

## Gender-based Violence and ‘Femicide’ in Queer Italian Movements: Questioning Gender, Sexuality, and the (Hetero)normative Order

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### Abstract

This article describes the development of the Italian feminist political lexicon on gender-based violence within the security frame in the last years. After the description of the historical main issues developed by feminism during the Seventies about the relation between gender-based violence, women’s self-determination and criminal law, this paper describes the new framework of feminist and queer movements against the security policies on gender-based violence adopted by the Italian government since 2007. On the one hand, feminist movements criticized the processes of criminalization and victimization produced by the security frame and denounced the underlying nexus between sexism and racism. On the other hand, they addressed the essentialism deriving from these processes. Despite the mainstream vocabulary used the term “femicide” in order to focus on its victimizing and alarmist aspects, contemporary feminist and queer movements thus addressed gender-based violence as a problem related to the gender stereotypes and sexist prejudices by deconstructing concepts such as gender, sexuality, and (hetero)patriarchy. In this perspective, gender-based violence is not only a form of dominion by men of women, but it also takes the shape of differential forms of inclusion and exclusion of LGBTQI persons in the neoliberal system, as in the case of homo- and trans-phobia.

### Key words

Gender-based violence; femicide; queer Italian movements; criminalization/victimisation processes; security policies; heteronormativity

### Resumen

Este artículo describe el desarrollo en los últimos años del léxico político feminista italiano sobre violencia de género en el marco de la seguridad. Después de describir los principales hitos históricos desarrollados por el feminismo en los años setenta, sobre la relación entre la violencia de género, la autodeterminación de las mujeres

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y el derecho penal, este artículo describe el nuevo marco de los movimientos feministas y queer contra las políticas de seguridad sobre violencia de género adoptadas por el gobierno italiano desde 2007. Por un lado, los movimientos feministas criticaron los procesos de criminalización y la victimización producida por el marco de seguridad y denunció la conexión subyacente entre sexismo y racismo. Por otro lado, abordaron el esencialismo derivado de estos procesos. A pesar de que el vocabulario convencional utilizaba el término "femicidio" para hacer hincapié en la victimización y sus aspectos alarmistas, los movimientos feministas y queer contemporáneos abordaron así la violencia de género como un problema relacionado con los estereotipos de género y los prejuicios sexistas, desmontando conceptos como género, sexualidad y (hetero)patriarcado. En esta perspectiva, la violencia de género no es sólo una forma de dominio de los hombres sobre las mujeres, sino que en el sistema neoliberal también asume formas diferenciales de inclusión y exclusión de las personas LGBTQI, como en el caso de la homo- y transfobia.

**Palabras clave**

Violencia de género; femicidio; movimientos queer italianos; procesos de criminalización y victimización; políticas de seguridad; heteronormativa

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## 1. Introduction

This article forms a part of a study on the genealogy of the political lexicon and practices developed in the context of the new wave of feminism in Italy since November 2007, when a broad-based mobilization of women combating the security policies on gender-based violence adopted by the Italian government turned out for a national demonstration in Rome known as "Not in My Name".

The demonstration was an expression of a radical opposition to the spread of the moral panic against foreigners that had exploded after the murder of Giovanna Reggiani by a Roma man in Rome a month earlier. To counter the political manipulation of this episode by the mass media and the Government parties, the purpose of which was the passage of a repressive new immigration law, the feminist movements denounced the mystification of a mainstream racist discourse that represented the phenomenon of gender-based violence as a crime committed predominantly by male immigrants.

This research addresses the genealogy of discourses and practices (the "challenging codes" described by Melucci in 1996) of the non-institutional queer and feminist groups that took part in this demonstration, which expressed the feminist critique of the use of security laws and the heteronormative paradigm in the matter of gender-based violence. The feminist perspective is crucial for understanding and interpreting the definition of what gender-based violence is today, as regards its subjective and objective aspects, because its meanings have been formulated within, and by, feminist movements over the last forty years. Indeed, if gender-based violence has finally emerged as a structural and cultural problem of our society, it is due to the conflicts and mobilizations feminists have been organizing since the 1970s. Two issues have characterised the historical feminist perspectives about gender-based violence as a social phenomenon: on the one hand, the importance of formulating vocabularies that render the political meaning of terms - the so-called "power of naming" in public discourse (Melucci 1998) -, and, on the other, the controversial relationship of feminism with the law as a dispositif performing sexualities and identities (Pitch 1990). As this article details, the definition of gender-based violence changes according to political approaches and strategies employed by different actors (institutional feminists, feminist and queer movements, law makers and so on).

In the last years, within the security frame, gender-based violence has been at the core of the public and political debate, and its definition was the object of different formulations according to different political aims and positioning. Criminalization and victimization processes underlying the security frame polarized the political representations and discourses on gender-based violence. Despite the mainstream vocabulary, which used the term "femicide" in order to focus on the victimizing and alarmistic aspect of violence against women, contemporary feminist movements describe gender-based violence as a problem related to the gender stereotypes, sexist prejudices, and (hetero)patriarchal asymmetries that are deeply rooted in Italian history and culture (Pitch 1983, Creazzo 2008, Simone 2010, Peroni 2014).

This paper develops a framework for gender-based violence by an analysis and deconstruction of concepts such as gender, sexuality, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, through the lens of the queer theories that had landed in the Italian political debate of the late 1990s. This further expression of feminist and queer perspectives, which has been borrowed mainly from Judith Butler, questions the heteronormative nature of the social order, "undoing" gender itself and focusing on gender as a heteronormative sexual dispositif (Foucault 1978, Butler 1990). Overcoming the essentialist paradigm of patriarchy, queer movements address its heteronormative dimension, which produces and reproduces asymmetric power relations between sexed and gendered subjectivities. In this dimension, gender-based violence is not only a form of dominion by men of women, but it also takes

the shape of differential forms of discrimination of LGBTQI persons in the neoliberal system, as in the case of homo- and trans-phobia. My research utilizes qualitative, situated, and self-reflexive feminist methodology (Harding 1987, 2004, Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992, Alcoff, Potter 1993, Melucci 1998, Baxter 2003). I also belong to a trans and queer feminist group that has participated in the mobilization of, and contributed to the theoretical discussion generated by, the feminist movements regarding strategies to combat gender-based violence. Hence, my perspective reflects contemporary feminist approaches that view a cognitive and theoretical separation between critical analysis of gender-based violence and feminist approaches to this social problem as an impossibility (Pitch 1998, 2001, Terragni 1998, Creazzo 2008).

