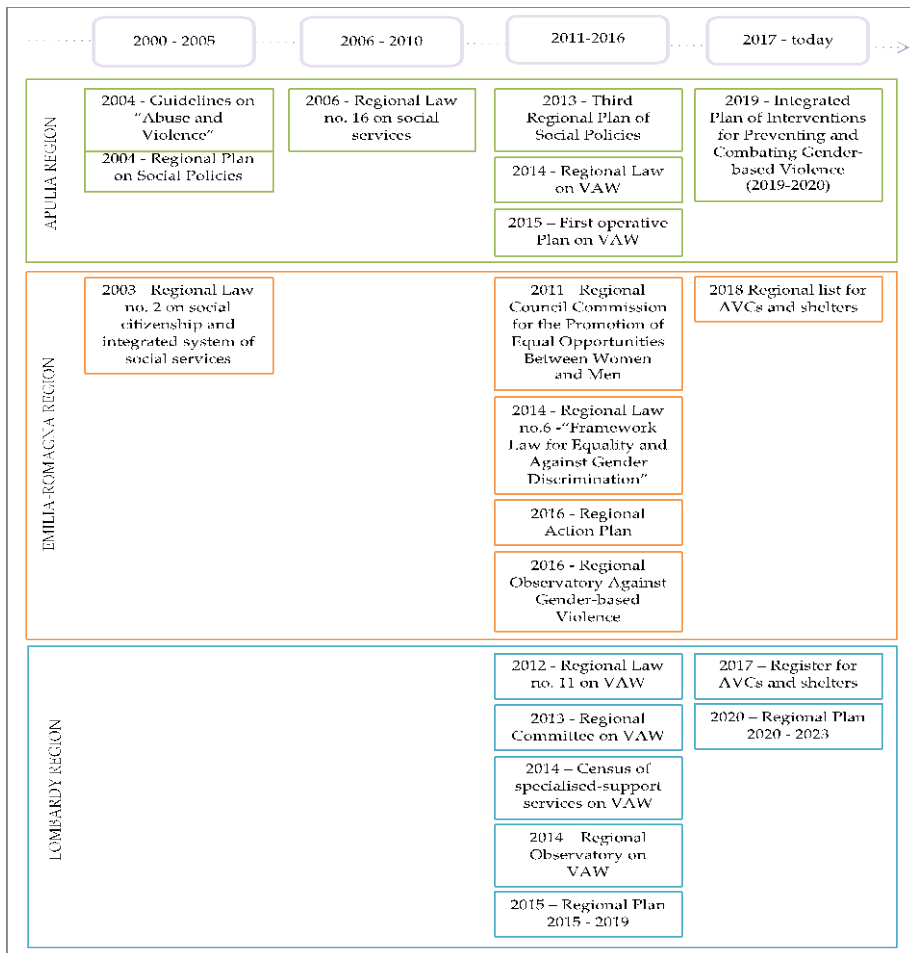
Source: ViVa project, 2017-2020.

At the bureaucratic level, Apulia and Emilia-Romagna started to deal with the topic well before Lombardy did, in the early 2000s. Apulia and Emilia-Romagna have chosen to include the VAW policies among their

social policies, since the beginning, while Lombardy tries to keep them separate. Nevertheless, even in Lombardy, the design and implementation of these policies is largely borrowed from social provisions.

The figure below shows a summary of the development of VAW policies/law in the selected Regions, which will be discussed right after it.

Apulia Region

The regional government of Apulia has intervened several times at the legislative level to regulate the integrated system of welfare and gender policies, in the same way as Emilia-Romagna, recognising more than fifteen years ago the urgency and the need to activate effective tools to combat discrimination and violence. Since 2004, thanks to the "Regional Plan on Social Policies" and the following guidelines on "Abuse and Violence"[14] there has been a call to have an AVC in all the main municipalities, including criteria for building multidisciplinary teams in each local district. In Apulia, as in Emilia-Romagna, the VAW policies were explicitly and strictly connected to social welfare policies: regional law no. 19/2006 on social services[15] established, on the one hand, the types of structures and services to support the social inclusion of women experiencing violence, and, on the other, the "Regional Observatory of Social Policies", including the "Permanent Observatory on Families and Family Policies", which also dealt with violence-related situations within the family.

