The andro-white marketization of volunteer and community services: A case study of London's social reproduction crisis

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A B S T R A C T

Neoliberal austerity has hit hard for people of colour and women living in deprived urban spaces, where we observe unprecedented levels of inequality in access to care and food. In this context, volunteer and community services (VCSs) have become fundamental to compensating for the lack of urban public services that support human needs. This article deploys a social reproduction framework to analyse the andro-white marketization of VCSs occurring in the care and food solidarity practices in London. By unpacking this multidimensional process through a combination of material and methods, it untangles the racialised, class and gendered forms of material exploitation and cultural domination exercised on and through VCSs circuits operating in marginal communities. Along these lines, it reflects on the transformational limits of the neoliberal care system in supporting the social reproduction of unequal cities.

1. Introduction

Austerity in the UK has widened class, gender and race inequality in urban spaces (Walby, 2015; Hall, 2020a; Strong, 2020b). Food insecurity and lack of care exemplify the social and material immiseration of poor urban communities, and more so in London than in any other part of the UK (TrustforLondon, 2020). Public reports[1] show that in the borough of Tower Hamlets, six in ten children (57%) live in poverty, and they and their families struggle to access healthy diets. Most of these children come from households of colour. In this context, food banks and community kitchens organised by VCSs[2] have expanded to combat urban food and care insecurity. An extensive body of literature has analysed the cultural and political-economy dimensions of food banks in urban and rural contexts (Lindenbaum, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Strong 2020a, 2020b; May et al., 2020; Denning, 2021), and virtuous forms of organisation, contestation and resistance of local communities (Isoke, 2013; Williams et al., 2016; Chennault, 2021). While some attention has been paid to racialized and gendered tensions in VCSs and food access institutions (Hall, 2020b; Swan, 2020), including among the organisational volunteers or leaders (Dickinson, 2017), this article focuses specifically on the racialized and gendered forms of bias, oppression and exploitation visible through VCSs marketization. In particular,

little is known about the gender, class and race demographics of the volunteers who have taken on the burden left by the state's inability to respond to the food and care crisis; how VCSs are embedded within the material and cultural circuits of urban austerity; and what forms of institutional racism and sexism are performed to enable the persistence of the social reproduction crisis we are living in. Indeed, while the literature on VCSs has often denounced the failure to factor in gender, race and class in discussing how structural capitalist relations reproduce and capture the work of such practices (Tyler and Slater, 2018; Harries et al., 2020; DeVerteuil et al., 2020), such intersections are still under-investigated empirically. To address this gap, this paper introduces the concept of 'andro-white' marketization. It is argued that the notion of *andro-white* helps us to reflect on the distinctive nature of the current form of neoliberal marketization, which performs and promotes a culture centred around white, male, and heteronormative practices and actors (Harries et al., 2020). The *andro-white* encompasses the everyday and institutional social forms that are conducive to misvaluing, commodifying, and exploiting race, gender and class through and within VCSs practices. It develops this notion by demonstrating empirically the specific ways in which it is structuring VCSs practices. Focussing on how *andro-white* neoliberal marketization produces and captures racialised and gendered VCSs work thus helps to make explicit the ensemble of

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material, institutional and political forms of sexist and racist discrimination which shape the infrastructure of social reproduction. Social reproduction is here understood as the multi-scalar forms of labour, technologies, relationships, and practices that sustain and maintain life (Katz, 2001; Hall, 2020a; Federici, 2019).

Focussing on race and gender, this paper contributes at filling a crucial gap in the literature on food poverty and its charitable responses in the UK, and to advance the wider debate about austerity and social reproduction. Observations and interviews undertaken during the COVID-19 crisis across food banks in London suggest that although some VCSs groups are aware of - and resist their embeddedness in- the neoliberal marketization of VCSs, they mostly focus on coping with the urgent material needs of social reproduction through actions of resilience and active citizenship (Harries et al., 2020). VCSs are rarely able to contest and resist the *andro-white* marketized circuits of urban social reproduction.

The article puts forward two points. Firstly, that VCSs solidarity practices necessary to support people of colour, women, and the vulnerable community at large rely on unpaid and highly gendered emotional, managerial, and reproductive labour. These represent an integral support of social reproduction infrastructure through which marginal lived experiences are reproduced. Secondly, that 'reproduction supply services' (Hall, 2020a) are very often forced to comply with marketization pressures and racialised ideologies imposed by the *andro-white* institutions which finance them. These institutions, which include local and central government, philanthropic organisations, food corporations and the VCSs themselves, depoliticize the language and work that generate structural injustice and inequalities linked to gender, race and class. In conclusion, while VCSs can provide a voice in local anti-austerity campaigns and collective resistance (Williams et al., 2016: 2036) the organisations here observed struggled to challenge, resist and reverse the structural causes of the urban social reproduction crisis.

Section 2 discusses the interlinkages between the social reproduction crisis of urban life and the role of VCSs in navigating *andro-white* neoliberal capitalism. Section 3 outlines the context and the applied methods of investigation. Sections 4 and 5 analyse the intersecting class, gender and race inequalities reproduced by the *andro-white* marketization of care and food system. Section 6 summarises the main findings and draws conclusions.

