

# Whose responsibility is it? Secondary victimization in the Italian press representation of intimate partner violence

AG AboutGender  
2025, 14(28), 01-24  
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## Abstract

Gender plays a key role in crime, as evidenced by the existence of a specific category of offences in which gender constitutes the underlying motive: male violence against women.

Despite its structural and cultural roots, as highlighted by the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011), this violence is frequently represented as a matter of private deviance (Belluati, 2021; Saccà, 2021a) and victims are portrayed as partially co-responsible for the violence they endure (Gius & Lalli, 2014; Hewa, 2021; Lalli, 2021; Saccà, 2021b, 2024). This process of secondary victimization tends to shift at least part of the responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim (Busso et al., 2020; Niccolini, 2020; Saccà, 2021b).

Based on this assumption, this study – conducted within the framework of the PNRR Research “STEPSISTER-STereotypes and PrejudiceS In preSs represenTation of gEndeR-violence” – analyzes news articles on intimate partner violence published in 2024 by 28 national newspapers (n=2091). Through quantitative-qualitative content analysis, the study aims to assess whether and to what extent the stereotypical frames and narratives that have historically shaped secondary victimization in the Italian press are still detectable or whether the representation has started to change. Overall, violence is still frequently framed in terms of jealousy and family disputes, resulting in a de-emphasis on the perpetrator in the former case and the normalization of violence

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**DOI:** 10.15167/2279-5057/AG2025.14.18.2591

in the latter. Nonetheless, some shifts are observed: the "raptus" frame, used to depict violence as a sudden loss of control, and references to "crime of passion" and romanticized narratives have significantly declined. While progress is evident, the representation of perpetrators remains inadequate, and victims are not yet fully acknowledged in their role. This framing can lead to tertiary victimization and increased levels of misjudgments in court (Saccà, 2021a, 2024; Massidda, 2021).

**Keywords:** gender-based violence, secondary victimization, social representations.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Gender plays a key role in crime, as evidenced by the existence of a specific category of offences in which gender constitutes the underlying motive – namely, male violence against women. This is a pervasive, structural and worldwide phenomenon, even in contemporary societies. Indeed, about one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner at least once in her lifetime (WHO, 2021; UN Women, 2025).

Defined by the Istanbul Convention as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (Council of Europe, 2011), this crime is recognized as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men" (Council of Europe, 2011) that are reproduced and reinforced by culture and perpetuated through social norms and institutional practices. In this regard, male violence against women is a product of patriarchy and, as such, can be fully understood only within the broader socio-cultural context underlying it, that is permeated by stereotypes and prejudices (Hunnicutt, 2009; Connell, 2013; Saccà, 2021b; WeWorld Onlus, 2021; Bianchi & Cuevas, 2024).

However, the recognition of male violence against women as a violation of human rights has been a long and gradual process, promoted by supranational institutions both universal (e.g. the United Nations) and regional (e.g. the European Union) (Manente & Boiano, 2021) that led to the development of common policy frameworks and preventive strategies. The first international legal instruments in this regard were the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" (CEDAW<sup>2</sup>), adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, and the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of the joint work of both authors. The research design and overall supervision are to be attributed to Professor Flaminia Saccà, the extraction of the specific data used in this article to Dr. Maddalena Carbonari. The analysis of the data and the drafting of the manuscript were carried out on an equal and collaborative basis.

<sup>2</sup> The document is available at this link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

“Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women” (DEVAW<sup>3</sup>), that clearly highlighted the social roots of GBV and the responsibilities of states in developing measures to challenge it. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, represented another pivotal moment in the establishment of a normative framework on GBV with the “Beijing Platform for Action<sup>4</sup>” (United Nations, 1995).

This process culminated in 2011 with the adoption of the “Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence”, widely known as the Istanbul Convention, that represents the first legally binding international instrument to prevent and counter violence against women, which the Convention fully recognizes as a form of human rights violation and gender-based discrimination.

In Italy, efforts to combat violence against women, alongside the ratification of international treaties, have evolved through the introduction of specific legal instruments and broader reforms of Italian criminal law. In this regard, the two most relevant tools are the “Pink Code” and the “Red Code”.

The former is a prevention project, developed in 2011, aimed at establishing an integrated system for managing cases of violence against women and providing a timely and non-revictimizing response that prioritizes victims' needs and dignity (Lorenzi et al., 2022).

Law No.69/2019, commonly referred to as “Red Code”<sup>5</sup>, adopted in 2019, speeded up the judicial process, increased the penalties for existing offences and introduced new crimes, including “Non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit images or videos” or “Revenge Porn”.

Finally, a new bill is currently being debated in the Italian Parliament. It aims to introduce femicide as an autonomous criminal offence, with the objective of specifically recognizing the killing of a *woman because she is a woman*.

Despite the institutional acknowledgment of the cultural roots of gender-based violence, its social and cultural representation still fails to fully capture its structural and systemic dimensions.

In Italy, the public debate on the issue has emerged more prominently in recent years and studies on the topic underscore the tendency of national media to portray a stereotyped and distorted representation of male violence against women (Gius & Lalli, 2014; Giomi, 2015; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017; Saccà & Massidda, 2018a, 2018b; Belluati, 2021; Saccà, 2021b, 2024), with a few notable exceptions (e.g. the Manifesto of Venice, 2017<sup>6</sup>). In general, such violence is framed

<sup>3</sup> The document is available at this link: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/eliminationvaw.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The document is available at this link: <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995>

<sup>5</sup> The document is available at this link: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/07/25/19G00076/sg>

<sup>6</sup> The Manifesto is available at this link: <https://www.fnsi.it/upload/70/70efdf2ec9b086079795c442636b55fb/0d8d3795eb7d18fd322e84ff5070484d.pdf>

as a private matter rather than a collective issue and the responsibility of the author is frequently downplayed or partially shifted onto the woman's conduct or behavior (Saccà, 2021a, 2024).

