
Female violence in Italy. An emerging discourse of heterosexuality.

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Abstract

The phenomenon of female violence perpetrated by women (so forth female violence) is acknowledged in criminology and family studies and it is also discussed in cultural studies as a stereotypical monstrous and erotic representation of deviant women. However, it remains a neglected topic in any public discourse of ordinary domestic and partner violence. In Italy, a new discourse on female ordinary violence in heterosexual context is emerging from a heterogeneous social movement. Through interviews with men's right, shared parenting and divorced father activists, family violence professionals, and opinion makers, main features of this emerging discourse are revealed. Central is the urgency to challenge the normalized dichotomy of male aggressor and female victim by rendering visible specific modalities of female violence, which typically are less visible than male modalities: psychological abuses aimed to control partners through blackmails and limitation to father-children relations, insults, manipulations, but also physical abuses and aggressions through a third male party. Stereotyped perception of dominant masculinity as inviolable and violent and gender differences in socialization of violence are core barriers hindering public acknowledgment of this emerging discourse on female ordinary violence in context of heterosexuality. This discourse can be politically subversive in that it requires overcoming fixed gender stereotypes with a redefinition of ordinary masculinity as emotive and potentially vulnerable and a redefinition of ordinary femininity as aggressive and potential harmful.

Key Words: intimate partner violence, discourse, critical discourse analysis, male victims, media representations.

1. Double standard

On 19th September 2012 a 28 year old man William Pezzullo, a bar attendant, was assaulted with acid by his ex-girlfriend and a friend of hers. The ex-girlfriend wanted to punish Pezzullo for his decision to send their problematic relationship. At that time she was claiming she was pregnant but refused to visit a gynaecologist. In the past, she had already claimed she was pregnant, although she was not. In fact, this last time she was saying the truth and a child was born after the attack. Pezzullo survived the attack with permanent damage to most parts of his face, and 40% of his torso. He lost both of his ears, and is now almost blind and needs to have the muscles in his neck reconstructed. The female aggressor was imputed for the crime of grievous bodily harm and sentenced to a 10-year imprisonment. Local and National media reported the crime, but extended coverage in national media did not develop around the 'case'. Today Pezzullo lives with his parents, whose only income is his retired father's pension. The family does not receive any financial support for Pezzullo's medical treatment and the victim has not received any compensation. Pezzullo's personal monthly income is the 400 euro received as a pension for his total disability.

On 16th April 2013, a 38 year old woman Lucia Annibali, a lawyer, was assaulted with acid by two men recruited by her ex-boyfriend. He could not accept the end of their relationship. Her face is disfigured notwithstanding multiple surgeries. However, she can still rely on her primary functions and unlike Pelluzzo, has retained her mobility. Annibali's ex-boyfriend was imputed for the crime of attempted murder, infliction of serious wounds and stalking and was condemned to a 20-year imprisonment. The victim received 800,000 euro as advance on a full compensation that is yet to be established by civil court. The incident sparked a mobilization of women's groups to speak out against Violence Against Women (VAW) and femicide and the assault received intensive media coverage, even commemorated on the International Day for VAW on 25th November and again the following year for International Women's Day on 8th March.¹ The victim received declarations of solidarity from institutional representatives and the President of Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano honoured her with the title of "Cavaliere al Merito".

'Dalla parte di Giasone' (On Giasone's side) is an organization dedicated to fighting against violence against men and for the rights of divorced fathers. The group wrote a letter to the President of Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano to point the asymmetry of institutional attention towards the two victims and to urge public acknowledgement of male victims. The President did not reply in person but through one of his female consultants, Professor Giovanna Zincone. The Professor pointed out that the Presidency does not ignore men, in

fact in occasion of International Day on VAW he also honoured with a plaque a specific awareness campaign against VAW that have men as testimonials. ‘Dalla parte di Giasone’ commented that such an inconsistent reply is an ‘insult to our intelligence’.

