

Femicide and social determinants of health: the “mercy killings” of elderly women in Italian news media representation

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This contribution aims to address violence against women from a socio-cultural perspective (Moscovici, 2005; Lalli 2005; Tuchman 1978b). More specifically, we will discuss how media representations of femicide, the most severe form of violence against women, plays a crucial role in the circulation of specific cultural discourses on femininity and masculinity at the societal level (Bollock and Cubert 2002; Gillespie et al. 2013; Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Meloy and Miller 2009; Mendes 2011; Meyers 1997).

Building on the results of a research conducted over a three-year period (2015-2017) on the social representations of femicide in Italy, we will highlight how Italian news media steadily rely on very traditional and gendered ideas of femininity and masculinity to describe the social world, even when horrendous acts of violence are being perpetrated. In order to show the pervasiveness and the relevance of this issue, we will focus our attention on news media coverage of femicides in which the male perpetrator was the sole, or the principal, caregiver of the victim (which amount to 8.8% of the 374 femicide events included in our corpus).

Results suggest that when a femicide is perpetrated in this context - especially in the case of elderly couples - the media narrative of the homicide is generally framed by a specific set of assumptions regarding the responsibility of the perpetrator. In particular, the motives identified in these accounts reveal the existence of gendered expectations associated with the role of caregiver: whereas women are implicitly expected to assume the burden of caregiving because of a supposed natural or social predisposition, men tend to be justified in their inability to bear the weight of providing round-the-clock care to a spouse or a mother living with mental illness or severe disability, even when this results in the extreme act of killing the care recipient. This underlying inequality reflects on the framing of this group of femicides as the inevitable outcome of caregiver stress - as “mercy killings” born out of “desperation” and “isolation”.

Moreover, our findings reveal the lack of an independent discourse in the Italian media regarding the dimension of prevention. Possible issues related to the shortcomings of the welfare programs directed at elderly psychiatric or disabled patients and their families were rarely addressed or identified as contributing cause of the event or as possible solution. Further research is needed to address the role played by studies and data on femicides of minority groups – such as older women – in the discussion of new policies aimed at tackling domestic violence.