

# Modernisation and Femicide in Italy (2018–2022): An Exploratory Analysis of Gendered Violence

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# **Modernisation and Femicide in Italy (2018–2022): An Exploratory Analysis of Gendered Violence**

## **Introduction**

Studies on femicide are currently at the center of the international academic debate, as the phenomenon is recognized not only as a dramatic manifestation of individual violence but also as a structural expression of gender inequality embedded in economic, political, and cultural systems. This growing awareness has led to intensified scholarly efforts to investigate femicide as a global and transdisciplinary issue. Among the disciplines involved, sociology has played a particularly prominent role in framing femicide as a social phenomenon shaped by power relations and normative structures (Jill Radford and Russell 1992; Corradi et al. 2016; Caputi and Russell 1990; Brodie 2024; Widyono 2008; Dawson and Vega 2023, among others).

This paper aims to bridge this gap by analysing whether a connection between modernisation and femicide can be established in Italy. In doing so, it moves to a deeper analytical level than previous studies, exploring the potential mechanisms that may contribute to a reduction in femicide rates. To achieve this, it is necessary to critically reconsider some key concepts commonly used in existing studies, namely the notion of patriarchy and the working definition of femicide. Moreover, modernisation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon involving various economic, political, and cultural factors. Our current data and analytical methods do not support robust causal inferences. Rather, this study should be regarded as an exploratory attempt to identify a descriptive connection or covariation between levels of modernisation and femicide rates across different Italian macro-areas.

This study opens with an outline of the main issues addressed below.

Firstly, the concept of patriarchy is critically re-examined to argue that it requires revision: modern Italian society can be described in terms of gender inequality but not straightforward male dominance. The discussion compares approaches from different fields. While the debate in feminist sociological literature has focused mainly on defining (or redefining) the concept of patriarchy, historical and sociological studies have examined its long-term development, highlighting the decline of the male dominance model alongside persistent gender disparities. These comparisons serve to determine and justify the indicators used in this study to measure gender differences in two geographical macro-areas.

Secondly, the concept of femicide is analysed to provide a working definition. This is essential to distinguish gender-conditioned homicide from other murders. The difficulty lies in identifying the motives behind a man killing a woman. The discussion therefore focuses on the definitions used in literature, generally inclusive in nature, and their applications to highlight all those circumstances where genuine femicides can be differentiated from other murders. It emerges that in several cases gender-based violence can reasonably be excluded. Naturally, a reduction in the extent of femicide does not reduce the gravity of the phenomenon. However, only in this way will it be feasible to attempt to determine its possible underlying cause(s).

Finally, these comparisons require data on the geographical distribution of homicides and the nationality of the perpetrator. For the former, distinctions are drawn between varying levels of modernisation and gender equality across Italy. For the latter, Italian perpetrators are considered separately from non-Italians, as references to cultural aspects, such as patriarchy and gender disparities, pertain specifically to Italian society.

The analysis begins with a discussion on the definition of patriarchy.

## **The definition of patriarchy and the identification of gender inequalities**

The discussion of the concept of patriarchy will focus first on feminist literature and then on historical and sociological studies, before identifying useful indicators for measuring gender inequality.

### ***Definitions of patriarchy in the feminist field***

The concept of patriarchy refers to a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate political leadership, social privilege, and control over resources, including authority within families. Various feminist and historical perspectives offer slightly different definitions, making the topic broad and complex. However, understanding patriarchy is essential for identifying appropriate indicators in this study.

There is no single concept of patriarchy in the feminist realm (Beechey 1979; Hunnicutt 2009; Acker 1989; Hakim 2016; see also Tong and Botts 2018; Kandiyoti 1988). Indeed, the term has taken on a variety of meanings depending on the researcher's standpoint.

Drawing on the work of Weber, Millett claimed in her pioneering study (2000) that patriarchal societies are organised according to two principles: male hegemony over women and the dominance of elders over younger members. Following a similar line, Walby defined patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices used by men to dominate, oppress, and exploit women (1989, 214). Radical feminist literature on violence against women subsequently referenced patriarchy as a theoretical concept in an

analogous way, maintaining that women and their children are essentially the personal property of men (Brownmiller 1975, 17).

By contrast, Marxist feminists analysed the subordination of women as a consequence of the capitalist mode of production. They stressed that this system not only promotes an ideology that leads women to play the less prestigious societal roles of housewife and carer (Zaretsky 1976) but also fosters financial inequality, with women earning less than men for equal work (Young 1981).

Likewise, for Eisenstein (1979) and Hartmann (1981), patriarchy derives from the network of material-based relations among men which enables them to retain their power over women. This can take shape, for example, by denying them access to paid work and imposing restrictions on their sexuality. Although Mitchell (1974, 407 and ss.) abandoned the traditional Marxist position, she adopted a comparable stance, placing greater emphasis on the sexual submission to which women are subjected in modern society. In other words, despite the transition from a society based on nature to one grounded in culture, women have maintained the same specialised role associated with the natural aspect of procreation.

The latter idea was also supported by Hakim (2016). Drawing on the work of Lerner, She claimed that patriarchy is still strong in terms of sexual behaviour even though its other traditional aspects have weakened. This is because the imbalance in male and female desire and the resulting sexual gap have not diminished over time. It is therefore no surprise that violence against women remains a feature of modern societies or, indeed, that the consumption of pornography and the sex industry both continue to grow.

