

# Femicide in Italy

## “Femminicidio,” Moral Panic and Progressivist Discourse

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### 1. Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the literature in the area of Discourse studies that investigates politicization and moral panics, particularly in regards to Violence Against Women (VAW), a discussion that in this journal was initiated by Giomi and Tonello [2013] with an article on a recent media moral panic of immigrants raping and killing Italian women. In that instance of media hype, VAW was constructed as an emergency and was used as a narrative device to gather political consensus around immigration restrictions and public security measures. Through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of television 2006 coverage Giomi and Tonello showed that the public discourse around VAW was typified by an externalization of violence along racial and ethnic lines, one that dovetailed conveniently with an anti-immigration rhetoric which functioned to support the enforcement of public security measures and raise consensus around right-wing xenophobic legislation [see also Woodcock 2010].

Our article builds on Giomi and Tonello’s discussion by shedding light on the continued modification of meanings of VAW in Italian media that occurred before and during the last National Election Campaign (2012-2013) where a media epidemic revolving around a new term “*femminicidio*” (femicide or male murder of women) imported from existing international feminist debates and activism. Moral panics, or more generally media hypes, are important subjects of discourse because they serve

as crucial moments for the sedimentation and transformation of discourses which delimit the field of knowledge and lay down the rules for the ways in which the problem can be talked about [Ajzenstadt 2009; Critcher 2003, 168; David *et al.* 2011; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2010; Hall *et al.* 1978; Lumby and Funnell 2011; Vasterman 2005; Watney 1989]. These transitional phases are interesting in so far as different claim-makers, social movements and politicians concur in a battle of signification for changing and repositioning categories of social problems and beliefs [Cohen 2011; Hall 1973 and 2001; McRobbie and Thornton 1995]. Therefore, in our study *femminicidio* is understood within the contextualized constructivist approach in which social issues are constructed through discourses advanced by different claim-makers who name a pre-existing social condition and rally public concern around it [Becker 1963; Best 1995; Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1987].

The focus of our analysis differs from that of Giomi and Tonello's in some key ways, not only in terms of timeframe but also because we are interested in a different type of discourse, namely the mediatized political discourse [Fairclough 1995] and more precisely in how political representatives and activists construct the discourse of VAW in the media. Our analysis was guided by the following questions: How was the term contextualized in the Italian media discourse? Which meanings were advanced and normalized through the popularization of this term and more specifically how did the feminist origin of the term influence the representation of VAW deployed through the *femminicidio* narrative? How did activists and political parties contribute to the politicization of VAW and which other political discourses are intertwined with *femminicidio* in a strategy of consensus?

We looked for answers to these questions in media texts and activists' and political representatives' speeches reported by news agencies. Qualitative methods inspired to Fairclough and Wodak's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) [Chilton and Wodak 2005; Fairclough 1995, 1998, 2001, 2010; Wodak 2001, 2011, 2013] were applied to texts from newswires and mainstream press outlets sampled through a *data mining* software, Dow Jones Factiva. CDA stems from Cultural Studies and aims to illuminate ideologies concealed by language and how discourse gives power to certain groups while excluding certain "sub-cultures" [Scannell 2007]. A dominant approach of CDA in the area of Gender Studies focuses on how patriarchal power is reproduced in textual representations of women and men, in speeches by female and male speakers, and how feminist discourse, which is treated as a subculture's discourse, is used and distorted by political élites to meet different ends [Baxter 2003; Baker 2014; Bloor and Bloor 2007; Formato 2014; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Sunderland 2004]. Our approach is different: we are interested to show how feminist discourse can become hegemonic through narratives of VAW.

Whereas the media epidemic analysed by Giomi and Tonello represented violence as an outside threat to women that needed to be addressed through public and international security policies, our analysis shows that *femminicidio* marks a dramatic shift in this discourse: the emergency was reconstructed as a structural problem within Italy's borders, affecting the Italian patriarchal family, originating in a backward sexist culture which is legitimized by politics and media domestically. In other words, *femminicidio* – which in its popularized version is understood as the “male murder of woman because she is a woman” – drew public attention to the issue of domestic and partner violence and enabled the deployment of a feminist gender reading in public representations of VAW. Also, whereas in 2006 the construction of a moral panic to drive political consensus positioned the State as the protector of Italian women from male immigrants, the *femminicidio* discourse enabled political parties to present themselves as progressivist actors that through their female candidates would promote gender equality and rescue Italy from a misogynistic past represented in many ways by the State.

This article begins with a discussion about how the discourse of VAW has been established and widely reproduced through feminist production of knowledge and further appropriated by political élites, both internationally and in Italy. The second part of this article retraces the origin of the term “*femminicidio*” itself and its different meanings. The third outlines CDA methodology as it is used in this study. Next, the results of the analysis will be presented along three sub-sections: the first shows that the social phenomenon of male homicides of women was over exaggerated in the media, the second describes the framework of domestic gender violence, and the third discusses the parallels of feminist and political rhetoric of progress. At that point the representation of femicide is criticized in light of sociological literature and frameworks on domestic violence. Finally, in the conclusion we offer a possible reading of *femminicidio* from a cultural perspective as a narrative intended to bring about a change in society.

## **2. The Construction of a Feminist Discourse on VAW and Its Politicization**

Knowledge, it has been argued, is formed in local centres of power where texts and practices are produced. This process entails the institutionalization of meanings under new disciplines: texts and practices in which concepts are defined, reiterated and adapted across different discourses [Foucault 1970 and 1986]. Internationally, feminist movements have been the predominant producers of knowledge on women's

sufferance and have contributed significantly to creating and broadening the meaning of VAW, by challenging the dominant view of the time. For instance, the feminist movement in the Twentieth century fought against the once general belief that sexual abuse is often a fantasy and does not cause trauma [Harrington 2010]; later, second wave feminists since the 1950s have worked to expose the pervasiveness of domestic violence in people's everyday lives and made it worthy of academic investigations [Maynard 1998]. Since the 1970s, feminist advocates enabled discussions of rape to emerge from a culture of silence and redefined sexual violence as a cross-cultural practice of the reassertion of male power over women [Brownmiller 1975]. The same logic applied to rape, viewing it as a sexist practice driven by male power, was later applied to explain other acts, including pornography, sexual harassment, prostitution, etc. [Jeffreys 2009; Kaye 2005].

In Italy too, women's movements – especially since the 1975 “Circeo massacre,” where two young women were raped and tortured by three higher class young men (in which one of the two women died) – have been key in the establishment and definition of the discourses of VAW, framing domestic and sexual violence as social problems to be eradicated by challenging patriarchal culture and the wider social acceptance of male domination of women [Creazzo 2008]. This process entailed challenging previous biological theories of violent crimes, a redefining VAW from an issue of morality to an issue of crime and the parallel transformation of women from accused to victims [Simone 2010]. Anti-violence centers established across the country since 1990s have been crucial hubs for feminist policy making, and for providing information to the general public and government institutions about the scope and the characteristics of the social problem of VAW [Virgilio 2010].

