# Looking at gender stereotypes to fight gender based violence

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## Abstract

"Violence against women, including domestic violence, is one of the most serious forms of gender-based violations of human rights". This is the first statement of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the so-called Istanbul Convention. As underlined by the Convention, violence against women (VAW) and gender-based violence (GBV) are structured on our society and their causes are mainly rooted in the culture of a stereotyped gender dimension. The stereotyped society is at the basis of GBV and of women discrimination and prevents to reach equal opportunities and complete the emancipation process of women from men. In this perspective, to study gender role stereotypes means to study causes of violence, how the violence is perpetuated and to detect reasons that make difficult to stop it. Interesting is the dualism between public and private context where VAW occur and the perception of safety women have. The increase concern for local and national governments about VAW can contribute to feelings of insecurity, if not well addressed. We argue that gender stereotypes are not only important to understand the phenomenon, but to avoid the risk to make our society less safe for women. The paper will look at the sources that Istat uses to deepen the framework that causes and reinforces GBV. Following the multi-source approach, data from population surveys and from big data are used, with a focus on the urban dimension, in order to depict GBV and identify some strategies to combat it.

**Keywords**: gender stereotypes, violence against women, attitudes towards violence, social media, urban dimension

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# Looking at gender stereotypes to fight gender based violence

## Introduction. Why is it important to study gender stereotypes?

Gender stereotypes concern beliefs about what men and women typically do and about what they should do. They are descriptive and prescriptive simultaneously and permeate all aspects of social life conditioning, for instance, educational and occupational choices, career opportunities, the access to the political arena, as well as the places where they decide to live. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2011), better known as the Istanbul Convention, recognises that gender stereotypes contribute to making violence against women acceptable in societies and therefore requires promoting a cultural change in their regard[1]. The Convention focuses on stereotyping as a major cause of violence. The gender-based violence (GBV) in fact, is mainly rooted in the culture of disparities and unequal power between men and women that is at the bases of our societies (Cornelli R., 2019). Even the dualism between the public and private spheres that distinguishes men's and women's lives, as reinforced by stereotypes, for which family life and the home, represent the safe places for women, as opposed to the street and the city which are seen as risky, shatter against a very different reality, as demonstrated by the data collected on violence.

Istat started to study gender-based stereotypes carrying out in 2018 (the second edition is now ongoing) a dedicated module on gender role stereotypes and the social image of violence[2], in the context of the agreement with the National Department of Equal Opportunity (Italian Presidency of Council), and, in 2020, developing out an experimental analysis of big data on gender based violence and stereotypes[3].

Based on these data, firstly, our goal is to measure how gender stereotypes are widespread, looking at differences in the population and trying to identify if there are protective and predictive risk factors for being stereotyped.

Secondly, we want to address questions about the urban context. Are gender stereotypes anchored to a certain territory or to the urban dimension? Can the urba-

nity dimension drive some changes? And yet, is the urban reality a place of real risk for women, to the point that it is right to believe that women should be protected and stay at home? Another point is how much safety perception is linked to violence against women?

The third important issue is the growing reach of the internet. The rapid spread of mobile information and communications technologies (ICTs), and the wide diffusion of social media, especially during the pandemic period, have spread online gender-based violence (UN Broadband commission, 2015). Consequently, our further questions are: how does these new forms of modern conversation affect gender stereotypes?  How gender stereotypes should be studied from this perspective? How to observe what the users think, say and share, and how to monitor the discussions about gender stereotypes on the web?

These relevant and complex questions will be addressed considering different data sources, as described in the following.

## Background: The cultural roots of violence

Before discussing the results of our analysis on gender stereotypes, we need to point out the causes and effects of GBV, related to cultural and social roots of violence, using data from the Istat surveys on violence against women (Istat, 2008, 2015). The Violence against women, the so called Women's Safety survey, was carried out by Istat in 2006 on 25,000 Italian women aged 16-70 by telephone (Cati, Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) and in 2014 on 21,000 Italians (CATI) and a sample of foreign women mostly interviewed in person. The next survey will be in 2023-2024.

*The intergenerational transmission*
From data results (Istat, 2008; 2015), as well as in the international literature (Baldry and Ferraro 2008; Baldry 2007; Corazziari and Barletta 2012; Culross 1999; Cummings, Pepler and Moore 1999; Dauvergne and Johnson 2000; Prinz and Feerick 2003; Riggs, Caulfield and Street 2000; Baldry, Ferraro and Ferraro 2011), it emerges that the violent context of the family of origin is associated with the level of violence that characterises the current history of abuses. Violence by current partner (5.2% of women) rise to 35.9% if men were physically abused in childhood, to 22% if they witnessed the violence of their father against their mother. Analogously, when women suffered sexual violence before the age of 16, the occurrence of sexual or physical violence as adults reach 58.5% (compared to the average of 31.5%), 64.2% amongst women who were bea-

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ten as children by their father, and 64.8% in cases they suffered physical violence from their mother.

These results are reinforced by the application of two models of logistic regression. For physical violence[4] (by current partner) were meaningful the variables about witnessing violence, and the physical violence suffered by the

victim from her mother. While for sexual violence[5], the higher factor risks were again the experience of having witnessed the violence of own father on own mother and the physical violence suffered by the mother, in addition to the sexual violence suffered in childhood.

| EFFECTS | ODDSRATIO | Pr>ChiSquare |
|---|---|---|
| Victim graduate vs primary school/no school degree | 1.902 | <.0001 |
| Sexual violence in childhood: yes vs no | 1.703 | <.0001 |
| Partner physically violent outside family: yes vs no | 2.115 | <.0001 |
| Partner verbally violent outside the family: yes vs no | 2.957 | <.0001 |
| Victim's father battered his wife: yes vs no | 2.577 | <.0001 |
| Victim's father battered the woman: yes vs no | 1.579 | 0.0008 |
| Victim's mother battered the woman: yes vs no | 2.079 | <.0001 |
| Partner father battered his wife: yes vs no | 3.967 | <.0001 |
| Any form of psychological violence from partner: yes vs no | 7.629 | <.0001 |