This story demonstrates an undeniable bias of the dominant discourse on heterosexual intimate partner violence (IPV) in Italy, a discourse that provides narratives, organizations, and celebrations focused on female victims whilst male victims are left in the background, with few interpretive frameworks. This discourse reinforces dominant stereotyped masculinity and femininity: men are depicted as social threat, inviolable, actors of violence; women as passive and harmless victims. This bias has been exacerbated since 2012, the year when partner femicide transformed into a national emergency as a central political topic through persistent media hype by feminist groups and political élites.¹

However, a sensibility on violence perpetrated by women has progressively consolidated into a counter-discourse of IPV, outside of the mainstream, within men’s right groups,² divorced fathers, shared parenting activists and amongst more general domestic violence activists. Purpose of this paper is to explore topics of this emerging counter-discourse as they are narrated by these voices and show the possibility for women to be violent in daily life against those subjects that in dominant discourse and social theory are understood to be more powerful: other men in the context of heterosexual relationships.

Let me clarify that it is not the aim of these voices nor mine, as a researcher focused on the study of discourse surrounding these social movements, to diminish the issue of VAW by juxtaposing the issue alongside female perpetrated violence. If this were the case, I would consider my own intellectual work trivial. Instead, the female perpetrated partner violence discourse is worthy of study for two main reasons. It brings to the fore victims that so far have remained neglected by public policies; it is politically subversive in that it enables to innovate fixed gender identities with characteristics of women and men that are denied by dominant discourse: male suffering and female agency to harm.

2. Women are ordinarily violent only in literature

The existence of female offenders such as serial killers, abusive mothers, tyrannical mother-in laws, aggressive partners, mothers who kill their children and their partners, stalkers and cyber-stalkers, female teen bullies, abusive nurses, is well documented by criminology, sociology and cultural studies.³ Empirical studies on domestic violence show that females initiate violence as often as men and that female same-sex couples are more violent than heterosexual couples.⁴

Notwithstanding such a strong corpus of knowledge on the abuses perpetrated by women, female violence remains at the background of public debate, which instead focuses on male violence.⁵ Male violence has been widely theorized since 1950s feminist mobilization on domestic violence (DV) and has developed into its own specific discourse, which gradually has been institutionalised.⁶ In comparison, female violence remains a marginal discourse mainly circulated within men’s right movement, which have so far, never reached the popularity and institutional recognition that feminism reached internationally.⁷ When dominant discourse discusses female perpetrated violence, does so by placing female offenders in the role of a victim, only partially responsible for their violent actions.⁸

Simkin argues that the public imaginary of the violent female is trapped between two main partial representations: that of *femme fatale* and that of monstrous femininity.⁹ Monstrous femininity retains a form of agency and is generally represented with masculine traits that disconfirm her female nature; on the contrary *femme fatale* has boosted traits of sensual femininity.¹⁰ Both representations depict female violence as extraordinary and reproduce a stereotyped understanding of femininity, a representation that does not admit capacity of violence as ordinary possibility for every human being, regardless its sex.

3. Alternative voices in Italy

Lack of discourse on female ordinary violence fixes a normative representation of women as non-violent. In Italy this norm is questioned by a variegated choir speaking on female violence in the context of heterosexual relationships. The choir is composed of males and females, people across different social status, educational background and political orientation; there are those who raise their voice because of their personal history and those who speak in their professional capacity, as lawyers, psychologists and family volunteers who encounter female violence in their daily work. They circulate their discourse mainly online through websites, blogs, Facebook pages and groups, Youtube channels and Twitter accounts dedicated on men’s rights, DV, and shared parenting.

As a qualitative social researcher, I have navigated this network for the last three years and I conducted in-depth interviews with 66 experts contributing to the public debate on Gender, DV and VAW (not all 66 speak on female violence, some especially feminist voices minimize the phenomenon). Findings presented in this paper do not aim to provide data on female violence in Italy as social phenomenon itself. Criminology, empirical sociology and psychology would offer a more precise account on it. Rather, my study focuses on how the social phenomena is represented by new discourses spoken by voices at the margin of the mainstream,

voices who shed light on meanings that are neglected in dominant and institutional discourse.¹¹ Hence, spirit of my research, inspired by Critical Discourse Studies, is to bring an academic validation to this marginal discourse and contribute to bring it from the margins to the centre.¹² A similar process to that carried out for the last 60 years by feminist movements, which at the outset were speaking about male violence at the margin of public discourse.

