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Like being underwater. Gender perspective in the emancipating paths for sex trade survivors hosted by SAI

**È come stare sott'acqua.
La prospettiva di genere nei percorsi emancipanti per le sopravvissute del SAI**

Gaetana Tiziana Iannone
Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata

iannonegaetanatiziana@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The contribution returns the results of a research on the issue of the reception of trafficked women, with regard to the importance that a gender perspective can guarantee in the design and implementation of educational interventions aimed for them. The research highlighted the difficulties that socio-educational inclusion paths encounter in their concrete realisation: without gender training of educators and professionals with a pedagogical value, actions risk reproducing ethnocentric and tendentially 'neutral' visions, without considering the peculiarities of the feminisation of migrant women's destinies. The reference methodology is constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), a methodological universe appropriate in intercultural contexts. The theoretical frame of reference relates to intercultural, gender and difference pedagogy, the intersectional perspective and African feminisms, which are useful in defining transcultural frames of reference, capable of generating encounters and preserving from the risk of neo-colonial visions in education.

Keywords: educational paths for survivors, emancipation, African feminisms, training of professionals.

RIASSUNTO

Il contributo restituisce gli esiti di una ricerca sull'accoglienza delle donne vittime di tratta, con riguardo all'importanza che la prospettiva di genere può garantire nella progettazione di interventi educativi a loro destinati. La ricerca ha evidenziato la difficoltà che i percorsi di inclusione socio-educativa incontrano nella realizzazione concreta: senza una formazione in ottica di genere di educatrici/ori e professionalità a valenza pedagogica, le azioni rischiano di riprodurre visioni etnocentriche e tendenzialmente "neutre", senza considerare le peculiarità della femminilizzazione dei destini delle donne migranti. La metodologia di riferimento è la grounded theory costruttivista (Charmaz, 2014), universo metodologico adeguato in contesti interculturali. Il quadro teorico di riferimento è relativo alla pedagogia interculturale, di genere e delle differenze, alla prospettiva intersezionale e dei femminismi africani, utili alla definizione di quadri di riferimento transculturali, capaci di generare incontri e preservare dal rischio di visioni neocoloniali in educazione.

Parole chiave: percorsi educativi per le sopravvissute, emancipazione, femminismi africani, formazione dei professionisti.

1. RESEARCH CONTEXT

The present research comes from my own personal experience, since I work as coordinator for the educational area of the System Reception Integration of the Latina's Council (from now on referred as SAI), a national initiative whose aim is to welcome, protect and include asylum seekers and refugees (Sprar Handbook, 2018).

Since 2019, the system of second reception has undergone modifications and unexpected remodulation as a result of the arrival of increasingly heterogenous and complex migratory flows that have inevitably impacted, even abruptly, on the Italian reception system. In the specific of Latina Council SAI there was the so called phenomenon of *sliding* between trafficking and asylum, which has resulted in the presence of trafficked persons, especially women, within the system of second reception, resulting in a massive and stable presence of victims of trafficking, women of Nigerian and Ivorian origin (Floris, 2022).

The entanglement between the trafficking system and asylum applications has requested a review of the socio-educational practices provided for in the SAI Handbook for asylum seekers and refugees. This has led to the activation of procedures and actions that take into account the specificity of this interrelation and the different legal and social demands.

This process, which began in 2018, has characterized Latina's SAI for the presence of single-parent families and single women, mainly from Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, from Côte d'Ivoire. The territory of Latina presents peculiar challenges due to its historical-political background. Founded during the Fascist period, the city maintains a socio-cultural substrate connected to an often populist idea of politics and a population not always open to diversity.

As of December 2023, the refugee and asylum-seeker hospitality project in Latina had 111 beneficiaries, including 23 adult women. Of these, 10 were victims of trafficking: 3 of them asylum seekers and 7 refugees. The multidisciplinary and multi-professional team includes pedagogues, professional educators, social workers, psychologists, linguistic-cultural mediators (for Arabic, English-speaking, Ukrainian, Persian, Somali) and a teacher of Italian L2.

Due to the stable presence of women victims of trafficking, the Central Service invited the team to a continuous and specific training in order to address the socio-educational needs of the beneficiaries. In 2014, the Europe Council's expert team for the fight to trafficking of human beings reported that between 2011 and 2013 around 4,000 victims of trafficking were taken into Italy. With the increase in migration flows between 2014 and 2015, trafficking has become part of the international protection system, with asylum applications as the main access channel for victims.