Although there are many different definitions of patriarchy, certain elements are shared by almost all of them. These common traits reference the gender inequalities which

effectively limit women's scope for action in the fields of family, work, and finance, even though the vast majority of indicators relate solely to the latter aspect (see Hunnicutt 2009 for an extensive debate on this issue).

As will be seen below, the justification that leads scholars to focus exclusively on the *economic dimension* is linked to the fact that asymmetries of power within the family are a remnant of the twentieth century. Although the levels of inequality between the sexes have not been eliminated, they are much less relevant. Nonetheless, the prevailing assumption in most studies is that the most significant gender disparities persisting today are primarily economic in nature.

The next section will focus on family relations, outlining the main historical studies that analysed the development of patriarchy between the fifteenth and twenty-first centuries.

### *Historical-sociological studies and the dilemma between patriarchy and gender inequality regarding terminology and other factors*

The differences between patriarchal societies and gender-unequal societies will now be analysed with reference to two closely interrelated aspects. The first of these concerns conventions, focusing on the evolution of family relationships in Europe, which is the most frequently cited facet of the debate on patriarchy. The second regards the legal sphere, concentrating on Italian legislation.

### *The 'fall' of patriarchy*

Different approaches have been adopted in an extensive body of research to analyse the changes in gender power relations in Western countries. All these studies agree, however, that such alterations have led to emancipation from authority relations. Indeed,

the same result is seen whether the changes be internal, with a reduced power imbalance in relationships between spouses and with children, or external, with the dwindling influence or control of the community and parents over the family. There are varying opinions, though, about when and why these shifts occurred.

Shorter (1975) claimed that relationships only changed from the late eighteenth century onwards as a result of the development of capitalism. This was the period when spousal relationships first became less deferential and more intimate, with the growing importance of feelings and changes in the parent-child dynamic, leading to the emergence of the concept of maternal love. Stone (1979, 3–9) on the other hand, argued that family relations changed in pre-industrial times, citing a decline in the influence of kinship ties in England in the second half of the seventeenth century. It was during these years that marital relations became less imbalanced, and children formed less subservient bonds with their fathers.

In fact, the evolution of changes in these power relations within the family is not straightforward as the importance of patriarchal power did not decline in a linear pattern. The influence of paternal authority in family life was actually further strengthened from the fifteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth century (Cavallo 2010; see also Miller 1998, 22 and ss.). This power shift can be explained by two factors. Firstly, the head of a household took on a new social and political role, as the family was perceived as the basic unit of the modern state, the husband-father embodied the authority to be obeyed by his wife and other family members (Stone 1979, 102, 151 and ss.). Secondly, the birth of Protestantism and reforms in the Catholic Church led to a reassessment of marriage, which became strictly regulated along with harsh discipline of children (Hardwick 2004).

Be that as it may, it is likely that the trends of the waning importance of the paterfamilias and the decreasing influence of parents over their offspring started before the twentieth century and accelerated between 1900 and 1920. This process concluded in Europe approximately at the end of the 1970s (Therborn 2004, 73 and ss.).

The circumstances in Italy are even more intricate and complex, as the changes affected different social classes at different times. For Barbagli (1984), the nuclearization of the family and the consequent increase in neolocal residence first became common among the upper classes before spreading to the lower classes. This change at the top of the social hierarchy was triggered by new rules of hereditary succession before the start of industrialisation. By contrast, it was the latter process, in tandem with urbanisation, which caused this change to have a broader impact among the lower classes. The shift transformed family relations to such an extent that the patriarchal system was already in crisis in the first half of the twentieth century.

To sum up, the traditional conventions of intra-family and kinship relations from the early modern period were already starting to fall apart in Italy — and indeed throughout Europe, albeit with different characteristics — between 1900 and 1950. The next step is to estimate approximately when this male-dominated control system disappeared completely. In other words, when did it become possible to replace the term patriarchy with the less dramatic expression gender inequality?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On this point see also Pierik (2022, 72).

### *The achievement of legal or formal equality*

It is not simple to identify a dividing line between patriarchy and gender inequality as the two concepts overlap significantly. The course of the transition can, however, be roughly outlined in legal terms with a brief summary of the main steps leading to formal gender equality.

The important role played by Italian women during the Second World War was only recognised after the conflict, with the approval of universal suffrage in the institutional referendum of 2 June 1946. Subsequently, in 1948, the text of the Italian Constitution recognized the human rights and dignity of both men and women alike.

Although Article 29 of the Constitution affirmed the moral and legal equality of spouses, remnants of a patriarchal legal culture persisted. It was only in 1956 that the Court of Cassation definitively ruled that husbands no longer held the *jus corrigendi* — the supposed right to physically discipline wives and children —, a practice rooted in the traditional *pater familias* model (Rizzo and Schettini 2019). Another important turning point came with a reform of family law in 1975, which introduced the principle of equality into the domestic sphere: from that moment on, both parents had identical rights and responsibilities towards their children (Librando 1978). Finally, a law on sexual violence was passed in 1996, transforming it from a crime against morality into an offence against the person.

Nevertheless, these laws were applied somewhat belatedly. For example, women were only allowed to become fully-fledged magistrates in 1963, twenty years after the Constitution had established equal rights for all citizens (Simonato 2010). Similarly, women had to wait until 1981 to join the police force and, incredibly, 1999 to enrol in the armed forces (Scarponi 2019).

Finally, since 1990 the legislative authorities have not only defined the terms of formal equality but have also promoted positive action through specific laws and equal opportunities policies in order to foster *substantive* gender equality (Simonato 2010; Pescarolo 2019, 286–87).

