

## ANALYZING FEMICIDE IN ITALY. OVERVIEW OF MAJOR FINDINGS AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In Italy, femicide is an event much debated on newspapers, but scientific investigation and discussion is still rare. Instead of simply focusing on a national case, the article tries to highlight national characteristics of femicide by comparison with other international findings. The article discusses the Eures data on femicide in Italy in the period 2000–2005, regarding 1080 victims and 954 perpetrators. To sum up, the Italian data that confirm international findings are: strong predictors at individual level, intra-ethnic lethal violence, a connection between intimate partner violence and femicide, endemic conflict in the couple, a high risk during estrangement or divorce, a high number of unemployed perpetrators with no previous criminal record, and social settings of low gender equality and rising gender equality. The Italian data that do not confirm international findings are: older victims and perpetrators, non foreign-born victims, senior victims, the presence of couples in long-term relationships, perpetrators with mental health issues. These data show how femicide is a universal phenomenon with some characteristics that are constant across different countries. At the same time, some elements of femicide are specific to the Italian national context; they should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing actions for prevention and control.

**Keywords:** intimate partner violence, lethal violence, gender violence, intentional homicide, social policies.

### INTRODUCTION

The term femicide was first introduced in scientific literature more than twenty years ago to describe the “misogynist killing of women by men” (Radford

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& Russell 1992: xi; see also Stout 1992). Nowadays, extant literature acknowledges that the type of perpetrator and the reasons for male victim homicide differ from female victim homicide, and in view of this, this crime needs to be analysed in its specific social and cultural context (Campbell *et al.* 2007; Frye *et al.* 2008; Dixon *et al.* 2008; Taylor & Jasinski 2011). Even when empirical research cannot ascertain misogyny as a homicide motive, “femicide” is used every time a woman is intentionally killed by a man, namely most of the time a woman is killed.

International comparisons are very helpful when it comes to gaining a better understanding of different national phenomena and highlighting their local characteristics. Furthermore, understanding the specific phenomena in the different countries is necessary when it comes to formulating prevention policies, which are always implemented on a local level. But such comparisons are not easy to make. The definition of intentional homicide is not the same everywhere (albeit less variable than that of other crimes), and homicide is recorded at different points of the penal system, so the annual rates for one country may not be entirely comparable to others; in Europe the category of femicide is rarely used in national statistics systems, but must be derived from “female victims of homicide”, when this information is present. Even data on intimate partner femicides (IPF), when available, are not easy to compare, because this category does not have an unequivocal definition: in some countries it only regards spousal killings, in others it also covers common-law marriages and dating relationships (Wilson & Daly 2008). Bearing these limits in mind, comparisons can be made on the most recent, reliable data available: in South Africa, the country with one of the highest rates in the world, femicides stand at 24.7/100,000, 50% by intimate partners (Abrahams *et al.* 2009); in Australia 1/100,000, 60% by intimate partners (Australian Institute of Criminology 2010); in Canada 0.8/100,000, 45% by intimate partners (Statistics Canada 2011), and in the United States 3.4/100,000, 40% by intimate partners (U.S. Department of Justice 2011).

The global prevalence of intimate partner homicide (IPH) is estimated in a recent study (Stöckl *et al.* 2013). Median percentages for female IPH were highest in high-income countries (41.2% of total female homicides), including, among others, Western European countries such as Austria, England and Wales, Finland, France, Germany, and Italy; and in southeast Asia (58.8%). A study specifically focused on IPH and IPF in 10 European countries found that rates of IPH among 1 million women above the age of 14 varied from 9.35 in Finland to 1.62 in the Netherlands. Authors warn that availability and nature of data “do not allow for a direct comparison... across countries” (Corradi & Stöckl 2014, 603).

In Europe, while the general issue of non-lethal domestic violence has interested scholars for years (Hagemann-White 2001; Smeenk & Malsch 2005), research into the more specific phenomenon of femicide is in its early stages (Weil 2016). There is attention to this phenomenon only in a small number of European countries, with data gathered by teams of researchers using locally constructed

methodologies and indicators (Walby & Allen 2004; Corradi 2011; Gonzalez-Mendez & Santana-Hernandez 2012; Rodríguez–Castro *et al.* 2012). The lack of systematic data collection with common criteria (for example the victim's age, marital and socioeconomic status, the type and length of relationship with the perpetrator, characteristics of the neighbourhood environment, homogeneous measures for gender equality) represents a barrier when it comes to understanding femicide on an European level and developing suitable preventive measures.