In the first parts of the article, I examine the genealogy of the feminist approaches that first named the phenomenon of gender-based violence during the 1970s. My purpose is to frame the theoretical and political system in which the concept is situated and the lexicon of the interpretive paradigms utilized. The definition of gender-based violence is deeply rooted in the feminist conflict on gendered power relations, and reflects the varying perspectives on the use of law in general, and criminal law in particular. The section describes this conflict, which constitutes the *fil rouge* of feminist positions on gender-based violence up to today.

The second part describes the political and social context in which gender-based violence became a two-fold dispositif for mobilizing society against immigration since the 2000s. While criminalization of immigrants as "ethnic rapists" led to further stigmatization, and in some cases persecution, the representation of Italian women as "natural" victims was an attempt to control their self-determination by defining how a "good (meaning respectable) victim" should behave in order to merit protection. The aim of the social construction of women as objects of State control was to reaffirm a subaltern role of women, and thus the heteronormative order of our society, where gender and its social construction is still the tangle of the feminist critique.

Indeed, the spread of the use of terms like "femicide" in the public discourse expresses a shift from the focus on gender conflict developed by feminists during the '70s to a victimizing paradigm developed in the last fifteen years within the security frame. These issues lead to an in-depth examination of what (hetero)patriarchy and heteronormativity mean for contemporary feminism in Italy through the deconstruction of gendered power relations and victimization of women.

In the empirical section that follows I analyse the public campaign organized after the murder of Giovanna Reggiani for the national "Not in My Name!" demonstration to protest against male violence against women. That campaign took place in November 2007, and constituted a real political turning-point in the Italian feminist movement as regards the historical "Difference Feminism" tradition (Libreria delle Donne 1987, Di Cori 2007, Fantone 2007). Contemporary feminist and queer groups have developed new theoretical and practical tools to undo gender and heteronormativity, overcoming the risk of essentialism that was rooted in the previous wave of feminism, which even in recent years has left traces of the victimization paradigm, for example, in public campaigns such as that against "femicide".

I then set out the point of view of the activists who organised and participated in the demonstration through fifteen in-depth interviews, which questioned the meaning and interpretation given to gender-based violence, analysing issues such as gender itself, sexual identity, and (hetero)patriarchy on a strategic and theoretical level. Here, the data analysis has a genealogical purpose (Baxter 2003), and reconstructs the epistemological and methodological process that contemporary feminists have experienced in recent years. In the methodological section, I explain the epistemological and reflexive tools I have used in order to

manage potential biases in this complex relationship between research and political engagement. The dialogue resulting from these interviews represents an attempt to co-construct with the activists a feminist lexicon on heteronormativity and self-determination in our society.

## 2. Gender-based violence: genealogy of a political definition

The current definition of gender-based violence in public discourse is the result of decades of feminist theorization and mobilization against patriarchy, sexist normative and heteronormative power, and asymmetry in gender relations (Pitch 1998, Creazzo 2008, Peroni 2014). This definition can never be a final one, however: it is formulated within the context of the development of feminist movements, and offers a subjective perception of what violence, gender and sex are in a specific historical, political, and social context.

Gender-based violence was acknowledged as a culture-related problem in the context of the social movements of the 1970s, when the feminist movement produced a new lexicon and a new consciousness of gender inequalities in Italian society. Until then, sexual violence had been treated both socially and legally as a psycho-pathological or biological problem affecting men, in the former case by attributing violence to deviance from an assumed "normality" of male behaviour (the so-called, and still cited, "raptus"), and in the latter by normalizing the "natural aggressiveness" of men, thus branding women who were victims of violence as provocateurs. Evidently, both approaches had a clear absolution function, and had the goal of avoiding criticism of the structure of gendered and power relationships (Adami *et al.* 2000, Balsamo *et al.* 2004).

In addition, there was no political or legal vocabulary to define the subjective, political, sexed, power dimensions of this phenomenon. From a legal perspective, this lack of social and political awareness was well symbolized by the fact that sexual violence was located in the "crimes against public morality" section of the criminal law (Pitch 1990). Indeed, in the 1970s, in the abstract language of the law, women's bodies were still represented as a mere object of Italian moral identity, rather than having full legal subjectivity (Terragni 1998, Adami *et al.* 2002, Creazzo 2008).

As far as the cultural and social sphere is concerned, two emblematic cases reported by the mass media highlighted the cultural backwardness of Italian society and the spread of violence against women: the so-called "Massacre of Circeo" (1975), and "Trial for Rape" (1979). The former was the shocking news of the kidnapping and murder of three young women by a group of rich Fascist youngsters nearby Rome, and the latter a prime-time TV programme that clearly showed the dual victimization by all legal actors of female rape victims during trials for sexual violence. These episodes underscored the seriousness and cultural rootedness of violence against women in Italy, and revealed that a sexist culture was also pervasive in judicial and police institutions. This was also one of the main reasons for the high rate of crimes involving sexual violence.

For this reason, during the 1970s feminist and women's groups developed two new strategies in order to organize social resistance to sexual violence and provide victims of rape with a legal defence. The first of these was a form of alliance between women and feminist lawyers to support victims during trials for sexual violence, while the second was the foundation of self-help centres in which women could be housed and protected from their abusers (Creazzo 2008).

As a result of these experiences, the feminist definition of sexual violence evolved on the basis of a shared knowledge of feminist practices and a consequent awareness of the cultural and social dimensions of these types of crime. Sexual violence was, however, only one of the multiple forms of violence against women within traditional families, which also included physical, economic, and

psychological harassment. The political definition of violence against women thus also included a dimension of gender conflict in which from a feminist viewpoint, gender became a political category for analysis and a dispositif that produced power asymmetries and inequalities between men and women.

