

WOMEN FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE AS A TOOL FOR DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPED REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Abstract. The social representation of gender-based violence constitutes a subject of increasing interest by researchers in many sub-disciplinary areas of sociology. The growing interest of social scientists in this topic is due to the crucial role of culturally transmitted social mechanisms, that are reflected in the language through which institutions and social actors represent male violence against women, thus reproducing the conditions underlying it.

Every social phenomenon lies in its narrative, in the way it is constructed and, in the language chosen to represent it. Therefore, narrative constitutes a fundamental heuristic and hermeneutical instrument through which it is possible to give meaning to a social phenomenon. Nevertheless, it often happens that third people, institutions, or various social actors construct narrative of social phenomena, without involving the people that experienced it. This happens with the narration of gender-based violence that all too often comes from external social actors, while the women who are protagonists – against their will – of the episodes of violence, are excluded from the construction of the social representation of what they suffered.

This work, after briefly illustrating the main characteristics of the dominant social representation of male violence against women, proposes a theoretical reflection on the importance of women first-person narrative, as a tool for deconstructing the distorted social representation of gender-based violence that contributes to the perpetuation of its normalization, to the “de-responsibilization” of its perpetrator and of the sexist prejudices against women victims of such violence.

Keywords: women first-person narratives, gender-based violence, sexist stereotypes, role of women in society, research methodology.

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Introduction. Gender-based violence is a «structural and widely spread phenomenon» [1] that is common to all cultures worldwide and does not make distinctions according to the age groups, social classes, income levels, health conditions and sexual orientations. It can take many forms: from physical violence to sexual violence; from psychological violence (e.g., deprecation, denigration, threats of physical violence, isolation from relatives and friends) to economic violence (e.g., prohibition of working or managing women’s own economic resources, obligation to do jobs that do not reflect woman’s ambitions); from stalking to revenge porn¹; up to femicide – the killing of women or girls because they are female [2] – that in most of the countries still does not constitute a specific kind of crime.

¹ Revenge porn consists in sexually explicit images of a person posted online without that person’s consent.

All these different forms of violence have in common the fact of being perpetrated against women, who are in a disadvantaged position within a social structure based on unequal power relations between genders, in which men occupy a position of symbolic and material domination [3–5].

This imbalance of power is not only reflected in the discriminations that women face every day, (e.g., less pay for similar work, higher rates of unpaid work, glass ceiling, the full charge of care works, exposure to higher rates of gender-based violence), in the unequal distribution of power among genders (e.g., lack of representation in government, obstacles in achieving top positions in companies) or in the violence itself. The unbalance of power between genders is reflected also in the way gender-based violence is represented within society, and in the way its protagonists are depicted.

The social representation of gender-based violence constitutes a subject of research in many sub-disciplinary areas of sociology such as political sociology, sociology of communication, sociology of security, sociology of the family, sociology of deviance, and so on [6]. This widespread interest of sociologists in this topic is due to the crucial role of culturally transmitted social mechanisms [7–8], which are reflected in the language through which institutions and social actors represent male violence against women, thus reproducing the conditions underlying it [9–11].

The research project *STEP – Stereotypes and prejudice. Toward a cultural change in gender representation in judicial, law enforcement and media narrative*², whose findings this article is based on, has investigated sexist attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices related to gender-based violence and characterizing the current Italian socio-cultural environment by analyzing 16.715 newspaper's articles and 282 court judgements on gender-based crimes, for the period between the 1st of January 2017 and the 31st of December 2019. The main insight emerging from the research is a distorted representation of gender-based violence that tends to normalize some forms of violence – especially intimate partner violence and domestic violence –, to obscure the correlation between violence and its perpetrator (who is always a man), and to depict violence against women as a consequence of the victims' behavior [8; 11].