Although some more specific gender-related measures were adopted in the following years[16], it was only in 2014 that the Region passed a law on preventing and combating VAW, with attention to women who experienced violence[17].

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[14] Deliberation no. 1104/2004.

[15] Retrieved from https://www.isfol.it/sistema-documentale/banche-dati/normative/archivio/legge-10-luglio-2006-n.19/Puglia_Leggen.19del100706.pdf (accessed on 14 January 2020).

[16] Such as law no. 7/2007 on gender-based policies, retrieved from http://www.pariopportunita.regione.puglia.it/documents/10180/0/Legge+regionale+7_2007.pdf/451513ce-a746-4524-93c2-d82eb8c37db8

[17] Law no. 29/2014, retrieved from http://pariopportunita.regione.puglia.it/documents/10180/21256/LR+29+del+04.07.2014.pdf/e4e056bf-6702-4625-a48c-7dcaf33f4878 (accessed on 14 January 2020).

While implementing the regional law and the "Third Regional Plan of Social Policies", the Region approved some guidelines[18] to create a region-wide plan for the interventions and to consolidate the VAW services.

The "Third Regional Plan of Social Policies" (2013-2015) sets the basic operational objectives for planning local and concentrated resources, such as the signing of at least one agreement between the local district of municipalities and AVCs, which had to be authorised and registered in the regional register[19].

The "Fourth Regional Plan of Social Policies" (2018-2020) provides the municipalities with operational guidelines for structuring territorial governance so that territorial anti-violence networks can operate in order to allow adequate and integrated support, and protection for women.

As already mentioned, the Apulian VAW policy design has been structured around the framework of social welfare policies, as confirmed by the last "Integrated Plan of Interventions for Preventing and Combating Gender-based Violence"(2019 – 2020)[20] approved in August 2019, as part of the Regional Plan of Social Policies. Following this approach, AVCs are authorised to work (and economically supported) if registered in the "Lists for public and private social welfare facilities and services". Moreover, to be funded by the Region they need also to have an agreement with local territorial districts.

Emilia-Romagna Region

In 2003, earlier than the other two Regions analysed, the government of Emilia-Romagna adopted a regional law "for the promotion of social citizenship and the realisation of an integrated system of social services"[21],

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[18] Deliberation no. 729/2015.

[19] http://www.pariopportunita.regione.puglia.it/documents/10180/21256/2019-Cav/672438a8-00c1-40ca-89ab-938e25dc7be4 (accessed on 14 January 2020).

[20] Deliberation no. 1556/2019, retrieved from http://www.pariopportunita.regione.puglia.it/documents/10180/994594/PianoIntegratoInterventi_Burp/c0edd49b-00f0-47cf-8c55-1ebc8f0906b1 (accessed on 14 January 2020). The 2019-2020 Regional Plan on gender-based violence clarifies that law no. 29/2014 establishes strict requirements for new AVCs and shelters, in addition to the requirements for social welfare services.

[21] Regional Law no. 2/3003, retrieved fromhttp://salute.regione.emilia-romagna.it/normativa-e-documentazione/leggi/regionali/leggi/legge-regionale-2-2003(accessed on 14 January 2020).

recognising the role of women's centres and shelters, and including them in the social welfare system. The relationship between institutions and women's centres and shelters appears to be ongoing, and has framed regulatory measures since the beginning: in 2011, regional law no. 8 established the "Regional Council Commission for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities Between Women and Men", which, among its first activities, during 2012-13, aimed to understand the work of the AVCs through a sort of "travelling consultation" which involved fourteen AVCs and started to monitor the data on women who accessed AVCs.