Therefore, training was required to bolster the pedagogical and intercultural skills of professionals and operators in the multidisciplinary team. These skills are essential for all professionals who contribute to the democratic development of the country, bringing empathy and humanity into education. The acquisition of transversal skills promotes the understanding of experiences of vulnerability peculiar to victims of trafficking, facilitating the mastering of tools useful for the design of educational interventions (Abbatecola, 2010).

1.1 Positioning of the researcher

This research has used CGT methodology; a research methodology useful for understanding complex realities and developing new emerging theories. In this approach, the researcher is not a detached observer but an integral part of the reality that she is studying, and likewise for the data she is analysing: through her direct involvement and interaction with the participating subjects she becomes part of the co-construction process of the emerging theory. Her position is never neutral, but influenced both by her cultural and professional interests and her theoretical sensitivity.

In this regard, being she completely immersed in the context or, to put it with Piasere (2002) *imbombegà*, it was necessary to act a constant monitoring and a meta-reflection related to the ethical posture in the co-construction process of research. A construct to keep in great consideration was that of the whiteness; it is useful to specify that theorization about whiteness has little consideration in the Italian literature of sector. Thanks to the historical-political vision of Giuliani and Lombardi Diop (2013), we refer to the theoretical assumptions of whiteness studies (Fanon, 1996; Flagg 1996) that support the work of analysis and the meta-theoretical writing of the theory. From a privileged position, the researcher, aware of her "power", has made great reference to the use of autoethnography (Bianchi, 2019) as a tool for monitoring and deconstructing cultural implications.

Sometimes, researchers become unknowingly capable of acting an always colonial power: it is in order to avoid certain drifts that positioning needs to be promoted during the whole process of research through self-ethnography, constantly comparing with data and developing analytical

hypotheses in collaboration with a community of dialogue. Charmaz (2014) attributes to the constructivist grounded researcher a central role in the construction of knowledge, since he/she learns from data and reshapes his/her own implicit theories. Research therefore represents also a valuable improvement tool for the researcher herself, who describes, elaborates, interprets and invents new knowledge.

2. PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH

The present study aims to develop a medium-range substantive theory rooted and situated in the context of the second reception of migrant women victims of trafficking; vulnerable category par excellence, characterized by unfavourable social and economic conditions.

The general purpose is to improve the good practices of the reception-integration system through educational actions marked by the emergence of that pedagogical optimism which has its roots in the Freysian pedagogical hope (Freire, 2014). The specific purpose is to improve the projects aimed at beneficiaries: so that truly inclusive processes are activated (ie ethically oriented to the valorization of autonomy and individual emancipation). It is necessary to orient towards a gender perspective the training for those involved in the work and, again, to develop the project in a global and systemic way. Intercultural and gender pedagogical competence would support a holistic, authentic and effective management: from access to the National Health Service, to the management and care of the female migrant population; from the promotion of healthy and sustainable lifestyles, up to professional placement.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical assumptions of this research move in the wake of intercultural pedagogy (Fiorucci, 2020), gender and differences (Lopez, 2014) and intersectional perspective. For the purposes of this discussion, we refer specifically to African feminisms (Salami, 2020) considered consistent with the decolonial and committed vision that is assumed.

Starting from the production of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, we try to articulate a dialogue with some African feminists, unknown by international literature, such as Ransome Kutu Funmalayo, Margaret Ekpo and Elizabeth Adekogbe who have been charged with pioneering feminist thought in a place like Africa, which is too often mistakenly considered as a generalised entity. The African continent, with its cultural traditions, is made up of a multiplicity of contexts and traditions developing precisely from Nigeria and having their own identity and diversity.

African feminisms cannot be defined as neutral and attributable to a single, all-encompassing category but, above all, they must not be interpreted and read through the lens of western feminism, which favours gender as the only dimension of feminism itself. The experiences, contexts and lived experiences of African feminism consider gender in relation to other factors of oppression: racism, classism and eurocentrism. The specific characterization of black feminism - which chases and pursues the path of emancipation of gender as much as political, social and economic emancipation - concerns the liberation struggle; it is a struggle capable of preserving roots and values: a liberation that is not achieved through compromise with Western feminism.

