



Building Safer Spaces: Daily Strategies and Networks of Care in Cisheteronormative Italy

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This chapter discusses the undeniable importance of affects, friendships, collective and mutual care and support among LGBTQ people. We will see how different kinds and levels of collective mutual support—where one is never just either cared for or caring—stand at the roots of a broader and creative resistance to an oppressive context. Sharing knowledge, information and experience and helping and caring for each other are fundamental means of empowerment and resistance.

In the chapter I will navigate through the experiences and stories of participants following a route that goes from the material and symbolic consequences of the lack of laws protecting LGBT rights to the different strategies they adopt to counteract and live what Judith Butler calls livable lives (Butler, 2004, 2009). Following Baumle and Compton (2015), this chapter aims at shedding light on the individual and collective forms of resistance, defiance and manipulation that participants carry out vis-à-vis a legal system that does not recognize them.

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Law (and its absence) does not constitute the only problem LGBTQ people face throughout their lives, but it surely is a central issue, particularly concerning gay fathers through surrogacy and trans people. Moreover, such an evident lack of basic rights is one of the peculiarities of Italy in comparison with other Southern European countries studied in the INTIMATE research project, namely, Spain and Portugal (Santos, 2013).¹

Indeed, in 2015 Italy only had a law on rectification of sex attribution (Act 164/1982) and one against discrimination in the workplace (also) based on sexual orientation (Legislative Decree 216/2003). At that time, the most recent attempt to issue a law against homophobia and transphobia was Bill 245/2013, which proposed adding sexual orientation and gender identity as motivations to two already existing laws against hate crimes based on racial, ethnic and religious motives: it was approved by the Chamber of Deputies, but stopped once it passed to the other chamber of Parliament, the Senate. In November 2020, a law proposal that gathered five similar texts written between 2018 and 2019 was approved by the Chamber of Deputies and passed to the Senate (where it is still waiting to be discussed at the time of writing). The main content of the proposal consists of adding motives “based on sex, gender, sexual orientation or disability” to two articles of the Criminal Code dedicated to hate crimes and hate speech, namely, 604-*bis* (“Propaganda and incitement to commit crimes for reasons of racial, ethnic and religious discrimination”) and 604-*ter* (“Aggravating circumstance”).

In July of 2015, the European Court of Human Rights stated that Italy breached the European Convention of Human Rights by not providing any legal form of recognition to same-sex partnerships. A few months later (October 2015), right in the middle of the INTIMATE² project, Senator Monica Cirinnà presented a bill on civil unions for same-sex people and de facto unions for all couples. The Senate approved Cirinnà’s Bill in February 2016. After months of parliamentary discussions, with a strong opposition by right-wing, conservative and Catholic politicians of both fronts, a provision on stepchild adoption was eliminated from the text of the bill—which eventually became law on 20 May 2016 (Act 76/2016)—thus

¹ For a thorough analysis of the Italian legal context and LGBTQ social movements, see also Bertone and Gusmano (2013); Biagini (2018); Trappolin (2004).

² INTIMATE—Citizenship, Care and Choice: The Micropolitics of Intimacy in Southern Europe was funded between 2014 and 2019 by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007–2013)/ERC Grant Agreement [reference n. 338452].

leaving unchanged the status of hundreds of LGBTQ parents waiting for recognition. Not surprisingly, same-sex parenting was the most troubling issue and faced the strongest resistance. One of the arguments rhetorically and strategically used against it was surrogacy: some politicians claimed that legalizing stepchild adoption would have legitimized gay men who had children through surrogacy abroad and encouraged more of them to do so. This kind of discourse circulated in the media and in the public debate and was endorsed by a part of the feminist and lesbian movement, which proposed abolishing and penalizing surrogacy worldwide (commercial surrogacy in particular). As a result, a homophobic narrative specifically directed against gay fathers, intertwined with a feminist one against the exploitation of surrogate women, ended up damaging LGB social parents, who remained unrecognized by the law, since stepchild adoption was not approved. Moreover, during this whole process, lesbian mothers were totally invisibilized (Guerzoni & Motterle, 2018).

In order to better understand the situation of same-sex parents in Italy, it must be remembered that they have absolutely no reproductive rights, since Act 40/2004 on Medically Assisted Procreation allows the use of *Assisted Reproductive Technology* (ART) only to married or cohabiting different-sex couples with documented infertility. Moreover, it prohibits surrogacy and its promotion. In consequence, anyone who wants to become a parent, be they single or a same-sex couple, is forced to go abroad, which implies an economic investment that not everyone can afford.

Moreover, according to Act 184/1993 on adoption and fostering of minors, full adoption, too, is strictly reserved to married heterosexual couples (or unmarried couples that have been living together for at least three years before marriage). Nonetheless, Art. 44 of this law provides for the so-called adoption in particular cases, which, as shown in the next paragraph, is used by the courts to legitimize stepchild adoption for same-sex couples. Temporary fostering follows less strict rules, allowing single people to foster (used in the courts to accord such possibility to same-sex couples).