From a feminist vantage point, violence experienced by women as victims is treated as a specific type of violence and understood in a different way than other forms of violence [Felson 2002]. VAW is explained as a pillar and product of a patriarchal society and sexist culture, more precisely as a phenomenon originating in and functioning to maintain the normative relationship between men and women, characterized by inequality and fixed paths of socialization [Dobash and Dobash 1998; Dworkin 1987; Lonzi 1974; MacKinnon 1989; Romito 2008]. In feminist discourse, different deviant acts such as rape and non-consensual sexual acts, psychological domination, harassment, battering, homicides, serial murders and even prostitution and pornography (when perpetrators are men and the victims women) all are explained through a gender lens, and converge under the umbrella term of Gender-based Violence (GBV) [Bumiller 2008; Enloe 2000; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2010; Harrington 2010; Jenkins 1992].

GBV is a very broad signifier that defines many different typologies of acts as abuses perpetrated for reasons ascribable to sexist culture and institutions that normalize unbalanced power between men and women through the imposition of rigid heteronormative identities, roles and relations [Berns 2001; Butler 1990; Corradi and Stöckl 2014; Dutton and Nicholls 2005; Magaraggia and Cherubini 2013]. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) defines GBV as

violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately [article 3d].

VAW is understood as

a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life [article 3a].

The GBV paradigm infers that violence, whenever it is perpetrated by men against women, is committed because of male will of control and should be approached separately from other kinds of aggressions in virtue of the victim/aggressor's gender [Bates *et al.* 2014]. In other words, the GBV discourse affirms

the notion that all acts of violence against women should primarily be seen as an assault on their gender identity [Bumiller 2008, 21].

International literature demonstrates that a gender feminist reading has entered the public sphere, heavily influencing the public discourse of VAW and becoming the dominant framework in different academic disciplines [Bumiller 2008; Corradi 2014b; Enloe 2000; Garro and Ruggieri 2012; Harrington 2010; Minić 2014]. For example, Jenkins [1992] argues that since the 1970s feminist politics in Britain, by framing different forms of violence (rape, homicide, child pornography) all as sexual crimes that originate in patriarchal family, has shaped the public imaginary of serial murders as well as child abuse. He also notices that

feminist ideas were accepted by large sections of the criminology profession within Britain [Jenkins 1992, 60].

In a more recent publication, Comas-d'Argemir argues that in Spain

the feminist movement [...] has made significant progress in Spain in advancing men's violence against women political and legislative agendas, and providing ser-

vices for victims and survivors [as well as has] affected how genderized language has been shaped in both the political and media discourse [Comas-d'Argemir 2015, 123].

Also Bates *et al.* [2014] underline that the male control theory, which stems from feminist analyses and reads partner violence as a gendered phenomenon that originates from patriarchal values, has been influential in public policy internationally.

Discourse travels and is appropriated by different actors, who in their own production of knowledge reinterpret and modify contents according to their interest, agenda and view of the world [Chilton and Wodak 2005; Erjavec and Volčič 2007]. Copious literature shows how political élites and institutions across the globe have contributed to the discourse on VAW to mobilize consensus around their particular agendas and on a variety of domestic and international political maneuvers, such as the fight against prostitution and trafficking, limitations on freedom of speech, public security policies, racial and ethnic profiling, anti-immigration and trafficking policies, wars, development, imperialism and so forth [Angst 2009; Eisentein 1997; Enloe 2000; Isgro *et al.* 2013; Nayak and Suchland 2006; Riley *et al.* 2008; Volčič and Erijavec 2013; Weitzer 2006 and 2007]. For instance, Bumiller reads the affirmation and marketization of the discourse of VAW and its apparatus as a result of different agendas that have merged: a feminist agenda on changing common assumptions about rape and blaming the victim with a state agenda of control of criminality and bio/control [Bumiller 2008, 19]. Also, Harrington [2010] argues that sexual violence was instrumental in order to represent Germany as a threat towards British and American women and gain support for mobilization in WWII. Once appropriated by the political discourse, the social problem of VAW is distorted (for example rape becoming a threat related to immigration), acquires new symbolic meanings and moral connotations (for instance prostitution becoming an issue of public security; gender discrimination in the Global South is portrayed as an issue of lack of civilization and democracy; etc.), it is overexposed and transformed into an emergency, with some of its characteristics (such as sexual and physical) receiving more emphasis while others remain without public representation (such as emotional abuse).

In Italy the topic of VAW often intermingles with discourses on immigration and security, and has been used by political parties to gather consensus around specific legislation rather than organically support women's genuine participation in public life [Creazzo 2008; Giomi 2010; Pitch 2008 and 2010; Simone 2010]. A case in point is the moral panic that started in 2007 when Giovanna Reggiani was raped and murdered by a Romani man [Giomi and Tonello 2013]. The crime itself and the subsequent racist attacks against Romani settlements were widely reported in the media and framed with an antiquated portrayal of women as "sexually vulnerable ob-

jects in need of (white) masculine protection” [Woodcock 2010, 470]. This particular discourse surrounding the incident served to strengthen the power of the Ministry of Interior to expel foreign citizens from the country and to raise consensus around unrelated national security policies presented along ethnic lines by the right-wing coalition during the 2008 elections campaign [*Ibidem*].

Is this frame also reproduced within the *femminicidio* narrative or did this new media hype redefine the political discourse of VAW along different lines than ethnicity and race? Can we read *femminicidio* as a device for security politics as in previous moral panics on VAW or are the interests of political actors engaging this discourse different? Before attempting to answer these questions through the help of data from our CDA, let us spend some time unpacking the complex semantics of the word at the centre of this study: *femminicidio*.

### 3. “Femicide” and “Femminicidio” across Politics and Sociology

Femicide is defined by the United Nations as “the killing of women and girls because of their gender” [International Council of Women 2013]. The political use of this term aims at underlining the gender structural dimensions of male homicide of women and make these crimes different than more neutral homicide. The political definition of femicide can be traced back to a 1976 speech made by feminist social psychologist Diana Russell at the first International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels [Cameron and Frazer 1987; Radford and Russell 1992; Russell and Van de Ven 1976]. Her intention was to reveal the “sexual politics of murder” of women:

from the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for “honour” [Russell and Van de Ven 1976, 104].

In other words, femicide was discussed as the murder of women because they are women.

In the 1990s, Latin American activists popularized the term with the Spanish translation of “*feminicidio*”. These activists sought to draw national and international attention to the mass murder of hundreds of working women in the border town Ciudad Juarez (Mexico),

a peculiar VAW, a violence wherein organized crime and Juarez’s political and economic powers converge [Gonzalez 2012, 73].

