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Contesting gender: young women and feminist generations in gender-based violence services

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ABSTRACT

Activism and service provision around gender-based violence (GBV) are often young women's first entry point into feminist movements. Definitions of gender and GBV, however, are increasingly contested within feminist spaces, with often exclusionary consequences for how survivors of violence are supported. Drawing on the findings of online and in-person interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Serbia and Italy, this article documents young activists' efforts to broaden the category of gender within feminist organizations and questions whether the frame of feminist generational conflict, prevalent both in the literature and in public discourse, can explain the ensuing tensions. It argues that narratives of generational conflict, despite being frequently deployed by activists themselves, obfuscate a genuine struggle to redefine the subject of feminism and extend feminist solidarity to trans women and other marginalized groups. Different feminist praxes, as seen in the two case studies, can either trigger acts of generational disidentification and disengagement or foster spaces of intergenerational exchange and discussion. Paying attention to the work that intergenerational conflict narratives are doing, and the work they are preventing, can help uncover and explicitly address the tensions currently permeating feminist spaces towards a more inclusive and expansive feminism.

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Introduction

As we sat in a hotel bar, fuming after another day of thinly veiled transphobic rhetoric at a conference on sexual violence, my fellow thirty-somethings and I despaired about the possibility of making any progress towards a more inclusive gender-based violence (GBV) sector while certain older feminists stuck around. We vowed to never become those 'old-fashioned feminists' who cannot understand the claims of new generations and obstruct their participation in the movement. In our minds, the heated debates about the recognition of gender diversity within feminism and in GBV service provision were a classic example of generational conflict.

While issues of trans inclusion in women's shelters and other safe spaces have been debated since the 1970s, the increased visibility in the last few years of diverse gender identities, including those outside the male-female binary, has revived conflicts within feminism (Hines, 2019; Voli, 2016). Within organizations that provide services to survivors of GBV, the outcome of these conflicts ultimately determines who is welcome into a counselling room or safe house and how to represent violence in advocacy initiatives or campaigns. These organizations are also a key site of feminist

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activism and often an entry point into feminism for young women in response to personal experiences of violence and discrimination (Davies & Sweetman, 2018; Homan et al., 2018).

As they enter these professional and political spaces, however, young feminists find them ridden with 'debates and anxieties about the status and boundaries of the feminist subject' (Dean & Aune, 2015, p. 382). An enduring issue within feminist theory and praxis, the demarcation of the category of womanhood continues to have concrete implications in terms of who can participate in feminist movements, who can speak on behalf of whom and who can access services and support provided by feminist networks (Crenshaw, 1991; Hooks, 1982; Lewis & Hemmings, 2019; Stryker & Bettcher, 2016).

With young people being increasingly considered as *gender trailblazers* who directly contribute to, or at least more readily accept, an ever-expanding understanding of gender and gender identity (Allen et al., 2022; Risman, 2018), their participation in feminist activism can challenge long-standing definitions of gender and GBV and contribute to more expansive and inclusive services. At the same time, as these boundaries are challenged, dynamics of resistance and retrenchment emerge which can result in disillusionment and withdrawal of young feminists (Beechey, 2006; Bias, 2019; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). This article therefore explores the presence and impact of intergenerational debates and conflicts surrounding the definitions of gender and GBV in two organizations working with survivors of violence in Italy and Serbia. It further questions the extent to which the frame of feminist generational conflict, prevalent both in the literature and in public discourse, is sufficient to explain the current tensions. For the purposes of this study, generations are understood as shaped both by age and by the participation in shared socio-historical experiences (Mannheim as cited in Bias, 2019), including their participation in different phases of the feminist movement.

After presenting an overview of debates surrounding generational conflict in feminism, focusing on gender diversity, I explore the divergence of younger and older feminists' perspectives on gender identity and GBV and how these are perceived and narrated by activists themselves. A straightforward interpretation of these dynamics as a form of feminist generational conflict is complicated by a range of intersecting personal and institutional factors which influence organizational and individual positions. In the Italian case, recurring to narratives of generational conflict allows activists of all ages to neutralize and distance themselves from the political claims of 'the other generation'. In Serbia, a different orientation towards feminism as an ongoing project of learning and responding to emerging social justice demands points to the possibility of fruitful exchange even when starting positions differ. Ultimately, what emerges from the data is not a struggle for recognition amongst different generations, but a battle to determine who is seen as a valid subject within feminism and therefore who feminist activists welcome, support, and fight alongside.