These stereotypical frames also permeate the justice system, where mechanisms of secondary victimization are not infrequently reproduced, potentially compromising the principle of equal justice.

In this paper, we present the main results of the analysis of a vast database of articles on gender-based violence published by 28 Italian newspapers in 2024, with a specific focus on secondary victimization in articles addressing domestic violence. The project is grounded on the findings of two previous studies that highlighted the endemic tendency to re-victimize the women and to minimise men's responsibilities for their crimes, both in the courts and in the press. The first, funded on call by the Italian Department of Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and coordinated at a national level by Flaminia Saccà, in partnership with Differenza Donna, had analysed over 16.000 national newspaper articles and 282 court sentences between 2017 and 2019. After that, with the research team, we decided to continue monitoring the social representation of male violence against women with the Research Project of National Interest "STEP - Stereotypes and prejudices: the social representation of gender-based violence and contrast strategies ten years after the Istanbul Convention", funded by the Italian Ministry for University and Research<sup>7</sup>. The project investigated the narratives of gender-based violence in 16 Italian newspapers between 2020 and 2023.

These experiences have led to the launching of the "STEP Observatory - Research and Information", a national and independent Observatory on the social representation of male violence against women in the media, aimed at implementing actions to promote gender equality that support a correct, respectful and inclusive social and media representation of gender violence<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The project is coordinated at national level by prof. Flaminia Saccà (Sapienza University of Rome). It involves also Messina Unit (coordinated by prof. Milena Meo), Molise Unit (coordinated by prof. Fedele Cuculo) and INDIRE (coordinated by Fausto Benedetti)

<sup>8</sup> The Observatory was promoted and coordinated by prof. Flaminia Saccà (Sapienza University of Rome). It involves the PRIN research team, expanded to include other colleagues with expertise in gender issues and media studies, as well as the major Italian journalistic organization, such as: Equal Opportunities Commission of the National Federation of the Press (FNSI), the Equal Opportunities Commission of the National Council of the Order of Journalists (ODG), the Equal Opportunities Commission of USIGRAI and GiULiA journalists (an Italian acronym for United Free Independent Women Journalists).

## Methodological note

In light of the above, this study – conducted within the framework of the PRIN 2022 PNRR Research “STEPSISTER-STereotypes and PrejudiceS In preSs represenTation of gEndeR-violence”<sup>9</sup>, coordinated by Flaminia Saccà for Sapienza Unit – has analyzed news articles on *intimate partner violence* (IPV) published in 2024 by 28 national newspapers<sup>10</sup>, with a specific focus on mechanisms of secondary victimization. The corpus consists of 2091 items.

The decision to focus specifically on *intimate partner violence* stems from the fact that it is one of the most widespread forms of male violence against women (UN Women, 2025). In Italy, for instance, with reference to femicides, in 2023, out of 117 women murdered, 63 were killed by a current or former partner/spouse (ISTAT, 2023).

This type of abuse (which includes physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence) is also particularly prone to stereotyped and distorted representations in media and public discourse (Saccà, 2024). Indeed, this is often not recognized as such, as it tends to be normalized within the framework of romantic relationships, something to be tolerated rather than condemned. This tendency is also highlighted by a recent study on young people (Fondazione Libellula, 2024), which shows that abuse within intimate relationships is frequently not identified as such due to a confusion between the concepts of love and violence, ultimately leading to the legitimization of the latter under the frame of love.

Through quantitative-qualitative content analysis, the objective is to assess whether and to what extent the stereotypical frames and narratives that have historically shaped secondary victimization in the Italian press are still detectable or the representation has started to change. The analysis appears particularly relevant also in light of the symbolic turning point marked by the femicide of Giulia Cecchettin by her ex-partner Filippo Turetta, at the end of 2023, that stimulated a wide public reflection on the gendered dynamics underlying violence against women, contributing to a shift from a private to a public framing of the issue and enhancing the visibility of its systemic nature.

Given the remarkable amount of data, as the database from which the corpus was drawn includes nearly 4,000 articles, a fully manual/human content analysis was not an option. Therefore, we opted to collaborate with a software company specializing in news media, which tailored a

<sup>9</sup> The project is coordinated at national level by prof. Rosalba Belmonte (Tuscia University) and divided into four units of research: Tuscia Unit (coordinated by prof. Rosalba Belmonte), Sapienza Unit (coordinated prof. Flaminia Saccà), Messina Unit (coordinated by prof. Milena Meo) and Molise Unit (coordinated by prof. Fedele Cuculo).

<sup>10</sup> The newspapers analyzed are: La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno; Il Messaggero; Il Gazzettino; La Nuova Sardegna; Corriere della Sera; Il Giorno; La Nazione; Il Giornale; Il Tirreno; La Stampa; Il Tempo; Libero; La Repubblica; Corriere Adriatico; Corriere della Sera (ed. Roma); Avvenire; La Repubblica (ed. Roma); Il Mattino; Il Fatto; Quotidiano; La Sentinella del Canavese; La Verità; Metro (ed. Milano); Metro (ed. Roma); Il Sole 24 Ore; Il Manifesto; Secolo d'Italia; Il Riformista; Il Foglio.

bright new software for the project. This tool was created using an artificial intelligence system, trained on the basis of prompts provided by the research team. Specifically, the categories of analysis were: the date of the article, the newspaper, type of violence mentioned, the relationship between victim and offender, the reported motive, possible presence of bias – such as secondary victimization, exoneration of the perpetrator, blurring of male responsibility –, and who the article gave the right to speak to (the offender, the victim, the relatives of one or the other).

For each of these labels, we provided a clear definition and practical examples, which the company used to code the data. Fine-tuning the software to a reliable and significant method of analysis required several months of work. Indeed, while some of the items proved to be accurate (such as the forms of violence and the relationship between victim and offender) others required thorough checking and revision, especially the more qualitative ones (such as those related to possible biases). A manual sample check was therefore carried out and the labels and definitions were reviewed. In the end, however, the tool has proven effective for the core aims of the study.