4. “If you leave you won’t see your child again”

Core theme of the counter-discourse under study is female psychological violence, described as almost embedded in common relational modalities with male partners, and mainly connected to her will of controlling partner’s life and downplaying his self-worth. Females achieve control of males through manipulation and blackmailing, especially by taking advantage of his affective bond with the child: she prevents him from freely determining time spent with his child in order to punish him for not being a good partner, for adultery or any other intimate partner dynamics that are external to his role as a parent. Female control of their ex-husbands and partners extends to their new female partners and recomposed families: stalking,¹³ defamation, and physical aggressions are some examples. An interviewee member of “Movimento femminile per la Parità Genitoriale”(MFPG), a spontaneous aggregation of women advocating for shared parenting, recalls this proverb “*Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*”.

Men in this counter-discourse articulate that in case of separation they are at their partners’ mercy; unprotected by the State, victimized by a phenomenon they call ‘judiciary sexism’: discriminations rooted in patriarchal resistance, creating a cultural prejudice that women are better persons, normatively harmless, and that ‘children-belong-to-their-mothers’.^{14 15} Separated father groups report that women through the manipulation of children, judiciary strategies such as false allegations, abduction, and arbitrary prohibition have the possibility to realize deprivation of the father-child relationship. Fabio Nestola, an independent researcher and President of an organization for shared parenting called Fenbi, describes this form of violence as a

“castration of the parenting role”; violence operating as a “forced interruption of the life project, father-child relations are deprived of spontaneity, limited in time and modalities, these are all violent inhibitions of natural instincts and cultural structures. This is aggression towards an intimate sphere of adults and children, a rape of father relationships” (personal notes).

To sum up, there is a shared belief amongst separated men that if “she wants she can ruin me”, and “nobody would help me”. Therefore, they resign that it is “better to remain submissive to her”. Personal stories of power, abuse and submission that are strikingly similar to the domestic abuse stories long narrated by women and brought to the public eye by feminist mobilizations for women’s rights and divorce law since the 1950s.¹⁶

5. Violence in daily life

Insults, private and public humiliations, ridicule, verbal aggression and initiation of quarrels, are all forms of abuses described by interviewees as ‘typical’ female. Downplaying sentences uttered with a pre-assumption of men’s inferiority such as “you do not earn enough“ and “you are a loser” are coded as typical patterns of female psychological domination. Besides psychological abuses, the counter-discourse touches also the topic of physical violence. Although there is no strong consensus on whether women perpetrate physical violence as often as men, many interviewees draw the attention to the need to acknowledge that women are capable of minor aggressions such as scratches, slaps, object throwing, hair pulling, but also of major violent incidences such as acid attacks, strangulations, poisonings, murders committed in person or delegated to a third party.

A marginal topic of female violence discourse in Italy, but a very powerful one to break up the common prejudice of male invulnerability and female uprightness is the topic of sexual violence.¹⁷ When I raise the topic, a common reaction I get is: “How can a woman rape a man?” This reaction can be explained with the fact that male sexuality in public imaginary is associated with active penetration and is depicted as primarily physical, predatory, always ‘available’; also, it has been widely discussed as capable of violence. On the contrary very little has been said about male sexual vulnerability and experiences of violence.¹⁸

6. Barriers and resistances

Why do these topics remain in the domain of counter-hegemonic discourse? Could it be related to major and minor incidences? This last question has no clear answer because no systematic data on forms of female abuses discussed so far have been collected in Italy. However, in 2012 a pool of independent researchers with a sample of 1,025 male respondents conducted a pilot study on the modality of female violence against male partners.¹⁹

This pilot study found that 60% of male respondents are victims of female physical, 48,7% sexual, and 77,2% psychological violence. Therefore, I suggest that current marginalization of this discourse might be related to different social and individual understandings of violence suffered by men and by women.