Table 1 Risk factors that increase the physical violence (by current partner) probability

| EFFECTS | ODDSRATIO | Pr>ChiSquare |
|---|---|---|
| Sexual violence in childhood: yes vs no | 2.264 | <.0001 |
| Partner physically violent outside family: yes vs no | 2.055 | 0.0003 |
| Partner verbally violent outside family: yes vs no | 2.385 | <.0001 |
| Victim's father battered his wife: yes vs no | 2.202 | <.0001 |
| Victim's mother battered the woman: yes vs no | 2.288 | <.0001 |
| Partner's father battered his wife: yes vs no | 2.903 | 0.0013 |
| Psychological violence: yes vs no | 10.179 | <.0001 |

Table 2. Risk factors that increase the sexual violence (by current partner) probability

Other risk factors predicting physical and sexual violence are mainly associated with social and cultural behaviours: the partner being physically violent outside the family, the partner being psychologically abusive against the wife and especially, the denigration of women. Looking at women's characteristics, only low education is a factor of risk, while characteristics of the partner (like age, education and work) and territory, or the urban context are not meaningful.

*Violence tolerance as a cause of violence*

As emerging from the Italian GBV survey, women are socialised to consider violence as normal (Corazziari and Muratore, 2013, pp. 88-116). Forms of violence, also the most serious ones, are sometimes considered as something wrong but not as a crime, and when "victims considering the suffered serious violence as something wrong but not a crime have more difficulties to get out of it". Also, the analysis carried out on female students and girls that were raped by their partner (data from the 2006 GBV survey)

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4 The logistic model followed the stepwise method and included as independent variables other characteristics of the woman (education, civil status, professional condition, geographical area, urban area) and of the partner (age, education, problems with the police, battered by father or by his mother).

5 For the logistic model on "sexual violence perpetrated by the current partner", as a dependent variable, the independent variables were very similar to those for the physical violence and, in addition, was considered if the partner was getting drunk.

show how the rape was considered just as something that happened (Sabbadini and Muratore, 2007, pp. 253-256), with dangerous consequences on the possibility to acquire awareness and starting the process to go out of violence. Most of these girls, in fact, remain with the fiancé, even if he is an abuser. This message assumes the normality of the men's sexual needs that have to be satisfied, and on the contrary, the same messages assume that women's willing is to be denied. A woman is, by definition, a weak actor in life, an object for the other's wishes that likes to be conquered.

Over time the situation has been changing and the awareness increased: in the second VAW survey, doubled the women who recognised violence suffered as a crime, those who reported to the police the suffered violence, those who sought help in anti-violence centres (Istat, 2015). The increase in awareness is also visible in the increase of requests for help to 1522, the national helpline against violence against women (by phone and chat) (Istat, 2022a).

## Methods of analysis

*Surveys data: the module on gender stereotypes*
The module addressing gender role stereotypes[6] and, for the first time in Istat, opinions on the acceptability of violence, its permeation and its causes, as well as stereotypes about sexual violence was carried out in 2018.

The module was organised into six main areas in order to reach specific purposes:
1) stereotypes about gender roles;
2) the acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV);
3) the perception of the extent of the violence;
4) the causes of intimate partner violence;
5) the reactions to violence;
6) stereotypes about sexual violence.

In 2023 this module was extended and became a web survey, focusing on the following areas:

| Area of questions | Purpose |
|---|---|
| A series of questions on stereotypes of gender roles at work, in education and in the family | To understand what are the prevailing gender stereotypes in a given society/country and their prevalence. |
| Tolerance and acceptance of physical and psychological violence committed on women | To understand how pervasive the culture of violence is in a given society/country and people's awareness of it. |
| The causes of gender-based violence | To understand the population's awareness of gender-based violence and its causes in a given society/country. |
| Stereotypes relating to sexual violence | To understand the social representation of sexual violence and how widespread the idea is that women are responsible for the violence committed upon them in a given society/country (victim-blaming attitudes). |
| Social representation of women and men | Understanding how women and men think of each other, and themselves is a nuanced way to understand gender stereotypes in a given society/country. |
| Socio-demographic data (sex, age, education level, variables on socioeconomic status, citizenship) and questions on life satisfaction. | These variables are useful for analysis and data interpretation. |

Table 3 Thematic areas and research purposes, Survey on Gender stereotypes and the social image of Violence 2023

6  Istat already studied gender stereotypes in two previous surveys, the Time use survey, carried out in 2014 (Istat, 2014) and the Survey on discrimination on the base of gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity (Istat, 2011).

Respondents of the survey were asked to express their degree of agreement with some descriptions of gender roles, with some behaviours regarding family relationships and, in the last part of the questionnaire, with some opinions about sexual violence that place responsibility on the victim and other issues regarding attitudes towards violence (Istat, 2019b).

The questions were addressed to individuals aged 18 to 74 years in 2018, interviewed with the CATI technique.

In order to describe aspects linked to the urban context, the analysis compares the results of the survey that refer to persons living in big towns and those who live in smaller places. The distinction made with this purpose is between municipalities of at least 200,000 inhabitants and those with less than 200,000. In 2018 in Italy municipalities with at least 200,000 inhabitants were: Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Palermo, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Bari, Catania, Venice, Verona, Messina, Padua and Trieste. In this analysis is included also Cagliari, the biggest town in Sardinia, despite having a lower number of inhabitants. With the aim to highlight the most significant differences, the attention focuses only on the most common stereotypes among those included in the survey.

### The Big Data Sources: machine learning method

In 2020 Istat started an experimental study using Big Data (methodology is still ongoing) intended to analyse and monitor the different uses of social media: when the main effect is raising awareness about GBV or, on the opposite, when they lead to reinforce the related stereotypes. An additional reason to further develop methods of analysis of social media contents is the fact that they can also be used to perpetrate some forms of violence (cyberviolence, cyberbullying).