Feminist waves amongst generational and political divides

Discussions about generational divides in feminism are embodied by the image of feminist waves, widely cited by media, scholars and activists themselves. Defined as organizing frameworks and identities for activists by Nancy Naples (2006), feminist waves allow newcomers to the movement to distinguish their political claims from those of feminists who came before, while pointing to a shared history of opposition to patriarchal systems (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015). In studies of generational conflict within US feminism, Henry (2004) and Reger (2011) analyse processes of generational *disidentification*, whereby younger activists define themselves in opposition to generations of older feminists, who are recast as oppressive, and present themselves as harbingers of a 'new and improved' version of feminism. At the same time, Reger (2015) identifies acts of disidentification carried out by older feminists when confronted with new themes and forms of political mobilization, such as Slut Walks, which in their appropriation of the patriarchal signifier 'slut' and its imagery appear distant from earlier feminist critiques of the male gaze and the sexualization of (young) female bodies.

Multiple scholars have pointed to the flawed nature of the wave narrative. Acts of disidentification often rely on a portrayal of the 'other' wave as having a single, coherent, almost caricatural identity: the second wave as prudish and exclusionary, the third wave as narcissistic and consumerist (Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021; Hogeland, 2001; Mackay, 2015). Critiques of the second wave as racist, transphobic and homophobic occlude the activism of feminists of colours, lesbian, trans and queer feminists of previous generations and perpetuates a vision of linear progression where contemporary feminism is beyond reproach (Gillis et al., 2007; Naples, 2006; Reger, 2011). Furthermore, overemphasizing age and generational differences can obscure other factors, such as class, race, and sexuality, which contribute to the elaboration of different claims within feminism (Henry, 2004). Portrayals of feminist generations as fundamentally at odds with each other also foreground rupture over continuity and resilience (perhaps strategically) and thus discourage intergenerational exchange, mutual learning and productive dissensions, all key avenues for feminism to evolve and adapt to changing social and political environments (Chironi, 2019; Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Reger, 2011).

Beechey (2006) and Bias (2019) argue that what is presented as generational conflict within feminist non-governmental organizations is more the product of the imbalance of power and lack of recognition of young women's contributions than the expression of irreconcilable ideological differences. In the working environments they analyse, the narrative of feminist generational conflict rooted in opposing political claims hides and displaces frustrations at hierarchical power dynamics that advantage older, more senior feminists within the organization (Beechey, 2006; Bias, 2019).

Nonetheless, generational narratives are often found in the discourses of both Serbian and Italian feminist movements. Ammaturo (2020) documents how feminist positions that reject gestational surrogacy, sex work and trans-inclusion in Italy are sometimes referred to as *veterofemminismo*, the prefix *vetero* meaning old, outdated, obsolete. In Siročić's study of millennial feminists in post-Yugoslav countries, younger activists distance themselves from the founders of the feminist movement in the region through different forms of mobilization, such as do-it-yourself festivals, and alternative interpretative frameworks which draw on left materialist and queer feminist repertoires (Siročić, 2019).

These examples illuminate how discourses of gender and sexual diversity are a critical terrain of contention between different feminist generations across contexts (Davies & Sweetman, 2018; Reger, 2011). In Italy, the popular *Non Una Di Meno* movement and some younger feminists have adopted the term *transfemminismo*, transfeminism, to signal their separation from the strong tradition of feminism of sexual difference (Cossutta, 2021). Transfeminism is defined both as an explicitly trans-inclusive position and as a philosophical perspective opposed to a global system of domination which maintains the status quo through the control of bodies and the arbitrary assignment of genders at birth (Furci and Vescio, 2021). Examining questions pertaining to transgender or other gender-non-conforming identities can denaturalize and deconstruct binary notions of gender which underpin patriarchal domination, a critical task for any feminist project (Corte, 2021; Stryker, 2007). The rejection of the binary social construction of gender is increasingly embodied by young *gender rebels* who use their own gender identification and presentation as a revolutionary act which, they hope, will ultimately lead to the demise of the overall gender structure (Risman, 2018). Their personal and political deployments of gender(s) repeatedly disrupt the gender order with the question: 'Why must our lives be organized by the legal and bureaucratic binary system that relegates everyone to one of two categories based originally on genitalia observed at birth?' (Risman, 2018, p. 284).

