



1. Himpathy in the Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence by the Italian Press. *A Content Analysis of 16 National Newspapers through the years 2020-2023*

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Abstract

Male violence against women – recognised as a violation of human rights by the Istanbul Convention – is rooted in structural power asymmetries between men and women and is reflected, legitimised and reproduced by culture, which is permeated by stereotypes and prejudices. News media, in particular, often convey a distorted representation of the phenomenon as male violence against women is frequently framed as a private, individual and episodic matter, rather than as a problem of collective importance. Furthermore, the perpetrator is represented as only partially responsible, since the framing of the phenomenon offered by press tends to portray him as driven to action by the woman's "misconduct" or by an irrepressible impulse. This article presents a summary of the main findings of a quantitative-qualitative analysis of an extensive database consisting of articles published on these topics by the 16 most widely distributed newspapers in Italy. We argue that these articles use rhetorical strategies that tend to distribute the responsibility of violence between the victim and the perpetrator. Thus re-victimizing the women who have suffered violence while, at the same time, offering empathy towards their offender.

Key words

Gender-based violence; Secondary victimization; Social representation of gender-based violence; Italian press.

1.1. Introduction¹

Gender-based violence is based on unequal relationships between men and women, reflected, legitimised and reproduced by culture, permeated by stereotypes and prejudices and introjected from childhood through socialization (Saccà, 2021a), a culture that is reflected in how institutions and different social actors deal with violence suffered by women, that ends up in helping to produce or reproduce the conditions that underlie it (Taylor, 2009; Richards *et al.*, 2011).

From a sociological point of view, gender-based violence is a social phenomenon, linked to power relations, to the roles and forms of relationship that society establishes for its people (Saccà, 2003, 2021a; Monkton-Smith, 2012), and it is a cultural phenomenon because the way of perceiving relationships between genders is the basis of the male predisposition to use violence towards women and of society to tolerate such violence (Merli, 2015). In the analysis of the phenomenon, of its causes, of its different social representations and of the ways in which it is reproduced, particular relevance is assumed by the theory of social control of sexuality, which underlines the role of the socioeconomic context on the one hand and of the socialization process on the other. A process through which individuals learn values and behavioural models linked to gender (Saccà, 2001, 2003, 2016, 2021b). The studies carried out so far have had the merit of bringing to light how socialisation, starting from the decisive role played by school education and its texts (Gianini Belotti, 1973; Blumberg, 2015; Abbatecola, Stagi, 2017; Biemmi, 2017), translates into the reproduction of those stereotypes and prejudices in daily practices and into the power relations between men and women, making them appear as inevitable but which are, instead, subject to historical and cultural change (Davis, 1983; Saccà, 2003, 2016; Pitch, 2008; Carnino, 2011; Meo, 2012; Ercolani, 2016).

Suffice it to say that the expression “gender violence” was introduced into international theoretical and political language only following the IV UN Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), allowing the emancipation of subjectivities that seemed by nature destined for

¹ This paper is the result of the joint work of both authors. The research design and overall supervision are to be attributed to Professor Flaminia Saccà, the extraction of the specific data used in this article to Dr. Maddalena Carbonari. The analysis of the data and the drafting of the manuscript were carried out on an equal and collaborative basis.

social subordination (Bimbi, 2012). Equally recent is the use of the expression “femicide”, introduced for the first time by Russell in 1992 and taken up in 2003 by Lagarde, with reference to the numerous cases of the killing of women in Mexico. This concept became part of the Italian public and academic debate only in 2008, thanks to the jurist Spinelli. Therefore, the entry into common usage of these expressions is understood as a sign of ongoing cultural change.

There are several studies that focus on how language reflects and produces stereotypes, and which invoke non-sexist language that respects the dignity of the person (Sabatini, 1986, 1987; Cavagnoli, 2013; Robustelli, 2018; Giuliani, 2021, 2024). These are linguistic studies that provide an important starting point for sociological reflection. The debate on the social representation of gender-based violence in the media has started to be widespread in the Italian context only in recent years, from studies carried out so far in this area (Bordoni, 2012; Gius, Lalli, 2014; Giomi, 2015; Giomi, Magaraggia, 2017; Saccà, Massidda, 2018a, 2018b; Saccà, 2021b, 2024b; Belluati, 2021; targeting the tendency of national media to convey a distorted representation of violence, albeit with praiseworthy recent exceptions (e.g. the Manifesto of Venice 2017²).

In general, we can see that male violence against women is fundamentally considered a private, individual affair, rather than a matter of collective importance. The author is often obfuscated, represented as only partially responsible, as one who is driven to action by the woman's conduct or an irrepressible impulse (Saccà, 2021a, 2024b).

However, stereotypes and prejudices underlying this unbalanced social representation of gender-based violence do not only concern the news but also affect justice, where secondary victimisation phenomena of women are not infrequently found. Where, for example, distorted representations of domestic violence tend to downgrade it to “family disputes” (that, of course, are not a crime), or where the defendant's defense strategies focus on the victim's presumed unreliability or her supposedly “provocative” attitude, shifting the responsibility for the violence from *his actions to her conduct* (Boiano, 2015; Boiano, Simone, 2018; Di Nicola, 2018; Manente, 2019; Simone *et al.*, 2019; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b).

² The Manifesto is available at this link: <https://www.fnsi.it/upload/70/70efdf2ec9b086079795c442636b55fb/0d8d3795eb7d18fd322e84ff5070484d.pdf>

This type of distorted representation leads to greater difficulty for women in accessing justice and, ultimately, to a violation of the democratic fibre of the nation. Because it means that justice is not truly equal and, ultimately, that not all citizens are actually considered equal. Which is why we reckon that tackling stereotypes and prejudices in the social representation of gender-based violence is so important.

This article is based on the work carried out by Sapienza's research unit of a PRIN2020 (a Research Project of National Interest funded by the Italian Ministry for University and Research) entitled "Stereotypes and prejudices: the social representation of gender-based violence and contrast strategies ten years after the Istanbul Convention". The project, coordinated by Flaminia Saccà at Tuscia University at first and then at Sapienza University of Rome, was one of a series of research projects aimed at preventing and combating violence against women, also in implementing the Istanbul Convention. It sought to investigate the stereotypes and prejudices that permeate the narrative and social representation of violence both in court and in the press, and to build innovative practices and methodologies to contrast them, also among the young and very young generations, in the awareness that these stereotypes contribute not only to the risk of weakening judicial action but also to the secondary and tertiary victimisation of women.

Here we present the main results of the analysis of a vast database of Italian newspaper articles on gender-based violence published between the years 2020 and 2023. As we will see, we have analysed 16 newspapers, selected for their circulation at a national level. The idea is based on the outcome of a previous pioneering research project funded on call by the Italian Department of Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, always coordinated at a national level by Flaminia Saccà, in partnership with Differenza Donna, the Italian association that manages the public utility number 1522, supporting women who suffer male violence.

At the time, the research group had analysed over 16.000 newspaper articles and 282 court sentences, realising how stereotypes and prejudices were affecting women's right to be recognised as victims even when they had been killed. The most striking result was the endemic tendency to re-victimise women and to minimise male responsibilities for their crimes. We found this tendency both in the courts and in the press, realising that the patriarchal culture beneath this type of representation of male violence against women was being reproduced

by the press of all political orientations and was to be found in court, even when the law should have implied a different code of conduct.