This misrepresentation is a visible symptom of the unbalance of power between men and women that, in this case, manifests itself by excluding the protagonists of gender-based violence from the narration of such phenomena. This work, after briefly illustrating the main characteristics of the dominant social representation of gender-based violence emerged by STEP project, proposes a theoretical reflection on the importance of women first-person narrative of violence, as a tool for deconstructing the distortions that contribute to perpetuating its normalization, as well as the “de-responsibilization” of the perpetrator and the sexist prejudices against women victims of such violence.

The social representation of gender-based violence. In the last two decades, thanks to the several global campaigns such as *#MeToo* and *Ni una Menos*, that have drawn great attention on gender issues, gender-based violence has gained more visibility in the public sphere and throughout the media [6; 10; 12]. Anyhow, social representations of gender-based violence vehiculated by media do not always help to correctly understand and interpret the phenomenon. They often beneath the dignity of the victims and feed prejudices towards them through toxic and stereotypical narratives, thus reproducing a patriarchal ideology that weakens women and prevent them from breaking free from masculine domination [6; 11].

² The research project “STEP”, coordinated by Professor Flaminia Saccà, has been led by Tuscia University in cooperation with the NGO “Differenza Donna” and with the support of Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministries – Department for Equal Opportunities.

At the same time, despite the increasing global attention, we still do not have a clear picture of the extent and complexity of the phenomenon. In Italy, data on gender-based violence are not fully available, and they are not even constantly monitored, analyzed, and imposed to the public debate.

Let us just mention that the last important statistic survey on a national scale about gender-based violence in Italy has been made in 2014 by the ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) and it does not provide the percentage of the complaints compared to the effective cases of violence, the number of gender-based crimes that get to trial and the number of the convictions. Likewise, there are no statistics related to the convictions and acquittals for each kind of gender-based crime. Furthermore, just a small number of texts of the judgments for cases of gender-based violence is available on-line and we do not know the criteria according to which some texts are published, and some are not. Consequently, since the access to the documents related to the trials is very difficult, it will be just as difficult to reveal the most critical aspects, the prejudices, and the distortions of the representation of gender-based violence produced by those documents [8; 13-14].

What we know for sure is that male violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in Italy, which involves almost one third of the female population aged between 14 and 70 [1]. We know also that its social representation is distorted, both in the press and in the court judgments, and this distortion produces a re-victimization of the women who suffered male violence. Consequently, women find themselves at the center of distorted narratives of violence, which are the product of deeply rooted sexist stereotypes and prejudices, and that make women three-times victims, because they are victims of: 1) the violent crime perpetrated against them (primary victimization); 2) the press and the judicial system representing them as – at least partially – responsible for what has happened to them (secondary victimization); 3) a judiciary system that is not capable of granting women the justice they deserve, weakened as it is by distorted narratives of gender-based violence, consequence of a patriarchal culture in which women and men do not have the same rights (tertiary victimization) [8; 14].

The empirical evidence from the STEP research project shows that the disparity between women and men produces effects on the newspaper's representation of gender-based violence, thus influencing the public discourse on this theme. A primary form of distortion of reality deals with the dimension of the phenomenon. Indeed, the most common form of male violence against women, namely the domestic violence, is not sufficiently covered by the press. Although it represents the most frequently perpetrated crime against women (51,1% of the reported crimes against women)³, domestic violence is one of the less covered gender crimes in Italian newspapers (14% of the articles)⁴. This demonstrates that this kind of crimes is not to be taken too seriously. On the contrary, this underrepresentation of domestic violence vehiculates the idea that this phenomenon is not worthy of stigmatization, but it is a normal aspect of private life and private relations. In other words, domestic violence is not worthy of becoming a “news”. At the same time, the crimes of stalking, which represent 30,7% of the reported crimes in Italy and are generally less violent and dramatic than domestic violence, are covered by the 53,4% of the Italian newspapers' articles. The most frequently covered crime by the Italian press is the femicide, which recurs in 44,5% of the newspapers' articles analyzed within STEP project, although it corresponds to the 0,7% of gender crimes perpetrated in Italy in the period 2017–2019. The effect of this weak interest of the

³ Data provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior, related to the period 2017–2019..

