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MAGAZINE

Gender-based violence: data, culture, contrast

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The interview of FBK Magazine to the FBK-IRVAPP director on the hot topic of gender-based violence from the perspective of public policies.

On the occasion of the **International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women**, we interviewed **Mirco Tonin**, director of IRVAPP, surveying the issue from the perspective of public policies: understanding how to quantify the phenomenon and counter it effectively are the first steps in developing evidence-based policies that will help curb a violent crime that, unlike many others, has been only slowly decreasing over the years.

1) We often talk about how the roots of gender-based violence are to be found on a general cultural level. Going more specifically into the various stratifications of society, what are the factors that increase the likelihood within a social group – or socioeconomic segment – that gender-based violence occurs?

One way to realize **how culture influences the degree of the phenomenon** is to observe migrant communities in Europe: despite finding themselves within the same legal, regulatory and institutional context, there is a strong **heterogeneity in the prevalence of gender-based violence among different communities**; and the severity of the phenomenon is systematically linked to the gender gap present in the communities' country of origin. **Cultural heritage, therefore, survives the reinstallation of families in a new context.** The importance of cultural differences also emerges from studies that look at regional differences within the same country due to events that occurred in the distant past: for example, studies that have been done in Spain show how family types, determined on the basis of different inheritance regulations enacted in medieval times, still influence violence against women today.

Along with cultural factors, there are **socio-economic factors**. Women's participation in the world of work has an effect on decreasing violence: a woman who works has greater autonomy, is therefore less likely to be blackmailed, and this leads to a **reduction in the likelihood of**

domestic violence. On the other hand, there is also evidence that points out that for some men it is still problematic that their partners are more successful than they are at work. For example, in Sweden it has been shown that women who win elections for public office are significantly more likely to divorce than those who lose them.

However, gender-based violence also has **factors unrelated to cultural superstructures**, where elements of a more **psychological nature** come into play: an interesting and widely quoted study was conducted in the United States on the increase in cases of gender-based violence after the local football team's defeat, especially if it came unexpectedly compared to predictions.

2) What are the policies we have evidence for that counter gender-based violence? And what are the ones to prevent it?

There are a number of studies from England based on access to geolocated calls received by the police, which allows determining whether acts of violence re-occur in the same house. These studies have shown the **remarkable effectiveness, both in the short and long term, of immediate arrest.** While it is self-evident in the short term because of the incapacitation of the violent person, the fact that the effect persists in the medium and long term demonstrates the deterrent force of the measure.

In contrast, other protective measures, such as sheltered residences, do not seem to be particularly effective in preventing recidivism of violence. This raises a doubt about these less forceful measures.
In fact, another measure that proved effective was a strong one such as the ban on withdrawal of charges: if a woman decides to file charges, the provision goes on until the investigation is concluded, consequently disengaging any threats made to withdraw the charge. Of equal effectiveness also seems to be the establishment of specialized courts against domestic violence, as is the case in the United States.

Finally, **it is helpful to have the presence of women among police officers** when a report of mistreatment is filed, probably because the victim feels more comfortable and listened to.

3) Dwelling on educational policies, let's talk about male education and masculinity: even today we struggle to deconstruct a certain model of the male, and a number of attributes traditionally associated with this gender. What can be the role of public policy in problematizing this model and proposing an alternative? And how can sensitivity and awareness on the issue be increased in families?

Rather than policies understood as specific measures, I would like to talk about **cultural operators**. For example, television is a major cultural operator, and there is evidence that the stories told in sitcoms, soap operas, and even TV news have **gendered connotations** that end up influencing people's behavior.

However, the fact that we are beginning to talk systematically about feminicide means that the topic also enters inside families and parents can talk about it with their children. Affectivity and sexuality

education programs that have recently been implemented by schools can also help in this regard. The fact that mass media and schools devote space to these issues can bring about a change by transforming what was “a private affair” into an increasingly explicitly “social” problem .

4) Is it possible to isolate psychological variables from socioeconomic and cultural variables in determining the causes of gender-based violence? Assume, for example, two very similar social groups, such as the inhabitants of two Paris banlieues may be. Should a significantly higher number of gender-based violence case histories be observed in group A than in group B, could we speak of a difference determined by psychological variables?

It is very difficult to do so, because we must always take into account that **two groups may appear very similar based on what we are given to observe**, but there may be socio-economic (even more strictly cultural) factors that cannot be directly observed. However, we mentioned earlier the study on the increase in violence in the case of unexpectedly lost matches by the local team: in this case we can speak of psychological factors determining the crime, such as anger arising as a result of the dissatisfaction felt.

Alongside the more “epistemological” problems, we then have practical problems: **many cases of abuse** (to varying degrees depending on culture and other factors) **go unreported**. This is also a problem for longitudinal analyses: **in the past fewer cases were reported, which is also why the phenomenon may seem to us to be growing.** For this reason, in surveys very often we use feminicides as indicators, because they are the most observable, but gender-based violence is a more articulated phenomenon, still partly unaccounted for.

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