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Comment on Bandelli and Porcelli/1. Against Moral Panic, in Defence of Data

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Comment on Bandelli and Porcelli/1

Against Moral Panic, in Defence of Data

by Elisa Giomi

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I believe the study by Bandelli and Porcelli [2016] is very interesting and contributes to our understanding of how the meaning of Violence against Women (VAW) is modified and instrumentalized in the Italian media and in political discourse.

However, in my view there are several methodological weaknesses, as well as interpretations that are not adequately supported with empirical data. I will highlight the aspects which, in my view, require further clarification so that the authors' line of reasoning can become more persuasive; I will explain why I believe that the notion of moral panic does not apply to the phenomenon being considered; finally, I will engage with the authors' arguments against gender as a key aspect in VAW and in interpersonal violence in general.

1. About the Macro-Level Analysis of News Items

Phase 1 of the empirical analysis consisted of a keyword search in the Factiva database. The results are illustrated in paragraph 5.1 "*Media Overexposure of a Stable Phenomenon.*" The keyword search showed 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 [*Ibidem*, 13].

In Phase 2, the authors conducted a thematic analysis of 385 news items in circulation fifteen days prior to and after the day of two major events, which were “selected for their relevance as feminist mobilizations and political incidents” (one in November 2012 and one in February 2013) [*Ibidem*, 10]. The empirical evidence derived from this macro analysis led the authors to conclude: “the fact that media texts on “*femminicidio*” revolve around social movements and the politics of political representatives rather than around specific criminal cases,” suggests that the rapid increase in media exposure to the phenomenon might reflect a change in awareness and primarily be triggered by advocacy and political action instead of being a reflection of an actual increase in homicides.

I fully agree that the recent, widespread use of the term “*femminicidio*” in Italian news discourse cannot be ascribed to an increase in the extension of this social phenomenon, which has sadly remained stable over recent years. However, in order to support the conclusion the authors draw from Phase 2 more effectively it would be useful to be specific as to what the term “mainly” – too generic to be used in an essay of this type – means: how many of the 385 news items that were analysed were of a “mainly political nature” and how many were not?

Furthermore, I question whether the political nature of these news items might depend on the particular time-frames under analysis, and on the typology of the events that were chosen (the Convention *NoMore* urging Prime Minister Mario Monti to take meaningful action against VAW; the *One Billion Rising* flash mob against VAW coordinated by *Se Non Ora Quando*). What happened in other periods during the year, when VAW-related political events or grass-root mobilizations were not in the forefront of public awareness? We know that in 2013 the number of femicides per month changed very little, so it would be interesting to verify if the nature of the news about *femminicidio* remained equally homogeneous. Do they still revolve around political/media/cultural events or, on the contrary, do they tend to concentrate more on specific crimes and commentaries on crimes? Are political representatives and feminist activists still the main “claim makers” in these articles? Such a comparison, I believe, would definitively confirm the authors’ hypothesis of *femminicidio* having become a stable category of political discourse (of course, this is just a suggestion for further research).

A point that I find particularly challenging is Bandelli and Porcelli’s examination of misuses, distortions, and instrumentalisations of the term “*femmmminicidio*”: they uncover the presence, in this narrative, of discursive strategies that are typical of the politics of fear [Paragraph 5.2], highlight the intertwining of the *femminicidio* narrative with a progressivist discourse [Paragraph 5.3] and the exploitation of the VAW social issue as a

viable moral stage for different discourse agents in search of the electorate's consensus [*Ibidem*, 19].

2. Regarding the Overexposure of Domestic/Partner Violence and Moral Panic

Based on their analysis, the authors observe that the term “femicide” was re-worked and adapted to a different cultural and national context from the original one:

on the one hand – [they explain] - the term has been adopted in Italian political discourse with the meaning popularized by Ciudad Juarez's activists, that is to say as the misogynistic male murders of women; on the other hand, it re-contextualizes the atrocities linked to intricate criminal networks in Mexico to an Italian family issue [*Ibidem*, 17].

This domestic/partner violence framework – Bandelli and Porcelli conclude – is the specific marker of the femicide discourse “made in Italy.”

However, in the discussion in Paragraph 5.2 “A Gender Frame of Domestic/Partner Violence,” some aspects appear to me a) methodologically unclear; b) in need of more empirical evidence; c) contradicted by data.

a. It is said that

The thematic and representational analysis shows that the term “femminicidio” is framed as a crime of domestic and partner violence [*Ibidem*, 17]

and that it

conveys the idea that male homicide of women is an emergency occurring in heterosexual families [*Ibidem*].