## **Secondary victimization and social representation of male violence against women**

Secondary victimization was defined in 2006 by the Council of Europe as “the victimization that occurs not as a direct result of the criminal act but through the response of institutions and individuals to the victim” (Council of Europe, 2006<sup>11</sup>). The same document emphasizes the responsibility of states in contributing “to raising public awareness of the needs of victims, encouraging understanding and recognition of the effects of crime in order to prevent secondary victimization and to facilitate the rehabilitation of victims”.

Moreover, the Istanbul Convention claims that the parties should take measures that, among other things, are aimed at avoiding secondary victimization (Council of Europe, 2011, art. 18).

In Italy, the recent “Report on Secondary Victimization”, presented in May 2022 to the Senate of the Republic, further specified that secondary victimization “is carried out by the institutions with which the victim comes into contact, when they act without following international and national guidelines and fail to guarantee respectful and protective behavior, such as to avoid harming the victim’s personal dignity, psychophysical health, and safety” (Parliamentary Inquiry Committee on Femicide and Gender-Based Violence, 2022).

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<sup>11</sup> The Recommendation (2006) of the Committee of Ministers on assistance to crime victims has been recently updated with the Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)/2. The document is available at this link: [https://criminaljusticenetwork.eu/contenuti\\_img/Raccomandazione\\_CM\\_REC\\_2023\\_2.pdf](https://criminaljusticenetwork.eu/contenuti_img/Raccomandazione_CM_REC_2023_2.pdf)

Examples of secondary victimization can be found in court rulings, judicial debates, official expert evaluations, and reports written by psychologists and social workers, as well as in the arguments of defense lawyers or in the language used by law enforcement officers who lack adequate training in this area. More specifically, this form of victimization occurs when: a) a woman is accused of manipulation or of having hidden motives for denouncing the man; b) she is stigmatized for her behavior, clothing, or choices; c) the trauma she experienced is denied or minimized; d) abuse is downplayed or redefined (e.g., violence is described as a “dispute”, rape as a “sexual act”); e) a woman is required to file a report in spaces that do not guarantee her privacy; f) when the risk associated with the violence is not properly assessed; g) her difficulty in escaping abuse is attributed to inaccurate causes (such as emotional dependence) rather than to the dynamics and consequences of violence itself.

Overall, this process constitutes a blame-shifting strategy aimed at implicating the victim in her own victimization on a semantic level, which ultimately deprives the woman of both justice and empathy within the courtroom, even before a verdict is reached. It is precisely within this cultural climate that the woman must then face the trial, and it is within this same symbolic humus that all the actors involved – law enforcement, lawyers, judges, and witnesses – are called to act.

From the perspective of the social representations of male violence against women, secondary victimization contributes to framing violence as a phenomenon in which the victim is at least partially responsible for the harm suffered. In this regard, the woman is often subjected to a mechanism of *victim blaming*, which is also reproduced and reinforced by the media. Indeed, news media play a crucial role in shaping how social phenomena, including gender-based violence, are collectively perceived and interpreted. As a primary source of information, they contribute not only to the dissemination of facts but also to the construction of meaning.

Drawing on framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), media narratives – by emphasizing certain aspects while omitting others – can amplify dominant viewpoints and marginalize alternative interpretations (Taccini & Mannarini, 2025). Thus, they contribute to shaping the collective imaginary, influencing public opinion, and, ultimately, determining which issues are included or excluded from governmental political agendas (Sorice, 2020; Saccà, 2021b; Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023; Taccini & Mannarini, 2025).

However, the national and international literature on the topic highlights that social representation of male violence against women is often distorted and partial because the press adopts stereotypical and biased frames to depict the problem. This tendency appears to be independent from the specific context and media system (Richards et al., 2011; Hart & Gilbertson, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2019; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b, 2024; Balica et al., 2022; Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023; Meltzer, 2023; Slakoff, 2023; Karageorgos et al., 2024).

Male violence – especially *intimate partner violence* (Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023) – is typically portrayed through *episodic framing* (Gross, 2008) that obscures the power dynamics underpinning it (Taylor, 2009) as well as its structural and cultural roots. This type of framing does not allow acknowledgement of the violence as the manifestation of systemic inequalities sustained and reinforced by the socio-cultural context, the patriarchy, in which such violence is embedded (Magaraggia, 2018; Giomi, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2019; Saccà, 2021a, 2021b, 2024; Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023).

Violent acts are often represented as isolated and episodic events (Sela-Shayovitz, 2018), confined to the personal and private domain (Giomi, 2015; Brancato, 2018; Belluati, 2021; Belmonte, 2021, 2024; Saccà & Belmonte, 2022), concerning only the man who commits the crime and the woman who suffers it. Moreover, journalistic narratives tend to focus on victims' behavior and characteristics, suggesting that they might have somehow provoked the perpetrator (Karageorgos et al., 2024). As a result, the stereotypical frames portray violence as a man's reaction to a woman's behavior deemed – explicitly or implicitly – as transgressive (Abis & Orrù, 2016; Busso et al., 2020; Saccà, 2021a; 2024), shifting at least part of the responsibility from the offender to the victim (Monckton-Smith, 2012; Gius & Lalli, 2014; Lindsay-Brisbin et al., 2014; Abis & Orrù, 2016; Busso et al., 2020; Niccolini, 2020; Hewa, 2021; Lalli, 2021; Saccà, 2021b; 2024). It occurs, for instance, when the article implies a causal link between the woman's decision or behavior and the crime committed, using expressions such as “she wanted to break up with him” or “she was having an affair”, or when the focus is on what the victim was wearing at the time of the assault or on her blood alcohol concentration.

This process is usually accompanied by an omission regarding the identity of the offender or by discursive strategies that de-emphasize his responsibility, mitigating his intentions, actions or character (“he was a good person”, “a gentle giant”). Hence, the power asymmetries underlying male violence against women have, as a secondary effect, the tendency to distort the factual reconstruction when the perpetrator is male and the victim is female. The result is a narrative that fails to clearly frame the events: violence “happens” rather than being committed, and the author of the crime is not immediately identified. What emerges is a persistent, repeated, and often unconscious omission of the facts.