When talking about Italy, it is necessary to highlight the role of the Catholic Church, its institutions and allies and its deep, strong influence on the national public discourse and on the political agenda. Indeed, concerning questions, particularly but not solely, connected to sexual and reproductive rights (from abortion to same-sex civil unions), the Church has always been extremely active and present in the political field and the

media (Cafasso, 2014; Congiargiu, 2015; Lorenzetti & Viggiani, 2015). As Sara Garbagnoli (2017) recalls when talking about the huge success of the rhetoric of “gender ideology” in Italy, the Church and the “Conferenza Episcopale Italiana—CEI” [Italian Episcopal Conference] have influenced political agendas through both a more intransigent and publicly visible line, promoting and supporting public conferences and demonstrations, and a more subtle and “moderate” stance of parliamentary lobbying. Their actions are part of a broader, multifaceted assemblage/network of associations, think tanks and other entities, from fascist and far-right forces to anti-abortion associations, which have been successfully using the rhetoric of “gender ideology”. Their influence is so strong that it has been capable of blocking any law concerning LGBT rights (or part of it, as in the case of same-sex civil unions) and, among other effects, it impeded the implementation on strategies against homophobia and transphobia in public school, also leading to the withdrawal of a children’s book on family diversity from primary schools.

Since the 2010s—given the discrepancy between such lack of legislation and the growing claims and needs coming from LGBTQ individuals, couples and parents³—some Italian courts have made decisions regardless of Italian law, based on the Constitution and European legislation (Barel, 2020). For example, between the approval and the entry into force of Act 76/2016, the Supreme Court, with decision no. 12962 (26 May–22 June 2016), stated the legitimacy of stepchild adoption in the case of a lesbian couple who had their child abroad through ART. Moreover, the Juvenile Court of Rome, with its decision of 23 December 2015 (the first unappealable decision on stepchild adoption for a gay couple), ruled that the partner of the biological father could adopt the child, on the grounds of a specific instance of the so-called adoption in particular cases. This has been used extensively by courts on this matter and remains the only option for lesbian and gay social parents, as an alternative to stepchild adoption, which is itself a specific kind of adoption in particular cases.

³According to research, 3.4% of gay men and 5.4% of lesbians in Italy are parents (10% of gay men and 19% of lesbians are over 35 years old): most of them have children from previous heterosexual relationships, but in the last years, more and more lesbian and gay couples (especially lesbian ones) have been trying to have children together (Gigli, 2011). Out of 1391 LGBTQ families interviewed, 28.6% (16% of whom are single) have at least one child; out of this sample of 424 nucleuses, 7% had children through auto-insemination, 12% through surrogacy (abroad), 41% through assisted reproduction techniques (ARTs) and 20% from previous heterosexual relationships (Centro Risorse LGBTI, 2017).

Another kind of court decisions concerns the transcription of birth certificates made abroad, which was legitimated by a decision of the Supreme Court of Cassation that accepted the transcription of the birth certificate of the child of a lesbian couple (*Court of Cassation*, I Civil Section, no. 19599, 21 June–30 September 2016).

METHODOLOGICAL SECTION

This chapter is based on the interviews I collected in Italy for the INTIMATE project between 2015 and 2017 with five coupled lesbian and bisexual cis women (2015), five gay men who had children through surrogacy (2016) and five trans and non-binary persons. On interview, participants were between 25 and 45 years old (with two exceptions) and were living in Rome (most of them came from other cities). All of them were born in Italy and are White and able-bodied. In addition, I interviewed nine key informants.

Participants were interviewed using the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001) by key experts using semi-structured interviews.⁴

The recruitment methods we used in Rome for biographic interviews ranged from contacting LGBTQ organizations and collectives via mail to distributing informative flyers in LGBTQ gatherings and spaces, to getting help by friends and acquaintances, to snowballing. As concerns our sampling criteria, besides following the basic common criteria of the INTIMATE project, I tried my utmost (though I did not always succeed) to differentiate the sample in terms of age, geographic and socio-economic origins and political involvement.

The BNIM interviewing technique entails a two-part interview, the first part beginning with a broad question about the study theme and allowing interviewees all the time and freedom they need to talk about their biography and the second part being a sequence of questions coherently and subsequently based on the biographic account. My interviews lasted from 50 minutes to 5 hours, with a mean duration of about 2 hours.

The interviews were analysed through the NVivo software using a wide and complex array of nodes (topics) that were created by the whole team in order to have a common ground for a comparative analysis.

⁴For the sake of anonymity, only the age range will be indicated and pseudonyms will be used.

Before going on to present their stories, I will introduce the people who generously gave their time and helped me with my research. I will sort participants into the project's strands and studies.

(a) Strand: Micropolitics of partnering—Study: Lesbian couple-dom (2015):

- Alice, 40–44, lesbian, unemployed, living with her partner
- Fiore, 25–29, lesbian, student, living with a friend
- Ipazia, 35–39, bisexual, freelance, living with others
- Lenù, 25–29, bisexual, unemployed/precarious, living with her partner and a friend
- Vittoria, 30–34, lesbian, full-time job, living alone

All are White, cisgender, able-bodied and born in Italy. The majority come from other cities and/or regions and had been in a relationship for at least six months.

