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Systemic Exploration of Women Associations' Network Capacity—Case Study of the Consulta Femminile of Milan

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The commitment and collaboration of associations are driving forces for improving women's conditions. This paper reports on research that used a systemic design approach to study the Italian NGO league Consulta Femminile di Milano, to support them in their search for strategies that could substantially improve their influence on policymaking by local government institutions. The study analyses the league's composition, the practices and activities, and the network of external partnerships and collaborations. Systemic design provides the conceptual tools to understand and produce a representation of how this community works.

The study aims to facilitate the discussion within the Consulta about the most promising actions for achieving their goals by raising awareness of opportunities and helping them to identify frictions that could hinder the evolution of their modalities of work and collaboration.

The analysis uses interviews, ethnographic observations, and web scraping to focus on the Consulta's structure, governance, and external influence. The outcomes reveal the community's diverse nature, highlight internal and external tensions, and identify leverage points for potential systemic change within the network and its acquisition of greater impact capability. The description provides the starting point for this community to identify actions that could enhance their influence on how women's issues are considered in policymaking by local public sector institutions.

KEYWORDS: Systemic design, women's associations, system mapping, gender equality, relational dynamics, women's empowerment

RSD TOPIC(S): Mapping & Modelling, Policy & Governance

Introduction

Overcoming gender inequalities is a global challenge. It requires the commitment of civil society and academia to promote local and central government policies that create equal opportunities and take women's needs and points of view into account in policymaking (UN Women, 2025). The empowerment of women and girls is a key focus of the European Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25 (European Commission, 2020) and of Goal 5 of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Shreeves, 2024; UN, 2015, 2025). The Beijing Strategic Actions cover poverty, education, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, power and decision-making, and the media (UN, 1995; UN Women, 2014). The UN's 2030 Agenda includes many Sustainable Development Goals that directly impact women, who still encounter disadvantages in various areas. (Esuna & Gülasan, 2017). Climate change and energy costs, for example, have devastating social and economic impacts in some parts of the world, particularly affecting women (Capetillo-Ordaz et al., 2024; Rather & Mahalik, 2025).

Despite the significant changes to the situation of women in many countries that have been promoted by the strong commitment of civil society, equal opportunities remain a distant goal (Our World in Data, 2023). Renewed commitment from civil society is a prerequisite for effective participation and decision-making in public life (Esuna & Gülasan, 2017; Markandya et al., 2025; UN Women, 2014).

Worldwide, women's organisations vary in size, goals, internal organisation, scope, duration and skills. This makes collaboration and networking important for increasing their impact (IASC, 2017).

This study uses a systemic design approach to examine a specific case study: the Consulta Femminile di Milano (ConsFIM), an Italian association wishing to increase its

impact on local policies and decision-making processes. The research authors aim to contribute to the evolution and empowerment of this community.

ConsFIM is a second-level association, i.e. a league of women's organisations committed to equal opportunities for women. The Italian word consulta does not have a direct equivalent in English. It refers to consultation and dialogue, and is used to denote various organisations, including collegial committees and councils. Founded in 1963, ConsFIM aims to study social and economic issues that directly or indirectly affect women. Its current objectives are to find solutions and propose them to local administrations, to raise public awareness of women's issues, and to encourage women to participate in public life (ConsFIM, 1996). Although ConsFIM is based in Milan, it includes local branches of international NGOs, some of which are recognised by the UN Economic and Social Council. The list of NGO members also includes professional associations, such as those for women engineers, architects, and doctors, among others (Anheier, 2014; ConsFIM, 2021a).

ConsFIM has established strong relationships with various social actors, including local and national administrations, public institutions and businesses (ConsFIM, 2024c). ConsFIM is not unique in Italy. Three other Italian cities have umbrella associations with the same organisational model and a comparable history: the Consulta in Genoa, Trieste and Verona (Consulta delle Associazioni Femminili di Verona, n.d.; Consulta Femminile di Genova, n.d.; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, n.d.). In recent years, ConsFIM has intensified its dialogue with these three organisations, as well as with other networks such as the Italian W20 (Women 20), which facilitates international discussions on women's issues alongside G20 meetings (W20 Italy, n.d.).

The ConsFIM case study is interesting because it involves long-term cooperation between very different associations. Over time, the federation has capitalised on convergences and managed internal diversity. ConsFIM acts as a flywheel and a centre of aggregation. However, the community is wondering how it can evolve to meet the challenges of the present while maintaining its cohesion and innovating its forms of action.

Faced with a multitude of project and initiative opportunities and relationships with various local, national and international stakeholders, ConsFIM is frustrated by the

limited impact of its actions. It is therefore questioning its priorities and reflecting on how it can increase its influence on urban development policies and local services, despite the limits of its resources.

The members of the ConsFIM associations include experts from a variety of fields, including law, medicine, technical and scientific research, design and culture. On the other hand, similarly to many independent non-profit associations that rely on voluntary work, ConsFIM is faced with limitations (Nowakowska et al., 2024). Due to its nature and statutes, ConsFIM cannot and does not wish to increase in size, as its members are associations that must meet certain requirements regarding solidity and continuity.

In the current situation, the systematic analysis is promising in terms of identifying current opportunities and facilitating dialogue and decision-making regarding future actions and strategic assets. Even though most of the delegates have been part of this organisation for several years, conceptualising the system of relationships and opportunities could trigger new thinking and facilitate the development of new perspectives, approaches and scenarios. The application of systemic design is intended to enable efficient information exchange and promote conceptual thinking and critical, constructive discussion (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer et al., 2024). Furthermore, adopting an external perspective can highlight the tensions that could hinder the evolution of ConsFIM (Ryan, 2014).