Women were harassed in the factories, abducted in the street, kidnapped, tortured, raped, killed, with their bodies either disappearing altogether or discovered dead in the desert [Amnesty International 2003; Corona and Domínguez 2010]. These misogynist homicides occurred in a very specific social context marked by the power of narcotraffic and institutional impunity, with the internal migration of workers encouraged by neo-liberalist trade agreements and a sexist culture in which financially emancipated women were considered dirty [Connell 2013; Gonzalez 2012; Jeffries 2013].

So far we have explored the political interpretation of the term. Yet femicide can simply mean homicide of a female, a crime that can be perpetrated by either males or females and can occur in a domestic setting as well as in public. Indeed, some international scholars feel the necessity in their articles to specify different typologies such as “intimate femicide” and “female femicide” [Dixon *et al.* 2008; Glass *et al.* 2004; Muftić and Baumann 2012; Sela-Shayovitz 2010]. The term is also used to specifically connote the murder of women by a male perpetrator followed by the perpetrator’s suicide [Richards *et al.* 2014]. The use of the term “femicide” does not necessarily imply syndication of the cultural motivations of the murders (sexism, gender inequality, patriarchal power over women, etc.), but simply addresses the sex of the murdered subject.

At an earlier stage, approximately since the 1990s, in Italian feminist circles and specific academic publications, “femicide” has been translated as “*femicidio*” and “*femmicidio*” to stress the gendered dimension of crimes such as uxoricide and homicides with women victims in general. However, these previous terms were far from reaching the massive popularization of the newer neologism “*femminicidio*”: our keyword search in Factiva (2005-2013) found only 23 and 27 media items mentioning the earlier terms and 5.975 items reporting the latter. The most recent neologism, although it has appeared as a literary term since the Nineteenth century, started to be used with a political/criminological connotation only recently. In 2008 feminist lawyer Barbara Spinelli published the book “*Femminicidio. Dalla Denuncia Sociale al Riconoscimento Giuridico Internazionale*” [*Femicide. From Social Condemnation to the International Legal Recognition*] that discusses theories underlying the advocacy efforts conducted by Latin American feminists to politicize different crimes and discrimination against women, including the Ciudad Juarez murders [Spinelli 2008]. In the same year feminist group *Unione Donne Italiane* (UDI) [*Union of Italian Women*] launched a symbolic rally to “*Stop femminicidio*”; in 2009 the neologism appeared in the dictionary *Devoto Oli*; in 2011 the term reached key decision makers through the launch of CEDAW shadow report elaborated by Spinelli and a coalition of NGOs [Signoretti and Lanzoni 2011]; in 2012 “*Se non ora quando*” (SNOQ) [*If*



*not now when*], a new network of women singled out for their rebellion against sexism in media and the political culture reinforced by Silvio Berlusconi's sex scandals, launched the "*Mai più complici*" [*Never again accomplices*] campaign asking men to stop being complicit with *femminicidio*; finally, a different feminist coalition led by UDI launched the campaign "*No More*" to urge Mario Monti's Government to ratify the Istanbul Convention on VAW. Countless advocacy initiatives across the country, including theatre pieces and art exhibitions, books, TV-programmes and rallies, have been disseminating the neologism in public discourse since 2012.

Although Spinelli (as well as Devoto Oli) originally interpreted *femminicidio* according to the extensive framework theorized by Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde, as different forms of structural and systemic discrimination against women in society, the term has been adopted in Italian media and political discourse with different significations: as an issue of intimate and domestic violence, rooted in culture, a phenomenon that erupted because of men's incapability to accept women's assertion of freedom. Far from identifying the sole female sex of the victim, as a pure linguistic perspective would suggest, *femminicidio* connotes murders of women as the product of a sexist patriarchal culture where VAW is normalized. In other words, whenever we use the term *femminicidio* we signify that a woman was killed because in Italian culture men are entitled to exert power upon women, who in turn are subtly considered killable.

The context of the femicide/feminicide debate in Italy is dramatically different than that in Mexico, and could not be presented simply as the Italian translation of the Spanish word. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note that Russell strongly opposed those who link the neologism "feminicide" to the particular situation of Ciudad Juarez:

The term "feminicide" is Marcela Lagarde's Spanish translation of the term femicide which I used for the very first time in Brussels, Belgium, in 1976, with no reference to Juarez, Mexico. [See: [http://www.dianarussell.com/origin\\_of\\_femicide.html](http://www.dianarussell.com/origin_of_femicide.html)]

Barbara Spinelli firmly claims the peculiarity of the Italian discussion about the issue at stake:

In Italy the term "femicide" (*femmicidio* or *femicidio*) is referred only to gender-motivated killings of a woman. The concept of "feminicide" ("*femminicidio*" or *feminicidio*) is used in political and sociological contexts to conceptualize every form of discrimination or violence (physical, sexual, psychological, economic, structural, cultural, including violence perpetrated or condoned by the State and its officials) affecting a woman for the sole reason that she is a woman. The concept of feminicide is so referred to the cases of women who are killed just because they are women, as well as to any gender-based violent action against women. Accord-

ing to Marcela Lagarde’s definition of femicide, “the term enables us to highlight the common root causes of any form of gender-based violence, that annihilates women in their physical, psychological, and social dimensions” [Spinelli 2011].

#### 4. Methodology

This sociological study is an analysis of discourse conducted within the Critical paradigm, which assumes the Foucaultian’s understanding of discourse as a device of social control [Hall 2001]. Analysing discourse from a critical perspective

is not only about interpretations of something that already exists, [...] but about the analysis of the production of reality which is performed by discourse – conveyed by active people [Jäger 2001, 36].

The aim is on one hand understanding the language but also advancing a broader social critique built upon a critique of discourse, which is conceived as part of the social process [Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 2003]. In other words, this critical approach to Discourse Analysis is characterized by a combination of a critique of discourse itself and an explanation of relations between discourse and contextualized political/institutional power with particular attention paid to contradictions existing in the discourse-reality dialectic [Talja 1999; van Dijk 2008]. In this study, the specific milieu under investigation is the “mediatized political order of discourse,” which was earlier defined by Fairclough in 1995 as the political discourse reported in mainstream media texts, which are regarded as “communicative events” contextualized in “social practices” [Marlow 2002]. Three stages of analysis were conducted.