However, not all young people are gender rebels and not all young feminists embrace trans and non-binary inclusive positions. Multiple studies (Allen et al., 2022; Reger, 2011; Risman, 2018) have revealed diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives on gender normativity amongst young people and young feminist activists, symptoms of 'an increasingly politicized climate of discussions around gender and identity, where [. . .] there is both cultural visibility and seeming permissibility of gender diversity *and* simultaneous resistance to this' (Allen et al, 2022, p. 4.) Young Serbians who identify as anti-nationalist radical feminists reject queer, trans and sex-work inclusive positions

normally associated with young activists and align themselves instead with the 'real feminists' of older generations (Bias, 2019). Similarly, young British radical feminists interviewed by Mackay (2015) oppose the idea of generational divides within feminism and point to divergent political positions on issues such as women's safe spaces and feminist separatism, referring to strictly women-only political and social organizing, as the roots of conflicts within feminism.

Within the field of GBV, the rejection of gender binarism challenges the women's safe space paradigm upon which feminist responses to violence have been built over the past fifty years. In doing so, it has the potential or, depending on the viewpoint, poses the risk to fundamentally alter service delivery models and political approaches to ending violence against women. Used to constant attacks on women-only spaces by anti-feminist conservative forces and austerity regimes, feminists of 'older generations' are understandably wary of any efforts to contest such a cornerstone of established GBV practice (Mackay, 2015). At the same time, in their critique of new conceptions of gender identity and violence, those who have been active in the movement for a long time often portray themselves – and are perceived by some younger activists – as 'keepers of the feminist truth' which must be protected from contamination (Bias, 2019).

It is thus worth considering whether generational conflicts in feminism could not be more accurately interpreted as 'debates about the subject of feminism – encompassing the demarcation of "feminist" as a political self-identification, and debates about the constituency feminism is seen to represent' (Dean & Aune, 2015, p. 385). Disagreements over the definition of the category of woman have endured throughout the history of feminism and religious women, trans-women, migrant women, and women of colour are currently at the forefront of feminist debates in Europe (Dean & Aune, 2015).

Yet, as the case studies in this article demonstrate, the image of feminist waves and the trope of a mother-daughter relationship between older and younger feminists recur in the literature and in activists' discourses. Henry (2004) argues that many of the conflicts within feminisms are, at least, *perceived* and *represented* as rooted in generational differences. The well-rehearsed narratives of feminist waves might thus need to be analysed in terms of their affective, rather than their explanatory, power (Hogeland, 2001). As this paper will argue, framing conflict as generational allows younger and older activists to sidestep difficult conversations about the subjects and goals of the feminist movements and dismiss political claims as old-fashioned or naïve without engaging in meaningful dialogue.

Methods

This article is based on online and in-person fieldwork conducted as part of a larger study on intersectionality in feminist organizations providing services to survivors of GBV in Italy and Serbia. The project favours a qualitative case study approach to focus on 'how' rather than 'why' questions (Schwandt & Gates, 2017; Silverman, 2017), and the specific cases were selected to provide a transnational perspective on the application of intersectionality outside of Anglophone and Francophone contexts where most studies on this topic have focused to date. Serbia and Italy's feminist movements have distinctive histories linked to their socio-historical locations which have resulted in specific articulations of feminist theory and praxis (Lóránd, 2015, 2018; Pojmann, 2006). Locally established feminisms have however been increasingly challenged by claims for inclusion of various marginalized groups, particularly migrant and refugee women[1] (due to the two countries' positioning on global migratory and refugee routes) and queer and trans activists in the face of sustained discrimination and strong anti-gender movements in both countries (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Zaharijević, 2018).