In the experimental study, the contents of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, press review websites) were selected on the basis of specific keywords. They were processed using a machine learning process, which uses a supervised text classification methods based on machine learning algorithms. This allowed us to apply the sentiment and emotion analysis to the contents of interest (buzz). The Sentiment Analysis (SA), defined as the study of opinions and sentiments expressed by textual data, is a rapidly growing technique within the NLP research field, thanks also to the wide range of application. The SA techniques range from relatively simple rules and methods to advanced deep learning procedures.

The machine learning process has accomplished 3 phases of work:
1) *Step 1 - Definition of the requirements of the study and of the criteria for extraction, processing and assembling of the corpus of the annotation.* A specific platform provides the recovery of public conversations produced by users on social and web channels by setting a set of keywords. The keywords allow to create specific filters for the extraction of contents of interest from the iden-

tified sources. The keywords may be subject to periodic changes and additions during the supply, in order to create a consistent and inherent data flow to the object of the survey. Once the data of interest have been collected, the dataset is composed by choosing the sentences that present a maximum degree of heterogeneity. In this way, the sample is expected to be representative of the population from which it was extracted. The annotation dataset consists of a sampling of tweets acquired from Twitter connectors. The sampled tweets are included among those in Italian language published in the period 01/06/2020 - 30/09/2020.

2) *Step 2 - Dataset preparation.* The corpus of tweets extracted has been divided and repeated on several files, suitably formatted to facilitate the annotation process: the repetition of the tweets allows multiple readings of the same tweet by different annotators in order to enable a majority pre-award mechanism. According with the literature concerning goodness of annotation, the sample to annotate has been re-labelled until the value for the Fleiss Kappa index reached the minimum value of 0.8 and the value for the IRA index reached the minimum value of 0.6 (Interrater reliability: the kappa statistic)

3) *Step 3 - Identification of trained classification models.* The classification models implemented are based on an algorithm called Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) proposed by Google researchers, part of the Google Brain and Google Research departments, representing the state of the art in Natural Language Processing. After this stage of the project the algorithm is ready to analyse other social media message, as planned from Facebook and Instagram (public pages), YouTube channel, Public forums (Web), Press review (to monitor a maximum of 5 keywords out of 100 newspapers).

## Evidence-based results from the survey and big data
### The Stereotypes' survey results

#### Stereotypes about gender roles and sexual violence

The survey results show that in Italy, stereotyped ideas about gender roles are still spread among the population. If we consider those who say to strongly or somewhat agree with the proposed ideas of roles, the most common stereotypes about gender roles are: 'for the man, more than for the woman, it is very important to be successful at work' (32.5%), 'men are less suited to do housework' (31.5%), 'it is up to the man to provide for the family's financial needs (27.9%). The statement with the lowest level of agreement is 'it is up to the man to take the most important decisions about the family' (8.8%), somehow recognising to women their contributions to decisions however related to the family. It is worth highlighting that 58.8% of the population (aged 18-74 years) have at least one of these stereotypes, without particular differences bet-

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ween men and women. These opinions are more widespread as age increases (65.7% of those aged 60 to 74 and 45.3% of people aged 18 to 29) and among the less educated. Correlation that is observed about people's opinions about sexual violence too.

Considering the territory, people living in the South and in Sicily show the highest percentage of agreement with the stereotypes. In Bolzano, Lombardy, and Basilicata, women hold fewer open opinions than the men in the same geographic area; in contrast, the men in Abruzzo, Calabria, Liguria, Veneto, Apulia and Molise have more prejudices than the women do.

Looking at stereotypes towards sexual violence, the prejudice that assigns responsibility to the woman who suffers sexual violence persists: 39.3% of the population believes that a woman is able to avoid having sexual intercourse if she really doesn't want to and the percentage of those who think that 'women can provoke sexual violence by how they dress' is also high (23.9%). Also, 15.1% believe that a woman who suffers sexual violence when affected by alcohol or drugs is at least partially responsible and for 10.3% of the population, 'often accusations of sexual violence are false' (more men, 12.7%, than women, 7.9%). For 7.2% of citizens, 'faced with a sexual proposition, women often say no but in reality mean yes', and for 6.2%, 'serious women do not get raped'. Basilicata represents the region where persist more stereotypes about sexual violence (69.8% of the population, 79.8% of men and 60% of women). The minimum level is reached by Liguria (40.4% of the population agrees with at least one statement, 42.1% of men and 38.7% of women).

### The acceptability of violence

Attitudes towards intimate partner violence show a limited tolerance of violence: only 7.4% of people think it is always or under certain circumstances acceptable that "a young man slaps his girlfriend because she flirted with another man", and 6.2% think that "in a relationship, a slap might occasionally occur". Opinions change when addressing a different type of IPV: control. In fact, more than double, the 17.7%, consider acceptable always or under certain circumstances that "a man habitually controls his wife's/girlfriend's cell phone and/or activities on social media". The younger people (aged 18 to 29), in this case, find it acceptable much more than the average (28.8%).

Again in the South and in Sicily the percentage of people who accept some form of IPV is higher. Also, in this case, in some regions, there are huge differences between sexes (in Basilicata and Abruzzo, for instance, men show more tolerance than women, while in Veneto, Aosta Valley, Umbria and in the Autonomous Province of Trento, women accept more violence than men of the same regions).

### Gender Stereotypes and urban areas

Opinions on gender roles show that some differences exist between municipalities of at least 200,000 inhabitants and those with less than 200,000. Persons who agree at least with one stereotype on gender roles are 55.0% among those living in the biggest towns, while they are 59.6% among living in smaller places. The less stereotyped people seem to be men living in the big cities (53.6%).

However, when analysing data by age, differences between big and less big cities become less meaningful.

Considering the gender stereotypes, namely those that turned out to be the most pervasive and rooted among the population, we can find some interesting results.