The two researchers include a senior university professor who is an expert in UX design research and a junior research fellow who specialises in systemic design. The senior is a member of ConsFIM as a delegate of an NGO, which means she had prior knowledge of the organisation, aiding in information collection. The junior acted as an external, critical observer and worked systematically on processing information. Systemic design methods were employed to investigate the complex system of ConsFIM's relationships, resources, and activities through interviews, document analysis, and observation of a national inter-association event. The two researchers support ConsFIM's aims to increase its impact while maintaining its autonomy and independence from political organisations, and to respect the independence of its NGO members.

The paper provides a preliminary description of ConsFIM, outlines the theoretical background and research method. It reports the main findings of the investigation and a related discussion.

ConsFIM—Preliminary description of the case study

The information reported in this chapter comes from the ConsFIM website (ConsFIM, n.d.-b), the paper archive kept at the headquarters of the National Women's Union of Milan (Unione Femminile Nazionale, n.d.), and more recent ConsFIM documents. The historical documentation is incomplete, with large gaps, particularly during the first twenty years of the twenty-first century. Mapping ConsFIM's activities is, therefore, a complex task requiring a methodology that considers the actual availability of materials.

ConsFIM was founded in 1963 by nine associations. Other associations have joined since then, bringing the total number of members to 18. The statutes were renewed in 1996, 2021, and 2023, with only minor changes being made, such as adjusting the president's term of office and adding specific rules to fulfil the requirements for inclusion in the official national register of NGOs. However, this objective was not pursued. The organisational structure is very simple: the Assembly holds the main powers and elects the key roles, President and Executive Committee. The president will now serve for two years, with the possibility of a second term. Like many European women's organisations, the ConsFIM relies on the pure voluntary work of its members (Elomäki, 2012; Nowakowska et al., 2024) and has a minimal organisational structure and operates with little to no funding, apart from the small annual membership fee.

The documents demonstrate ConsFIM's consistent and continuous commitment to advocating for women's education and professional training, organising awareness-raising events and projects. In recent years, ConsFIM has organised public events and projects in collaboration with public bodies and companies (ConsFIM, 2024b). Some initiatives have been developed within a framework to raise the profile of different areas of work.

Research methods and background

Women's associations and the struggle for influence

Since the 18th century, non-governmental associations have played a crucial role in promoting gender equality by addressing issues related to women's rights (Joachim, 2018). These organisations have contributed to changing the status of women in many countries by raising public and institutional awareness of gender inequality, violence against women, and the lack of equitable and inclusive services (UN Women, 2014). Nevertheless, gender inequality remains pervasive (Our World in (Data, 2023), with women and the organisations representing them often being excluded from decision-making processes or being involved in a non-systematic manner.

Gender-balanced policymaking would benefit the urban development of safer and inclusive cities (Rampaul & Magidimisha-Chipungu, 2022). However, gender-inclusive governance is often inconsistent and problematic (Jupp, 2014). This phenomenon can be described as an institutional glass ceiling, whereby women's demands are acknowledged, yet they lack real co-responsibility in policymaking processes.

On the other hand, the landscape of women's organisations reflects different ideas about women's collective identity and how it differs from men's (Joachim, 2018). The size, mission, priorities, competencies and relationships with the local area of women's associations vary greatly.

ConsFIM is an interesting case study given the fragmented nature of women's organisations due to its composition, long-standing role in civic engagement and ability to facilitate cooperation despite the diversity of its members. However, the organisation's current aim is to understand how it can enhance its concrete influence on local policy and urban development. Some of its members feel the need to reconsider the usual activities and how to manage external networking to strengthen their influence over public service and policy decisions.

Designing in complex social contexts

The commitment to gender equality is characterised by articulated scopes and an indeterminate scale; it can therefore be described as a 'wicked problem'. Designers can mitigate the negative consequences of such problems by shaping systems and

infrastructures in more inclusive and desirable ways (Kolko, 2012). Design has often been applied beyond its traditional disciplinary boundaries to address complex, information-dense contexts. Methods such as sense-making and sense-sharing reveal tacit knowledge and make it usable. These approaches enable complexity to be broken down and multiple perspectives to be integrated into coherent proposals (Mollenhauer et al., 2024). Designers can use the knowledge provided by NGOs to develop interventions that enable co-design processes with other stakeholders (Manzini, 2015, pp. 151-152).

Systemic design, participatory design, transition design and design justice are key areas for designers who want to contribute and develop new skills for promoting social change (Dorn & Dickman, 2023). Systemic design combines systemic thinking and design practice to address complex situations, enable transitions within systems, and create change (Mulder et al., 2023). Social systems such as ConsFIM are complex and dynamic (Jacoby & Van Ael, 2021), so they must be addressed by considering the whole system.

ConsFIM brings together individuals and associations from a variety of cultural and ideological backgrounds. This diversity has the potential to address the complex issue of gender inequality. However, having diverse viewpoints on the same challenge is not enough to provide solutions. In order to achieve its goals more effectively, this diversity must be integrated through a shared approach (Mollenhauer et al., 2024). ConsFIM can take more calculated action by adopting a systemic perspective and improving its understanding of its internal and external systems.

Starting from this assumption, this study takes a systemic design approach, collaborating with ConsFIM's stakeholders (Jones, 2014) to map the interconnections between actors, identify leverage points and design more impactful action strategies.

Understanding ConsFIM as a complex social system

Figure 1 shows the overall methodology adopted in the study. It is divided into three main steps. The first one explores the ConsFIM system and its relationships. The second step defines the design rationale, and the third begins with presenting the research results to enable stakeholders to co-create a transition through collective design.