The aim of this article is to help close the knowledge gap regarding femicide in Italy. In 2011, femicide rate in Italy stood at 0.6/100,000, 47% by intimate partners. This figure is much closer to that of England and Wales, at 0.7/100,000 (Home Office Statistical Bulletin 2012), rather than Southern European countries like Spain, at 0.3/100,000 (Centro Reina Sofia 2007). While academic attention has yet to match the gravity of the phenomenon, when a woman is killed by her partner the episode is given considerable coverage in the Italian press which has played an important role in raising public awareness of IPF (Corradi 2013). This article offers a descriptive analysis of the data regarding a crime that affects Italian society transversally and is connected to the wider issue of violence against women. The Italian data are compared with some of the main findings on femicide in international literature. To conclude, the article presents a number of hypotheses for future research both into the Italian and international field.

## METHOD

This article presents a discussion of femicide as yielded by the Eures database. Eures is a research center that stores detailed information regarding all cases of intentional homicide in Italy since 1990. The database combines information on intentional homicide gathered every year by the Ministry of the Interior's Criminal Police Department, with data supplied by the National Institute of Statistics. For every femicide case, it also adds information from the court files as well as from the Ansa Agency, the country's largest news agency that archives the full text of each press release since 1981. The Eures database is not publicly accessible, but every year they present a report on intentional homicide in Italy<sup>2</sup>. Owing to the wealth of database information and the multiple sources used, inputting the information on each individual case is a lengthy process: it takes around two years to complete the database of all the homicides that take place in one year. This article identifies and analyzes all the cases of femicide in the database that were committed between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2005.

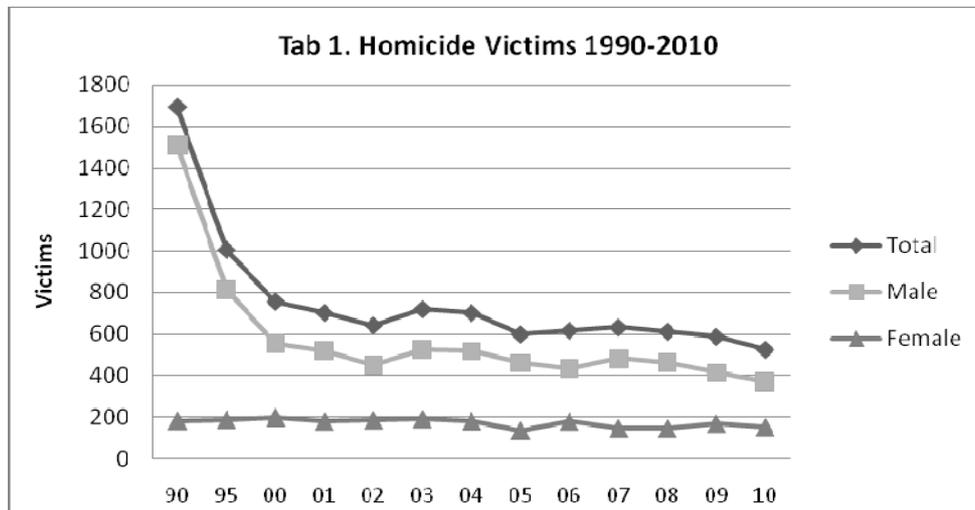
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<sup>2</sup> See [www.eures.it](http://www.eures.it). The *Rapporto Eures-Ansa sull'omicidio volontario in Italia* [*The Eures-Ansa Report on intentional homicide in Italy*] presents data on this phenomenon classified in general types: homicides in the family, organized crime and common crime. It also offers a closer examination of the most numerous category, almost always organized crime (Eures 2006, 2007, 2009).