2. The urban social reproduction crisis, VCSs, and andro-white neoliberal capitalism

Neoliberal capitalism, through the ways it organises access to the means of subsistence, produces and reproduces racial, class and patriarchal hierarchies (Bhattacharyya, 2015, 2018a). Institutionalised racism and discrimination are visible in multiple ways. First, in how some segments of the citizenry are depicted and treated through neoliberal austerity, namely as the undeserving poor who have lost the right to have rights (Hall, 2020a, 2020b; Bhattacharyya, 2018b); second, in how the job market discriminates against women, people of colour and migrants; and finally, in how the rationing of social services reproduces racialised structural disadvantages which lead to poor health outcomes, malnutrition and lower life expectancy (Razai et al., 2021a, 2021b). Here neoliberal austerity is not only understood as the political act of defunding the welfare system by affecting people's 'daily' health, care, housing and education (Hall, 2019), which is a process started with the Coalition Government in 2010. Neoliberal austerity also determines the marketization of VCSs which are now forced to compete among themselves for funding and to adopt business-oriented models of well-being provisioning. Such trends marketize the needs of marginal groups without politicising nor challenging the political status quo (Bhattacharyya, 2018b; Harries et al., 2020; Cloke et al., 2011).

The Muslim Council of Britain reported that the unemployment rate among Muslims is almost double that of the general population (Ali and Whitham, 2021). Minorities thus rely more on public welfare, which

suggests that cuts to social safety nets are particularly harmful to them. In England, minority-background communities have felt the impact of everyday austerity particularly hard (Hall, 2019). Bhattacharyya's observation that "the logics and techniques of racism inform the practices of austerity [...] to enable the greater consolidation of systems of dispossession and dis-entitlement" (2015: 111) seems to be demonstrated in the widespread instances of food poverty among essential workers and segregated communities in East London and beyond.

Food insecurity is a highly emblematic symptom of the racialised and gendered crisis of social reproduction, as food access is the *sine qua non* condition to develop all the other aspects of individual and social reproduction linked to access to health, education and social justice. In the UK, 43% of people on Universal Credit are food insecure (Barnard, 2021). Of all food bank users interviewed in a study conducted by Prayogo et al. (2019), nearly 60% were women, 65% were on benefits, more than half (52%) were classified as having low educational attainment and about 62% lived in social housing. The inadequacy of public policy to ensure urban food security is so evident in the fact a Manchester United football player had to solicit the Conservative government to reallocate funds in the budget to finance school meal vouchers, a fundamental source of nourishment for many poor households, during the half-term holidays (BBC, June 2020). Food access is not only biologically necessary for social reproduction of the labour force (Katz, 2001) but is also connected to the circuit and infrastructure of public and private care through food shopping, reproductive work and public welfare.

The crisis of urban social reproduction is therefore three dimensional. Firstly, it encompasses the historical process of deliberate weakening of trade unions since the 1980s, which led to the collapse of the social contracts that guarantee workers the ability to receive a decent wage (Cloke et al., 2011). Decent wages are important not only because they provide tax revenue to fund public welfare, but also because they enable the consumption – and provision – of the basic commodities and services necessary to reproduce life, such as food (Fraser, 2016). Secondly, the *andro-white* forms of austerity in the infrastructures of social reproduction have made gendered reproductive work extremely burdensome in the private and communitarian domain to compensate for the privatisation (or unavailability) of public care provision (Bakker, 2007; Fraser, 2016; Williams et al., 2016). Third, the crisis is triggered by the lack of recognition of the societal, material and political value of the unpaid domestic, emotional and care work that women perform to support and maintain families and communities (Bhattacharyya, 2018a; Stevano et al., 2021; Hall, 2020a). By understanding racism as a technique of austerity (Bhattacharyya, 2015, 2018b), and making explicit its link to women's work for the social reproduction of urban minorities (Bassel and Emejulu, 2014, 2017), the concept of *andro-white* sheds light on the everyday and institutional social forms that are conducive to misvaluing, marketizing, and exploiting race, gender and class through and within VCS practices. In other words, *andro-white* forms of neoliberal capitalism entangle the material, gender and racial discrimination within VCSs practices.

The *andro-white* forms of discrimination thus define the social relations in which VCS operate. Despite this context, to compensate for the lack of public support for social reproduction of the most deprived corners of urban marginalities, women and Black people have worked for free in many food initiatives (Williams et al., 2016; Hall, 2020b; Chennault, 2021). During COVID-19 there were so many volunteers, and VCSs were so instrumental in the reproduction of urban lives, that Legal & General, a FTSE100 British multinational financial services and asset management company headquartered in London, produced a series of reports called 'The Isolation Economy', recounting how over the past year in the UK 10 million adults have served as an informal 'volunteering army', with an equivalent economic value of more than £357 million. Such quantification emphasises the 'time-value' of the paid labour in which these volunteers would normally engage (based on the UK's median gross hourly wage of £13.27). However, such a narrow

understanding of unpaid work conceals that is rather the ensemble of gendered, emotional, managerial and care work – inside, between, and outside the household – which is indispensable to the social reproduction of urban lives. "The provision of care and support is a messy endeavour, entangled within intra-personal relationships and responsibilities" (Hall, 2019:778) which is performed through multi-spatial acts and gestures of care that might transcend the institutional space through emotional labour.