The process of secondary victimization, ultimately, can lead to tertiary victimization, reinforcing gender biases and stereotypes within the justice system and perpetuating gender inequalities (Saccà, 2021b; 2024).

Alongside these representations, the press often relies on a set of discursive and rhetorical strategies that the Australian philosopher Kate Manne (2018; 2020) conceptualizes as *Himpathy*. This mechanism consists of taking empathy away from the victim in order to redirect, at least part of it, toward her offender, who will benefit from it, both at a social level, in terms of preservation



of his reputation, and at a judicial level, through the ex-ante recognition of mitigating circumstances.

One of the ways in which *Himpathy* is employed in news media is by adopting the self-exonerating and victimizing perspective of the offender: he cries, he is regretful, he “loved her so much”, he was depressed, or he was overwhelmed by a sudden outburst of rage (“the raptus”). Thus, unlike victims of other crimes, who are certainly not asked to account for the crime they have suffered, women who experience male violence are often subjected to this very form of scrutiny. A man who is stabbed, attacked by the mafia, or robbed would not typically be asked whether he did something to provoke his murderer, mobster, or thief, nor would these criminals ever be portrayed as kind, compassionate, or loving. Yet in the case of violence against women, this reversal of responsibility and humanization of the perpetrator occurs rather frequently.

In this regard, these “exonerating narratives that hyper-privileged men tend to be the beneficiaries of” (Manne, 2018, p. 23) reflect the unequal power relations between genders and contribute “to a tendency to let historically dominant agents get away with murder – proverbially and otherwise – vis-à-vis their historical subordinates. In the case of male dominance, we sympathize with him first, effectively making him into the victim of his own crimes” (Ivi, p. 201).

Overall, this mechanism leads women to be three-times victims: they are victims of the violent crime suffered (primary victimization); they are victims of the stereotyped journalistic narratives and the judicial system that portray them as – at least partially – co-responsible for what has happened to them (secondary victimization); they are victims of a judicial system that fails to grant women the justice they deserve (tertiary victimization) (Saccà, 2021b; 2024).

## **What Italian newspapers (don't) say about gender based violence: A brief overview**

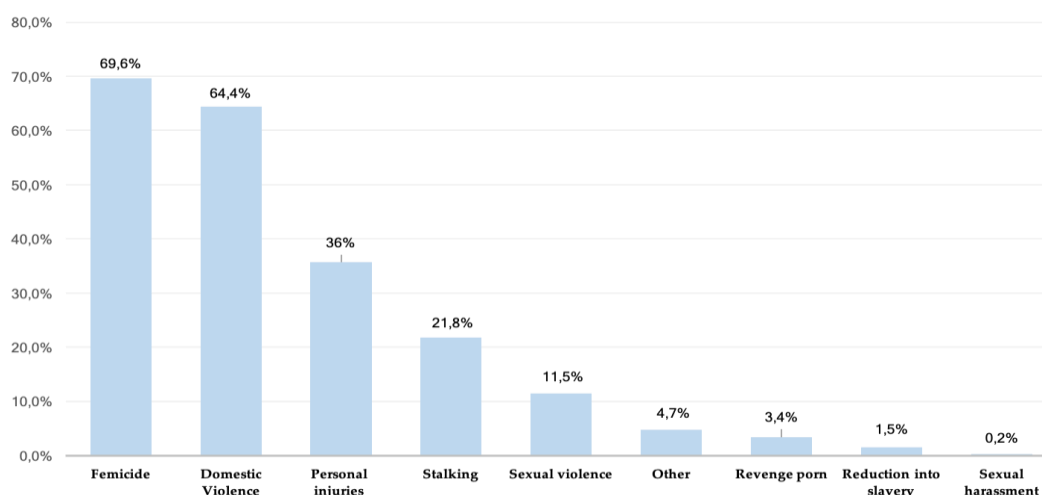
News media contribute to defining the collective imaginary, reinforcing or challenging the prevailing value system. In this case, they play a crucial role in shaping the public opinion of male violence against women. As a result, it is essential to examine which form of violence receives the most coverage, because, even though it is not the newspapers' responsibility to keep count of the crimes, the way they represent them affects how people perceive the phenomenon.

The first type of crime represented in Italian newspapers is “femicide” (69.6%), which, according to the reports of the Public Security Department of the Police (2024), actually represents only 0.29% of all forms of male violence that women suffered in Italy. This discrepancy appears consistent with previous findings indicating that the press tends to cover primarily the most

extreme forms of violence (Belmonte & Negri, 2021). Articles that explicitly refer to domestic violence constitute 64.4% of the corpus. This is particularly noteworthy given that all the items analyzed actually fall within the category of domestic violence, as the crime is committed by individuals belonging to the victim's family. Yet, one-third of the articles do not explicitly define or recognize them as such. However, the fact that two-thirds of articles use the term "domestic violence" can be viewed as a positive shift because only by naming things and codifying them, we can make issues – such as GBV – more visible and contribute to their public recognition.

"Personal injuries" appear in 36% of the sample and "stalking" in 21.8%, while "sexual violence" is reported only in 11.5% of the articles. This is noticeably lower than what has been observed in previous studies examining all articles addressing gender-based violence in Italian press (Saccà, 2021b; 2024; Saccà & Carbonari, 2025) and may suggest that this form of violence is more frequently perpetrated by men with whom the woman does not have a close or intimate relationship (Graph. 1).