### *2.1. A feminist bill proposal to acknowledge sexual violence as a crime against women*

In this same period, a part of the feminist movement also helped advance legal recognition of sexual violence as a crime against women through proposed legislation that enjoyed popular support. This article is not the place for a lengthy description of the development of the feminist debate on the convenience and lawfulness of the use of the criminal law in an intimate, sexual relationship; indeed, the use of the law in general, and the criminal law in particular, lay at the heart of Italian feminist debate (for a review of the political and juridical debate around the bill proposal and its relations with feminism, see the full special issue of *Democrazia e diritto*, in Pitch 1993, and Pitch 1990). As far as the broader-based feminist movement was concerned, the criminal law in general raises three principal political and strategic issues: first, the risk of the simplification and distortion of relationships between the sexes as being between a victim (the woman) and an offender (the man); second, and as a result of this, the unavoidable victimization of women, who are seen by the State as being weak subjects in need of protection, and the identification of the sex offender as the responsible party, in isolation from the social and cultural issues in which sexual violence is legitimized; and third, the risk of de-sexualizing sexual violence into a common crime that could never properly render the sexed and relational dimension of the phenomenon (Bumiller 1987, Berns 2001, Larcombe 2011). Other feminists, by contrast, asserted full subjectivity and self-determination within gendered and sexed relationships and independence from State control, concepts that they considered hard to translate into the dichotomy and abstraction of legal vocabulary (Pitch 1983).

The limitations of the existing criminal law on sexual violence prompted a number of groups to develop a proposed bill that aimed neither to criminalize sex offenders further nor to over-protect and victimize women, but overall to raise a symbolic issue of the legal subjectivity of women. The main intentions of the first draft of the bill were in fact: to symbolically relocate the articles of the law relating to sexual violence from the "Crimes against Public Morality" to the "Crimes against Persons" section of the Penal Code<sup>1</sup>; to eliminate the difference between rape and other sexual acts; to make mandatory the prosecution for sexual crimes; and to safeguard a victim's dignity during the trial. In other words, the goal of the first draft of the bill, which was submitted to Parliament in 1979, was to recognize women's juridical subjectivity and contest the representation of their bodies as a moral issue (Pitch 1983).

Over the following eighteen years, the legislative proposal was modified by parliamentary debate, and the resulting text represented a radical change to its initial purpose: the law that was passed in 1996, while relocating the offence of sexual violence to the "crimes against persons" section of the criminal law, also provided for a special procedure for private prosecutions, extending the term for them to up to six months from the date of the event, but making them irrevocable (Pitch 1998, Creazzo 2008). This provision was a response to a protective rationale aimed at avoiding the risk of a woman's being threatened by the offender, but in fact it deprived women of the right to change their minds, in a context in which the "crime" is often associated with the complexity of affective, family, or sexual relationships (Virgilio 1996, Pitch 1998). The victimizing and moralistic rationale of

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<sup>1</sup> The backwardness of the previous norm on rape was due to the juridical legacy of the Fascist Penal Code, called "Rocco" from the name of its main writer, the Justice Minister of Mussolini's Government, that is still in effect.

the final version of the law can also be seen in the criminalization of all kinds of sexual relationships with a person under the age of fourteen. In brief, the 1996 law confirmed the framework of criminalization and victimization as regards sexual violence and individualized responsibilities, thereby failing to question the social and cultural heteronormative context that legitimizes and reproduces gender-based violence.

Only in 2001 did State intervention on gender-based violence in intimate relationships move from criminal to civil law through new legislation (L 154/2001), by providing protection orders issued by the civil courts in cases of a serious risk to the safety of victims of violence. In addition, the law provided that a court may order the intervention of the local social services and family mediation centres, and order payments where the spouse lacks adequate means as a result of the above order. Apart from this exception, all the further legislation on "violence against women" or "gender-based violence" has been framed within the criminal law, as a result of an emergency- and security-based approach to the problem.

### *2.2. Femicide and victimization: translation and neutralization of a political concept*

In more recent years, sexual violence and rape returned to the core of the public debate within a new wave of moral panic that pervaded the media and the political sphere since the 2000s. During this period, the increasing phenomenon of Africa and Eastern European immigration raised considerable social alarm, fuelled by the mass media and conservative neo-nationalist parties, and turned into a truly racist movement throughout the entire country (De Giorgi 2000, Dal Lago 2004). Within this context a close nexus between racism and sexism emerged, built around the need to construct a national, white identity to counteract the "other": namely, the immigrants who were "invading" our society. Thanks to the wider feminist, anti-racist, and post-colonial literature, populist discourses on security are profoundly rooted in the gendered and sexualized processes of ethnicization (Razack 1994, Wing 1997, Spivak 1999, Haritaworn 2012), which relates white Western women in the victimized role and "brown men" in sexual criminalization. Indeed, the affirmation of a national identity recalled the image of Italian woman's bodies as a symbol of purity, while a pervasive discourse on immigrant men as sexualized public enemies resembled a return to the Fascist regime (Woodcock 2010, Bonfiglioli 2010).

Feminist mobilizations against the anti-immigrant exploitation of sexual and gender-based violence, supported by the first national survey on violence against women in Italy (ISTAT 2007) that revealed that almost the 70% of violence against women in Italy was committed by their (ex-)husbands or partners, helped advance public discourse acknowledging the connection between violence and intimate relations. Nevertheless, public discourse still represented intimate partner violence as an exception that regarded only a psycho-pathological deviance of men, and thus in an alarmist way.

With this rising moral panic, a new analytical category – femicide, a term translated from the Latin-American legal feminism<sup>2</sup> – was introduced into the Italian public debate by an Italian feminist attorney, Barbara Spinelli. The concept of femicide denotes any kind of violent behaviour or discrimination against women 'as women'. It includes the gender dimension of violence, which is described as "the exercise of male power over the minds or bodies of women and lesbians; a power that aims to annihilate their lives, their freedom, or their personalities if they do not

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<sup>2</sup> The feminist anthropologist Marcela Lagarde coined this term to describe the connivance between Mexican illegal *narcos* groups and the State in the mass torture, rape, and killing of hundreds of women around the city of Juarez, close to the border with the United States in the last ten years of the twentieth century (Lagarde 2005).



conform with the proposed social model" (Spinelli 2008). Although the definition offered by Spinelli includes the gender conflict dimension as the core of femicide, it relates to violence by men against women, with the implicit presumption that it is impossible to take any action to transform gender identities themselves or gender relationships and asymmetries.

