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The role of gender in the professional practice of mediation: the picture through the eyes of Italian mediators

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ABSTRACT

In Italy, community interpreting and public service interpreting are often subsumed under the label of *mediazione* ("mediation"). In official documents, *mediazione* appears to be a form of conflict management, heavily dependent on the empathy and trust stemming from a shared language, culture, country of origin, age, and gender between mediators and migrants. Informed by gender and queer studies, this article aims at investigating the role of the gender dimension in building such empathy and trust, particularly when mediating for survivors of gender violence, through interviews with women working as professional mediators in Italian women's centres and associations. The analysis of responses reveals that interviewees are acutely aware of the importance of gender issues when mediating for survivors of gender violence, and that they perceive a need for specific training in this field, which, however, seems to be lacking.

KEYWORDS Mediation; community interpreting; gender; empathy; migration.

The Italian notion of *mediazione*

On the Italian interpreting scene, the notions of "community interpreting" and "public service interpreting" are common only within interpreting studies. In professional practice, the two realms are not termed "interpreting" at all, but rather, following administrative terminology, *mediazione*, which can be translated as "mediation" and is usually further qualified either as *mediazione linguistica e culturale* ("language and cultural mediation", as in Falbo 2013; Favaro 2001; Gavioli 2009; Tonioli 2016) or *as mediazione inter-culturale*, with or without a hyphen ("inter-cultural mediation", as in Barbieri et al. 2021; CNEL 2009; Luatti 2011). Both "intercultural mediation" and "language and cultural mediation" describe an identical professional practice, which can be defined as a type of community or public service interpreting used to facilitate communication between migrants and the host country's institutions and services, guaranteeing the respect of human rights, access to health services, education, public offices, and participation in social life. In the discourse of interpreting studies, *mediatori* are usually equated to community or public service interpreters (Ceccoli and Torresi 2022, 45).

Professionally, the qualification of "mediator" is certified by a local authority after a training course or alternatively, a certain amount of professional practice. Mediators are often migrants themselves, who are asked to interpret for members of their

community, not only providing linguistic and cultural assistance but also proactively preventing misunderstandings and conflicts (Baraldi and Gavioli 2012, 10; Merlini 2009, 59; Rudvin and Pesare 2015, 98; Rudvin and Tomassini 2008). Legal and administrative discourses about *mediazione*, although fragmented and inconsistent to say the least (Amato and Garwood 2011; Ceccoli 2022, 26; Ministero dell'Interno 2023, 11; Rudvin and Spinzi 2014, 61), agree that *mediatori* first and foremost implement conflict-avoidance strategies by explaining differences in socio-cultural practices, to reach mutual understanding – their linguistic and interpreting proficiency appears to be only functional to this aim, and usually taken for granted.[1] Interestingly, the Italian Ministry of Justice[2] cautions against gender differences between mediators and their migrant clients, as they (together with cultural, ethnic, religious differences and different migration backgrounds) may hamper mediators' role as facilitators of communication.