These regard 1080 female victims and 954 perpetrators. This data-set spans 6 years and offers a good representation of the phenomenon in Italy. Eures supplied percentage distributions of many items concerning the victim, perpetrator and circumstances of each event. Femicide is defined as the intentional homicide of a female victim. Since the information collected by the Eures database does not consider the perpetrator's motives, the misogynist intention which appears in Radford & Russell's original definition cannot be established.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the patterns of three curves for the years 1990 to 2010: total number of homicide victims in Italy, only male victims and only female victims. In 1990 the total reached a peak (with 1695 victims, 1511 male and 184 female) before falling in the 10 years subsequent to that, but this decrease entirely favoured male victims: it was actually the number of male victims which decreased sharply, while the number of female victims, while lower than male, remained steady. Prevention policies and repression of mafia have successfully combated the phenomenon of organized crime that generated a high number of male victims in 1990–2000. In the period 2000–2005 (which is considered in detail in this article) there was an average of 506 male victim homicide and 180 femicides annually. In relation to the female population, as indicated above, this equates to 0.6/100,000. In 92% of femicide cases, the perpetrator was a man.



### THE VICTIMS

A total of 77% (n=828) of victims was of Italian citizenship; the foreign-born victims were mainly from Romania (10%, n=25), Albania (8%, n=21), Nigeria (8%, n=20), Ukraine (7%, n=17) and Morocco (6%, n=16). A total of 38% (n=409) of victims was aged between 25–44, 23% (n=245) between 45–64, and 21% (n=231) was over 64. A total of 51% (n=547) of victims had children, around a third of whom were minors. Twelve women (1%) were killed while pregnant. It was only possible to gather information on the educational qualifications of victims in 18% of cases (n=191), and though scarcely representative, the data are noteworthy: with regard to this group, 19% (n=37) were university graduates, 36% (n=68) had a secondary school diploma, 18% (n=34) a middle school diploma, and the remaining 27% (n=52) had a primary school qualification or no qualification. The employment status of victims was very varied: retired 17% (n=186), housewife 15% (n=166), white collar worker 5% (n=53), self-employed 6% (n=65; for example artisan, shop-owner or farmer), student 5% (n=54), domestic worker 4% (n=49), business woman or company director 4% (n=48), unspecialized worker 4% (n=48), unemployed 4% (n=41). In 9% (n=100) of cases the victim was involved in prostitution or drug trafficking.

### THE PERPETRATORS

The information regarding perpetrators concerned 954 people. As indicated above 92% (n=878) of femicides were committed by men, who in 47% (n=452) of cases were aged between 25 and 44, and in 26% (n=252) of cases between 45 and 64. The high majority of perpetrators were Italian (84%); the four foreign nations of origin present were, in this order, Albania, Romania, Morocco and China, namely the four largest groups of migrants present in Italy. If compared to the group of victims, the employment status of perpetrators was more clustered around certain categories: unspecialized worker 19% (n=184), pensioner 17% (n=166), unemployed 14% (n=134), white collar worker 11% (n=97). Cases of femicide involving the suicide or attempted suicide of the perpetrator represented 27% (n=254) of cases and the main means of suicide were firearms (63%, n=138) or hanging (15%, n=33), almost always immediately after the crime and at the same crime scene. 13% (n=125) of perpetrators had a previous criminal record for theft, crimes against the person and homicide, but 73% (n=692) had no previous criminal record (no data was available in 14% of cases). In 87% (n=830) of cases the man was identified by police within 20 days of the crime.

### THE EVENT

A total of 77% (n=831) femicides in Italy were committed by a perpetrator known by the victim; in particular 69% (n= 751) occurred within a family or intimate relationship and 16% (n=171) was committed in conjunction with robbery, mugging or organized crime (for 78 cases there was no information). With regard to femicides in the family setting, 21% (n=232) were committed by relatives (in particular parents and children) and 47% (n=505) corresponded to IPF, namely committed by the victim's husband, partner, ex-husband or ex-partner. If the victim and perpetrator were married or cohabiting at the time of the crime, in 39% (n=195) of cases the relationship was ongoing for more than 10 years; if the victim and perpetrator were divorced or estranged, in 52% (n=67) of cases estrangement or divorce had taken place within the previous year. In 73% (n=94) of cases it was the victim who filed for divorce, whereas in only 1.5% (n=2) of cases it was the perpetrator who filed for divorce. In 86% (n=436) of cases of IPF, the victim and perpetrator had a very conflictual relationship involving arguments, jealousy and control by the perpetrator on the victim's behaviour; in 15% of cases the woman had been victim of recurrent physical or sexual violence, that others (such as relatives, friends or neighbours) were aware of.