In short, while the first half of the twentieth century saw a drop in inequalities rooted in traditions and reiterated in laws, the second half witnessed legislative reforms that further levelled out disparities, arguably leading to the total disappearance of patriarchy. However, as will be shown below, although this post-patriarchal society grants men and women the same opportunities in formal terms, it has essentially maintained gender inequalities in terms of freedom of action (Therborn 2004, 127). It can therefore be defined as a gender-unequal society.

It is possible, if not probable, that the disparities in scope for action consolidate discriminatory social rules and establish certain customs and traditions. This is not, however, the most significant aspect of the context at hand. Of greater relevance is a distinction that can be made between the two types of society. Gender discrimination under the patriarchy was a disorder that affected the whole of society. Indeed, disparity was a foundational pillar of patriarchal societies as a result of male domination. In gender-unequal societies, on the other hand, disparity is less deeply rooted and only affects certain, albeit important, sectors.<sup>2</sup> It thus no longer plays a foundational role.

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<sup>2</sup> In the economic sphere and in terms of employment, for instance, there are some sectors in which disparities are no longer present or exist to the detriment of men. In 2022, for example, the percentage of female employees was approximately 50% in the sectors ‘Accommodation and food service activities’, ‘Financial and insurance activities’, and ‘Business services’ (respectively 50%, 47%, and 48%), while it reached 73% in ‘Education and Healthcare’ (IstatData 2022).

The focus will now shift to the most substantial aspect of gender disparity by identifying useful measurement indicators and two geographical macro-areas in which inequalities vary due to different levels of modernisation. In this instance, the analysis will concentrate on the present-day situation in Italy in the second decade of the twenty-first century, leaving aside the historical aspect.

### ***The identification of gender inequalities***

The different levels of modernisation in Italy are well documented. There are significant variations between the two geographical macro-areas — North-Centre and South-Islands — both in economic terms (Asso 2021; Scappini and Trentini 2016; Istat 2025)<sup>3</sup> and from a political and family dynamics perspective (Putnam 1994). It is worth noting that the data had to be aggregated into these two broad macro-areas, as the number of femicides was not sufficient to allow for a more detailed national-level analysis, which would have been interesting.

With specific regard to *gender gap inequality*, it is not difficult to establish useful indicators of disparity.<sup>4</sup> Three areas have been taken into consideration in this study. The first of these, usually deemed the most significant, is the economic sphere, with reference

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<sup>3</sup> In particular, the North-Centre of Italy recorded a GDP per capita ranging from 34,000 to 40,000 euros in 2022, with some regions such as Trentino-Alto Adige reaching almost 50,000 euros. In contrast, the southern regions and the islands lagged behind significantly, with GDP per capita values between 20,000 and 22,000 euros, underscoring the persistent economic disparities between these macro-areas.

<sup>4</sup> It is true that the economic aspect may well be the main cause of gender inequalities, but this cannot be confirmed with the available data. Furthermore, it is overly restrictive to limit the possible scope of disparity to this factor. On this point, see also Phillips (2004).

to the employment rate (MacInnes 1998; see also Hunnicutt 2009).<sup>5</sup> The second is political representation, with data on the make-up of regional councils. The final area is the family dynamics, which are indicated by differences in domestic roles measured by time spent on family care work (Gershuny 2003; Daminger 2019).

With regard to financial disparities, Table A1<sup>6</sup> illustrates that there is a ratio of 0.80 between the female employment rate (58.8%) and the male employment rate (74.4%) in the North-Centre macro-area. The difference is significantly higher in the South-Islands, with a ratio of 0.58 (with respective employment rates of 34.4% and 59.1%). As regards political imbalance, Table A2 shows a ratio of 0.40 between women and men in the regional councils of the North-Centre (with 36 women and 91 men). Representation of women is far lower in the South-Islands, with the ratio dropping to 0.23. Finally, concerning inequalities in family dynamics, Table A3 highlights that women spend 264 minutes on family care work in the North-Centre while men are only active for 113 minutes, producing a ratio of 2.34. This figure rises to 3.07 in the South-Islands.

The significant and consistent differences between the values of the indicators are clearly the result of considerable variations in the modernisation of the two macro-areas.

## **The definition and operationalisation of femicide**

The next step is to discuss the definition and measurement of femicide.

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<sup>5</sup> The initial intention was to use gender pay gaps as an indicator of economic disadvantage, which totals to 5.6 percent in 2022 (Istat 2025). The analysis by macro-area, however, highlighted highly intricate and complex circumstances, which cannot be addressed in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Tables A1, A2, and A3 are included in the appendix.

## ***Femicide: an overview of a problematic definition***

Definitions of femicide have developed over time and there has never been a consensus on the matter (Corradi et al. 2016; Grzyb, Naudi, and Marcuello-Servós 2018; Brodie 2024; Walby 2023). This section will outline the most influential contributions.

The feminist Diana Russell first used the term femicide in 1976 but did not provide an explicit definition until 1990, when, together with Caputi, she described it as ‘the murder of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women’ (Caputi and Russell 1990, 189). In an anthology jointly edited with Russell a few years later, Radford redefined the term as ‘the misogynous killing of women by men [...] This definition enables sexual aggression by men to be seen in the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society.’ (Jill Radford 1992, 3).

Using these concepts, four key aspects can be identified to define and explain femicide. Firstly, there is the killing of a woman. Secondly, the act is carried out by a man. Thirdly, the underlying motive is misogyny or hatred of women. The fourth aspect concerns the way in which the crime is explained, namely the oppressive environment in which women live. Radford thus claims that the continued existence of patriarchy in modern societies enables, or even justifies, this form of capital punishment against women. However, this seminal definition, which forms the basis of the explanation generally used at an international level (UN Women 2022), is more easily understood than applied.