⁴ Data provided by STEP research project.

Italian press in covering domestic violence is a normalization of the phenomenon that could produce – among its consequences – a delay in the identification of the problem by the women that suffer it, who are induced to think that if domestic violence is not frequently mentioned by the media, it is because it represents the ordinary situation and not the deviant one [8]. Thus, domestic abuse ends up being interpreted as «normal acts of discipline, naturalized as relational gender dynamics» [15, p. 37].

Instead, when newspapers narrate violence, they usually represent it as an accident – something unexpected – and they do not frame it as a social, cultural, and political event. When perpetrated in a private context, male violence (physical or psychological) is usually represented by the newspaper narrative as a private issue, concerning only the two persons involved [10–11].

Furthermore, in most of the cases, when describing violent cases, newspapers tend to circumscribe such actions in the frame of an individual responsibility, without putting them in a socio-cultural perspective and without conferring them great importance. On the contrary, they tend to depict them as the consequence of “too much love”, “jealousy”, “depression”, or of a personal deviance (e.g., the perpetrator is alcoholic, or drug addicted). This way to describe violence obscures the social and cultural roots of the issue and diverts the reader’s attention from the structural causes of the problem, that are rooted in the unbalance of material and symbolic power among women and men [16–19]. On the contrary, recognizing the cultural roots of violence, instead of considering it as a generic form of deviance, means conferring political significance to this type of violence and to the actions aimed at contrasting it. It also entails that the women who have suffered male violence are not considered as mere victims but also as bearers of rights [20].

Another important result of the STEP research relates to the centrality of women in the journalistic narrative of gender-based violence and to the parallel marginality of the men who perpetrated such violence. Indeed, by observing the first hundred occurrences within the corpus of Italian newspapers’ articles analyzed within the research project, we can notice that the words *woman* and *women*, that correspond to the victims of male violence, are much more frequent than *man*, *men*, or *husband*, namely the main perpetrators of gender-based crimes, who occur very marginally [6; 10–11].

Even if it is common knowledge that, in every society, the authors of violence against women are mostly men and, in most instances, they are the husbands, partners or relatives of the victims, in their narrative of violence, newspapers tend to eclipse the man who perpetrated such violence. In these narrations violence against women is something that “happens”. This type of representation is made possible through a distortion mechanism that Romito calls “linguistic avoidance”, namely: «a technique, deliberate or unconscious, thanks to which the perpetrators of violence against women and children – men – disappear from discourses and texts on male violence, whether these are international documents, scientific work or the popular press» [21, p. 45]. Linguistic avoidance consists in the use of expressions such as “marital disputes” or “domestic violence” instead of “male violence” and “husband’s violence” [22], or in the common practice of de-humanizing the perpetrator by depicting him as a “monster” [23] or as a beast [24]: e.g., «*It was a blow for the woman, who came face-to-face with a real ogre*»⁵ or «*A raptus that suddenly turned the boyfriend into a monster*»⁶. Such expressions, indeed, conceal the relation between male gender

⁵ Taken from the newspaper’s article *Violentava la figlia: operaio condannato (He used to rape his daughter; worker condemned)*, published by the daily newspaper “Il Tirreno” the 18th of November 2017.

⁶ Taken from the newspaper’s article *Violenza sulle donne: i ragazzi dicono “no” (Violence against women: youngsters say “no”)*, published by the daily newspaper “Il Tirreno” the 14th of February 2017.

and violence. The latter is thus narrated as something that does not involve men, at least not directly [6; 11. On the contrary, highlighting the male protagonist of the violence would mean standing up to the men's "power" – deeply rooted in every culture – to disappear from the discourses about violence against women [25; 6].

From the STEP research it also emerged that, even when the man does not disappear, he is never depicted as completely guilty. There is a tendency of newspapers, widely confirmed in the sociological literature on the topic [22; 26; 24; 27], to de-responsibilize the author of the violence and to not stigmatize the phenomenon. Such tendency, that contributes to make the abuses of women socially acceptable, is mainly based on three biases that occur very often in the journalistic and judicial narrative of gender-based violence: the *lovers' quarrel*, the *jealousy*, the *raptus* [6].

