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# Gender-based Violence Representation in the Italian Media: Reviewing Changes in Public Narrations from Femicide to “Revenge Pornography”

*Saveria Capecchi\**, *Chiara Gius\*\**

## Author information

- \* Department of Political and Social Sciences, Alma Mater Studiorum-University of Bologna, Italy.  
Email: [saveria.capecchi@unibo.it](mailto:saveria.capecchi@unibo.it)
- \*\* Department of Political and Social Sciences, Alma Mater Studiorum-University of Bologna, Italy.  
Email: [chiara.gius@unibo.it](mailto:chiara.gius@unibo.it)

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# Gender-based Violence Representation in the Italian Media: Reviewing Changes in Public Narrations from Femicide to “Revenge Pornography”

*Saveria Capecchi, Chiara Gius*

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**Abstract:** The following contribution examines the phenomenon of male violence against women in Italy from a sociological perspective. The aim is to present the latest changes in how gender-based violence (GBV), perpetrated online and offline, is represented in news media and awareness-raising campaigns. Building on the most relevant qualitative and quantitative research studies conducted on the representation of GBV and femicide in Italy over the past ten years, the paper will reflect on the role that the Italian women’s movement and some communities of journalists have played in eliciting a narration of GBV and violence against women and girls (VAWG) more attentive toward power dynamics and freed from gender stereotypes.

**Keywords:** *gender-based violence, femicide, revenge porn, cyber-VAWG, Italian media*

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## Introduction

Misogynist violence is a cultural problem based on gender stereotypes and prejudices rooted in a long-lasting patriarchal understanding of gender roles (Connell, 2020; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Today, this dimension of inequality still insists in subtle and insidious ways. In Italy, as in most other countries, violence against women and girls (VAWG) seems unstoppable (Amnesty International Italia, 2021a; EIGE, 2021a; 2021b; Istat, 2021; Eures, 2021). According to the latest available data (Istat, 2015), one out of three Italian women (31,5%) between 16 and 70 years of age has experienced some form of violence during her lifetime. Moreover, data show a steady trend in the number of femicides perpetrated in the country, with a woman being killed every two or three days at the hands of a man (Casa delle donne per non subire violenza, 2021 - annually from 2006; Eures, 2021 - annually from 2013; Istat, 2021). Although available data are difficult to compare, as various organizations consider different definitions in their studies (see Corradi & Piacenti, 2016; Capecchi, 2019; EIGE, 2021a), there is a broad agreement that most femicides in Italy are connected to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Namely, any violent act occurring in intimate relationships among partners or ex-partners that might or not have been perpetrated in a context of cohabitation (Baldry, 2016).

Further complicating the issue, besides traditional forms of physical and sexual abuse, new types of VAWG have emerged in the past few decades due to the spread of the Internet and social media platforms (Amnesty International Italia, 2020; 2021b; Vox, 2021). These violent acts, aimed at the disqualification and humiliation of women, are perpetrated throughout the use of digital technologies and include but are not limited to acts of hate speech, doxing, cyberstalking, gendertrolling, technology-facilitated sexual violence, as well as non-consensual distribution of intimate images (mostly referred to as “revenge pornography”). The presence of toxic comments against women and racial minorities; the use of explicit sexual remarks; the adoption of rude language; the recurrent exercise of anger and hate; and even the circulation of threats have all become standard features in online public commentaries (Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021), reproducing, rather than dismantling, traditional forms of inequality that characterize society at large (Morahan-Martin, 2000; Jane, 2014; Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016).

In recent years, the Italian government has started to take a more active approach in promoting legal measures aimed at contrasting VAWG, indicating that growing political attention is paid to the issue (Ministero dell’Interno, 2021). Among the most recent legislative actions upheld, law 38/2009 should be mentioned, as it introduces stalking as a criminal offense

for the first time. The 119/2013 decree should also be cited, as it increases the penalties for those who commit gender-based violence or stalking. In addition, the Istanbul Convention was ratified by Italy under Law 77/2013, leading to the approval of a new crucial piece of legislation, commonly referred to as the “Red Code” (Law 69/2019). The “Red Code” stiffens the penalties for existing gender-based felonies and introduces a new form of crime: the unauthorized and non-consensual disclosure of sexually explicit images and videos of others, recognizing aggravating circumstances for intimate partners perpetrating this type of violence.