The data emerges from qualitative interviews I conducted between October 2020 and December 2021 with 19 women and one man[2] employed by two organizations (8 participants in Serbia and 11 participants in Italy). Both organizations describe themselves as feminist and were founded in the late 1990s or early 2000s in response to perceived gaps in support provided by other

women's organizations, namely services for victims of human trafficking, migrant and refugee women and girls. They each employ less than 30 staff members who, supported by volunteers, provide a range of legal, housing, psychosocial and advocacy services for survivors of various forms of GBV, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking, economic violence, as well as broader support for women at risk of violence, including migrant, asylum seeking and refugee women.

Twelve participants were interviewed multiple times over the course of the research project (between two to four times), both online and in-person, while seven participants only participated in one face-to-face interview. Online video interviews were conducted using Zoom. Interviews in Serbia took place in English or Serbian with the support of a simultaneous interpreter, while Italian was used in Italy. All participants signed consent forms in advance of their interviews and the data has been anonymized and pseudonyms used for all participants throughout the article. Interviews are complemented by field notes I compiled during observation of the organizations' activities.

Data analysis was supported by a two-stage coding process using Nvivo12 software. After the first round of interviews with all participants, initial coding as defined by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) revealed *intergenerational dynamics* and *sexuality and gender identity* as important themes raised by participants in response to questions related to intersectional analysis in their work and power dynamics within their organizations. A question directly engaging with intergenerational differences within feminism was then added in subsequent interviews. Focused coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) was used to distinguish between the discourses of different generations and explore relationships within the data (for example between *feeling rejected* and *abandoning feminism)*.

Initially, participants were divided in three generations (young, middle and older) as they mentioned three generations being visible within the organization and to complicate the dyadic view of generations present in much of the literature on generational conflict (Henry, 2004). However, the sample size was too small to distinguish trends for the middle and older generations in relation to the themes of this article and views of these two groups tended to align. Future studies with larger samples could overcome this limitation and provide a more nuanced perspective on generational differences. The younger feminists I quote throughout this paper are therefore (8) young women under the age of 30 and the last cohort of women to be employed by both organizations. The older generations refer to (11) women in their late 30s, 40s and 50s who have worked within the organization for several years and tend to have positions of leadership or significant responsibility.

(De)Prioritizing gender diversity

In line with the literature, young women interviewed in this study were more likely to hold fluid views of gender identity and sexuality and to speak about gender diversity in positive terms. They were also much more likely to present the recognition of gender diversity and the inclusion of trans women within feminism as important, or even central, to their politics. Camila, a young practitioner in the Italian organization, pointed out how the lack of engagement with transgender identities during the induction training immediately alerted her to a disjuncture between her personal feminist politics and those of the organization:

> I was surprised by an aspect [of the training], the fact that no-one spoke about transgender people at all. That made an alarm bell go off because I know there are also feminist movements that do not consider transgender women to be real women. That doesn't sit well with me. (Camila, mid-twenties, Italy)

Importantly, the Serbian organization regularly provided support to trans women experiencing violence, which was recognized by young feminists such as Lara in the quote below as an important starting point despite differences in opinion between younger and older colleagues.

> I can have my opinion on that topic, you can have yours. But still, we have to agree upon that within the organisations, what we are going to do in the moment when someone refers to us a trans woman. [. . .] When I asked that, I realised that I have an answer. We are supporting this. (Lara, late-twenties, Serbia)

In the Italian case, while organizational policy did not explicitly exclude trans women, young activists did not perceive its services as welcoming or ready to support trans or non-binary survivors. Anisa expressed her discomfort at not feeling prepared to assist a trans woman who might seek support from the Italian organization's anti-violence centre:

> Transsexual *[sic]* women who are victims of violence could come [to our services] and so we should have some training, know and speak about it, and understand how to help, without discriminating. (Anisa, early twenties, Italy)

Younger feminists were also more likely to challenge the dominant narrative of male violence against women within the context of a heterosexual relationship, which they considered exclusionary towards survivors in same-sex relationships and based on a binary perception of all men as perpetrators and all women as victims. Viola, a young activist within the Italian organization and also connected to queer and transfeminist movements in her local area, presented a careful analysis which drew both from radical feminism and queer perspectives on violence in an attempt to navigate the need to recognize forms of violence which do not fit a cis-heteronormative image of domestic violence and the importance of retaining an understanding of male violence as the expression of a patriarchal system rooted in gender binarism.