Graph. 1 - The forms of violence reported in Italian articles of domestic violence in 2024<sup>12</sup>



Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN 2022 PNRR "STEPSISTER-STereotypes and PrejudiceS In preSs represenTation of gEndeR-violence"

A closer look at the relationship between the offender and the victim reveals that in the vast majority of cases the violence is perpetrated by a man with whom the woman is or has been in an intimate partner relationship. More specifically, ex-partner committed violence in 41.5% of the articles, the spouse in 24.2%, the partner in 16.7% while the ex-spouse in 9.7%. Less frequently,

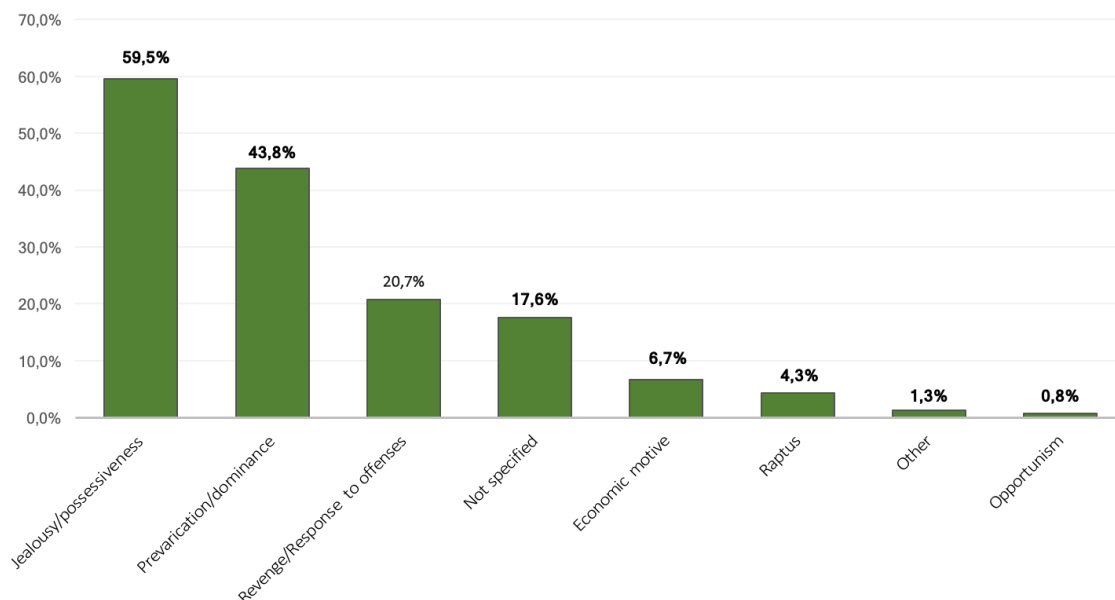
<sup>12</sup> Since articles often reported multiple forms of violence, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

though still present, the offender is identified in another family member such as the father (5.1%), the brother (0.5%) or the step-father (0.4%).

With regard to the “motives” for the violence as reported in the articles (Graph. 2), the most frequently cited is jealousy/possessiveness (59.5%). Together with revenge/response to offences (20.7%), they account for over 80% of the corpus. This framing is problematic as it tends to normalize violence within intimate relationships, often portraying it as a “domestic dispute”, and to activate mechanisms of secondary victimization. Indeed, referring to jealousy as a “motive” or framing the violence as a reaction to an offense implicitly suggests that the woman may have provoked the violence, thus shifting part of the responsibility from the offender to the victim.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that references to the “raptus” were found in only 4.3% of the cases, suggesting a gradual decline in the use of this stereotypical frame which has traditionally served to portray violence as an uncontrollable outburst of anger – thereby portraying the offender as temporarily irrational and the crime as unpredictable and inevitable. Additionally, the fact that 43.8% of the articles cite prevarication/dominance as the underlying motive is significant, as it may indicate a slow but emerging awareness in media narratives of the power asymmetries that underpin gender-based violence. In this regard, it may represent a first step toward framing violence within a broader perspective that recognizes the social and cultural structures that sustain and legitimize it: the patriarchy.

Graph. 2 - The reported motive of the male violence in Italian articles of domestic violence in 2024<sup>13</sup>



<sup>13</sup> Since articles often indicate multiple motives, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

Source: Sapienza Unit of the PRIN 2022 PNRR “STEPSISTER-STereotypes and PrejudiceS In preSs represenTation of gEndeR-violence”

## Himpathy: It is not really his fault

As we mentioned earlier, one of the discursive strategies widely adopted to represent male violence against women lies in what Australian philosopher Kate Manne called *Himpathy* (a crasis of the terms “him” and “empathy”). A mechanism that has the effect of withdrawing the empathy that is usually offered to the victim in order to redirect it, at least to a certain extent, towards the offender. We have found that, when narrating male violence against women, news media often adopt the offender's self-exonerating perspective, while, at the same time, offering him the mitigating circumstances of the case. He is usually presented as if he couldn't help killing or harming her, he was caught by a “raptus” (or functional equivalents of the term), or he is desperate or sorry for what he has done, he is regretful, overwhelmed, madly in love. This general attitude is even enhanced when it comes to narrating femicides towards elderly or ill women.

In the following article, we can see an example of what we have come to call the “*altruistic femicide*”, after we have registered a number of articles where an elderly or ill/not self-sufficient lady gets killed by her husband in what is rhetorically depicted as an impossible situation, too hard for anybody to bear, especially given the fact that *she* was suffering and *he* could not stand this burden any longer *for her own sake*. In other words, he claims to have killed her to free her from her pain, and the articles don't even question his version. Quite the contrary, they take it for granted and reproduce it a-critically. These are cases in which the use of the term “raptus” or its functional equivalents becomes more frequent (found in 34% of the articles analyzed between 2020 and 2024 in correspondence with the above-mentioned cases of so-called “*altruistic feminicides*”, that, as we said, targeted elderly/ill women, compared to 4% ca of the total cases in the entire database in the same years).