The stereotype that makes the difference between bigger and smaller cities is 'it is up to the man to provide for the family's financial needs' (22.3% of persons in the big towns and 29.0% of those living elsewhere). In this case, also, the difference is due especially to the opinions of men (24.4% against 32.8% of men living elsewhere).

The minimum is for women aged 30-44 living in big cities (12.8% of women of this age), and the maximum is for men aged 60-74 who do not live in big cities (43.1%). Only among the youngest men and women (aged 18-29) there are no differences, and they represent the most open opinions in both contexts (agree 18.5% and 17.5%).

| SEX AND AGE | | MEN ARE LESS SUITED TO DO HOUSEWORK | | FOR THE MAN, MORE THAN FOR THE WOMAN IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT WORK | | IT'S UP TO THE MAN TO PROVIDE FOR THE FAMILY'S FINANCIAL NEEDS | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants |
| Men | 18-29 | 26.9 | 17.4 | 30.2 | 23.4 | 19.6 | 16.6 |
| | 30-44 | 29.2 | 28.2 | 36.0 | 31.7 | 25.3 | 35.7 |
| | 45-59 | 26.3 | 31.7 | 25.8 | 29.8 | 21.1 | 32.2 |
| | 60-74 | 35.9 | 43.0 | 30.1 | 34.8 | 30.9 | 43.1 |
| | Total | **29.5** | **30.8** | **30.5** | **30.3** | **24.4** | **32.8** |
| Women | 18-29 | 23.1 | 23.0 | 33.9 | 27.9 | 17.1 | 18.4 |
| | 30-44 | 24.0 | 30.8 | 29.7 | 38.0 | 12.8 | 25.9 |
| | 45-59 | 29.0 | 32.8 | 37.4 | 35.4 | 20.0 | 22.8 |
| | 60-74 | 35.7 | 42.2 | 35.1 | 35.0 | 29.1 | 33.1 |
| | Total | **28.6** | **33.0** | **34.4** | **34.7** | **20.1** | **25.4** |
| Total | 18-29 | 25.3 | 20.2 | 31.8 | 25.6 | 18.5 | 17.5 |
| | 30-44 | 26.8 | 29.5 | 33.2 | 34.8 | 19.7 | 30.8 |
| | 45-59 | 27.7 | 32.3 | 31.8 | 32.7 | 20.5 | 27.3 |
| | 60-74 | 35.8 | 42.6 | 32.6 | 34.9 | 30.0 | 37.8 |
| | **Total** | **29.1** | **31.9** | **32.4** | **32.5** | **22.3** | **29.0** |

*Source: Istat, The module on gender role stereotypes and the social image of violence, 2018.*
Table 4 People aged 18-74 years who agree with some stereotypes on gender roles, by type of municipalities, sex and age - Year 2018
(per 100 persons aged 18-74 years with same sex, age and type of municipalities)

Big city dwellers also have less stereotypical views with respect to sexual violence prejudice, although again, the differences are slight, by about 3-4 percentage points compared to others.

The difference is bigger for women living in big cities that less agree with the prejudice "a woman who suffers sexual violence when affected by alcohol or drugs is at least partially responsible' (10.8% of women in the biggest cities against 15.1% of women elsewhere) and again for people of 30-44 years old.

The higher differences are by age, people aged 30-44 living in big cities report less stereotyped opinion: 15.7% agrees that 'women can provoke sexual violence by how they dress' versus 23% elsewhere. Youngest adults (aged 18-29) show different patterns. In general, it seems that they have similar ideas about sexual violence in all types of towns, but huge differences emerge when taking into consideration the sex of respondents. In the biggest cities, young women report positions more open than women of the same age living elsewhere, while young men in big towns have positions more stereotyped than those living elsewhere. Moreover, in the big towns, young men result to have more stereotyped ideas than other men in general.

| SEX AND AG | | WOMEN WHO DON'T WANT TO HAVE A SEXUAL INTERCOURSE ARE ABLE TO AVOID IT | | WOMEN CAN PROVOKE SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY HOW THEY DRESS | | IF A WOMAN SUFFERS SEXUAL VIOLENCE WHEN SHE IS AFFECTED BY ALCOHOL OR DRUGS, SHE IS AT LEAST PARTIALLY RESPONSIBLE | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants |
| Men | 18-29 | 43.6 | 41.0 | 14.1 | 15.0 | 21.1 | 14.7 |
| | 30-44 | 33.8 | 44.0 | 17.1 | 23.3 | 11.6 | 17.8 |
| | 45-59 | 38.7 | 41.2 | 20.7 | 24.8 | 10.5 | 13.3 |
| | 60-74 | 43.6 | 44.0 | 29.4 | 32.5 | 18.5 | 19.1 |
| | Total | **39.2** | **42.5** | **20.6** | **24.4** | **14.5** | **16.0** |
| Women | 18-29 | 20.0 | 34.3 | 13.8 | 16.2 | 6.4 | 13.2 |
| | 30-44 | 34.2 | 37.6 | 13.9 | 22.7 | 10.1 | 14.0 |
| | 45-59 | 37.2 | 37.5 | 15.6 | 24.8 | 7.1 | 14.1 |
| | 60-74 | 37.7 | 38.0 | 34.2 | 32.5 | 19.2 | 19.1 |
| | Total | **34.3** | **37.1** | **19.6** | **24.8** | **10.8** | **15.1** |
| Total | 18-29 | 33.5 | 37.7 | 14.0 | 15.6 | 14.8 | 14.0 |
| | 30-44 | 34.0 | 40.8 | 15.7 | 23.0 | 10.9 | 15.9 |
| | 45-59 | 37.9 | 39.3 | 18.1 | 24.8 | 8.7 | 13.7 |
| | 60-74 | 40.7 | 40.8 | 31.8 | 32.5 | 18.8 | 19.1 |
| | **Total** | **36.9** | **39.8** | **20.1** | **24.6** | **12.7** | **15.6** |