However, if I have understood correctly, the samples used in thematic and representational analysis were different: the first focused on 385 news items (of different typologies), and the second on quotations from activists from feminist social movements/nationally renowned politicians extracted from (an unstated number of) news wires. Therefore it is not clear to me what kind of discourse is being analysed here: news discourse or political discourse? In other words, who is responsible for framing *femminicidio* as a crime of domestic and partner violence? Journalists (as well) or (only) actors in the political arena?

b. With the exception of Dandini's monologue, all the sources being quoted throughout the essay (that is news wires reporting politicians' statements) present

no reference whatsoever to the “Italian family” or to “heterosexual relations” as the sites/causes of femicide: “women” and “men” are quoted in only one case [footnote number 11], and in all the others only general claims of “chauvinism” [footnote number 14] and “cultural norms” [footnote number 11] are mentioned. As this part is the keystone of the authors’ thesis, I believe it should be supported by a more effective use of empirical evidence (I am sure a large quantity has been produced); above all, some form of quantitative indication should be provided, otherwise the authors’ interpretation appears to be subjective and questionable. For instance, how many occurrences were found in the thematic and representational analyses (Phase 2 and Phase 3) that explicitly re-contextualise femicide “as an Italian family issue?”

c. However, the most problematic part of the authors’ thesis is the total lack of reference to factual data describing the phenomenon under analysis, that is – if I have understood correctly – violence against women in Italy, with particular regard to its lethal outcome. No claim to an “overexposure of domestic/partner violence” in public discourse [*Ibidem*, 19] can be made in the absence of a comparison with empirical findings, and this is even more so if we contend that such overexposure is at the heart of a moral panic. A key issue in the concept of moral panic is the proportionality between the attention given to a social problem and the threat described [Giomi and Tonello 2013, 24]. Tonello and I framed the 2006 Italian media hype about lethal VAW in terms of moral panic just because of the quantitative and qualitative biases found in TV coverage of the issue. Evening news overrepresented the (uncommon) murders of Italian women perpetrated by strangers as well as the (extremely rare) murders of Italian women perpetrated by a stranger and ethnic minority perpetrators (one case); on the contrary, the (very common: 100 cases) murders perpetrated by (ex)partners were underrepresented. In 2013, the same disproportion cannot be found between the *femminicidio* narrative as it is described by the authors and the statistics on murdered women. Italian politicians’ and newspapers’ attention may be instrumental, I agree, yet if the *femminicidio* narrative drags the “enemy – as the authors state in their own words – from the streets to inside the home of the typical Italian family” [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 20], it is because this is where lethal aggressions against women most frequently occur: in 2013, more than 70% of women (122 out of 179) were killed by their (ex)partners or another family member(s), and this number has significantly increased (16.2%) since 2012 (105 victims) [Eures 2014, 10]. Likewise, if the perpetrator is “depicted as a typical heterosexual man” (although as I have already shown, this statement is not accurately supported), once again it is because statistics depict him like that in the first place: in 2013, 81 men killed their partner (89% of total IPV-Intimate Partner Violence homicides), and

79/81 of victims were female. Only two men only were killed by their male partner (and only one woman was killed by her female partner) [*Ibidem*, 22].

Finally, although femicides perpetrated by ex(partners) and by other relative(s) in 2013 were the most diffused typologies of women being murdered, these were the least covered. In terms of news items, they were outnumbered by both killings perpetrated by a person known to the victim and by killings perpetrated by a person unknown to the victim [Giomi 2015].

All this data cannot be ignored when complaining that the original term “*feminicidio*,” in Italy is re-contextualised and framed as a crime of domestic and (heterosexual) partner violence. Of course my discussion only has *raison d’être* if we assume, as I do, that the authors’ concern regards substantive matters, and not the “betrayal” of the original, Mexican *femminicidio* etymology *er se* which, honestly, would not warrant a whole essay – unless in another discipline such as Linguistics – and their and my cognitive efforts.

As to the qualitative side, I am not persuaded that the authors’ analysis of the *femminicidio* narrative also applies to public discourse in general. In news discourses, which represents an important realm of public discourse, a gender paradigm is hardly “applied to the official reading of domestic/partner violence and VAW”: with few exceptions, in 2012 and 2013 Italian press [Gius and Lalli 2014; Giomi 2015], *femminicidio* is being used as a fashionable, eye-catching label to be stuck on what remains exactly the same discourse as ever: lethal IPV is framed by the ideology of “romantic love” or justified as the result of loss of perpetrator control/a conflict between victims and perpetrators.

