From Offline to Online: How the Covid-19 Lockdown Challenged the Refugee Services in Italy

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1.   Introduction

In recent literature, authors present evidence of how the Covid-19 pandemic and in particular lockdown as the primary containment measure in different parts of the world had a negative impact on socially vulnerable groups. In particular, there is an emerging strand of studies (Bukuluki et al., 2020; Golechha, 2020; Lozet & Easton-Calabria, 2020; Mainul Islam, 2020; Navarrete & Sanchez, 2020; Oladimeji et al., 2020; Shammi et al., 2020; Islam & Netto, 2020) that provides critical insights into how the Covid-19 contamination measures have reinforced pre-existing social inequalities among refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers worldwide. In line with this, an initial analysis from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) identifies five dimensions of vulnerability in the context of migration leading to migrants and refugees having a higher likelihood of contracting the Covid-19 virus (Guadagno, 2020): limited awareness, inability to respect social distancing measures in overcrowded homes, limited personal protective equipment in workplaces, limited access to appropriate care services, and limited awareness of options and rights, for example due to language barriers. Thus, in order to understand the specific vulnerability of refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, patterns of vulnerability for migrants and refugees need to be understood from a multilevel perspective. A singular level of analysis may fail to capture the complex interacting structural conditions, such as em-

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ployment environments, legal statuses and different housing arrangements. In line with this, also Ryan and Ayadi (2020, "An Intersectional Approach" section) point out that "the pandemic will differentially impact individuals by interacting and overlapping with context-specific drivers of vulnerability and marginalization, including but not limited to gender, 'race'/ethnicity."

This article focuses on the dimension identified in the IOM study (Guadagno, 2020) of accessing appropriate care services, through study of the experiences of social services in Italy during the two-month lockdown – from March 2020 to May 2020 – by asking social workers, volunteers and other professionals involved to evaluate the accessibility of services for refugee groups during this period. Aragona et al. (2020) provide a first insight into concrete experiences in the Italian health services by referring to the challenges experienced regarding service use and follow-up adherence. Analysis of the data collected for the present study indicated that this is also to be expected for the social service sector. In fact, to face challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic such as closure and restriction of face-to-face support from social services and related institutions, different professionals and volunteers working in the field of forced migration adopted alternative methods to support clients, mostly remotely. As outlined in a recent article published on Public Social Institutions (Cibrario, 2020), Italy, as one of the earliest and most severely affected countries, has launched a process of progressive digitalization. More precisely, the pandemic catalysed the rapid deployment of a range of technological resources to mitigate the negative impacts of social distancing measures, including: Skype, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Google Hangouts, Facetime, Telegram, WhatsApp, Whereby and Zoom (Shu Wei Ting et al., 2020). However, this digitalization process did not include a uniform framework at national level. Consequently, all services, local institutions, cooperatives, associations etc. have made their own decisions with huge disparities and fragmentation of resources (digital infrastructure) and conditions. This may also be linked to a chronic underfunding and austerity policies that make it much more difficult for some associations, cooperatives, public services etc., to participate, despite the increasing need for this solution during the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the digital infrastructure is not equally available or accessible to all, with vulnerable groups in society often being disadvantaged. The lack of digital accessibility, usability and not

least the affordability (Faith, 2018) for refugees hinders resolution of the urgent necessity for digitalization of services during lockdown, promoting new forms of social and digital exclusion (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