However, as is also the case for Apulia and Lombardy, we need to wait until2013-2014 for specific measures and deliberations aimed at recognising women's centres and shelters, underlining the need for a network between public and not-for-profit institutions to introduce effective strategies against VAW and to spread a culture against gender stereotypes. These measures worked as a sort of guideline for the definition of law no. 6/2014, the "Framework Law for Equality and Against Gender Discrimination"[22]. The law takes into consideration some of the instances put forward by the AVCs in the Region, and called for the definition of a Regional Action Plan (article 17), approved in 2016[23]. As for the law, the AVCs were audited, carrying on the participative approach to the law and policy-making activities that has characterised this Region. The plan sets out to strengthen the system of prevention, protection, and support services for women, calls for the establishment of the "Regional Observatory Against Gender Violence" and for the definition of a "regional list of women's centres and shelters". The list was drawn up in 2018 and it is constantly updated: as for Apulia and Lombardy, both having their own AVCs' list, only women's centres and shelters registered in this list can receive public national funding through the local authorities and entities. In 2018 minimum

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[22] Approved on 27 June 2014, retrieved from: https://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblealegislativa:legge:2014;6(accessed on 14 January 2020).

[23] Deliberation n.69/2016, retrieved from: https://parita.regione.emilia-romagna.it/violenza/copy_of_norme-violenza/piano-regionale-contro-la-violenza-di-genere/@@download/file/Piano%20Regionale%20Violenza%20di%20Genere%202016.pdf(accessed on 14 January 2020).

regional standards[24] for AVCs and shelters were also defined, complementing and integrating the national ones.

Moreover, the ongoing relationship between the AVCs and institutions is consolidated at the local level too, as revealed by the 2015 agreement between the network of local municipalities (*ANCI* Emilia-Romagna) and the regional committee of AVCs, a further demonstration that gender-based violence policies can be strictly connected to social welfare provisions.

Lombardy Region

Unlike Apulia and Emilia-Romagna, the Lombardy Region only started to deal with VAW after it adopted a specific regional law on the topic in 2012 (law no. 11/2012)[25]. It started out as a citizens' initiative law, thanks to the mobilisation of AVCs and women's groups. Since the Region latched onto the topic in 2012, the process has been relatively fast and consistent. In 2014, a census[26] was conducted on the AVCs in the Region, mapping twenty-one AVCs in order to allocate funding following national law no.119/2013. Since then, the regional government has aimed to promote collaboration between AVCs and other actors involved in supporting women, through local networks which are led by a local authority. Formally, these networks now cover the entire territory. In 2015 a regional plan defined the way that the system of support services had to work[27] and a new plan has been approved very recently (February 2020)[28].

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[24] Measure no. 586/2018 on the creation of the regional list of women's anti-violence centres and shelters defines women's centres as "social welfare and cultural units".

[25] Retrieved from: http://normelombardia.consiglio.regione.lombardia.it /NormeLombardia/Accessibile/main.aspx?view=showdoc&iddoc=lr002012070300011 (accessed on 14 January 2020).

[26] Study conducted by Éupolis Lombardia (2014), "*Supporto tecnico scientifico all'attivazione della l.r. 11/2012 'Interventi di prevenzione, contrasto e sostegno a favore delle donne vittime di violenza'*".

[27] Retrieved from*:* https://www.regione.lombardia.it/wps/wcm/connect/f9d29d94-70ff-4f3b-80ad-e78c45337aaa/Dgc_894_10-11-2015_Piano_Antiviolenza.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-f9d29d94-70ff-4f3b-80ad-e78c45337aaa-meSrnUJ(accessed on 14 January 2020).

[28] Retrieved from: https://www.regione.lombardia.it/wps/wcm/connect/4717d7d6-ce0e-4af5-b878-4ec8e78472e0/DCR_XI_999+del+25.02.2020_Piano+Quadriennale+violenza+2020-2023.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-4717d7d6-ce0e-4af5-b878-4ec8e78472e0-n4Xt5Ed (accessed on 24 April 2020).

The involvement of AVCs was greater at the beginning of the policy-making activities. The cited regional law asked for the constitution of a "Regional Committee on VAW" (article 5 of law no.11/2012), which was then launched in 2013[29]:50% of the participants in the committee had to belong to AVCs. Like Apulia and Emilia-Romagna, the Lombardy Region also wanted to regulate AVC standards, establishing a register for AVCs and shelters in 2017[30].