Although feminist economists have recognised the need to study household work and treat it as work because it is crucial for social reproduction (Fraser, 2016; Federici, 2019), limited attention has been paid to how social reproduction, for example in the sphere of emotional labour and nourishment, has been operationalised and captured in the social spaces located across the state, the household and the market, namely in the world of VCSs. Furthermore, work for social reproduction is not only economically unvalued but has also been treated as gender-, class- and race-neutral. Thus, social reproduction is a useful framework to investigate the social relations within – and between – VCSs for the reproduction and maintenance of capitalism during crises (Fraser, 2016). Firstly, it allows the public and private domains where lives are maintained to be analysed holistically. Secondly, it is a theoretical framework that, by making explicit the false dichotomy between productive (paid) and reproductive work (Federici, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017, Mezzadri, 2019), challenges the meaning of 'value' in work and expands it to all the crucial activities conducted within the non-market circuit to sustain life. Furthermore, it allows light to be shed on the gendered and racialised forms of material and cultural oppression and exclusion.

VCSs have been filling the cracks of the crises of social reproduction in both domestic and marketized social relations through food donations, outsourced services funded by both public and private funding, and care labour. In other words, the inadequacy of the state has led to the reconfiguration of collective reproductive work (Ossome, 2020). VCSs are considered a vital space where a particular conception of collective care, ethics and belonging is performed (Williams et al., 2016; DeVerteuil et al, 2020). Yet, although VCSs practices of sustaining urban lives in times of austerity have been widely investigated in the UK (Loopstra et al., 2019; Prayogo et al., 2019; Strong, 2020a, 2020b), the debate on how to interpret the role of VCSs in the crisis of urban social reproduction is still contested, and to what extent food banks and volunteers are embedded in the present neoliberal care system. While some see these as institutionalised responses to austerity (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017; Williams et al., 2016), others see them as embedded in austerity (Hall, 2019; Harries et al., 2020). VCSs have also been analysed by critical theory through the perspective of philanthropic capitalism because they are funded within the capitalistic space and act with strings attached to the socio-economic status quo (Guilhot, 2007; DeVerteuil et al, 2020; ibid). In other words, VCSs can be seen as a pillow for the neoliberal state, which keeps them operating according to a market-led rationale through its cultural values and impulses (Harries et al., 2020). Since the mid-1990 they have spatially expanded a social order which perpetuates patterns of uneven socio-spatial accumulation. However, how such expansion is articulated by *andro-white* marketization is not always made explicit.

Indeed, what is under-investigated is how the black box of VCSs contributes to the social reproduction of urban lives in relation to race, gender and class on two levels: how racial, class and gendered hierarchies are compounded and reproduce themselves among VCS volunteers and which relational tensions are created by capitalistic accumulation, domination and exploitation. This paper highlights such intersectional hierarchies and contradictions through two premises. Firstly, VCSs address the social reproduction of urban marginalities by relaying on de-commodified and unpaid emotional, managerial, and reproductive work mostly performed by women. While minorities and women are often the main beneficiaries of social care, the pandemic has pushed many of these women to volunteer outside the household and perform social reproduction work in the hybrid spaces of marketized VCSs organisations. The hidden abode value of such care and nourishment in VCSs is currently overlooked and is not analysed for its race and class intersections. Secondly, VCS operations are embedded in the *andro-white* centric institutions which push VCSs to comply with marketization pressures and racialised ideologies. This produces discrimination, which is *multi-dimensional*, *multi-scalar* and *multi-relational*. It is multi-dimensional because it appears in different media such as space, language and materiality. It is multi-scalar because it is produced and reproduced at state-national, local and community levels. It is multi-relational because it shapes the connections between funders and funded, beneficiaries and volunteers, regulators and marketized selection criteria. Unveiling such dimensions is key to understanding such organisations' operative, stretegic and performative behaviours. These initiatives are rooted in, and therefore compliant with, neoliberal capitalism nonetheless are made necessary to survive the defunding and disentitlement that the public services are currently facing. Hence, it is necessary to use an intersectional lens to analyse the multi-dimensional, multi-scalar and multi-relational configuration of gender, race and class within and around VCS practices.

3. Context and methodology

During the COVID-19 pandemic, newspapers were filled with headlines announcing a food crisis in the big cities of the UK. The pandemic has hit essential workers hard through the health risks and the immiseration they suffer (Swan, 2020; Stevano et al., 2020), but it has also hit the household and the local community, putting at risk an already fragile care system. According to Sustain (2020), while "1.9 million Londoners regularly struggled to afford or access food before the COVID-19 pandemic, over 500,000 food parcels across London have been delivered" during the pandemic due to unemployment and the inadequacy of social security (Strong, 2020a, 2020b). A piece published by the Independent in July 2020[3] reported that in 6 months alone, approximately 2,500 children younger than 16 years had been admitted to UK hospitals for malnutrition. COVID-19 intensified an already-existing issue, as austerity had already disproportionally affected those segments of society that are disadvantaged in terms of class, gender and race. Indeed, data shows that approximately 5 million people in the UK, including many households with working adults, families with children or older or disabled adults, and people from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) communities faced some form of food insecurity which has increased by 9% during COVID-19 (Sustain, 2020[4]). A staggering statistic on child poverty (Sustain, 2020) shows that among children younger than 15 years in the UK, 20% lack enough money to buy food and 19% are reported to be food insecure. A study on food insecurity commissioned by The Trussell Trust Food Bank Network found that already in 2016, nearly 80% of over 400 households interviewed had skipped meals and gone without eating, sometimes for days at a time (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017:8). Therefore, for many UK households, food insecurity is a long-standing issue that they had experienced monthly or almost monthly in previous years (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017). Studies carried out by the National Food Strategy and the University of Northumbria have indicated that because parents are 'cutting corners,' children are eating more junk food and snacks and less fresh fruit and vegetables, and that following school closure they are likely to skip at least one meal per day (Razai et al., 2021a). A Sky News article published on 16 December 2020 stated that "In May, a YouGov poll commissioned by the charity Food Foundation found that 2.4 million children (17%) were living in food insecure households" and by October it said an extra 900,000 children had been registered for free school