The variables regarding the month of the year in which femicide took place, the day of the week and the time of day did not prove significant, and the same can be said of the region of Italy and the size of town or city: femicides took place both in the North and South of Italy, and in both small towns (between 1,000 and 5,000 inhabitants) and big cities (with more than 250,000 inhabitants). The Eures database does not keep a record of units smaller than a municipality, so it is impossible to distinguish between the disadvantaged/affluent areas of a big city, or to obtain a picture of the neighbourhood environment. The weapons most frequently used were firearms (31%, n=338) – but only 18% (n=169) of perpetrators were in possession of a gun license<sup>3</sup> – followed by knives (29%, n=314) and improvised weapons (12%, n=133) such as domestic objects or tools (like hammers, pieces of wood or metal bars) seized by the perpetrator on the scene.

There was a significant number of cases (18%, n=192) in which femicide occurred by means of battery, strangulation or suffocation, with the perpetrator physically attacking the victim, often with his own hands. There was also a high level of premeditation: 38% (n=413, but information is missing for 297 cases).

The victim's body was almost always found by police at the scene of the crime, namely at the home of the victim (20%, n=218), or of both victim and perpetrator (40%, n=437). In these cases the crime scene was the bedroom (30%,

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<sup>3</sup> In Italy the purchase of firearms is strictly regulated. Applicants must obtain a specific authorization from the police, as well as a gun license, which is issued after medical and psychological examinations and the applicant's criminal record check.

n=223), followed by circulation spaces like the stairway, corridor or hall (28%, n=205) and the kitchen (17%, n=99). Other elements are overkilling (14%, n=149) and other forms of violence inflicted on the corpse (18%, n=88), such as binding, gagging or dismemberment. Sexual violence only appears to be present in 2% (n=17) of cases, but medical examinations were not systematically performed so the figure is probably very conservative.

## DISCUSSION

The Italian data confirm the hypothesis present in many international studies, namely that women are almost always killed by men, very often men with whom they have a family or intimate relationship (Mouzos 1999; Frye *et al.* 2005; Dobash *et al.* 2007; Abrahams *et al.* 2009; Warner 2009). Rather than a hypothesis this is in fact “a universal finding” (Path 2008, 3) and should be studied as such: as a general phenomenon that is present in almost all societies and cultures. In Italy too, the strongest predictors of femicide are at the individual level (Frye *et al.* 2008).

In more than a third of cases, the age of the victim coincides with the periods of maximum responsibility in a woman’s life (Campbell *et al.* 2007; Frye *et al.* 2008), which in Italy is between 25 and 44 years of age. This is a higher age range than in other countries, but it is in line with the fact that, in Italy, women enter the world of work, embark on stable intimate relationships and have children later than in the United States and other countries in Western Europe. The prevailing profile of the Italian victim of femicide presents the following characteristics: Italian citizen, young adult or adult, mother of children who are minors living with her, in employment, with a medium-high level of education. The prevailing profile of the perpetrator presents the following characteristics: Italian citizen, adult but younger than the victim, employed in occupations with a lower status than that of the victim, or unemployed (14%, compared to 4% unemployment among victims), with no previous criminal record. With the exception of the unemployment factor, this is the profile of the “conventional perpetrator” described by Dobash & Dobash (2010): a man who, by conventional standards, would not be expected to commit murder. The figures also confirm the greater lethal risk for a woman during estrangement or divorce, especially when instigated by her (Campbell *et al.* 2007; Dixon *et al.* 2008; Taylor & Jasinski 2011).

