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# Moral Panic: the Issue of Women and Crime in Italian Evening News

by Elisa Giomi *and* Fabrizio Tonello

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, moral and political entrepreneurs have created an increasingly strong link between gendered violence and race/ethnicity within the public debate, in many European countries. Media coverage and public discussion have started to focus on cases of sex crimes perpetrated by immigrants or foreigners. The rise of neo-nationalist and anti-immigrant forces has fuelled the interest in the link between gendered violence and race/ethnicity in several European countries, with right wing populist parties and traditional conservative parties (such as the French UMP) exploiting it to promote “Law & Order” agendas [Gingrich and Banks 2006]. These societal and political settings even affect Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland, where issues related to immigration and multiculturalism had, in terms of policy, previously been rather marginal [Bredal 2005; Keskinen 2011].

Likewise, in Italy, between 2006 and 2008, a “politics of fear” pervaded public discourse and political agendas, and had a strong impact on government policies related to the issue of collective safety. Violence against women depicted in the evening news in 2006 played a major role in this process, creating a moral panic with long-lasting consequences on “security” policies.

The generalised social concern that started to spread to the issue of women’s physical and sexual safety in 2006, was accompanied by the dissemination of “anti-immigrant rhetoric.” Both reached their peak on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007 with the mur-

der of Giovanna Reggiani, which was attributed to a young man from a Rom camp in Rome. The following day, the Italian government issued Decree 181/2007 with emergency provisions that permitted the expulsion of EU citizens, and cited “safety reasons.” In response to this, the mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni (centre-left) had the Rom camp demolished by the municipality’s bulldozers. On November 1<sup>st</sup> of the same year, Meredith Kercher, a British student in Perugia, was killed, and the media immediately focused on a student from the Ivory Coast as the possible perpetrator (an Italian student and his American girlfriend were later indicted for the murder, tried, and ultimately acquitted).

New elections were held in the spring of 2008. In this politically charged atmosphere, Mr. Berlusconi obtained a comfortable victory by campaigning on public safety issues and by emphasising the role of illegal immigrants in the increase in crime in Italy. Following his return to power, the main television channels immediately started de-emphasising news about crime. In the summer of 2008, the “great fear” that had characterized 2006-2007 seemed to vanish [Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza 2010] although it was politically exploited again in 2009.

Our purpose was to explore the origins, growth, and reduction of the panic regarding violence against women, and to examine, in-depth, the media’s role in creating it. We believe the definition of moral panic given forty years ago by Stanley Cohen is still valid: “A [...] group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people” [Cohen 1980, 9].

In his book, Cohen described the process: first, a “new threat” provokes a collective response; second, public concern is magnified by extreme events that are well-publicised and call for action to be taken; third, the majority of the public accepts the threat as real and becomes extremely hostile to the group identified as responsible; fourth, politicians respond through political, administrative and legal procedures. Cohen finished his description noting that at some point the actual threat is understood to be much less important than the perceived threat, and the panic vanishes. This is precisely what happened in 2009, when concerns about the economic situation and rising unemployment superseded the fear of crime.

Before describing our research in more detail, two further important premises should be added to the idea of moral panic.

a) A vulnerable group must be involved: societies mobilize when groups traditionally perceived of as in need of special protection, notably women and children, come to be seen as at risk.

b) No moral panic is independent from the role of the media in framing the issues, assessing the threat, and proposing solutions. The very conditions in which the media operate (ownership, competition, standardised processes) are a key factor in the production of moral panic.

We also argue that television maintains its role as a “dominant” medium and sets the agenda for other media [Meyrowitz 1985], and that the role of evening news is particularly important in this process. Italian newspapers, including large-circulation sport dailies, have a combined circulation of about 4.5 million copies. A single evening news bulletin (TG1 at 8 PM) has more than 5 million viewers, and the six channels that were monitored for this study have a combined audience of 18 million people every night. In the United States in 2006, the evening news of the three major networks had an audience of 25 million, which is one American out of every twelve: in Italy one citizen out of every three sat in front of their television screen.

Table 1 illustrates which topics received the most coverage in the evening news between 2005 and 2010.

TAB. 1. *Top-ten news items related to crime broadcast by the six main evening news programs in Italy (January 2005-June 2010)*

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of items</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Meredith Kercher	11/1/2007	941	Student murdered by unknown killers in Perugia
Chiara Poggi	8/13/2007	759	Student murdered by unknown killer. The boyfriend was tried and acquitted
Tommaso Onofri	3/2/2006	538	Kidnapping and murder of an 18-month-old child
Samuele Lorenzi	1/30/2002	508	Murder of a 3-year-old child by his mother
Multiple killings in Erba	12/11/2006	499	Four people murdered by neighbours, including a young child
“Ciccio” and “Tore” Pappalardi	6/5/2006	349	Two young twins presumed kidnapped. Their death was in fact an accident
Gabriele Sandri	11/11/2007	265	A football fan killed by police
Sexual abuse in Rignano Flaminio	4/27/2007	234	Suspected sexual abuse in a kindergarten in Rignano Flaminio, near Rome (the indicted individuals were later acquitted)
Elisa Claps	3/17/2010	164	The body of a girl who disappeared in 1993 found in the attic of her church
“Satan’s Beasts”	January 2004	145	Three victims of a satanic sect found

Five out of the ten high-profile cases in the evening news involved the murders of young women (Kercher, Poggi, Castagna, Claps and one of the three victims of “Satan’s Beasts”), and five involved small children (Onofri, Lorenzi, Youssuf Marzouk in Erba, the Pappalardi brothers, and the Rignano Flaminio case). Only one story, the killing of a football fan that sparked riots in several cities, concerned an adult male. The evidence points to the news media’s extremely high interest in crimes committed against women or toddlers: in the Erba case, the two categories overlap as it includes the murders of a mother and a child.

## **2. Literature Review, Research Corpus, and Methodology**

Despite the heightened attention paid by Italian media to female victimisation, the news coverage on violence against women in Italy is not a well-researched topic. In the international literature, most empirical research on this issue, either surveys or qualitative analysis of specific cases, focus on newspapers [Soothill and Walby 1991; Clark 1992; Carter 1998; Weaver, Carter and Stanko 2000; Carter and Weaver 2003; Boyle 2005; Marhia 2008 for the UK; Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997; Berns 2004; Meloy and Miller 2009 for the US; Greer 2003 for Ireland; Korn and Efrat 2004 for Israel]. Televised news stories remain under-analysed [Meyers 1997, chapter 4; Moorti 2002; Dowler 2006]

These studies have produced similar findings. They show that the coverage of violence against women is shaped by common trends, the values held by news producers across nations, news products (tabloid and quality newspapers) and the circulation figures (at local and national levels). News coverage on violence against women appears to follow the criteria that Surette [1998, 47] calls the “Law of opposite,” which is generally found in crime reporting in the press. Our data compares women killed by their partners and victims murdered by strangers. It will demonstrate that the types of crimes, the perpetrators, and the victims that are considered most newsworthy are those that the viewers are at least risk of experiencing.