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[3] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/food-poverty-hunger-child-malnutrition-hospital-layla-moran-coronavirus-a9615161.html.

[4] https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/whatisfoodpoverty/.

meals. The London borough of Tower Hamlets was identified as a striking example of such intersectional inequality. It is the second most densely populated district in the country (and in London) and it contains some of the poorest and richest areas in the country. Within the same borough, Canary Wharf, a major global financial hub with a gross added value of £40 billion stands just meters away from some of the UK's poorest households.

The impact of austerity on Black women in the UK is particularly harsh. As Olufemi (2020) reports in her book *Feminism, Interrupted*, because of the cuts in public spending in 2010, one in five mothers were missing meals so their children could eat, while women of colour experience a higher rate of wage exploitation and unemployment. An ONS report on the demographic background of COVID-19 deaths states that "Females of Black ethnic background had the highest rate for deaths involving COVID-19, the relative gap was 4.2 times higher among those of Black females compared with White females. Females of Bangladeshi or Pakistani ethnic background had a rate of death that was 3.7 times higher than that of White females" (ONS, 2020). Black women in formal employment are also very often employed as essential workers such as nurses or other health providers, which has exposed them to a higher risk of getting COVID-19 (Stevano et al., 2021). Austerity is thus a sexist and racist policy and that was even more visible during the pandemic (Olufemi, 2020; Bargawi et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has put further strain on urban food security, highlighting the limitations of the socio-economic system in ensuring that affordable and nutritious food is available for all. Across the country, according to news reports, VCSs saw demand soar by 325%,[5] leading to an entire army of volunteer labour becoming involved in tackling such issues.

Despite the clear picture provided by statistics, understanding the micro dynamics of food insecurity in an advanced economy is not an easy task. There is a lot of stigma attached to food insecurity and poverty, because the idea of not being able to afford food or receive care in one of the richest countries on Earth is not only counterintuitive, but also seen as an individual failure rather than as a product of uneven mode of accumulation (Tyler and Slater, 2018).

This article builds and expands on both theory and empirical evidence gathered during an investigation on food poverty and food banks conducted in London between May and November 2020. Complementing the methodological approach adopted by Strong (2019), Denning (2021) and Williams et al. (2016) among others who engaged with human experiences of volunteering at foodbanks, the paper draws on the lived experiences of VCSs through 18 semi-structured interviews with volunteers leading local charities and social enterprises (VCSs) in North and East London. The VCSs have been selected based on the following criteria: 1) are operating in North-East London; 2) they work to address food insecurity; 3) their availability and willingness to participate to the interviews and observations. The organisations have been identified through web search (keywords: food banks; food poverty; London), local councils' records, word of mouth and snowballing process. 25 organisations have been contacted by email and 7 declined the interviews due to lack of time or did not reply. 15 interviews took place online via Teams and 3 in person in the organizations' headquarters. The unstructured interviews were organized around three macro areas: the structure of the organizations' activities and mission; the socio-characteristics of the volunteers; the institutional and political context. To protect the privacy of the organisations and their volunteers, I have kept the interviewees anonymous, and the names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms. The analysis is also developed through participant observations in two London-based organisations for whom I volunteered during the second waves of the pandemic between June and December 2020 and after having interviewed their contact person.

During my visits I have worked together with other volunteers to prepare meal boxes, order food stocks etc. While working, I was chatting with the volunteers to understand their background, motivations, and perceptions. The notes collected on the VCSs activities allowed me to give meaning to a complex array of projects, agents, and policies (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2019) which helped understanding how gendered and racialised power dynamics played out among volunteers and beneficiaries.

One organisation led by Black women has been particularly insightful to capture both the gendered and race dimensions of volunteering in the disadvantaged communities of East London. The charity, based in East London, was founded in the late 1980s by women arrived in the UK from East Africa. Its mission is to support disadvantaged women in Tower Hamlets to become independent and socially included and the focus is on supporting the needs of women from that ethnic community and promoting *social cohesion* within the wider community. As per its slogan: run "by women, for women", the organisation has rapidly grown to become the first point of contact and referral for mainstream organisations with beneficiaries from North-East African origin. While the initial name made explicit the ethnic origin of its members, it has changed to reflect the diversity of the people using its services, which are now Arab, South Asian, and European women, although the community from the Horn of Africa is still the large majority. This Black women's organisation, through its care and food services practices, showcased the racialised and gendered contradictions which characterise the material and cultural dynamics of VCSs.