*Source: Istat, The module on gender role stereotypes and the social image of violence, 2018.*
Table 5 People aged 18-74 years who agree with some stereotypes about sexual violence, by type of municipalities, sex and age. Year 2018 (per 100 persons aged 18-74 years with same sex, age and type of municipalities)

The level of acceptability of intimate partner violence does not change when considering the population living in big towns or in smaller places. The only slight differences are about "the control of partner", which is less accepted for people living in the bigger towns (16.8% against 18.0 of those living elsewhere), especially for women (14.6 % against 18.6% elsewhere). The attitudes of the youngest towards the behaviour of control raise some attention. In fact, as already said, in contrast to their less stereotyped profile, they result to accept more control, especially those living in big cities (32.7% of those living in big towns, 28.1% elsewhere, while the average is 17.7%); differences due to men. 40.0% of young men living in big towns consider acceptable the partner's control, against 22,8% of women. At the same time, there are no meaningful differences between young women and men living in smaller towns.

| SEX AND AGE | | A MAN HABITUALLY CONTROL HIS WIFE'S/PARTNER'S MOBILE PHONE AND ACTIVITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA (FACEBOOK, CHATS, ETC.). | | IN A COUPLE'S RELATIONSHIP, IT IS NORMAL THAT A SLAP MIGHT OCCASIONALLY OCCUR | | A YOUNG MAN SLAPS HIS GIRLFRIEND BECAUSE SHE FLIRTED WITH ANOTHER MAN | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants | >200.000 inhabitants | <200.000 inhabitants |
| Men | 18-29 | 40.0 | 28.5 | 18.4 | 9.4 | 2.2 | 10.8 |
| | 30-44 | 22.8 | 22.2 | 7.5 | 7.8 | 4.9 | 8.9 |
| | 45-59 | 13.8 | 12.4 | 4.9 | 6.9 | 9.8 | 8.2 |
| | 60-74 | 5.4 | 9.9 | 11.5 | 8.8 | 10.1 | 11.3 |
| | Total | **18.8** | **17.3** | **9.4** | **8.0** | **7.2** | **9.6** |
| Women | 18-29 | 22.8 | 27.6 | 2.3 | 4.9 | 0.8 | 5.3 |
| | 30-44 | 20.2 | 22.7 | 2.8 | 3.8 | 5.3 | 5.2 |
| | 45-59 | 11.7 | 15.7 | 4.5 | 3.9 | 4.6 | 6.2 |
| | 60-74 | 8.5 | 12.3 | 3.5 | 5.0 | 6.1 | 6.6 |
| | Total | **14.6** | **18.6** | **3.5** | **4.3** | **4.7** | **5.9** |
| Total | 18-29 | 32.7 | 28.1 | 11.5 | 7.2 | 1.6 | 8.1 |
| | 30-44 | 21.6 | 22.4 | 5.4 | 5.8 | 5.1 | 7.0 |
| | 45-59 | 12.8 | 14.1 | 4.7 | 5.4 | 7.2 | 7.2 |
| | 60-74 | 6.9 | 11.2 | 7.5 | 6.8 | 8.1 | 8.8 |
| | **Total** | **16.8** | **18.0** | **6.6** | **6.1** | **6.0** | **7.7** |

*Source: Istat, The module on gender role stereotypes and the social image of violence, 2018.*
Table 6 People aged 18-74 years who find acceptable some behaviours related to intimate partner violence, by type of municipalities, sex and age - Year 2018 (per 100 persons aged 18-74 years with same sex, age and type of municipalities)

*How much social media reinforces and spreads gender stereotypes?*

Social media can foster and reinforce gender stereotypes. Some research shows that girls and women are more affected by cyber-attacks than boys and men (Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milnes, 2018). Female journalists, YouTubers, and influencers receive more negative comments to their comments, videos, and content (including sexist, racist, and sexually aggressive hate speech) than men. With this form of digital gender violence, some users push people off social media (silencing), preventing them from further expressing themselves and shaping public opinion.

Based on the data collected from social media, by using the machine learning process mentioned above, we can consider quite relevant the volume of conversations related to gender stereotypes. As the table below shows, the conversation volume about gender stereotyping from January 1 to the 31 of May 2023, is quite high, coinciding with related Tweets.

| Total buzz | Twitter | Instagram | Facebook | WEB |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 208,995 | 132,820 | 1,466 | 7,894 | 66,818 |

*Source, Istat 2023 – Experimental statistics "Sentiment analysis of Gender Stereotypes".*
Table 7 Number of social contents on gender stereotypes (1st of January 2023 to 31st of May 2023)

Which are the events that generate these conversations? Even if there are some external events that polarise the conversation (such as the March 8 celebration of Women's Day), it is interesting to see how the debate on gender stereotypes comes alive around the social role of mother and father stimulated by a TikTok video of a European politician on February 12, 2023. The topic addressed regards the traditional female and male roles in a "traditional" family against new forms of families. The volume of likes, comments, and retweets has generated an increase in the volume of conversation that the blue line on the chart describes, more linked to this Tweet rather than the volume of discussion around the 8th of March Women's celebration Day.
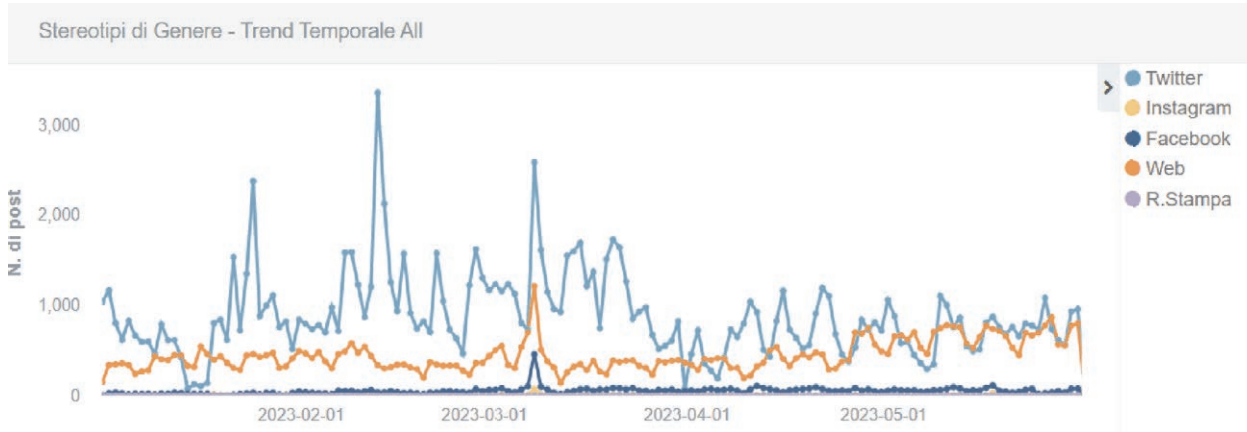