In the words of Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie (2021)

I believe that reading Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second sex" is important but not necessary. It is more important that young women start to think of feminism as something about their lives, not about what they read. I was a feminist long before I knew the word. My grandmother was because she decided that she was a person who needed to be taken into consideration and wanted to reject a culture that was trying to stifle her. There is a feminism that does not concern me because it is theoretical and far from the real life of women and their problems. I am a writer, I do not care about the theory. When I meet women I want to know their lives.

Adichie brings us back to a vision of African feminism that we could define as "concrete" and "contextualized", connected with a permanent bond with the origins, aware of being still nailed to a misogynistic, patriarchal and oppressive land. And it's precisely from this awareness that is necessary to start for a critical deconstruction and for the construction of processes of liberation and emancipation. These are not understandable through parameters derived from western feminism that does not take into account how much colonialism and racism have determined the lives of African women.

The Afro-centric approach that interprets multiple and alternative realities cannot ignore one of the characteristic elements of feminism, which is that of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998), increasingly widespread to address issues related to gender, race and class in contemporary contexts.

The intersectional perspective is a valuable help to understand and address the issue of differences within groups that are socially constructed and perceived as homogeneous from the outside. This perspective is useful to guide the present contribution, as it examines the different experiences of oppression lived in daily life and their repercussions on life, in addition to have access to rights and justice for survivors.

Intersectionality is seen as the 'place' of awareness where gender, race and class overlap, creating multiple levels of social injustice. Barbara Foley (2019) defines intersectionality as a way of thinking about the nature and causes of social inequality, and proposes to consider the cumulative effects of multiple forms of oppression.

According to the intersectional model, it is only by taking into account the complex experiences of many people on the margins of the "dominant" society that issues of social justice can be addressed in an honest way.

Starting from the radicality of their struggles to overcome gender inequality and colonialism, I was able to understand the feelings that move young women "survivors" in the SAI: struggle, resilience, the pride in cultural roots and the movement for legitimacy. Why, then, reproduce colonial educational paths, when one can elaborate a decolonial and committed vision, starting precisely from their cultural background? It is urgent to analyze the lives and experiences of the beneficiaries trying to have a global knowledge of their background and their potential and, possibly, draw from them to design and re-design their life trajectories.

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The choice of a qualitative methodological system was determined primarily by the context and relative target under consideration, particularly complex and vulnerable, and by the full involvement in the scope of investigation by the researcher who is "immersed" in the context, playing the role of

educational coordinator for SAI activities. This prompted the choice of a methodology that aims to investigate complex areas and not easily perimetrabile, like the *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014). Aim of this methodology is a grassroots study of the phenomenon, since its will to identify socio-educational processes from what the participants say. From then, it searches an interpretative theory able to integrate, to synthesise and to conceptualise empirical data so to bring out the processes underlying these assertions or observed phenomena (Tarozzi, 2008, p. 63).

It has to be stressed that the Constructivist Grounded Theory is a good method in intercultural context, particularly suitable to unravel the complex interconnections within the migratory experiences and its individual outcomes; and thus effectively used in all those cases where we want to observe without prejudice a group and a set of situations to arrive at an explanation and design routes.

As fully specified, the methodology is clearly akin to the context, a hyper-complex, tiring and unexpected context.

The flexibility and plasticity of the Constructivist Grounded Theory allows us not to operate a mere extraction of meanings without negotiations of the meanings themselves through the discovery of the other's cultural horizons.

5. RESULTS: TO CREATE AUTHENTIC AND NON-COLONIZING RELATIONSHIPS IN GENDER AWARENESS

Starting from these pre-conditions, it becomes evident the centrality of the relationship continuum: the report is not only about having to provide a service to the beneficiaries, but calls on everything and everyone involved in the context.

Co-constructions of effective relationships means to give value to the emancipatory potential for both actors involved, not only for the people defined as vulnerable. "Nigerians fighters in the SAI: educational challenges and emancipating projects" is the emerging theory that is configured as an end (result) of research. It explores the needs, desires and aspirations of SAI project participants. The theory underlying the project emphasizes the importance of constant training and self-training, encouraging people to think about themselves as subjects in co-research. Research-action-training is seen as a constant, work-related educational strategy accompanied by supervision.