After that first round of analysis, which lasted three years (2017-2019), the research team decided to continue monitoring the cultural representation of male violence against women, wrote two more research projects (PRIN2020, whose results are presented here and a PRIN2022 PNRR coordinated by Rosalba Belmonte at Tuscia University), and launched the STEP Observatory, a national and independent Observatory on the social representation of male violence against women in the media. Coordinated by Flaminia Saccà, it was born from a non-onerous agreement of scientific collaboration between the Department of Psychology of Development and Socialization Processes of the Sapienza University of Rome and the Equal Opportunities Commission (CPO) of the National Federation of the Press, the Equal Opportunities Commission (CPO) of the National Council of the Order of Journalists, the Equal Opportunities Commission (CPO) of USIGRAI, GiULiA (Giornaliste Unite Libere Autonome), the Department of Economics, Engineering, Society and Business (DEIM) of the University of Tuscia.

The STEP Observatory aims to implement actions to promote gender equality that support a correct, respectful and inclusive social and media representation of gender-based violence, and the data presented here is an integral part of the Observatory's work.

1.2. Violence against women: an overview

Thirty years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Gender Equality (1995), power asymmetries between men and women remain a critical issue that, among other consequences, expose women to gender-based violence (GBV). More specifically, violence against women is defined by the Istanbul Convention as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (Council of Europe, 2011) and it is recognized as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men [...] and one of the social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men" (*ibidem*).

Such a definition highlights the social and structural roots of this pervasive and worldwide spread phenomenon and the unequal power relations

between genders that underlie it. In this regard, the social norms, the institutional practices and the cultural representations contribute to the reproduction of male dominance (Connell, 1987) and violence against women must be understood as a manifestation of enduring systemic inequalities, that originates from patriarchal culture rooted in the structural gender domination and in the normative construction of gender roles (Hunnicutt, 2009; Connell, 2013; WeWorld Onlus, 2021; Bianchi, Cuevas, 2024).

Overall, although data are not always readily accessible and are likely underestimated, we know for sure that male violence against women is a widespread phenomenon. According to a 2021 World Health Organization's survey, globally, about one in three women aged 15 years or older has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner at least once in her lifetime (WHO, 2021). This prevalence highlights how such offences "remain pervasive in the lives of women and adolescent girls across the globe" (WHO, 2021, p. IX).

In Italy, the situation reflects this general trends. The latest available data released by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2014³ indicates that 31.5% of women aged between 16 and 70 have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime (ISTAT, 2014) while in 2023 out of 117 homicides of women, 63 were committed within an intimate relationship, by a current or former partner, 31 women were killed by a family member and two by a general acquaintance with "motives rooted in passion", as ISTAT defines them. Altogether, these cases account for 96 (83%) suspected feminicides (ISTAT, 2023).

Such data, though fragmentary, reflect the multifaceted nature of violence against women that can take many and often overlapping forms. Among these, domestic violence is the most pervasive globally (WHO, 2021) and it refers to the violence perpetrated "within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners⁴, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim" (Istanbul Convention, 2011, art. 3). It encompasses various types of abuse, including physical, sexual, economic and psychological violence.

³ According to ISTAT website, updated data are expected to be released in November 2025: <https://www.istat.it/statistiche-per-temi/focus/violenza-sulle-donne/il-fenomeno/violenza-dentro-e-fuori-la-famiglia/il-numero-delle-vittime-e-le-forme-di-violenza/>

⁴ When the violence is perpetrated by the current/former spouse or partner it is commonly referred to as *Intimate Partner Violence* o IPV.

Physical violence is one of the most visible expressions of GBV and it involves actions such as slapping, choking or burning that often occur within the context of intimate relationships. Equally prevalent is sexual violence, defined as “any sort of harmful or unwanted sexual behavior” (UN WOMEN, 2024), that can range from coerced sexual acts to rape and sexual harassment. Less frequently recognized in public discourse, yet equally widespread, are economic and psychological violence. The former involves denying women access to financial resources, property, the labor market and education while the latter refers to emotional abuse and controlling behavior (such as isolating the woman by preventing her from seeing family/friends, monitoring her social interactions, insulting and humiliating her in public) that tend to erode the victim’s autonomy (*ibidem*).

Furthermore, stalking is characterized by a pattern of persistent and unwanted attention, frequently perpetrated by current or former partners (Logan, Walker, 2017). It includes repeatedly calling/messaging, showing up, threats, and/or following that have an impact on the victims’ life in terms of fear or concern for safety to the extent that their daily habits and routines are significantly affected (Nicol, 2006; Logan, Walker, 2017).

More recently, another form of violence has gained prominence due to its entanglement with digital technologies: non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, commonly referred to (although wrongly, for it entails some sort of plausible reason for revenge) as *revenge porn*. It involves the publication or dissemination of private, sexually explicit content without the express consent of the woman depicted in the image or video. Again, this form of violence is often acted by former partners (McGlynn *et al.*, 2017) with the aim of publicly humiliating the woman.

Finally, femicide represents the most extreme form of violence as it means the killing of women or girls because they are female. Even though in most of the countries femicide still does not constitute a specific kind of crime, in Italy a bill has been recently approved to formally introduce the crime of femicide into the Penal Code⁵.

⁵ The document is available at this link: <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/442258.pdf>

1.3. The representation of gender-based violence in news media

Alongside the institutional recognition of gender-based violence as a violation of human rights, the issue, over the past two decades and partly due to awareness campaigns and global activism movements such as #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos, has gained significant visibility in the public sphere and media landscape (Belluati, Tirocchi, 2021; Belmonte, Negri, 2021; Belmonte, Selva, 2021; Saccà, 2021a; Bianchi, Cuevas, 2024). The way media, and news media in particular, represent gender-based violence play a crucial role in how people understand and interpret the phenomenon because, as a major source of information and vehicle of social representations, they have “the power to reinforce beliefs and shape public opinion by using particular definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Aldrete, Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023, p. 2).

In this regard, one of the most relevant theoretical frameworks for the analysis of how media contribute to constructing social phenomena, including GBV, is represented by the mechanism of *framing* (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) through which certain aspects of a perceived reality are selected and made more salient in communication, promoting specific perceptions and interpretations. Indeed, by emphasising particular narratives while omitting others, media framing can amplify specific viewpoints and downplay alternative perspectives (Taccini, Mannarini, 2025). News media select, organize, and assign meaning to information – thus, to the collective experience of events – by presenting facts within frames that function not only as narrative devices but also as cognitive tools that influence public opinion and conceptualization of the problem, political debate, and institutional response (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993; Giomi, 2019; Sorice, 2020; Saccà, 2021b). In other words, to what extent and how the press covers violence against women contributes to constructing our collective imaginary, shaping public opinion and, ultimately, including or excluding certain topics from the political agenda.

However, an extensive body of literature has shown that the press often adopts stereotypical and biased frames, resulting in distorted and partial representation of violence against women, both at international and national level. These narrative patterns appear to partially transcend geographical boundaries and the specific media system: a wide range of studies, conducted in different countries (Europe: e.g.

Cullen *et al.*, 2019; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b; Balica *et al.*, 2022; Meltzer, 2023; North and South America: e.g. Richards *et al.*, 2011; Fernández López, 2017; Ravelo Blancas, 2017; Aldrete, Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023; Slakoff, 2023; Australia: e.g. Hart, Gilbertson, 2018; Sutherlan *et al.*, 2019; Karageorgos *et al.*, 2024), have converged on similar conclusions. In the Italian context, recently, the research project “*STEP – Stereotypes and prejudice. Toward a cultural change in gender representation in judicial, law enforcement and media narrative*”⁶ has analyzed more than 16.000 national newspaper’s articles and almost 300 court judgements on gender-based crimes between 2017 and 2019 in order to explore stereotypes and prejudices related to GBV (Saccà, 2021a, 2024b).