Although legislation plays a crucial role in contrasting gender-based violence (GBV), promoting change through culture and education is equally essential. On this account, legacy and digital media play a fundamental role in conveying specific representations of reality (Moscovici, 1984). Media participate in the definition and circulation of notions of what should be considered normal, acceptable, and desirable while supporting distinct worldviews, values, and beliefs.

Building on a review of the sociological and media studies conducted within the past ten years on the representation of GBV in the Italian media, this contribution aims at providing a comprehensive understanding of the changes that occurred in the ways GBV has been reported and framed (Goffman, 1974) to the Italian public over time. The overall hypothesis is that Italy has recently experienced a significant shift in how VAWG is being represented and discussed inside the mediatic arena, thus providing audiences with new cultural meanings useful to sustain a much more critical understanding of the issue. The Italian women’s movement has played a pivotal role in enhancing this change, lobbying to obtain political and societal attention while also requiring a much-needed improvement in the ways media represent GBV. In particular, the paper will discuss how the representation of VAWG in the Italian news media is moving from an initial approach that framed violence as the result of individual acts of brutality, often perpetrated by someone considered psychologically unstable, to a more gender-aware framework capable of including explanations of VAWG linked to the social disparity of power distribution between the genders. Alongside news media, the paper will also discuss studies conducted on awareness-raising campaigns against VAWG promoted in Italy over the past two decades and on some of the most recent campaigns launched to contrast cyber-violence against women and girls (cyber-VAWG) specifically. This focus will facilitate recognizing the changes accomplished in the past few years in the representation of GBV at the societal level in the country.

## **The contribution of Italian journalism to a less stereotyped representation of GBV**

The Italian women's movement has strenuously worked to enhance a more attentive public understanding of GBV for the past couple of decades. Throughout the promotion of public discussions of gender-based crimes, also supported by the collection of first-hand data, feminist groups, women's shelters, and other civil society organizations have actively worked to influence the public agenda while also raising awareness among journalists, media operators, and media scholars (Gius & Tirocchi, 2021). As a result of these efforts, organized groups of journalists have promoted initiatives to foster more conscious forms of communication on gender issues (Capecchi, 2018). These communities of operatives (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) recognize media's social responsibility (Gius & Lalli, 2016) to the public by championing social equality, challenging gender stereotypes, and offering visibility, value, and voice to women and LGBTQ+ persons while promoting seminars, workshops, training opportunities, and professional guidelines in support of a more sensitive and appropriate coverage of femicide and other gender-based crimes.

The process leading journalists towards a more profound recognition of the role played by gender relations in determining specific kinds of criminal actions was undoubtedly supported also by the work of some associations of journalists, such as "Giulia" ("Giornaliste Unite, Libere e Autonome/United Free Autonomous Journalists"), or by the contributions of some blogs, such as "La 27 Ora" of the "Corriere della Sera". For the past decade, these organizations have publicly sustained the necessity for journalists and media professionals to adopt non-offensive and detrimental language while reporting gender-based crimes and femicides, pushing for a more sensitive and appropriate coverage of VAWG. Besides promoting workshops and training opportunities for journalists, in 2017, "Giulia", in collaboration with the Committee of Equal Opportunity of the Italian National Federation for the Press and the USIGRAI (the Union of the journalists working for Rai, the National Broadcast Company of the country) proposed the formulation of a set of guidelines: the "Manifesto of Venice" (2017) for gender equality and correct information against VAWG.

Among the good practices recommended, the "Manifesto" states that journalists should refrain from suggesting, even involuntarily, possible justifications for the perpetrators of GBV. As such, the "Manifesto" opposes journalistic accounts motivating violence as the result of "loss of employment", "financial strains", "depression", "betrayal", or the use of terms such as "raptus", "madness", "jealousy", and "passion" to describe gender-based crimes. Similarly, the guideline urges journalists to correctly use the term

“femminicidio” to indicate a crime committed on a woman “as a woman”; to avoid resorting to gender stereotypes and to refrain from publishing images sexualizing the victims. The “Manifesto” also offers indications on how, while reporting GBV, journalists should adopt the point of view of the victims rather than that of the perpetrators and stresses the importance of highlighting positive examples of women who had been capable of breaking the circle of violence, or who are part of organizations that offer help and support to VAWG victims.