Mediation as a (situated) practice

As mentioned above, in real-life mediated interactions and for interpreting studies, mediation can be seen as an "Italian version" of community or public service interpreting (Merlini and Gatti 2015, 140). As such, the activity of mediation can be considered a communicative *pas de trois* (Wadensjö 1998a), where mediators are legitimate participants in the conversations they interpret, who co-construct and coordinate communication (Wadensjö 1998a, 105) and bring not only their knowledge and skills, but their very *selves* to the interaction (Angelelli 2003, 16). This means that mediators take part in the interaction as whole persons, continuously managing their positioning. As a result of such fluidity in their positioning, however, mediators often face the dilemma of being seen as both the immigrant's advocate and the institutions' helper (Wadensjö 1998b, 44), which may create some tension as they are "torn" between the other two participants in the interaction. Additionally, the mediator's continuous positionality shift appears to clash with a basic tenet of interpreters' associations' professional ethics discourse, the principle of neutrality. Ideally, in such professional discourse an interpreter should be a neutral conduit, with their subjectivity, moral responsibility and empathy being secondary to what is presented as a "professional" (i.e. neutral) attitude (Rudvin 2007). Neutrality, however, has been denounced as impossible in community interpreting settings, especially where power asymmetries are at work (Garzone 2009, 101; Merlini 2009, 61). In such contexts, "the polarization between the 'impartial' and 'advocate' role models is a theoretical simplification with very limited value for actual community interpreting practice, given the virtually infinite range of situational and interactional variants" (Merlini and Gatti 2015, 144). For this reason, more and more studies tend to challenge the idea of interpreter's neutrality to be an asset (or even a possibility) in interpreting. Conversely, more emphasis is placed on empathy and trust between the mediator/interpreter and the people they interpret for, which are seen as factors of success of mediated communication. Such factors are sometimes subsumed under the label of "the human factor" (Valero-Garcés 2020).

While sharing the same gender has been recognised to have some relevance in building such bonds of empathy and trust (Valero-Garcés 2005, who also cites other factors: age, migration history, culture and language), the dimension of gender has so far attracted little attention from community interpreting studies, with some notable

exceptions (Toledano Buendía 2019; Toledano Buendía and Del Pozo Triviño 2015; Weber, Singy, and Guex 2005). In the latter studies, gender emerges as a relevant factor which may influence the outcome of encounters, at least in certain settings (particularly, healthcare and migration), which in itself highlights the need to study gender identity and its role in interpreter-mediated interactions. Specifically, Weber, Singy, and Guex (2005) report how gender symmetry (i.e. the mediator and service user identifying with the same gender) makes communication easier for certain groups of users of healthcare interpreting services in Swiss hospitals. Toledano Buendía and Del Pozo Triviño's (2015) edited volume collects the results of the EU project SOS-VICS and raises awareness on the need of applying a gender perspective to community interpreting (see in particular Toledano Buendía 2015). The guidelines resulting from the SOS-VICS project suggest that interpreters be specifically trained to employ a gender perspective when working on cases of gender-based violence:

> Intervening with a gender perspective requires an understanding of the concept of gender and the relationships of power and inequality that the concept of gender generates in our societies. It also involves comprehending that the situation of violence affecting a woman is a result of this inequality and not an isolated behaviour [...]. (Abril et al. 2015, 34)

Similarly, Toledano Buendía (2019) highlights how specific training on gender-based violence provides interpreters with the tools to manage the communicative exchange, preventing the victim's re-traumatisation and taking a technically neutral but morally sided stance to give voice to survivors.

The present study intends to follow in the path opened by the SOS-VICS project on the one hand, and the ethnographic research done by Weber, Singy, and Guex (2005) on the other hand. The purpose of the research is to explore mediators' perceptions about the role of gender in mediation in general, and specifically when dealing with cases of gender-based violence and sex trafficking. To pursue that purpose, an ethnographic inquiry was carried out among a selection of mediators working in Northern Italian migrant associations and women centres. The scope of research is therefore limited to respondents' perceptions about their own working practice, as recounted by themselves in the face-to-face, in-depth interviews described in the following section.

Materials and methods

For the purpose of this study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out by one of the authors with six women mediators who work in migrant associations and women centres in the north of Italy. Among the research questions of the study, two are relevant to the scope of this article: (1) In mediators' perceptions, what role does gender play in linguistic and cultural mediation in general? (2) Does this perception change when applied to working in contexts of gender-based violence and sex trafficking?

