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Femicide and the Media. Is Moral Panic Always Delusive?

by Consuelo Corradi

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In the last decade, violence against women has been a much debated topic by the Italian media. How was it discussed, and what was the outcome? The most recent European survey on violence against women, conducted by the “Public Opinion Analysis Sector” of the European Commission, found that in Italy the *perception* of this phenomenon is the highest in Europe; in 2010, 91% of Italians believed that violence against women was very common or fairly common (European average=78%), with an increase of 10 points compared to the previous 1999 survey [Eurobarometer 2010]. Awareness of violence against women as a public issue has grown in the Italian public opinion: the relentless activity of women’s organizations, advertising campaigns funded by the Ministry of Equal Opportunities, the implementation of a national telephone hotline (for female victims of violence, active 24 hours a day) and local funding for women’s shelters, have improved prevention policies and increased awareness. However, the above mentioned survey also shows how contradictory the Italian situation is: the perception of the *proximity* of violence is one of the lowest in Europe, with only 16% of Italian respondents stating that they were acquainted with a victim of violence within their circle of friends and family (European average=25%). In short, Italian respondents regard violence against women as very serious problem, but they seldom perceive it as one close to their lives.

In this paradoxical social context, Giomi and Tonello’s article fills a scientific gap, as media coverage of this phenomenon was not investigated so far. Sociologists had opinions on how well and how much media succeeded or failed in representing

violence against women, but opinions have a very different cognitive status from scientific data.

Three strong arguments are developed in the article: a survey of the 2006 TV evening news coverage of female murder cases; a discussion of the concept of moral panic; a set of conclusions on how the media represent gender violence in Italy. I will address each of these arguments.

The most compelling part of the article is, in my view, the first argument above. The authors show in a convincing way that, in 2006, there was no connection between the intensity of the phenomenon (number of female victims murdered by non-Italian male perpetrators) and the amount of TV evening news coverage. Their research design is accurate: they build a database on the six national networks for a full year, monitor all the news items in which a woman was a murder victim, analyze both quantity and quality of coverage, then compare data with police statistics.

In 2006, 188 women were murdered in Italy: 22 murders were committed by foreigners, while Italians accounted for 140 cases. However, the small number of murders “committed by foreigners produced 115 news items, that is almost *one quarter* of the total number of news items [p. 9]. “ Giomi and Tonello claim that “the level of media interest in covering the murder of women is inversely related to the rate of occurrence in terms of type of murder” [p. 8]. The TV evening news broadcast an anti-immigrant rhetoric which did not reflect the reality of female homicide, but was instrumental in approving emergency provisions against non EU-citizens. The “crusade to defend women and children” allowed right-wing politicians “to score political points against the center-left government” [p. 10]. This discussion explains the apparently paradoxical situation referred to above; it supports with scientific data a long-lasting view held by sociologists who are engaged in studying violence against women and how to prevent it: mass media can be extremely helpful in raising awareness for social issues, but for many years the Italian media have misrepresented the phenomenon. Giomi and Tonello endorse Surette’s “law of opposite.” Correct representation of reality was not used in news-making. Quite the contrary: “Whatever the media show is the opposite of what is true [...] the entertainment media present a world of crime and justice that is not found in reality” [Surette 1998, 47].

Can we apply the 2006 findings to subsequent years? The authors believe this is the case, as the following paragraph reveals:

Had the issue of women threatened by strangers been real, that is in proportion with the attention of media and government officials, it would have remained high on the agenda. On the contrary, in 2012 and 2013, the media started to pay attention to the “epidemic” of domestic violence and homicides perpetrated by husbands or boyfriends, even if the figures were not much different from those of 2006.

The panic of 2006-2007 was out of fashion, we are now ready for a new one. [p. 24]

Here, Giomi and Tonello's discussion is less compelling. The main reason is that the notion of moral panic, which is used as a theoretical framework to the survey, cannot be generalized to media discourse, but it must always be empirically tested. "Panic events come and go," they write [p. 24]. Quite true, as panic is an emotion, so it is unstable by definition. But to say that it just goes out of fashion is sociologically meaningless. Additionally, Cohen's definition of moral panic is almost always associated with deviance and it implies delusion or manipulation of events. The authors reinforce this argument by referring to Surette's "law." But is this always the case?

Starting in 2012, and with an increasing intensity in 2013, the Italian media covered more and more cases of female homicides; the evening news, talk shows, and other forms of infotainment paid greater attention to this type of violence, to the point of incorporating the scientific term "femicide" into their everyday talk. Since 1990, femicide figures recorded by official statistics are not very different through the years: one female victim is killed every 36 to 48 hours; 92% by a man, 77% by a known man, and 47% by an intimate partner (husband, partner, boyfriend) [Corradi *forth.*]. It is not clear what exactly triggered the escalation in media coverage. Was it a transition from fear against foreigners to a general fear of murderers, regardless of their citizenship? Or was it the sheer fact that murder always sells well? In my view, this is an important question that should be answered on the basis of empirical data, particularly because the femicide coverage occurred simultaneously with the high peak of the Euro-debt crisis in Italy, possibly the worst economic crisis the country is facing since WWII. Sky-high unemployment, raising poverty and heavier taxes draining the middle class wallet did not divert attention from femicide. Contrary to what Giomi and Tonello argue for 2006, concerns for the economic situation did not supersede the fear of crime.