The theory emphasizes the need to deconstruct implicit colonial acts and adopt a critical view on ethnocentrism, broadening our worldview and embracing ethnorelativism. It is essential to reconsider educational practices, especially in L2 language literacy, recognizing the complexity of learning in the presence of trauma.

The context calls for a continuous rearrangement of educational practices, approaching beliefs without trivializing them. Resisting with love, as suggested by bell hooks (2000a), means aspiring to the best version of oneself and fighting for emancipation. This theory redefines the emancipatory projects for migrants seeking international protection, in particular women victims of trafficking, emphasizing the need for relational skills and mediation. The integrated approach, which avoids the fragmentation of interventions, enhances the overall process of caring, also teaching to care for oneself, especially in contexts of trauma and violence, where the reconstruction of identity appears to be a crucial objective.

Taking charge of the survivors, therefore, is not to be understood solely as a "procedure of actions put in place" following in a rigid way the handbook of socio-economic inclusion; it means instead building environments "that work", to value and enhance individual and group well-being.

Another crucial factor is a persistent and deep-rooted inclination by the survivors to prefer a relationship that is characterized by "gender recognition" towards female workers and professional figures that facilitate a kind of recognition and sensitivity, producing a natural and physiological restitution of the violent migration experience.

In this regard we report some significant interviews with operators of the SAI team of the Municipality of Latina:

... I have now been working at SAI for more than a year and despite having already had a similar experience in the past, I was able to deepen a dynamic that I did not know well, peculiar to women victims of trafficking. Let's say that previously our female colleagues were more involved, but lately we are thinking of introducing also male figures, even though it is not always possible, because often women ask us for a female reference. Their specific requests are complex to expose to a male figure. However, we are trying to introduce my presence, in a gentle way, for now I am exclusively listening. They have a way of scrutinizing me... I let myself be well scrutinized. I must say that in the moment there is an opening on their part, generated by my silent but daily presence, I can then establish a relationship that we say benefits everyone, both the survivors and the team.

(excerpt operator 1)

My relationship with them is mainly based on the practice of doing... as accompaniment to the police station or in the job search. They favour female colleagues to explain traumatic experiences before and after migration, they choose them as their first safe haven. It is not an easy process, we are experiencing ourselves. For it was important to have a previous knowledge of the human trafficking phenomenon, and contextualizing it to Nigeria and the cultural background of the individual survivors. Without such information I would have risked to do great damage! An empathetic approach, the guarantee of a welcoming and comfortable setting, the predisposition to listen, are required but not enough; I had to understand first of all in which exact part of Africa was Nigeria, to deal with the many ethnic groups that characterize it, approaching a religious syncretism that is not easily understood.

(excerpt operator 2)

6. RESULTS

As we can see from the excerpts, the awareness of having to train in service is raw material. Decolonizing and bending socio-educational practices to gender sensitivity is no longer a negligible effort: those who have educational responsibilities in hypercomplex intercultural contexts as the one just presented, should be able to have an appropriate "toolbox".

Proposal of sharing literature on African feminism gives a very important opportunity to focus on roots and cultural traits in order to design new paths able to value previous skills; review documentation and procedures, from the masculine-neutral language used in the documentation itself, it is a compulsory road to be taken; as well as a challenge to be won is replacing established practices

where the male operator is "peripheral" and make him instead present (able to be present) along the process.

It is necessary an active work to subvert established customs that, in fact, do not facilitate relations but, on the contrary, make them unauthentic.

The similarity between people can not be obtained only through a common gender: in the light of these considerations we cannot underestimate cultural roots, we cannot diminish the belonging and neither we can't eliminate conflict as one of the main ingredients (Bennett, 2015, p. 195).

Active listening, decentralization exercises, pedagogical supervision and commitment are some of the possible keys to improve communication, practices and relationships.

It's like being underwater, suspending judgment, learning to stay in a limbo of meanings, learning to wait, as the operator says:

I had to remodulate with respect to the canonical protocols of intervention, especially with regard to the tools to be used, it's like diving into a part of the world never known... Yes! the feeling is to be underwater... everything is suspended... and re-emerge means to deal with something that does not belong to me, something I do not know and that does not match the narrative I have had so far...

(excerpt operator 3)

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