*Source, Istat 2023 – Experimental statistics "Sentiment analysis of Gender Stereotypes".*
Graph 1 Number and trend of content on Gender Stereotypes (1st of January 2023 to 31st of May 2023)

Even in the virtual discussion space, therefore, we see that the classic stereotypes of women's and men's roles in society being crystallised are still recurring. Looking at the sentiment driving this discussion (Chart 2), we detect an overall positive sentiment toward the celebration of Women's Day and also a clear (positive) agreement with the stereotypical role of mother and father in a traditional family (the green line shows positive comments).
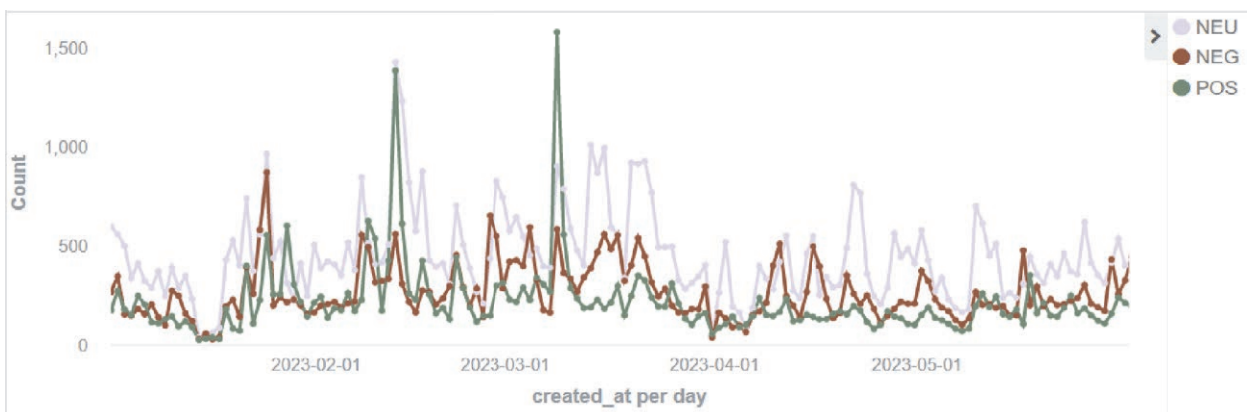


*Source, Istat 2023 – Experimental statistics "Sentiment analysis of Gender Stereotypes".*
Graph 2 Sentiment Analysis (Positive, Negative and Neutral) of the content on Gender Stereotypes (1st of January 2023 to 31st of May 2023)

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Filtering the post using one of the topics addressed in this paper, such as the "urban dimension" (the keyword is "city"), it is also fascinating to discover that social media contributes to discussion around the role of gender stereotypes in that topic, not only strictly connected to the Internation Women's Day celebration (the 8th of March), but also with other topics.

In particular, the discussions (mainly the feeds that are depicted in the graph below with the orange line) show the top hashtag #sicurezzavera (true safety), which evokes one of the topics already highlighted as one of the main issues to consider when raising the matter of gender stereotyping and the urban dimension: the women's and girl's safety. It is a hashtag generated by a local administration initiative aimed at increasing the level of urban safety against GBV, as the word cloud explains.
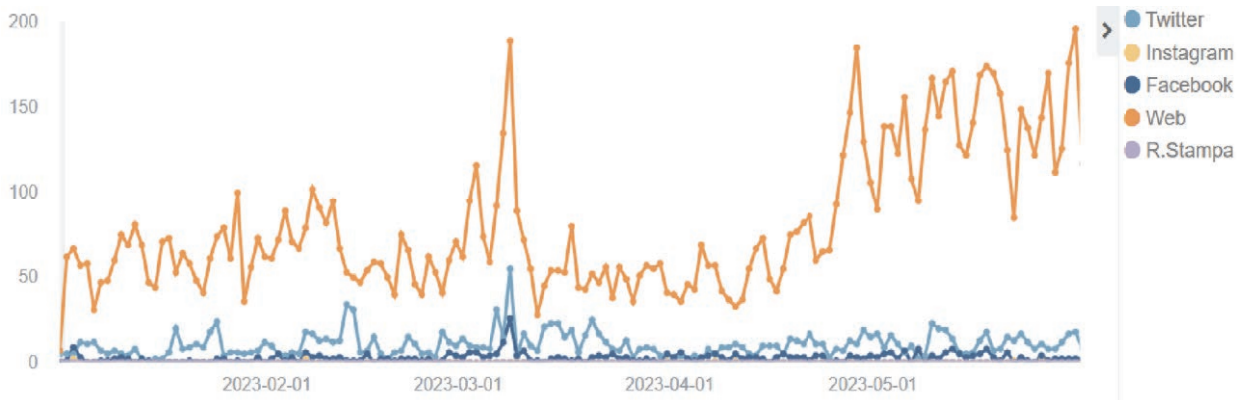


*Source, Istat 2023 – Experimental statistics "Sentiment analysis of Gender Stereotypes".*
Graph 3 Number and trend of content on Gender Stereotypes and keyword "city" (1st of January 2023 to 31st of May 2023)



The table below shows the total number of posts on this topic during the same period.

| Total buzz | Twitter | Instagram | Facebook | WEB |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14,194 | 1,601 | 22 | 404 | 12,157 |

*Source, Istat 2023 – Experimental statistics "Sentiment analysis of Gender Stereotypes".*
Table 8 Number of social content on gender stereotypes and keyword "city" (1st of January 2023 to 31st of May 2023)

## Discussion

*How much gender stereotypes are still spread?*
The application of multidimensional analyses of data on gender role stereotypes and the social image of violence highlights situations diversified based on the position taken on gender roles and sexual violence, the acceptability of violence and the cultural vision people have of gender-based violence.