The findings confirm general trends as acts of violence – especially intimate partner violence (Aldrete, Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023) – are typically portrayed by the press as isolated and singular events (Sela-Shayovitz, 2018), framed within the private sphere (Giomi, 2015; Brancato, 2018; Belluati, 2021; Belmonte, 2021; Saccà, Belmonte, 2022), concerning only the two individuals involved: the man who commits the crime and the woman who suffers it. In this *episodic framing* (Gross, 2008), which is considered more emotionally engaging (Taccini, Mannarini, 2025), there is little to no reference to the broader socio-cultural context, the political significance and the patriarchal structures in which such violence is embedded (Magaraggia, 2018; Sutherland *et al.*, 2019; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b; Aldrete, Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023).

In this context, especially femicide, which receives broader media coverage compared to other forms of violence (Hart, Gilbertson, 2018; Cullen *et al.*, 2019; Sutherland *et al.*, 2019; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b; Karageorgos *et al.*, 2024), is frequently framed through sensationalist and emotional lenses (e.g. “crime of passion”) that obscure the power dynamics underpinning the violence (Taylor, 2009) meanwhile domestic violence is underrepresented despite being the most common form of violence against women (Saccà, 2021a; Wong, Lee, 2021; Meltzer, 2023) and is often portrayed as a mere “family dispute”. This framing reinforces the idea that, to a certain extent, domestic violence is somewhat to be expected within a couple’s relationship, and, thus, it tends to be normalized and tolerated (Belmonte, Negri, 2021). In other words, if domestic

⁶ The research project “STEP”, coordinated by Professor Flaminia Saccà, has been led by Tuscia University in cooperation with the NGO “Differenza Donna” and with the support of Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministries –Department for Equal Opportunities.

violence does not result in its extreme form (femicide), it tends to be underreported by news media, because newsworthiness seems to be determined “on the brutality of the crime perpetrated or the presence of extravagant details in the story. Newspapers, indeed, tend to focus on those events that break the everyday social life, thus becoming worthy of collective attention” (Belmonte, Negri, 2021, p. 55).

Moreover, victims of violence are subjected to a process of *victim blaming*, as journalistic narratives tend to employ stereotypical narratives that focus on the victim’s behaviour and characteristics, suggesting that they might have somehow provoked the perpetrator (Karageorgos *et al.*, 2024). In doing so, women are represented as, at least partially, co-responsible for the event suffered (Fernández López, 2017; Ravelo Blancas, 2017; Aldrete, Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023), violent men are implicitly exonerated and the violent act is depicted as a reaction to the victims conduct deemed – explicitly or implicitly – as inappropriate (Monckton-Smith, 2012; Gius, Lalli, 2014; Lindsay-Brisbin *et al.*, 2014; Abis, Orrù, 2016; Busso *et al.*, 2020; Niccolini, 2020; Hewa, 2021; Lalli, 2021; Saccà, 2021a, 2024b).

The blaming of the woman is often accompanied by a deresponsibilization of the offender (Romito, 2008; Monckton-Smith, 2012; Gius, Lalli, 2014; Stella *et al.*, 2021; Saccà, 2021b, 2024b; Bianchi, Cuevas, 2024), which is evident in the depiction of the violent man as a deviant subject, by focusing, for instance, on the fact that he is a drug addicted or alcoholic. In this way, as shown by Karageorgos and colleagues (2024), media “decenter the domestic violence committed by these types of men and replace it with another crime, thus reducing the perceived importance of domestic violence offenses” (p.2151), leading to “criminalize the perpetrator for reasons other than their violence toward women” (*ivi*). Furthermore, presenting mental illness as the cause of the crime is another mechanism used to frame the violent man within a pathological context in which any references to societal issues of GBV are absent (Little, 2015; Karageorgos *et al.*, 2024).

Hand in hand with this, the literature has repeatedly highlighted the tendency of representing violence as a consequence of “too much love” – that leads to a romanticization of the violence – “jealousy” – that often implies that the woman did something to provoke the man’s jealousy – and/or a “raptus” (or its equivalents such as an “outburst of rage”). The last trope, in particular, is one of the most pervasive and problematic biases in news media narratives because it frames the

violent act as an unpredictable outcome of a sudden loss of control and emotional instability, due to which the man cannot be considered completely guilty for the crime committed (Abis, Orrù, 2016; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b, 2024b).

Another common practice is that of dehumanising the perpetrator by defining him as a “monster” or a “beast”. Again, this narrative strategy tends to highlight the exceptional nature of the violence because it reinforces the idea that such crimes are committed mostly by pathological individuals, diverting attention from the gendered dimension and its social structure (Belmonte, Negri, 2021; Saccà, 2021a; Karageorgos *et al.*, 2024).

Alongside these representations, press often employs discursive strategies that philosopher Kate Manne has defined of “Himpathy” (Manne, 2018, 2020) – a crasis of the words “empathy” and “him” – because they tend to subtract empathy from the victim in order to direct at least some of it toward her offender. In other words, media narratives tend to humanize the author of the violence, focusing on his emotions, suffering and background while the victim’s experience and perspective remain marginal and overshadowed. These “exonerating narratives that hyper privileged men tend to be the beneficiaries of” (Manne, 2018, p. 23) may lead readers to empathise more with who committed the crime (the man) than with who suffered it (the woman), reflecting the unequal power relations between genders. Hence, the excessive sympathy “both owes to and contributes to a tendency to let historically dominant agents get away with murder – proverbially and otherwise – vis-à-vis their historical subordinates. In the case of male dominance, we sympathize with him first, effectively making him into the victim of his own crimes” (Manne, 2018, p. 201).

1.4. Method

Thanks to the PRIN2020 (years 2020-2023) and PRIN2022 (years 2024-2025) projects, the STEP Observatory analyses how the leading Italian newspapers represent the following gender-based violence crimes: Domestic violence/family abuse; Murder of women/femicide; Stalking/persecutory acts; Sexual violence; Trafficking/enslavement.

Here we focus on the PRIN2020 analysis of news articles, leaving for future publications the analysis of political or cultural articles on the matter. This work has involved 16 national newspapers: *La Nazione*; *Il*

Giorno; Il Messaggero; Corriere della Sera; La Repubblica; Il Gazzettino; Il Tirreno; Corriere Adriatico; Il Mattino; Il Giornale; La Stampa; Avvenire; Il Fatto Quotidiano; La Sentinella del Canavese; Il Sole 24 Ore; Il Manifesto.

Through four years, 2020-2021-2022-2023, we have collected and analysed 28332 news articles.

Given the remarkable amount of data, human content analysis was obviously to be discarded. Consequently, we decided to turn to a software company specialising in news media, which tailored a bright new software for our project. After a few months of fine-tuning, the software has proven effective in achieving the aims of the research, although some of the more qualitative domains remain to be further proof-checked in order to be considered up to standards.

We have also decided to add human content analysis to some specific focuses for a more in-depth work on the biases contained in the news. Specifically, we examined the journalistic narratives of violence against ill and/or elderly women, as well as the media representations of cases in which the perpetrator is identified with the victim's father or stepfather.

The research group counted on four sociologists specialised in gender issues from a political and a communication theoretical background (Flaminia Saccà, full professor at Tuscia at first and then at Sapienza University, Luca Massidda, associate professor at Tuscia University, Rosalba Belmonte, Researcher at Tuscia University, Maddalena Carbonari, post-doc at Sapienza University), one sociologist specialised in methodology (Michele Negri, associate professor at Tuscia first and now at IUL), one linguist (Fabrizia Giuliani, senior researcher at Sapienza University) and one senior journalist (Mimma Caligaris).

Here we present a synthesis of the main data monitored between 2020 and 2023, extrapolated and analysed by Flaminia Saccà and Maddalena Carbonari.