The key experts who participated in the lesbian study are the activists Miryam Camilleri, lawyer with Rete Lenford,⁵ Antonia Ciavarella and Graziella Bertozzo. Elena Biagini also made an important contribution through a recorded informal conversation.

(b) Strand: Micropolitics of parenting—Study: Surrogacy (2016):

- Carlo: 30–34, gay, precarious freelancer,⁶ lives with his partner Sergio and their son Ilario
- Filippo: 40–44, gay, full-time employed, lives with his husband Giacomo and their twin sons Giulio and Andrea
- Gianni: 30–34, gay, precarious freelancer, lives with his partner Riccardo, their son Calogero and the nanny, Cathrine
- Michele: 45–49, gay/bisexual, freelance, lives with his partner, their twin sons and the nanny
- Vanni: 45–49, gay, freelance, lives with his husband Vittorio and their daughter Carlotta

⁵ Rete Lenford is a professional body of lawyers dedicated to LGBTI rights.

⁶ I indicated as 'precarious freelancer' the participants who had legally defined freelance jobs, which actually are full-time jobs but only with the duties (but not the rights) of a full-time regular contract by part of the worker.

All are cis-men, White, able, coupled and born in Italy. Most of them come from other regions.

The key experts I interviewed for this case study were Carlo Flamigni, gynaecologist and member of the Bioethic Council; Sergio Lo Giudice, at that time senator for the Democratic Party (and father through surrogacy); Susanna Lollini, lawyer with Rete Lenford; and Tommaso Giartosio, radio presenter for a public national channel and father through surrogacy.

(c) Strand: Micropolitics of friendship—Study: Care and transgender (2017):

- Bibi: 40–44, trans woman (“dad trans woman”), lesbian, full-time job, lives alone, two daughters from previous heterosexual marriage
- Flavio: 40–44, trans man, heterosexual, part-time job, lives alone
- Max: 25–29, trans man (“atypical masculinity”), pansexual, freelance, lives with mother and one sister
- Penelope: 25–29, transgender girl (purely binary identity, non-binary expression), demisexual, panromantic, part-time job, lives with parents and brother
- Silom: 30–34, genderqueer, pansexual, unemployed/precarious, lives alone

Three had precarious jobs or were unemployed, one had a part-time job, and another had a full-time job. Their monthly income went from less than €500 to €1500/2000. Two of them lived with their families of origin, and three lived alone, with only one owning his own house.

As key experts I interviewed Ilaria Ruzza of Sat Pink, a support service for trans persons, and Valentina Coletta of MIT (Movimento Identità Trans—Trans Identity Movement).

Michela Angelini and Egon Botteghi of Anguane and Christian Leonardo Cristalli of Rete Trans gave a fundamental contribution through recorded informal conversations.

In this chapter I will take into consideration 13 of the 15 biographic interviews and, in particular, the part of them where the topic of care, in/visibilization and daily micro-practices of resistance are explicitly expressed. Regarding key informants, their contribution is, sadly, underrepresented, since my choice here was to focus on biographic experiences.

SYSTEMIC INVISIBILIZATION

The issue of systemic invisibilization, its internalization and the micro-practices used to tackle it emerged from the case studies with which this chapter engages. Before focusing on the consequences of (the lack of) law in participants' lives, I will therefore dedicate this section to illustrating how interviewees suffered and reacted to the consequences of systemic invisibilization, meaning the social and structural phenomena through which the lives, experiences, needs and existences of LGBTQ people are silenced, underrepresented and marginalized. Through the following accounts, we will see how this process also works through daily micro-practices of (self-)in/visibilization.

Starting with lesbian and bisexual women, I found the accounts of Ipazia and Fiore very telling. Recounting their times at high school, both told me they did not know about any lesbian girls back then and they did not even consider the possibility of being lesbian or bisexual themselves. Nonetheless, they knew some boys who were gay. Even if their age difference is not so remarkable, there are some substantial differences between the two historical periods in which they attended high school: during the decade that separates their teenage years, lesbian women have become slightly more visible in popular culture and mainstream media (e.g. an Italian TV channel started to broadcast the US lesbian series *The L Word*) and the LGBTQ movement in general gained visibility (Cirillo et al., 2010), but that does not seem to trigger significant differences in their experiences in their school years.

In my class there were two or three homosexuals (...) but there were no lesbians. I hadn't thought I could be attracted to women, too, honestly. (Ipazia, 35–39, bisexual)

We didn't even know a person who self-defined as a lesbian, so we knew... Of course, we knew... I mean, we are in the 2000s, not in the fifties, though... I had always had the suspicion that my brother was gay (. ...) It was logical for us to like boys. (Fiore, 25–29, lesbian)

In the case of gay men interviewed (particularly older ones), (self-)invisibilization involved the desire to become a parent—similarly to what Beatrice Gusmano found about lesbian mothers (Gusmano & Motterle, 2019):

There was the desire to be a parent for a long time (. . .) But obviously, since I did not associate homosexuality with parenthood, it seemed like something that could not be done (. . .) I must say that I had to overcome my resistance to seeing... homosexuals with children. (Michele, 45–49, gay/bisexual)

The desire to become a dad is something not taken for granted in my life, in the sense that for a first part of my life that was an idea that I never considered... (. . .) Because I probably made a very simple association [:] I am homosexual, so I cannot have children, I do not want them. (Filippo, 40–44, gay)

Nonetheless, self-invisibilization is tackled and actively brought into question by the interviewees, both in private and public spaces.