Quantitative content analyses of large samples from the UK press carried out over different periods show the consistent presence of this law. It applies to the coverage of sexual violence against women as well. It results in a disproportionate emphasis being placed on certain types of incidents, such as murder or rape, at the expense of other and far more common offences, such as battery, sexual assault and sexual harassment [Carter 1998, 228]. According to these studies, the coverage of rape, sexual assault and battery also tends to “select single events, that favour incidents or extreme violence or other markers that supposedly make the event unique”

[Cucklanz 1995, 337]. This disproportion is also evident in terms of article length: the news reports of rape and sexual assault which contain more words “tend to be either the most extreme, violent or unusual cases, sometimes involving murders or serial offenders, which do not reflect the everyday reality of sexual violence” [Marhia 2008, 20]. Findings from research based on the US context confirm this evidence: domestic battery, which is the most common form of violence against women in the US, is also the most under-reported type of crime, unless it involves rape or murder [Meloy *et al* 2009, 31]. However, our data show that crimes of sexual violence can be “over-reported” for political purposes when moral panic is involved.

In the analysis of the coverage of violence against women, an area of common interest is the portrayal of the victim: findings have been consistent across nations and over time since the classic study of Benedict [1992]: visibility and sympathy are awarded to victims according to their race/ethnicity and to their conformity to gender role models. Victims from minority or foreign backgrounds are not afforded the same type of representation in the news as Caucasian women are, and are less likely to be presented as innocent [Cuklanz 1995, 338; Meyers 1997; Moorti 2002]. For example, Meyers’s analysis of press coverage of African American victims of sexual assault shows that racial stereotypes shape the construction of guilt and innocence [Meyers 2004]. Qualitative studies have consistently found that women who transgress “appropriate” female behaviour are likely to be partially or entirely blamed for their attacks [Benedict 1992, 225; Meyers 1997, 3-4; Soothill and Walby 1991, 146; Alat 2006; Korn and Efrat 2004; Meloy and Miller 2009, 38-39].

As for the characteristics of perpetrators, their race/ethnicity and national origin have proved to be major factors of bias. Studies of tabloid newspapers both in the UK and US show that inter-racial sexual assaults by ethnic minority men tend to be over-represented, despite being a statistically unusual scenario [Boyle 2005, 70]. Qualitative studies of high profile cases, such as Benedict [1992], show that when attacks on white females by white males are reported, journalists tend to frame perpetrators’ behaviour in terms of personal ethos, whereas offences against white females by ethnic minority perpetrators are explicitly linked to race. In conclusion, scholars agree that accounts of gendered violence in both the UK and the US contexts fail to consider the intersection of race and gender, and few reports mention these among the possible causes of sexual aggression [Boyle 2005, 70].

The relationship between victims and perpetrators is also a powerful biasing factor. Classic news media research indicates stranger rape/sexual assault as one of the most over-represented sex crimes compared to its actual recorded occurrence in police statistics [Voumvakis and Ericson 1984; Soothill and Walby 1991; Benedict 1992; Cuklanz 1996; Meyers 1997; Greer 2003; Boyle 2005]. As previously stated,

assaults by someone the victim does not know are considered far more newsworthy than the statistically more diffused episodes of domestic violence/violence in intimate relationships.

In Italy, systematic research to date has only examined newspapers in terms of this data, without making reference to police statistics, so that the picture provided is limited to the function of news-making. In contrast to this, we have analysed the coverage of *all* murder cases in which a woman was a victim, over a one year period.

For practical reasons, we focused on the coverage of Italian homicides in 2006, the year when the issue of “women and children in danger” started to become visible in the evening news. Our first goal was to check if certain homicides were given more coverage than others, and if so, which ones. A database was compiled that included all the murders of women that took place in 2006. In that year, Italy experienced 188 female homicides, a comparatively low figure when compared to other European countries [Eurostat 2008]: this was the corpus of our research<sup>1</sup>.

All 188 cases were categorised according to these criteria: the relationship between victim and perpetrator, their nationality and sex, and the victim’s age. Combining the relationship, nationality and age categories, we obtained a detailed picture of violence against women in Italy in 2006. We created another database including all news items reporting the murder of women (473) broadcast by the six most watched evening news programs in 2006: three by the Italian public broadcasting system, RAI (TG1, TG2, TG3), and three by the largest commercial television group, Mediaset (TG4, TG5, Studio Aperto)<sup>2</sup>. Altogether, in 2006, these reports reached more than 95% of the evening news’ audience.

The perception of murders that was manufactured by the television coverage was compared to police statistics in order to measure the gap between the media’s representation and the empirical data in terms of the numbers and types of crime. The corpus of qualitative analysis consisted of saturation coverage cases only: the 250 news items (almost half of the corpus of 473 reports) that related to seven cases. We believed these high-profile cases offer the best expression of coverage trends specific to each news broadcast and are paradigmatic of the overall representation of social actors involved in this kind of fatality. The goals of our qualitative analysis were: a)

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat does not break down the number of homicides by gender, but the data about murders show that generally Italy has a lower rate of homicides compared to most EU countries: 1.19 per 100,000 inhabitants (Portugal 1.35, Poland 1.47, England & Wales 1.49, France 1.56, Hungary 1.81, Scotland 2.34). Among the major countries, only Germany has a lower rate compared to Italy (0.90) together with Spain (1.14).

<sup>2</sup> TG1 – the main newscast of RAI – is aired on Rai 1 at 8.00 p.m, TG2 on Rai 2 at 8.30 p.m and TG3 on Rai 3 at 7.00 p.m; TG4 is aired on Rete 4 at 6.45 p.m, TG5 – the main newscast of Mediaset group – on Canale 5 at 8.00 p.m. and Studio Aperto on Italia 1 at 6.30 p.m.

to double-check the news values and coverage trends that emerged from quantitative analyses b) to further investigate the representation of social actors involved in the reported crimes, the victims and the perpetrators, as well as the overall construction of the crime. In particular, we aimed to identify the strategies of idealisation (the innocent victim)/re-victimisation (the victim who is to blame) and of social legitimisation/stigmatisation of perpetrators, and to analyse how and to what extent issues of ethnicity and gender influenced these strategies. Our methodology drew on Critical Discourse Analysis, which aims “to discover and bear witness to unequal relationships of power which underline ways of talking in society, and in particular to reveal the role of discourse in reproducing or challenging socio-political dominance” [Garrett and Bell 1998, 6]. We also used frame analysis to investigate how the crimes turned into high-profile cases.

### 3. The Influence of the Relationship between Victims and Perpetrators, in Terms of Age and National Origin

In 2006, 188 women were killed in Italy; 162 of those cases were solved. Ninety-four percent of these deaths were caused by men acting alone. Fifty percent of them, 81 cases, were covered in the evening news. Out of the 26 murders that have yet to be resolved, six appeared in the news (23%), while twenty did not (77%). We took into account the variable “perpetrator/victim relationship” starting from a comparison between the number of actual cases in Italy and the number of similar events (187) in England and Wales in the same year.