The involvement of and the relationships with AVCs have changed over recent years, producing some frictions that are still ongoing. The consequences of the implementation of these policies by the Lombardy Region appear clearly through an example. In 2014, the Region established a "Regional Observatory on VAW"[31], which collects data on women from AVCs. The regional government asks data requirements allowing the identification of each woman (namely, taxpayer number). This decision created conflicts not only between the centres and the regional government, but also among AVCs that follow different methodologies. To make the request more coercive, the Region attributes economic resources to anti-violence networks in proportion to the number of women's taxpayer numbers indicated: as a result, the AVCs that refuse to do this, in observation of women's privacy and their own methodology, withdraw from the local networks, thus impacting on their resources.

Regional attempts of VAW system's top-down coordination

As it emerges from the above description, all three Regions have demonstrated the willingness to build up a strong policy. In particular, the three selected Regions promoted actions to integrate a system of services and expertise driven by national actions[32].

Specifically, Apulia and Emilia-Romagna have structured some instruments to integrate – yet "incorporate"- the local welfare system and the AVCs through strengthening the relationships between them. Similarly, Lombardy pushed for the integration of services, but through local anti-

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[29] Established with decree no. 10741/2013.

[30] Deliberation no. 6526/2017 and decree no. 6712/2017.

[31] Deliberation no. 2795/2014.

[32] Both the Istanbul Convention (article 7) and the 2017-2020 "National Strategic Plan on Male Violence Against Women" (paragraph 5) call for an integrated approach to tackle VAW, asking for effective co-operation among all relevant actors.

violence networks driven by local authorities. In all three Regions, the instruments used could be summarised as it follows: a) regulatory frameworks with requirements for ACVs and shelters' registration in regional lists, in line with or even stricter than the national ones; b) mechanisms of coordination between different actors; c) requirements for the financing of AVCs, often aimed to support a) and b). For example, Emilia-Romagna asks for precise requirements for AVCs workers' training, interpreting the "Agreement between State and Regions on minimum requirements for AVCs and shelters" in a stricter way; Apulia economically supports only those centres that have a convention with a social territorial district; Lombardy finances only those AVCs that are formally part of a territorial local anti-violence network, guided by a local authority.

Therefore, we can detect that in all three Regions there is a top-down coordination, which take into consideration national measures with the simultaneous proposal of horizontal coordination through the establishment of anti-violence networks.

Even though in the Lombardy Region the conflict among AVCs and the government is more explicit than in the other two Regions, in the three contexts we can detect a sort of clash between AVCs practices, imbued with women's experiences and feminist group actions, and the organisational context that would result from the application of standards, protocols, and procedures, as we will discuss in the next section, by taking into consideration AVCs experiences and voices.

Consequences of government, intervention, and bureaucratisation mechanisms

The AVCs interviewed, in all the three Regions, recognise that collaboration with general services is necessary, as integrated interventions are needed for the implementation of the women's projects. The AVCs have always looked for these partnerships, often exploiting informal networks.

> The network is crucial for the success of women's projects. Some collaboration among actors has always existed. We try to be the leaders of the network, to ensure that the woman, her will and objectives are at the core of the network and that all around her there will be the different professionals necessary for the success of a complicated project. However, there are always difficulties, also because each actor in the network has its own priorities and mission (AVC's activist, Region B).

One of the challenges in working within a local network with many actors consists in building a common language, a shared understating of violence, and, consequently, an agreed decision on possible support-services solutions.

We are part of networks with subjects that see things differently from our perspective and we often find ourselves managing complexities that seem insurmountable to me. For example, in the case of women with children, institutions tend to strictly follow rigid protocols, which are independent from reading the women's stories. But, in a woman's history, you cannot forget the violence (AVC's worker, Region A).

The issue of women-mothers victims of violence is paradigmatic, because while there is the need to protect both women and children, services tend to take women's place in decisions, justified by the rhetoric to protect minors. Therefore, women risk being further dispossessed of their role as mothers even by institutions, when they seek help in a situation of violence. Therefore, this representation is far from the idea of empowerment as entailing change, which tends to neglect the structural nature of VAW as a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men. It follows that we are witnessing a reinterpretation of VAW policies in family and motherhood terms, as also recently pointed out in the GREVIO report on Italy (2019, p. 6). Vitale (2005) already highlighted that the strong connection between VAW and welfare policies risks defining the status of those women who experience violence on the basis of a "domestic" matrix of agency, which confines women to a network of dependencies and family responsibilities. One more chance to underline that VAW policies have to be framed as gender-based ones, since the nature of violence, and its consequences cannot be ignored.