The statistical analysis revealed five clusters of individuals: two clusters (36.3% of those interviewed) are individuals with the most stereotyped convictions, the 'strong stereotypes'; two clusters are individuals less supportive of stereotypes, the 'no stereotypes' (who make up 62% of the total) and, finally, one cluster is characterised by indifference (1.8%), the 'aloof'.

What discriminate people is not only the level of prejudices, but also the different opinions about the causes of violence and the role they would perform if they knew a victim of violence.

The less stereotyped people show more awareness about the cultural roots of violence: are more likely to associate the causes of violence to a lack of acceptance of women's empowered identities, the need of men to rein-

force their superiority, the idea of woman as a property. They also suggest to survivors to report to the police or call the emergency dedicated number 1522 or to seek help in shelters.

On the contrary, the two 'strong stereotypes' clusters differ on strength and typology of stereotype. The most stereotyped cluster accepts physical violence as normal in the intimate relationship and strongly agree with negative attitudes towards sexual violence, looking at women as the main guilty, or not trusting them. The other cluster presents more nuanced positions, even if shows important gender roles and considers acceptable that a man controls his partner's activities on social media. For this last group, the violence is more a kind of conflict in the couple, in fact they would recommend to the victim to talk to the partner but not report to the police the event.

The residual cluster, the "aloof", the smallest one, contains individuals without a position, as they did not provide opinions on possible reasons for violence and state they do not know or do not want to give advice to any violence survivors so as not to intrude. More than 60% of the people in this cluster are male, while the most associated age group is those aged 45-59.

*Urbanization and gender stereotypes: can we say that there are links?*

The analysis reveals that stereotyped opinions that are the most common across the country might show some differences when considering the population living in big towns or in small places. Often persons living in bigger towns have more open opinions, despite the fact that differences are limited and do not occur in all the considered topics.

Data confirm that generational and gender dimensions drive the main differences. Living in big towns or smaller places results in different attitudes depending on age and sex.

Persons in the oldest age group of the survey (aged 60-74) have similar attitudes regardless of the place where they live and with limited differences between sexes.

Living in bigger towns influence attitudes of persons aged between 30 and 59. These generations show more open opinions when living in the bigger towns and especially if women. Concerning their opinions on gender roles, in the big towns the idea that 'it is up to the man to provide for the family's financial needs' is probably going to be obsolete. However, the importance of success at work and a limited suitability for housework are still assigned to men, with no relevant differences according to the sex or the type of town in these age groups.

The youngest generation (aged 18-29) have the less stereotyped opinions when addressing the topic of gender roles, regardless the place where they live and with limited differences between sexes. But concerning sexual violence, the attitudes of the youngest generation change depending on the place where they live, even if following a different pattern compared to the other generations. The youngest women and men living in towns smaller than 200.000 in-

habitants are the most open compared to persons of other ages. In the bigger towns, instead, there are evident differences between young women and young men. Young women living in the big cities represent the group with least stereotypes about sexual violence. On the other hand, young men living there show more stereotyped ideas than those living elsewhere and also more often than men with higher age in the big towns. The urban context seems to catalyse the differences. Young women who want to 'behave freely', away from prejudices about sexuality, and young men who also want to 'behave freely', blaming the woman for any sexual violence they may cause. How to interpret this finding: are young men frightened of the emancipation of their female companions and consequently support more traditional views? Or they just want to behave without thinking at the responsibility of their actions? Does life in big cities urge young men to more negotiate their interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex? Or do big cities not help them build a strong identity, so to anchor their identity in a more traditional culture, where old stereotypes more clearly assign gender roles?

Even in the case of acceptability of violence, the young men show different opinions. In particular the behaviour of 'a man habitually controlling his wife's/girlfriend's cell phone and/or activities on social media' is acceptable for 40.0% of young men living in big towns (against the 28.5% living elsewhere, while among young women is the lowest (22.8%).

On the contrary, results about the acceptability of IPV show attitudes very similar in all persons aged 30 and over, regardless of the sex and the place where they live.

*Urban context, safety perception and violence against women*

Safety has both an objective and a subjective dimension and both are important on personal wellbeing. Economic and violent crimes, that constitute the objective safety, affect directly the life of persons, having health, psychological and economic consequences; but also fear of crime and worries of crime impact on life, especially women's life. Women are indeed much more scared than men are. In 2022 about 70% of men felt safety when walking alone in their area in the dark, against the 50% of women (Istat, 2023). Anyway, it is also important to add that the most vulnerable groups as the eldest or less educated people or persons that live in less advantaged socio-economic situation are more scared by crime. The higher fear is the answer to a rational choice, because crimes have worse and serious consequences for these groups, like for women.

Also people living in bigger cities feel less safety (Istat, 2023): all the indicators of safety – fear of crime, social decay indicators, perception of risk of own area – are higher in metropolitan areas, with important differences with smaller municipalities (for instance, safety perception reaches around 70% in small villages against 51,4% of metropolitan cities), and even greater for women living in the big cities. Nevertheless, not all crimes are more wide-

spread in metropolitan area. In Italy it is true for bag-snatching and pickpocketing, but not for burglary, or vehicle theft for instance (Istat, 2019a). And the same analogy can be done for sexual violence.