The issue of visibility and invisibility often emerged when the interviewees were talking about their families of origin. Indeed, structural invisibilization of LGBTQ subjects reproduces itself through daily micro-practices, and it is also through micro-practices that these subjects fight and react. The relationship with their family of origin is a good example of this.

Even if the reaction from parents and siblings to their sexual orientation and gender identity was not always good, participants nonetheless generally wanted to keep a good relationship with their parents whilst demanding recognition and expecting acceptance both as individuals and as a couple.⁷ This can imply continuous and distressing conflicts with parents, or at least employing caution with their feelings regarding their children's open sexual orientation and gender identity, by employing daily strategies of in/visibility, namely, at family gatherings or in the town of birth (when the parents still live there).

When we consider gay fathers and trans people, the issue of visibility acquires specific contours since it would be almost impossible to hide their reality from their families and still nurture a relationship with them. The

⁷The effort employed by some of the participants to preserve their relationship with the family without renouncing the visibility of the couple confirms what Chiara Bertone (2008) recalls when describing personal communities in Italy as less developed outside the family than inside. Moreover, as Bertone and Pallotta-Chiarolli argue, “(t)he limited research into heteronormative families of origin is a striking absence, especially if viewed with Southern European eyes, where inter-generational closeness and dependence mark people's lives” (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014, p. 2).

situation is different for lesbian women, since they could, in principle, continue seeing their families without ever coming out to them. Sometimes, actually, being “seen” by their families is a problem in itself. Indeed, in the lesbian coupledom case study, three participants out of five came out to their families of origin after starting a relationship: the couple stood out, then, as an element of visibility, as “the proof” of lesbianism (or bisexuality) from which the family cannot look away (Roseneil et al., 2020). On the other hand, it also functioned as a banalizing factor of the revelation; that is, the couple per se can make lesbianism visible without the need to declare it explicitly (Chetcuti, 2014).

Filippo’s experience is one of positive change and personal satisfaction. He and his partner informed their parents from the beginning of the surrogacy process, trying to make them understand and accept their wishes. Eventually, not only did the relationship with their parents improve, but Filippo’s relationship finally became visible in his hometown and with his extended family.

The evolution our families had with children is something extraordinary (. . .) When I went back there [hometown], I jumped into the past, I don’t know how to say, but really [it was like] two realities. Now that separation is gone. There is only what I am. And the same happened to my family (. . .) I would have never imagined to see my parents proudly talk about their grandchildren and normally talk about our family, as they do now. (Filippo, 40–44, gay)

Gianni’s parents were also happy with him having a son with his partner. However, when I interviewed him, they were still “in the closet” in their town. Gianni would have liked them to be more open, but he also understood their fears and hesitations. Therefore he respected their limits and decided for a compromise for the upcoming summer holidays: he would go and visit them with his partner and their son, but they would be staying in another town, where his mother “at least (. . .) will have the chance to come and stay with us”. Gianni’s attitude about his own homosexuality also evolved when his son arrived, since it became much easier to be open about it, even in his own hometown.

In the experiences of trans interviewees with their families of origin, we find similar accounts of sons and daughters assuming a caring role, guiding and supporting their parents through a path of learning and

acknowledgement. In Flavio's case, for example, transitioning actually made him reconnect with his parents:

When I had to start this path, (...) it was an opportunity... somehow, to take care of our relationship (. ...) I accompanied them a little: I prepared some written things (. ...) A support path, really (. ...) Well, it wasn't easy. But this forced us... forced me, when I was more than adult, to bring up feelings, emotions, [my] whole life, to narrate, (...) to narrate about us and to do this thing together.

Bibi, too, tried to guide her parents through her coming out as a trans woman. Differently from Flavio, she did not receive the same support from them, and when I interviewed her, she was still struggling at least not to be called by her dead name or with male pronouns in public. Fortunately, she is consistently supported by her daughters ("within the family context, they were the first people who supported me", she told me):

They always call me "dad", anyway [she smiles], (...) but they inflect it as feminine. My younger daughter... we were having lunch at my parent's, with some family friends (...) and this child (...) said: "But how is it, a female dad? There are no female dads!" "Yes, my dad is a female, so they exist!" And she always corrects my parents when they use the masculine with me.

INVISIBILIZATION THROUGH LACK OF LAW

Systemic invisibilization also operates through the legal system, as the disturbing issue of the lack of legal recognition of the social parent—and, then, of their relationship with their children—demonstrates.