> This binarism, in my opinion, must be overcome. Which doesn't mean forgetting it because, [. . .] the gender issue exists, and it's also binary. But there is a whole other part which we should be discussing and reflecting upon. (Viola, mid-twenties, Italy)

In contrast, older feminist activists were considerably less likely to raise issues of trans inclusion as critical to the work of the organization or to argue for a re-definition of gender and GBV. Rather, some of them shared concerns around the political expediency of drawing parallels between trans, queer and feminist issues, primarily driven by the fear that cisgender women's claims would be side-lined or 'weakened'. We see these concerns emerge in Mirella's quote below, where she questions the idea of a 'big queer umbrella' under which diverging experiences of trans and cis women are forced together.

> In my opinion it is important to recognise the pathway, the political process of each claim, the recognition of each one, trans or something else. And, I'm not sure how to put it, [transfeminism] seems to minimise, to weaken our claim to rights. It puts us all under, now I have this image of *queer*, of the big umbrella. Are we all under the big umbrella? No, I don't want to be under the same umbrella! (Mirella, late thirties, Italy)

In Serbia, Svetlana did not argue against the recognition of gender diversity within the feminist movement in principle, but remained doubtful about its prioritization, again pointing towards anxieties surrounding the loss of focus on cisgender women's concerns:

> On [online feminist forum], I see maybe 25 emails in a day about trans women in Serbia. Which is okay, but is this really the most important thing for women in Serbia today? (Svetlana, mid-forties, Serbia)

The data also confirmed the influence of UK feminist discourses identified by Bilić (2022) in his study of transphobia in post-Yugoslav leftist movement. For instance, Viki (early fifties, Serbia) directly echoed common British trans-exclusionary arguments in conversation, such as stating that (cis) women are being forgotten due to trans rights activism and that 'there is too much trans in the UK!'.

The specific socio-political situation in Serbia, characterized by an increasingly authoritarian government and a regional and global backlash against women's rights, animated older feminists' fears that symbolic feminist victories around GBV, equal pay, abortion could be under threat and reinforced their belief that they should remain central to the feminist agenda. Viki warned against the risk of 'moving on when the previous job is not done', drawing on the socialist roots of Serbian/Yugoslav feminism which prioritize women's material needs over what are perceived as individualistic rights, such as self-definition and gender expression. In her view, sexual difference remains constitutive of social classes operating within the patriarchal system and it therefore needs to be safeguarded against the perceived threat of the dissolution of the category 'woman' and its attached

position of subordination. Interestingly, some young people in this study, as will be explored below, and in Allen et al. (2022) research with British youth, also characterized attention towards gender diversity as a luxury issue which distracts from more important political and material struggles.

Complicating the generational narrative

So far, the data appears to support a straightforward narrative of generational conflict between 'young gender trailblazers' and 'older exclusionary feminists'. However, a deeper analysis reveals the influence of other intersecting factors in determining views about gender diversity and their prioritization within GBV services and the feminist movement.

Giada was the only young feminist who did not spontaneously raise the issue of gender diversity during interviews. When asked directly about it, she speculated trans inclusion would be a controversial issue in the organization due to different religious beliefs, with colleagues of faith more likely to uphold, in her perception, exclusionary views. However, despite describing herself as secular, she did not unequivocally embrace an inclusionary perspective of gender diversity, instead expressing uncertainty and the need to further consider the position of trans women within feminism.

> Actually, my position also needs to evolve, in the sense that I should also reflect on it personally. (Giada, late twenties, Italy)

Women who are negatively racialized in Italy sometimes expressed converging positions despite differences in age. Anisa, a racialized Italian in her early twenties, supported trans inclusion in services but also complained about queer claims overshadowing the 'concrete needs' of women during a protest march she attended on the International Day against Violence Against Women. Older racialized feminists within the organization also mentioned experiencing discomfort at the march, either due to its themes or its modalities of protest, directly recalling Reger's reverse disidentification from younger generations during a Slut Walk (2015). These reflections evoked a juxtaposition between materialist and identity politics and between the needs of different groups of marginalized women.