The first step involves exploring the system to inform the framing and empathising with it, based on the data collected. This phase aims to create a system view (Van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020) and reflect on its dynamics and relationships by integrating analysis and synthesis (Jacoby & Van Ael, 2021).

Tensions were identified within the system overview. By tensions, we mean the presence of diverse perspectives that emerge when "making sense" of the system itself (Ryan, 2014). These tensions can be either a "creative engine of innovation" or the origin of conflicts within the system. The goal is to find a balance, mediate and resolve the tensions to achieve a collective understanding of the situation (ibid.).

The second step is to identify a wide range of potential opportunities for ConsFIM coherently with its goals. These include networking and collaboration, project types, communication methods and other types of intervention. The design rationale phase selects the opportunities that best align with ConsFIM's objectives, values, and operational constraints.

The ultimate goal of systemic design is to enable stakeholders to collaborate in designing interventions, such as policies, programmes and services, to address complex challenges more effectively (Jones, 2014). Accordingly, the third phase will involve ConsFIM members reflecting on the system's dynamics and engaging in the collective design of systemic interventions (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).

This paper only covers the first two phases: the iterative process (Fig. 2) for interpreting ConsFIM as a complex system and reflecting on it using systemic design reasoning.

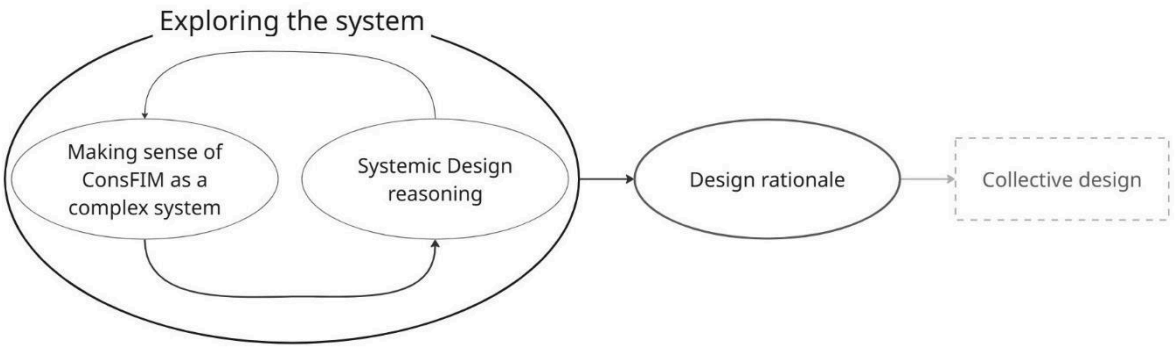

Figure 1. The main steps of the research. Source: Authors.

The ConsFIM system is analysed to gain an understanding of how it functions and what its dynamics are (Jacoby & Van Ael, 2021). Systemic design reasoning is a practice based on abductive thinking (Van der Bijl-Brouwer et al., 2024) and the design expertise of the researchers conducting the study. As they learn how the system functions, the researchers consider the context and the behaviour of the stakeholders to understand how these elements can impact the system itself and how they can be leveraged to achieve a system shift (ibid.). Reasoning was also carried out by confronting the researchers' different points of view, given their varying prior knowledge of ConsFIM.

As shown in Figure 2, the process of understanding and reasoning is characterised by the iteration of some main steps according to the systemic design literature. In more detail:

Inquiring—The aim is to develop an in-depth understanding of the ConsFIM network (Ryan, 2014). Objective information is collected through ethnography, interviews, desk research, web scraping and analysis of social media content.

Data analysis—Data analysis is performed with the support of conceptual maps representing the status quo (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Schematic visual representations were also created to facilitate the design process (van der Bijl-Brouwer et al., 2024).