If femicide presupposes that a woman is killed by a man, it is not a difficult crime to identify, at most, it is a simple delimitation of the broader criminal phenomenon of murder. In this instance, measurement presents no difficulties. Problems arise, however, when attempts are made to further demarcate the category of murders of women in terms of the motives that prompted men to commit the crime. Misogyny, or *hatred of women*,

is not an easy cause to quantify (Dawson and Gartner 1998). As a result, this motive is generally applied to almost all killings of women in order to simplify the data collection process (Widyono 2008; Campbell and Runyan 1998; Corradi and Piacenti 2016; Minello and Dalla Zuanna 2019; Taylor and Jasinski 2011; Iezzi 2010; Dawson, Angus, and Zecha 2024). Alternatively, at most, an extremely limited selection is made from all murdered women (Todesco 2021; Gazzelloni 2024; ISTAT 2022; 2023; Dawson, Angus, and Zecha 2024).<sup>7</sup>

These inclusive solutions are not arbitrary as they refer to the internationally used definition, which will now be examined.

### ***Conditions for an operationalizable definition of femicide***

The International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) defines intentional homicide as ‘Unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury’ (UNODC 2015, 33).

As a subset of intentional homicide, femicide is classed as the ‘Intentional killing of a woman for misogynous or gender-based reasons’ (UNODC 2015, 33). This part of the explanation therefore includes not only misogyny but also any gender-related motivation. The latter is defined as follows:

Gender-related motivation [...] refers to the root causes—such as stereotyped gender roles, discrimination towards women and girls, inequality and unequal power relations between women and men in society—that characterize the specific context in which such killings take place. [...] In this context, the term “gender-related motivation” does not

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<sup>7</sup> Some studies have also separated femicides from murders of women in a more analytical way, but such cases are relatively rare. On this point, see the article by Colagrossi et al. (2023, 4).

refer to the subjective intent of the perpetrator to commit the homicide, but to its underlying root causes. (UN Women 2022, 3,7).

This definition of gender-related motivation has three problematic aspects: the subjective sense of the act, the cause-effect relationship, and the practical repercussions of the definition in terms of measurement.

The first problematic area lies in the assumption that individuals may not be aware of the cause of their actions. This presumes that behaviour is guided by a moral imperative in which the expression of patriarchy is implicit. As a man might not be conscious of this aspect, some causes cannot be attributed to subjective intent.<sup>8</sup>

The second problematic point is the idea that the patriarchal mindset is the ultimate cause of all such crimes. This is incorrect, because we are not in a patriarchal society anymore and a murder can be committed for many reasons unrelated to a woman's submission.

Thirdly, in practical terms it is necessary to establish indicators that can be used easily in extremely diverse social contexts (UN Women 2022, 10). The combination of all three issues means that the identification of femicide is an overly simplified process.

In other words, if an individual kills a woman, the root cause is generally identified in the patriarchal rules that characterise society. Consequently, not many other details are

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<sup>8</sup> It is undoubtedly true that individuals might not be aware of the causes of their behaviour in certain situations, but exhaustive analysis of this issue would move well outside the scope of this study. In any case, though, femicide does not fit this profile as hostility towards or hatred of a woman is a *tangible* fact, the real difficulty is the ability to measure this mindset. In other words, although the violent behaviour of a man can be explained through macro factors, he cannot be oblivious to such conditioning.

required to identify femicide among the statistics for murders of women. *Therefore, whenever a woman is killed, the crime can almost certainly be defined as femicide.*

Two observations should be made at this point. Firstly, the complex discussion developed thus far has led to the identification of an indicator in which motivation and intent play no role. Secondly, as will be seen, if the definition is inadequate, it is impossible to analyse changes in the phenomenon over space, and indeed probably also over time, although this matter is not examined herein.<sup>9</sup>

### ***A working definition of femicide***

The key issue now is to find an operative way to identify femicide. As underlined above, there is a considerable leap of logic between the theoretical discussion and the indicator suggested by the definition now discussed and provided by UN Women.

It is therefore necessary to take a step back and start afresh from the intermediate definition given in the UN Women report (2022, 7), which states that femicide includes killings with the following characteristics:

- 1) the killing of a woman by another person (objective criterion);
- 2) the intent of the perpetrator to kill or seriously injure the victim (subjective criterion);<sup>10</sup>
- 3) the unlawfulness of the killing (legal criterion);
- 4) the gender-related motivation of the killing [subjective and collective criteria].<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The idea that more thorough data analysis is required for a better understanding of the phenomenon of violence against women has also been put forward elsewhere (Badinter 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Attempted femicide is not considered in this study.

<sup>11</sup> Author's square brackets.

The first three features are essential but will not be discussed here as they are self-explanatory. The fourth criterion, on the other hand, needs to be analysed and used in the measurement of the phenomenon.

Criticism has already been levelled at this part of the definition. Nevertheless, by excluding causes of which individuals may be unaware (collective criterion) and considering full intent, all murders of women in which gender-motivation can be ascertained or inferred may be classed as femicide.

To sum up, drawing on Radford's definition, it can be claimed that three important aspects are required to define the murder of a woman as femicide. The first of these is a situation with divergent interests which generates conflict. The second is the fact that the male perpetrator is aware of the meaning of the act he commits. The third is that this meaning is connected to the man's abuse of power and/or the woman's duty to submit.