Femicide became a universal concept in the following years, when the moral panic on immigration decreased but women's bodies were still exploited as symbols of a national and moral identity to be defended through State protection. The term was mainly adopted by women's groups that belonged to political parties and unions, and was used as a sort of pick lock to be used at public ceremonies and events, such as the World Day Against Violence on Women promoted by the United Nations. On these occasions, women of opposing political positions declared that they were united in the struggle against femicide; this was a sort of ontology of women's destiny, but made no mention of the political, cultural, or social reasons underlying gender-based violence.

The fact that a term defining gender-based violence was used by left-wing, conservative and women affiliated with mainstream institutions conveys the process of neutralization that took place while it was being translated in the Italian debate. This shift moved the focus away from viewing gender-based violence as a concept related to the gender stereotypes. Indeed, addressing the cultural and social roots of gender-based violence would require a broad intervention by public institutions (such as the education system), mass media and political actors, against the persisting sexism in the public discourse and the gender discrimination that still pervade the whole society.

Some critical feminist scholars object to the term "femicide's" essentialist etymon, which actually neutralized the gender and political dimension intrinsic in the genealogy of gender-based violence by representing it as an exceptional event, and not as a structural cultural and political issue (for further in-depth analysis of this semantic shift, see Graziosi 2013, Peroni 2014, Virgilio 2014).

Furthermore, queer and feminist groups have criticized the use of a terminology that refers to the criminal law vocabulary – as "Femicide" does – because it produces a static representation of gender-based violence as a potential condition of (all) women as women, persecuted in a kind of war that has been declared by one gender against another. That concept does not offer any possibility of change in gender asymmetries, and describes a potentially unavoidable destiny for every woman.

### *2.3. The security framework: the sexualisation of moral panic*

In October 2007, moral panic over immigration reached its peak when the national press reported the news of the brutal murder of an Italian woman, Giovanna Reggiani, by a Roma man. Mrs Reggiani was middle-class and married to a respected admiral in the Italian Navy, and her murder immediately became a symbolic event for further stigmatizing immigrants, and especially Roma men, as ethnic sexual offenders (Woodcock 2010, Peroni 2014). Indeed, the problem of security and its link to immigration became the main topic in the public and political debate, while a new law on security was discussed in Parliament (Simone 2010).

The political reaction was extremely repressive and highly alarmist, and Law Decree 181/2007 "Urgent Regulations on Expulsion from the National Territory for Public Safety Reasons" was passed just a few days later. The decree included the so-called "*anti-Roma*" rule, which allowed deportation not only of non-EU citizens, but also of European Union citizens, in order to "preserve national security in extreme circumstances". The provision provoked controversy and ultimately was not enacted into law, though subsequent similar legislation was enacted. Despite this, the "*anti-Roma*" rule informally and politically legitimized pogroms in a number of cities, and

the police evicted a large number of gypsy camps with the use of violence. At the same time, the institutional debate and the social alarm fuelled by the mass media fostered the process of the criminalization of immigrants, implying that there was a relationship between foreigners and the sexual abuse of Italian women.

In May 2008, Silvio Berlusconi won the Italian elections. During his electoral campaign, his political alliance exploited Italians' increasing fear of migrants, and made "security" the main political priority. After the elections, the Government immediately approved the so-called "Security Package" (Law Decree 92/2008), which consisted of a series of norms on immigration and urban control. The most controversial measures contained in the law were the expulsion of EU and non-EU citizens sentenced to more than two years of imprisonment, the increased powers given to mayors to adopt administrative bills on urgent security issues, and military control of land and Italian cities, especially against gypsy settlements.

Less than one year later, in February 2009, following new episodes of sexual violence for which foreigners were blamed (for a description of these episodes, see Woodcock 2010), a new Legislative Decree on sexual violence and harassment was debated in Parliament. The decree, entitled "Urgent Measures regarding Public Safety and Combating Sexual Violence, and Harassment", linked immigration and gender-based violence together, along the paradigm of security policies (Simone 2010, Woodcock 2010, Peroni 2014). It introduced norms against sexual harassment and deportation measures affecting illegal migrants at the same time. It also allowed the organization of civil patrols (Simone 2010), groups of individuals with explicit xenophobic tendencies, as a response to the presence of immigrants. These norms were subsequently repealed, but they influenced public opinion by identifying a close link between gender-based violence and immigration (Woodcock 2010).

At the same time, Giovanna Reggiani's murder raised another issue that was closely associated with the topic of security: the exploitation of Italian women's bodies as a symbol of Italian identity and ethnicity. Women were represented as weak, minor subjects in both the political and public media discourse, and were expected not to have a voice in the public sphere.

Giovanna Reggiani was the right victim at the right time, because she was a well-off, middle-aged, white woman who was *married* to a respected admiral of in the Italian Navy. She was a wife and a mother, and was not viewed as being at fault for what had happened to her. A sex worker, a young girl who had spent the evening discotheque, or a lesbian would not be worthy of similar protection. At least one of the consequences of the social alarm on immigration was the reaffirmation of the role of women within heteronormative society, and any deviation from this norm would be stigmatized, and considered as "Other", just as a foreigner would.

The distinction between a "good" and a "bad" victim was therefore used for defining what it means to be one of "our" women, and to clarify how a "real" victim has to behave to qualify as a woman who deserves to be defended. As with the Reggiani affair, a "respectable" victim conducts herself decently so as to be recognized by heteronormative society as a victim, and will not be blamed for her victimhood (Simone 2010).

### **3. Entering the fieldwork, between epistemic and methodological issues: a reflexive co-research**

This section analyses documents associated with the demonstration "Not in my name!", that were published on a website, [www.controviolenzadonne.org](http://www.controviolenzadonne.org) ("Against Violence on Women") (Contro Violenza Donne 2013), which was launched by a number of feminist groups expressly for that event, one month after the murder of Giovanna Reggiani. The section also reviews interviews with activists who were members of groups belonging to the queer feminist network which took part in the

"Not in My Name!" demonstration. Many other autonomous institutional groups participated in the demonstration, but I focused my research on this network, my aim being to analyze the perspectives of this new political approach in Italian contemporary feminist collectives.