*He shot his wife and turned himself in. ‘I did it to put an end to her depression,’ Giampaolo Brigante, 74, a former long-distance captain, later confessed. The scene of yet another femicide is Sestri Levante, in the province of Genoa. The tragedy occurred around 1:00 pm yesterday, when the man grabbed his gun, which he legally owned, and pulled the trigger [...] Immediately afterwards, the man called his son to tell him that he had killed his mother and then called the police to report himself. He waited for the soldiers [...] and told them that he had done it to ‘free’ his wife from the depressive state she had been in for some time. A strong depression that ‘was devouring her’, and for which the woman apparently did not want to take the drugs required for treatment. It seems that she also had frequent outbursts of anger. The two*

*had been together for 53 years. Yesterday, probably in the throes of a raptus, the crime was committed. [...] The 74-year-old, retired for some time, was known as a quiet person, a lover of the sea. He used to play cards with friends, as he had done yesterday, and tell stories of his adventures at sea on ferries. Acquaintances knew about his wife's problems, and he was worried, but he never let anything else slip.*

*Il Giornale, 20/09/2024*

In this example empathy for the femicide is expressed by recognizing him as a “quiet person”, by depicting him in his normal, peaceful, social life, but most of all, by assuming his perspective right from the start: “I did it to put an end to her depression”, and again, “he had done it to *free* her from her depressive state”, and of course, by framing the killing within a “raptus” (which has no scientific foundation). And last but not least, by constructing the following phrase without connecting the subject and the verb, therefore *without connecting him to his actions*: “the crime was committed” (by who? Against who?) is one of the rhetorical constructions that subtly make responsibilities less visible and less obvious when a crime is committed by a man against a woman.

Other strategies of *Himpathy* are enacted when the titles quote the offender or his lawyer or a close relative, thus a-critically giving voice to his version and not to the victim's or to her lawyer's, relatives', or to that of the investigators, nor, indeed, of the newspaper itself.

There are two remarkable and well-known examples of this kind of *Himpathy* that concern the most impactful case of femicide Italy has known in recent years, that of Giulia Cecchettin. Giulia Cecchettin was a brilliant biomedical engineering student who was about to graduate from Padua University when she was brutally killed by her ex-boyfriend, Filippo Turetta, who risked dropping out of university and could not come to terms with the end of their relationship. Investigations revealed (and later the court sentence confirmed) that he had been planning her femicide for quite some time, and that he had kidnapped and brutally stabbed her 75 times before succeeding in killing her on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2023. This was one of the rare cases that managed to draw empathy for the victim and her family at a national level, representing quite an exception in this Country<sup>14</sup>. Nonetheless, the press representation of the case displayed various forms of *Himpathy*, although generally avoiding revictimization.

One of these titles, published by Il Messaggero on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2023, quotes Turetta's lawyer, who had the audacity to say that he did not believe his client had acted with premeditation because he “*loved Giulia*” and “*even baked her biscuits*”. Today we know that this clearly did not prevent him from organizing her abduction, stabbing her repeatedly until she died, hiding her body and fleeing. However, what is striking about this headline is the absolute lack of criticism with which the newspaper accepts and reports the point of view of the defense lawyer of a man who

<sup>14</sup> We wrote about the reasons for this exceptionality in Saccà & Carbonari (2025).

has committed such a barbaric murder of a woman. One of those crimes that has shaken public opinion, which, for once, found itself empathising with the victim and her family.

But even when the brutality of the femicide has been revealed and the killer brought to justice, the newspapers cannot help but express some form of empathy towards the murderer. They tell us about him in a compassionate tone, feeling the need for readers to know that he cries in court, that he always lowers his eyes and cannot bring himself to look at the father of the girl he brutally kidnapped and killed. They then insist on his alleged love for the murdered woman, thus adding to the *Himpathy* strategy the rhetoric of romanticising male violence against women:

*Filippo Turetta cries in court: 'I just wanted to extend the time with Giulia'. Eyes downcast, he never looks at Gino Cecchetti.*

*Il Messaggero, 25/10/2024*

A similar strategy is adopted in a totally different case, that of a man who has beaten his wife to death. A cruel aggression, no doubt, and yet we find no empathy for the victim, no social stigma for this crime. Quite the contrary, in the following article, it is the femicide lawyer's voice and perspective that we get to read. And of course, he carefully uses the opportunity to construct the image of a man who is desperate and regretful. Who cries and demands of his children. Inducing us to think that, after all, he is a family man (i.e. a good man) who has regretted his actions:

*He beat his wife to death. The lawyer: 'Massimo Malavolta cries. He keeps asking about the children'.*

*Corriere Adriatico, 31/12/2024*

These cases are not rare exceptions. The power asymmetries between men and women that still plague the country have, among their secondary effects, that of producing an unconscious empathy for the perpetrator, which can have consequences ranging from hilarious to tragic, as we can see in the following example.

*New Year's Eve rape case, Flavio Ralli: 'My girlfriend pushed me to have sex with Sara'.*

*Corriere della Sera - edizione Roma, 05/11/2024*

In this case, we see that the headline gives voice to a young man suspected of raping a girl, allowing him not only to downplay rape (which is a crime) as sexual intercourse (which it is not), but also to blame another girl, his girlfriend. This is to remind us that when a man commits violence against a woman, it will be framed as if the woman were the one to blame, perhaps a third woman, but not him.

## Victim blaming practices in the Italian press and courts: It is *her* fault, after all

With regard to the social representation of male violence against women, both in the media and in institutions, secondary victimization has the effect of framing violence as a phenomenon in which the victim is at least partially to blame for the violence suffered, becoming the subject of *victim blaming*. A phenomenon that can be articulated in different rhetorical strategies, but usually the crime is presented under the framing of something that *she has or has not done* and to which *he reacted*. This rhetorical strategy can be achieved in different ways, for example by letting the perpetrators *frame* the situation right from the headlines (“she left me, I killed her”, “she betrayed me, I stabbed her”) or by clumsily trying to justify/explain the violence in the article.

In the following example, the headline reports the femicide’s perspective even if he is no longer alive to tell his version. But, apparently, that is what he shouted to his wife before killing her and then committing suicide. From what we can gather, she must have done something terrible to drive this man to despair. She has gone as far as to ruin his life. *She did* that to him. The fact that *he ended her* life is not equally emphasised.