As pointed out above, misogyny in its strictest sense and hatred of all women are difficult to measure and, moreover, extremely rare phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Divergent interests are a different matter, though, as they may emerge in any form of relationship. In such instances, however, the issue at stake is no longer misogyny but hostility or hatred directed at one particular woman.

Contrary to what may appear to be the case, this is not a question of readmitting what was previously excluded. Indeed, when the data is codified, it is usually possible to

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<sup>12</sup> From what could be ascertained, the only cases fitting this category in the period 2018-2023 are the femicides of Saman Abbas, an eighteen-year-old of Pakistani descent killed on 1 May 2021, and prostitutes Martha Castano Torres, Li Yan Rong, and Yang Yun Xia, murdered during a rampage by a serial killer on 17 November 2022.

establish the specific motivation behind the crime and whether the woman was murdered as a result of conflictual circumstances linked to gender-based discrimination.

Accordingly, femicide is defined as the killing of a woman where the motive, provided that it has been acknowledged, even in broad terms, consists mainly of the perpetrator's desire to dominate and control the victim, driven by her resistance or failure to submit to rules, expectations, or roles imposed by the man. Specifically, this definition includes cases where the sole or near-exclusive purpose of the act is to deny the woman's personal or emotional freedom — that is, the intent to punish or repress her autonomy and independence, including her freedom to choose personal or intimate relationships.

Excluded from this definition are cases where the killing is motivated exclusively or almost exclusively by other causes or aims, such as economic reasons, family or inheritance disputes unrelated to gender-based domination, political or ideological motives, religious reasons, psychiatric disorders, or other forms of interpersonal conflict not grounded in gendered domination. Crimes of passion or emotional outbursts (*raptus*) are also excluded, unless they are clearly linked to an intent to punish the woman's autonomy or assert control over her freedom — such as when jealousy or abandonment triggers violence aimed at restoring or enforcing male authority.

To be even more explicit: every murder of a woman attributable to factors within the couple, such as a breakup in an emotional relationship, has typically been considered femicide. However, cases attributable to external factors, such as economic hardship or illness, have not been classified as such. Other situations involving explicit hatred toward women (e.g., serial killers or particularly heinous murders) have been evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Before providing a more detailed explanation of the identification of femicide and discussing the results, the database created for this study will be presented.

## **The database**

Although a special database was constructed to carry out this study, new research was not necessary as much of the relevant information is available online. The website FemminicidioItalia (2023) was the main source from which the data used in the following discussion were drawn and codified. Additional data on other murders of women were taken from similar websites that were generally less comprehensive.<sup>13</sup> Finally, further missing information was collected directly from the Internet by consulting newspaper websites. In this regard, we note that FemminicidioItalia and LaFionda are the only sources that, in addition to documenting female homicides, provide supplementary details, including the motives behind the perpetrator's actions. As will be shown, this information proves instrumental in distinguishing cases of femicide (gender-based killings) from non-gender-related homicides.

[table 1 here]

The years taken into consideration were 2018-2022, the period for which the most complete data were available. A comparison with the statistics produced by Istat and the Ministry of the Interior, which respectively identified 605 and 619 cases of homicide, suggests that, with 610 cases, the database accurately reflects all the murders that took

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<sup>13</sup> Other websites consulted: CasadelleDonne (2023), LaFionda (2023), and NonunadiMeno (2023).

place (Table 1). From this data, it was possible to establish in each case the location and date of the crime and the age and nationality at birth of the murdered woman. With regard to the murderer, if known, data was collected on sex, age, nationality at birth — classified as Italian/non-Italian —, type of relationship with the victim, motive, and subsequent suicide, if applicable.

The following section will analyse the criteria for including or excluding murders of women among cases of femicide. Suffice it to say for now that that homicides committed by women (34 cases) or an unknown perpetrator (12 cases) were not included. In the former instance, the exclusion was mainly motivated by the apparent lack of any Italian centres and services for female perpetrators of violence. Indeed, measures to limit the effects of patriarchy generally refer exclusively to men. In the latter case, on the other hand, the fact that the killer is unknown makes it impossible to determine whether the murder of the woman was gender motivated.<sup>14</sup>

[table 2 here]

## **Specifications regarding cases of homicide included or excluded as femicide**

After providing the working definition of femicide for this study, the next step is to identify and justify the categories of inclusion and exclusion, starting with murders of women that have been classed as cases of femicide (see Table 2).

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<sup>14</sup> Brutal murders rarely go unpunished for long in cases where femicide is established without knowing the identity of the murderer, such as the killing and dismembering of eighteen-year-old Pamela Mastropietro from Rome on 30 January 2018 in Macerata.

## *Cases of femicide*

### *When the cause of femicide is conflict*

As highlighted above, for a murder to be classified as femicide it is necessary to identify gender-based conflict which ends in an extreme display of violence. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to obtain precise information about behaviour prior to the murder, which can help define the circumstances more effectively, assuming of course that such details are even known, let alone available to the legal authorities. Indeed, prior violence could only be ascertained in 45 cases, or 18.3% of femicides, although this is probably an underestimate. It was therefore necessary to refer to secondary details such as the relationship between murderer and victim (direct information) or additional data providing evidence of conflict (indirect information).