Furthermore, male responsibility is mitigated also when violence is considered to be a consequence of the deviant nature of the perpetrator or when the journalist (or the judge) explains the violence as a reaction of the man to a female behavior that does not satisfy his expectations. In this way, the male decision to perpetrate violence against a woman ends up being interpreted as an irrational action, not correlated with a gender order, in which women are in a disadvantaged position.

This disadvantaged position is reflected in the way newspapers describe women who suffered male violence. Indeed, in these cases, attention is mainly focused on the woman's social status (i.e., *young, foreigner, residing, Italian, etc.*), and on her family status (i.e., *married, single, pregnant, divorced, etc.*). In addition, a further element emerging (which does not characterize the description of men) is that, in some cases, press describes the victim as beautiful, whereas there is no mentioning of male beauty in the narration of gender-based violence. It is also infrequent that the press describes a man as a son, a father or a father-to-be. Talking about the woman who is victim of violence by referring to her youth, beauty and motherhood means not to recognize her a full subjectivity and autonomy, thus fostering prejudices and stereotypes that perpetuate the old dominant gender order and that normalize male violence. In other words, women are not protagonist either when they are abused, stalked, or killed because the dominant perspective is still the male one [6].

While newspapers too often depict violence from a male perspective, in the texts of the court judgments for gender crimes, the victim's narrative is at the center of the attention. Nonetheless, there are still critical aspects in terms of stereotyped representation of male violence. Firstly, since during a trial the attention is mostly focused on the victim's testimony, the woman's reconstruction of the events will be judged, together with the woman herself. In other words, what happens is a role reversal in which the woman ends up being under judgement. In front of the judges, she will have to worry about being trustable, able to provide an accurate testimony of her experience and to have characteristics that make her an "ideal victim", namely a vulnerable and weak woman that goes for a criminal prosecution of the violence perpetrator to defend herself, after having suffered in silence for years [28-29]. This means that testimonies, medical reports, and unequivocal evidence will not be sufficient to ensure justice to the victim. She will also have to demonstrate to have always been an angelic lady in order to be taken into serious consideration and to be believed without being held co-responsible of the violence suffered.

The consequence is that where the female perspective should assume centrality – as in the judicial field – the voice of the victims is muffled by sexist stereotypes and prejudices that still condition the gender norms and the gender role expectations. Such stereotypes and prejudices are so deeply rooted in our society that they characterize

even ideally neutral contexts such as tribunals. In other words, what is listened to during the trial is hardly ever the real testimony of the victim, but the collective narrative constructed by the press, the judges, the lawyers, the society, permeated by stereotypes that are so strongly rooted in the social fabric that they end up obscuring the real matter of facts.

In her own words. Exposing women's own voices in order to deconstruct stereotyped representations of gender-based violence. In the previous pages, we have seen how the culturally transmitted social mechanism underlying male violence against women are reflected in the language through which social institutions and actors represent it. Every social phenomenon, indeed, is not only the object of a narrative, but it lies in that same narrative and in the way it is constructed. Therefore, the narrative of a social phenomenon represents a fundamental heuristic and hermeneutical instrument through which it is possible to give meaning to a social action [30; 31; 27].

In order to understand an experience – theirs or other's – it is necessary that people give it the shape of a narration, because «narrating means selecting – from the infinity devoid of sense of reality – aspects that seems significant and relevant. It implies, also, the fact of putting in relation those aspects through the identification of meaningful links» [32, p. 28]. For this reason, narration represents a very useful tool for social scientists. In fact, regardless of the variety of theoretical and methodological traditions, scientific approaches (i.e., qualitative, or quantitative) and objects to be analyzed (e.g., interviews, text corpora, storytelling), through narration social scientists can reconstruct events and states of mind and reflect on the meaning of the words people choose to represent their emotions, feelings and experiences [32].