TAB. 2. *Comparison of the composition of victim-offender relationships in murders of women in Italy and in England/Wales in 2006*

<i>Italy</i>					<i>England/Wales</i>				
Partner/ex-partner	Family	Other known	Stranger	No suspect	Partner/ex-partner	Family	Other known	Stranger	No suspect
61.7%	21%	13%	4%	14%	44%	12%	12%	20%	12%

*Sources:* Our database for Italy, Home Office Statistical Bulletin, “Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2006/07,” January 2008, for England and Wales

It should be noted that the population of Italy, about 60 million, is 10% larger than the combined populations of England and Wales, giving Italy a lower rate of women killed per 100,000 inhabitants (0.31, compared to 0.34 for England and Wales). The main difference in crime patterns is clear: women killed by persons un-



known to them or to their families account for only 4% of murders in Italy, compared to 20% in England and Wales. Partners, ex-partners and relatives of the victim account for 82,7% of murderers in Italy, but only for 56% in England and Wales. This should logically lead to media coverage that takes into account the fact that the most dangerous place for an Italian woman is her own kitchen, not a dark street corner at night.

On the contrary, we found that the picture given by Italian evening news reversed the actual trends of victim-offender relationship. Figure 1 below shows the composition of cases that were solved (162).

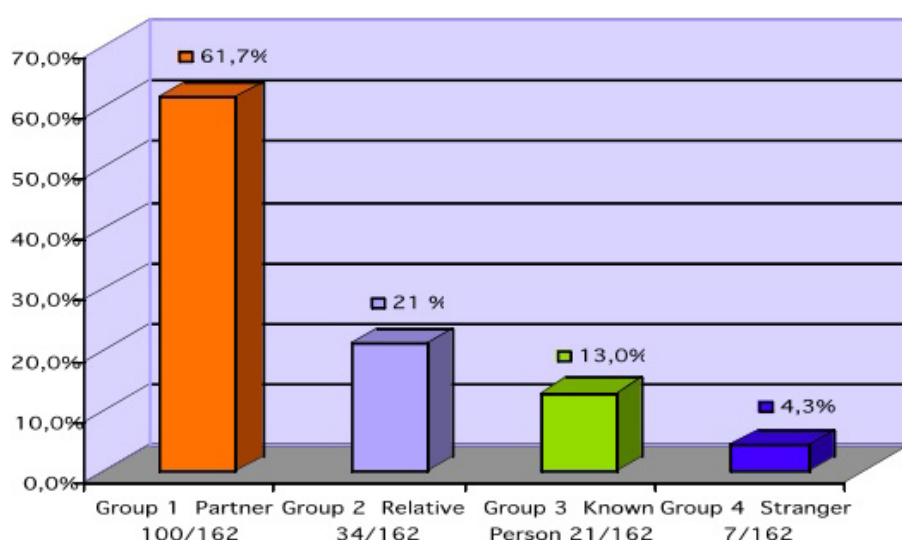


FIG. 1. Composition of victim-offender relationships in crimes committed – 2006

Source: Authors' elaboration

In 2006, women killed by a partner or ex-partner (Fig. 1, Group 1) represented the most common type of murder: 61.7 % of total female homicides. Of these cases, 40% were covered in the evening news. The second group shows that 21% of murders were cases in which women were killed by relatives (Fig. 1, Group 2); almost two thirds of these cases were covered. Fig. 1, Group 3 (women killed by friends, colleagues, or neighbours,) accounted for 13% of cases. Although only seven women out of 162, or 4.3% were murdered by strangers (Fig. 1, Group 4), more than two thirds of these cases were covered in the news. This indicates 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: among the cases solved in 2006, *nineteen* women were assassinated by a partner or relative for every *one* killed by a stranger.

Yet, the “normal” husband killing his wife was not deemed newsworthy, while any attack by a stranger, notably an immigrant, created a media event.

This bias appears even more pronounced when we consider the number of stories produced: in 2006, there were 473 of these. On average, the women who were murdered by (ex-)partners received four news items, while the average coverage for murders caused by perpetrators unknown to victims rose to 16.6 items per case. For the five cases that attracted the most attention, there were 83 news items. This fact confirms that victim-offender relationship where a stranger is the perpetrator is one of the factors that makes homicides more likely to be covered by the news [Sorenson, Manz and Berk 1998; Boyle 2005, 79]. This factor seems to act powerfully in the specific area of violence against women: Marhia’s basic statistical analysis of a sample of 136 newspaper articles covering rape and other sexual assaults that appeared in the UK press (broadsheets, tabloids and articles on the BBC website) in 2006 confirmed the “Law of opposite.” Accordingly, the majority (54.4%) of assaults represented in the press sample were perpetrated by strangers, while just over one-third (36.8%) of the attacks were perpetrated by known assailants. In contrast, the police estimate that only 8-17% of rapes in England and Wales are attacks by strangers: 83-92% of rapes are carried out by known assailants, predominantly (45%) current partners, with former partners accounting for a further 11% [Myhill and Allen 2002, 30; Marhia 2008, 23].

As for the national origin of perpetrator, of murders committed by foreign individuals, mostly non-UE citizens<sup>3</sup>, there were 22 of these, that is 13.58% of total solved murders, while Italians accounted for 140 cases (86.4%). Foreigners, therefore, were responsible for a minuscule number of crimes against women, but received far more intense coverage for their acts: the 14 murders committed by foreigners produced 115 news items, that is almost *one quarter* of the total number of news items dealing with women’s murders, broadcast in 2006 (473). The 14 episodes were less than *one tenth* of the solved murder cases in which a woman was the victim.

The perspective [Goffman 1974; Hartley 1996] adopted by evening news bulletins was simple, portraying multi-ethnic cities as the most dangerous places for women. The evening news offered the public a single focus, emphasising both the stranger-victim relationship and the impact of foreign perpetrators: Italian women were at risk because of the criminal immigrants roaming the streets. Facts did not get in the way of television reporters, producers and executives who remained fixated on this narrative even when it was the opposite of what really happened: most vio-

<sup>3</sup> Perpetrators were extra-communitarian in 17 cases, from Poland (2) and from Romania (3).

lent crimes – perpetrated against both Italian and foreign women – were committed within the family, as we have already noted.

Why was this narrative so appealing? The answer is twofold: first of all, perspectives used by journalists are as important for what they *include* as for what they *exclude*. Focusing on the remote possibility of aggressions by foreigners, the perspective excluded the much more realistic probability of domestic violence which, in Italy as well as in other European countries [Canu 2008], is behind an important proportion of female homicides. The routine of domestic/intimate violence and the frequency of deadly attacks were hidden, preserving the image of well-balanced, harmonious families, an image cherished both by the Church and by politicians of all colours.

Secondly, we found that there was direct political interest by right-wing politicians in exploiting the issue of murdered women in order to score political points against the centre-left government. This was possible because, in 2006, three major private news channels were owned by Mr Berlusconi, who doubled as head of the Opposition in Parliament. In addition, two out of the three public channels had editors who were politically close to Mr Berlusconi for most of the year. We shall return to this aspect in our conclusions.

We will complete the picture by noting that the mobilisation of editors and reporters in the crusade to “defend women and children” is also visible in the age-bias we found in the coverage of the 2006 murder cases. Only 7% of women murdered between 1992 and 2006 were under 18.