Central in initiatives such as the “Manifesto di Venezia” is the idea that VAWG should be recognized and depicted in the media as a societal problem, not as a women’s problem or, even worst, as the problem of a specific woman. Although this political understanding of VAWG appears to be shared by just a relatively small number of reporters and media professionals, growing evidence (Lalli, Gius & Zingone, 2020; Gius & Tirocchi, 2021) suggests that journalists have started acknowledging the gendered dimension of femicides and other GBV. This growing awareness directly questions how VAWG has been reported in the press, pushing for a renovation in the language and the frames used by journalists and other media professionals to narrate these crimes.

### **Detecting shifts in the representation of gender-based crimes in the Italian media: academic studies on femicide and other forms of VAWG**

Besides promoting a debate among media operatives, the growing attention paid to the representation of GBV in the Italian media has also elicited the interest of media scholars. In the past couple of decades several sociological qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted to investigate how Italian mainstream media represent GBV, in general, and femicide, in particular (Gius & Lalli, 2014; Gius & Lalli, 2016; Bandelli & Porcelli, 2016a; Giomi, 2013; 2015; Giomi & Tonello 2013; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017; Lalli 2020a; 2020b; Dell’Anno, 2021; Belluati, 2021). One of the earliest research projects on the topic (Gius & Lalli, 2014) analyzed 72 cases of intimate partner femicide covered in 2012 by three national newspapers (“Corriere della Sera”, “Repubblica” and “La Stampa”). The research revealed how, at the time, femicides were presented in the news according to three recurring *frames* (Goffman, 1974). The first frame described femicides as crimes linked to romantic love, with the perpetrators reported as acting over an excess of “passion” and/or “love” for their victims, and violence justified as having been triggered by jealousy and/or by the inability to accept the woman’s decision to end a relationship. A second frame detected in the news, often used by journalists in combination with the previous one, reported fe-

micide as resulting from a loss of control of the perpetrators. Following this frame, Gius and Lalli (2014) noticed how the reported stories described the killers as driven in their actions by an uncontrollable rage or a moment of insanity frequently termed as “raptus”. Finally, a third frame emerged from the analysis, signaling the presence of other contextual elements (i.e., the consumption of substances, a state of depression of the killer, the presence of health or work-related problems) often used as the primary explanation for the killing.

In subsequent research, Elisa Giomi (2015) investigated how 17 Italian online newspapers reported 124 cases of femicides perpetrated in Italy in 2013, both in terms of agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) and framing (Goffman, 1974). Her research findings suggested that in 2013 the news coverage of femicides provided a numerically adequate representation of the phenomenon. This result showed an improvement compared to earlier findings on the topic (Giomi, 2013). In particular, previous research revealed how Italian news media sustained a distorted representation of femicides by consistently reporting only those perpetrated by killers unknown to their victims while overlooking the numerically more relevant ones committed by intimate partners. Despite the improvements in representation, Giomi (2015) observed that in 2013 at least one media bias persisted, as femicides involving a foreign perpetrator and an Italian victim received greater media attention, despite their lesser incidence in the totality of the crimes. According to Giomi, this should be understood as an attempt at “othering” VAWG as a problem investing only the members of specific cultures or ethnic groups.

Regarding Giomi’s analysis of the ways 95 news stories framed femicide, research results suggested that jealousy and/or the incapacity of the perpetrators to accept their victims’ decision to end their relationship was still consistently used in reporting femicides following breakups or separations. Slightly paradoxically, the word “femminicidio” was used in the news more frequently than before, with a little more than a quarter of the stories framing femicides as part of a broader social issue. Albeit positive, these elements of innovation appeared contradictory, coexisting with a representation of femicide that mostly alleviated the perpetrator’s responsibilities, heavily relying on the idea that these crimes should be considered individual matters.