Disciplines such as epistemology, anthropology, history, sociology, political science, psychoanalysis, psychology and even economy recognize narrative as a fundamental instrument through which the researcher can interpret the social world in which he is embedded, and the conditions underlying certain social phenomena in order to get their significances and to foster a social change [33–39].

Even philosophical research – a field where it is still difficult to overcome the dualism between personal and philosophical level – recurs to narratives to 1) highlight the prejudices lying in the object of analysis and in the methodology adopted by the discipline, 2) facilitate the understanding of the other and the empathy towards him, 3) reveal the prejudices of the researchers [40].

When someone narrates an experience, he/she gives an order and a meaning to events and actions. Also, he activates a process through which it is possible to understand and explain the narrated reality [34; 41; 38].

Through narration, social scientists can collect information about a certain social phenomenon, on the context in which the narrator lived his/her experience, and on the way in which he/she interprets and represents it. Therefore, the social and discursive practice of narration allows to construct a reality from the narrator's perspective. Indeed, the person who directly lived an experience is the only keeper of his/her narrative knowledge. At the same time, narration allows the narrator to provide connections and interpretative schemes, thus reaffirming and reconstructing his/her own identity and personal story [38].

Nevertheless, it often happens that other people, institutions, or various social actors construct narratives for third persons, without involving them in the creation of the social representation of the phenomenon that they have experienced. This is the manifestation of an unbalance of power of which the distorted representation of gender-based violence is the clearest example. Indeed, very often the narrative of

gender-based violence is outlined by external actors – social actors of institutional subjects – while women, who are the real protagonists of the violence narrated, end up being excluded from the construction of the social representation of what they have suffered.

Even in disciplines like criminology or social psychology, for long time researchers used to focus more on the perpetrator than on the victim. An example of this unbalance in terms of scientific attention on the perpetrator is represented by the psychosocial research about de-humanization, which are mainly focused on the reasons and on the mechanisms that pushed the authors to perpetrate violence [9]. The result is a well-established narrative of violence in which men are depicted as active subjects and women are relegated to the role of “passive victims”, thus transforming the temporary condition of the person experiencing the violence in a permanent status of victimhood.

The etymology of the word “victim” (from the Latin *victima*) – which means a living creature, person, or animal, killed, and offered as sacrifice to a deity or supernatural power, or in the performance of a religious rite⁷ – refers to a condition of subjection and passivity. This is the reason why, according to a feminist approach, it is considered inappropriate to refer to women who suffered male violence by using the word “victims”. Instead of “victim”, that suggests the idea of being powerless, passive, weak and needy of compassion [42], it would be more correct using the word “survivors”, that suggests a more active role of the women who experienced male violence, the idea of a reconquered freedom and control of their lives; a control that manifests itself in the women’s personal or judicial struggle against the violence and against its perpetrator.

In the light of the abovementioned considerations, giving these women a voice means to promote an alternative to the dominant tendency of narrating social phenomena in an abstract and impersonal way, without considering first-person narrations and the perspective of those who actually have experienced such phenomena and their consequences. As said by Brison: «Some issues, such as the impact of the racial and sexual violence on the victims, cannot even be juxtaposed, unless it is given the possibility to tell their own experience with their own words to the people that has been affected by these crimes» [40, p. 30]. At the same time, as argued by the American philosopher: «First-person narratives may unveil gender-based and other prejudices. [...] They can be used to give a testimony, and thus to draw the professionals’ attention to the injustices suffered by groups that in the past have been neglected and have not been considered» [40, p. 60]. Therefore, to give voice to the women who survived male violence by adopting their perspective and trying to understand how they represent their experience is a fundamental epistemological tool for understanding the reality of gender-based violence.

But that is not all. Several studies on male violence against women highlight the therapeutical power of first-person narrative [43; 44; 40; 15]. Asking a woman to “break the silence” by narrating her experiences from her own perspective, by deciding how to define herself, the violence suffered and its perpetrator, is not only an epistemological instrument for the observer who tries to understand the phenomenon of gender-based violence from outside, but it is a form of help to overcome the trauma. The act of narrating her own experience, indeed, is a tool of reappropriation of the Self and of the autonomy that has been disintegrated by male violence [44; 40].