The profile of the victim of femicide is in line with Italian data on non-lethal violence against women on a national level. The two victimization surveys carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 1997 and 2005 (Muratore & Sabbadini 2005) revealed that 23% of women of higher status (lawyers, doctors, managers) and 14% of women factory workers stated they had experienced physical violence from their partner during their lives (Barletta *et al.* 2009). Explanation for this difference is twofold: while it is possible that women of a higher socioeconomic

status are actually more frequent victims of violence, they are also more likely to acknowledge the experience and speak out. In any case the fact remains that in Italy violence against women is not restricted to conditions of poverty and social disorganization (Frye *et al.* 2008). As has already been highlighted in a number of studies (Stout 1992; Campbell *et al.* 2007; Taylor & Jasinki 2011), the dual explanation suggested by the Italian data is only apparently contradictory. Femicide is observed in two types of situation: low and rising gender equality. Femicide victims are housewives, women who are unemployed or in unskilled jobs, with a low level of education, who are economically and perhaps also emotionally dependent on their partners. However, femicide victims are also independent and economically autonomous women, with a high level of education. They may be perceived by their partners as a threat to traditional gender roles. These two situations are entirely compatible with the positives and negatives of the status of women in Italian society. The data show that female unemployment is higher than male unemployment (10% compared to 8%); the female employment rate is much lower than the male employment rate (47% compared to 67%); there is a wage gap of 6% in favour of men, and 30 women out of 100, compared to 3 men out of 100, state that they were forced to give up work because of family responsibilities (Istituto nazionale di statistica, 2012a). On the other hand women have a higher level of education than men: for example 24% of women aged 30–34 have a university degree, compared to 15% of men in the same age bracket; the marriage rate is one of the lowest in Europe (3.8/1,000 inhabitants), and the fertility rate (1.4 births per woman) is one of the lowest in the world. All these indicators speak of changes in gender roles, which force men to reconsider traditionally acquired behaviours (Istituto nazionale di statistica 2012b).

Femicide is predominantly of the IPF variety, and is particularly high in two types of victim-perpetrator relationship. The first type regards couples in long-standing relationships (among victims and perpetrators cohabiting at the time of the crime, in 4 cases out of 10 the cohabitation had been going on for more than 10 years). We can posit that IPF occurs after a series of episodes of domestic violence, that the victims have not managed to report to the police, or have encountered many obstacles while doing so; in 2004, 2006 and 2009, Italy introduced more stringent laws against intimate partner violence and stalking, but the penal justice system reacts slowly and across Italy judges do not apply the law consistently (Baldry 2005). The second type includes recently divorced or estranged couples (in 1 case out of 2 for less than a year, and in 3 cases out of 4 estrangement was instigated by the woman); as previously observed, the Italian data are compatible with American and British findings (Titterington 2006; Frye *et al.* 2008; Dobash *et al.* 2007). Various characteristics of the event increase our understanding of IPF in Italy: as indicated above, it is very often committed in the home of the victim or couple, with particular frequency in the most intimate, familiar areas of the home like the bedroom or kitchen, or in access or exit areas. The use of improvised

weapons and violence on the corpse are also frequent, indicating high levels of anger and the personalization of the relationship with the victim (Dixon *et al.* 2008).

The high number of femicides of middle-aged or senior women (21%) deserves specific commentary: victims are Italian, pensioners or housewives, probably with a long-standing intimate relationship with the perpetrator. It can therefore be hypothesized that part of these women are the victims of a violent relationship based on male desire for control and female vulnerability, which could take the form of intimate terrorism, rooted in patriarchal traditions and gender inequality (Johnson, 1995; Warner, 2009). But the IPF of senior women can also be contextualized in a family, not just an intimate relationship, in which the perpetrator suffers from a serious mental illness; in 30% (n= 249) of IPF cases the perpetrator is classified as having a psychiatric disorder. This is a very interesting finding, though it must be treated carefully: this group includes men who are registered psychiatric patients or suffer from medically diagnosed illnesses, but also men who suffer from “psychological disorders” or anxiety, namely conditions without a strict scientific diagnosis. In addition to this is the 2% (n= 21) of perpetrators with a serious physical illness or handicap, certified by public services. While due care is necessary with these figures, it seems evident that in these cases lethal violence occurs in situations in which the woman has the onerous responsibility for caring for a family member, without adequate support from the mental health services. These observations are in line with the high rate of femicide-suicides, which amounts to 27% and is similar to that encountered in other studies (Frye *et al.* 2005; Dixon *et al.* 2008; Campbell *et al.* 2007).