*‘You ruined my life’. At the age of 81, he shot his wife and then took his own life in a public square.*

*Title, Il Messaggero, 20/08/2024*

A similar structure can be noted in the following headline. The femicide’s words are quoted right from the most noticeable part of the article, and the man’s version is reported without any critical comments. He is even allowed to: a) *blame the woman* for what *he* did; b) further *soften his position*, emphasising that he arrived at the meeting unarmed (i.e. there was no premeditation) and asserting that he was not fully himself when he committed the femicide because, he claims, he had a blackout.

*He stabs his wife outside Lidl: ‘I blacked out, she provoked me. I arrived unarmed’.*

*Title, Today Bergamo, 28/03/2025*

Another typical argument focuses on the fact that she had left him or wanted to leave him, and at that point he reacted (by attacking her, injuring her, killing her and/or attacking her family members):

*She leaves him, he attacks her parents with a billhook.*

*The 25-year-old man could not accept the end of his relationship with his girlfriend. Identified and arrested by the Carabinieri after fleeing, he was transferred to Marassi prison on charges of attempted aggravated murder.*

*Il Giornale, 11/06/2024*

In the following headline, a young woman, a public official, has been raped but the newspaper feels the urge to immediately rebalance the situation by giving the suspect rapist voice to defend himself in order to accuse his victim of corruption:

*Female finance officer raped in L'Aquila, captain's defence: 'She wanted to know the exam questions'.*

*Il Messaggero, 31/07/2024*

"She wanted to know the exam question" implies that she was trying to bribe him. The fact that, even if it were true, he did not denounce the bribe and actually took advantage of the situation, is not equally underlined.

Even when the victim, who has been killed, is recognised by the public as a smart, compassionate and kind young woman, there is an unconscious tendency to point the finger at her decision to leave him. Worse still, if she has another man. It is the classic mechanism that we have seen so many times: she leaves him, he kills her. Not even a "perfect victim" like Giulia Cecchettin, whom the press, for once, was unable to find fault with, can escape this mechanism.

*He still wanted her. She, however, 'was seeing another guy'. He couldn't accept it and threatened to kill himself if she left him. She replied, 'You're clingy'. But he kept insisting. 'You're crazy', Giulia shouted at him. Then he stabbed her, '12-13 times', looking her in the eyes. Seven months after the femicide of Giulia Cecchettin, new, chilling details have emerged from Filippo Turetta's interrogation.*

*Il Mattino, 23/06/2024*

These rhetorical strategies represent a real call for complicity on a semantic basis, which ends up denying justice and empathy to women victims of violence, even before a verdict is reached. Indeed, it is in this cultural climate, which represents women as socially closer to the ideal-type of the perpetrator than to that of the victim, that they will then have to face trial. And it is in this cultural environment that all those involved in the judicial process will set about to develop it: the police, lawyers, magistrates and witnesses. It should therefore come as no surprise that in court we find that even the judge can end up sympathising with the perpetrator of femicide.



*Double femicide, 30 years for Salvatore Montefusco: 'He was driven by motives that are humanly understandable'.*

*La Repubblica, 13/01/2025*

This very recent headline sparked a heated debate in academic circles and among feminist associations, because it seemed astonishing that a judge could empathise with a femicide, thus sparing him a life sentence. Nonetheless, we must say that this is no news.

In the previous pioneering project STEP, carried out between 2017 and 2019 at Tuscia University, the research team (Flaminia Saccà, Luca Massidda, Rosalba Belmonte and Fabrizia Giuliani) analysed 282 judgments and found out that many of them contained some sort of empathy for the perpetrator and a conspicuous amount of victim blaming (Saccà, 2021b; 2024; Massidda, 2021; 2024; Giuliani, 2021; 2024).

One of these judgments struck us particularly because of its repeated blaming of the victim, who had been brutally stabbed to death by her husband. We were struck by the imaginative reconstruction of the facts written in black and white in the judge's ruling. And we know it is imaginative because the judge's own words reveal that there are no witnesses on the crime scene. But he has no doubt that the woman behaved disgracefully, getting drunk and shouting at her husband. The latter, it is written at the end, stabbed her, but his reasons are not entirely "humanly incomprehensible":

*It should be noted that while it is indisputable that \*\*\*\*[he] has been responsible for violent behavior in the past, on other occasions the defendant, although legitimately resentful of his wife's behavior, has shown that he wants to control his outbursts of anger, managing to control himself to prevent himself from doing something crazy [...] The wife [...] is indecisive, expressing love and then contempt immediately afterwards, and this drives her husband crazy. It is also credible that \*\*\*\*[she], completely drunk, contradictory and incoherent as always [...]. provoked \*\*\*\*[him] by questioning his determination and his ability to prove himself a "man", putting his self-control to the test. There were no witnesses to the scene, but it is indisputable that the tone of the argument became very heated and that the woman, completely drunk, may have said or done anything [...] certainly the impulse that led \*\*\*\*[him] to stab his wife with a knife arose from a very strong and sudden feeling, he did not simply act out of jealousy but out of a mixture of anger and despair, deep disappointment and resentment [...] he acted under the influence of a very intense state of mind, which was neither pretextual nor entirely incomprehensible from a human point of view.*

*Femicide, First instance ruling, 2018*

As we can see, here it is written in black and white, with a profusion of examples of *Himpathy* and *victim blaming*, that the judge states, in his ruling, that he, as a human being, can somewhat relate to what the femicide has gone through and to the reasons that have brought him to stab her

to death. Using exactly the same words that have been used by another judge in a later judgment, reported by the previous headline (La Repubblica, 2025), which sparked so much debate. But can we really be surprised when we are surrounded by factual examples in the press, the media and on television of how patriarchal culture produces stereotypes and prejudices such that a woman is portrayed as at least partially to blame even when she is killed, raped or beaten by a man?