Subsequent studies (Lalli, 2020a; Dell’Anno, 2021) confirmed the persistence of conflicting narratives in the journalistic accounts of femicide, although also detecting further improvements in its representation in the press. In the collective volume, “Love does not kill” (Lalli, 2020a), the authors present some of the most significant results of the most extensive quali-quantitative research ever conducted on the topic in Italy. The study, which included the analysis of a wide range of media products (national and local newspapers, TV news, awareness-raising campaigns) and an extensive body

of interviews, focused on the representation of femicide over three years (2015-2017) as presented in the media, in criminal court responses, and in institutional and political debates. Albeit mostly confirming previous findings (Gius & Lalli, 2014; Giomi, 2013; 2015), the researchers detected some elements of novelty. First, the analysis proved that the usage of the terms “raptus” had consistently diminished in the news, while the term “femminicidio” was frequently used, suggesting that some changes had occurred, at least in the glossary used by journalists.

Moreover, the researchers detected that the press paid a more attentive consideration to the existence of legal proceedings instituted against the perpetrators. News articles regularly reported the presence (or absence) of charges for stalking or assault and battery pressed by victims against their perpetrators. Albeit indicating that further steps were made toward a more gender-sensitive representation of femicide, research authors noticed that the same could not be said for the changes in the language used in the news. In particular, the researchers noted how, despite the lesser use of the term “raptus”, the news still compelled narratives that elicited individualistic and psychological understanding of femicides by describing the events as the outcomes of “a fit of rage” or as having occurred “on the verge of a fight”. Interviews conducted with 30 journalists (Lalli, Gius & Zingone, 2020) revealed that, albeit having a general understanding of the reasons why the term “femminicidio” was promoted by feminist scholars (Radford & Russell, 1992; Lagarde, 1996) and the women’s movement, its use in the news was still perceived to be controversial and somehow inappropriate.

In a follow-up study, Maria Dell’Anno (2021) analyzed how 20 femicides perpetrated between April 2019 and April 2020 were reported in 6 Italian newspapers, reaching similar conclusions. Her analysis suggests that the lesser presence of the term “raptus” shows a change in the vocabulary but not in the overall understanding of femicide conveyed in the news stories. The recurrent use of alternative expressions like “fury”, “at a culmination of a quarrel”, or “in a moment of madness”, confirms GBV as being still relegated to a psycho-individualistic framework. Moreover, Dell’Anno findings suggest that the press mostly used the term “femminicidio” for sensationalist purposes rather than political aims. This result contradicts the conclusion reached by a previous study investigating the link between the rise of a gender feminist discourse in Italy and the attention paid to gender-based crimes by Italian media (Bandelli & Porcelli, 2016a). In their research, Daniela Bandelli and Giorgio Porcelli concluded that the surface of the term “femminicidio” in the Italian media should be explained as the result of a specific and highly political project led by feminist activists supporting the emergence of a gender paradigm inside of the Italian public discourse. Accordingly to their analysis, the feminist frame has become hegemonic, leaving little space for

alternative interpretations of GBV considering other social or psychological factors. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that, as it happens among journalists, the academic debate on femicide also hosts different interpretative explanations (see Bandelli & Porcelli, 2016a; 2016b; Giomi, 2016).

If for a long time, Italian news media mostly limited their attention to femicide (Bandelli & Porcelli, 2016a; Giomi, 2016), other forms of GBV have recently started to gain recognition in the public debate. In particular, episodes of online misogyny and hatred towards women have received growing attention from the Italian media, with some cases of non-consensual distribution of intimate images and the practice of sharing online intimate or sexually graphic pictures or videos of someone without their consent, making national headlines. Interestingly, media outlets have had a relevant role in determining the outcomes of the case of cyber-VAWG that has marked the issue's entrance into the national debate (Pietropaoli, 2017). The story was that of Tiziana Cantone, a young Italian woman who committed suicide after falling victim to the non-consensual distribution of some of her private videos in the spring of 2015. Shortly after their online publication, Ms. Cantone's videos became extremely popular, becoming the object of public conversation and media attention. Unbeknown to Ms. Cantone, news media circulated the assumption that the videos were part of a marketing strategy aimed at launching a new porn star and participated in spreading slut-shaming narratives and sexist remarks. After her death, most newspapers decided to eliminate from their online archives all the articles published on the story, while some editors-in-chief made public amendments to how their newspapers handled the story<sup>1</sup>. Although systematic studies are still lacking, a recent study (Gius, 2021) questioned how cyber-VAWG is constructed inside the Italian public debate. The research, conducted on a corpus of comments posted under news-media articles reporting the suicide of Ms. Cantone, revealed how, in 2016, cyber-VAWG was still discussed as part of a frame that victimized Ms. Cantone's behaviors and sexual conduct. In particular, the analysis revealed the persistence of a traditional understanding of sexual desires and practices (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Jackson, 2006; Scarcelli & Stella, 2019) and profound neglect of the issue of consent.