2. Methodology

To lay the groundwork for analysing the complexities experienced by social services in Italy during the two-month lockdown in reaching refugees and asylum seekers, the research adopted a qualitative approach to understand the complex settings through semi-structured interviews. More precisely, in order to understand better how services in the social sector have perceived the particular vulnerability of asylum seekers during lockdown as well as the institutional efforts to guarantee the accessibility of their services during lockdown by adopting digital solutions, the authors opted for an explorative research approach. In line with this, not the comparison between different geographical regions was centre-staged but the problem of service accessibility for asylum seekers during lockdown. In line with this, the project started with a general idea and used the research as a medium to identify issues. In the research phase (May–August 2020) 15 interviews were conducted with social workers, social educators, mediators, psychologist as well as three volunteers operating in the research field in different cities across Italy. Due to the Covid-19 situation, all interviews were conducted online and recorded for transcription by the interviewers themselves. On average, interviews lasted 20–45 minutes. All interviewees participated voluntarily. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the data collection process and how the data would be treated. Before the data collection started, all interviewees gave their written informed consent to participate. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, relevant documents were collected, reviewed, and evaluated. Document collection pertained not only to the situation in Italy but also to an international level. Interview data were analysed using an open coding process described by Strauss and Corbin (1994), which involves three levels of analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding phase, the researchers constantly compared interview transcriptions and the questions asked. In this first phase, different catego-

ries were developed, the properties and dimensions of which were recorded in document memos. During axial coding, parts of interviews of note were pieced together in new ways, which allowed to bring new issues and perspectives into the process of analysis. Finally, during selective coding, core categories were defined and connected to other categories by looking for similarities and relationships between the categories.

3.   Results

From the interview data it appears that the Covid-19 pandemic and in particular the lockdown in Italy from March 2020 to May 2020 worsened the situation for refugees in Italy. In particular, interviewees referred to the psychological and economic well-being of refugees and asylum seekers. Interviewees pointed to psychological discomfort that may have developed or re-developed during lockdown: "What we have observed is that many of them have developed or re-developed a very strong psychological tension, a very strong anxiety." In fact, being closed within a confined and limited space (reception centre) provoked negative emotions: "Because for many of our guests, loneliness, the feeling of loneliness has reactivated a whole series of negative emotions. As if it was an emptiness that sucked them in. An anguish that sucked them in. Almost a folding back on themselves." Interviewees referred to a "second trauma" meaning the development of a post-traumatic stress disorder as an immediate or delayed psychological response to an extremely stressful event, a situation of extraordinary threat or catastrophic proportions: "For example the word 'pandemic' to the sub-Saharan man had automatically reactivated what in the collective imagination of the African is Ebola. This can increase the level of anguish." Similarly, another interviewee outlines: "I remember when they saw us wearing the protective suits for the first time. They were intimidated and were in shock because they could not tell Ebola from Covid – it was the same for them." Ebola was not the only dramatic lived experience revived; other dramatic experiences like the detention experiences in Libya were remembered. A social worker reported on a refugee's experience of lockdown leading him to memories of experiences in Libya: "With all the differences, but the level of feeling, the renewal of loneliness, of

being alone, brought him back to the experience in Libya. With a difference, because of torture, but the experience of loneliness, of the passing of time, has reactivated the experience of being alone." Hence, for many refugees, the experience of lockdown increased the need for psychological support linked to traumatic experiences, which were intensified by the lockdown.

This situation has been further aggravated by the precarious situation on the labour market provoked by the lockdown. The economic consequences have not affected all refugees and asylum seekers equally, however. Interviewees distinguished between those who had a regular work contract and therefore received redundancy funding and "others who had more precarious contracts or were working illegally; they lost their jobs, understand? Therefore, we had to pick them up here. The lockdown made a real mess." In the Italian labour market, migrants and refugees predominantly work in the seasonal sectors: agriculture, hospitality, and construction, often under extreme working conditions (uncertainty, danger, poor pay, and socially penalized). During the lockdown, the hospitality sector in particular was one of the first to close: "The big problem with this lockdown has been that most of the refugees who find work, at least here in Rome, find it in the hotel and restaurant sector, which was the first to close." Interviewees even felt that especially in the metropolises of Rome and Milan, the hospitality sector had been affected already before the lockdown. Chinese restaurants had been boycotted: "You will remember that all talk of the coronavirus started from there and therefore the first forms of protection, self-protection of the average Italian, even prejudice and boycotting towards the Chinese world was through Chinese restaurants. Therefore, the crisis was already born in mid-February for Chinese restaurants and so many of them had already lost their jobs there."