In addition, this work draws on data analysis from news, policy documents published by think tanks and charities campaigning on food security, blogs, local councils and VCSs websites and newsletters, and social media such as Facebook groups and Twitter. More than 100 sites have been consulted based on independent desk review and under suggestions of the interviewees. I have also attended monthly online meetings of the 'Food London Boroughs Group' organised by the Greater London Authority, in which local organisations report on their activities and food policy issues related to school meals, food parcels, community kitchens and food banks. These multiple sources helped to contextualise the policy narrative and the stakeholders' positions on urban food poverty. I have assessed the complexities of food solidarity operations and what has changed (and not changed) in their social, political, and regulatory context as a result of the intensification of food poverty due to COVID-19. By showing the practices of food provision and care labour of such VCSs, the next section unveils how institutionalised forms of gendered, class and racialised marginalisation take place, triggering a crisis of social reproduction of urban lives.

4. Unpacking the gender, race and class dimension of volunteers' work for urban social reproduction

The gendered unpaid practices of nourishing and caring for others conceal the work necessary to maintain society (Federici, 2019; Katz, 2001). In the wake of neoliberal austerity, which has decimated public welfare provision and slashed wages already weakened in the 1980s during Thatcherism, women- and Black-led VCSs have helped mitigating food insecurity and social exclusions through unpaid emotional labour, care, and reproductive work in their community. This crisis has been further exacerbated by COVID-19 (Stevano et al., 2021). Working-class women and women of colour have coped with and subsidised the 'care gap' that public services have left by undertaking informal bottom-up mutual aid, community kitchen and volunteering initiatives (Swan, 2020; Stevano et al., 2021). A substantial body of work of Black scholars (and particularly Black feminists) wrote about racial encounters in mutual aid and food sharing practices (i.e. Isoke, 2013; Bassel and Emejulu, 2014, 2018; Bhattacharyya, 2015; Ossome, 2020). As observed during fieldwork in a Black-led charity in East London, women of colour carry out three main activities: firstly, through food banks they sort dry goods and meals and supply them to local residents, including toiletries, cereals, fruit, cookies, tea, drinks, salt, rice and pasta. Secondly, they

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collaborate with local halal restaurants and community-run kitchens and coordinate cycle couriers volunteering to deliver hot meals for lunch and dinner, including half-term meals. Finally, they set-up a system of counselling which, by training volunteers, helps local residents to cope with loneliness, isolation and mental health issues.

One volunteer explained, "*Older people got follow-up calls to make sure they got their meals, but then these calls became personal to make sure they are OK, given the mental health challenges people were facing during the lockdown*".

As a result of such calls, the organisation has been able to put vulnerable people into the radar of the social protection services by making safeguarding referrals, providing emergency medical assistance, and offering mental health support sessions. Through the material circuit of nourishment, women volunteers were also able to offer emotional and mental support to the most vulnerable. Ultimately, they have established a safe space for women exploited within and outside the household. These Black communities can forge spaces of affinities, alliances and 'commoning' on their own terms (Isoke, 2013; Federici, 2014) which can enable a non-confrontational type of politics of care, inspired by spiritual beliefs and community empowerment (Isoke, 2013). Nonetheless, often these collective activities subsidise the marketized system of care and food provision, compensate through free work for the individualisation of the welfare system and expand the urban-capitalist mode of accumulation in marginal communities.

At the individual level, women volunteers juggle motherhood, collective responsibility, ethical missions, safety needs, social protection (or lack of), patriarchy and austerity. When I interviewed Rabia, the leader of a Black women's organisation, our conversation was interrupted multiple times because women were coming in to help cut salad, prepare food parcels and organise the logistics of food delivery. She said, "*People who were just surviving before, now (during COVID-19) cannot make it*". "*A hot meal coming was the first step, but then they soon realised that people needed not only hot meals, but also groceries, milk and cereals…*"

These lived experiences suggest that the vulnerabilities of these poor communities are complex and require a mix of emotional, managerial, and reproductive labour. Interviews show that mothers within the Black community had to navigate the bureaucracy of austerity to obtain scattered and short-term support, such as a place to cook free meals and small amounts of funding for school uniforms. They have been able to recruit other women and address the emotional and material needs of those at the margins. These formalised experiences of VCSs have been romantically praised as an abstract quality of women' resilience. Yet, the gendered exploitation through unpaid care work is the constitutive element of social reproduction of urban minorities.

In similar ways to gender, race plays an important role in unfolding *andro-white* marketized practices of VCSs. During the data collection process, race became an important dimension of the research. Across the different organisations observed, very few were run by people of colour, and even less were run by Black women. Also, based on self-declaration of the interviewees, volunteers were predominantly from white and/or middle-class backgrounds. This could be for a variety of reasons. Many have been furloughed through job retention schemes while others have been working remotely, thus had more time to volunteer. Yet, it might also be that essential workers, being mostly people of colour, are often employed for long hours outside the home and away from their community and do not have time to 'help out' through volunteering. Also, many London boroughs, including Tower Hamlets, post adverts for volunteer services online, so considering the digital divide minorities are subject to, this might be a further reason for the disproportionate white representation among volunteers. In the organisations led by North-East African women, people reported that volunteers are 70% white, mostly because the posts were largely advertised online. A volunteer admitted, "*the internet and access to a computer is needed to hear about volunteering opportunities, which is often scarce among people of colour. Instead, 30% of BAME volunteers reach out through word of mouth, which is slower than the internet*". White privilege is hence exemplified by having better access to

information and opportunities, and confirmed by the institutionalisation of the channels through which these organisations recruit their collaborators.