The first objective was to ascertain when the term became popular, to understand the scope of its media exposure, and how its’ appearance and popularization can be read in light of the contemporary political context. The second objective of our investigation was to identify in which types of news the word “*femminicidio*” appeared: what were the news subjects, who were the claim makers, what were the recurrent themes of *femminicidio* coverage, and finally which meanings and recurrent themes were associated to the term. This analysis was conducted on media texts (a total of 385 items) circulated fifteen days before and after the day of two major events that I selected for their relevance as feminist mobilizations and political incidents:

a) On the 2nd of November 2012 the Convention *NoMore* asked for a meeting with the Prime Minister Mario Monti. This event marks an important step forward in urging institutions to take concrete actions against VAW.

b) On the 14th of February 2013 the *One Billion Rising Flash Mob* against VAW coordinated by SNOQ danced across the country and was nationally broadcast on RAI TV. This event was selected for being the most visible mobilization against *femminicidio* and because it happened just after the elections.

Drawing from Wodak's view of language as "not powerful on its own" but gaining "power by the use powerful people make of it" [Wodak 2001, 10] and given our interest in understanding how feminist discourse of VAW has been appropriated by the political discourses during the 2013 electoral campaign, the third stage of analysis focused on statements made by two categories of claim makers: activists of feminist social movements and nationally renowned politicians. Direct quotes were extrapolated from main national news agency wires included in the sample of phase II. We decided to focus this micro level of analysis only on news wires in so far as news agencies tend to include speeches in their original versions with few comments from journalists. Rather, our interest in this specific analysis was not on the contribution of reporters to discourse but rather on the direct contributions of activists and politicians. Also, news agencies tend to give more neutral and standardized information than other forms of media, which instead would have been interesting to analyse if our aim was one of understanding how the same *femminicidio* narrative is developed differently in progressive and conservative press. For the selected speeches, a linguistic analysis inspired by Fairclough's [1995 and 2003] method of representational strategies in clauses was conducted. In particular, for each text we identified the following strategies at work: causation, categorization, nominalization, metaphorization, referentialization, predications and rhetorical tropes. Additionally, Wodak's argumentation theory was helpful to identify persuasive strategies that were deployed to garner consensus on the need for a State's intervention [Richardson 2007; Wodak 2001 and 2011]. To sum up, the analysis of each text was organized around the following tasks:

- a) Meanings associated with the word "*femminicidio*;"
- b) Representations of males and females as actors and victims of violence and as political subjects;
- c) Envisaged solution to tackle VAW;
- d) Representation of the State;
- e) Arguments to mobilize consensus on State's action.

Table 1 summarizes the three stages of research.

TAB. 1. *Research Phases and Sample*

	Method	Timeframe	Sample
Phase I	Factiva - keyword search	July 2006-October 2013	5975 items found
Phase II	Thematic analysis of media texts around two events	Event 1. 18 October-17 November 2012 Event 2. 30 January-1 March 2013	124 + 261 = 385 media items (national and local press and newswires)
Phase III	Micro analysis: representational strategies and rhetoric	Newswires included in timeframe Phase II.	41 newswires

*Source:* Authors' Elaboration.

Please note that the analysis is not focused on representations of these events, but rather are used as a sampling device for timeframes only and chosen for their political relevance. Also, we clarify that although the methodology is predominantly qualitative, numbers will be mentioned to contextualize the media hype. However, in representational and rhetorical analysis, themes have not been simply counted but identified and discussed more in depth as relevant to answering the research questions. In order to contextualize the media hype, place it in time, and then select the texts for discourse analysis, we used the database Dow Johns Factiva. This database was chosen in that it is the largest agglomerate of media, it is widely used in media content analysis, and it enables keyword search, tag cloud and graphs [Johal 2009]. Although the initial population sampling cannot be strictly controlled by the researcher because texts are uploaded in the database accordingly to specific agreements between Dow Jones and media outlets, we considered this tool suitable in that our analysis is not concerned with any specific media outlet but rather it investigates the media discourse at large. Aggregation options enabled in Factiva are quite diverse and detailed: users can easily select sources by time, country, language and types of text. We restricted our keyword search to Italian sources including the following types of items: columns, commentary/opinion, editorial, news digest and political/general news. The timeframe search was left unset from an indefinite date in the past to the month before the search was performed (October 2013 included). The main advantage of using computerised keyword search is the speed of the sampling process. However, limitations were also considered [Roy *et al.* 2007; Soothill and Grover 1997]. The main shortcoming is that keyword searches can give back “false positive” and “false negative” items in that not all articles containing the given keyword focus on the investigated topic, while on the other hand some articles that are relevant

may not be detected by the software because they do not contain the given keyword [Soothill and Grover 1997]. However, this problem does not affect our study because our interest is to demonstrate the large occurrence of the term in media discourse in general rather than the occurrence of texts reporting on a given topic.

## 5. “Femminicidio”: a Media Narrative of Insecurity and Gender Politics

### 5.1. *Media Overexposure of a Stable Phenomenon*

The preliminary keyword search in the database Factiva (phase 1) showed that the first media item reporting the term “*femminicidio*” was circulated in 2006; since then it has been mentioned in 5975 news items, of which more than 5,500 were published in the last two years. This shows that although the term “*femminicidio*” has been viable since 2006, it developed into a media epidemic only in 2012 when it was mentioned in 751 news items. These results are consistent with the *Report on Security* drafted by the Observatory on Communication, showing that *femminicidio* established as a major narrative on insecurity in 2012 [Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza 2013].