1.5. Before and After Giulia Cecchettin. Press Coverage of Male Violence Against Women in Italy

Male violence against women has not always been considered big news in Italy. Through the years, only the most dramatic cases of the murder of women have made the news. We call them femicides, but

femicide is not a recognized crime yet in Italy, so police records keep on registering them as the murder of women by men. Thanks to feminist battles in civic society, in workplaces and in the political sphere, the issue has started to gain recognisability and visibility in recent years. Indeed, efforts to combat violence against women in Italy have progressively evolved, particularly since the last decades of the twentieth century, through the introduction of specific legal instruments and broader reforms of Italian criminal law, such as the introduction of Law No.69/2019, commonly referred to as *Red Code*⁷, that has increased the penalties for existing offences (i.e. stalking) and introduced new crimes, including “Non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit images or videos” or “Revenge porn”.

Furthermore, a new bill is currently under discussion in the Italian Parliament to introduce femicide as a standalone criminal offence, with the aim of specifically recognising the killing of a *woman because she is a woman*.

The introduction of these new rules has contributed to the rise of the problem. Naming things, codifying them and defining them finally make things more visible. Even if they have always been there. But we couldn't see them until we'd named them. We don't think there is a new emergency about male violence against women. The data show that the numbers are stable and actually slightly decreasing (ISTAT, 2014, 2023; Department of Public Security, 2024). The new thing is that gender-based violence is finally drawing more attention. It has become a subject of public debate.

We will see that there has recently been a remarkable increase in the number of articles at a national level. And that this clear difference is recorded in conjunction with a femicide that has had a great echo throughout the Country. That of Giulia Cecchettin. A brilliant university student. A beloved daughter and sister. A kind and compassionate young woman, brutally kidnapped and killed by her ex-boyfriend, who could not stand the fact that she was about to graduate, whereas he was struggling behind. That she was blossoming while he felt he was losing ground without her.

Italy seems to have finally realised what femicide is when it was forced to face the brutality of men when it has exploded against what we

⁷ The document is available at this link: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/07/25/19G00076/sg>

may call the “perfect” victim. Nobody could fault Giulia Cecchettin of anything. This victim could not be victimized nor blamed for what Filippo Turetta had done to her and for the first time men have started questioning in public if the “not all man” argument was somewhat missing the point, for men’s privileged position might have been the background of these frequent aggressions towards women, “even when they have done nothing to deserve it” seemed to be the untold thought⁸. As argued by Michele Serra, a well-known journalist and writer, in one of the very first articles to have ever called men to step in and take responsibility for men’s violence against women or at least to start questioning it:

given that the problem of male violence is evidently a male issue, and that it has been women’s cultural and political work, over the decades, that has called the entire framework into question – destabilizing roles and unmasking identities – the question we, as men, must ask ourselves now is whether to continue to consider ourselves condemned by DNA, or whether to attempt a reformulation of ‘maschiness’ (I deliberately avoid ‘masculinity’) in new, more civil and compassionate forms⁹.

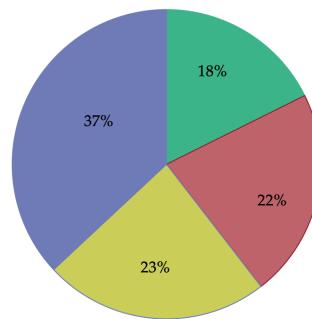
If we look at the data, we can see that between the years 2020-2022, there is a slight but steady increase in the number of articles on male violence against women published in Italy. But if we look at the year 2023, the year when Giulia Cecchettin’s femicide occurred, we can see that the number of articles has more than doubled compared to 2020, going from a total of 5006 in 2020 to an outstanding total of 10464 in 2023 (graph 1.1.), representing 37% of the total articles in our entire database.

They are not the largest, widely spread and well-established newspapers at a national level that cover the issue the most. Quite the contrary, male violence against women is mainly covered by local newspapers. *La Nazione*, a Florentine newspaper with a national distribution but mainly read within the Tuscany region, is first, with 17.4% of the articles, followed by *Il Giorno* (13.9%), a daily newspaper from Milan, with local editions in the main provinces of Lombardy. Together with *La Nazione* from Florence, *Il Resto del Carlino* from Bologna, and *Il*

⁸ https://www.repubblica.it/dossier/cronaca/25-novembre/2023/11/24/news/maschi_femmine_patriarcato_discriminazione_genere-421168659/

⁹ The translation was made by the authors. The original Italian text can be found at this link: https://www.repubblica.it/dossier/cronaca/25-novembre/2023/11/24/news/maschi_femmine_patriarcato_discriminazione_genere-421168659/

■ year 2020 ■ year 2021 ■ year 2022 ■ year 2023



Graph. 1.1. Press Coverage of Male Violence Against Women in Italy (Years 2020-2023)

Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention

Telegrafo from Livorno, it is part of the network that bears the name of QN Quotidiano Nazionale and is published by Editoriale Nazionale s.r.l. In third place, we find Il Messaggero (11.2%), another daily newspaper based in Rome. It is the eighth Italian daily newspaper by circulation and the most sold in the capital. The first national newspaper, Corriere della Sera (11.1%), is only fourth in our ranking; La Repubblica, the second national daily newspaper by circulation, is in fifth place with only 7.7% of the total articles dedicated to male violence against women. A rather surprising ranking position given the progressive approach that has historically characterized the newspaper.

NEWSPAPER	ARTICLES A.V.	ARTICLES %
La Nazione	4937	17,4%
Il Giorno	3943	13,9%
Il Messaggero	3175	11,2%
Corriere della Sera	3144	11,1%
La Repubblica	2179	7,7%
Il Gazzettino	1905	6,7%
Il Tirreno	1889	6,7%
Corriere Adriatico	1594	5,6%
Il Mattino	1498	5,3%
Il Giornale	1091	3,9%

NEWSPAPER	ARTICLES A.V.	ARTICLES %
La Stampa	942	3,3%
Avvenire	917	3,2%
Il Fatto Quotidiano	468	1,7%
La Sentinella del Canavese	334	1,2%
Il Sole 24 Ore	167	0,6%
Il Manifesto	149	0,5%
Total	28332	100,0%

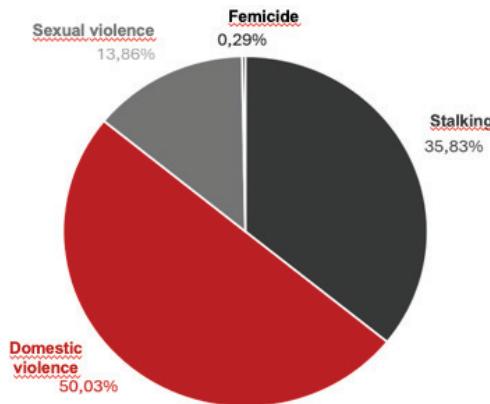
Table 1.1. Press Coverage of Male Violence Against Women in Italy (Years 2020-2023)
 Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention

1.6. Which crime hits the news? Reality vs. social representation

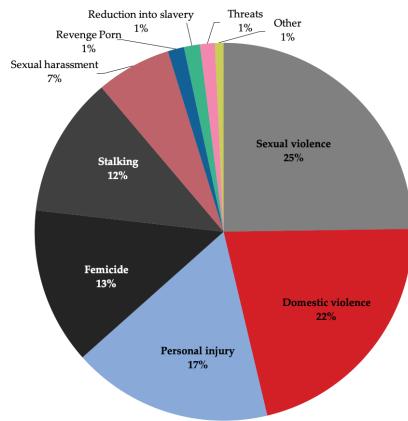
Newspapers and the media system contribute to the formation of public opinion. As a whole, they contribute to the reinforcement of our value system or indeed to its changes and on how we perceive the world we live in. In this case, they contribute to how male violence against women is perceived and interpreted by the Italian population and by its decision makers.