The methodological tools I used to analyze texts and interviews with queer activists who participated in the demonstration are situated within the Feminist Post-Structural Discourse Analysis (FDPA) (Baxter 2003). This method incorporates an awareness of power relations and the positioning of subjects within the research, and pays significant attention to the issue of self-reflexivity. It gives a voice to differences in multiplicity of discourses through a genealogic approach, following the interest of Foucault in knowledge and the performative power of its production. The aim of FDPA is to construct a transformative project of society, recognizing "gender as a potential site of struggle" (Baxter 2003, p. 12).

The "Not in My Name!" demonstration held in Rome in November 2007 and the political documents issued in connection with it can be viewed as a debut of contemporary feminist movements, characterized by their merger with queer and trans approaches. This is why I call "Not in My Name!" a true dividing point in feminist genealogy, although longstanding and institutional feminist groups helped organize and participated in it.

I had easy access to the fieldwork through my personal contacts, as I myself am a part of this network. The interviews took the form of in-depth discussions on the contemporary feminist lexicon and practices against gender-based violence, and reflected the theoretical concept emerging from their political (and therefore public) activity. I am aware of the potential multiple biases of this kind of research, because I am directly involved in the queer groups that are subject of the study, and at the same time I participated in the development of the issues being analysed. This has triggered a profound reflexive process concerning the epistemic perspective from which I developed my research questions, the relationship between activism and academia, and my relationship with the activists I interviewed, who in turn were also sometimes friends, often colleagues, and always "comrades". In other words, I have focused on my strategic position (Harding 1986), and attempted to pinpoint the limitations, distortions, or *aporiae* that this involvement might have brought to my research process.

As Melucci (1998) argues, the risk of this type of circular self-reflexivity is that one will tumble into an endless spiral that continually pushes the researcher back to one point or another without identifying a way out. I resolved this tangled web (though perhaps not finally) by clarifying, within my set of methodological tools, that adopting a feminist approach means deconstructing the idea that there is a truth to be found, and immersing oneself in an inner perspective within the subject-matter of the research. Standpoint methodology (Hartsock 2004), which relates to subjective experience, offers a partial answer to this question, but in my case, political engagement required a further methodological resource. Zavos and Biglia (2009) have coined the helpful term "activist research": that is, a research and political approach that recognizes the power relations involved in a research process and permanent reflexive self-criticism. At the same time, I would say that "activist research" belongs to the historical tradition of political inquiry known as "co-research" (Alquati 1993), which is a true dialogue between researchers and activists on political issues, meanings, practices, and subjectivities that seeks to formulate a new lexicon and tools for activism.

From my feminist approach, the borders between the purpose and subject-matter of research disappear (Terragni 1998), and the research question itself is a political issue at the same time, which I analyse in order to produce political and critical discourse and practices. Indeed, the aim of my interviews was to understand the

genealogy and meaning of our discourses *with* activists and colleagues<sup>3</sup> in a profound dialogue on both theoretical and strategic issues. The risk that a certain amount of tacit knowledge would be left in the background was a real one, but I sought to overcome it by focusing on and deconstructing all the shared concepts, and discussing the contradictions within theory, discourses, and practices.

The table below shows the list of the activists interviewed and the groups to which they belonged

Activist no.	Name of group – City
1	Transgender – Milan
2	Lucha & Siesta – Rome
3	A/Matrix – Rome; Smaschieramenti - Bologna
4	Gruppo G – Milan
5	Comunicattive – Bologna
6	Femminismo-a-Sud (website)
7	Ribellule (Rome)
8	De-generi – Rho (Milan)
9	Sexy Shock – Bologna
10	Smaschieramenti – Bologna
11	Facciamo Breccia; Mai Stat@ Zitt@ Network – Roma
12	Kespazio – Rome
13	Smaschieramenti – Bologna; Antagonismo Gay – Bologna
14	Gravidamente – Bergamo
15	Maschile Plurale – Bologna

#### 4. The queer discourse on gender-based violence: challenging security and heteronormative frames

The demonstration “Not in My Name! A National Demonstration Against Male Violence Against Women” was organised by a broad composition of institutional and autonomous feminist groups, brought together by the common critique of the exploitation of Mrs. Reggiani’s murder. The groups critiqued the security framework traditionally applied to gender violence and urged a different positioning concerning the terminology used and the role of State and law in combating gender-based violence. This can be considered the first *début* of a new feminist discourse on gender-based violence in the Italian context.

This section analyses the feminist and queer autonomous discourses in order to describe their political framing as different from the traditional approach, taking into account the feminist debate and its genealogy. Queer and contemporary feminist movements inherited a powerful criticism of controls over sexuality and relationships using the law – and particularly criminal law – from historical feminism. Indeed, feminists see criminal law as a control dispositif, which, together with public narratives, mainstream stereotypes and political discourses, continuously performs gender and its relations with sex. At the same time,

<sup>3</sup> One interesting aspect of Italian queer and feminist groups is the overlapping of academic and activist identities. Indeed, a significant number of activists are also involved in academic research (but without permanent status: see Galetto *et al.* 2014).

contemporary movements challenge the essentialist paradigm of patriarchy elaborated by the historical feminism, by overcoming the binary and essentialist definition of sex and gender.

In the context of gender-based violence, contemporary feminists criticize both mainstream "security-based" racist and sexist speech and the heteronormative framework that accompanies it. From the queer perspective, the security and heteronormative frames share a series of dichotomist processes that serve to polarise subjectivities into fixed and opposed identities and social roles, based on the social construction of sex and gender and their relationship. On the one hand, the security frame reveals the structural nexus between sexism and racism through criminalising and victimising process. The representation of foreign men as "folk devil" and that consequent of Italian women as weak and in need of (State) protection, justify a pervasive form of moral sexual control of their self-determination (Simone 2010, Woodcock 2010). On the other hand, the sexist paradigm deriving from this frame constitutes a complex system of dispositifs aimed at enforcing the heteronormative order through dichotomous processes of naturalization and culturalization of intersectional differences. Thus gender, sex, and ethnicity become tangles where local power create and perform identities in order to control – and not restrain, as Foucault (1978) argued – their subjectivities.