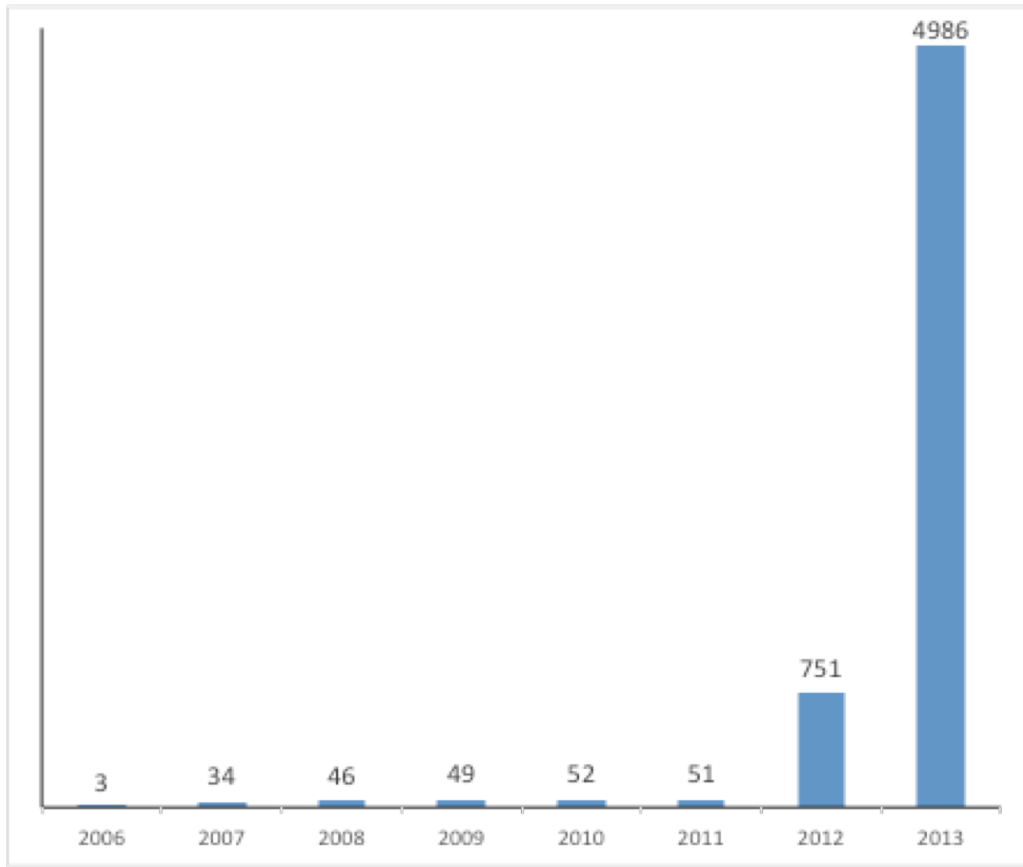


FIG. 1. Number of “femminicidio” media items per year

Source: Factiva

The macro analysis (Phase II) revealed that the nature of news about *femminicidio* was mainly political and revolved around mobilization campaigns, political parties’ events and comments made by feminists and electoral candidates regarding specific criminal cases or the social issue of VAW at large. In timeframe 1 the most visible criminal case was the murder of Carmela Petrucci, a 17-year-old girl killed by her sister’s ex-boyfriend. The case sparked several public commemorations held by local feminist groups and media commentaries by local politicians on the urgent need to tackle the VAW emergency with a full ratification of the Istanbul Convention and new national laws. The term appeared also in announcements of the following cultural and media products: the stage show *Ferite a Morte* [*Wounded to Death*], the new season of *Amore Criminale* [*Criminal Love*], a TV series dedicated to crimes between intimate partners, and the launch of Dacia Maraini’s book “*L’amore rubato*” [*Stolen Love*]. The leading case of the time-frame 2 was the murder of model Reeva Steenkamp in South Africa. The feminist mobilization that was reported most in the news was the Flash Mob and comedian Luciana

Littizzetto's monologue that took place at the National Music Contest *Festival della Canzone Italiana di Sanremo* as an explicit response to SNOQ appeal. *Femminicidio* was associated with various media and cultural products such as: the movie "*Italy amore mio*" [*My beloved Italy*], Cristina Comencini's documentary "*Comizi di fatica*" [*Hard Meetings*], the installation *Zapatos rojos* [*Red shoes*] created in Ciudad Juarez and replicated in Italian cities, singer Adriano Celentano's videoclip, and a series of debates on the noir literary genres organized by the University La Sapienza in Rome.

The fact that media texts on *femminicidio* revolve around social movements and political representatives' politics, and not around specific criminal cases, suggests that the rapid increase of media exposure of the phenomenon might reflect a changing awareness and be primarily triggered by advocacy and political actions rather than a reflection of any increase in actual homicides. This observation goes hand in hand with the data from the Ministry of Interior showing that in the timeframe 2011-2013 homicides of women remained nearly stable [Corradi 2014b].

Analysis undertaken under Phase 3 shows that several discursive strategies that are typical of politics of fear are at work in the *femminicidio* narrative [Wodak 2015]. In particular, at work there is the well known distortive process that starts with the labelling of a new deviant behaviour which is then amplified through the accumulation of different categories of crimes or deviances under the same umbrella term [Bovenkerk and van San 2011; Thompson 1998]. Hall calls this strategy "convergence" and defines it as the process of

listing a whole series of social problems and speaking of them as "part of a deeper, underlying problem" – the "tip of an iceberg," especially when such a link is also forged on the basis of implied common denominators [Hall *et al.* 1978, 223].

In fact, *femminicidio* was presented as a neologism created to name a hidden social phenomenon and transform it into an important political topic. Advocates emphasized the urgency to coin and use this term to publicly acknowledge that "it is not *only a homicide*."<sup>1</sup> Convergence is realized in speeches where femicides are mentioned together and often conflated with different forms of minor abuses, such as stalking. Let us for example consider the following words spoken by Senator Anna Finocchiaro:

Today more than in the past women die as victims of violence [...] *Femminicidio* and stalking are crimes against the individual and the approach of the State to tackle

<sup>1</sup> Adnkronos Bulletin, "*Violenza su donne: Boldrini (Sel), politica deve affrontare il problema.*" 14 February 2013.

these crimes needs to be different. Often the first attempt is one of conciliation, as if this phenomenon was just a form of violence against female “weakness”.<sup>2</sup>

Which phenomenon? Stalking or femicide?

Convergence is also realized with a metonymic use of statistics, which is a strategy widely employed in feminist discourse on VAW: data referring to a broader phenomenon is cited to prove the existence of one of its parts [Somers 1994; Badinter 2004; Farrell and Drezner 2008]. This is realized for example when advocacy and protests against *femminicidio* in Italy merged with the international mobilization *One billion rising*, a title that refers to the one billion female victims of *all forms of violence* (not only lethal and physical but also psychological, sexual, etc.) *in the world* (not only in Italy). This double convergence enables the suggestion that *femminicidio*, which is the cruellest part of the broader global phenomenon of VAW, has reached the level of an emergency in Italy.

Hyperboles are at work to connote the social issue as a “plague,”<sup>3</sup> “*war bulletin*,”<sup>4</sup> “*epidemic of possession*,”<sup>5</sup> “*carnage*” (“*strage*” in Italian)<sup>6</sup> and even with the Italian metaphor “*mattanza*”<sup>7</sup> which in English can be roughly translated as “*tuna fishing*.”

This threat is established as unquestionable through two strategies. The first is *argumentum ad populum* exemplified in the following expression “a spiral of violence which is realized daily *before our eyes*.”<sup>8</sup> The second is tautology realized with the *topoi* of reality and the *topoi* of numbers, which enable to portray single cases of crime and statistics as evidence of the raise of the crime itself [Wodak 2001]:

“One hundred victims in 2012, one woman killed every two days. *Figures*, alarming, *come from statistics and are almost daily confirmed by chronicle*. The latest victim of today was in Palermo: a 17-year-old girl stabbed to death in her home’s hall.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> National Agency of Associated Press (ANSA) Bulletin, “*Violenza donne: Finocchiaro, istituzioni intervengano*.” 8 November 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Adnkronos Bulletin, “*Elezioni: Bersani da Pd impegno concreto per democrazia paritaria*.” 19 February 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Agi Bulletin, “*Violenza donne: Ghizzoni, prevenzione parte dalla scuola*.” 14 February 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “*Violenza donne: Sereni, in tante in Parlamento per fermarla*.” 14 February 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Agi Bulletin, “*Femminicidio: Severino, no benefice per una pena più breve*.” 14 February 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “*Telefono Rosa: Un femminicidio ogni due giorni, aumento inaudito*.” 19 October 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Agi Bulletin, “*Elezioni: Sel manifesterà giovedì contro violenza a donne*.” 12 February 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “*Ragazza uccisa a Palermo*.” 19 October 2012.