So it was important for our project to firstly detect if the way newspapers depicted gender crimes corresponded to the actual reality as crystallised by the reports of the Public Security Department of the Police. Of course, it is not up to the newspapers to register and keep count of the crimes, but the way they represent them affects us and has an impact on how we look at the phenomenon as a whole.

As we can see, in Italy, the vast majority of cases of male violence against women are represented by cases of domestic violence. To be more precise, half of all the cases (50.03%) of violence are represented by *domestic violence*, that means that violence is primarily perpetrated by a man who knows the victim very well: her partner/husband or ex. These cases are followed by cases of *stalking* (35.83%), *sexual violence* (13.86%) and *femicide* (0.29%) (graph. 1.2.). But if we look at how the press represents male violence against women, we find that the first type of gender crime represented in Italian newspapers is *sexual violence* (25%), followed by *domestic violence* (22%), *personal injury* (17%), *femicide* (13%) and *stalking* (12%) (graph. 1.3.).

**Graph. 1.2. Gender Crimes in Italy Registered by the Italian Police (year 2020-2023)**

Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention

**Graph. 1.3. The Social Representation of Gender Crimes in Italy According to the Press**

Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention

Furthermore, if we look more closely at this data, we find that most of the time, domestic violence is only cited in connection with other crimes. As if it alone wasn't worthy of attention. As if it wasn't serious enough. An underestimation of what in fact constitutes the main and most widespread problem of violence against women, which could lead readers to think that, after all, domestic violence is not really a crime, a misdemeanor, and may be that a certain degree of domestic violence, within a couple, is somewhat to be expected. It is somehow normal.

This is not new. In the first STEP Project, we monitored Italian newspaper articles on male violence against women from 2017 to 2019, and we found that only 14% of them were related to domestic violence (Saccà, 2021a, 2024b).

This under-representation makes domestic violence less visible, withdrawing it from the public agenda and from political debate. It is no wonder that when Flaminia Saccà and Rosalba Belmonte (2021) interviewed women from different backgrounds who suffered domestic violence as part of the first STEP Project, they all reported that it took them years, sometimes decades, to realize that what they were suffering was in effect a crime from which they had every right to escape.

Since domestic violence seems to be so widely normalised, even close relationships, from family members to neighbours to colleagues at work, seemed incapable of understanding and accepting that those women needed help to escape those abuses.

So, we decided to spend the following three years denouncing this underrepresentation by the media on many occasions, especially during the many training seminars for journalists organised throughout the Country as “Osservatorio STEP Ricerca e Informazione”, together with the professional associations, like Ordine dei giornalisti, Federazione Nazionale della Stampa, USIGRAI and GiULiA giornaliste and as we can see from the most recent data, things seem to have begun to improve slightly.

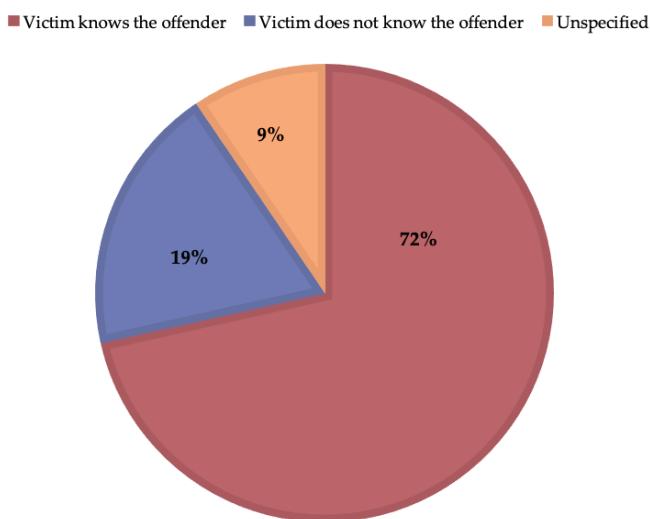
1.7. The relationship between the victim and the offender

In fact, there are some interesting, slightly positive trends that need to be acknowledged. Although, as we have just seen, we have registered low percentages of articles addressing the most widely spread gender-based violence crime in Italy, and although right-wing and populist leaders have tailored a narrative that presents illegal immigrants as the main threat to Italian women (Saccà, Massida, 2018b; Meo, Tramontano, 2024), we can also see how, according to the vast majority of Italian newspaper articles, the victims of male violence against women actually know their offender. And if we take a closer look at those articles, we realise that their relationship is actually quite a strong one. So even if domestic violence is only marginally cited by less than a quarter of the articles, almost two thirds (72%,

20259 cases) of the total articles published between 2020 and 2023 report that the woman knows her offender (graph. 1.4.). Amongst those, a high percentage (68.5%) entails some sort of domestic violence coming from her partner/husband/ex or family member: i.e. even if the article doesn't mention domestic violence, the vast majority of the crimes committed (be it a femicide, stalking or rape) and reported by the press come from the woman's intimate or family circle. Followed by general acquaintances (17.8%), work-related relationships (4.6%), educational figure (2.6%), medical figure (2%), classmate (2%), neighbour (2%) (graph 1.5).

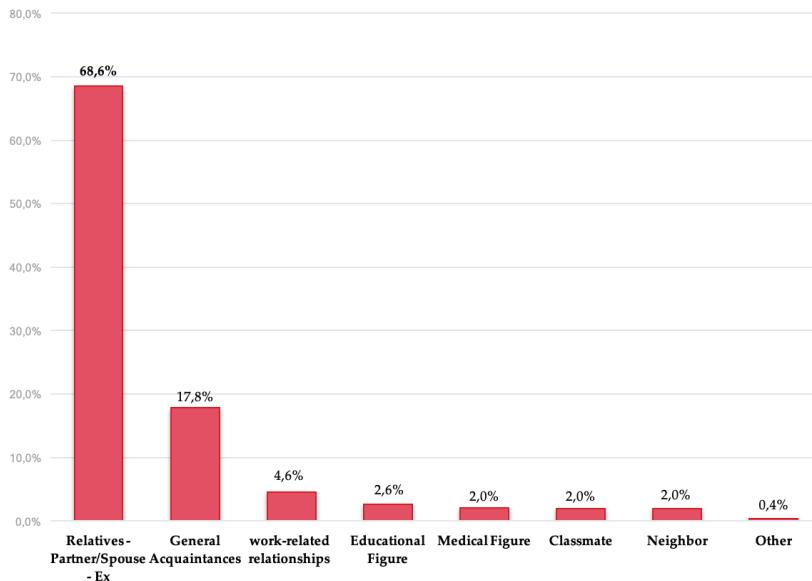
It is interesting to note, that maybe counterintuitively, when we are talking about violence against women in the work places, it is more often a current or former colleague to have committed the crime (60% of the cases) rather than the current or former employer (40%) demonstrating once again that a man doesn't need to be a woman's boss in order to exercise his power on her. Being a man – and her peer at work – is already enough.