Cyber-VAWG remains an under-researched and under-conceptualized phenomenon in Italy and elsewhere (EIGE, 2017; European Parliament, 2021). However, the growing attention paid to episodes of non-consensual distribution of intimate images has elicited the attention of activists and media scholars. Mimicking what has happened with the word "femminicidio", scholars have started paying attention to the vocabulary used in the media

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<sup>1</sup> For example see the editorial published by the "il Fatto Quotidiano": <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/09/14/tiziana-cantone-il-caso-sul-web-il-suicidio-e-le-nostre-negligenze/3032639>

to define this type of abuse. Expressions like “revenge pornography” or “revenge porn” have been extensively problematized as they convey the idea that the abuse could be seen as the retribution of something wrong done by the victim. Moreover, they often suggest the idea that cyber-violence could be acted only by someone intimate with the victim, such as a partner or ex-partner. Commentators (Abbatecola, 2021; Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021, Gius, 2021) have pointed out how, contrary to what is commonly believed, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images of others is a crime that might be perpetrated by individuals unknown to the victim. Moreover, the expression “revenge pornography” conveys the idea that victims could be responsible for triggering the abuses, suggesting some form of justification for the perpetrator’s actions. (Abbatecola, 2021; Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021). Finally, it has been stressed the fact that the non-consensual distribution of intimate images is a practice that can be connected to a vast range of motivations other than revenge, such as entertainment, sexual gratification, or financial gains (Henry & Powell, 2015; Šepec, 2019; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). As a result, through the years, different definitions have been coined in scholarly literature to overcome the listed above limits, such as: “involuntary porn” (Burns, 2015); “image-based sexual exploitation” (Powell, 2009), “image-based abuse” (Henry & Powell, 2015; Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021), “non-consensual pornography” (Gius, 2021), and the most recent proposition of the acronym D.I.V.I.S.E., resulting from the denomination of the crime in the Italian legislation (Abbatecola, 2021). Besides referring to the legal framework regulating the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, according to Abbatecola (2021) D.I.V.I.S.E.<sup>2</sup> also holds a profound political meaning as it constitutes a device to create a bridge and refuse the patriarchic division between virgins and deserving and underserving victims (Benedict, 1993).

### **Italian awareness-raising campaigns on cyber-VAWG: toward a feminist “counteractive” approach**

Besides the already mentioned communities of practitioners, in recent years, other public bodies, non-profit organizations, and institutions have taken action to foster a more gender-sensitive approach to VAWG through the production of media content and awareness-raising campaigns. Confirming the trend already detected in the press, a few studies (Magaraggia &

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<sup>2</sup> D.I.V.I.S.E., which could be translated in English as “divided”, is the acronym of “Diffusione Illecita di Video e Immagini Sessualmente Esplicite” (Illicit Distribution of Sexually Explicit Videos and Images). As Italian is a gendered language, the verb “divided” appears to be declined at the feminine, thus reinforcing the political meaning behind Emanuela Abbatecola’s proposition.