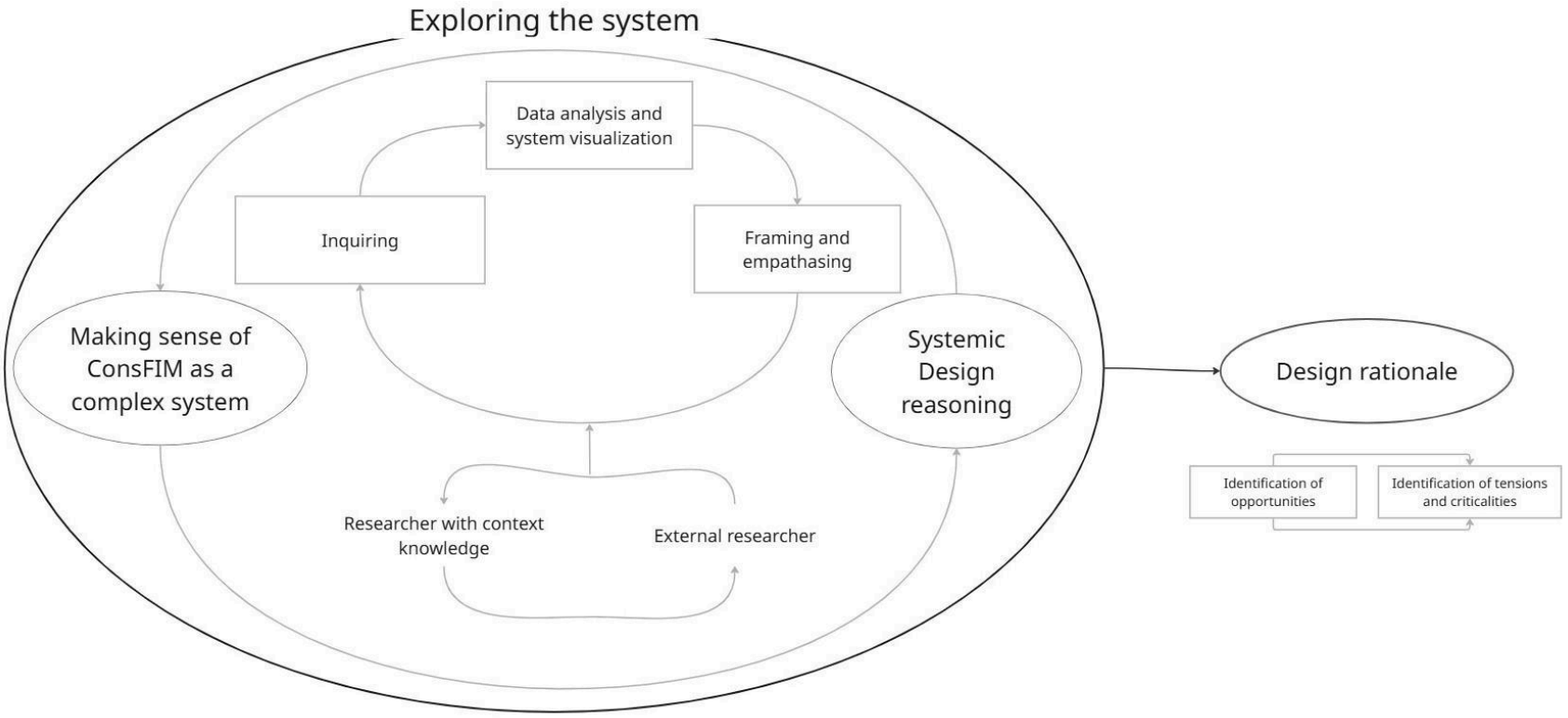

Figure 2. Details of phases 1 and 2. Source: Authors

Framing & empathising—Framing involves making sense of information and reiterating reasoning until a frame of reference is developed that describes the status quo of ConsFIM. To take into account the different perspectives that may exist on the system, the process included interviews with ConsFIM members, which enabled the identification of challenges and opportunities for improvement (Ryan, 2014). Tensions emerged from empathising with the diversity of perspectives, objectives, and values expressed by different stakeholders (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020). Empathising combines the systemic thinking focus on relationships and tensions with the human-centred nature of design; the aim is to 'develop empathy with the system' (ibid.).

Throughout the process, the two authors engaged in continuous dialogue, confronting perspectives and supporting systemic design reasoning, as well as deductive and reflective thinking.

Results

The first challenge of the study was to select the main areas to focus on during data collection that would provide useful insights into the study's final objective. This preliminary task resulted in the identification of two main dimensions: internal relationships and the external network. The process and the expected outcomes for data collection are shown in Figure 3.

The investigative activities are presented in Fig. 4. These include desk research and web scraping on ConsFIM and the other three Italian leagues. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted: one with the current president and one with a long-standing member who represents the historical memory of the organisation. Thematic analysis of the interviews (Naeem et al., 2023) involved keyword coding to identify themes. Finally, the two researchers participated in a public meeting of the Consulte in Milan, Genoa, Trieste and Verona (Trieste, 21 February 2025). This event was recorded and analysed using thematic analysis (ibid.).

The main insights of the exploration phase are summarised in the following paragraphs.

