
Hostile Spaces for Women

Violence against women represents the most serious form of human rights violations recognized by international organizations¹. Although physical violence is instantly recognizable, serious and codified discrimination forms linked to gender are: verbal violence, sexual, psychological, domestic and economic violence, stalking, bullying, and harassment

¹ United Nations Entity for the Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2011, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, European Council. Available from: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm



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in communities, workplaces and society at large. The hostility towards the female gender is present every day and everywhere in various forms, more or less obvious.

Historically, some of the social units propagating the belief that women are not autonomous individuals may be identified in family circles and the school environment. Starting from childhood, women are raised to be submissive, to raise children at home and to be economically dependent on men. At school, women are influenced and guided toward types of studies and jobs tailored toward family needs. As if this was not enough, society continues applying pressure to established professional women to choose between having a professional life or to get married and being stay-at-home mothers.

With this purpose, the Italian Ministry of Health established “Fertility Day” on September 22 (2016), dedicated to raising awareness on the issue of fertility and the risk of falling birth rates². The advertising

² Ministry of Health 2016, *National Plan for Fertility*, Italian Government. Available from: www.salute.gov.

The three gender-related propaganda levels

- 1) Family circles
- 2) School environment
- 3) Business milieu

campaign has been criticized due to its tone which is reminiscent of an authoritarian regime³ and the excessive pressure it puts upon women to have children, rendering motherhood into a “public good.” The initiative of the Italian government has also been questioned because it is self-contradicting. It establishes a day of information and training on fertility, when it lacks the economic and social tools that would allow women to reconcile work-life balance.

The national government should focus more on these latter aspects in order to ensure that workplaces do not become further hostile spaces for women: to not force women to choose between family and work or to give up one or the other, unlike men.

Along with the problems associated with high or low rates of unemployment, the difficulty for women to find a job is also a matter of exclusion related to gender. It is still a common practice in many areas of employment to ask the job candidate about her marital status during the recruitment phase and whether she plans to have children or not. But even more serious and in violation of existing maternity protection rules, is the practice of excluding pregnant women and mothers with young children from accessing leadership roles. When a woman is in turn able to hold such a position, she must continuously prove that she is equally capable and qualified as a male colleague for the job offered – notably – often offered with a salary gap.

In addition to these discriminatory practices, which at their very core denote a type of psychological violence with outcomes characterized by suffering and constant feelings inadequacy, we cannot neglect to mention the abuse, stalking and bullying in the workplace perpetrated against women⁴ by employers, managers, and colleagues.

[it/imgs/C_17_publicazioni_2367_allegato.pdf](#) [27 May 2015].

3 Il Fatto quotidiano, 2009, *Fertility day*. Available from: www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/08/31/fertility-day-quando-il-ministero-della-salute-fa-sentire-sfigato-chi-non-vuole-o-non-puo-diventare-genitore/3005629/ [31 August 2016];

Corriere della sera, 2013, *Fertility day*. Available from: http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_settembre_01/clessidra-fa-infuriare-web-bufera-spot-fertility-day-afcd27d4-7001-11e6-acff-0ba0a2f56bad.shtml [1 September 2016];

Il Post, 2009, *Fertility day*. Available from: www.ilpost.it/2016/08/31/fertility-day/ [31 August 2016].

4 Commission of the European Communities 2007, European framework agreement on harassment and violence at work, BUSSINESSEUROPE, CEEP, UEAPME, ETUC. Available from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0686&from=it> [24 April 2007].



Is Themis (Justitia) blind?
Courts can also make discouraging decisions for women who decided to report cases of violence. In a sentence of a court, the groping of men against women at work was considered not a crime, but as a “playful attitude”.

The record of violence against women at workplaces is registered by those countries where female employment rates are higher and where women are retiring over the age of 70⁵. On the contrary, in countries where there are precarious working conditions for women, there are fewer complaints of harassment at the workplace because in those places most notably women need to safeguard their employment. In workplaces where trade union protections are absent, a much higher percentage of women report being victims of stalking and domestic violence⁶. The tendency to not report these incidents prevents the control and collection of real data about this phenomenon⁷. This phenomenon, as it is known, is a result of fear among women.

However, in many cases data also show that complaints of abuse at home and at work, often create additional difficulties for women and their children who suffer violence. One reason may be due to the fact that the mothers have taken a long time to sue the violent partner, or because mothers may remain alone to take care of their own children like a single-mother after the complaint against their partner. In these cases, an investigation by

5 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, Violence Against Women Survey, FRA. Available from: http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf [4 March 2014].

6 Ministry of Home Affairs 2014, EURES Report on Femicide in Italy. Available from: www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/femminicidi-aumento-italia-i-dati-rapporto-eures [2 February 2015].

7 Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Department Equal Opportunities 2014, Violence against women inside and outside of family, ISTAT Italian Statistic Institute. Available from: www.istat.it/it/files/2015/06/Violenze_contro_le_donne.pdf?title=Violenza+contro+le+donne+-+05%2Fgiu%2F2015+-+Testo+integrale.pdf [5 June 2015].

the Social Service Department can be open to evaluate their household situation and child care. The tendency of Social Service Department is to oversee that children are being taken care of and living in a peaceful habitat, especially when a domestic violence incident has occurred. For this aim, when the mother reports her violent partner and starts a criminal case against him, the Social Services Department may also start a civil procedure to evaluate if the complainant mother has the economic resources to take care of her children alone. Social services evaluations, will, of course, be analyzed by the Courts, which will then take the final decision to protect the child. Indeed, the Courts might consider it essential that the minor preserves the relationship with the violent father: in some judicial decisions it can happen that a judge decides for the joint custody of child to both parents (violent husband and victim mother).

Besides the Department of Social Services' hostility, other studies show data testifying that also courts can make

discouraging decisions for women who decided to report cases of violence. In a sentence of an Italian court⁸, the groping of men against women at work was considered not a crime, but as a "playful attitude". These judicial decisions minimized the gravity of the act both legally and culturally. Harassments, in fact, are often considered a consequence of the attitude taken by women colleagues, perpetuating once again the culture of complicity of women in the acts of sexual abuse.

A "modern" element of discrimination and stereotyping is represented in the web. It is increasingly common and easy to find offensive expressions used by the mass media. Anyone can find disrespectful vocabulary and use it against women transforming internet and the whole communication world in another hostile space for women in which freedom of expression is totally without control.

⁸ Office Parity Councillor of Venice Court of Palermo, 2015. Second Criminal Section, decision of 23 novembre 2015, n. 6055/2015, Palermo Court. Available from: www.consiglieraparita.cittametropolitana.ve.it/sites/default/files/sentenza_palermo_senza_nomi.pdf [5 December 2015].