These circumstances were established directly when the couple was in a state of separation regardless of their status — married, cohabiting, or a simple affective relationship — and indirectly when sufficient information was collected from friends, the press, or the police to confirm gender-based conflict. The data reveal that 236<sup>15</sup> cases can be identified as femicide, accounting for 38.7% of the murdered women. Of these, 33.9% were killed by a spouse, partner, ex-spouse, or ex-partner, while the perpetrator in the remaining cases was another relative or even an acquaintance. The latter category

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<sup>15</sup> Some femicides are connected to conflict in a separated couple. In these situations, the law in Italy (Miccoli and Grassini 2023), as in other countries (Felson 2002, 60), is applied significantly in favour of women. It is therefore possible that some of these cases should not be classed as femicide as the root cause was the practical application of post-divorce laws rather than gender-based enmity. There is consequently probably an overestimate of the number of femicides in this category.

includes cases featuring a situation of sexual abuse, harassment, or jealousy, or where the criminal is a serial killer.

### *Indirect femicides*

These are cases where a girl aged eighteen or under was killed to cause a partner to suffer. In other words, the male murderer has, or had, a relationship with the mother of the girl killed. There are 10 cases in this category, including 4 where the girl was younger than 6, accounting for 1.6% of the murdered women.<sup>16</sup>

### *Non-femicides*

The analysis will now move to cases where the killing of a woman cannot be defined as femicide. Such a crime is naturally a serious matter in any case but lacks the characteristics associated with gender-based discrimination.

### *When a spouse is ill*

In cases of sick women, the aforementioned criteria (UN Women 2022) are not applicable. It seems pointless to presume that the actions of a generally elderly man (with an average age of 76), who is also often physically impaired, involve a demonstration of power over his equally elderly — and sick — female companion (with an average age of 77), who is also usually no longer self-sufficient. In such instances, the motive or cause

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<sup>16</sup> The data in this instance are an underestimate as sons killed with the same intent should also be included. However, such details are unavailable.

is not gender-based conflict but the intolerable domestic circumstances of seeing a partner suffer.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the murder was followed by the man committing or attempting suicide in, respectively, 55.6% and 14.8% of cases. For those who survived, sentencing was carried out by the judicial authorities, as stated above, though, the cases were classed as murder, not femicide. Overall, 81 cases are included in this category (13.3% of the women killed).

In similar but inverted circumstances, the man was sometimes found to be suffering from mental health problems. In such instances, the element of diminished responsibility makes it impossible to assume that the root cause of the murder was gender-based conflict. There are 107 cases of this type, accounting for 17.5% of the women killed.

#### *The killing of a woman for other reasons*

The category of generational conflict is used for murderers who were one or two generations younger or older than their female victims (they are typically sons, grandsons, or parents). For these circumstances to apply, however, there must be an explicit reference with direct or indirect mention of generational conflict in the data provided by the judicial authorities or the police.<sup>18</sup> 13 cases are included in this category, accounting for 2.1% of the women killed.

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<sup>17</sup> This form of homicide recalls a Durkeiminian-derived concept “altruistic homicide”, in that the man kills the woman because he feels he has a moral obligation in bringing her suffering to an end (Gregory 2012, 144; Bridges 2013). Other denominations, which nonetheless invoke a similar explanation, are “dependent-protective killing” or “mercy-killing” (Berman, 1979; Harper & Voigt, 2007; Marzuk et al., 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Two examples will help to clarify this point. The first is the case of Valentina Giunta (2022), who was stabbed by her 15-year-old son. According to the prosecution, he had refused to accept his mother’s decision to move house and take him and his younger brother away from

The penultimate category, various reasons, includes other motives for the crime which are not covered by or cannot be linked to gender-based discrimination. This grouping includes a variety of cases. For example, when the murder is caused by a conflict over money or economic problems in the family. When it is committed within the framework of a criminal environment — racketeering/underworld —, concurrently with another crime — theft/robbery or blackmail —, and when the massacre of a whole family, and other people unknown to the murderer happens. 85 cases are classed in this category, accounting for 13.9% of the women killed.

The final category regards cases where the murder was committed in unclear circumstances and where a motive could not be established (59 cases), or cases in which death was caused unintentionally (12 cases).<sup>19</sup> 71 cases meet the conditions for this category, accounting for 11.6% of the women killed.

To sum up, only some of the cases of murdered women can be classed as femicide. Out of the 610 cases considered in this study, 246 were identified as femicide, or 40.3% of the total number. The next step is to assess whether gender inequalities can relate to the ratio between femicide and male population, as part of an exploratory effort to clarify the social mechanisms underlying this relationship.

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the area. The second is the case of Paola Merlo (2018), who was beaten to death by her 38-year-old son. The judges ascribed the crime to the strong tensions in their relationship stemming from the defendant's continued degenerate behaviour.

<sup>19</sup> For example: Maria Magdalena (2018), who died following a sex game, Brigitte Louise Pazdernik (2018), who committed suicide after an argument, and Maria Stefania Kaszuba (2020), whose death was caused by a dispute that ended in her falling head-first onto a radiator.

## **Further observations on the indicators**

The discussion thus far has identified the main indicators for analysing the relationship between gender inequality and gender-based violence. Before examining the results, however, it is necessary to focus on two further interrelated aspects: the method for calculating femicide rates and the reference population for the study.

With regard to the former, it was decided to calculate the rates with reference to the male rather than the female population. This is because the study aims to assess whether the rate of male crime changes in tandem with alterations in the level of gender inequality. As the rates obtained in this way are almost identical to those calculated for the female population, this is more a matter of theory than of practice.