In the evening news we monitored, female victims over the age of 65 were covered in only 28% of cases (compared with a coverage of 50% of cases of all ages), while children and teenage victims received attention of the evening news 93% of the time. Older women often made the news only because they were part of larger episodes of violence. On the contrary, 13 out of 14 cases in which the female victim was under 21 found their way into the evening news in 2006.

All in all, these 13 crime episodes produced 225 news items, which is almost half of the total. On average, each of the cases involving a victim under 21 obtained 14.4 news items while the cases where the victim was over the age of 50 were, on average, covered by 3.5 items. We only took into account the events important enough to be broadcast by all six of the main television channels.

## 4. Qualitative Analysis

### 4.1. *The Representation of (Alleged) Perpetrators: Immigrant as a Criminal*

The news items that reported on the seven most covered cases in 2006 accounted for more than half of the total news items taken into consideration (250 out of 473). In particular, the top three cases (1.6% of the total) counted for almost 30% of news items broadcast, producing 135 of them. These cases had an impact on public opinion far beyond the number of news bulletins they generated: Italian newspapers follow the lead of the previous night's evening news in designing their front pages, and invariably amplify television reports with "investigations," commentaries and pictures. It is not unusual for an Italian daily newspaper to dedicate 6-8 pages to a crime story deemed particularly newsworthy, thus conveying the feeling that something really shocking and unheard of has happened.

The qualitative analysis of these seven high-profile cases confirmed the obsession of Italian evening news programs with "immigration as a danger to women and children": in fact, all the news bulletins on unsolved murders that pointed to immigrants and strangers as the probable perpetrators. This happened even when there was no evidence, and even in cases when the actual killer *was already identified as an Italian*. As Cohen wrote, "The repetition of obviously false stories [...] is a familiar finding in studies on the role of the press in spreading mass hysteria" [1980, 33].

The top case in 2006 was the one of Hina Saleem, a young Pakistani woman killed by her father with the help of her brothers-in-law, and buried in the back yard of her house (62 news items). The other saturation coverage cases also focused a priori on foreigners as "enemies." In the murder of Raffaella Castagna, a mother killed in the northern town of Erba together with her 3-year-old son Youssuf, her mother and a bystander obtained 47 news items. The news stories that were broadcast on the day after the murder identified Castagna's Tunisian husband, Azouz Marzouk, as the main suspect. After it was revealed that Marzouk was abroad at the time of the crime and that Raffaella's father publicly hugged him and his parents, television bulletins insisted that the actual killers were other North African immigrants, active in drug dealing and known to Marzouk. According to their reconstruction of the events, Marzouk who was "a shady character himself" (SA December 12<sup>th</sup>)<sup>4</sup>, was "the real target of killers" (TG5, December 15<sup>th</sup>). This approach in the news bulletins remained consistent throughout the entire crime's coverage: "Investigators are persuaded that

<sup>4</sup> Studio Aperto will be indicated as "SA;" when more items are broadcast by the same news bulletins on the same day, these are indicated as 1°, 2°, etc.

he [Marzouk] must know that he has the key to solve the whole mystery, no matter what direction it will take” (TG5 December 16<sup>th</sup>). Weeks later it was ascertained that two Italian neighbours who had had financial disagreements with Raffaella Castagna were responsible for the multiple killings.

Another Italian woman, 44 year-old Annamaria Giuseppina, was killed together with her husband, Camillo Pane, and their two children, Maria (18) and Eugenio (22) (39 news items). Since the very first day of media coverage, it was said that the motive for the massacre must have been due to economic reasons: all six news bulletins broadcast on March 28<sup>th</sup> reported Tunisian Mohamed Zenzani (Camillo Pane’s brother-in-law) as the main suspect. The intuition about the multiple murders’ motive was correct, but an Italian turned out to be responsible for it: Claudio Tomaino, Pane’s nephew, who was also his partner in illegal real-estate activities.

The fourth saturation coverage case (34 news items) involved the ferocious killing of Marzenne Topar, a 41-year-old Polish woman found dead in her home with Italian husband Angelo Cottarelli and their 17-year-old son Luca. This family’s massacre immediately looked like an execution-killing. While investigators stressed that “foreigners might be not involved” (TG1 August 28<sup>th</sup>), many news items insisted that “three men with a foreign accent were seen *knocking at the house door*” before the murder (TG5 August 29<sup>th</sup>); threatening “killers from the East” (TG1, TG2, TG3 August 28<sup>th</sup>) were mentioned, together with the recurring “gangs of Extra-communitarians,” that had allegedly burgled the family’s home. A few months later, the prosecutors established that the massacre was the work of Vito and Salvatore Marino, two men from Southern Italy, who had grievances against Cottarelli, a former accomplice.

The fifth case, that of Jennifer Zacconi, killed by her ex-partner when she was about to give birth, was covered in 29 news items: this is the only case where immigrants were *not* suspected, as investigators’ attention immediately focused on Jennifer’s partner, Lucio Niero. However, Niero tried to divert the investigation by using Jennifer’s mobile phone to send her mother a message after the murder. Television bulletins emphasised the detail that Jennifer was supposedly in Romania.

Another much-covered case concerned the homicide of 23-year-old Elena Lonati, whose body was found wrapped in a plastic bag in a church, hidden on a concealed stairway that lead to the pulpit. A young man from Sri Lanka, who used to work in the church as sacristan, was said to be a suspect, and within a few days, he was arrested and confessed to the crime. The event was covered by 24 news items.

The last case involved Luciana Biggi (15 news items), a 35-year-old Italian woman killed in the centre of Genoa, where “fear creeps along the walls” (SA April 28<sup>th</sup>)

and where one “lives side by side with extra-communitarian gangs who make a living out of bag-snatching and drug-dealing, and threatening and assaulting passers-by” (TG4 April 30<sup>th</sup>). After the third day, investigators began to focus on the man who would later be indicted and tried for the murder, her former boyfriend Luca Delfino. Nevertheless all news broadcasts relentlessly indicated “gangs of young extra-communitarians” (TG5 April 30<sup>th</sup>, May 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>), “Moroccan drug-dealers” (TG2 April 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>), or generic “extra-communitarians” as suspects in the crime. This happened in 10 out of 15 news bulletins and was often repeated within the same item; in three other news items, immigrants were not explicitly identified as suspects but were presented as the social actors responsible for Genoa town centre’s degradation: “Locals do not consider this murder to be an isolated case [...]”; “I was assaulted two or three times by extra-communitarians” (TG4 April 29<sup>th</sup>); “here they are, the streets where the robberies and pillages happen, where South Americans and North Africans fight and provoke brawls” (SA April 29<sup>th</sup>).

An “immigrant as a criminal” perspective – as we have called it – was clearly at work in the coverage of Biggi’s murder, and sometimes it was so strong that the news bulletins’ discourse went as far as inverting the order of cause-effect logic: after reporting that the main suspect was Luciana’s Italian boyfriend, TG3 felt the need to “reassure” its audience by saying that Moroccan drug-dealers were also taken into consideration, “especially in the light of the increasing need for security expressed by those living in the city centre” (TG3 April 30<sup>th</sup>).