Young feminists who identified as LGBTQ+ were more likely to express a fluid understanding of gender and gender expression, which they explicitly linked to their queer feminist or transfeminist politics. Interestingly though, the same linkage between sexuality and interpretations of gender was not observed amongst lesbian or bisexual women belonging to older generations.

Pathways to feminism and, consequently, to their current organization emerged as a lens of analysis in several interviews. Young women who were active in multiple movements and built their political awareness outside the GBV sector found the definitions of gender and GBV in their current organization harder to navigate. Nisrine (mid-twenties, Italy), a racialized Italian with a similar background to Anisa, had extensive experience of organizing within feminist and anti-racist movements across Italy and embraced trans and sex worker inclusion as a key issue for contemporary feminism. She condemned her organization's 'old feminism, a feminism that is *TERF-y* and *SWERF*[3]*-y*'. Her position stands in contrast to Giada's, who described herself as someone who was not politically conscious until joining her current organization and discovering feminism within it. Like the young radical feminists in Bias (2019) and Mackay's (2015) studies, Giada did not perceive a generational conflict centred around gender identity within the organization and considered older and more experienced members of the organization as feminist guides to follow.

The simple paradigm of younger feminists as holders of progressive views of gender diversity clashing with the outdated binary views of older generations is therefore challenged. What is revealed is a more complicated picture where young feminists are operating within, and therefore influenced by, local and global landscapes characterized by intensifying struggles over the meaning of sex and gender (Allen et al., 2022; Hines, 2020; Risman, 2018). While the study sample is too small to draw any conclusion, questions for future research emerge in relation to intersecting factors, such

as sexuality, racialization, religion, and pathways to activism, which influence young feminists' perceptions of gender, their willingness to actively contest binary gender norms and to prioritize trans and queer claims in feminist activism.

Generational discourse as a distancing strategy

Despite the complexity revealed by the data, the interpretative frames deployed by activists in describing tensions within their organization often relied on the trope of feminist generations or waves, although with different outcomes in the two case studies.

In Italy, young feminists like Nisrine engaged in explicit acts of disidentification through the use of terms like *TERF* and by directly citing generational conflicts:

> In general, at a political level, it is not the place for me. Because of the age issue, specifically because of the generational issue. [. . .] The feminist movements of my generation are different, otherwise we wouldn't be talking about a fourth wave, we wouldn't be talking about feminism of a certain kind today. (Nisrine, mid-twenties, Italy)

Anisa also specifically framed the lack of acceptance for trans and non-binary identities in generational terms, referring to an 'old feminism' rather than to a contemporary trans-exclusionary movement.

On the other hand, older feminists, such as Mirella quoted below, engaged in acts of reverse generational disidentification (Reger, 2015) by portraying younger activists as too theoretical and not sufficiently knowledgeable about feminist practice.

> There is a lot of theory, many have a lot of theory in their head. And often that coincides with a young age. (Mirella, late thirties, Italy)

Young feminist's theory was juxtaposed to older women's experience. Women belonging to older generations expressed frustration as they felt that their experience was not valued by younger colleagues. These assertions of expertise, however, were often perceived as assertions of authority both within the hierarchical organizational structure and on a political level as the keepers of 'feminist truth' (Bias, 2019, p. 6).

By leveraging their experience within the feminist movement, older activists dismissed young women's political claims as naïve. By depicting them as immature, they also restricted young women's access to the feminist movement by refusing to hire them or to give them responsibility within the organization, effectively reducing the risk of new political claims challenging the organizational stance on issues such as trans inclusion. This strategy was evidenced in a conversation documented in my field notes about the arrival of a new staff member:

> She is an older woman, which Mirella said she chose specifically, because she is tired of young people who challenge her, who are very arrogant, according to her. (Field notes, July 2021)

Young feminists like Viola perceived an initial excitement about their contribution to the organization, which was however quickly replaced by a sense of distrust towards their work.