Absence of public knowledge on violence suffered by men and a parallel overexposure of male violence suffered by women, treated since 1950s emancipation movements as special, intersects with a dominant representation of masculinity and femininity: the former as active, physical, unemotional, inviolable and the latter as passive, peaceful, emotional, vulnerable.²⁰ Also, men generally have greater capacity of self-protection and perceive physical violence as less threatening than women.²¹ For the same reason, female violence towards men results in being perceived as less noticeable. A typical argument raised by those who deny male victims is indeed: “rarely do men end up at the hospital with black eyes!” The seriousness of violence against men is questioned as if men would be less woundable.

Men and women are socialized to prove their manhood and womanhood in specific ways, and therefore have different attitudes in disclosing their status as a victim. Whereas women are encouraged to control their anger and ask for social and institutional protection, men are encouraged to be machos. Fabrizio Marchi, founder of men’s right group Uomini Beta believes that:

“machismo is a culture that women have contributed to consolidating. It is a culture that prescribes men to hide his fragility and violence he has suffered. He must prove he is tough”
(personal interview).

However, whenever men would like to disclose their experiences and ask for protection there is a void of structures available; their narratives end up being minimized and ridiculed, also at an institutional level. Consider the following testimony:

“You are not believed by police officers when you denounce abuses, you are regarded as you wanted to take advantage for achieving something else” (Antino Sanzone, family activist, personal interview).

6. Conclusions

Notwithstanding ordinary characteristics of female violence, interviewees lament that the topic is denied in public and institutional discourse on heterosexual relations, which offers only angelic portrayals of women. Furthermore, this counter discourse is regarded as politically incorrect, vilified as chauvinist backlash, an attempt to distract public awareness from violence suffered by women.²² Voices of this counter-discourse are also labelled as ‘deniers’. This ‘cold’ reception hinders that counter-discourse from the margins moves to the centre and innovates the dominant representations of the sexes as holders of oppositional sets of opposing characteristics. Cultural prejudices that fix women in role of passive victims, and naturally inclined mothers and men as secondary care-givers, potentially violent, remain in place. Also, public acknowledgment of this counter-discourse would enable to intercept and provide better services to unreached and unheard victims. Addressing the need of all victims is fundamental to break the inter-generational cycle of family abuse, which cannot be interrupted by the sole intervention on male abusers and female victims.²³

However, a parallel caveat is that more categories of victims would be established with the subsequent provision of more affirmative action resulting in new forms of discrimination.²⁴ Also, public awareness of victims of violence can result in an adverse fixation of one gender in the role of eternal victims.²⁵ Abused men and the divorced fathers movements have the possibility to learn from feminist movement lesson and innovate their fight by resisting the temptation of engaging in victimization and isolating themselves in all-male circles and self-help groups.

Finally, this counter-discourse is likely to be appropriated by a certain feminist discourse preaching further sexualisation of femininity as a twofold liberation from prude feminism and from patriarchs. In this foreseeable eventuality, female violence discourse would serve to innovate gendered markers of emancipation and advance a proud reclamation of women’s ability to inflict harm and enjoy the suffering of others. This is not the original spirit of the discourse as crafted by pioneering actors: men’s and divorced fathers rights activists, new partners of divorced fathers, shared parenting advocates and anti-violence practitioners.

Notes

¹ Daniela Bandelli and Giorgio Porcelli, 'Femicide in Italy. Narrative of Cultural Killings and Progressivist Discourse', *Sociologica* (submitted).

² Please note that men movement is variegated. Main streams are mythopoeic, men's and father's right, and pro-feminist. The topic of female violence is core in the first two streams whereas the third is more focused on abusive men.

³ Joanne Belknap et al., 'Types of Intimate Partner Homicides Committed by Women: Self-Defense, Proxy/Retaliation, and Sexual Proprietariness', *Homicide Studies* 4 (2012); Michele Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: The Ultimate Taboo* (Chichester: Longman, 1997); Nancy Glass et al., 'Female-Perpetrated Femicide and Attempted Femicide: A Case Study', *Violence Against Women* 6 (2004).