### Three times a victim

The analysis highlighted how the social representation of violence in the press and media, even in courtrooms, is characterised by the structural presence of recurring prejudices and stereotypes. The result is a narrative of violence that makes women victims three times over:

1. Victims of the violence they suffer (*primary victimization*);
2. Victims of the guilty representation made of them by the press and, not infrequently, by the judicial field (*secondary victimization*). This is a veritable call for complicity on a semantic basis, which ends up denying justice and empathy to women victims of violence, even before a verdict is reached. Indeed, it is in this cultural climate, which socially represents her as closer to the ideal-type of the guilty party than to that of the victim, that she will then have to face trial. And it is in this cultural humus that all the actors in the judicial process will set out to carry it forward. The police, the lawyers, the magistrates, the witnesses.
3. Victims of a justice system that is too often undermined by this distorted narrative, permeated by gender prejudices and stereotypes, the result of a patriarchal culture that does not see men and women as equal and as having the same rights (*tertiary victimization*).

While secondary victimization tends to expose women as potentially responsible for the violence they suffer (“she wanted to leave him”, “she was drunk”, “she had a lover”), these rhetorical strategies, used in newspaper articles as well as in court sentences, also complete the picture by omitting to specify the perpetrator or by mitigating his behavior, intentions or character (“he was a good person”, “a gentle giant”, “a mild-mannered man”) (Saccà, 2024).

Furthermore, the power asymmetries that underlie male violence against women have the secondary effect of making it more difficult to describe the facts correctly when he is guilty of violence against her. The result is that violence against women is a narrative without culprits, which fails to focus on the facts and in which violence “happens”, instead of being acted upon. It is like a movie that fails to focus on the action taking place in front of it.

We can understand the extent to which biased reporting leads to a blurring of the facts when the same crimes are committed by a woman. Only then does the logical and chronological sequence

of events suddenly become clear. The fog lifts, and the perpetrators, the crimes and the victims are left in plain sight.

As illustrated in the following articles, the facts are presented in a sharp manner, and the dynamics of the events are reported precisely. In the case of the two sisters killing their father, the roles of victim and offenders as well as the facts are clearly defined from the very first sentence: *“Two sisters burn their father alive after rape: they took gasoline and set him on fire while he was asleep”*. Although (apparently) they had been raped by the father, the abuse is not presented as a “motive” or “justification” for the crime nor is the violence framed through the lens of empathy or emotional complexity. Furthermore, the perspective of the female offenders is not taken for granted and assumed by the journalist, as often happens when the perpetrator is a man, as shown by previous examples. He writes, *“The two sisters said that their father raped them”*, marking a distance between himself, the article, and what the two suspects reported. He did not directly adopt their point of view by writing, for example, “their father raped them”.

*Two sisters burn their father alive after rape: they took gasoline and set him on fire while he was asleep. The two said the father raped the older daughter for a year and had twice attempted to rape the younger sister.*

*Il Messaggero, 8/01/2025*

Similarly, in the second article, roles and responsibilities are immediately and unambiguously identified, *“mother chases husband and children with scissors”*, along with the kind of crime committed: the woman was *“arrested for domestic abuse”*. The type of violence is thus clearly defined, without employing any discursive strategies that may mitigate it or ambiguous language. There is no reference to “family dispute” – a stereotypical frame frequently detected in articles reporting cases of male violence – which downplays the criminal nature of the event and frames it within the private dynamics of intimate relationships. Ultimately, the article does not shift focus on what the man has or has not done to *trigger* the violence.

*Sant’Antimo, mother chases husband and children with scissors after affair revealed: arrested for domestic abuse. They told their father their mother had an affair– and that revelation sparked her fury. Armed with a pair of scissors, the woman chased her husband and their two young children through the house and into the street.*

*Il Tempo, 14/02/2024*

Overall, while some progress can be observed – particularly in the decreasing use of overtly stereotypical frames such as “raptus” as a motive for gender-based violence – the mechanism of secondary victimization is still detectable and discursive strategies of *Himpathy* seem to be rather frequent. The representation of perpetrators continues to be partial and inadequate, while victims

are not yet fully acknowledged in their role and experience. This asymmetry reflects a persistent bias in which men are still considered more entitled to justification than women, as clearly exemplified by discursive strategies of *Himpathy* employed by the Italian press.

This mechanism becomes particularly evident in certain types of cases that tend to be framed as more “socially acceptable” or morally complex, such as those involving elderly or ill women who are victims of intimate partner violence. In these articles, the use of the term “raptus” to explain the outbreak of violence is significantly more frequent, and even the most extreme form of violence is often depicted as an act of compassion (“*altruistic femicide*”), reinforcing *Himpathy* strategies for the man – who is represented as *desperate* for the woman’s condition and as a poor soul who could not handle the situation anymore – and re-victimizing the woman, who ends up partially “blamed” for her condition – be it illness or advanced age.

In conclusion, patriarchal stereotypes and biases are still frequent in the social representation of gender-based violence, both in the press and in court. They tend to victimize women and to soften men’s position even when it comes to ending women’s lives. Making them victims three times over. But this process does not just affect women. It puts the country’s justice system at risk, as well as its ability to create a public space where citizens are truly equal and entitled to the same rights. It also weakens its ability to leverage an information system capable of contextualizing facts and responsibilities.

These findings have led us and our research team to join forces with leading Italian journalistic organizations (Ordine nazionale dei giornalisti, Federazione Nazionale della Stampa, USIGRAI, GiULiA) and create a national Observatory called “STEP - Research and Information”, in order to collaborate on analyzing the social representation of male violence in the press, developing guidelines for professionals in the sector<sup>15</sup>, and monitoring the implementation of the “Venice Manifesto” code of conduct by the main national newspapers.

Our work has often been used for the training of journalists and lawyers and the results published in this article represent the material for future courses.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example: <https://www.odg.it/oltre-le-parole-un-vademecum-su-come-comunicare-la-violenza-contro-le-donne-la-pubblicazione-a-cura-della-cpo-cnog/60569?https://www.odg.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Oltre-le-parole-Vademecum.pdf>

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