We now come up against a new finding: Cohen's moral panic can still be applied to the present status of femicide media coverage, but it leads to theoretically different conclusions. Giomi and Tonello are correct when talking about an "epidemic": media concern about femicide was magnified in 2012-2013 even if figures were basically similar to previous years, public concern called for action to be taken, the majority of the public (and this included Facebook users and bloggers, as well as writers, intellectuals, movie-stars, bishops, and many more) accepted the threat as real, and politicians responded by approving a new Bill which introduced, among others, a fast-track lane for trials, stricter restraining orders and more severe sentences for the perpetrators, in order to prevent lethal and non-lethal violence against women. The

difference from Giomi and Tonello's 2006 discussion is that femicide is not elusive; it is as intra-ethnic in Italy as in other countries [Frye *et al.* 2005; Abrahams *et al.* 2009], i.e., more often than not perpetrator and victim belong to the same ethnic group. The fact that the femicide rate has been basically the same for years is a matter of extreme concern, since male-victim homicide has dropped dramatically since 1990, making Italy a very-low homicide country but a medium-high femicide one [Liem and Pridemore 2013]. A lot needs to be done in terms of prevention. In fact, media coverage prompted new policies and legal action for which the women's organizations had been clamoring for a long time.

Can we still frame this as moral *panic*? In his book, Cohen emphasizes that the societal reaction to the deviance is seen as partly causative of the deviance itself [Cohen 2002, 14]; he relies on Becker's assertion that deviance is not the intrinsic property of an act, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to a so-called offender. Over-reporting creates distorted emotions and perceptions, and for Giomi and Tonello, it leads to the law of opposite. But the 2012-2013 coverage is a case in which what the media represent is *not* the opposite of what is true. If we compare it to prior under-reporting, it may be a case of over-reporting, but it is definitely not causative of the violence itself. What made this femicide narrative so appealing to the media? If manipulation is always at work, who scored points against whom? Only under certain conditions moral panic and the law of opposite are valid scientific concepts. As this is their strongest theoretical claim, Giomi and Tonello should be much more specific.

The third argument of the paper consists of a set of generalizations on how the media represent gender violence in Italy. The authors argue that "perspectives used by journalists are as important for what they *include* as for what they *exclude*" [p. 10], and the 2006 coverage excluded the much more realistic probability of domestic violence which is behind female homicides, thus preserving the image of well-balanced Italian families. But the term "domestic violence" is unclear; victims are at the higher risk of femicide at the time of divorce, separation or estrangement from the perpetrator, and this cannot be described as a domestic setting; furthermore, although the perpetrator is a man known to the victim, a considerable proportion of men who kill their intimate partner have no previous criminogenic history. The authors argue that qualitative analysis of the seven high-profile cases confirm "the processes that are at work in the discourse of violence against women in Italian news coverage" [p. 20]; however, out of these seven cases, three are multiple killings or family massacres. Should any homicide incident, in which there is at least one female victim, be classified as gender violence? The authors state that de-gendering of violence, i.e., ignorance of the fact that it is connected with the larger structure of

patriarchal domination is deemed as an important side-effect of the television news discourse [p. 20], but do not clarify how one should understand patriarchal domination. If it is defined as subordination of the socio-economic status of women within the intimate relationship or the family system, the victims only partly correspond to this description. In Italy, just as in other high-income countries, femicide victims can have high levels of education and professional life, often higher than their partners [Dugan *et al.* 2003; Titterington 2006]. Is this a gendered or a de-gendered situation?

It is not clear what gender violence is in the context of this paper. When one male perpetrator kills one female victim, can we always speak of gender violence? Or, as many authors suggest, do we need a stronger criminal motivation: killing her *because* she is a woman [Radford and Russell 1992; Taylor and Jasinski 2011]? In Table 2 of the paper, out of the top-ten news items related to crime in 2005-2010, 5 are male-victim homicides and 2 are multiple killings. Giomi and Tonello seemingly refer to topics such as gender violence, rape, sexual violence, violence against women, and the killing of infants and children as if it was the same phenomenon. When we move from the 2006 evening news case study to more general conclusions, the authors' arguments are less convincing. They fail to recognize that "violence against women" is a very broad topic. Empirical investigation must narrow down different categories, because each occurs under certain conditions and a different victim-offender relationship. Just to provide a few examples which are valid for high-income countries: quite differently from femicide, rape is committed mostly by men unknown to the victim; lethal violence against women (femicide) is not necessarily an escalation of prior non-lethal violence; "ordinary men" (i.e., men with no previous crime and violence history) are as likely to murder as violent men; baby killing (or infanticide), both male and female, is mostly committed by women. We need to progress in understanding how media shape reality in this context, but a better knowledge of the "violence against women" literature is essential.

All in all, the 2006 case study is a valuable piece of empirical work. The authors succeeded in recognizing that the news coverage of femicide is not a researched topic, and they show convincingly how crucial the media system was, at that particular time, in shaping public discourse and political agendas. At the same time, the case study leaves open many questions. How new is a "new threat?" Under what circumstances the media represent as real a *real* social threat? Clear definitions, more articulated theoretical concepts are now needed to improve the knowledge of a social issue which can be, literally, vital for women's safety.

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Abstract: Mass media play an important role in raising awareness on social issues. In Italy, how do mass media cover crime? The survey of the female murder cases covered by the TV evening news in 2006 shows that media broadcast an anti-immigrant rhetoric which misrepresented reality. In this case, Cohen's notion of moral panic can be applied to capture the dynamics and consequences of media representation, but it cannot be generalized to the way media present crime. Moral panic is an empirical concept which must always be tested, especially when the societal reaction to deviance is not causative of the deviance itself. Femicide in Italy is an interesting example of this latter case.

Keywords: Femicide, moral panic, crime and media coverage, gender violence.

Consuelo Corradi is Professor of Sociology and Vice-Rector for research and international relations at Lumsa University (Rome, Italy). She specializes in the study of violence in close relations, intimate partner violence and femicide. In 2013-2017 Professor Corradi is member of the management committee of the European project "Femicide across Europe", financed by Cost-Cooperation in Science and Technology.