The latter point regards the nationality at birth of male murderers. As previously mentioned, this study makes exclusive reference to Italian culture without any value judgement, focusing on the extent to which male homicidal behaviour is determined by the conventions and/or legal framework within which they have been socialised. For this reason, the following data will separate male murderers born in Italy from their counterparts born in other countries. In fact, it has been demonstrated that an important aspect of cultural difference — patriarchy — has disappeared in Italy, but the same cannot necessarily be said for other countries.

[table 3 here]

## **Data analysis**

The results will now be analysed using the data in Table 3, which illustrates the average annual rates for men (left column) and the total absolute values over the 5-year period (right column). Reference will be made here to the former figures, which were calculated

as a ratio between the overall number of male murderers divided by five (the number of years studied) and the total male population multiplied by 100,000. For example, the overall average annual rate is 0.42 murderers for every 100,000 men.

A comparison of the values in the two geographical areas shows that the overall rate of murderers in the North-Centre (0.44) is appreciably higher than in the South-Islands (0.38). As these are overall values, they are of little use to the aim of this study. Nevertheless, these data seem to corroborate the theory of the backlash effect (Rudman, 1998), supported by Karadole (2012) and Todesco (2021), according to which modernisation is an aggravating circumstance for femicide rather than a form of protection against it. The rates will now be analysed by selecting only the perpetrators of femicide. In this instance, gender inequalities clearly have little to do with male homicidal behaviour in the two geographical macro-areas, inasmuch as the rates in the North-Centre and the South-Islands are quite similar (respectively 0.17 and 0.18). As will be shown below, the apparent lack of a relationship indicated by these values was in fact due to a *masking effect*, which only became evident after including the moderating variable *nationality of perpetrator*.

The analysis will now consider the crimes committed by men born in other countries (see also Table 1). In this case, the rates — calculated only as a percentage of the non-Italian male population — are much higher than average, with regard to both the overall value (0.89) and the figure for femicides alone (0.58). It is noticeable that the distribution of Italians/non-Italians is extremely unbalanced as the majority of non-Italians live in the North-Centre. It is therefore necessary to take account of country of birth, otherwise the assessment will be erroneous, on which more below.

The fact that immigrants may exhibit different behaviors compared to natives has been previously addressed in the scientific literature (Choi, Elkins, and Disney 2016). This difference can be partly explained by the presence of immigrants originating from countries with strongly patriarchal social structures, often intertwined with religious traditions where women are commonly subjected to traditional gender roles and male dominance. Such cultural and religious patterns may contribute to the relatively higher incidence of femicide and related violent crimes among individuals from these backgrounds compared to native populations.

As seen, these patriarchal patterns no longer hold sway in Italian culture. Therefore, the analysis will now focus exclusively on Italian offenders, who represent the most significant category for the purposes of this study.

If non-Italians are excluded, the overall rate drops to 0.37, while there is little difference between the two macro-areas (0.373 for the North-Centre and 0.361 for the South-Islands) with a relative discrepancy of about 3%. In other words, there is negligible regional divergence in the tendency of Italian men to kill women.

Nevertheless, this does not represent the most critical issue, since another masking effect emerged in this context and only became evident once the moderating variable *type of killing* was taken into account. If the analysis is limited to criminals who committed femicide, significant differences emerge between the macro-areas. While the rate is 0.17 in the South-Islands, where there is less modernisation, it drops to 0.11 in the North-Centre, with a relative difference of about 50%. These differences appear to reflect a correlation between gender inequality and the killing of women by men, suggesting that, at least in the Italian case, modernisation and femicide are likely to be interconnected phenomena.

This seems a reasonable thesis. Women are more autonomous and financially independent in a modernised society. They play a greater role in political life and therefore also in the decision-making that affects the community. Finally, they are less conditioned by family care work. In other words, women have broader scope for action in a more equal society. Moreover, and most importantly, these opportunities are accepted or welcomed by an increasingly higher percentage of men, which also reduces the chances of gender-based conflict.

## **Conclusions**

This study has demonstrated, hopefully in a convincing manner, that a correlation can be drawn between modernisation and femicide in Italy between 2018 and 2022. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to re-examine the definitions of patriarchy and gender inequality and to introduce a working definition for recording cases of femicide. The results of this analysis highlighted three key aspects.

First, it is no longer possible to speak of a patriarchal society, even though considerable disparities in terms of scope for action persist. Second, genuine cases of femicide need to be separated from the total number of murders of women. Third, cases involving Italian perpetrators must be distinguished from those involving foreign nationals. This differentiation is essential to isolate the relationship between modernisation and femicide, thereby controlling for confounding variables, such as cultural differences, that could otherwise produce spurious relationships.

The result of this process shows that the tendency to commit femicide is lowered, not increased or unaffected, by modernisation. A community in a modernised society holds more equal gender expectations, including those held by men. It is thus also a less dangerous environment for women. However, these results are not definitive and should

be corroborated by further studies. Nonetheless, they offer indicative findings that contribute valuable insights to the complex understanding of femicide within varying socio-cultural contexts.