The AVCs recognise the usefulness of formalising the relationships in the anti-violence local networks through specific protocols defining mutual tasks and making public institutions accountable, to keep each actor in its active role through women's projects, even when public institutions' hierarchies change. However, protocols and standardised procedures become "regulating tools" that risk overshadowing the women's needs, because, according to an ACV's worker, procedures seem to prefer professionalised routines for the workers and services over the women's times and desires.

Being part of a local network is helpful (…) If the network aims to offer opportunities to women, it is meaningful to share good practices. However, if we sign protocols that are too strict, bureaucratisation becomes a risk. Also, we collaborate with actors that have a different approach to VAW. The network and resources are at the core of the intervention: the women come after (AVC's worker, Region A).

Analysing the interviews, the risk that work processes will be more oriented towards keeping the procedure correct, rather than towards needs assessment, emerges. This is a challenge underlined by other research that studied the evolution of professional routines in public services, after standardisation processes (Wihlborg, Larsson and Hedström, 2016). AVCs workers fear that these processes may change their practices, which they represent as more focused on women's needs rather than those of other network's actors or professionals that may be driven by different objectives, missions, as well as other organisational and professional logics. Specifically, it is in emergency situations (those that are most often described and regulated by protocols) that the centrality of women seems to be dissolved, because of the urgent need (sometimes apparent, sometimes necessary) to find as soon as possible proper solutions to the situation. It follows that tensions lie on a symbolic level, and not only on a practical one, since the difficulties encountered in collaborating with others are not only related to the need to negotiate between different professional practices and routines, which often have specific objectives and constraints, but also to the potential clash between different conceptions of the problem and the solutions.

We need to keep working with social workers in order to maintain our own methodology (respecting women's times and decisions) towards workers and services that have different missions (AVC's coordinator, Region B).

Standardisation may be useful for workers to have clear references, to not get lost in the situation. However, our assumption is that each project is individualised and is done on the basis of the women's times and needs. If the woman is ready, she does it, otherwise she waits. The woman is always free to decide not to continue the project. The project is defined with her (AVC's worker, Region A).

Women's self-determination is the goal of our support (AVC's worker, Region C).

Protocols and procedures are often standardised according to how public services (such as social services, healthcare professionals, the law enforcement system, and so on) are usually structured and how the users are represented. Therefore, users, including women experiencing violence, are seen usually portrayed by public services as "clients", "victims", with a limited agency, and in need of support (thus controlled), as already mentioned.

3. AVC's methodology facing bureaucratisation

Many anti-violence centres, in particular those with a feminist history, support women through the so-called "women-to-women relationship" methodology: a woman manage to overcome the violent situation or the history of violence, thanks to the encounter with other women, who are experts in gender-based violence, either because they experienced it or because they have been trained and have been working on it. At the core of AVCs practices there are the desires, the needs and the particular times of women who ask for support. All of these must be respected even when they might conflict with the professional routines and the AVC's organisation[33]. The methodology based on the women-to-women relationship, which may conflict, also at semantic level, with the "taking charge of users" approach used by social services.

This approach encounters some challenges while complying with standardised and financeable requests, such as a defined number of meetings, the obligation to report in order to start a support-path or the sharing of victims' personal data between services. These requirements are often part of the professional routines and procedures of social services, of the law enforcement and the health system, and they are taken for granted at the point that, many Regions ask for such requirements to better quantify resources, to assign funding and to tender's participations. But these same requirements seem conflicting with the traditional practices of historical and feminist centres. Therefore, some of the constitutive elements of these AVCs risk of being blanked out and not legitimised when the standards to

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[33] AVCs that come from different histories and have different practices operationalise this methodology in very diverse ways, as we detected during the interviews conducted.

access funding are borrowed from the welfare system, reflecting the classification criteria and technicalities typical of social policies.