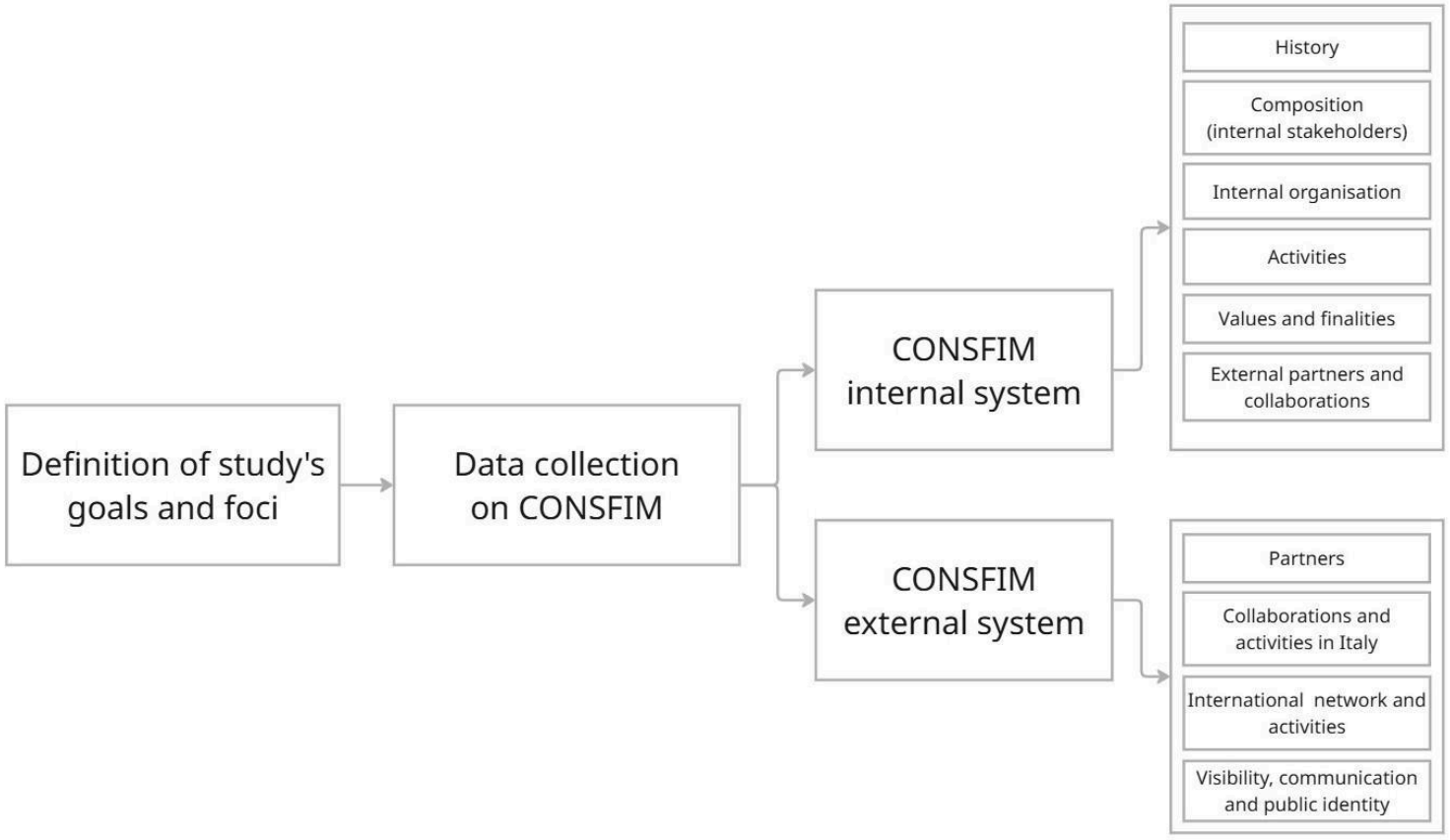

Figure 3. The main tasks and expected outcomes of the realm of investigation. Source: Authors.

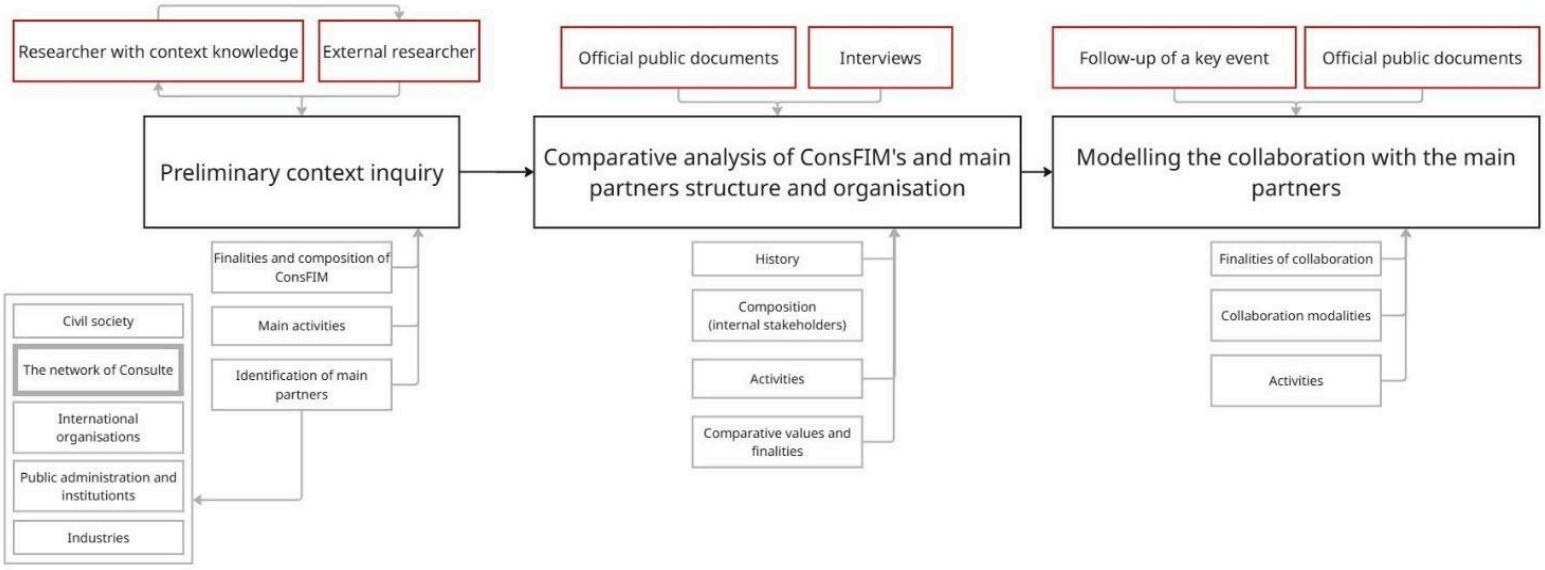

Figure 4. The main activities of inquiring: sources (in red) and outcomes. Source: Authors.

Structure and functioning

Figure 5 shows the structure of ConsFIM. Most NGO members (16 out of 18) belong to national and/or international organisations.

Any association can apply to join ConsFIM, but there are eligibility requirements. In the words of the President: "All women's associations that prioritise women's empowerment and women's issues are eligible for ConsFIM membership, although this is not their only focus."

These requirements include independence from all political parties, an absence of economic objectives or exploitation, and a commitment demonstrated through the participation of delegates. These criteria were described in the interviews as being fundamental to the stability of ConsFIM. Applications for new membership must be submitted to the Executive Committee and put to the vote of the Assembly (ConsFIM, 2021b).