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**Table 1.** Murdered women in Italy by type of killing and year (count)

| Type of killing                   | Year       |            |            |            |            |            |
|-----------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                                   | 2018       | 2019       | 2020       | 2021       | 2022       | Total      |
| <i>Non-femicides</i>              | <b>79</b>  | <b>63</b>  | <b>71</b>  | <b>72</b>  | <b>79</b>  | <b>364</b> |
| <i>including those committed:</i> |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| by women                          | <b>4</b>   | <b>5</b>   | <b>8</b>   | <b>9</b>   | <b>8</b>   | <b>34</b>  |
| by unknown                        | <b>4</b>   | <b>5</b>   | <b>0</b>   | <b>0</b>   | <b>3</b>   | <b>12</b>  |
| <i>Femicides committed by men</i> | <b>53</b>  | <b>51</b>  | <b>48</b>  | <b>49</b>  | <b>45</b>  | <b>246</b> |
| <i>including those committed:</i> |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| by NON-Italians                   | <b>19</b>  | <b>14</b>  | <b>11</b>  | <b>15</b>  | <b>14</b>  | <b>73</b>  |
| by Italians                       | <b>34</b>  | <b>37</b>  | <b>37</b>  | <b>34</b>  | <b>31</b>  | <b>173</b> |
| <i>Total of murdered women:</i>   |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| this study                        | <b>132</b> | <b>114</b> | <b>119</b> | <b>121</b> | <b>124</b> | <b>610</b> |
| Istat                             | 133        | 111        | 116        | 119        | 126        | 605        |
| Ministry of the Interior          | 141        | 113        | 119        | 120        | 126        | 619        |

**Table 2.** Murdered women by type of killing, motive, and relationship with murderer (years 2018-2022, values in percentages)

| Type of killing and motive | Relationship with murderer |      |     |      | Total (N) |     |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|------|-----|------|-----------|-----|
|                            | 1                          | 2    | 3   | 4    |           |     |
| <i>Femicides</i>           |                            |      |     |      |           |     |
| 1. Conflict                | 0.8                        | 33.9 | 0.2 | 3.8  | 38.7      | 236 |
| 2. Indirect femicide       | 0.0                        | 0.0  | 1.3 | 0.3  | 1.6       | 10  |
| Total Femicides            | 0.8                        | 33.9 | 1.5 | 4.1  | 40.3      | 246 |
| <i>Non-femicides*</i>      |                            |      |     |      |           |     |
| 1. Conflict                | 0.2                        | 0.3  | 0.2 | 0.2  | 0.8       | 5   |
| 2. Indirect femicide       | 0.0                        | 0.0  | 0.3 | 0.0  | 0.3       | 2   |
| 3. Woman critically ill    | 2.1                        | 10.0 | 1.1 | 0.0  | 13.3      | 81  |
| 4. Mentally ill killer     | 7.5                        | 5.7  | 2.0 | 2.3  | 17.5      | 107 |
| 5. Generational conflict   | 1.8                        | 0.0  | 0.3 | 0.0  | 2.1       | 13  |
| 6. Various reasons         | 2.5                        | 4.1  | 1.5 | 5.9  | 13.9      | 85  |
| 7. Undefined**             | 1.6                        | 3.8  | 1.8 | 4.4  | 11.6      | 71  |
| Total no. femicides        | 15.7                       | 23.9 | 7.2 | 12.8 | 59.7      | 364 |
| <i>Total women killed</i>  | 16.6                       | 57.9 | 8.7 | 16.9 | 100.0     | 610 |

Key for relationship with murderer: 1. younger generation (murderer younger than victim); 2. equal generation including: spouse/ex spouse/partner/ex partner; 3. equal generation including other relatives (excluding categories indicated in 1. and 2.)/older generation (murderer older than relative); 4. acquaintance/outsider/not identified.

\* The category 'Non-femicides' also includes murders of women committed by women.

\*\* The category 'Undefined' includes unintentional murders, homicides with an unclear motive, and killings where the perpetrator is unknown.

**Table 3.** Murdered women in Italy by nationality of perpetrator, type of killing, and geographical area of crime (rate per 100,000 men, years 2018-2022)

| Nationality of perpetrator and type of killing | Area of crime |               |             | Count (N)    |               |       |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|-------|
|                                                | North-Centre  | South-Islands | Total       | North-Centre | South-Islands | Total |
| <i>All People</i>                              |               |               |             |              |               |       |
| Non-femicides                                  | 0.28          | 0.20          | 0.25        | 266          | 98            | 364   |
| Femicides                                      | <b>0.17</b>   | <b>0.18</b>   | <b>0.17</b> | 158          | 88            | 246   |
| Total                                          | <b>0.44</b>   | <b>0.38</b>   | <b>0.42</b> | 424          | 186           | 610   |
| <i>Men NOT from Italy</i>                      |               |               |             |              |               |       |
| Non-femicides                                  | 0.34          | 0.14          | <b>0.31</b> | 36           | 3             | 39    |
| Femicides                                      | 0.60          | 0.48          | <b>0.58</b> | 63           | 10            | 73    |
| Total                                          | 0.94          | 0.62          | <b>0.89</b> | 99           | 13            | 112   |
| <i>Men from Italy</i>                          |               |               |             |              |               |       |
| Non-femicides                                  | 0.26          | 0.19          | 0.24        | 223          | 90            | 313   |
| Femicides                                      | <b>0.11</b>   | <b>0.17</b>   | <b>0.13</b> | 95           | 78            | 173   |
| Total                                          | <b>0.37</b>   | <b>0.36</b>   | <b>0.37</b> | 318          | 168           | 486   |

Note1. Only one male criminal was considered for each woman killed. The resulting approximation is negligible.

Note2. The sub-category ‘All People’ includes women and men in cases with an unknown murderer. This approximation offers a general overview and simplifies the presentation.

Note3. In 2021, 83% of the NON-Italian resident population was in the North-Centre and 17 % was in the South-Islands. In terms of the total resident population, whether Italian or non-Italian, 66% was in the North-Centre and 34% was in the South-Islands.

Note4. Among the non-Italian offenders, only two had citizenship of a Western country.

## Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [FemicideItaly4.Appendix.docx](#)