#### 4.1. "Not in my name!" Queer critique to the security frame

This section analyses the political frame underlying the construction of the national demonstration held in Rome in November 2007 that represents a turning point in the feminist discourse on gender-based violence. The title of the demonstration was itself the object of deep internal discussions for the relevance given by movements to the terminology used in the public debate. The name had two-fold significance, and denoted an intention to break into public discourse by introducing two clear meanings.

On the one hand, the slogan "Not in My Name!" recalled that used in the mobilization against the "War on Terror" that began after the 9/11 attacks, and the opposition to the spread of racism against immigrants that fuelled persecutions and repressive police control in the United States. In this way, feminists wished to declare their opposition to a similar "war" against illegal immigrants on the part of the Italian government, and to the inappropriate use of violence against women as a means of increasing social alarm regarding immigration (Peroni 2014). This opposition is clearly declared in the documents gathered from the website [www.controviolenzadonne.org](http://www.controviolenzadonne.org), the unique and official web platform launched for the demonstration, where a number of statements denounce the political exploitation of the problem of gender-based violence that criminalizes all foreigners as "ethnic rapists" and controls women's bodies (Woodcock 2010). All the feminist and queer groups have criticized the exploitation of the moral panic that erupted after the murder of Ms Reggiani in order to secure general agreement prior to the upcoming political elections.

The State combines the use of the bodies of women who have been violated and murdered as a result of male violence to legitimize a form of repression that is a precise repetition of the same violence: to reduce us all to the role of victims in need of protection, to justify security and fascist practices, and to legitimize the racist logic of mass deportations of migrant women and men (Facciamo Breccia) (Contro Violenza Donne 2013).

We are not 'vulnerable subjects' whose safety must be protected by the institutions and the police. We are, if anything, people who are weakened by the fears that paralyze us, inculcated since childhood with dreams of love that deceive us, and by dominant discourses that speak in our place. They try to keep us silent, to make us subjected and not subjects. Our REAL SECURITY can only be achieved by defeating the culture of fear and 'security', and combating sexism, racism, and lesbophobia. (Mai stat@ zitt@ Network) (Contro Violenza Donne 2013)

According to these excerpts, the security framework imposes stigmatization of immigrant men and the social shaping of women as victims to be protected by State through the exploitation of sexual violence perpetrated by foreigners. Security in this sense becomes a dispositif that transfers the real causes of perceptions of insecurity (the economic crisis, financial cuts, and egoistic individualization) to the "public enemy": in this case foreigners (Bonfiglioli 2010, Peroni 2014). By rejecting and overcoming the dichotomy between criminalization (of immigrant men) and victimization (of Italian women), queer and feminist movements have thus focused on the nexus between racism and sexism (Bumiller 1987, Balibar 1993, Razack 1994, Wing 1997, Perilli 2007) that historically relates to the construction of ethnicity, race, and gender, and produces domesticated subjectivities, subjected identities, and gender roles that are consistent with the heterosexual norm.

#### *4.2. Against women's victimization: naming the perpetrators*

On the other hand, the sub-title of the demonstration, "National Demonstration against Male Violence against Women," focused on the second term of the relation racism/sexism, and was chosen to publicly name the perpetrators of gender-based violence, thus moving the attention of public opinion from the ethnicity to the gender of abusers. Interviews with queer activists that organised the demonstration revealed that this was a strategic decision, the result of deep discussions regarding the significance to be attached to the message in the public discourse, but highlighted different nuances at a political level:

We had long discussions about this, and 'violence against women' somehow seemed too absolving. I mean, it doesn't identify who commits the violence, so it's too easy... 'Gender-based violence', on the other hand, where 'gender' is the focal term, is a very important analytical tool; but during public discussion it can be dissimulating: a way to avoid naming the offenders. (3)

'Male violence against women' was a term used during the demonstration to highlight that it is not only violence on women, but that it is a violence that men basically do; the intention, therefore, was to place the emphasis not on the victims but on those who commit the violence. By this I mean that first of all, violence has a gender dimension, and secondly, we should not focus on the victims but on those who commit violence. I dislike the term "femicide" because it might suggest a high risk of victimization. (12)

These last excerpts explain that the label "Male Violence against Women" was first chosen in order to "highlight... that it is a violence that men basically do" (12), in a sort of public denouncement of the gendered rather than ethnic identity of perpetrators.

Furthermore, if "Not in my name" was aimed at contrasting the criminalisation of immigrants, the subtitle was chosen also as a public stance in opposition to the mainstream use of "femicide" and to the general process of victimization of women.

Strategically, there are various formulae of 'femicide'. It assumes that there is an ongoing extermination of women ... it is used for a deep-lying cultural reason, with a precise cultural and explicit intent. This way of thinking and representing violence is wrong because it victimizes women. It's a way of victimizing women that we don't wish to share. (6)

With regard to 'femicide' ... here, we see another difference with respect to traditional feminist groups. Often, talking about 'femicide' means talking about the murder of a woman ... but in our opinion, 'gender-based violence' has a broader meaning that implies that this is not only physical violence, and not just on women, but a form of violence determined by gender or sexual orientation that can also be against a man, a type of violence that is related to sexual orientation, and maybe not only to women. (8)

The word 'femicide' stresses the subject that suffers this violence in some way. At the same time, it certainly refers to certain old traditions. Basically, I feel that I can say that the word 'femicide' refers to an essentialist and traditional frame ... (9)

The queer critique addressed the implicit suggestion of an ongoing "war" against women deriving from the essentialist paradigm of femicide, for this idea was considered to be misleading as regards the real social and relational dynamics that lie at the root of gender-based violence. Interviewees questioned this kind of essentialism as being an out-dated feminist tradition, framing the discontinuity with the "Difference feminism" born in the 1970s (Bellagamba *et al.* 2000, Bertilotti *et al.* 2006, Fantone 2007). By sharing the critique against the performativity of the heterosexual norm and the sexual dispositif developed in post-structuralist and post-modern feminism, the new feminist and queer approaches have criticized the sex/gender relation and the underlying dichotomous processes of naturalization (of sex) and culturalization (of gender) (Butler 1990).