I mean, it has to do with being actually socially recognized, that is, our relationship is there, it exists, and we want you to know that it exists! (...) Same thing for the social recognition of the relationship between Carlotta and me, which is a parent-child relationship (. ...) It is not only a right about my daughter, but it is also a duty towards her. (Vanni, 45–49, gay)

This problem also involves the whole family of origin of the social parent:

My mother was sorry when she discovered she wouldn't become part of (...) Carlotta's family line. She cared much about being also recognized as

the grandmother (. . .) The same goes for my brother: as an uncle, he also felt sorry (. . .) It is not that he isn't, he is in fact. I mean, that's the thing: you actually are but there's a 'No', (...) a ban by the authorities, which is... it is unfair. (Vanni, 45–49, gay)

Vanni shed light on the social and emotional implications of laws on partnering and parenting (Baumle & Compton, 2015). Moreover, he expressed the legitimate fear of having to suffer the consequences of potentially illegal actions or facing homophobic discrimination by public institutions due to the lack of specific legal protections:

I was a little insecure. Not so much about being a parent, but about the legal safeguards we would have, and if social services could interfere in our history, what power they had. That scared me a little.

As respondents' experiences show, this sense of insecurity is produced not only by the absence of law or by the existence of clearly homophobic legislation but also by the unclear, unpredictable and discretionary application of the law (Baumle & Compton, 2015).⁸ Indeed, some of the fathers I interviewed spoke about the problems they encountered when trying to transcribe the birth certificate of their children in Italy. For example, Vanni, once again, recalled the fear of doing something illegal, when talking about putting both fathers' names on the certificate:⁹

As long as you do it with the marriage certificate, you risk it, whatever, you don't care, you try it. To fight, to move on. But when your child's life is involved, maybe you say: "Well, let's not risk it, let's try to do things as best we can".

⁸ Moreover, as Baumle and Compton recall, laws protecting LGBT rights may be perceived as temporary achievement that could be erased at any moment, depending on the political situation.

⁹ The "Appellate Court of Trento", with order of 23 February 2017, ruled that the social father could be recognized as legal parent of the two children he and his partner (genetic father) had had through surrogacy.

Filippo's case is even more complicated, since one of his twins is genetically bonded to him and the other to his husband. Indeed, he notes how in his case it is nearly impossible to avoid illegality.¹⁰

We also had to agree to make a choice that, I'm not ashamed to say, does not follow the law, but there are situations you don't know how to handle [:] Italian law cannot provide for our case. (Filippo)

This issue clearly depicts how the legal system reproduces the symbolic and material hierarchy of genetic ties between parents and children (Nebeling Petersen, 2016; Riggs & Due, 2013). As Michele, genetic father, told me: "to be honest, you must admit [that] if there were a conflict, the law would be on my side".

So, when it comes to the interactions with institutions, gay fathers, together with lesbian mothers, are often discriminated against and invisibilized or face an institutional lack of knowledge about their specific kind of families. Faced with such difficulties, they employ different daily micro-practices of resistance (Gusmano & Motterle, 2020), some of which border on illegality and are themselves a kind of resistance to the inadequacy of the legal system (Baumle & Compton, 2015) as we saw in the examples above.

Even when respecting the rules as much as possible, open discrimination can be encountered, as happened to Carlo, whose experience is representative of many others in Italy:

Because of the mere fact that one can grasp that Ilario is the son of two dads, but is recognized only by one, we have received an obstructive formalism in the transcription of this certificate (...) "Do you know (...) that (...) rented uterus is illegal?" (...) This sort of veiled threat (. ...) We [asked] "Famiglie Arcobaleno"¹¹ [:] it turned out that everyone had faced this exact same script, this kind of formalist obstructionism (. ...) Then a manager took this situation to heart (...) in short, this was then solved.

¹⁰The "Appellate Court of Milan", with decree of 28 December 2016 (six months after I interviewed Filippo), ruled that two gay fathers, each genetically connected to each of their twins, could give both their surnames to both twins. However, the children were not legally recognized as brothers, since each was the legal child of a different father.

¹¹"Famiglie Arcobaleno" [Rainbow Families] is an organization for homosexual individuals and couples who have or want to have children.

Notwithstanding the “veiled threats”, as a lawyer Carlo knew that registry employees could do nothing against him and his partner legally. Moreover, they had the chance to compare their experience with other similar ones, thanks to “Famiglie Arcobaleno”. His example shows how resorting to surrogacy and facing all the different kinds of difficulties that it entails requires not only economic capital but also social and cultural ones (Gusmano & Motterle, 2020).¹²

For her part, Lenù considered going abroad with her partner Noe, to “build a family”: together with the dramatic employment situation affecting her generation, the lack of legal recognition as a couple¹³ and as (potentially future) mothers is an extra motivation to consider leaving Italy. However, in a context of socio-economical precariousness, Lenù and Noe’s projects for a future together also included other potential plans, beyond the couple. Indeed, the option that actually seemed closer to becoming true, at the time of the interview, was participating in a project with some of their friends in order to work together, sharing responsibilities and professional skills.

The importance of social capital in the forms of (networks of) friends, colleagues and political comrades will be analysed later in this chapter. Before that, the next section will focus on the particular invisibilization that trans people suffer in Italy, in spite of a law on gender identity actually existing.

WHEN THE LAW IS NOT ENOUGH

The experiences of some of the trans persons I interviewed—which echo those of many trans people in Italy and beyond—show how, even when a law does exist, it can fail to help and protect the very subjects it aims to serve. In fact, the law fails in particular because it does not recognize non-binary, gender-variant and other non-normative subjects, who consequently remain invisible (Voli, 2018).