The qualitative ethnographic research was conducted following feminist (Cook 1983; McNamara 2009) and queer (Browne and Nash 2010) methodologies and the concept of Situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). According to this latter concept, the goal of ethnographic research is not to produce so-called objective results, but a partial point of observation, which is situated and embodied, but nonetheless valid. By acknowledging her specific positioning, the researcher carries out situated research providing subjective

results. Feminist research is carried out focusing on the importance of a situated observation point that is well-defined and acknowledges its positioning and partiality. By applying feminist principles to ethnographic research, the relation between the object of the study and the subject who carries it out is re-evaluated, focusing on the central role played by the object of the study, which actively takes part in the research process (McNamara 2009, 165). Moreover, queer methods theorise the importance of carrying out research in specific spaces (Browne and Nash 2010, 7) on identities that are the outcome of multiple intertwined factors, among which are race and class (Sedgwick Kosofsky 1994). Queer theory is characterised by epistemological openness towards subjectivity, positioning, and embodiment, observing one's performativity as a subject with a certain gender and sex and problematising these traits in the research process (Rooke 2010).

The six respondents were selected through personal contact with one women's centre in Turin, and one cooperative offering services to migrants in the province of Rimini. The original request made to such organisations was to select mediators who had experience working on cases of gender-based violence and sex trafficking. Although its number is small, the sample is representative of the category of mediators as it is homogeneous in some respects (all interviewees were female, had come to Italy as adults and had been working as mediators for years, except one who had been working only for a few months), but diverse with reference to age (between 27 and 60), educational and training background, and country of origin (Guinea, Jordan, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, and Ukraine).

An interview model was drafted that – after a set of questions about respondents' personal background and professional experience – inquired about their perceptions about the role played by gender in mediation in general, and with particular reference to cases of gender-based violence and sex trafficking. The relevant items of the original interview format (intended as a checklist for the interviewer) were:

(1) Do you think that your gender identity has an influence on the way you work with your clients? How?
(2) Do you think your gender identity helps you in your job, or is it an obstacle? (if respondent needs further prompting) If you work with a woman, does gender symmetry help creating more empathy and trust, because the relationship is perceived as more balanced, or do you run the risk of identifying with your client too much?
(3) Do you think there is a difference between mediating for migrant men and migrant women?
(4) Is gender just one of the elements shaping your job when you work, or has it ever been an obstacle? (if respondent needs further prompting) For instance, has a person of a different gender ever refused you as a mediator?
(5) Have you ever received specific training on how to work on topics related to gender and/or gender-based violence, or do your approach and techniques stem from field experience alone?
(6) Have you ever worked with survivors of gender-based violence? If so, what was your experience?
(7) Have you ever worked with survivors of sex trafficking? If so, what was your experience?

It should be noted that the actual wording and order of the questions varied from interview to interview, and sometimes they did not need to be asked at all, since the respondents volunteered answers during spontaneous conversation following other prompts. This is in line with the semi-structured format that allows researchers to follow each interviewee's train of thoughts and narrative style, ensuring that each individual voice is heard at the same time as ensuring that all the research questions are covered (Gillham 2000, 10). It should be also noted that, using an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989), gender was never considered in isolation, but as a characteristic that intersects with others, such as race, migratory background, level of education and training.

Similarly, two other questions, aimed at exploring general issues of empathy, trust and secondary trauma yielded some answers that highlighted the role of gender in such issues, which will therefore be included in the Results and Discussion sections of this article:

(1) How do you manage your personal involvement in your job, deriving from the emotional and psychological burden of mediation?
(2) Do you think your clients see you as someone to turn to, someone they trust and feel close to?

Upon informed consent of the participants, the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and pseudonymised as Med (standing for Mediator) followed by a number from 1 to 6. Orthographic transcription was chosen for the purpose of this ethnographic research, transcribing hesitations, false starts, repetitions, and disfluencies. Four of the interviews were carried out remotely via Skype and WhatsApp, while the other two were conducted in person in a room made available by the association the mediators were working for.

Interviews were conducted, and later analysed, from a specific positioning of the researcher, considering the influence of her gender, nationality and academic training and the observer paradox (Labov 1972), and the interpersonal relationship created with the interviewed sample (Detamore 2010).