We can also posit two further categories of femicide: 1) female infanticide (children aged 0-10), which represents 4% (n=45) of total victims; 2) victims in the context of crime, 16% of the total, which may be random femicides (victim was an innocent bystander), or be connected to drug and sex crimes, which represent around 9% of cases; the context of this violence is very different from that of IPF and prevention requires measures addressed at reducing crime and prostitution connected with female trafficking. To summarize: the 2000-2005 Italian data lead us to posit the existence of 4 different social contexts in which femicide occurs. These are intimate partner femicide, femicide occurring in a family (non intimate) setting and committed by a mentally disturbed perpetrator, female infanticide and femicide occurring in a context of organized criminality. Since these 4 types emerge from a univariate analysis of variables, a more detailed and sophisticated data treatment is necessary.

Separate attention should also be devoted to femicide of foreign citizens, 23% of victims. While a small number of these cases is included in the second category mentioned above, many more belong to the category of domestic violence or IPF: women migrants or daughters of migrants who experience double marginalization, in both society and the family, and are therefore doubly vulnerable. Actions like calling a helpline, accessing services or requesting police

intervention are socially sanctioned in most of the ethnic communities, which exert strong control over women rather than supporting them. As observed above, the countries of origin of non-Italian victims partly overlap with perpetrators', echoing findings in other countries: most family and intimate partner killings are intra-racial and intra-ethnic (Stout 1992; Frye *et al.* 2005; Abrahams *et al.* 2009). In these cases murder may be classified as IPF or occurs as a consequence of the lethal repression of behaviour (often in young women) that the family views as overly liberated.

The Italian data appear to confirm the power-gender explanation (Taylor & Jasinski 2011): femicide is the extreme act of control of a man over the behaviour of a woman with whom he has or has had a close, family or intimate relationship. Yet in this relationship of control, the woman does not always occupy a socially lower status. The data show both a victim profile that corresponds to the male-female gender gap (low level of education, unemployed or in unskilled work, therefore low or no income) and a different profile, where the victim is in a qualified profession, has a high level of education, and is at least potentially independent (Smith & Brewer 1990; Pridemore & Freilich 2005; Titterington 2006; Campbell *et al.* 2007). The age of the victim, in particular, seems to be a deciding factor between the two profiles; only women born after the mid 1970s have grown up in a society that acknowledges and supports female emancipation in the public sphere.

Moreover, the gender gap and genuine equal opportunities when it comes to accessing the world of work are not uniform throughout the country. In one of the few scientific studies on femicide in Italy published to date, the author reveals that women in all occupations are victims of IPF, with the exception of prostitutes, who are killed by men unknown to them (Iezzi 2010). We can therefore conclude that in Italy, female victimization is the result both of women's disadvantaged position in society, and the "backlash effect" – namely when increased female autonomy and independence can induce men to "keep women in their place" (Titterington 2006, 209); in these cases, femicide is a means of exerting control, motivated by a wider loss of male control (Dixon *et al.* 2008).

Just as there are different types of violence against women (Johnson, 1995), researchers must acknowledge that there are different types of femicide. These spring from different situations and call for different prevention measures (Johnson 2005).

#### LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study should be read with a number of limitations in mind. The first is that the data-set made available by Eures describes the phenomenon in percentage terms. The next stage of research would call for a more sophisticated approach, using bivariate and multivariate associations to describe profiles of

victims and perpetrators and the characteristics of social contexts that represent a high risk of victimization. This would enable us to test various hypotheses that have emerged in the USA and the UK, such as models of domestic violence applied to femicide (Johnson 2005), the profiles of abusers in lethal and non lethal violence (Dobash *et al.* 2007), and the expressive/instrumental thematic split in the perpetrator's behaviour (Salfati 2012). The second limitation regards the absence, in the original data set, of information on the neighbourhood or local community where femicides take place. Even if there is not a clear consensus on the role played by the community, the literature available highlights the importance of assessing the influence of the neighbourhood environment on femicide, in terms of elements like collective efficacy, social cohesion, informal social control capacity, ethnic distribution of population, local availability of domestic violence resources (Browning 2002; Dugan *et al.* 2003). This type of information could be particularly significant in a country like Italy, where there are major cultural and economic differences between the various regions. The third limit regards the necessity of enriching the quantitative data with qualitative findings. With regard to the Italian data, we can posit the hypothesis that lethal and non-lethal violence in families are intimately connected phenomena, but this needs to be tested empirically. As British scholars have observed, in order to prevent femicide we need to understand the background and personal stories of victims and perpetrators more in detail (Dobash *et al.* 2007; Dobash & Dobash 2010).