Italy was one of the first European countries to pass a law on gender identity: Act 164 of 1982, “Norme in materia di rettificazione di

¹²Other examples that confirm the centrality of cultural and social capital come from Michele and his partner, who researched and studied books and articles on surrogacy and searched the web and asked other fathers, to be sure their choice was ethically sustainable. Moreover, a certain fluency with the English language is needed to communicate with surrogacy agencies, donors and surrogates.

¹³When I interviewed her, the law on civil union was yet to come.

attribuzione di sesso” [Rules Concerning the Rectification of Sex-Attribution] was a fundamental achievement. However, it showed some shortcomings, especially in its enforcement, and is now extremely outdated. Firstly, even if the law does not explicitly demand surgical genital rectification for legal gender recognition, Italian jurisprudence always interpreted it that way, until two recent decisions by the Court of Cassation (decision n. 15138, 20.07.2015) and the Constitutional Court (decision n. 221, 05.11.2015). Secondly, a long and difficult path is required in order to have name and gender changed on one’s ID. Indeed, excluding some rare exceptions, the procedures for gender reassignment in public centres follow the guidelines of the National Observatory on Gender Identity (ONIG), which demand at least six months of psychotherapy before starting hormonal treatment (during the year-long, so-called real-life test). Only after that is it possible to ask a judge for the authorization to change one’s ID.¹⁴

Some of the trans and non-binary participants described their experience with public health services regarding their transitioning process as extremely unsettling, both because of economic issues¹⁵ and the serious lack of professionalism they faced (Dierckx & Platero, 2018).

Indeed, despite being supposed to provide help and support, health services may happen to be the very place where one not only undergoes frustrations and injustices but also institutional and social power structures that limit the rights of trans people to show themselves in their concrete, material functioning (Braz & Souza, 2018; Butler, 2004; Hines, 2007). The so-called medicolegal system (Butler, 1993; Hines et al., 2018) and its discourse reproduces and strengthens (hetero)cisnormativity by shaping “the trans person” as a perfectly gendered subject, in order for them

¹⁴ ONIG guidelines are followed by most national public hospitals’ multidisciplinary specialized centres that deal with gender transitioning; very few centres follow the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) “Standards of Care” protocol, which is notably less demanding. NB. In November 2020 ONIG guidelines were updated, including an explicit call for depathologization.

¹⁵ According to Italian law, the transitioning process is covered by the public health system, but there are actually substantial costs to face (medical, administrative, judicial). In September 2020, the AIFA (Italian Medicines Agency) added hormone therapy to the list of free-access medicines (under the National Health System). However, this news is not as good as it seems, since the conditions for free access follow a strongly pathologizing and binary stance: <https://con-te-stare-transgender.it/terapia-ormonale-sostitutiva-gratuita-per-persone-trans-facciamo-chiarzza/>; <https://www.dinamopress.it/news/falsa-buona-notizia-dibattito-sulle-terapie-ormonali-sostitutive/>.

to fit exactly into socially expected gender norms. In particular, Max disapproves of the strong gender binarism he encountered among professionals: “They end up in binarism, too. So if you’re FtM you necessarily have to dress in a certain way, have a certain kind of sexual orientation, have a certain kind of sexual fantasies”.

Strict binary approaches contribute to leading to what Penelope strongly deplores, regarding both the psycho-medical and the jurisprudential application of the law on gender recognition, that is, the obligation for trans people to fit into an extremely rigid and standardized model of what being trans—that is, being a man and/or a woman, too—should be, in order to have their rights recognized and their gender legally registered (Garosi, 2012; Lorenzetti, 2015).

There are methods that can make people feel good right away, methods that may even be reversible (. . .) And yet... it is assumed that everyone must / really prove/ [*with emphasis*] they need all this. That is, you really have to get there and prove that you are worthy of the path. Which is somewhat the same as (...) the fact that we must /prove/ [*with emphasis*] to a judge that we are really who we are. We are not free. We are not free to self-determine ourselves, a judge must decide for us. (Penelope, 25–29, trans, demisexual, panromantic)

The account of Valentina Coletta, one of the key informants I spoke to during fieldwork, shows the contradictions and self-inflicted invisibilization that many non-binary persons—and any other gender non-conforming individual—face when trying to get a legal gender recognition.¹⁶ Legal recognition, as a matter of fact, is a basic matter of living one’s daily life without having to face continuous troubles and complications, so that it keeps being an obliged objective even for the people who do not recognize themselves in any of the two binary genders. Indeed, finding (and keeping) a job is one of the most serious and common problems among trans people (Saraceno, 2003)¹⁷:

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that these appropriation strategies are also used, very diffusely, by trans people who do not necessarily question the transitioning process as imposed on them nor gender binarism. Many of these people also do not fit into the well-defined and rigid boxes in which they are constrained.

¹⁷ Keeping one’s job is another expectable problem. Moreover, even in formally supportive workplaces, daily life may not be easy, as in the case of one participant, Bibi, who keeps being teased by colleagues and suffers from her boss’s transphobic stereotypes.