#### 4.3. Gender-based violence, from patriarchy to heteronormativity

Other comments highlight the criticism of the feminist paradigm of patriarchy that described a binary view of sexual and gendered domination. In activists' opinions, the concept of patriarchy does not register the social change that has involved both men and women in recent decades. The concept's rigidity prevents interpretation of the spaces and shifts activated by feminist struggles against gender and power relations. In other words, the term "patriarchy" risks failing to recognize the possibility of self-determined subjectivation (Foucault 1978) by crystallizing sexual and gender identities in unchangeable destinies.

I say that the category of patriarchy doesn't satisfy me for the same reasons that I don't like the category of 'femicide', but so far I haven't been able to offer a definition for the current situation. I think there are also different levels at stake: to use Foucauldian categories, there are the levels of control and discipline, the two systems co-exist... and resistance, in Foucauldian terms, co-exists with socially spread powers. (3)

I say that the term 'patriarchy' is not enough. I would use 'hetero-patriarchy'. I think we need to have the intelligence to understand as far as possible how things change. Of course, we cannot speak of the same patriarchy we talked about in the seventies... (12)

Personally, I have a big problem with these categories: that is, I would tend to make the analysis more local and precise. Yes, OK, we have been in a patriarchal society for five thousand years, but, of course many things have changed over these five thousand years (...). So we have still to read biopolitical regimes that constantly change, that continually reshape subjectivities. In this way, it will be clear that a new space of freedom and autonomy has been created around feminist claims and revolt that is somehow immediately reconfigured by the dispositifs of power. Anyway, the question must be how male behaviour changed. (13)

Neoliberalism is a bio-political differential system of social inclusion that absorbs and governs subjectivities through a complex set of dispositifs. In this context, sexism is not merely a form of male domination on women, but a broad series of relationships and performances that involve, and are produced by, every individual, including women and LGBTQ persons.

At a theoretical and political level, as far as queer theories are concerned, gender is, in fact, a normative dispositif that not only creates gender as a binary category that relates to, and is socially constructed on, the two supposed biological sexes, but also creates the binary male and female sex by naturalizing bodies in a heteronormative manner (De Lauretis 1986, 1987, Butler 1993, 2004). With respect to gender-based violence, as Carnino (2011) noted during the international *World Wide Women* conference held in Turin some years ago, "In their subversive and transformative nature, feminist approaches have the task of identifying and questioning the norms that determine which lives are useful and which are not".

Hence, gender-based violence becomes, in queer perspectives, the dispositif of discrimination of all non-heteronormative subjectivities (Morrison 2006).

Taking a more militant approach on these issues, I would say that gender-based violence is a useful concept for connecting different aspects of violence linked to an heteronormative-patriarchal society. Gender-based violence may therefore also include forms of violence that are not committed on bio-women and are connected more broadly to gender relations and any form of violent defence of the normative gender order. Homophobic or transphobic violence or lesbophobia can therefore be considered to be gender-based violence (12).

Certainly, I prefer the term 'gender-based violence' (...) in fact I think it is interesting to consider violence not only on women ... but also on men, lesbians, transsexuals etcetera, committed by both men and women .. (8)

We think that if the aim of violence is to reaffirm the order on which the gender relationship between men and women is founded, including violence against homosexual men and lesbian women, we recognize that there is a link between male violence against women and homophobic violence (15)

This shift takes place within a context acknowledging multiple LGBTQI (Gay Lesbian Bisex Transgender Questioning Intersex) subjectivities in the political space of broader movements. In the case of gender-based violence, the problem is no longer protecting women against their abusers, but changing stereotypes, norms, social roles, and expectations about gender, including all the other subjectivities that do not adhere to the heterosexual norm (Connell, Messerschmidt 2005). Thus, starting from the critical deconstruction of patriarchy as an essentialist system of gendered power relations, queer movements contextualize gender-based violence in the heteronormative (or "hetero-patriarchal") frame, where deviant subjectivities are differentially included or discriminated based on their adherence to the heterosexual norm (Butler 1990, Seidman 2010, Croce 2015).

The 'queering' of the feminist approach to gender-based violence is an ongoing process embedded in a profound social change that sees political activists challenging the heteronormative order in society as a whole.

#### 4.4. *Queering gender against the heterosexual norm*

The complexity of the neoliberal heteronormative order seems to contain two different political, juridical and social tendencies concerning intimate relationships and reproductive issues. On the one hand, the defence and conservation of the traditional family, with all the related asymmetries of power and the naturalization/culturalization processes on which it is built, and, on the other, the multiplication and capture of sexual differences and gendered subjectivities (rather than their repression, as Foucault has argued). What counts in this apparently contradictory set of social norms is that in every case, the heteronormative system is differential and inclusional, meaning that it provides dispositifs of valorization and subjection that shape every subjectivity in an asymmetric manner. In criminological terms, this means the permanent construction of enemies and subjects to be defended as the symbols of what we should be. In the heteronormative order, the point is not which precise subject will be persecuted or protected, but the matrix within which this will occur. Heteronormativity, according to Butler and queer perspectives, provides certain characters and roles of masculinity and femininity, and pushes all differences into this binary shape of conducts and attitude.

Bringing each of these different subjectivities within some kind of normativity is definitely a form of control. For example, also the homosexual movement was born as very libertarian, very much alive, just "fabulous", but it is now going to be normalized in order to be recognized by the broader society. A new identity for gays is arising: you can be gay in a mainstream way or not at all. (4)

Therefore, at a strategic level, deconstructing gender identity is what distinguishes radical activism from a variety that permits fitting in politically and carving out an



area of compatibility with the heterosexual norm. The neoliberal 'branding' of gayness has totally stripped gay and lesbian incompatibility of its original subversive potential, and has domesticated it within recognizable heteronormative niches (Lo Iacono 2014).

This is what a number of authors have called the process of "homonormativity", and is a path taken by a part of the LGBT movements whose aim is to be recognized by the heteronormative system of rights and roles, for example by calling for same-sex marriages within the universal framework of human rights (Polikoff 1993, Brandzel 2005, Seidman 2010, Croce 2015). Queer activists criticize the claim for same-sex marriage for its heteronormative matrix, being that traditional heterosexual marriage is one of the main institutions in which gender asymmetries are produced. Queer perspectives, however, still claim that "The first Pride was a riot"<sup>4</sup>, meaning that the first coming-out of LGBT gender identity and sexual orientation was not an attempt to be recognized, but rather to subvert the heterosexual norm and the essentialist power of shaping subjectivities with it. The response to homo- and trans-phobia as forms of gender-based violence cannot be, in queer perspectives, the neutralization of differences in an inclusive and differential hetero-norm, but, on the contrary, it must be the radical critique to the production of gender itself in the heteronormative matrix. If, then, gender is a *dispositif* that can be deconstructed, this means that it can also be constructed, performed, and exceeded so as to escape the performativity and normalization of heterosexual norms.