Against this background, a series of new needs emerged such as an increased need for psychological care to deal with the loss of employment, the sudden (and forced) inactivity and the loneliness of quarantine and needs for legal care, counselling, and information to explore ways of surviving during this critical situation. Data from the interviews indicated that refugees and asylum seekers depended more than before on services to assist and support them in this precarious situation: "So in this period our clients contacted us more and more often to ask for advice, ask for information or updates. Even on what the various regulations adopted during the pandemic were – linked,

for example, to complaints of non-compliance with the rules of the quarantine." However, although most refugees and asylum seekers showed an increased need to contact the services during this time, most of the services for refugees had to be closed or had to reduce their face-to-face activities. The lockdown led to a comprehensive closure and/or severe restriction of all non-systemically relevant services and institutions.

During this time, however, many of the services for refugees and asylum seekers organized themselves differently to maintain their basic services, taking care not "to lose our clients but to continue to offer the services" and "to reach as many refugees and asylum seekers as possible." In doing so, most interviewees described using social media platforms to organize their offers and services in an alternative and digital way. Technology thus created a space that was considered "our new window to the world." This transition took place in a very short period, as the lockdown and closure of services happened quickly without time for preparation. In fact, interviewees reported trying to reorganize their offers within a very short time to be as optimal as possible: "We closed on March 6 and reopened on May 18. From March 7, we transferred all our activities to online mode, creating a platform or in any case an action that we called 'civic online'. That included many activities, mainly on Facebook. On Facebook, but also via telephone, and WhatsApp." Similarly, another interviewee reported, "The ones we used the most were definitely Facebook and WhatsApp. The Italian school was also transferred to online via Facebook, also the legal desk. And so we had the lawyer, the linguistic and cultural mediator, both in Albanian and Arabic, with a fixed appointment every day from two to four." Thus, media platforms guaranteed a continuous contact with the service users and functioned as the main channel of communication and support during lockdown: "So we... [worked] also through WhatsApp or by phone or through collective actions on Facebook. On Facebook we also hosted several workshops: percussion, photography, video making workshops… we also transferred these to Facebook." The services for refugees and asylum seekers via Facebook created a bridge between the refugees and asylum seekers confined to their centres and the services. Furthermore, having scheduled appointments with the services and social workers, counsellors and mediators every day helped them online to withstand the loneliness of quarantine, as evidenced by one of the interviewee's

comments: "So even for those in quarantine…, the fact of having a fixed appointment… from four to five there is the open chat, from five there is the mediator, on Wednesday there is a workshop, somehow also marked the time for these boys. And it also gave a sense to their days. For example, we also did some work on the phone, on WhatsApp, with some guests who were getting anxious. For example, on some concepts related to the health discourse."

When reflecting on the positive and negative effects of this digitalization, interviewees generally gave a positive testimony regarding the adaptation of services from offline to online. Social workers underlined for example as positive their learning process when including digital media in their work: "After this first emergency phase, the services were structured in a more organized way and even what were previously experimental attempts have now become practices, such as interviews with the legal department and job placement interviews. They have now become the usual way of doing them, online." Technology also gave them the possibility to keep in contact with refugees and asylum seekers across regional borders, as an interviewee outlined using the example of languages courses: "Consider also another thing: one of the problems we had with the school was…with guests, who were perhaps taken to other reception centres…they went to Potenza or Campobasso, they went to Forlì or Verona. Do you understand? So for us, this marked an abrupt interruption in the course of the Italian language school. Instead… with the online school, we continued to guarantee these kids the possibility of attending….Despite being transferred to other cities."