Results

Respondents' views on the role of gender in mediation in general

As shown in the section above, respondents were asked to speak about the role played by gender in mediation, focusing on the differences between working with men and women users and the importance of gender symmetry. This section will present their responses concerning mediation in general, while the following section will report on interviewees' opinions relating to contexts of gender-based violence and sex trafficking.

In general, gender symmetry was perceived as a factor that has a positive effect on the mediators' performance. Identifying with the same gender as the service users was considered by some of the interviewees as a source of a higher level of empathy and understanding of the problems brought up by users. It was also seen as a way of building a higher level of mutual trust between the migrant user and the mediator, which in turn makes service users more at ease in the mediated communication.

With regard to the link between gender symmetry, empathy, and trust one mediator stated:

(1) Well, being a woman, yes, I think that's an advantage, it's an advantage for, what did you say? Empathising? [...] being a woman that's much easier, especially with women. (Med1)

The same interviewee also claimed that speaking with a woman mediator helps women users to open up more easily:

(2) with women, on the other hand, it's much, much easier to work. Much easier to work, because if you are a woman, if you are a woman and you want to talk to a man about certain things, it's not certain than he ... However, maybe it takes more time for a woman to speak, but at the end she talks about everything, she tells you everything, she opens up to you, she finds a little sensitivity, she feels a little more at ease confiding things, right? (Med1)

Similarly, Med4 found that women confide in women mediators more easily, especially when recalling their experiences of gender-based violence. On the other hand, however, she noticed that clients prefer a man mediator if they need help with different issues, because they associate men with strength and protection:

(3) Because women open up more to women. Then it depends on the problems they have. If they have a problem related to violence or abuse, they prefer speaking to a woman, but if they need informative help, I mean, if they need information, to be accompanied, if they have some other type of problem, well, some look for a man also because they see him as protection, you know? But then it depends on the problem, it depends. Many women if ... they want to speak to a woman, whom they see more as a friend, as someone on their side. Women's solidarity. [...] So in certain moments, when they need these types of things, a woman is better, then maybe if ... if it doesn't have to do with violence or they want to assert their rights for other reasons, for other issues, maybe they prefer a man. Because you know, a man is an advocate, yes, "He protects, he's strong, bring me to a man!". (Med4)

Furthermore, identifying as a woman was pointed out as a factor that contributes to the creation of a close bond between users and mediators, who can thus build both a professional relationship and a personal one with their clients. Because of this bond, one interviewee claimed, women migrants often consider mediators an example to follow:

(4) But with women, always, always, I manage to have a bit of empathy, as if they, I don't know, as if they saw in you, in me, I mean in women who live here, who come from another country, as if they saw a model [in you], you know? (Med1)

This was confirmed by another interviewee, who claimed that some female clients do not only see mediators as interpreters but also as mother figures, and this is facilitated by gender and age:

(5) Yes, yes, also because of their age I think, because some women come here when they are young, and maybe they they want you to be their mother, more or less, because they feel a bit a bit protected, they feel safe telling you everything, asking you for help. That's why I think a relationship of trust is created straight away, yes, that is important, when you build this relationship straight away you find yourself closer to these women. And so the closer they are the more you can help, yes, that's it. (Med5)

On the other hand, it is possible to infer that gender can be an obstacle if women mediators find themselves interpreting for male clients. Various interviewees pointed out that men are in general distrustful towards women mediators, and some attributed this to habits and stereotypical gender models learnt in the migrants' country of origin. One mediator recalled that in various cases male clients had refused to talk to her, especially about health-related issues:

(6) [...] a young man arrives, and there's a problem with, I don't know, an infection, he has some problem in his private areas, you know? Okay, maybe he prefers speaking to a man instead of me. But I understand that, but mostly with young men coming from Africa, from where I come from, okay. Because we were not brought up this way that a woman needs to know certain things about a man, so there's this thing, that they have to understand first of all that I am here to help you, but not as a woman, as you see me, as you saw a woman back home, it takes time, it really takes time. And I feel bad about this because, well, there are things I could help them with, but they don't understand and they say "No, I want a man" and I feel bad about that. (Med2)