Isabella Merzagora Betsos, *Demoni Del Focolare: Mogli E Madri Che Uccidono* (Torino: Centro scientifico, 2003); Laura Pigozzi, *Chi È La Più Cattiva Del Reame? Figlie, Madri E Matrigne Nelle Nuove Famiglie* (Milano: Et al., 2012); Alessandra Salerno and Sebastiana Giuliano, *La Violenza Indicibile: L'aggressività Femminile Nelle Relazioni Interpersonali* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2012); Marina Valcarengi, *Mamma Non Farmi Male* (Milano-Torino: Bruno Mondadori, 2011).

⁴ Diogo Costa et al., 'Intimate Partner Violence: A Study in Men and Women from Six European Countries', *International Journal of Public Health* (2015); Richard J. Gelles and Murray A. Straus, 'Violence in the American Family', *Journal of Social Issues* 35, no. 2 (1979); Colleen Stiles-Shields and Richard A. Carroll, 'Same-Sex Domestic Violence: Prevalence, Unique Aspects, and Clinical Implications', *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* (2014).

⁵ Theresa Porter, 'Women as Molester: Implications for Society', in *Grotesque Femininities. Evil, Women and the Feminine*, ed. Maria Barrett (Oxfordshire: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2010).

⁶ Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State, How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), Book; Kerwin Kaye, 'Sexual Abuse Victims and the Wholesome Family: Feminist, Psychological, and State Discourses', in *Regulating Sex. The Politics of Intimacy and Identity*, ed. Elizabeth Bernstein and Laurie Schaffner (New York; Abingdon: Taylor and Francis Books, 2005).

⁷ Robert A. Kenedy, 'Moral Panic. Male Studies and the Spectre of Denial', *New male studies: an international journal* 1, no. 1 (2012).

⁸ Larry A. Morris, *Dangerous Women* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008); Christine Rogers, 'Aileen Wuornos: Sympathy for the Devil', in *Women as Angel, Women as Evil: Interrogating the Boundaries*, ed. Andrea Ruthven and Gabriela Mádlo (Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2012); Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁹ Stevie Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁰ Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays* (London: Viking, 1994).

¹¹ Stuart Hall, 'Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse', in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader.*, ed. Stephanie Taylor, Margaret Wetherell, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage, 2001).

¹² Norman Fairclough, 'Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research', in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001).

¹³ National Stalking Observatory reports an increase in female stalkers. However, this crime continues to be framed as a threat towards women by men through awareness campaigns and media coverage.

¹⁴ Marco Colantoni, *Il Diritto Calpestato: Quando Un Pregiudizio Fa Giurisprudenza* (Salerno: Book sprint, 2013).

¹⁵ Although shared parenting law enacted in 2006 establishes the right of children to be equally raised by each parent, the majority of judiciary verdicts do not implement the law: mothers tend to be assigned the role of principal guardians and children are allowed to stay at their father's house only in fixed time-slots.

¹⁶ Carol Harrington, *Politicization of Sexual Violence: From Abolitionism to Peacekeeping* (Farnham; Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁷ Helen Gavin, 'Mummy Wouldn't Do That: The Perception and Construction of the Female Child Sex Abuser', in *Grotesque Femininities. Evil, Women and the Feminine*, ed. Maria Barrett (Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Philip W. Cook, *Abused Men* (ABC-CLIO, 2009).

¹⁹ Pasquale Giuseppe Macrì et al., 'Indagine Conoscitiva Sulla Violenza Verso Il Maschile', *Rivista di Criminologia, Vittimologia e Sicurezza* 6, no. 3 (2012).

²⁰ Richard B. Felson, *Violence and Gender Reexamined* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2002); Robert William Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005).

²¹ Warren Farrell, Steven Svoboda, and James P. Sterba, *Does Feminism Discriminate against Men? A Debate* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

- ²² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992); Cathy Young, *Ceasefire!: Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
- ²³ Erin Pizzey, *The Emotional Terrorist & the Violence-Prone* (Canada: Commoners' Pub, 1998).
- ²⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- ²⁵ Mary Talbot, 'Choosing to Refuse to Be a Victim: 'Power Feminism' and the Intertextuality of Victimhood and Choice', in *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse*, ed. Michelle M. Lazar (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

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