The autonomy of a woman who survived violence depends also on her relationship with the other people. On this regard, the words of Brison are particularly inspiring:

⁷ Translation of the definition of the word “vittima” (Italian word for “victim”) in the online dictionary Treccani: URL: <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/vittima/> (last request 24.02.2022).

«Survivors of a trauma depend on an emphatic Other who is willing to listen their narratives because the language through which narratives are communicated and understood is, by itself, a social phenomenon» [40, p. 113]. In this sense, survivors' narrative helps us to face the problem of gender-based violence without keeping the distance from the women or even de-humanizing them.

Finally, giving voice to the survivors of gender-based violence is also a political act. Indeed, to question themselves on the significance that a woman who suffered male violence attributes to her experience is not useful only to understand the deepest aspects of her experience, but also for reflecting on the relations of power and domination existing in society, especially for what concerns power relations between sexes [45; 15]. In other words, giving voice to who has suffered gender-based violence means choosing to adopt the perspective of those subjects that are in a disadvantaged position within a social structure based on unequal relations. In this way, violence is recognized into a common social horizon of significance, in which the personal and the political levels are not distinguished. On the contrary, they complement each other perfectly and the first become constitutive of the second, and vice versa.

From a methodological point of view, interviews represent an instrument to find – despite the diversity among the personal experiences – the elements that each personal story has in common with other women's stories. Furthermore, this can also be an important opportunity for women to recognize violence. Indeed, by listening or reading the first-person testimonies of other women who have already gone through such an experience, a woman can recognize herself, her own story, and can finally realize that what she experiences or has experienced is actually violence and so deciding to interrupt it.

In conclusion, giving space to a woman's first-person narrative of violence – free of mediations and distortions – represents the most useful instrument for a realistic understanding of this social issue, and it is a first step to give women the justice they deserve, by giving them their voice back. A voice that has been suffocated by male violence against them and by the narration of gender-based violence made by the press, the judiciary system and by society itself.

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РАСКАЗЫ ЖЕНЩИН ОТ ПЕРВОГО ЛИЦА КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ РАЗРУШЕНИЯ СТЕРЕОТИПНЫХ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЙ О ГЕНДЕРНОМ НАСИЛИИ

Аннотация. Социальная репрезентация гендерного насилия является предметом растущего интереса исследователей во многих субдисциплинарных областях социологии. Растущий интерес социологов к этой теме обусловлен ключевой ролью передаваемых в рамках культуры социальных механизмов, отраженных в языке, с помощью которого институты и социальные акторы представляют мужское насилие в отношении женщин, тем самым воспроизводя условия, лежащие в его основе. Каждое социальное явление определяется его описанием, тем, как оно конструируется, и в языке, выбранном для его представления. Поэтому описание представляет собой фундаментальный эвристический и герменевтический инструмент, с помощью которого можно придать смысл социальному явлению. Тем не менее, часто случается, что сторонние наблюдатели, институты или различные общественные акторы конструируют описание социальных явлений, не привлекая людей, которые их пережили. Так, в частности, происходит с повествованием о гендерном насилии, которое часто исходит от внешних социальных субъектов, в то время как сами женщины, пережившие насилие, исключены из процесса общественной трансляции о произошедшем.

В данной работе, после краткого отображения основных характеристик доминирующей социальной картины насилия со стороны мужчин в отношении женщин, предлагается теоретическое осмысле-

ние важности повествования женщин от первого лица как инструмента разрушения искаженного социального представления о насилии по признаку пола, которое способствует сохранению его нормализации, «снятию ответственности» с виновного и сексистских предрассудков в отношении женщин, ставших жертвами такого насилия.

Ключевые слова: женское повествование от первого лица, гендерное насилие, сексистские стереотипы, роль женщин в обществе, методология исследования.

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