To be more specific, in those articles, when the woman knows her offender and the relationship is (or was) a close one (intimate/family)

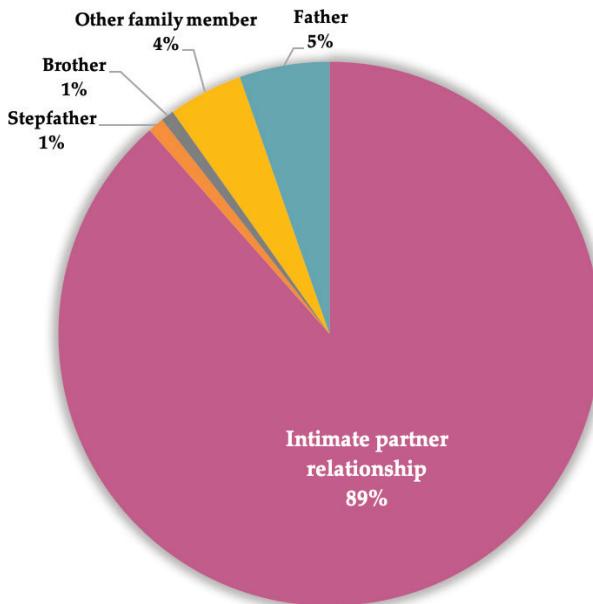


Graph. 1.4. Does the Victim Know the Offender?

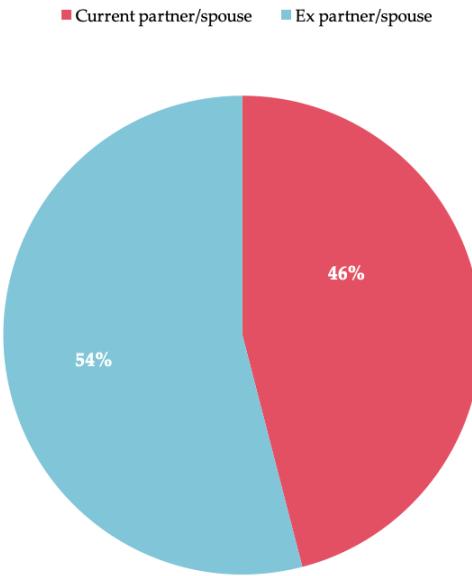
Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention



Graph. 1.5. Type of Relationship Between the Woman Victim and the Male Offender
 Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention



Graph. 1.6. The Various Faces of Domestic/Intimate Partner Violence
 Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention



Graph. 1.7. It Is Mainly the Ex

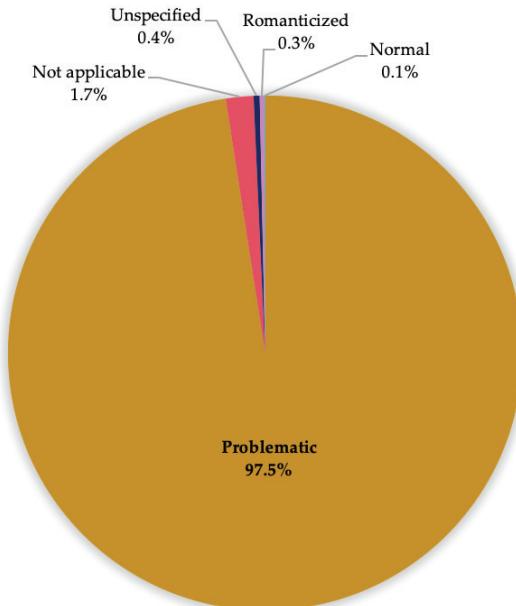
Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention

then we can see that in the vast majority of cases it is perpetrated by a man with whom the woman is or has been in an intimate partner relationship (89%) (graph. 1.6.). Not only that. Family, in general, even her own family of origin, may also represent a threat. In 5% of the articles, we find that it is the father who has perpetrated violence against the woman, in 4% it is another family member, in 1% it is the stepfather, and in another 1% it is the brother.

According to Italian articles, it is mostly the ex (54%) who perpetrates violence, and the ex-partner more frequently than the ex-husband (ex-partner in 5031 cases and ex-spouse in 1612) (graph 1.7).

1.8. Framing male violence against women

In those cases in which the victim is or was in an intimate relationship with the offender (89%), the relationship is largely framed as problematic (97.5% of the cases). The relationship is romanticised only in a very limited number of articles (0.3%) (graph 1.8), and this seems to be an improvement in comparison to the past years (Saccà, 2021a, 2024b; Belmonte, 2021).



Graph. 1.8. Framing the Relationship

Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN2020 Stereotype and Prejudice: The Social Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Counterstrategies Ten Years After the Istanbul Convention

Nonetheless, social stigma is hard to find and “love” or “jealousy” can still appear as the excuse given by the offender in the attempt to justify his actions. We note that often newspapers will simply report his words (or those of a relative or of his lawyer), without framing them as problematic or without taking a clear distance from this type of narration.

In the example that follows, we can see how the rape of a nine years old child by a fifty-five year old man fails to be stigmatized as a case of paedophilia while his ongoing abuse is actually merely framed as a “pseudo-friendship”. The article reports his justifications: “I fell in love”, “I loved her”, thus transforming and normalizing one of the most heinous crimes into an acceptable and positive relationship, for, according to his words that the article doesn’t criticize, he meant no harm, he actually showed affection towards her:

“**I fell in love with her**». Eight years in prison for abusing the minor daughter of a couple of acquaintances. This is the sentence handed down by preliminary hearing judge Giulia Costantino to a fifty-five-year-old from Brescia (9 years was the request of prosecutor Gianluca

Grippo) accused of aggravated sexual violence against a girl of just nine years old. «I fell in love» justified the defendant, who never attempted to deny the charges [...] The meetings continued for years until the victim, thirteen years old, confided in a cousin a few years older about her pseudo-friendship with the adult. Alarmed, the girl ran to tell everything to her aunt, the mother of the very young girl, who checked her phone, and the tragic truth emerged. «I loved her», the justification.”

Il Giorno, 2021

In this other article, the romanticisation is the result of the journalist's stylistic choice. The brutal femicide by the husband thus disappears, crushed by the narrative of the woman's employer and the space granted to him uncritically by the journalist. The victim's boss describes the killer as a nostalgic, calm, creative painter.

“«I never knew of arguments between them, of disagreements. Elena had been working as a housekeeper in our house for about six years now: she never mentioned any problems with her husband. They were enchanting together, I can't understand how he managed to transform himself into such a ferocious beast». These are the words of the man who had hired Elena Madalina Luminita, 32, the woman killed by her husband Adrian Luminita on the night between Sunday and Monday, to give a sense of how the femicide of Pescia Fiorentina is inconceivable for anyone who knew that couple. He painted, he described the Maremma with its colours, he remembered the mountain landscapes of Romania, the ones he had carried in his heart ever since he came to Italy in search of work. He painted also his wife, Madalina: he sat in the large garden of Villa Tonci, in Via della Speranza, and abandoned himself to his imagination and creativity”

Il Tirreno, 2020

The admiration for the killer goes on. The article goes as far as letting the victim's employer describe the man who brutally killed his wife as well-mannered:

“«He also knew how to play some instruments – says the woman's employer – We have always found him very kind and polite [...]» No one, among the people close to the couple, could have even remotely imagined such an epilogue. Probably until a few days ago, there had been no reason for conflict between the two. At least, neither Adrian nor Madalina had spoken of problems that could concern their marriage.

Perhaps the thirty-eight-year-old had expressed the intention of resigning and returning to live in Romania where the couple had been for a month, last summer. «If that were the case, I imagine that Madalina opposed – says the owner of the house where the woman worked – But a reaction like that is unimaginable anyway, especially for a man like him» [...]"

Il Tirreno, 2020

Can we imagine the same type of rhetoric applied to any other type of killing? A mafia mob that kills the victim of his extortion? A terrorist who let himself explode in a crowded street? A thief who kills somebody while trying to steal their possessions? Would any of these types of killers be represented as kind, compassionate and loving?

Romanticism is also evoked when the femicide is represented as “desperate” after he killed his wife/partner/ex. We often find some kind of empathy expressed towards these men who are depicted as “heartbroken” and exposed to the danger of committing suicide.