Cherubini, 2016; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017; Capecchi 2020; Faccioli, 2020) have recognized that in the past couple of decades, relevant changes have taken place in the ways awareness-campaigns represented VAWG and its victims. Researchers have noticed how anti-VAWG campaigns moved from representing women and girls as mere victims of violence to a more conscious recognition of their role as subjects capable of reacting to the violence imposed on them. Moreover, recent studies have detected an enlargement of the public targeted by these campaigns. This is due to the higher attention paid to the inclusion of men in the call of action and the growing recognition of VAWG as a societal issue. The most extensive and comprehensive study of awareness-rising campaigns on VAWG conducted in Italy (Capecchi, 2020) analyzed 46 Italian ads circulated between 2006 and 2019. The analysis showed how anti-VAWG campaigns developed a sophisticated understanding of their role in promoting equality and respect among the genders through the years. In particular, the study categorized the campaigns according to 5 interpretative frames. The most utilized frame was found in all the campaigns representing women victims of violence as guilty of not pressing charges against their abusers. Usually, the visual adopted displayed a young woman carrying the signs of physical violence. The intent is informative and educational: the campaigns provide helpful information to persuade women to report their abusers. This is the case, for example, of the first campaign addressing GBV promoted by the Italian Council of Ministers and the Department of Equal Opportunity in 2006. The ad represented a woman with a bruised eye. The tagline stated: “It was a champagne cork”. Similarly, a campaign promoted by Amnesty International Italy in 2008, used the claim: “I hit the door” while the payoff explained: “No more excuses, stop violence against women”. Albeit addressing VAWG publicly as a relevant issue, these campaigns were harshly criticized and debated. Criticisms were moved to the representation of battered women as the sole ones responsible for the course of their relationships or as being too “vulnerable” to break the chain of violence, thus reinforcing stereotypes that see abused women as fragile and passive victims. Moreover, as men did not appear in the ads, the campaigns were accused of reinforcing the idea that VAWG is a women’s problem and that, as such, it only interests women.

Building on early criticisms, subsequent campaigns paid more attention to avoiding victim-blaming narratives. As a result, the second group of campaigns emerged. These campaigns used the frame of the “woman in love” as an awareness-raising device. An example of the use of this frame is a campaign launched by the Italian Department of Equal Opportunity in 2013. The visual displayed a young couple embracing. The woman’s face smiles happily, while the man’s face is obscured by a poster carrying one of the campaigns’ claims (i.e., “A violent man does not deserve your love. He de-

serves to be reported”, or “A slap is a slap. Mistaken a slap for love could be hurtful”). The goal of the campaign was to push women to detect early signals of violence, prompting them to report their perpetrators and put an end to the relationship. Although those types of campaigns did a better job representing women, they were not without criticism. They have been highly debated as missing out on the opportunity to educate men who were again excluded from the representation (Magaraggia & Cherubini, 2016; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017).

The necessity to revisit how awareness campaigns framed GBV determined three significant deviations from the two main frames utilized in earlier messages. First, Capecchi (2020) pointed out that newer campaigns incorporated the idea that men should be involved in the conversation. This was initially obtained by promoting campaigns focusing on the wrongful behaviors committed by men towards women. The main protagonist of these campaigns is the “violent man” who tries to raise awareness by establishing direct communication with other members of his gender to solve a problem that interests men and women equally. The aim of this frame is educational: the campaigns propose deconstructing the stereotype that defines “real” men as “machos” by coupling masculinity with the idea of respecting women and refusing violence. This is, for example, the strategy used in 2013 by the “NoiNo.org” (NotUs.org) campaign that called for a collective effort under the slogan “Commit yourself. Men opposing violence against women”.

A second strategy explored to avoid victimization relied on introducing a frame presenting the “women’s point of view”. In these campaigns, abused women are given a voice and the possibility of being represented as subjects capable of reacting to violence. This is, for example, the aim of the campaign “A home is not a place to fend for yourself” realized by Ikea Italy in 2017 in favor of an organization managing a major hotline for women at risk of violence (Telefono Donna Onlus). Similarly, the 2017 campaign “Women Run the show” showcased women who had been capable of breaking out from the circle of violence by showing courage and strength. Finally, the last frame identified by Capecchi (2020) addressed GBV as a societal problem requiring “collective effort” to be solved. To be targeted in these campaigns is society, with a specific focus on the effort made by institutional bodies to put an end to the issue. An excellent example of this strategy is the “This is everyone’s match” campaign promoted by the Italian Department of Equal Opportunity in 2018. It represented a group of successful athletes (the members of the Italian team of Women’s Volleyball) ready to fight the match against GBV actively. As Franca Faccioli (2020) observed in her analysis of the anti-VAWG campaigns promoted by the Italian Department of Equal Opportunity between 2006 and 2018, albeit victim/blaming persists in the pro-

posed representation of GBV, a public responsibility approach is emerging in its most recent campaigns.