I started thinking about changing my ID when I started having problems for the job (. ...) I mean, it's something that repels me, but you must be pragmatic and find ingenious solutions to survive in a precarious world. So that was the main goal: finding a job. (Valentina Coletta)

In fact, we cannot forget the economic, class and racial implications (Spade, 2006): not only is the transitioning process not for free at all, despite being covered by the public health service, but for people who do not want to undergo this kind of scrutiny, looking for solutions outside standard procedures may be the only option, which implies a much more expensive path (Davy, 2012) that few people can afford.¹⁸

Once again, participants' accounts show that economic capital can make a difference when rights are limited, but also that other kinds of capital are important and are in fact used.

For example, an interesting strategy that emerged from some interviews and is significantly connected with social and cultural capital concerns communication with medicolegal institutions. As the scientific and activist literature emphasizes, lying and acting for medicolegal institutions and their gatekeepers is a common strategy among trans people along the transitioning process, with the aim of fitting into the normative model and so getting access to the whole process and to having their IDs changed (Arfini, 2007; Arietti et al., 2010; Nicotra, 2004). Zowie Davy (2012) talks about "stage-managing" to describe a respondent's behaviour, that is, "[t]he ritualistic, lengthy and patronizing processes involved in persuading their psychiatrist (gatekeepers) that they are legitimate candidates for hormonal and surgical intervention" (p. 135).

Max gave a perfect example of that:

I had already studied all those tests (. ...) So I knew how I had to answer, [in order to] have certain reactions on their part (. ...) But if I had told them that my experience is both feminine and masculine (...) they would have never let me start the transition (. ...) According to them (...) if you are FtM, (...) you must like women, (...) you must dress in a certain way, you mustn't use make up, you must completely reject your genitals, you must necessarily do surgery or take your breasts off (. ...) I manipulated the tests

¹⁸Considering this situation, some trans people choose to follow self-administered hormonal therapy, with the aid of others that already did it and finding hormones in different (not always legal) ways (Braz & Souza, 2018).

all the way through, in order to give them what they wanted and to have what I wanted.

Valentina Coletta traced an interesting parallelism with the experience of undocumented migrant people:

Having worked with refugees for years, I see that I'm doing the same things they do to get a paper (. . .) They go before a commission, I go before three judges to have my life judged, and most likely I will also have to lie, because I cannot reveal the fact that I am a lesbian, the fact that I don't fully identify with female sex. One must lie, lie until death [*laughter*]!

The different strategies I described above often implied a significant social capital. Indeed, many accounts showed how support from friends, families, comrades, colleagues and former partners played a central role, as we will see in the next section.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKS OF CARE

One of the central issues that came out from my research with lesbian couples, gay parents and trans and care in the Italian context was the importance of different kinds of networks in the lives of participants in order to live liveable lives (or survive) in a cisheteronormative society, respecting and being proud of themselves, getting help and care (material and immaterial), sharing knowledge, and so on.

The role of friends in the daily lives of the respondents was strongly stressed by many of them, especially in the third case study, "Care and transgender". At the same time, however, someone recalled how some friends left for good and some friendships changed for the worse.

The importance of sharing common experiences with trans girlfriends is clear in Bibi's words, as is the soothing sensation of living a "normal life" and doing "normal things" together, in contrast with daily experiences of transphobic discrimination:

We had a very healthy dinner at the pizzeria, the two of us talking. So, normal life [she smiles] without the anguish of being trans... (. . .) To see that one can do absolutely normal things, gave me the peace of mind to continue doing what I did before.

Valentina Coletta underlined that friends also support the daily work of resistance to imposed gender binary:

People who, like me, are not binary but then followed a medicalized path, end up by clashing with that. (. . .) [T]he institution, the state... you must accept a binary choice of gender, (...) but it is a bit dangerous, you feel dragged to the other side. But you have an anchor [:] your network of non-binary friendships, that make you stand with your feet on the ground.

As I recalled above, families of origin are often included in such networks, even when they act as perfect representatives of the cisheteronormative system.

In Flavio's experiences, his family of origin blends into a larger community of care he is trying to build: another kind of extended family, where he calls "my children" the children of his ex-partners and friends. Starting from a clear separation between family of choice and family of origin (which he had a very difficult relationship with before), Flavio ended up actively mixing it all up by creating his version of "personal community" (Formby, 2017, p. 8), where the boundaries separating different affective contexts of references get blurred (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014).

Lenù underlined the central role that friends play in her and in her partner Noe's life. In her case, however, there is no blending, since she explicitly talked about "famiglia naturale" [natural family] and "famiglia acquisita" [acquired family], the latter meaning the family she chose and created in Rome, outside the family of origin: "I have a family and I also have another family here [in Rome]. It doesn't necessarily have to be just Noe, it can be my friends, the people I feel fine with".

Max sees his friends as a full-fledged family:

Friends for me are a family, (...) [F]riendship is fundamental in my opinion, especially if you don't really have a family or you have a family (...) that doesn't confirm you. In all the fundamental steps of this transitioning, Francesca and Anna have been there (. . .) In the sense of support, but also of protection, (...) I see it in them, they are my family (...) at a very emotional level. Whereas my family are still strangers to me, (...) they do not understand me.