In line with this, most of the interviewees working in cooperatives or associations managing accommodation centres confirmed that Wi-Fi was being provided for their guests, which allowed the inhabitants to be connected to and follow offers of online services: "In our centres here in Rome, we have internet connection. So for example there are refugee women who were attending cooking classes and these courses could continue to be followed by connecting to the internet." Several interviewees also reported that digital devices were donated to accommodation centres from firms, entrepreneurs and the public: "Depending on the situation, we have also received donations here…such as donations of tablets, laptops and even mobile phones." Access to digital devices is thus extremely valuable to refugees and asylum seekers during the lockdown to "withstand this situation," as described by a social

worker. The importance of being online during the lockdown is also under-lined by an interviewee, who reported on a concrete experience at a psycho-logical and emotional level: "One week we were without Wi-Fi [during lock-down] because the modem was broken. Because the [provider's] guy was not coming [because] there was the lockdown. It was delirium for a week. So hav-ing easy internet access, it made everything lighter. Okay, because it's true that if you can't get out in the real world, at least you have the virtual world and it's still a compensation. Even if it is minimal."

However, interviewees discussed not only the inclusive potential of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the daily social work rou-tine but also underlined its exclusive character. They did so by critically re-flecting on questions like affordability, accessibility and usability of digital devices and respective apps, applications and programs for those who did not have access to the accommodation centres and their free Wi-Fi. Those groups, as the interviewees outlined, remained outside and had no access to services during the lockdown: "No, we have not reached everyone, unfortu-nately not. Well, this is my big shortfall. We also take care of refugees who live on the street, in a position of discomfort, of enormous marginality. These people, many in fact, don't have a phone or if they have a mobile phone they don't have a smartphone and therefore don't have internet. So, with these ref-ugees eh…these refugees we have lost a little bit these months." Many of the interviewees' cooperatives and associations work with this particular group of refugees. As an interviewee outlined, these refugees have very concrete and basic needs which the service addresses, like the distribution of meals, the possibility of taking a shower, electricity supply to charge their phones etc. "These young people in coming to us used the whole range of basic ser-vices, such as showers, laundry, distribution of meals and of course it was im-possible to provide them online, in a virtual way. During the lockdown, we lost news about them, the updates. Because we had no way…to know where they were." Although possibly "most refugees now have smartphones," the interviewees revealed that in particular those living in fragile and precar-ious living situations often lacked adequate digital devices allowing them to use all the applications of a smartphone. In fact, refugees and migrants living on the streets often use older generation mobile phones with fewer features, which impacts on their reachability: "They did not have a mobile

phone suitable for using WhatsApp. One in particular…had a Microsoft mobile phone that no longer allows the WhatsApp application to be downloaded. Another guy, on the other hand, had a mobile phone that does not have an internet connection, an old mobile phone that does not allow connection. With these guys, we were not able to have constant contact as with the others." The consequences of not having access to connectivity as well as not being able to afford a smartphone became evident during the lockdown, as one interviewee emphasized: "There are places in the city that allow you to use Wi-Fi, such as public libraries, youth information centres or other offices. The problem is that all these offices closed during the Covid [pandemic].

Another critical dimension that emerged during the interviews was the digital literacy of refugees and asylum seekers. In particular, digital literacy training was requested by pupils in home schooling and by the parents who accompanied them for schooling: "When we also tried to ask for information on how the children followed the distance education activities, distance learning with the school etc., the discomfort was strong." The interview data indicated that being able to use digital devices to follow home schooling, for example, or to fill in documents online is crucial and influences the quality of how the lockdown is managed.

Most interviewees reported that refugees' knowledge of how to use the basic features of a smartphone was very high. However, refugees found applications which were not embedded in their daily routine more difficult, for example like writing and reading e-mails, using Microsoft Office programs or using communication tools like Zoom: "Technology must be able to bond. They watch videos on YouTube, especially if they are young people listening to music etc., but they have difficulties when it comes to using programs like Zoom to follow classes. Writing e-mails is also a competence that cannot always be taken for granted." The issue is thus not only about the acquisition of basic competences required, but also about being able to apply this knowledge to different and changing activities and adapting it to new conditions.