Actually, the murder of Luciana Biggi in April was only the beginning of increasingly widespread anti-immigration rhetoric. Three of the seven high-profile coverage cases also owed their visibility to their having happened within the same urban area and in the same period: in Brescia, in August, when moral panic regarding immigrants reached its 2006 peak. Hina Saleem was murdered on August 10<sup>th</sup>, Elena Lonati on August 18<sup>th</sup>, and Marzenne Topar and her family on August 28<sup>th</sup>.

As we have seen, these cases are very different in terms of the victim-offender relationship, the national origin of all parties involved, and to the murderers’ motives. In the first case, a Pakistan man kills his own daughter for not accepting his authority and submitting to his will, while in the third case, two Italian men murder a Polish woman so as to exact revenge on her husband. The case of Lonati is the only one where an Italian woman is killed by a foreign man, albeit one who was acquainted with her and not a stranger roaming the streets.

Although these details display marked differences between the cases, the mere coincidence of the time and place of the crimes was enough to create a panic about a “crime wave in Brescia.” Despite the city’s Chief Prosecutor insisting that the events were unconnected and that the number of crimes in Brescia that month was in line

with annual police statistics, television news aired interviews with local residents who claimed that “fear is increasing, inside and outside the home” (TG1 August 28<sup>th</sup>, September 2<sup>nd</sup>), or that they were “ready to evacuate Brescia” because “cities are only safe when nothing happens” (TG1 August 29<sup>th</sup>, September 2<sup>nd</sup>). Again, the security issue was a dominant one: news broadcasts covered the sit-in against immigrants organised by right-wing activists and the demonstration organised by the Northern League “to ask for better security against this slaughter” (TG2 August 29<sup>th</sup>).

As in the coverage of Luciana Biggi’s murder, the xenophobic attitudes displayed in news reports on the Brescia cases go beyond the “simple” pointing to one or more immigrants as probable perpetrators and become a more general process of “racialising criminality”: generalisations are made and a connection between the crimes and the presence of immigrants in the country is explicitly or implicitly suggested. Once again, all six television broadcasts frame the events in terms of “immigrant as a criminal,” consistently airing comments such as “there *is* a foreigner problem in Brescia,” “these people are gaining too much power” (TG5 AUGUST 21<sup>st</sup> on Lonati), “they are silently invading us” (TG2 and TG1 AUGUST 13<sup>th</sup> on Saleem), and “it is their fault, we have to send *all* of them away” (TG1 AUGUST 28<sup>th</sup> on Topar). In two cases (those of Hina Saleem and Elena Lonati, where perpetrators were immediately identified as foreigners), the success of this perspective also relied on another and more specific one, the “culture clash” perspective.

We conclude by noting that the construction of “racialised fear” is a process commonly found in 2006 news reports on gendered violence in other European countries as well. Often such a process relies on devices similar to those identified by our analysis, as in newspaper and Internet coverage of three cases of rape concerning Finnish women in the same city, Oulu, between 2006 and 2007. Keskinen’s study shows that, despite police statements that there was no evidence that the cases were connected or that the perpetrators were the same, the events were virtually merged to form one case, which the newspapers claimed involved foreign perpetrators: a situation that turned out to be true for only two of the three cases [Keskinen 2011, 14].

The logic behind the news-making, which was also apparent in the British press at that time, can be traced back to the same dynamic: according to Marhia’s study of the coverage of sex crimes by tabloids and broadsheets, only six out of 112 stories in the sample appeared on the front page, four of them describing “attacks perpetrated by non-British nationals whose “foreign” status was typically highlighted in the headline, using the assaults to insinuate that allowing dangerous foreign “others” into the country exposes the British public to sexual violence and criminality” [Marhia 2008, 19]. In Italy, the gap between the news coverage and reality appears even more

striking when we make a closer analysis of the month of August: while news broadcasts focused on crimes in Brescia, establishing links that were unsupported by police evidence and giving voice to people's fears and the racist statements of the centre-right coalition, another 11 women were murdered. One was killed by a neighbour, while another, a woman from an Eastern European country, possibly a sex-worker, has never been identified. The other nine women were murdered under "typical circumstances": by their husbands (6), by their sons (2), and by a son-in-law (1). All of the perpetrators were Italian, with the exception of a Tunisian man who killed his wife, who was also from Tunisia. Yet these cases received very little media attention.

## **5. Ideal Victims: Angels, Mothers, and even "Normal Girls"**

All of the victims from the seven saturation coverage cases that we analysed, underwent a process of idealisation that produced the effect of increasing the cruelty of the killers. The idealisation of victims in Italian evening news was achieved by three rhetorical constructs: murdered women were presented as either a) a "Daddy's Girl," b) a "Mother," or c) an "Angelic Woman." Often, a combination of the three figures is found. As we shall see, a fourth persona, the "Liberated Woman" is also present, which is a novelty.

Victims are transformed into Daddy's Girls through a process of "infantilisation," a very common technique in the Italian evening news. In the cases of Hina Salem, Elena Lonati and Jennifer Zacconi every single news item referred to them as "girls," or even "little girls," instead of "women," while Maria Pane was often described as being "not even 18-years-old."

The construction of the Victim-as-Mother was mostly deployed in the coverage of Jennifer Zacconi. Other than being "nine-months pregnant" (information provided in the introduction of 28 out of 29 news items), not much else was said about Jennifer except that she was "a girl like many others" (TG3 May 8th). She seemed to make the news only because of the male foetus she was carrying, as shown by the continuous references to him, which was mentioned about twice in every news item. The bombastic language (the "kid barbarously murdered by his father" or "the son conceived with her murderer" TG1 May 7th) went far beyond the usual reporting.

Jennifer, "a 20-year-old, whose only dream was to become a mother" (SA May 9th) and who "only wanted to peacefully live her life together with her baby" (TG5 May 8th) was represented in forms that drew her closer to the self-abnegating heroine of the "maternal melodrama," a genre, which has been well analysed by Linda Williams – where motherhood becomes the goal to which all other desires or ambi-



tions are sacrificed [Williams, 1990]. This mythopoietic process reached its peak in the coverage of Jennifer's funeral, where she was constructed in the double role of virgin and mother, crystallised as a contemporary Catholic Madonna.

Raffaella Castagna was only mentioned as the wife of Azouz Marzouk or as the mother of her son Youssef, whom "she would defend to her death" (TG5 December 16th). The attention of television news broadcasts focused on Marzouk, an immigrant from Tunisia and by definition a suspect in the murder. Little was said about Raffaella, who was idealized by combining the nurturing traits of the mother and those of the "angelic" woman, who redeems herself and takes care not only of her relatives, but of the entire world.

While Zacconi and Castagna embodied the perfect mother and wife, 23-year-old Elena Lonati was transformed into the quintessential daughter, "seldom late for lunch with her family" and often caring for her "very old grandmother" who lived in a nursing home (TG4 August 20th). Elena, whose picture with long, blond hair was shown over and over again, appeared to the public as "a kind and beautiful girl" (TG3 August 20th), "respectable [...], showy but not eccentric" (SA August 22nd), a "simple girl" who "used to attend her local church" (SA August 21st).