When talking about families, the accounts of gay fathers were very significant. These participants highlighted the affective bonds and

relationships they built with gestational carriers, egg donors (to a lesser extent) and their families, way before the child was born.

When describing how they found carriers and donors, participants talked about a bidirectional process, where the main features they looked for (and found) in those women had to do with a commonality of beliefs and motivations, first a desire to get to know each other and then to keep the relationship going after the children are born (Berend, 2016).

We started building this relationship as we wanted, I mean, as an extended family (. . .) A sense of family was created before the babies were born (. . .) It's an evolving relationship and it evolves more and more as regards children, now that they are (...) more autonomous, more independent (. . .) It's a relationship they are building with their... we call them "cousins", I mean (...) Brooke's children. (. . .) So we know what their children do and they know what our children do. So we accompany each other, step by step. It feels like family. (Michele)

When we talk about Helen we never separate her from Shawn and Mark (...) all her family participated and helped us with this project (. . .) And they still are now our full-fledged American family. (Filippo)

Different kinds of informal groups and support networks are deemed fundamental, even life-saving, in participants' daily lives, as seen above with fathers through surrogacy and "Famiglie Arcobaleno". Such contexts, indeed, are extremely useful and necessary not only to find and share information but also for emotional support.

Getting first-hand information directly from people who are in the same situation and already had direct experiences is one of the first objectives. Moreover, realizing that there are other people in very similar situations, and that many different experiences exist and are equally worthy, can be a tremendous relief:

[W]hen you talk to other people and you realize that there are people like you, then you understand that: "yes I exist". And you legitimate yourself, in a certain sense. (Silom, 30–34, genderqueer, pansexual)

And it helped me a lot, or at least it helped me to understand that I was not the only one who was transsexual and homosexual, that my sexual orientation did not clash with this situation (. . .) It was mainly the fact of discovering

all the differences and the facets, and the fact that there is no /single right way/ [*with emphasis*] to be trans. (Bibi, 40–44, trans, lesbian)

Information sharing easily becomes mutual care, and virtual spaces can become spaces of care, where every experience counts and anyone who comes searching for help can rapidly become a helper, these two roles always coexisting (Hines, 2007).

Flavio shed light on the collective dimension of care: having serious difficulty trying to help a young trans person, he asked other people for help, and he finds that such collective caring strengthened and enhanced his relationships with those people, whom he thinks could be at his side in other future experiences.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, we lie. We lie so beautifully that our stories are almost as powerful and big as the lies they tell about us. Our lies keep us alive. Our lies build communities out of the nothingness of colonization and stretch across diaspora, genocide, and heartbreak. Our lies are prayers to each other. They become flesh, grow bodies, begin a second order of naming.

—*Gwen Benaway, Pussy*, 2018

[F]riendship can create affective spaces that heal wounds inflicted by social norms. (Cornejo, 2014, p. 360)

This chapter tries to provide a summary of three years of fieldwork, by choosing to focus on Italian's peculiar legal situation and on how the persons I interviewed dealt with it at the time.

Being aware that the lack of law is not necessarily the main problem for LGBTQ subjects in their daily lives and that the existence of legislation that protects their rights is neither a definitive nor a determinant solution in cisheteronormative societies, I purposely left space to engage with participants' experiences of invisibilization and discrimination beyond the absence of laws. Moreover, especially through the accounts of trans people, I recalled how laws and their application, although fundamental to making many lives liveable, can invisibilize and ostracize many others, due to their deference to the cisheteronormative values that inform the social context.

However, apart from being accepted and suffered, the law and its mechanisms can be worked around and resisted in various ways, as the experiences of gay fathers through surrogacy and trans people I interviewed show. Wanting to exist and be recognized as a non-heterosexual parent or a trans person in Italy generally implies having to deal directly with the issues of law, whether it is there or not. Participants who talked about it described their fears and frustrations on the matter, but also showed awareness and knowledge vis-à-vis such a hostile context. These biographies (trans people's in particular) illustrate a wide, multifaceted flow of resistance and reappropriation (Busi & Fiorilli, 2014), where one of the most apparent (and common) skills is being able to read and interpret normative and oppressive systems and deploying strategies to make the most of them without bending to their standards.

Awareness, knowledge and other much-needed tools to manage these kinds of issues are strongly connected with social, cultural and economic capital. Among them, different networks of care (friends, associations, informal and virtual networks) emerged clearly as a fundamental and powerful support, not only when having to do with the law. In contrast with a neoliberal narrative of the individual capacity to overcome every difficulty thanks to one's inner force and capacity, even when living as abject and outcast subjects in Western democracies, the accounts of these participants show it is worth considering the political value of any relationship of care they experienced. This may take the form of emotional support among friends, in families, self-help groups, political collectives, virtual gaming groups or BDSM groups; of technical advice from more (and to less) experienced people in individual or collective contexts; of medical and psychological care from professionals; and so on.

To conclude, my—inevitably partial—analysis shows the importance of more research on the topic of care among LGBTQ people in Italy. In particular, what my research lacks is what I find most interesting to focus on, in particular: the experiences with (networks of) care and support of LGBTQ Black people and people of colour, migrant people, young people and children and older people.

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