As shown by the minutes of the meetings, ConsFIM's membership remained largely unchanged over time. Nevertheless, the entry criteria significantly influence ConsFIM's composition, favouring established, institutionally connected associations over radical ones. Additionally, ConsFIM members tend to be relatively homogeneous in terms of their formal education. For this reason, and due to the access restrictions, ConsFIM can be seen as an elitist association. Italy has a history of women's activist elites: groups of women from privileged backgrounds who had the power and motivation to effect change through organisation and networking (Laurenzi & Mosca, 2022).

ConsFIM is a registered association; however, it is not enrolled in the national register of third-sector associations, the Registro Unico Nazionale del Terzo Settore (RUNTS). Registration with RUNTS would open up the possibility of receiving funding from public institutions, but this entails administrative and accounting obligations. As ConsFIM is an association of associations, managing funds would require the creation of complex rules and responsibilities, which are not currently under discussion.

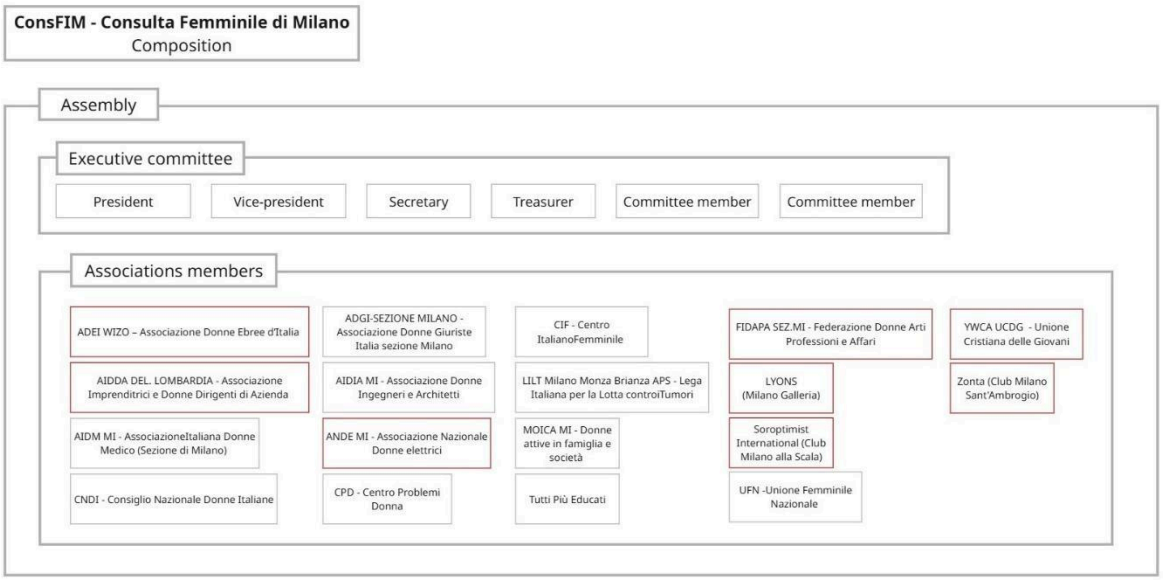

Figure 5. The internal composition and structure of ConsFIM (Consulta Femminile di Milano, 2021a, 2021b). The red boxes refer to international organisations. Source: Authors.

Values, vision and objectives

ConsFIM's core values of women's empowerment and gender equality have shaped its identity since its foundation in 1963. Although the vision has evolved, the core principles have remained unchanged (ConsFIM, 2020). As one of the interviewees expressed: "If women are well in a society, then society itself is well." Members are keen to identify problems affecting women and propose solutions to institutions (ConsFIM, 2021b), aiming to raise public awareness and promote a collective consciousness towards greater female participation in public life.

Connecting to this vision, they focus on developing networks of women with similar goals to increase collective impact (ibid.). The current President emphasises the need to find the "common denominator" between the member associations and external partners to foster collaborative projects for the territories.

Although ConsFIM often engages with political representatives, delegates for social policy and local administrations provide the Consulta with prestigious premises for some initiatives, it maintains strict political and economic independence. ConsFIM does

not accept members with explicit political objectives, as they believe that Women's empowerment, equality and emancipation should be supported by all politicians, with a focus on the objectives to be achieved, without instrumentalisation. The association values concrete action and constant dialogue with the parties involved, while maintaining political and economic autonomy.

Participation and internal challenges

From interviews and observations of private and public events in Trieste, it emerges that relationships between individual members and member associations are fundamental to ConsFIM's functioning.

On a personal level, members see ConsFIM as a space to develop friendships and foster new connections. Given its diverse composition, divergences may arise, and in these cases, the President should act as a moderator. Since its founding in 1963, ConsFIM has fulfilled the need of women's associations to join forces in a context that was still not sufficiently open to listening to women's voices by being a safe platform for synergies. This role remains central today, and projects are often initiated by one member association that invites the others to join in, based on their areas of interest or expertise. Multidisciplinary projects are highly valued within ConsFIM, and if aligned with the Consulta's guidelines, the President can propose that the Assembly grant patronage, thus providing visibility and advocacy.

Each participant in the Assembly is a delegate of the primary association and must represent the position of their association of origin (ConsFIM, 2021b). As one of the interviewees explained: "If a delegate has an idea that differs from that of the association or its mission, she cannot speak for herself in the Assembly." The delegate cannot express personal opinions if they differ from her association's standpoint, and she is obliged to report back. While this system may slow down decision-making, the interviewees agreed that discussions taking place at a non-personal level can help in preventing conflicts.

Still, members may have different ideas and positions on issues concerning women. It is therefore the responsibility of the President and the Executive Committee to ensure that all views are considered, while avoiding major divisions and conflicts.