I see gender as something that changes, because what really defines it for me is the system of power relations present in our society: sexuality, the cultural context, and what is happening around us. In this, I agree with Butler when she speaks about the performativity of gender, which can be something that changes, that is performative and not fixed. (7).

Following Foucault, changes, relationships, and bodies themselves are the result of power relations that pervade society as a whole (Foucault 1978). In the tension between power and resistance, which are movable points and changing relationships, everybody can achieve a shift in the balance of power, the first, basic ground for which is gender.

In the queer feminist discourse, challenging gender stereotypes and expectations and combating the heteronormative social order is the only way to truly combat gender-based violence as a *dispositif par excellence* in all its derivations. This *dispositif* is a tool for the discrimination and differential inclusion of all kinds of "deviances" from the norm: indeed, all non-conforming sexualities are excluded from State protection and, then, from full citizenship itself (Seidman, 2010, Croce 2015). Thus, for queer and feminist movements, a new discourse against gender-based violence must avoid sexual citizenship inclusive positions if not related to a deep critique of heteronormativity. If gender-based violence is in fact founded on gender as a social power relation and heteronormative *dispositif*, homo- and trans-phobia are direct derivations of it. This is the reason why queers criticize terms like *femicide* and its essentialist and victimizing matrix: the only way to fight against gender-based violence is deconstructing gender itself and claiming the conflictual genealogy of feminist and queer critique of heteronormativity.

## 5. Conclusions

In Italy, the contemporary feminist debate on gender-based violence adopted a new route following the murder of Giovanna Reggiani by a Roma man in October 2007. The social alarm provoked by this crime, the public demand for security and the rising xenophobia in society caused the feminist movements to deal with the phenomenon of gender-based violence in a new way. The rhetorical discourse

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<sup>4</sup> The reference here is to the "Riot of Stonewall" (Carter 2004).

constructed on the fear of foreigners, and consequently on the defence of Italian women, was the principal problem addressed by feminists in order to focus on what gender-based violence actually is and on how to combat it. Indeed, the State's defence of Italian women meant having direct control over their bodies and behaviour, whilst the criminalization of foreigners as rapists contributed to a spread of moral panic and racism, mainly against the Roma people. "Not in My Name", the slogan used by feminist movements for the national mobilization of 24 November 2007 in Rome to protest against increasing institutional racism, meant opposition to the repressive and anti-constitutional decree that was immediately approved by the government against foreigners, who were depicted in the public discourse as dangerous rapists invading Italy.

The feminist demonstration was one of the largest in Italian history, and burst into the public debate by denouncing the dual mystification of immigration and violence against women practiced by the mass media and the political institutions. The queer feminist movements criticized the exploitation of Ms Reggiani's death in particular and the problem of violence against women in general in order to justify a war in the true sense on immigration and the self-determination of women. Through this event, contemporary feminist groups developed a new lexicon on gender-based violence, questioning the cultural, social, and political status of patriarchy, gender relationships, and sexual differences in Italy.

The demonstration focused on the status of gender-based violence in Italy. As the National Statistics Institute had demonstrated a year earlier, gender-based violence is the leading cause of death and illness for Italian women, and mainly takes place within the family, where it is perpetrated by husbands, fathers, brothers, and other relatives. This focus on gender-based violence leads to challenges to the wider social system: it involves gender role stereotypes, the asymmetric relationships between sexes, and the heteronormative order.

At the meetings before the demonstration, activists analyzed violence as a *dispositif* whose meaning and perception are deeply rooted in the political and cultural context. Indeed, gender-based violence can be described as a social construct in both objective and subjective terms. From the former point of view, it is what the mass media, law, and policies say it is. In the public sphere, it has the function of mobilizing the whole of society against public enemies, or of diverting attention from other social problems, or in any case building and fixing identities, roles, victims, criminals, enemies, friends, protectors, and kin. From a subjective point of view, the definition of gender-based violence is related to the level of cultural determination and self-determination achieved by women in a society. In other words, what is now perceived as a sexual or gender-based offence might have been considered to be normal behaviour within a patriarchal family fifty years ago. The feminist struggles against gender-based violence are an acid test for women's self-determination and the standards of freedom of a society. In the course of the "security wave" of the past ten years, victimization of Italian women has produced a novel moralistic and sexist discourse in which they are represented as mothers, sisters, or daughters who need to be protected against the new folk devil, as embodied by the black foreign male. Not only is their subjectivity not represented, but it is also denied as a possibility.

The partial reconstruction of the feminist genealogy of gender-based violence in the recent wave of activism shows that it is recognized by feminist activists as a part of a general paradigm in which sexed bodies and the production of subjectivity are the first objects of contemporary governance in a Foucauldian sense. Contemporary Italian feminism recognizes this paradigm, and seeks to provide new cognitive and theoretical tools with which to re-formulate the political, cultural, and social struggle against gender-based violence. This battle extends the fight against male violence against women by pointing to the complex structure of the social

dispositifs that generate the naturalization/culturalization and victimization/criminalization processes.

Thus, from a queer contemporary feminist perspective, terms such as 'gender', 'heteronormativity', and 'patriarchy' assume new meanings by being rooted in the critique against the heterosexual norm and the limits of the sex/gender system. The *queering* of the feminist movement is associated with this deconstructive approach, and is an ongoing process that addresses not only gender-based violence but also the overall gendered social order in which it is situated.

By attempting to find an exit strategy from the *war against freedom* that has been declared by the political institutions and the mass media, contemporary feminism promotes new forms of education, new imagery, and a new vocabulary. In this way, the undoing of gender and sexed bodies extends the analysis of gender-based violence to violence against LGBTQ persons, thereby opening a new chapter in the field of feminist theories.

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