3. Regarding “Feminist Discourse,” Gender and Violence

Of course, I agree with the authors when they say that increasing women’s participation in politics cannot be the solution to VAW; however, it must be acknowledged that this is an aberrant and instrumental decoding made by Italian politicians, rather than the “preferred reading” prompted by feminist analysis. On the contrary, although no distinction is made in this article between the different strands of feminist thinking or politics (e.g. liberal vs. radical, to cite the main one), it is worth mentioning that many Italian activists and scholars are seriously critical of gender mainstreaming, equal opportunities policies, pink quotas (and even participation in institutional politics *tout court*). This brings me to two additional points of disagreement.

a) My feeling is that studies on Gender-Based Violence that are discussed in Paragraph 2, claims by (unidentified and never quoted) Italian feminist activists, and generic references to chauvinism or sexism made by either left-wing and right-wing Italian politicians, are all given equal weight and labelled as “feminist discourse.” This seems to me a stereotypical representation, instrumental in depicting the “feminist discourse” as a hegemonic one;

b) More in particular, I take issue the authors’ equation of “the public imaginary constructed by *femminicidio* in Italy, with all its aberrations, and (international) feminist studies. These two “narratives” are held equally responsible for producing a biased/incomplete understanding of the VAW phenomenon. I think it is important to keep them separate and to consider the contribution of feminist scholars to our understanding of interpersonal violence in all its forms.

Example: the authors’ statement that women can be violent too, is widely supported by feminist research in several disciplines and with regard to a plurality of contexts and manifestations [e.g. Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey 2016; Widdows and Marway 2015; Gartner and McCarthy 2014; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2013; Walklate 2012; Seal 2010].

However, with specific regard to female IPV, I am sceptical of the “gender symmetry” argument brought up by Bandelli and Porcelli [2016, 20], mainly because of the inconsistencies found in the body of research that has developed it. It is known as the “Family Violence” approach [Dobash and Dobash 2004], and

has been met by a rigorous examination of its knowledge base, a pertinent critique of methodology, and a theoretically informed problematisation of the (lack of) understanding of gender [Enander 2011, 107].

This is not the place for a detailed explanation, but it should be noted that one of the most widespread criticisms of these studies concerns their reliance on measurements – such as the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) – originally developed by Straus, that asked respondents about conflicts in their relationships and the ways they solved them, rather than framing questions in terms of crime or violence [Williams *et. al.* 2014, 363].

In addition, not all of the authors quoted among the sources used to illustrate findings in support of gender symmetry believe that differences in male and female IPV are limited to the slight differences mentioned by Bandelli and Porcelli: Johnson [2005], for instance, introduced the concepts of “intimate terrorism” and “common couple violence” in order to keep these two phenomena distinct; Kimmel simply should not appear in this list: he believes that gender symmetry claims

are often made by those who do not understand the data [...] or based on disingenuous political motives, attempting to discredit women's suffering by offering abstract statistical equivalences that turn out to be chimerical [Kimmel 2002, 1356].

Finally, a remark about the authors' critique of the gender framework. There is no doubt that "the gender of the victims and offenders can only be one of the multiple factors of violence" [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 21]; however, a vast literature examines this variable because this is one of those producing the largest, most widespread and consistently found disproportions in both offending and victimisation patterns, in all typologies of violent crimes. The essays in the recent collection edited by Gartner and McCharty [2014] offer valuable testimony to the relevance of gender in many of the crimes mentioned by Bandelli and Porcelli: infanticide, family massacres, violence against children, same-sex IPV. As to lethal violence, men largely outnumber women in both offending and victimisation, to the exception of infanticide (a typically female crime, at least in Western countries) and domestic violence: this is the only category where victimisation risk to women is higher than to men. Internationally, these patterns remain consistent [e.g. Wykes and Welsh 2009, 37; Britton 2011, 27; Davies 2011, 27; Eures 2013 for Italy].

I share the authors' concern about the risks of the Italian debate on VAW's focusing solely on lethal violence; likewise, I agree that when women are always portrayed as victims and men as perpetrators, this feeds a "stereotypical representations of domestic/partner violence" [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 19]. At the same time, important, crucial differences should be taken into consideration when reflecting on women and men's relationship to violence.

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Abstract: Elisa Giomi's commentary is an answer to Bandelli and Porcelli's essay "Femicide in Italy. 'Femminicidio,' Moral Panic and Progressivist Discourse" [2016]. Although Giomi assumes that Bandelli and Porcelli effectively illustrate the instrumentalization of lethal violence against women in Italian political discourse, yet she criticizes their reading of the "*femminicidio* narrative" as a phenomenon of moral panic that locates the threat in the typical Italian heterosexual family/couple: all the available empirical findings confirm that these are precisely the contexts where lethal aggressions against women most frequently occur. The author also disagrees with the authors' conclusion that the *femminicidio* narrative authorized "the application of a gender paradigm to the official reading of domestic/partner violence" in 2012/13 Italian public discourse. Finally, she contends that in their essay the "feminist discourse" is represented in a stereotypical way, one that is instrumental in depicting it as a hegemonic discourse.

Keywords: Moral Panic; Gender Violence; News Discourse; Gender Symmetry Debate; Italy.

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