## 5.2. A Gender Frame of Domestic/Partner Violence

The thematic and representational analysis shows that the term *femminicidio* is framed as a crime of domestic and partner violence and the identity of actors in femicide are nominalized in their relation to the victims as fiancées, lovers, husbands, relatives. Consider the following speech by theatre director Serena Dandini, at the forefront of *femminicidio* mobilization with her theatre piece *Wounded to Death*:

“Monologues of *Wounded to Death* speak of foreseeable crimes, of homicides of women *by their men, who should have loved and protected them*. It is not a coincidence that *culprits are often husbands, fiancés and exes, a family carnage* [...] Behind closed curtains of *Italian houses* a silent sufferance is hidden.”<sup>10</sup>

This domestic/partner violence framework is a specific marker of the femicide discourse “made in Italy.” Indeed, on one hand the term has been adopted in Italian political discourse with the meaning popularized by Ciudad Juárez’s activists, that is to say as the misogynistic male murders of women; on the other hand, it recontextualizes the atrocities linked with intricate criminal networks in Mexico to an Italian family issue.

Also, the second and third stages of research revealed that *femminicidio* is explained to the general public through the feminist gender/cultural framework that we discussed in earlier in this article: *femminicidio* conveys the idea that male homicide of women is an emergency occurring in heterosexual families and that men kill their partners because of gender inequality, sexist culture and the misrepresentation of women in media and society [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016]. That is to say, for reasons ascribable to the cultural construction of women as inferior subjects subjected to male power. Here we present a few extracts from our data showing this cultural gender framework at work in the *femminicidio* narrative:

*When the intention is punishing women for their outrage against men’s honour, and violation of social, religious and cultural norms.*<sup>11</sup>

*It is not a matter of isolated cases and deviance.*<sup>12</sup>

*They are “killed because they are women.”*<sup>13</sup>

*Symptom of a culture still deeply chauvinist, to be changed.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Adnkronos Bulletin, “Teatro: le donne della Dandini di nuovo in scena con ‘Ferite a morte.’” 20 February 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Asca Bulletin, “Violenza donne: Bongiorno (Fli), aggravanti per delitti onore.” 13 November 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Asca Bulletin, “Violenza donne: Bersani, coltivare cultura rispetto a parità sessi.” 17 November 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “Violenza donne: Serafini (Pd), serve legge contro femminicidio.” 24 October 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “Violenza donne: Finocchiaro, da rimuovere sono cause culturali.” 13 February 2013.

If we understand discourses as “significations of some domain of social practice from a particular perspective” and we maintain that any social practice can be interpreted from multiple perspectives [Fairclough 1995, 9], it follows that domestic and partner violence, violence suffered by women, and femicide, are all existing social practices that can be viewed from different vantage points. Thus, the cultural gender explanation of femicide conveyed by the *femminicidio* narrative is a specific reading, one of many possible coexisting and complementary readings, of the social phenomenon. In particular, as we saw earlier, this reading stems from and deploys in public discourse a feminist understanding of family and male/female relationships, a perspective that reads social facts in relation to the gendered organization of society with a taken for granted assumption that women are the disadvantaged gender in terms of power and freedom.

### 5.3. *A Progressivist Discourse*

Finally, for our discussion on representation of the social issue of VAW within gender politics, another relevant observation is that the *femminicidio* narrative intertwines with a progressivist discourse: VAW is framed as a product of that same chauvinist culture

*that take too few women in places of power and allow disparity in income as well as in rights,*<sup>15</sup>

a threat to modern civilization which needs to be fought by the State; political representatives, and in particular Center-Left parties, that pledge to advance the country from backwardness to progress by reserving a Parliamentary quota of seats for women. The State and politics are held accountable for lagging behind in terms of the application of international laws on gender equality, failing to protect women who are left vulnerable by an inefficient judiciary system, and being ungenerous to women’s groups who run shelters for victims of domestic violence. The State is blamed for legitimizing a culture of sexist discrimination, which is depicted as “*anachronistic*,” “*conservative*” and “*reactionary*.”<sup>16</sup> The predominant solution advanced by the Centre-Left coalition to tackle the alleged national emergency is to bring women into Parliament to supposedly better represent women’s interests. Consider the following extracts of two different speeches made by two parties’ leaders:

<sup>15</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “*Violenza donne: Finocchiaro, da rimuovere sono cause culturali*.” 13 February 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Ansa Bulletin, “*Violenza su donne: Serafini (Pd), grande alleanza per fermarla*.” 8 November 2012.

*We will bring to the Parliament 40% of women and I am sure that their presence will give us valuable extra hands in continuing and strengthening such a battle for civilization.*<sup>17</sup>

*Half of Sel's MPs will be women. This can be a good and different start from a past of vulgarity and burlesque that we want to leave for ever at our back.*<sup>18</sup>

These extracts show that an amplification of the social issue of VAW and femicide was functional to an emotional politics aimed at playing around a feminist rhetoric of women as actors of social progress [Donati 2006]. We can only suppose, and this point should be better addressed by political analysts, that *femminicidio* was a viable moral stage for different discourse agents in search of the electorate's consensus. Also, it is worth noting that endorsing feminist causes represented for politicians a crucial opportunity to create much needed distance between themselves and Berlusconi's past political style and accusations, by women's groups such as SNOQ, of misogyny and sexism [Ottonelli 2011]. In the *femminicidio* narrative women politicians are represented as saviors of the whole country, a country that needs to be emancipated from its backward male-centred political past [Donati 2006; Noonan 1995]. Violence, which in the public imaginary is a marker of virile masculinity, is represented here as a marker of backwardness [Ciccione 2012; Connell 2005]. Violent men represent obstacles hindering an envisaged civilized social and political order built on ideas of gender equality and feminist principles.

## **6. A Critique of “Femminicidio” Discourse from a Sociological Perspective**

CDA reveals how language shapes knowledge by authorizing certain ways of seeing the world and excluding others.

There are utterances which in a certain society at a certain point in time cannot yet, or cannot longer, be said, unless special “tricks” are used in order to express them without negative sanctions [...]. Discourse as a whole is a regulating body: it forms consciousness [Jäger 2001, 35].