Furthermore, the results show the importance of conceptualizing gender, age, and level of education as intersecting systems of inequality: "However, the starting point is that many people have no ease in displaying or producing content written in Italian. Therefore, asking them to refer to

technology…to use technological devices to stay in touch with us was a 50% [successful] request, because there you could also see the limits of the users' starting point." Whereas the younger refugee population demonstrated advanced use of smartphones as their digital devices, the older refugee population demonstrated more difficulties: "Contact via smartphone was good with young people; let's say those between 20 and 35 years old. They had no trouble using their smartphones. Those over the age of 35, over 40, showed more difficulty in using the smartphone, never mind a computer." Moreover, interviewees observed that a gender difference emerged during the lockdown: "Before not so much, but during lockdown, we observed that women, mostly those over the age of 35, mothers with young children, found it difficult to use their smartphones or to read an email. Many of them do not have an email [address]. This is something we try to work on." From an intersectional perspective, which combines influences of all discriminating factors, the interviewees added that level of education affected digital literacy: "The general rule of thumb is quite valid, so those who are further along in the schooling process also know how to use these digital devices." What became most evident in the interviews was thus the intersection of education and gender on digital literacy. Hence, in particular, women often show a lower level of education and thus experience more difficulties when using different digital devices: "We have women who have attended five to six years of school in their country of origin. So this means that they are not illiterate but they are poorly schooled. It is one thing to use a mobile phone, it is another to have a tablet and know how to use it, which in any case implies knowledge…even greater linguistic knowledge of Italian."

4. Conclusion

This article has shed light on how social and digital inequalities are experienced by refugees and highlights the consequences of this intersection in times of crisis. Three causes of the digital divide amongst refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic emerged from the interview data:
Affordability distinguishing between refugees with access to digital devices and those without. Although most refugees have a smartphone, only some

have access to other digital devices like tablets or computers. Refugees living in precarious housing situations often cannot afford a smartphone and therefore have an older version on which important applications are missing. During the pandemic this resulted in an unequal use and access to basic services that were moved online and thus to a marginalization of this group. The second factor which emerged from the data is related to accessibility in terms of electricity and connectivity. Accessibility was reduced in public places without electricity or free Wi-Fi, which contributed to a widening of the gap between those who benefit from technology and those who are excluded from it. The third factor concerns access to technology related to digital literacy. To use services that have been transferred to online mode and to participate in home school activities, for example, advanced digital literacy skills are necessary. Refugees generally were competent in everyday uses of smartphones and their applications. However, refugees were less competent in more advanced digital literacy activities such as using email and programmes like Zoom. In particular, refugee women demonstrated reduced digital literacy or competences in using digital devices .

To summarize, a digital divide exists between refugees and others, based on inequalities in physical access to and use of digital technology, the skills necessary to use technologies effectively, and the ability to pay for the services; these inequalities have been magnified during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has thus intensified social stratification among refugee groups (Alam & Imran, 2015). Socio-economic inequalities and technology-related issues presented barriers to accessing and using online services. The Covid-19 pandemic as well as the two-month lockdown in Italy has exacerbated inequalities in society and shed light on the important intersection between digital and social inequalities (based on the interference of different socio-demographic characteristics: gender, age and migration status, housing situation, legal status etc.), an intersection which leads to multidimensional forms of marginalization. Accessibility and affordability are closely related to legal status and the housing situation, whereas literacy in digital devices is influenced by gender, age, and education.

Digitalization and digital technologies are central to the daily lives of refugees and are central to the ways that social policies and response is administered. The problem remains though, that these two manifestations

of digitalization stay disconnected from one another. Professionals and social services therefore need to implement inclusive policies and strategies regarding access, affordability, and usability of technology by refugees from an intersectionality perspective to ensure a digitally and socially inclusive community for all, particularly during a state of emergency (Lynn-Ee Ho & Maddrell, 2000). Tackling the digital divide will require an approach that not only expands access but also provides digital skills and encourages people to use the Internet in ways that positively contribute to their social, economic, and political lives. This requires in particular a social policy approach that involves collaborative working forms to advance people's access to resources. In the digital age, access, adoption, and digital literacy are imperative resources. This not only calls upon social workers and other professionals to help identify and advocate for communities who continue to experience the digital divide, but also for social policies that provide new digital and socially inclusive spaces in territorial contexts.

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