However, racial encounters within Black-led VCSs were often perceived as positive. In one interview, a Black volunteer noted that the contributions of white volunteers to Black-led organisations led to positive outcomes because "*they bring skills in accounting and management but also cooking, they manage to get funding more easily because they know the language of grants, but also they are helpful for those migrants who might want to practice English, hence creating bridges between communities, where Blacks can also develop confidence, but also trust towards whites*".

Yet, racial inequality is often mirrored by the type of contribution they bring into the organisation. Indeed, when conducting participant observations in an organisation run by Black women where I was volunteering to pack meals, it was often noted that while white volunteers were busy with managerial tasks such grant applications and communication, manual tasks such as cooking were often performed by Black and minority women. Thus, such racialised, gendered and hierarchical division of labour within the VCSs organisation tend to reproduce dynamics that mirror the wider *andro-white* capitalist modes of production based on white privilege and power (Bradley and Herrera, 2016). The *modus operandi* of white women in VCSs organisations often promote and comply with neoliberal charity models. By entrenching both a managerial white class identity and marketized forms of value extraction, these forms of volunteering contribute to reproduce racialised relations and structures (Bonds, 2020).

Furthermore, the intersectional objective of many VCSs organisations representing ethnic minorities is often to address Black women's sense of alienation regarding the lack of 'empowering' social experiences. This objective highlights the first inter-racial relational contradictions within VCSs. While white volunteers are considered necessary because they are useful in executing so-called 'high-skill' tasks, in order to pursue the organisation's objectives – to reach out to local minorities – essential activities must involve 'insiders'. For instance, some training and social support activities are carried out by Arabic speakers, as 95% of participants speak Arabic as their first language.

A white volunteer interviewed admitted: "*It is important and easier to have someone who looks and speaks like you because language creates understanding but also trust, which is fundamental for the type of objective carried out for minority women around empowerment*".

Yet, in organisations managed by white volunteers in North-London, a project manager interviewee noted that many of the volunteers, being white and financially stable, are not representative of the people they are supporting, especially low-income people and people of colour. The literature has indeed pointed out that Black volunteers can struggle to deal with racial stereotyping by white colleagues, and some acknowledged the tensions that the increase in white and middle-class volunteers has entailed, for instance in the way new white volunteers have 'bulldozed' and 'whitened' pre-existing networks during the pandemic (Zuri, 2020; Chennault, 2021), or in turn the way in which wealth redistribution and reparation has been side-lined by white organisations, which has been perceived as racist and classist (Zuri, 2020). Such dynamics confirm that race-based inequality is a crucial lens not only to understand the structural dynamics linked to the causes of food insecurity and poverty but also in informing the racial intersections and contradictions within the VCSs. Many across different races live the contradiction of having to negotiate their race and class identity with the social and political aspiration they wish for their community. Many members of the organisations interviewed, independently of their race, have recognised the need to create a system that is more participatory, bottom-up and representative of the marginal voices and identities of local communities.

5. Andro-white marketization and neoliberal austerity in VCSs practices

Race-based inequality, food insecurity and poverty are deeply intertwined. Considering the multifaceted forms of discrimination embedded in the ensemble of capitalist institutions and its forms of austerity, it is worth investigating whether and how VCSs racialise and gender the provision of 'services' to beneficiaries vis-à-vis the neoliberal care system. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic volunteers asked beneficiaries from minority communities whether they had access to food banks. The answer was no because as the food in food banks is often not halal, but rather vegan or vegetarian, they lacked trust in the food banks. In some cases, they were not aware of places where they could access suitable and culturally appropriate food. A volunteer interviewee confirmed, "*some people cannot access local services because of language and religious-driven food barriers*". Interviews showed however that minority-led VCSs can represent an opportunity for beneficiaries and members to protect their identity, speak their language and observe their religion and related food practices, for instance by providing halal meals.

Volunteers mentioned that racism is also reproduced through forms of cultural and food discrimination in health services. According to an assessment survey carried out by a London-based organisation led by people of colour to their service users (anonymised, 2020:9), and mentioned by one of the interviewee, "*hospitals' patients of colour reported environmental racism in public social services in three areas: first, they were denied access to the spiritual guidance of their own religion; secondly, they struggled to eat culturally appropriate meals in hospital facilities; and finally, they suffered from language barriers*". Language barriers and related institutionalised forms of discrimination also depend on which ethnic minority people in need belong to. As it has been reported in the same interview, that more numerous minorities such as Bangladeshis have more leverage in public administration to obtain basic rights such as access to a translator when needed. The North-Eastern African community in East London has low trust in public institutions, as public services such as hospitals lack workers who speak their language. Therefore, this logic of scarcity puts minorities in competition with each other for accessing basic services while confirming that forms of institutional racism are systemic.