The *femminicidio* narrative in our view had the effect of authorizing the application of a gender paradigm to the official reading of domestic/partner violence and VAW. Also, the overexposure of male VAW contributed to the consolidation of stereotypical representations of domestic/partner violence according to which wo-

<sup>17</sup> TM News, “*Femminicidio/ Bersani: Una vergogna intollerabile che va fermata.*” 14 February 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Agi Bulletin, “*Elezioni: Vendola, da ‘Se non ora quando’ scossa contro sessismo.*” 10 February 2013.

men are always the victims and men are always the aggressors. This dichotomy does not reflect the findings of empirical studies on domestic violence which, on the contrary, tell us that women too can be violent against their partners and that violence in households is more often reciprocal and gender symmetrical, although there are gender differences in the following aspects: physical consequences of abuses (injuries produced by female offenders are less visible and men tend to have a higher level of self-defence); perception of violence (men feel less threatened than women and tend not to classify female actions as violence that are on the contrary perceived as dangerous by women when acted by men); publicity (male victims are less likely to report and denounce abuses received by their partners with a lack of public discourse, national surveys, and organizations that are necessary to detect the occurrence of female violence against their partners in society) [Anderson 1997 and 2005; Archer 2000; Betsos *et al.* 2010; Costa *et al.* 2015; Cook 2009; Gelles and Straus 1979; Johnson 2005; Kimmell 2002; Macrì *et al.* 2012; Salerno 2012; Steinmetz 1978; Straus 2008]. Moreover, by rendering unquestionable the link of violence with both intimate and public discrimination, as well as the frame of domestic violence as a women's issue, a politics of pink quota is presented as a way forward to advance cultural progress and stop a supposed epidemic of violence.

Our analysis shows that the *femminicidio* narrative marked a dramatic shift in the representation of VAW in media discourse and its recontextualization for the purpose of drawing a political consensus. *Femminicidio* indeed does not seem to follow the typical representation of VAW as an extraordinary threat against female sexuality from an unknown deviant enemy [Carll 2003; Carter 1998]. Also different, the narrative does not play out along ethnic lines as in previous moral panics on VAW studied by Giomi and Tonello [2013] (amongst others). *Femminicidio* drags the enemy from the streets to inside the home of the typical Italian family and depicts him as a typical heterosexual man; redefining VAW from sexual to physical and homicidal, from a matter of deviance to a normalized product of patriarchal culture, from extraordinary to ordinary and structural. In other words, *femminicidio* enabled the advancement in public debate of a feminist interpretation of domestic and partner violence, whether homicidal or not. Although we certainly need to applaud that a different representation of VAW has been brought into public debate we need at the same time to be cautious in considering this new feminist discourse as a more real and desirable project for social betterment. Let us discuss, in light of sociological literature, some important caveats of this discourse.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that the term *femminicidio* was introduced in Italy as the translation of a political term born in Mexico in response to drug cartel murders in the 1990s and repurposed to connote a diversified array of

discriminations and VAW, including but not limited to murders, that occur because power inequality between men and women is normalized in society. However, the term has spread in the Italian public discourse with a different, even more generalized meaning which nevertheless maintains the gender explanation of the act: male murders of female partners and ex-partners triggered by the will to reaffirm power upon women through a culturally normalized masculine violence. This in our view is only one of many possible typologies of femicide, which in sociological literature means more neutrally the murder of a woman that can be committed due to many different factors, including reasons ascribable to gender inequality and power but not excluding other social and psychological variables.

As argued by Corradi, femicide and VAW have different victim-offender relationships and the genders of the victims and offenders can be only one of the multiple factors of violence [Corradi 2011; 2014a; 2014b]. International sociological and psychological literature shows that different risk factors for violence include: personality, psychological pathologies, alcohol/drugs consumption, family history of violence, socio-cultural status, loss of self-control and provocation [Salerno 2012; Collins 2013; Johnson 2005]. All these factors are overshadowed in the public imaginary constructed by *femminicidio*, which, we think, flattens the complexity and variety of cases of homicides by imposing a standard explanation of violence, an explanation which generates several questions and inconsistencies. For example: A man who kills his wife and his child is committing *femminicidio*? Or maybe it would be better to talk about “family-cide”? How can we determine whether a man who kills his partner after she decided to leave is killing her because she is a woman or whether he kills her because of her relational role of partner? In other words, in reverse cases, when she kills him, would we define that homicide as “mal-icide”? And in same-sex couple murders? Infanticides should be defined according to the sex of the child? Or, when a man kills his partner in the context of an escalating quarrel, can this really be understood as a gendered-crime only because she is a female and he is a male? The gender analysis can be taken into analysis only when sex of the victim is different from the sex of the perpetrator? What about if a similar escalation dynamic occur between two males or two females? What about if femicide happens when male thieves rob female-run shop because it is considered easier to confront women than men?

In light of the analytical feebleness of the term and its specific origin in both a Mexican context of violent and in feminist literature internationally, we would like to recommend that *femminicidio* does not cross the realm of media to an institutionalized sociological level, and that different multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks continue to be addressed in the still young effort to understand interpersonal violence in general and VAW in particular [Corradi 2009; Walby 2013]. Just to mention, one

of the classic socio-cognitive approaches, stemming from landmark social psychology theories such as Bandura's [1978] Social Learning, enables an integration of a broad array of factors, individual and situational, and at the same time sheds light on the influence of culture on human behaviour [see Anderson and Bushman's General Aggression Model 2002]. Under this framework different trajectories can be investigated with the attempt to enrich an understanding of femicide: e.g. normalization (in media and cultural product) of violence as a conflict resolution modality, intra-generational violence, social gendered learning of management of aggressiveness and perception of suffered violence, escalation of violent emotions and anger, etc. Another framework can be drawn from Donati who considers any form of stress between men and women as a relational stressor and not necessarily as a behaviour acted exclusively by male aggressors against female victims [Donati 2006, 88]. Moreover Donati's Relational Theory focuses on the bidimensional *religo-refero* quality of the social relation, that implies either the socio-structural and cultural explanations, both equally important, neither exclusive [Donati 2012].

## 7. Conclusion: "Femminicidio" Read through Sociology of Culture

In conclusion of this paper, we would like to offer a possible interpretation of the media phenomenon analysed so far from a cultural perspective: we read *femminicidio* as a device of a sociocultural construction of reality (narrative) aimed at realizing an education and modernization project in Italian society.