The same interviewee claimed that men's reluctance to speak with women mediators is rooted in gender models acquired in the country of origin, which can clash with new gender roles taken on in Italy:

(7) So it's just about getting used to seeing that person there, to seeing that woman there, okay, because once I was told: "But you are a woman, women don't behave like that in Africa eh eh eh!" and then my supervisor [...] said: "You cannot say that here because whether there's a man or a woman, or whatever, she's here to work, she's just doing her job. There's no men or women, there's no difference here. We're all equal, okay? If at home you do differently, here it is like that, it works in a different way.". And then I saw that ... because they needed time to realise that they have arrived in a world that's different from what they've always experienced [...] (Med2)

Regarding the difficulties caused by gender self-stereotyping, some mediators argued that men are reluctant to open up because of the way they perceive their own masculinity:

(8) With men [...] sometimes you see that he refuses every other topic that doesn't have to do with the session, he doesn't want to speak to you at all, he only wants to listen to you [...] And with a man you could get to the end of the sessions without having known anything besides what he wants to tell you. [...] why is this work for a man is this work difficult? Why? Because a man has this trait, you know? "I am a man", so, well maybe he has a hard time showing his feelings, crying, you know? Crying, which helps a lot. (Med1)

Moreover, one interviewer revealed that men may feel threatened by women co- nationals who emigrated to Italy many years ago, because they do no longer conform with their idea of femininity or of a woman's "right place" (i.e. inferior to man):

(9) Oriental men [...] may think they are superior to women even intellectually, you know? [...] Yeah, then other men ... were scared of my appearance, my appearance you know? When I was speaking Italian, everything was fine, not so when I started speaking Arabic. [...] I've been here for a very, very long time, I've studied, I've worked, you know? These things scare men and scare them a lot. (Med1)

Another mediator reported her experience that men do not want to show they need the help of a mediator if she is a woman:

(10) Well, with men what happened was: some men feel a bit, I don't know, proud, to keep their dignity they pretend they know everything, but I need to always be patient. But some yes, they refuse this help from a woman, I believe [...] I think it's because I'm a woman and these men don't accept this role, I think, because they always feel like they're stronger, they never show their weakness, that they need something, I don't know, I think they try to keep it together ... (Med5)

However, not all the interviewees agreed that gender (a)symmetry is a factor in mediated communication. Med6 did recall a male client refusing to speak to her once, but she ascribed this to his coming from a different country rather than to gender asymmetry, since other male migrants coming from her own country had never had any complaints. Med3 stated that in her career she never noticed considerable differences in working with men or women, and that gender was never an issue (she did report, however, working more frequently with women).

Respondents' opinions on the role of gender in contexts of gender violence and sex trafficking

Excerpts in the previous section seem to highlight mixed views on gender symmetry always playing a crucial role in mediation in general. Nevertheless, all interviewees agreed that respecting gender symmetry is fundamental when working with survivors of gender-based violence and sex trafficking. It is important to note that such perceptions stemmed directly from the respondents' professional experience, as all six interviewees had worked as mediators with survivors of gender-based violence, and two of them had also interpreted for survivors of sex trafficking.

First of all, respondents highlighted that in contexts of gender-based violence and sex trafficking, empathy and trust are paramount to the success of the mediated events, which may have crucial practical implications (the victim being able to press charges against her abuser, for instance). This can be emotionally challenging for the mediator, but also very satisfying:

(11) Yes, not long ago, a few weeks ago, at the hospital, in the psychiatric ward I had a consultation with a psychologist and a young woman who had been a victim of violence. Domestic violence with her husband, you know? So it was very difficult because she had to tell the psychologist every detail. And she stopped here and there, she started crying, you know? And there at the end I felt mostly satisfied, because I think I helped her, leaving my mediator role a bit, I think I comforted her and the psychologist felt – in that moment that was really heavy for her too – at the end we managed, you know, to carry on with the consultation because I had to ask her so many questions, you know? Very, very, very personal questions about the violence she had suffered, you know? (Med3)