Like the character of God-fearing Lucia Mondella in Alessandro Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*, Elena Lonati embodied all of the traditional feminine virtues: compassion, modesty and, of course, chastity. These virtues were explicitly noted by one news account: "A white rose on Elena's coffin, to symbolise her youth and purity" (TG4 August 23rd).

Television bulletins cast Zacconi, Castagna, Lonati and Pane as the perfect victims, bearing no fault for what happened, because they did not trespass, did not exceed – the expression "not eccentric" is a very telling one – the limits imposed on their gender, especially those regulating sexual behaviour. Besides being "simple, normal girl[s]," all of these women were "pure": the figures described in news coverage were asexual in different ways (the Daddy's Girl, the Angelic Woman) or they implied an "appropriate" sexuality, developed within the limits of traditional female roles (the mother and wife).

Commenting on her year-long study on sexual assaults reported in the *Daily Mail*, Boyle noted that the victims of inter-racial assaults by (black African American) and minority ethnic men were, without exception, "presented as innocent, even when aspects of their behaviour could have opened to a complicit victim narrative" [Boyle 2005, 71]. This was the case of Hina Saleem who, despite her Pakistani origins, was presented in the discourse on television news as a western girl.

To portray her in the same vein as the victims mentioned above was quite a challenge even for the imaginative Italian television reporters: Hina was at odds with

Lonati and the others' modest lifestyle and total devotion to family and private sphere. She was described by friends, employers, and neighbours as a very "extrovert" girl, "very beautiful and talkative" (TG2 e TG3 August 13th, TG2 August 17th), who could not stand the strict rules imposed by her parents: she "used to smoke and drink beer sometimes" (SA 13 August, 3°), as well as "wear miniskirts and go out at night" (TG1 August 13th).

The visuals used in these reports reinforced this construction: in all six news broadcasts, Hina was portrayed in seductive poses, her body wrapped in tight dresses; images were shown of her lying semi-naked in a bed while performing in an amateur video shot by her friend. From the very beginning, news broadcasts repeatedly described her as someone who "wanted to become a film actress" (TG1 August 14th) or "dreamed of the silver-screen" (TG1 August 15th).

What is interesting here is that any references to the conventional values of the Daddy's Girl or the Angelic Woman were abandoned. On the contrary, the values of consumerism and personal success took over: Hina's dream to become a film actress was presented as nothing more than the innocent and legitimate ambition of a 20-year-old, "a dream shared by many Western girls" (TG1 August 14th), and therefore evidence of Hina's "normality." In the discourse constructed by televised news programs, normalisation coincided with "westernisation," which in turn was identified by the adoption of consumerist and self-exhibiting attitudes "typical" of Italian youngsters: "You know [she used to dress] like an Italian girl: jeans, short t-shirts leaving her midriff exposed...like a regular girl" (TG5 August 12th). Yet "by dressing in a Western style and loving an Italian boy, [Hina] was defying the family's patriarchal tradition" (TG1 November 13th).

For Hina to function as a model of a "liberated women" and thus the perfect victim, the strategy of westernisation was required. Her father was described not as a deranged individual, but as the representative of a barbaric and underdeveloped culture: "For her, a 20-year-old girl growing up in the Brescia region, in a Pakistani family with austere customs, she was not permitted the luxury of freedom." (SA August 15th). This perspective confirms the results of media research on sex, crime and race: violence committed by Caucasians is often described by the media as individual aberrance, whereas minority ethnic perpetrators are represented as emblematic of their entire community [Kozol, 1995; Chiricos and Eschholz 2002; Moorti 2002; Stabile 2006; Meloy and Miller 2006; Moorti 2002]. In order to prevent the stigmatisation of the Pakistani community (if not of the Muslim world as a whole) Brescia's Chief Prosecutor rushed to point out that Mohamed Saleem had a "distorted vision of faith," yet television news programs continued to use this perspective and insisted on claiming that "the murder was imposed on him [Mohammed Saleem] by his

religious beliefs” (TG2 August 12th, TG1 August 16th), by the “rules of their ethnic community and culture” (TG5 16 August, Studio Aperto August 12th), even by “Muslim rules.” Politicians from the centre-right seized the opportunity, stating that this murder revealed a “religious problem, an Islamic problem that has arrived on our doorstep” (Daniela Santanchè from right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale interviewed by TG4, August 16th), underlining the inefficiency of Government action and asking for “urgent measures to be taken against illegal immigration” (Alberto Cavalli, TG1 August 29th).

Both Rai and Mediaset television news tended to frame Hina’s murder in terms of a “culture- clash,” although Mediaset bulletins displayed a higher number of elements consistent with this perspective, such as comments on the (presumed) rules of Islam and generalisations about Mohammed Saleem’s behaviour, even making references to the problems of multiculturalism and integration. We counted 16 statements, evaluations, and comments of this kind within the 9 news items dedicated to Hina’s murder by TG5, 19 statements in 12 news items for TG4 and 29 in the 19 bulletins broadcast by Studio Aperto. RAI television news was also similar (TG1 had 11 comments out of 10 news items; TG2 7 out of 7, and TG3 5 out of 5).

The cultural clash perspective was also seen at work, although not as strongly as in the previous case, in Mediaset news coverage of Elena Lonati’s murder. Their reporting was paradigmatic of the process of constructing racialised fear and of generalising the threat posed not only by Chamil – the man from Sri Lanka who killed her – but also by his entire community (“not allowed to take part in the funeral”) and by the immigrant population tout court: “integration sounds like a mockery [in the streets of this city] that are full of anxious and scared inhabitants” (SA August 22nd).

The discourse constructed by television news is interesting for another reason as well: members of Elena’s family excluded the possibility of any sexual violence against her during the crime, yet some news bulletins, particularly Studio Aperto, offered this as the murderer’s motive. This innuendo reinforced the culture-clash perspective. After Elena’s murder, “local inhabitants and the increasingly numerous immigrants” were described as “two worlds that barely touched one another, two parallel realities that would ignite on first contact like an exploding fuse” (Studio Aperto August 22nd). Yet evoking the spectre of sexual abuse also served to further stigmatize the foreign perpetrator, and to construct him as a dangerous “other” on the basis of racialised sexual features. The “exploding fuse,” according to the interpretation of Studio Aperto, lay in the uncontrollable sexual ardour of Chamil: “Elena and Chamil did not know each other. Maybe he had noticed her, and when she walked through the church gate, as beautiful and elegant as she was, something must have clicked in him” (Studio Aperto, August 22nd).

Casting black or ethnic minority men in the role of the “sex-beast” [Boyle 2005, 69] is a common strategy in news reporting on inter-racial gendered violence, and it was also employed in the case of Luciana Biggi. The portrayal of this woman was made particularly complex and often contradictory by diverse discourses, ideological forces, and cultural influences found in the coverage. Luciana underwent the same process of infantilization as previously noted with other blameless victims: 13 out of 15 news items described her as a “girl” or “young woman” when the victim’s identity and her age (36) were already known, and actually mentioned in the same items.