According to the multi-layered definition of culture by Schein [2010], Hofstede *et al.* [2010] and Morgan [2006], a culture is characterized by three main layers starting from the outside and continuing down to the core. The most external layer is made of symbols and language and is called by E. Schein the "level of the artefacts." In this layer we can place the dramatic changes that have occurred in Italian society and family in the last fifty years and the new gender models that have abruptly appeared in everyday life in recent decades, those affecting especially the traditional male position in the family [Bellassai 2011; Ciccone 2009]. Let us for example think about the changing role of the father that was so divergent with respect to its characteristics in the recent past that some scholars have decided to analyse what they define as *the new fathers* [Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008]. This external layer continues to the intermediate layer, the "level of myths and narratives." In this layer we can place *femminicidio*, as a cultural narrative of change. Finally there is the internal core level of so-called "basic underlying assumptions" that are, in Schein's opinion, taken for granted beliefs and visions of the world. Every layer needs to be coherent with the other in order

to maintain and transmit a cultural model through generations. Therefore, when a change in the external layer occurs, the cultural model needs to change at the level of the adaptive culture that concerns the intermediate layer of narratives and the core layer of the basic underlying assumption [Ogburn 1922]. However, the process of adaptation needs time and this cultural lag can cause anomic behaviours and violence, a point also argued by feminist Susan Faludi [1992], who comes from a perspective different than ours, as a male response to women's emancipation. The *femminicidio* narrative in this model could be read as an attempt to instigate a quick change of cultural narratives and ultimately shared values, with the aim to finally overcome the anomic phase.

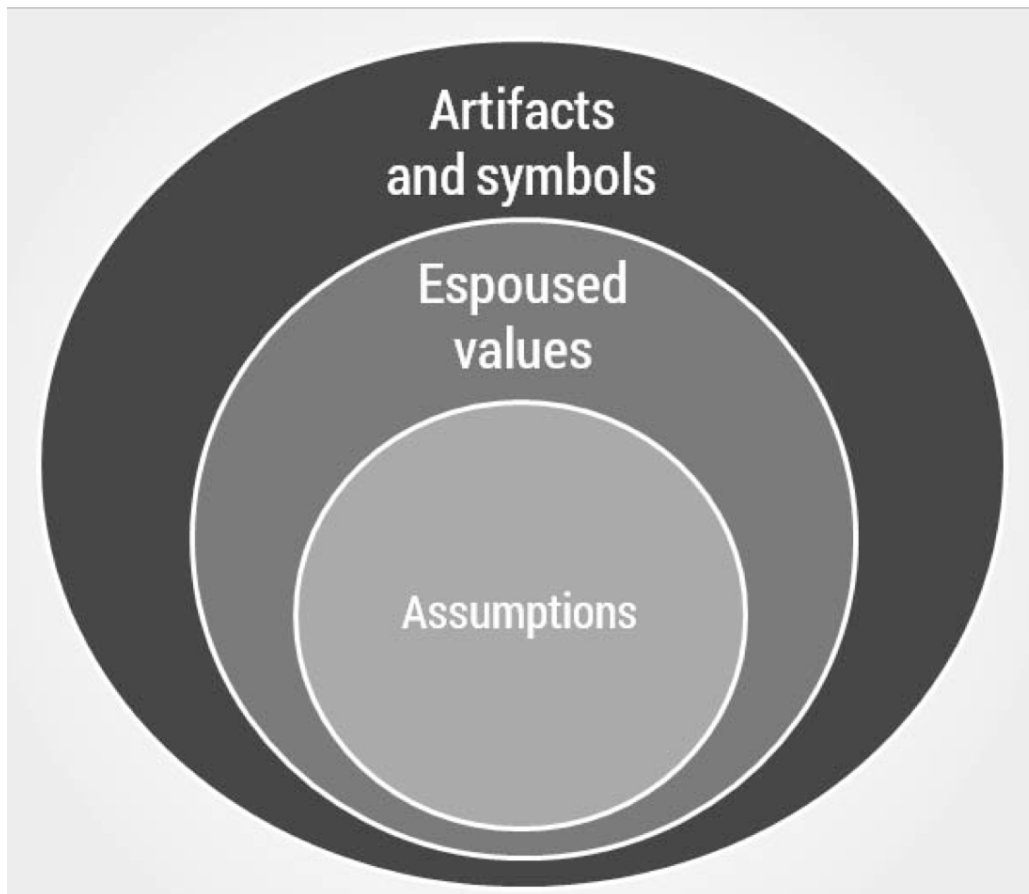


FIG. 2. Schein's Three Layer Culture Model

Source: Schein [2010]

As suggested by Hofstede *et al.* [2010] narratives telling who the heroes and the villains of the story are, convey appropriate values functional to the script. In the *femminicidio* case the script represents males as the only responsible party for acts of violence against female victims, casting them as the villains of the story. However

transforming the narratives does not mean a perfectly corresponding change in core shared values. Media narratives represent only the dominant/hegemonic side of Italian culture, the cultural pattern that controls the media being dominant [Hall 1973; Morley and Brunson 1999]. It is also important to consider more traditional cultural models that still survive in most parts of Italy. The new media narratives have to be interpreted and decoded by an audience against the backdrop of traditional cultural models; where the decoding process is mediated by local traditional cultures and subcultures with their specific gender roles. Then it is improbable that the hegemonic meaning of the message reaches its target *qua talis*. As a suggestion for further research, additional qualitative analysis could be devised to enquire about the specificity of this culturally located decoding with respect to the Italian media campaign against *femminicidio*. What can be said at this moment is that it is very likely that alternative negotiate or oppositional decoding are taking place simultaneously. In this case, *femminicidio* should be considered a very significant cultural transition in ideological struggles around this sensitive issue in Italy.

## Acknowledgements

*Data presented in this paper have been produced within Daniela Bandelli's PhD project at the University of Queensland. Her advisors are Associate Professors Pradip Thomas and Eric Louw. This article has been proof read by Mallory Peak, PhD candidate at the University of Queensland.*

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## Femicide in Italy

### “Femminicidio,” Moral Panic and Progressivist Discourse

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Abstract: In 2012-2013 the feminist neologism “*femminicidio*” (femicide) erupted in Italian public discourse as national media outlets repeatedly described an epidemic of men murdering their female partners. As a result, Violence Against Women (VAW) as a cause acquired a new centrality in political discourse surrounding the National electoral campaign that year. Through a critical thematic qualitative analysis of press articles and a linguistic analysis of claims made by activists and politicians reported in news wires, this paper shows that the *femminicidio* narrative constructed an emergency around violence, one affecting the everyday Italian heterosexual family. *Femminicidio* as a narrative was influential in the abrupt adoption of a Gender Violence (GV) framework within national institutions, a framework that explains violence as a product of patriarchal culture that normalizes sexist representations of women. Intertwined with a political discourse of progress, the *femminicidio* narrative suggests that the solution to VAW resides in increasing women’s participation in politics. While increasing participation in politics is a crucial factor in gender equality, focusing exclusively on this framework forecloses on the many sociological frameworks available to understand and prevent the complex social phenomenon of domestic and partner violence.

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*Keywords: Femicide; Critical Discourse Analysis; Gender Paradigm; Italy; Mediatized Political Discourse.*

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