The importance of actively participating, empathising with clients, and reassuring them when deemed necessary, especially in contexts of gender-based violence, was also highlighted by another mediator, who explained that she often verbally reassures users and explains that service providers are not there to judge them, but only to listen to them and find the best way to support them:

(12) To know from a woman if she has suffered violence or not, if she has a hard time talking, I need to, I don't know, I must put myself in her shoes and imagine how she feels. I have to tell her "Look, don't be ashamed". (Med1)

As mentioned earlier, gender symmetry seems to be paramount for building such empathy and trust, and is specifically requested by users:

(13) Often women [are chosen] for women, often [...] For what I know, in my experience with women, yes with women [women are chosen], yes. First of all, also because it is a request ... (Med5)

This was confirmed by another interviewee, who stated:

(14) [...] you are a woman too, so they can open up, tell what they need to tell. Maybe with male mediators, they may tighten up a little, keep their emotions and stories to themselves. (Med6)

Discussion of results

Before going on to the discussion proper, in line with feminist and queer ethnographic methods (see "Materials and methods" section above), it should be noted that the analysis will be inevitably influenced by the positioning of one of the authors who conducted the

interviews. This researcher had worked for a month as a trainee intern with an association of cultural mediators in Turin, which led her to work side by side with mediators and women who provided housing and other essential services to trafficked migrant women. As a result, at the time of the interviews she was aware of the kind of work that her respondents carried out with this category of clients. This awareness may have generated expectations that may have influenced the way the interviews were conducted, as well as the ways in which both authors have presented the data in the previous section, and in which they are going to discuss them in the present one. However, both authors agree that such first-hand experience should not be seen as a bias, but rather as an additional resource contributing to the following analysis.

The role of gender in mediation in general

When asked to speak about the role of gender in mediation in general, some of the interviewees claimed that gender symmetry among women is a positive factor that creates more empathy and trust between mediators and clients. Gender symmetry allows women users to talk more freely with the mediators (excerpts 1 and 2). Women service users were also reported to identify and empathise more with female mediators because they recognise them as role models (excerpt 4) or mother figures, if older (excerpt 5). However positive, gender symmetry in non-gender sensitive contexts does not seem to be perceived as fundamental. Whenever female clients feel disempowered in their relation with the other main participant in the mediated event (usually, institutions), they may actually prefer to be interpreted by a man, stereotypically seen as a stronger, protective figure (excerpt 3). The respondents who reported this preference on the part of female migrants did not seem to adopt a critical stance towards it.

The reverse is true for the reported instances of interviewees' mediation services being refused by male users, whose motives are always denounced as based on gender stereotypes that may hold in the country of origin, but not in the new context where the mediated events take place. Only in one case (excerpt 6) men's refusal of a woman's mediation was related to reticence to disclose sex- or gender-related medical data. Most frequently, such cases were reported to be associated with a general sense of independence and superiority to women in general that is ingrained in some stereotypical versions of masculinity (excerpts 7, 8, 9, and 10).

One of the recurrent themes of the interviews was the relationship between mediators and service users, which can be facilitated by gender symmetry but may also become a burden. Gender symmetry may tend to form a personal bond between the mediators and the women they work with, who may come to look up at them as almighty "guardian angels" (Med1) who will save and help them during the migration process, always available in and out of professional encounters and working hours. Despite these difficulties, the interviewees claimed that such involvement and participation in the job is part and parcel of mediation, confirming their *de facto* alignment with interpreting theories rejecting the myth of the interpreter's neutrality and focusing on their agency instead (Baraldi 2019). Respondents also seemed at ease with the idea of bringing their own subjectivities and intersecting identities to work with them, which also confirms the notion that