Interviewees highlighted that issues that may cause division are usually not addressed directly but reworked to avoid confrontation. Dialogue is seen as the primary tool for dealing with disagreements.

Impact, project planning and implementation

Given the nature of ConsFIM, its projects cover varying topics. As an example, Fin da bambina (Since childhood) is a project framework tackling the mechanisms that reinforce gender stereotypes starting from early childhood. Aimed primarily at families and educators, it involves experts from various disciplines who provide courses and materials on the subject (ConsFIM, n.d.-a; Gruppo CAP, 2023), including the nursery schools of the Gruppo CAP company (Gruppo CAP, n.d.). The same company is the main partner in a project dedicated to women trying to start a new life after leaving abusive situations; the goal is to help them find a job. Another project is Mi Amo—No Mi Amo, which includes animation activities, dialogue and awareness-raising for male and female inmates in the main detention centre of Milan, the Francesco Di Cataldo (San Vittore) prison, in collaboration with psychotherapists and people from the entertainment industry (ConsFIM, 2024d).

The research highlighted that several projects were initiated by the desire to take concrete action rather than by an established top-down strategy. The importance of concrete interventions was confirmed by interviews and the Trieste Convention.

Partnerships, collaborations and visibility

ConsFIM has established itself as a credible and reliable association, fostering a network of external actors in the process. Contacts with institutions are crucial for influencing policymaking, and ConsFIM engages with the Municipality of Milan and the Regional Government of Lombardy. While ConsFIM seeks interaction with institutions and is occasionally approached for collaboration, it firmly maintains its political neutrality and independence.

Figure 6 provides an overview of ConsFIM's partnerships across different categories.

Although partnerships have grown, ConsFIM could benefit from greater visibility. There are many historical reasons why visibility has a negative connotation within ConsFIM. Firstly, communication was, and still is to some extent, perceived as a loss of prestige, as

a narcissistic way of asserting ConsFIM's prowess. Secondly, there is also a persistent concern about instrumentalisation and misrepresentation. In recent years, ConsFIM has increased its communication efforts with a website and a LinkedIn page (ConsFIM, 2024a), although neither is regularly updated.

The Network of Italian Consulte and international relationships

The Consulte Network was established by ConsFIM to facilitate coordination among associations with similar structures and objectives. The second public meeting of the four associations, held in Trieste in February 2025, offered an opportunity for the members to collectively reflect on the network's vision and potential.

A key point of convergence is the desire to increase influence on public policy and urban planning decisions, shifting the perception of these associations to more than just charitable or cultural organisations. They aim at gaining influence as bodies that can engage in dialogue with institutions to get them to take concrete action to improve women's lives. To fulfil these ambitions, the network identified the need for more structured coordination, better anticipation of challenges and greater exchange of ideas and common projects.

The event in Trieste emphasised the importance of social services that support women's autonomy, such as accessible public spaces, safe and inclusive transport, housing and employment opportunities. It also addressed sustainability and environmental goals from a gender perspective, highlighting how issues such as energy poverty can disproportionately affect women (Capetillo-Ordaz et al., 2024).

The subsequent NGO CSW69 Conference on the Status of Women in New York (March 2025), where ConsFIM co-organised an event, encouraged the network to consider its international positioning. However, an examination of international interactions reveals that cooperation remains unclear and lacks a defined strategy.

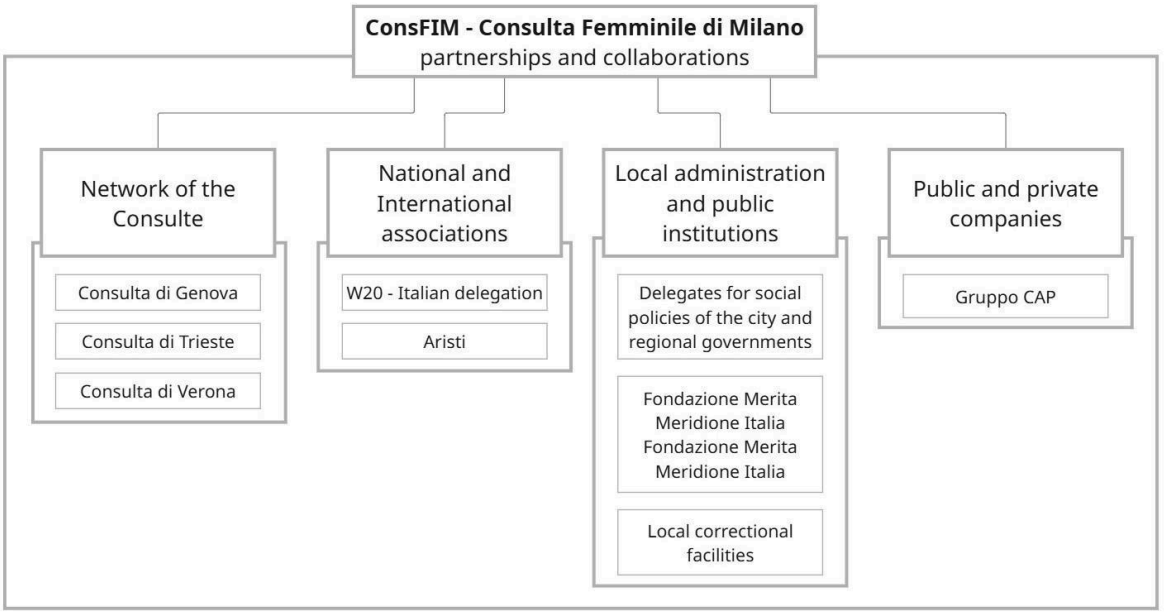

Figure 6. The partnerships and collaborations of ConsFIM. Source: Authors.