The point is that AVCs, as underlined above, are not merely "services", where users/clients go to get support, also if they may be perceived as such, as the quote reveals.

> The anti-violence centre is not a service (...) Nothing is standardised here. It all depends on the goal you set with the woman. It cannot be pre-defined. Every woman has her time, she has her questions (AVC's worker, Region C).

The centre workers also highlight the extent to which the financing system, in itself and by itself, produces standardisation, which risks distorting the methodology of many AVCs, characterised by the recognition of women's decision-making autonomy. In fact, resources are also distributed according to a performance logic that quantifies and monetises certain activities over others (such as psychological and legal support over awareness-raising activities or first-aid needs), with the identification of measurable objectives and indicators (e.g., number of women in care and number of services provided to women)**.**

> Furthermore, some tenders provide for highly standardised activities, with a set number of hours defined in the budget, which makes it difficult to maintain the personalisation that characterises our methodology. The results are assessed with quantitative criteria that often do not take into account either the specificity of the women's experience, or the specificity of the territories or timeframe (such as the economic crisis). Often, these criteria are in conflict with the very same guidelines that that same authority has defined for interventions in this area (AVC's worker, Region B).

Therefore, through standardisation, the AVCs' methodology may not be encouraged, and the AVCs' political action for transformation of the cultural system generating violence risks being disregarded.

4. *Some final reflections: the complexities of VAW policies*

In the last decade, Apulia, Emilia-Romagna, and Lombardy took up the call to develop a policy on VAW by adopting laws, regional plans, structuring a system of services, and developing these services on the ground. The choice and use of policy instruments are devices that both convey representations on

the interventions against VAW and structure relationships between actors. In this article we present some potential consequences of these interventions on the experiences and practices of AVCs.

On one hand, it is certainly crucial that public institutions define and finance actions to combat VAW and support women, since it is a public issue. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the actors' methodologies and interventions in the anti-violence system seems to require some kind of evaluation not only for funding purposes, but also as distributive equity: the aim is to give all women, wherever they live, equal opportunity to access the anti-violence system both in terms of territorial availability, and in terms of services and quality, keeping in mind that projects towards autonomy have to be linked to women's desires and empowerment, not only to bureaucratic logic and practices. Furthermore, inequality and discrimination may be caused among the AVCs, in light, for example, of the criteria on which funding depends. The topic of inequality among services provided is quite debated in Italy, in particular related to the health system (Tognetti, 2013). For the anti-violence system, public administrations seem to be proposing solutions to these inequalities by setting quantitative criteria and standards. One of the objectives of the ongoing ViVa project is to evaluate interventions in order to propose shared methodologies to monitor and evaluate them, and further analysis will be developed in this direction.

On the other hand, we need to pay attention to the regulating processes. Policies taken by authorities are self-depicted on the basis of technical motivations, schemes, and discursive mechanisms (De Leonardis, forthcoming); the technical and procedural dimensions of policy-making are seen as failing to recognise the specificity of the VAW issue, related to gender inequalities and their social-cultural causes, and connected to the risk of blanking out complexities, preventing understanding of the problem, and putting effective strategies in place to combat it. The risk is that this process may de-politicise AVCs' activities, confining them to be mere services-suppliers, similarly to the past experience of family counselling, as AVCs' activists interviews reveal. We are therefore facing instruments and tools that underline only the performative representation of AVCs, which are then deprived of their political dimension aimed at challenging and removing gender-based discrimination and inequalities.

The strong connection between VAW and welfare policies cannot result in framing anti-violence policies as social ones: they have to be understood and structured as gender-based ones, since the nature of violence, its consequences on women, and on society as well, cannot be ignored, but framed as structural.

To conclude, we need to recognise the great role of AVCs in stimulating institutions to deal with the topic. In such a complex time where bureaucratisation processes of VAW policies seem to be in an advanced phase and AVCs are called to sustain a great role in combining a technocratic approach typical of institutions, AVCs political action is still oriented to tackle gender unequal power relations. The challenge will be to avoid as much as possible the de-politicisation and de-genderisation of the politics and the policies, guaranteeing AVCs' sustainability and continuity in order to improve the support to women experiencing violence.

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