> interpreters embrace a range of social statuses and identities which may also be locally mobilised when 'interpreter' is the current dominant one. For instance, co-actors' shared social identity in terms of national origin, gender, age etc. [...] may become relevant in interaction. These other identities may promote an interlocutor's understanding of the situation which he or she shares only with the interpreter. (Wadensjö 1998a, 191–192)

However, while Med1, Med2, Med4 and Med5 offered opinions and real-life reports about gender playing a role in their work as mediators in general, this view was not shared by Med3 and Med6. This does not necessarily underlie respondents' unawareness of the importance of gender in communication in general – they do, after all, attach great importance to this dimension whenever communication revolves around gender-sensitive issues, as we will see in the following sub-section. Rather, it may imply that for them, other dimensions of personal identity may be more foregrounded in communication in non-gender-sensitive contexts, which confirms – from the professional mediators' side – that

> essentialist dichotomies between male-female identities [...] are inadequate in that they overlook the social situatedness of gender identities and the way they are constructed in specific contexts of interaction [...] Gender, as a dimension of diversity should be approached in relation to varied aspects of identity other than gender. From a performativity perspective, instead of treating men and women as two homogeneous categories, gender should be looked at as something which is performed and "accomplished". (Maryns 2013, 675–676)

The role of gender in mediation in contexts of gender violence and sex trafficking

If mediators did not unanimously agree on the importance of gender in mediation in general, all interviewees claimed that gender symmetry needs to be respected in interpreting sessions with survivors of gender violence and sex trafficking, as implied or explicitly stated in excerpts 11–14 above. This aligns both with the operational guidelines issued by the UNHCR (2012) for mediation in gender-related asylum application procedures, and with the field research carried out by the SOS-VICS project team, whose work may shed additional light on why it is so paramount to guarantee gender symmetry in mediation for gender-based violence and human trafficking.

Toledano (2019), for instance, highlights that in cases of gender-based violence, linguistic barriers are an additional obstacle that exacerbates the survivors' situation, aggravating their feelings of defencelessness, often becoming an insuperable impediment to them facing the situation of abuse. For this reason, mediation can be a crucial tool for victims to access the healthcare services, psychological support, and legal aid they need to effectively break the circle of violence. Mediators working with survivors of gender-based violence should actively gatekeep their own involvement in the interaction, avoiding any patronising attitude and helping survivors find their own voice without going as far as "speaking for them".

To reach these goals, a strong training in interpreting techniques and codes of ethics is of vital importance (Toledano Buendía 2019, 179–180), as is a specific training in gender issues (Abril et al. 2015, 34). However, not all the interviewees had undergone such training before working with cases of gender-based violence. Two of the interviewees had in

fact received, or were receiving at the time of the interview, some training on interpreting and gender issues, specifically on the topic of gender-based violence, abuse, and abusive men. These respondents, however, did not elaborate on whether they felt the training had helped them in their work. Two further mediators expressed their wish to follow specific training on human trafficking in the future; one of them, who had already followed two cases of sex trafficking at the time of the interview, thought it would be useful to undergo training to advise future users more appropriately.

Another reflection recurrently offered by the interviewees was that mediators become deeply involved when interpreting for survivors of gender-based violence, and this is seen as a powerful resource. As observed before, according to the mediators their gender was a key factor influencing their level of involvement with their clients (excerpt 12), who seem to trust a woman mediator more (excerpt 11), to be more at ease discussing sensitive topics (excerpt 14) and may explicitly ask for a mediator of the same gender (excerpt 13).