Despite infantilization, Luciana did not get the same benevolent portrayal as Lonati. Like Hina, she used to wear miniskirts, yet the approval of Italian television journalists was more ambiguous: Luciana was described as an “athletic girl, single and extrovert, a regular city-centre club-goer” (TG5 29 April). Sentences such as this one, apparently neutral or even positive, appeared over pictures showing Luciana in tight fitting outfits during her workout, or dressed up, wearing make-up and high heels. Her behaviour and personality were labelled as “self-confident” and “exuberant” and her “attraction to night life,” shared by thousands of young people, was presented as a risky, “fatal” habit. She “might have cultivated dangerous friendships, even with extra-communitarian men.” “The disappearance of her bag would suggest that it was a robbery. But is it possible that a girl ventured alone in a dark alley, at 3:00 AM, in an area of the city that is definitively unsafe?” (TG5 April 28th).

The resulting impression of this media construction was that of the provocative victim who “had it coming.” Yet it is worth noting that Luciana was not faulted for her sexual freedom and autonomy, but rather for fraternizing with foreigners and moving at night in an area of the city depicted by reporters as a “no-man’s land [no-go area]” due to the presence of immigrants.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, immigrants were the real targets of the stigmatisation strategy used by news bulletins, particularly those broadcast by the networks owned by Berlusconi, (Mediaset): as in the case of Lonati, detectives say that there was no evidence of sexual violence; nevertheless, after suggesting that Luciana might have died at the hands of immigrants, TG4, TG5 and Studio Aperto insinuated that she was also the victim of a gang rape. These news bulletins, therefore, tended to mitigate Luciana’s strong, unconventional traits in order to promote viewer solidarity with her. Luciana was eventually repositioned in the role of the perfect, modern-day “liberated woman,” exposed to the threats posed by “bad” men (immigrants) and therefore in need of the protection of the “good” ones (Italians).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that the crime rate in that area is not particularly different from the Italian average, and therefore very low by international standards.

## 6. Discussion

In 2006, there was only *one* murder similar to that of Giovanna Reggiani's, whose death was at the hands of a stranger, a perpetrator who was from an ethnic minority, and this played a major role in creating a moral panic with xenophobic implications in the year that followed. In contrast to this, there were *one hundred* women murdered by their partners or ex-partners, *thirty-four* by relatives, and *twenty-one* by neighbours or other people they knew. Yet the picture offered by Italian evening news inverted the picture one may obtain from the statistics regarding violence against women: an almost non-existent phenomenon – women killed by strangers and/or foreigners – was turned into a widespread danger, while the reality of women as victims of their partners or former partners was minimized and, *de facto*, concealed.

The qualitative analysis of seven high-profile cases confirms these trends and illustrates in detail the processes that are at work in the discourse of violence against women in Italian news coverage. These processes are strictly connected to each other and can be described as follows: a) “externalisation” of violence that was presented as the work of someone “other” than us; b) instrumentalisation of gendered violence in order to construct a racialised fear that formed part of a widespread anti-immigration rhetoric.

In regards to the first point, portraying violence as the work of “aliens in our midst” is a tendency that has been analysed since the influential study of Soothill and Wallaby [1991, 36], yet in the news items we analysed the process of framing the perpetrator as a “folk-devil” [Cohen 1980] was inclined differently, according to his national/ethnic origin. The differences in the representation of Niero and Salem, two similar and equally stigmatised figures of child-killers, were striking. Whereas Niero – who murdered Jennifer Zacconi, the woman who was nine-months-pregnant with his child – is represented as a mentally ill individual (he is the “other” insofar as he is a “crazy man,” a “monster next door”), Salem's crime – the killing of his own daughter Hina – is linked to his culture (by definition he is the “other”). In the case of gendered violence committed by Italian perpetrators, the news accounts examined promoted a view of gendered violence as a problem of “isolated pathology or deviance;” when the perpetrator was a black or ethnic minority man, criminality and violence were racialised, essentialised and turned into characteristics pertaining to certain ethnically or racially defined groups. This construction, in two of the high-profile cases analysed – Hina Saleem and Elena Lonati – was reinforced by framing them in terms of a culture-clash, with victim and perpetrator becoming symbols of Western civilized culture and barbaric Islamic culture, respectively. In the television news discourses, gendered violence was always

“alien” and therefore exorcized, either in the form of individualisation or of racialisation.

An important side-effect of such a process is that violence against women is de-gendered, that is, presented in forms that “ignore the social roots of this violence” and conceal its connection to “the larger structure of patriarchal domination and control” [Meyers 1997, 117-8; 10]. It is worth noting that the term “patriarchy” appears in only one news feature, reporting on Hina Saleem’s murder, out of the 250 studied in our sample.

The patriarchal structure of control obviously characterising not only the alleged “underdeveloped” cultures described by television news, but the Italian one as well, was confirmed by means of a discursive process that idealised the victims. This process in part relied on a normative construction of femininity.

In the evening news we studied, all of the victims are depicted as “ideal,” thus stressing their innocence and, as a consequence, contributing to the stigmatisation of their (often alleged immigrant) attackers. We have found that such an idealisation process strongly relies on gender themes, yet the “sexual history” of victims can no longer be considered as the main criteria to divide them into virtuous or venal women and therefore into good or bad victims [Humphries 2009, 19]. More accurately, the process acts differently, due to the interplay of discourses about gender on the one hand and of race/ethnicity on the other. The victims who conform to conventional sexual roles remain “virgins” (to use Benedict’s popular conceptualisation) and are celebrated as such; yet those who break the traditional rules of female decorum are no longer considered “vamps,” or, at least, they are not faulted for such behaviour. On the contrary, victims who are described as autonomous, self-confident, concerned with their physical appearance, enjoy the night-life and are even sexually uninhibited become the icons of that Western freedom which is jeopardised by the presence of immigrants.

Idealisation of victims also functions through a discourse on defenceless females that conversely cast Italian men in the role of defenders, “thus constructing simultaneously masculine honour and patriotic will” [Keskinen 2011, 2]. In 2006 Italians were called to defend “their” women and, symbolically, the Italian cultural identity (of which women – as child bearers – are particularly representative) and, ultimately, the borders of the nation, threatened by the “invasion” of immigrants. Gendered violence was therefore used to construct a dichotomous rhetoric, as it became a marker of difference between “us” and “them.” From this perspective, women’s bodies were instrumentalised as well, becoming both symbolic and material battlefields on which group struggles were played out. In particular, their bodies became part of a moral panic, manufactured by media, in which immigrants, with

no distinction of national/ethnic origins, were presented as folk-devils. In addition to the news bulletins about women murdered in 2006, 292 news items were broadcast about women who had been sexually molested. Most of these indicated immigrants as probable culprits. Our data clearly confirm Cohen's statement: "The media have long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right" [1980, 16].

In a survey from October 2007 (*before* the Reggiani killing that amplified the hysteria), 88% of respondents were sure that "crime ha[d] gone up" in the last five years. Strikingly, this quasi-unanimity was not sustained by personal, direct observation: the answer to the question has crime "gone up *in the area where you live?*" (our emphasis) was very different: only 50% of citizens agreed [Demos-LaPolis 2008].

More than half of Italian citizens (50.7%) considered immigrants "a danger to public order and personal safety" [*ibidem*]. This percentage is seen to be notably higher when understood in comparison to answers to the same question in November 2005 (40%) and in November 2008 (36%). What changed was not the crime statistics (homicides stabilised more or less at the same – historically low – level), but the interest of media.