Although cyber-VAWG is still a relatively new phenomenon, growing attention has been given to this form of violence in awareness-raising campaigns to address the issue and promote a safer online experience for all users. Building on Capecchi (2020), a preliminary analysis of the strategies set in place to discuss cyber-violence, in general, and cyber-VAWG, in particular, suggests the presence of three main approaches: “preventive”, “educational,” and “counteractive”. The “preventive” approach, often discussed in the media, is centered on the idea that to reduce women’s online vulnerability, it is necessary for them to refrain from producing intimate materials. The campaigns using this approach consider the too-easy access to audio-visual technological devices (such as the cameras of mobile devices) and ICTs as one of the key impediments in contrast to cyber-violence. “Preventive” campaigns mainly address sexting as one of the primary concerns for online safety. Sexting is a practice that combines sex and texting and revolves around the exchange of sexually explicit messages and/or images between two or more people involved in a consensual relationship. Policymakers and civil society organizations have focused their attention mainly on the exercise of sexting among youngsters, fearing that it could lead to grooming and other sexually abusive behaviors. As a result, a few communication initiatives have been launched to discourage youngsters from engaging in sexting. An example is the 2008 “I chose” campaign promoted by the organization “Cuore e Parole” which focused on raising awareness among mothers on the dangers of sexting, or the “Stop Sexting and Revenge Porn” (2021) campaign promoted by Mete Onlus in partnership with the Sicily Region that implemented a poster campaign against sexting inside of high schools. Although trying to offer a feasible short-term solution to cyber-VAWG, initiatives adopting this approach have been criticized. Their effectiveness has been questioned, as it prioritizes restraining the course of action of potential victims (who are almost exclusively girls and women) rather than addressing the social and cultural causes at the root of the problem (Hasinoff, 2012). Focusing on the necessity to abstain from what is perceived as risky, this frame not only normalizes online GBV but also exposes those exposed to violence to the risks of further victimization.

A second approach adopted in contrasting online violence focuses on media education initiatives or educational programs that support teenagers and young adults in recognizing violence and promoting consent. These initiatives aim at equipping youngsters with the necessary knowledge to enforce proper recognition and reaction to different forms of violence, question them, and be capable of confronting them appropriately. This is the case, for example, of the “Play4 your rights” project (2020) promoted, among

others, by COSPE Onlus. Through innovative use of gaming as a strategy of engagement, youngsters are actively constructing counter-narratives deconstructing gender stereotypes and developing valuable strategies to contrast online and offline bullying and sexist violence. Action Aid “Youth for Love” (2021) also launched a similar project. Aimed at engaging youngsters in creating a more equal and inclusive society, “Youth for love” proposes diverse ways to deal with situations of peer violence, bullying, and cyberviolence. Albeit targeting mostly youngsters, these campaigns have the advantage of addressing cyber-VAWG not as a separate issue but as a precise expression of GBV while using digital media as a bridge to raise awareness and reinforce positive behaviors.

Finally, the “counteract” approach rose from the explicit recognition of the Internet as a battleground of the feminist struggle against the dominant power (Daniels, 2009). This approach encompasses initiatives promoted by online feminist groups engaged in the political struggle to promote gender equality online. These campaigns are based on the idea that women should respond to men’s violence and utilize the web to create safe online spaces to discuss their experiences and find the strength to face their offenders. One example is the campaign: “Hate will cost you” (2020). The initiative was promoted by the Bologna-based non-profit organization “Pensare Sociale” and supported by Cathy La Torre, a civil rights attorney and LGBTQ+ activist, and other prominent figures such as Laura Boldrini, the former president of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, and feminist writer Michela Murgia as a reaction of the social media pillory and online violence reserved to Capitan Carola Rackete, a German citizen who volunteered with the sea rescue organization Sea-Watch. As a result, the initiative launched a Facebook page and a website where women, members of other marginalized groups, and allies could report episodes of online violence and find legal support. The team of activists leading the campaign reviewed the stories, offered legal support, explained countermeasures, and, in selected cases, promoted pro bono legal actions. Another example of how the counteract approach is used is the campaign “#teacherdosex” (2020) launched by a collective of artists to protest the dismissal of an elementary school teacher whose intimate images were disseminated online without her consent. The hashtag was used nationwide by teachers and educators to express solidarity and support to their colleagues and refute cyber-violence and cyberbullying.