Curiously, whereas when speaking about their mediation work in general some interviewees have reported issues with service users tending to go "out of boundaries" when bonds of empathy and trust are in place (which is reported to be easier between women), this other side of the coin never came up when speaking about survivors of gender violence or sex trafficking. This would seem counterintuitive, as these categories of service users may not appear likely to feel less in need than others outside their mediators' working hours and responsibilities. One explanation might be that interviewees may be more lenient on such pressing requests coming from survivors of gender violence and sex trafficking because they "feel" their trauma more, i.e. they may be experiencing secondary trauma, also called vicarious trauma (Rudvin and Carfagnini 2020, 124), which, again, may be exacerbated by gender symmetry.[3]

One last aspect worth considering is the gender of service providers in the encounters. Although no specific questions about this topic were asked in the interviews, in some instances the mediators casually mentioned that when working with female survivors of gender-based violence and sex trafficking, the third party in the encounter (whether a psychologist, a nurse or a gynaecologist) is usually a woman. Another interviewee talked about her experience working with a women centre, where an all-female staff provides assistance to women who are victims of violence, but did not elaborate on the implications of having a gender match between service providers and service users. Further exploration on this topic is needed to understand the role played by gender in mediated encounters between service providers and survivors of gender violence and sex trafficking.

Conclusions

This ethnographic study explored the role played by gender in intercultural mediation through in-depth interviews with six women mediators working in Italy. It contributes to the integration of gender research in mediation and community interpreting studies, which is much needed to further the shared understanding of mediated communication, especially in gender-sensitive contexts.

Although not all our interviewees agreed on gender being an essential component of mediation in general, several of them stated that in their experience women service users were more empathetic and trustful towards a woman mediator, which facilitates

communication. Conversely, all interviewees unanimously reported gender symmetry to be crucial when interpreting for survivors of gender-based violence and sex trafficking. In this light, gender symmetry seems to be perceived as a way to help survivors manage cultural factors, traumatisation, and shame that would otherwise hamper communication (Bögner, Herlihy, and Brewin 2007, 79).

Although the sample of interviewees appears to be diverse enough to be representative of female mediators operating in Italy, its number is too small to allow for any kind of generalisation of results. A further limitation of this study is that the interview format was not piloted, given the difficulty in reaching a more substantial sample of mediators with experience in cases of gender-based violence and sex trafficking, which was the original focus of the Master's thesis research this article builds on (Baroni 2022). The semi- structured format, however, ensured that interviewees could deal with any topic or comment that they deemed relevant with respect to the interviewer's cues, and beyond.

Further research is therefore needed in order to confirm the results of the present study and to delve deeper into the role of gender in mediation, with or without special reference to contexts of gender-based violence and sex trafficking. It is our contention that such further research should be conducted following feminist and queer ethnographic methods, which consider the researcher's subjectivity and positioning as well as respondents' voice, with a view of increasing their awareness and empowerment. Further research may also find non-patronising ways to help respondents reflect critically on their own gender essentialism or stereotypes whenever they emerge (as they have in some of the interviews excerpted here). One useful method in this respect might be the use of vignettes that render visually the real-life working situations described in some of our excerpts, leaving respondents free to verbalise what they see in the picture and caption (Aguinis and Bradley 2014).

A further area in which more insight is needed is the provision of quality training in mediation in the fields of gender-based violence, sex trafficking, and other sensitive areas that are potentially conducive to vicarious trauma for mediators. Although three of our interviewees had attended specific courses in such fields, this kind of training seems to be still lacking in Italy.

Notes

1. See also Art. 42 of the Testo unico delle disposizioni concernenti la disciplina dell'immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero (a collation of acts of law covering all regulation about immigration and non-Italian citizens' status), https://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/site/it/sezioni/servizi/old_servizi/legislazione/immigrazione/legislazione_200. html. Accessed 27 August 2024.

2.https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_12_1.page?contentId= SPS156904&previsiousPage=mg_14_Accessed 27 August 2024.

3. Secondary trauma is only mentioned briefly here as it lies beyond the scope of the present article. It was, however, extensively covered in the original research on which this article is based.

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Note on authorship

Although the article was planned and written jointly, Ira Torresi is mainly responsible for the sections "the Italian notion of mediazione", "mediation as a (situated) practice" and "conclusions", and Serena Baroni for "materials and methods", "results", and "discussion of results".

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