Due to COVID-related restrictions, people affected by illness have struggled to get support from their primary family network and lack access to an adequate public support system. Therefore, in big cities migrants and minorities are not only financially but very often also socially poor. A woman volunteer said: "*With the COVID-19 outbreak, lunchtime clubs closed, so Somali restaurants in East London helped organisations to cover hundreds of meals per day to older residents*", which helped relieve them from a hostile environment built around a pervasive narrative of shame and stigma (Tyler and Slater, 2018) by the neoliberal governmentality. Women and men in need of food are forced to queue or ask for help to organisations often within their intimate circle and communities as to prove their undeserving status and social exclusion. A volunteer added "*Here we have people who speak Arabic, Somali, Urdu, Bengali and obviously English and so it's accessible because the people [at the food bank] represent you, because the people are welcoming with their language and communication and so on, which is really important*".

Religious practices have also shaped the modalities of food provision of local VCSs. For instance, through the month of Ramadan Black-led organisations have provided for those fasting, giving them access to food to break their fast. Thus, "the taste and smell of food as well as the aesthetics of its making are central to embodied racial identities" (Slocum, 2011: 316). This practice is in sharp contrast with the types of food parcels provided by the local Councils. Volunteers interviewed reported that the content was not only quantitatively but also qualitatively inadequate.

These examples resonate with the multidimensional political-economic aspects of institutional racism and the class- and race-based abuses which the social reproduction of minorities must confront. As mentioned above, cuts have indeed disproportionally affected Black minorities and women who, according to national official statistics, are also suffering the highest rate of unemployment (UK.gov, 2021[6]). Minorities are thus increasingly stigmatised for being dependent on benefits, but the inadequacy of the public service systems reproduces a poverty circle that is almost impossible to escape (Tyler and Slater, 2018).

Budgets are limited, a woman managing a group of volunteers admitted: "*we can't sustain the volume of people requiring our services, so they had to go through a higher level of assessment*". Continuous assessment work, done by a third party, has to take place in order to rank the levels of need and eligibility for delivery of VCS food which makes the ability to follow-up on a single beneficiary sometimes quite volatile. This is exemplary of the neoliberal care system, where scattered and discontinuous flows of resources are allocated based on degrees of desperation rather than on rights or need.

There are indeed many ways in which VCSs can enable the persistence of institutional racism. Another example is the Prevent programme. The Prevent program consists of training funded by the Home Office franchised out to VCSs and other organisations, which is "part of the national counter-terrorism strategy, seeking both to educate communities on the risks of radicalisation and to stage interventions with vulnerable individuals long before any crime has been committed" (Financial Times, 24 January 2019). In the food bank organisation that I have observed in East London, funding has been secured to run Prevent workshops, and represented a substantive proportion of the overall budget. The workshops were usually run by white and mixed-race volunteers who speak the language of the community. Yet, rather than tackling the root causes of the economic and social injustice that leads to youth violence in the first place, this programme risks stigmatising young men and women based on their racial and religious background. Forms of islamophobia or non-white discrimination constitute an element of racialisation of both economic and political austerity (Tyler and Slater, 2018; Ali and Whitham, 2021), which frame an institutionalised barrier to welfare, based on discriminatory practices. The racial tension in such programmes is very subtle but can be considered as constituting new modes of surveillance and oppression in which racialised economies operates (Bhattacharyya, 2018a). Furthermore, the UK government can use this funding as leverage to impose a political narrative within - and through - VCSs which places the responsibility for addressing youth crime and local micro criminality back on the marginal communities.

Further examples of projects delivered by VCSs which are reflective of a racialised, classist and gendered bias, are those that promote awareness of healthy choices around eating, personal health, and care. Although education about healthy and nutritional diets is not negative per se, such programmes, are problematic for many reasons. First, they reinforce the 'good food' neoliberal narrative (Chennault, 2021) which places responsibility for staying nutritionally healthy on the individual consumer. As DeVerteuil et al. noted, "by using volunteers as service providers, VCSs are providing them with the opportunities to help others meet the responsibilities of being a self-sufficient member of the community" (2020:923).

Secondly, these training programmes detach the act of accessing food and health services from the context of oppression in which Black women survive inside and outside the household. The lack of affordable groceries and the local abundance of fast (junk) food shops makes it hard for families and especially women to access healthy food and maintain healthy consumption habits. "*Women in poor or single parent households are particularly vulnerable to the risk of accessing nutritious food because of lack of cars to buy bigger and cheaper bulks in food stores*", a volunteer

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[6] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/unemployment-and-economic-inactivity/unemployment/latest#by-ethnicity.

suggested. The socio-economic contextual challenges mentioned in the above quote, for instance barriers to mobility, contribute to higher incidence of non-communicable diseases, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, thereby impacting short and long-term health and nutritional outcomes. This was also visible when looking at the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on Black women due to their experiences of exploitative and discriminatory working conditions (Swan, 2020). Yet, the socio-political aspects of race and gender are rarely made explicit and instead are misleadingly justified as 'genetic risk factors' (Razai et al., 2021a, 2021b) such as in the report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities 2021.