> Our CVs were seen as "How wonderful! Innovation, new politics!". Then you put it forward and they say "No! I don't want any of this!" [. . .] You must accept that perhaps things start going a little bit differently, that we start bringing new discussions with the women. You must trust these new discussions. (Viola, mid-twenties, Italy)

The lack of trust evoked by Viola was documented by Bias (2019) in Serbia, where older feminists felt a sense of responsibility to preserve feminist ideology and feared that what they considered to be core tenets or methodologies of feminism could get lost if younger feminists took over the movement. Multiple young women in Italy expressed they did not feel comfortable voicing their questions and concerns about gender diversity, as they shared an overall perception of not being valued or listened to by senior team members. When attempts were made, they were often met with rejection or accusations of being 'antifeminists'.

The ensuing frustration experienced by young feminists in Italy almost universally led them to distance themselves, politically and professionally, from the organization.

> If I can be honest, my first few months were full of anger, full, towards the organisation. Because this for me is not feminism, or at least not what I believe in. [. . .] I'm less [angry] now, but honestly that is because my head is already somewhere else (Camila, mid-twenties, Italy)

The emotional responses described by Camila and others closely resemble those of the activists interviewed by Beechey (2006) in the US and Bias (2019) in Serbia: sadness, anger, disappointment, and the choice to leave feminist activism altogether. Two of the young feminists I interviewed in Italy left the organization during the period of data collection and are now engaged in different forms of activism. In discussing their decision to leave, they described the generational chasm they perceived within the organization, focusing specifically on their non-binary views of gender and GBV, their opposition to feminist separatism and their advocacy for trans and sex worker inclusion.

Generational encounters within an ever-changing feminism

In Serbia, despite different positions among younger and older activists on the prioritization of trans and queer claims within feminism, the generational divide was not felt as acutely. Younger and older activists did recognize the existence of generational differences, alongside other axes of distinction, and older feminists did frame the increased attention towards issues of gender identity and sexuality as generational. At the same time however, there was an appreciation of the need to engage younger staff members to widen perspectives and, crucially, to connect with younger women and girls who access their services. Petra, for instance, explained how they came to prioritize recruitment of professionals from a younger generation to provide support to survivors of violence:

> For example, we had a challenge because our psychologist, she's like now 50-something, and she was the one who said that "Really, I can't connect with girls who are 15, 16". We [. . .] need to have somebody who is a bit more into what's going on in this group. (Petra, late thirties, Serbia)

While the choice to recruit younger staff to support service delivery does not automatically reflect an intention to welcome new feminist perspectives within the organization, young women felt it was possible to discuss different viewpoints and to put forward suggestions for a more inclusive approach to service delivery. Lara, the youngest member of the Serbian organization, clarified that although different opinions within the organization might cause dissent or even conflict, ultimately she and her colleagues could share their proposals without being dismissed as inexperienced or not 'feminist enough'.

> We somehow injected a lot of ideas into [organisation], but not necessarily, let's say, happily accepted or something like that, in the sense of 'yeah, yeah of course'. But it was not put on the side before being discussed, talked about, shared (Lara, late twenties, Serbia)

Rather, their ideas triggered organization-wide conversations, including on issues of trans and non-binary gender identities during the organization's strategic planning process, a clear example of how 'the intersection between the waves is' – or at least can be – 'an important site for rigorous and healthy debate' (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015, p. 398). For Lara, this space for dialogue and the possibility of holding multiple positions on the issue of gender diversity was essential given the more trans-exclusionary views of some members of senior management. Nonetheless, she stressed that her level of comfort within the organization depended primarily on whether services were being provided to trans survivors, suggesting that if, after internal discussion, they were to take an exclusionary stance, she might struggle to accept that decision.

> I realised that, for example, even if she wanted to declare herself [a TERF], on the other side, it did not prevent us or stop us from supporting [trans] women and girls who were referred to our programs. (Lara, late twenties, Serbia)

Older generations and senior management in Serbia also mentioned the importance of having spaces of discussion and learning. As Viki illustrates in the quote below, the organization's ethos is based on a vision of feminism which evolves as new issues, claims and socio-political configurations emerge.