To sum up, the Italian data that confirm international findings are: strong predictors at individual level, intra-racial and intra-ethnic lethal violence, the presence of endemic conflict in the couple, high lethal risk in periods of estrangement or divorce, high number of unemployed perpetrators without a previous criminal record, use of knives and firearms (despite the fact that the latter do not circulate freely), a social context of either low gender equality or rising gender equality. The Italian data that do *not* confirm international findings are: older victims and perpetrators, non foreign-born victims, victims with medium-high socioeconomic status, senior victims, long-standing couples, perpetrator with psychiatric disorders.

The issue of policies aimed at preventing femicide deserves some specific observations. As table 1 shows, in the last 4 years the number of femicides has fallen, going from 181 in 2006 to 153 in 2010. The most recent European survey on violence against women conducted by the Public Opinion Analysis sector of the European Commission found that in Italy the *perception* of this phenomenon is the highest in Europe; in 2010, 91% of Italians believed that violence against women was very common or fairly common (European average=78%), with an increase of 10 points compared to the previous survey, conducted in 1999 (Eurobarometer, 2010). Awareness has grown in the Italian public opinion in the last decade: advertising campaigns funded by the Ministry of Equal Opportunities, the implementation of the national "Pink Phone" helpline (for female victims of

violence, active 24 hours a day) and funding for women's shelters, have all improved prevention activities and increased awareness of domestic violence.

Just as in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice 2011), it is likely that these measures, that in Italy were meant to tackle violence against women in general and not femicide in particular, also contributed to reducing the latter. However, the same Eurobarometer survey revealed one information that shows how contradictory the Italian situation is: the perception of the *proximity* of the problem is among the lowest in Europe, with only 16% of Italian respondents stating that they were acquainted with a victim of violence within their circle of friends and family (European average=25%). In short, violence against women is seen as a very serious but not a close problem. This contradiction is generated by a situation of denial that represents one of the toughest obstacles in the prevention of femicide. The Eures dataset does not register the story of the victim/perpetrator relationship, but Italian newspapers give ample coverage to cases of femicide; many deaths were foreseeable, because victims' extended families, friends or neighbours were aware of the conflicts, arguments and non-lethal violence that may precede murder (Corradi, 2011). The lack of trust in support services, the slowness of the penal system, and the perception of limited collaboration from police authorities make victims think twice before reporting abuse and discourage the community from getting involved in what many still believe to be a "private matter". For foreign women, the reticence of the extended community is a further obstacle. Moreover, as Dugan, Nagin and Rosenfeld have suggested (2003), "a little exposure reduction (...) in severely violent relationships can be worse than the status quo" (p. 194). While national campaigns and local support services promise less exposure to domestic violence, the lack of follow-through (due to inadequate services and an inefficient penal system) can actually worsen the victim's situation.

It can be concluded, also in relation to the Italian situation, that femicide is a universal phenomenon with numerous constants. Yet why is the Italian rate five times lower than that of the United States and twice as high as Spain? A cross-national survey based on common criteria, in combination with coordinated small-scale qualitative studies could answer this question. While in Italy, too, femicide falls within the broader context of violence against women (Mouzos 1999; Frye *et al.* 2005; Abrahams *et al.* 2009), the relationship of covariance between family violence, intimate partner violence and IPF requires further study. This observation is even truer when it comes to examining the question internationally: in order to understand the factors behind higher or lower rates of femicide in different countries, we need to broaden our horizons, and assess and compare other factors that might have a covariant relationship with violence, such as the country's homicide risk, the rates and types of crimes against the person, the legal and illegal circulation of firearms, and the levels of gender equality in different strata of society (Smith & Brewer 1992; Dewees & Parker 2003; Titterington 2006).

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