1.9. **Himpathy. Empathy for the offender**

Through the years, we have registered what philosopher Kate Manne called *himpathy* (Manne, 2018, 2020), the empathy withdrawn from the woman victim and redirected to the man who committed a crime against her. This is typical of gender crimes, more specifically of men’s violence against women. In no other type of crime does the criminal benefit from empathy, justification and deep understanding at the expense of the victim. In any other type of crime, solidarity goes straight to the latter. The reason why men’s violence represents an exception is that we still live in a patriarchal society, although we don’t like to admit it. Power, in all sectors of society – economy, politics, culture – is still held in the hands of men. If we look at the latest Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum¹⁰, we find that in its effort towards parity, Italy is as low as 87th in the world, out of a total of 146 Countries analysed. And things can get worse as years go by. In fact, if we look at the previous years, Italy was 79th in 2023 and 63rd in 2022.

¹⁰ The document is available at this link: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>

Asymmetries in power have many different consequences and outcomes. One of those is the asymmetry with which we look at facts, whether they involve men and women. In fact, when asymmetries are consolidated and crystallised, we have difficulties in discerning facts from ideology, culture and partial interpretation (Belmonte, 2024; Saccà, 2024b).

When it comes to male violence against women, we register that the press and even the judiciary system find it hard to recognise the rights of women to be considered as victims. And it is more difficult for men to be recognized and treated as culprits. Although the level of himpathy may vary according to the type of victim. If she is a young woman or a teenager, if she is the daughter or stepdaughter of the abuser, then her case will be narrated more correctly, and the man's responsibilities will be more easily recognised. Whereas if the victim is a sick, elderly or disabled woman, then the man's crime against her will be more tolerated, justified and misinterpreted, and empathy towards him will be displayed without reluctance, as we can see in the following, vivid examples.

“He Killed His Wife, Now He’s in Hospice: «I Wanted to Die With Her»

The tragic path of the 87-year-old who ended the life of his lifelong partner and is now battling illness. «She had Alzheimer’s – who would have taken care of her?» The hospice director: «It is a tragedy that comes from abandonment.»

Florence, July 25, 2022 – «I feel guilty for what I did. But I wanted to die with her.» Those were the first words he uttered to the healthcare workers who welcomed him at the Hospice on Via delle Oblate, a palliative care facility for terminal patients. Words he repeats over and over, unable to find peace. Despair, yes. But also **loneliness, illness, and love**. Yes, he killed his wife. In a particularly brutal act: he slit her throat. It happened two weeks ago. He then tried, with full intent, to turn that same macabre gesture on himself. But he failed. And yet, listening to this man – what the law calls a murderer – the first word that comes to mind is **love**. Despite everything. A gesture of love and death. [...]”

La Nazione, 2022

Of course, the cases of impaired or sick elderly should be treated carefully. Desperation can be understood, especially when the family/spouse is left alone to cope with them. Nonetheless, we register that this news tends to involve femicides, the killing of women, not of men. We hardly ever find news of older women so desperate or tired as to kill their elderly life partner because he is no longer independent.

Pressure on women to maintain their caring roles even when they are old and tired is still too strong for them to be treated as men are in such cases. So, a man who has killed his old wife with Alzheimer's is described as "desperate" and "in love", whereas it would be difficult to imagine the same framing of the killing if the roles were reversed.

In the following article, we can see a choral example of social acceptance and understanding of such crimes. We are immediately informed about the fact that the femicide has no intention of escaping his responsibilities. He wants to stay in prison, where his fellow inmates not only understand his drama but also go as far as to comfort him. The article assumes the perspective of the 74-year-old man who has killed his wife by empathising with him, giving him a voice, although through the words of his lawyer. The journalist even interprets the facts, giving his own version of the story, stating that the man has killed his wife at the "height of despair" for she was "reduced to no longer being self-sufficient after a stroke". As if a non-self-sufficient person was not worthy of living. And this is simply stated like that, *en passant*, as if it were obvious. In a catholic Country like Italy, which prohibits and morally condemns even euthanasia.

"Sergio De Zen has no intention of asking to be allowed to leave prison. The 74-year-old from Maser wants to pay for killing his wife, 77-year-old Manuela Bittante, with a stab wound to the abdomen. And he has found comfort from his fellow inmates: «**They have understood my drama,**» he confided to his lawyer, attorney Sabrina Dei Rossi, who has asked that he be subjected to psychiatric evaluation since «there is no passionate motive, much less economic, to explain the crime. **De Zen carried out an act dictated by a moment of great suffering and desperation towards his wife, with whom he shared 50 years of life. De Zen is a mild person, who has no history of aggression or violence behind him:** such a gesture can only find an explanation in a psychological condition that is far from lucid.» As a rule, the (unwritten) prison code 'punishes' those who commit crimes against women and children, that is, those who are most defenceless. In this case, however, according to De Zen himself, the behaviour of the other inmates toward him seems almost supportive. «**They stand by me,**» he reported to his lawyer, as if to say that they understand why, at the height of a moment of despair, he chose to kill his spouse, reduced to no longer being self-sufficient after a stroke. «**I could no longer see her in that state,**» the 74-year-old had justified himself, who, after the crime, immediately called law enforcement by turning himself in and confessing to what he had committed [...]»

Same plot for the following article. An older couple, a (may-be) ill lady (the journalist seems uncertain about it), a husband represented as a desperate man who, somewhat *understandably*, finds it unbearable to take care of his non-self-sufficient wife and then goes on to kill her, receiving social empathy. For he has tried to commit suicide too.

"A last desperate act: he kills his seriously ill wife, then tries to kill himself by ingesting barbiturates. It has all the elements to be called a crime borne out of desperation [...] He has been in the hospital in Fano since last night, but his life is not in danger. Apparently the woman had been suffering from serious psychiatric disorders for some time [...] The police station officers [...] are carrying out all the necessary investigations to see if there are any motivations other than those that the family's past, undermined by the woman's illness, seems to suggest in its **heartbreaking drama [...] The man was known in Fano and the surrounding area because, for years, he had run a well-known pizzeria in Cuccurano, which was named after him, "da Angelo." A popular and busy destination, not only for locals. **Different years, those, and perhaps better ones, when still his wife's illness had not come to weigh on her husband's soul day after day [...] That burden that eventually breeds violence, for his wife and for himself, too."****

Il Giorno, 2023

In general, the author of violence does not appear as fully guilty for the crime committed because the responsibility is often shifted on the victim, as we can see in this last example, in which there is also a strong link between the concept of love and violence:

"She is a university student. He is hopelessly in love with her, but after a brief flirtation, she turns him down. In October, the proverbial last straw: **jealousy consumes him.** He cracks her university account password and threatens, «If you don't give me the money, I'll tamper with your records, sit in on your classes, and alter your exam grades» [...] Everything began with that refusal. His inability to accept her "no" made him snap. He asked to talk, though they had already spent hours on the phone while she tried to calm him down, pleading with him to stop. All in vain. **He remained obsessed with "getting something" out of the disappointment, as if monetising his feelings**

could make abandonment hurt less. [...] “I’ll set your car on fire. I’ll torch your house. I’ll leak your photos online and dump your personal data on shady websites.” Those were some of the threats from the young man, **madly in love, yet consumed by jealousy**. His jealousy manifested as possession. Sometimes he even demanded cash from his victim: a hundred, three hundred euros. Small sums she simply couldn’t pay – she spent her days and nights studying [...]”

Il Mattino, 2020

Reporting a case of stalking, the article immediately suggests that the violence was triggered by the woman’s behavior depicted as somewhat “guilty” of rejecting the advances of a man described as “hopelessly in love” with her, after a brief flirtation. This latter detail, which is unnecessary to the narrative – since a crime remains a crime regardless of the relationship existed between victim and offender –, shifts the focus from the perpetrator’s responsibility to the woman’s conduct. Even if the woman had changed her attitude, this should never be considered an extenuating circumstance or a justification for the violence.