Is there any relation between consumption of evening news and opinions about crime? As mentioned, there was a vast difference between the perception of crime in general and the direct observation in the area of residence: this gap (38 percentage points in 2007) corroborates the thesis that media, and specifically television, distort the image of criminal events in the mind of many citizens and that they are mainly responsible for the "pictures in our heads" as Walter Lippmann would say.

A more specific link was found by the Osservatorio's survey. Thirty-six percent of citizens said that they feared for their physical safety. The percentage of people polled who watched television for less than two hours per day was 33.4%. Among those who watched for more than four hours was 47.7%: a 14-point gap in the perception of danger for their physical safety. The percentage among those who watched TG3 (the evening news with the least amount of interest crime news in terms of coverage) was 26%. The percentage among people who watched TG1 and Studio Aperto (the evening news with the most coverage of crime news) was, 41.4% and 42.2% respectively [Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza 2010]. In our monitoring of the 2006 saturation coverage cases, TG3 was responsible for 40 news items, TG1 for 71 news items and Studio Aperto for 126 items.

Cohen's analysis of the process that creates moral panic is confirmed by our data: first, the "new threat" of immigrants provoked a collective response by politicians and media. Second, public concern was magnified by well-publicized, extreme events, such as the murders in Brescia over a short period of time, killings that called

for action. Third, the majority of Italians accepted the threat of immigrants to women and children as real and became extremely hostile to the group, particularly Romanians. Forth, politicians responded through political, administrative and legal procedures such as the “Pacchetto sicurezza,” (a group of security-related government policies). Fifth, at some point in 2008 the threat started to be perceived as less important than previously thought, when the interest of the media shifted to other topics.

The manufacturing of the “big scare” in Italy should also draw scholarly attention to the topic of concentration of ownership in the media sector, specifically television. The explosion of the number of channels, and the possibility to watch television via the Internet, have reduced the interest in anti-trust laws and their ability to prevent, or to correct, distortions in television markets.

However, the Italian situation shows how much political and economic power can be concentrated in the hands of a single person and what the consequences can be. Mr. Berlusconi was able to appoint the editors of his three networks and have them support his political action: in 2006, Carlo Rossella (TG5), Emilio Fede (TG4) and Mario Giordano (SA) were his employees and behaved as such. Mr. Mimun (TG1) and Mr. Mazza (TG2) were equally close to the centre-right coalition and showed little sign of professional autonomy.

Events of moral panic do have consequences. First the Prodi government, and later the Berlusconi government, made immigration control a priority. Several laws were passed by Parliament, notably one in 2009 that made the very fact of being an undocumented immigrant a felony. The Italian Coast Guard routinely intercepted boats of African men, women and children seeking refuge in Italy and forced them to return to Libya, a violation of human rights. Politicians did not refrain from shocking statements about how to handle the wave of refugees landing on the island of Lampedusa: “Shoot them.”

## **7. Conclusive Remarks: A Return to Moral Panic**

Our findings can contribute to advancing the discussion about the concept of moral panic, that has been criticized in sociological literature. According to P.A.J. Waddington, moral panic “is a polemical rather than an analytic concept” because it implies “that official and media concern is [...] without substance or justification.” [Waddington 1986, 258]. In other words, this author takes issue with Cohen’s comparison between the dimensions of the problem and the dimensions of the social response to it: “Conceptually, the notion of “moral panic” lacks any criteria of proportionality without which it is impossible to determine whether concern about any



[...] problem is justified or not” [*ibidem*: 246]. Other critics, such as Cornwell and Linders [2002], take similar positions on the issue of proportionality.

While most social scientists exploring the field continue to accept “moral panic” as a useful tool [Ben-Yehuda 1990; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009; Best 1990 and 1995], we want to address the issue of “proportionality” with the help of our findings. How can we evaluate the attention given to a social issue and decide whether or not it is disproportionate to the threat described? *Sometimes*, it is impossible to determine the gravity of a particular situation, notably when we are dealing with threats that may or may not materialise in the future: nuclear war, or the greenhouse effect. However, we agree with Goode and Ben-Yehuda that “threats that are more familiar, ongoing, and based on the behaviour of specified individuals and the impact of measurable conditions are more or less calculable.” [2009, Kindle Edition, pos. 1213].

Firstly, the impact of measurable conditions. Clearly, the number of murders in a given year is measured, as are the number of car accidents, work-related fatalities and so forth. If the panic is related to an issue about which the figures cited by the media are fuzzy, clearly inflated, or distorted, we can say that the criteria of proportionality are met. As we have seen in our cases, evening news used a bombastic rhetoric, talked a lot about an “emergency,” or a “crime-wave” but did not give sound figures, nor put the numbers in context.

Secondly, critics of moral panic contend that studies using this concept underestimate the scale of the problem itself and therefore have no basis to discuss the “proportionality” of responses (Waddington 1986, 246]. In our research, we could establish that in 2006 there was only *one* murder of an Italian woman by a stranger and ethnic minority perpetrator whom she did not know: clearly, the threat was not there. On the contrary, there were *one hundred* women murdered by their partners or ex-partners. This is evidence that an almost non-existent phenomenon was turned into a widespread danger, and provoked disproportionate reactions by the media and the government, while the reality of women being victims of their partners or former partners was minimised.

Thirdly, panic events come and go. Whilst the years 2006-2007 saw the issue of immigration and crime very much at the forefront, 2008 was a “transitional” year and in 2009 the media attention to this issue fell, and in the polls it clearly left centre-stage to unemployment and concerns about the economic situation. 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.

Last, but not least: public attention could easily be made to focus on one issue that was somehow arbitrarily selected. In the year 2006 there were about 250,000 car accidents, with 5,669 fatalities, much more than in other European countries such as the United Kingdom (3,297), France (4,709) and Germany (5,091): why was the focus of media attention not on that? There were hundreds of thousand work-related accidents, with 1,170 casualties: why did government officials neglected that issue? Because these social phenomena were not the subject of moral panic.

We can conclude, therefore, that the issue of proportionality between a social issue and the response of society can be dealt with. In Italy, in 2006, the murder of women by foreigners was indeed perceived as a “new threat,” particularly after well-publicised, extreme events such as the killing of Hina Salem, Meredith Kirchner and Giovanna Reggiani, tragedies that “called for action.” As a result, the majority of the Italian public accepted the threat of immigrants as real and became extremely hostile to this group that were identified as being responsible. At the same time, politicians responded through political, administrative and legal procedures, often hastily and poorly conceived. Cohen’s intuitions are still valid.

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## **Moral Panic: the Issue of Women and Crime in Italian Evening News**

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**Abstract:** In the years 2006-2007, Italy experienced a moral panic largely fuelled by concern for women's safety being "threatened" by immigrants. This empirical research, based on a very large database (six national networks monitored for an entire year), focuses on the coverage of female homicides in Italian evening news, studying gendered themes and racial biases that shaped news accounts. Our findings support the use of "moral panic" as a valid scientific concept.

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*Keywords:* Moral panic, women, violent crime, evening news, ethnic representations

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