> I know that it is a process, I'm not the same person I was 25 years ago, and I don't have the same thoughts about feminism and about my position. [. . .] And all the women that are working now for [organisation] brought something [. . .] to go through it and to rethink also our positions. (Viki, early fifties, Serbia)

Older as well as younger members approach their work as a source of constant learning which might lead to shifts in existing positions, rather than holding on to a theoretical grounding which needs to be defended against contamination. In doing so, they point to the potential of generational exchange as a source of continuity and renovation within social movements, rather than conflict and crisis (Reger, 2011).

Conclusion

This study confirms that young activists are, in general, more likely to hold fluid views of gender and sexuality (Allen et al., 2022; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021; Siročić, 2019) and, as a consequence, to challenge definitions of GBV that are strictly based on a binary and heterosexual model. These challenges are often, though not always, met with resistance by older feminist generations who question the relationship between feminist and trans/queer politics and perceive discussions around gender diversity and trans inclusion as a distraction from core feminist struggles.

These diverging views have been interpreted within the frame of feminist generational conflict (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Henry, 2004; Reger, 2005), and generational narratives emerge strongly in this paper as well. However, young feminists' commitment to the integration of a queer or transfeminist perspective in their daily work and activism varies, raising important questions for future research regarding the intersection of age and generation with factors such as sexuality, racialization, religion, and, prominently, pathways to activism.

I argue that these tensions are not, as Beechey (2006) and Bias (2019) suggest, primarily rooted in struggles for power within a hierarchical organizational structure. Nor are they part of an inevitable generational exchange process which requires younger activists to define themselves in opposition to older cohorts in order to claim a space for their own political action (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Reger, 2015). Rather, they are symptoms of genuinely different views on how GBV support for survivors should be defined and provided, stemming from different understandings of the category of gender and its political value. These understandings are deeply enmeshed in global and local feminist, and anti-feminist, debates around the nature of gender and intersectionality.

At the same time, generational narratives recur in both younger and older feminists' interpretations of dynamics within their organizations, as they engage in discursive processes of disidentification from the 'other' generation by portraying their political beliefs, including their perception of gender diversity, either as old-fashioned or immature. This discursive disidentification can translate, as seen in the Italian case, in concrete acts of distancing and retreat in one's own generational comfort zone by refusing to listen to, or even hire, young feminists in the organization or by abandoning intergenerational spaces to pursue other political and professional projects. As a result, difficult conversations about who GBV services should serve, how they can keep survivors safe or how feminism can harness the lessons gained over fifty years of GBV practice while recognizing the shifting parameters of gender, are avoided.

This outcome is however not inevitable. The Serbian case presented here suggests that embracing a vision of feminism as an evolving social justice project is conducive to a dialogical encounter where the contributions of young feminists (and everyone else's) are valued despite the presence of different positions and concerns over the prioritization of gender diversity within feminism. In this respect, the findings presented in this article challenge portrayals of feminist generations as

inevitably at odds with each other and point to one possible avenue to untangle contemporary feminism from the intense conflicts that have gripped it in the last few years.

Discussions around gender diversity are the reflection of a global struggle to promote a more intersectional and inclusive version of feminism and to extend the borders of the feminist subject (Dean & Aune, 2015; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021; Hines, 2020; Stryker, 2007). Italian and Serbian young feminists' intersectional, queer and transfeminist proposals hold immense promise for the GBV sector and feminism more broadly. Their expansive view of violence and of the subject of feminism not only benefits trans and non-binary people, but also all other women who have felt excluded by previous definitions (Cossutta, 2021; Siročić, 2019; Voli, 2016). These promises, however, can only be realized if young, trans, queer, intersectional feminists are welcomed in GBV and other feminist spaces and organizations, not to simply replace older feminist ideas with new ones, but rather to engage in a process of dialogue and mutual learning towards safer and more inclusive support for survivors of violence.

Notes

1. While the inclusion of refugee, asylum-seeking and refugee women is not explored in this paper, it is a key focus of the broader research project which determined the choice of the two case studies.
2. No-one in the two organizations openly identified as trans, non-binary or gender queer.
3. TERF stands for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism and SWERF stands for Sex Worker-Exclusionary Radical Feminist. Nisrine's use of these English acronyms during our interview demonstrates the transnational or, as Bilić (2022) would argue, neo-colonial reach of discourses around transphobia and feminism.

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