Thirdly, and linked to the above, such food education programmes divert attention from the dysfunctionality of the corporate-led food system and ignore the contextual and structural barriers that a deregulated food market imposes on the same individuals. The determinants of food security are therefore only marginally related to individual dietary behaviour and mothers' knowledge. Rather, they involve a myriad of determinants – material, spatial, cultural, political and racial – that affect which foods are eaten, which VCSs solidarity practices alone struggle to address (Maslen et al., 2013).

Yet, charities and VCSs are aware that their only way to survive, i.e. to obtain funding, is to play by the rules imposed through the *andro-white* marketization of the neoliberal care system. VCSs are expected to launch programmes whose activities are embedded in a business-friendly framework of market resilience and individualised wellbeing. However, not only is the content configured in neoliberal marketization, but also the form. A volunteer of an organisation based in North London said: "*they have commercialised charities; I have to spend months writing applications. We need to build the infrastructure and speak the language of funding applications*".

However, the organisation's members are mostly second-generation Turkish speakers, who often do not have the skills to write a grant application in formal English or using technical terminology. Many VCSs have been professionalising the tasks of the grant manager by hiring people with an MSc in 'Social Enterprise'. One clear indicator is the use of wording which complies with a narrative of marketization and inclusivity (Harries et al., 2020). Material gathered through digital ethnography show that the language used in the VCS organisations' websites and reports conform with business-friendly jargon linked to 'client satisfaction', entrepreneurial 'services' and measurable impacts. One volunteer interviewee said, "*year on year, the number of individuals who refer to our services has increased by at least 30%, a testimony to our high-quality work*" which shows the normalisation of a market-oriented language which equates beneficiaries with clients.

Marketization intrinsically involves forms of exclusion which represent an attack to the lived experiences of communities struggling for social reproduction. However, in organisations founded by members of the community, sometimes the line between community members who give and receive is hard to draw, as the non-commodity relations that support social reproduction are multiple. For instance, such locally-rooted organisations often have strong ties with local authorities and other organisations, which contrasts with the scatteredness of the public funding on which they depend. Their deep and wide communitarian network is what makes them and their social reproduction practice grounded in their everyday inter-spatial experiences. Care and mental and emotional support, as well as food, are part of a circular and open system of access and provision. Yet, their existence is precarious. "*A recent survey showed that nearly 70% of our beneficiaries will not have access to hot meals should this service end*", said one volunteer. As such, people who are already on the edge of a food and care crisis will be back to a position of institutional abandonment once and if these services run out of volunteers and funding.

6. Concluding remarks

This article has unveiled how race, gender and class inequalities are reproduced within and around VCSs practices. It has reflected on the multi-dimensional, multi-scalar and multi-relational forms of *andro-white* discrimination that VCSs perform and negotiate vis-à-vis the institutional and economic barriers imposed by the neoliberal care system.

First, the paper has showed and discussed how VCSs address the social reproduction of urban marginalities by relaying on unpaid reproductive work performed mostly by women. It has shed light on the gender, class and race demographics of the volunteers who have taken on the burden left by the state's inability to respond to the food and care crisis. It discussed how COVID-19 has exacerbated gender and race inequalities along the lines of care and food provision, which has significantly contributed to the collapse of social reproduction of urban lives.

Secondly, it has argued that VCS operations are embedded in the *andro-white* centric institutions which push VCSs to comply with marketization pressures and racialised ideologies. The experiences discussed so far has shown that the *andro-white* forms of VCSs practices in care and food contribute to reinforce the lines of racial discrimination, gendered exploitation, and material exclusion. The *andro-white* nexus has helped unveiling the dimension of racism alongside the patriarchal relations entrenched in neoliberal marketization.

Thirdly, the paper has confirmed that the lack of a public care provision has created the need for practices of community resilience to maintain social reproduction through VCSs. However, it has also shed light on the tensions that arise. Although some argue that VCSs halt in part the circuit of accumulation through decommodification of food consumption (Lindenbaum, 2016), they can subsidise the system, leaving untouched the root causes of the social reproduction crisis. As a result, as Parson (2014) pointed out, neoliberal charities risk disciplining the poor, allowing austerity cuts to social services to be justified by the community services agenda. This tension is co-determined by a clear contradiction in the gender, class and race composition of the volunteers who have taken on the burden left by the state's inadequacy to respond to the food and care crisis. This tension is also confirmed by the languages and projects applied by VCSs to survive the neoliberal agenda of competitive grants. Hence, VCSs often spatially expand a regulatory order which perpetuates patterns of racialised and gendered uneven accumulation. Across these spaces, instances of institutionalised racism and techniques of exclusions in relations to food, health services, work and education have been reported among minority communities which make the social reproduction crisis persist.

In conclusion, such practices can help urban social reproduction in the short-term and can sometime channel voices of local struggles by enhancing bottom-up participation. However, their over-stretched members and under-resourced practices would need to create a political space outside the neoliberal circuit to build transformational campaigns advocating for social and economic justice. The Care Collective, the Women's Budget Group and others have envisioned ways to organise a more just society along these lines (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; De Henau et al., 2020). By redistributing wealth and reduce inequalities, while incentivising alternative forms of ownership, production and distribution of goods and service away from global corporate businesses, governments can invest in public spaces including social infrastructures such as hospitals, youth spaces, parks and libraries, thus dignify care workers and marginalised communities. A deep rethinking on how to organise our society *around* and *through* care is necessary.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lorena Lombardozzi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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