## **Conclusion**

From several sociological studies conducted in Italy over the years on the representation of femicides in mainstream media, VAWG has been primarily presented from the perpetrators’ point of view for a long time. In news sto-

ries, violent men have consistently been portrayed as having been carried in their actions by feelings linked to romantic love, amour fou, jealousy, or for having been caught in the “fit” of sudden madness. The media stripped perpetrators of their responsibilities, blaming those who had suffered the crime instead. In doing so, they have contributed to reinforcing hard-to-die stereotypes in the Italian culture: that of the “weak woman”, of “the helpless victim”, and of the “fiery and passionate man”. However, pushed by the strenuous work of feminist activists, the women’s movement, and social justice organizations, some signs of change in the narratives used in the media have been detected. More specifically, the drop in the use of the term “raptus” and the idea of VAWG as a sudden reaction to an underlying male impulse, the increased use of the term “femicide” to indicate the killing of a woman “as a woman”, the new attention paid to the cycle of violence, are all indications that VAWG and femicide are not just a “sudden” occurrences, but predictable and preventable events. Similar significant changes have also been intercepted in the improvement made in the awareness-raising campaigns addressing male violence against women. Recent campaigns openly contrast the stereotypes of women as “passive victims” and “provocateurs” while refuting victim-blaming narratives. Similarly, they also reject the stereotype of the “violent man” and its accordance with the traditionally understood concept of “virility” (a mix of strength and aggression considered a “natural” attribute of the male gender; see Kimmel et al., 2005; Bellassai, 2011) often proposed in early anti-VAWG campaigns.

Although traditional forms of physical and sexual abuse undoubtedly represent the most notorious and discussed types of gender-based violence, new forms of online persecution and molestation against women have also received growing public attention in recent years. Far from being safe, the web has been discovered as a space where gender-based violence is systematically exercised, and gender inequality is maintained. As the public discussion of early cases of non-consensual pornography (Gius 2020) proves, the recognition of cyber-VAWG as part of a continuum with offline violence has not been automatic. However, in recent years, as the result of the work of feminist activists, new narratives have started to emerge in the media and awareness campaigns addressing the problems posed by online violence. Although some campaigns still propose an approach to cyber-VAWG that focuses more on the potential that technology-mediated sexual practices could present (i.e., sexting) than on the cultural dynamics perpetuating gendered violence, new communication strategies are also emerging. Media education strategies are being used to promote a culture of consent and to provide youngsters with strategies to counter online hate and abuse effectively. Moreover, feminist groups are developing initiatives aimed at fostering social change through actions of denunciation and networking. Online femi-

nist activism understands the Internet as a highly gendered territory and, as a result, a site for women's struggle. As such, its effort has been directed toward creating online spaces where women can find support and build alliances to contrast patriarchy.

Many associations, organizations, and institutions have recognized the necessity to combat GBV at the cultural and educational levels. For this reason, they have promoted educational projects, media content, and public debates to discuss the phenomenon. As discussed in this paper, there is ample evidence of an ongoing effort to identify compelling ways to represent gender-based violence eluding gender stereotypes in the Italian public debate. Although the anti-gender movement often hinders these initiatives by denouncing their alleged role in supporting the "rupture" of traditional gender roles and the end of the traditional family institution (Marzano, 2015), there is still much work that could be done. More specifically, the educational tone of most of the anti-VAWG initiatives promoted in the country suggests that these argument questions the capacity of institutions to promote specific educational programs addressing GBV. Italy still misses a mandatory educational curriculum focusing on respect for individual differences (Biemmi & Leonelli, 2016; Ghigi, 2019). A welcomed initiative in this sense is the recent approval by the Italian Parliament of Law 1635/2022 fostering the adoption in schools of programs focusing on the development of "life skills" (i.e., self-awareness, empathy, emotion management) helpful to contrast bullying and cyber-bullying among youngsters suggesting that, albeit with resistance and slowness, more gender-sensitive approaches looking at VAWG are being established.

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