Discussion

The next step in the research process was to transition from exploring the system to extracting meaningful insights to share with members. This process revealed several systemic tensions that emerged from comparing different perspectives within the system. According to Ryan, these tensions can either drive innovation or cause conflict within the system. The aim is to balance, mediate and resolve these tensions to achieve a collective understanding of the situation (Ryan, 2014).

The most important insights are summarised below, alongside the related opportunities. The latter are presented as questions, as they will be presented to ConsFIM to inspire and stimulate the internal discussion process.

Cultural influence vs concrete impacts

The members have a strong drive for projects that have an immediate and concrete impact on women's lives. Practical projects root associations in the territory and generate knowledge. The need to see concrete results feeds the idea of being effective.

On the other hand, practical projects can divert energy from developing thinking and hinder long-term strategies for gaining political influence.

Hints: the members' drive for concrete actions can be a leverage point to produce a general strategy to accomplish a specific vision. The hint is to work on bridging the gap between the conceptualisation of a vision and the concrete actions.

Design opportunities: organise reflection sessions after practical projects? Identify one or more themes on which to launch a periodic debate on the principles that should guide the development of policies for women's practical problems, in collaboration with the network of Consultas and other social actors?

Gaining a role in decision-making

Maintaining an open channel with the institutions is a privilege for an association that wants to influence decision-making processes and affect structural change. However, ConsFIM is aware of the potential political exploitation and strives to preserve its autonomy. Increasing dialogue with the political world means reinforcing opportunities for collaboration while ensuring that the association is not mistaken for a partner or vassal of the parties.

Design opportunities: promoting the culture of the importance of independent civil society?

Increase the effectiveness of proposals.

ConsFIM and the network have many skills, but little proactive synthesis. To influence policymakers, ConsFIM needs to create precise proposals and monitor the fulfilment of promises. On the other hand, defining precise objectives and demands could make it difficult to manage internal diversity.

Design opportunities: collaborating with academic experts? Dialogue with the university researchers could bring concrete proposals for services and solutions on which ConsFIM can express women's point of view and launch public debates.

Leveraging the dialogue between ConsFIM and the association's members

People's work for ConsFIM is often (for example, involvement in projects) very similar to their work for the primary associations. Delegates can be in a bipolar situation: on the

one hand, they should work for their primitive association, and on the other hand, they must commit themselves to the Consulta.

Design opportunities: Is it possible to rethink the modalities of interaction between ConsFIM and the members of the associations to create more value from the double affiliation?

Inclusivity and representativeness

The convention in Trieste reinforced the principle that the network of women's organisations could improve democracy and empower women's voices. Even so, the Consulte network appears to be a homogeneous group in terms of social background, age, and ethnicity, and they do not represent the entirety of women in the territory. The network members do not perceive it as a problem.

Hints: Increasing attention to this point could enlarge the realm of action and facilitate the renewal of visions and strategies.

Design opportunities: Create events and projects with new partner associations and social actors to broaden links and involve different levels of women's associations?

Conclusion

This study aimed to support ConsFIM in enhancing its impact while maintaining autonomy and identity within the broader ecosystem of women's associations. As a hub that brings together diverse associations, ConsFIM could increase its influence and complexity in its internal and external relations.

The study coincided with a transitional moment for ConsFIM, marked by a leadership change, a Consulte's network meeting and the first participation in the NGO-CSW. These events, alongside the general climate of instability, made it a delicate yet fertile moment for reflection.

In this scenario, design did not involve being a key stakeholder in the ConsFIM system or offering quick solutions but played the role of a catalyst, through systemic exploration and the initiation of participatory dynamics. In chemistry, a catalyst is an element that triggers a reaction between other elements without being influenced by it. In this case,

design practice stimulated internal reflection and discussion through systemic investigation and sense-making.

This process encouraged members to re-evaluate internal dynamics, capabilities, and the association's broader position in a collective awareness-raising process. This change was spontaneous and emergent, rather than a planned intervention.

The researchers had anticipated some degree of change, as the study had stemmed from a desire to reconsider and realign the association, but the transformation was more spontaneous and emergent than expected. This demonstrates how design can be a relational practice that helps systems see themselves differently and initiate change from within, as well as being a tool for intervention.

Although participatory design was not formally applied, the exploration phase led to stakeholders spontaneously getting involved and taking action. As mentioned, a co-creation phase will take place at a later stage. The mobilisation generated by the design interventions provides a premise for the formal proposal of participatory activities, and ConsFIM's stakeholders are keen to engage in the collective design of their community. Therefore, as advocated by Dorn & Dickman (2023), the design action developed relational capacity even before the actual design actions took place.

The study also stimulated a reflection on the impacts of design practices on systems and communities, as well as the agency of the designer within systemic design processes. It shows how design interventions can generate results beyond the initial expectations and reverberate through community thinking and action.

This includes considerations about the potential of systemic design in emphasising specific dimensions of relationships, such as tensions. According to Engström et al. (2021), tensions involve emotional dimensions that must be navigated with care. Similarly, Mages (2020) notes that community conversations can be difficult if one's own identity is at stake. This was evident in interviews, where certain questions would trigger an immediate need to hold to their positions and ideas firmly.

These reflections and the results presented in the discussion offer guidance on future research steps, particularly the following co-creation phase, which should carefully consider the relational and emotional aspects of participation.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the notion that systemic design is an ongoing process of relational engagement and sense-making.

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