The roles of victim and perpetrator are further blurred and confused when the woman’s refusal is framed as an “abandonment.” An act of self-determination – saying no – is reinterpreted and transformed into an abandonment, which may elicit the reader’s empathy for the aggressor and activate a re-victimising mechanism for the woman, as widely documented in the literature.

Moreover, the article repeatedly emphasises that the young man was “madly” or “hopelessly” in love, creating a strong narrative link between love and violence, in which the latter becomes a manifestation of the former. As a result, violence risks being legitimised as a dimension proper to individual relation dynamics, rather than being clearly framed as an attempt at domination and control with structural roots.

In other words, the violence is narrated as the consequence of her rejection, of having “abandoned” him, and he is therefore portrayed as overwhelmed by uncontrollable emotions such as jealousy (which is referenced twice within a few lines). In this framing, he is not entirely guilty, and she is not entirely a victim.

1.10. Conclusion

The analysis of 28,332 news articles published by 16 national newspapers has made it possible to identify the persistence of stereotypes and biases that permeate the social representation and narrative of gender-based violence in the Italian press. It also highlights both structural criticalities and emerging signs of change in comparison to previous research and to findings from the first STEP project, conducted between 2017 and 2019 (Saccà, 2021b, 2024b). Alongside increased media attention and growing public awareness, also evidenced by the introduction of new gender-related criminal offences – the most recent being the proposed law on femicide, currently under Italian parliamentary debate –, the social representation of the issue appears to be slowly evolving. Nonetheless, it remains largely partial and still inadequate to correctly frame it and fully account for the structural and systemic nature of the phenomenon.

The selection of events reported in newspapers responds to criteria of newsworthiness, which seem to be closely anchored to the spectacularization of violence – that is, to the brutality of the crime committed or to extraordinary features of the case (Belmonte, Negri, 2021). In contrast, the most pervasive form of violence – domestic violence – continues to occupy a marginal space in journalistic narratives. Although there has been a slight increase in attention compared to the past, what stands out is the persistent difficulty in explicitly naming domestic violence: in most cases analysed, the perpetrator belongs to the victim's family or her relational sphere, and the dynamics clearly fall within the definition of domestic violence. Yet the lack of an explicit label reveals an ongoing inability to frame the phenomenon at a structural level, thus contributing to its normalization – especially when it occurs within intimate relationships. Hence, violence is portrayed as a potential (if not intrinsic) dimension of romantic relationships and, as such, tends to be somehow tolerated rather than critically deconstructed.

This tendency is also highlighted by a recent survey on young people (Fondazione Libellula, 2024), which shows that abuse in romantic relationships is not always recognized as such. This is due, in part, to a problematic confusion and overlap between the concepts of love and violence, which renders the latter invisible to the eyes of victims and/or legitimized within the emotional frame of intimacy and love.

Indeed, the great absentee in the journalistic narratives remains any reference to the cultural foundations (Abis, Orrù, 2016; Saccà, 2021b, 2024b) – first and foremost, patriarchy – within which gender-based discrimination and power asymmetries between men and women are produced and reproduced, ultimately giving rise to violence. In this sense, the *episodic frame* (Gross, 2008) continues to prevail, portraying violence as a fundamentally private and individual matter rather than as a systemic and social problem in which society as a whole is implicated.

Moreover, the frames through which media narratives take shape tend to reproduce stereotypes that serve to minimize male responsibility and re-victimize women, albeit some elements of change are beginning to emerge. The press is slowly moving away from the use of the so-called “raptus” (a sudden outburst of rage) to explain or justify violent acts, but references to “jealousy” and “love” remain recurrent. Moreover we still find different ways of demonstrating empathy for the men committing crimes, and the victim’s behaviour is still under scrutiny, continuing to play a central role in the narrative, reproducing and reinforcing mechanisms of secondary victimization. These discursive strategies often result in a reversal of perspective, where the roles of victim and offender become blurred: blame is extended to the victim and/or victimhood is displaced onto the perpetrator.

In particular, there is a frequent tendency to enact strategies of Himpathy (Manne, 2018, 2020), which tend to withdraw empathy from the victim while redirecting it toward the aggressor. The perpetrator’s point of view is emphasized, giving the reader access to his emotional and psychological dimension, while the victim’s traumatic experience is rendered marginal or entirely absent. This mechanism is particularly prominent in specific types of cases. As illustrated by some of the examples discussed in this article – such as the article published by *La Nazione* on the case of the 87-year-old man who killed his wife suffering from Alzheimer’s – when the victim is ill and/or elderly, empathy is disproportionately directed toward the offender, to the point that the violent act, even in its most brutal forms, is portrayed as altruistic – “altruistic femicide”, as we define it –, a gesture supposedly aimed at relieving the woman’s suffering. In such portrayals, the victim is framed as partially responsible for her illness that has “provoked” the husband’s despair.

When it comes to the rare cases in which it is a woman who commits violence against a man, these same exonerating narratives are far less detectable, to say the least. As we can see in this recent article reporting the case of two sisters who killed their father after years of abuse, the facts are presented in a sharp manner, without omissions. The dynamics of the events are described with precision and clarity, and the roles of the people involved are unambiguously identified, making it evident for the reader who the victim is and who the offenders are. Even though the two girls who committed the crime had been themselves victims of the man's abuse, the article does not dwell on their personal experience, nor does it explore their emotional state. Instead, it adheres to a measured and linear account of the facts, avoiding any sensationalism. Thus, the discursive treatment reserved for female perpetrators seems to be quite different compared to male ones, as the sisters' violent act is not contextualised or "justified" through the lens of empathy or emotional complexity, even though the circumstances of the case had all the elements to facilitate such framing. Finally, we can see how the sisters' "reasons" for committing the crime are not directly assumed by the journalist. He doesn't write "Our father raped us" or "attempted to rape us". He specifically draws a line between their recount of the facts and the newspaper's narration: "**The two said** the father raped...". Something that we don't find often when it is a man who commits a gender crime. In these cases, his perspective is assumed and taken for granted. We find phrases such as "I was desperate", "I loved her", "I didn't want to kill her", and not as in this last example concerning two girls, "he said to be desperate", "he claimed he didn't want to harm her". Reminding us that men are still considered more credible and worthy of justification than women.

"Two sisters burn their father alive after rape: they took gasoline and set him on fire while he was asleep.

The two said the father raped the older daughter for a year and had twice attempted to rape the younger sister"

Il Messaggero, 2025

Overall, the study reveals a persisting stereotyped and partial narrative of gender-based violence within the Italian news system, where the victims are not fully acknowledged in their role and are frequently

depicted as co-responsible for the violence endured while male perpetrators are inadequately represented and frequently excused or rehabilitated through biased frames and discursive strategies of himpathy.

Finally, it is important to highlight how the femicide of Giulia Cecchettin, which occurred in November 2023 and whose dynamics made it particularly newsworthy, has come to represent a symbolic turning point. The case stimulated a collective reflection on gender dynamics and the need to deconstruct them, shifting the debate from an individual to a collective level and making the systemic nature of gender-based violence more visible. But to better assess how and to what extent the "Cecchettin case" and the resulting public discourse are contributing to transform the social representation of gender-based violence, it is necessary to refer to the analysis of the journalistic production that followed the events, in particular the articles from 2024. This analysis is currently being carried out within the framework of the STEP Observatory, and more specifically through the research project STEP-SISTER (PRIN 2022 PNRR), whose data are currently being processed and will be published in the next few months.

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