The issue is complex; the urban reality takes on different characteristics depending on different situations. Consider, for example, the phenomenon of violence: sexual harassment is more frequent in large cities (unwanted touching is 25.2% for women living in big cities against about 14% of the other municipalities, Istat, 2018), but they do not present a specific risk for rape or attempted rape (the average is 5.1% for the Italian women, and is about 6.2% for those leaving in the metropolitan cities as well as in municipalities with less of 2.000 inhabitants, Istat, 2015). Yet the concern of suffering sexual violence and insecurity is more prevalent in metropolitan cities (35.5% of citizens living in big cities are worried about suffering sexual violence against 25.8% of those living in small areas)[7], especially for women (43.2%). The stereotype of rape occurring against lone women in isolated streets when it is dark is still very prominent, and it limits women's lives and freedom.

The link established between the violence against women and the urban context on one side, and the public sphere, on the other, is quite dangerous. Women are more scared by crime and violence, due to one of the most common prejudice that violence happens outside, in public space, in the urban context and this is the reason for which women have to remain at home, the only safe place. This is a way to perpetuate stereotypes, that relegate women at home, which reinforce the idea that they need to be protected by men – the father, the brother, the partner and the male children, when old –. The stereotype of protection reinforces their inferiority and produce again disadvantages to them. The reality is different, it tells another story. Women are raped in 62.7% of cases by partners, 3.6% by relatives, and 9.4% by friends. Only in the 6% of cases the perpetrator is an unknown person to the victim. The same framework occurs for most serious physical violence and for femicide (Istat, 2022b). Homicides of women are not more frequent in the urban context than in others and very rarely happen from unknown persons. Only sexual harassment is more frequent from unknown persons to the victim, besides to happen most frequently in the biggest cities.

*Social Media boost the gender stereotypes?*

As the analysis shows, some interesting results highlight the persistence of gender stereotypes, especially related to the role of women and men as a consequence of the increasing importance and diffusion of social media. Sentiment analysis shows that the Tweets that have generated the discussion, produced positive sentiment, which therefore expresses a closeness/agreement with the stigma-

tized and traditional view of the family, with its rigid division of female and male roles. Social media also contributes to the discussion about the role of gender stereotypes in urban safety, and the number of conversations seems to represent the growth of awareness about the need to consider the role of gender stereotypes when addressing issues of urban development and well-being.

Extracting statistically relevant information from these new sources of data is a challenging task and, even though no linkages are possible between Big Data and other sources, the idea to find new sources of data try to reply to a relevant research's questions. At the same time it is indeed possible to catch the gender stereotype in a changing society and framing social changes of cultural stereotypes from offline to online digital society. The Big Data time series is derived from social media messages and reflects the sentiment in the text of the messages. Even though these messages cannot be linked to individuals, and cannot be disaggregated at a sufficiently detailed level, this approach allows for exploiting temporal correlation and the link with recurrent topics where the gender stereotypes are more and more developed. Alongside the increase in empirical and methodological studies based on sentiment analysis (Agarwal, Xie, Vovsha, Rambow and Passonneau, 2011, pp. 30-38; Alicante, Corazza and Pironti, 2016, pp. 34-39; Kumar and Jaiswal, 2019; Gagliardi, Gregori and Suozzi, 2020, pp. 205-210), the Istat experimental statistics on gender stereotypes and GBV allow us to explore its new contents and forms, adding data and information from virtual life of the people.

## Conclusion

The data show women's increased awareness, which is one of the main keys to emancipating themselves from violence and stereotypes. However, interpretations of violence are not the same among women, as reflected in many studies: education, variety of cultural competencies among women, and belonging to different cohorts provide different interpretations of reality, some of which help women to emancipate themselves from violence, making them more self-aware with higher self-esteem, while others hide problems that remain as such, unresolved.

Tolerant messages about violence need to be modified appropriately, and messages need to be clearly defined. Touching a young woman or a girl with a sexual attitude when she does not want is a sexual harassment; speaking with abusive language on social media, commenting heavily on women's bodies, is verbal harassment, or boosting the traditional social role of the woman[8]. On the one hand, we can observe the impact of gender policies to combat gender stereotypes in an urban context; on the

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7    This figure was decreased from the other surveys (2008-2009 and 2002), particularly the concern for sexual violence.

8    In the Italian Victimization survey, the Istat Citizens's Safety Survey, edition 2023, more information are collected on harassment and cyber harassment.

other hand, we cannot deny that social transformation, as a process that occurs in response to social demand, is now also driven by a new form of collective discussion such as social media. The persistence of gender stereotypes, also amplified by social media, as our research shows, suggests that more work needs to be done on education.

From the Big data analysis two opposite aspects of rape emerged, the words 'streets, bright lights, sex', referring to the rape carried out by strangers, the minority part from VAW results, on the other hand the rape of Franca Rame, a political rape, marked by deep cultural roots. The press and media, in general, focuses attention only on the first type of rape. They act as a sounding board for certain kind of rape, putting in the spotlight only a part of the violence, the most sensational, the one that makes the headlines and at the same time the one that politicians can exploit, on the one hand proposing campaigns for safety, on the other hand letting the real problem remain out of focus and letting the stereotype continue that the woman must stay at home for her safety. But, as we have already shown, urban safety is not linked to violence, at least no more than in other places. The risk is that instrumental policies reinforce fears and make women unsafe. This opens up the need for good national and local policies. At the same time, new strategic policies for the future are still gender blind, if we look at official documents. We especially mention the European Green deal and Digital strategy (EU Commission, 2019), and European Commission Digital strategy next generation digital (EU Commission, 2022).

As we can observe from our data, gender stereotypes among the population are still widespread, especially those about sexual violence, such as the opinion 'women say no, while they mean yes'. While in general people living in big cities have more open attitudes, different generations have different ideas. Young women and men are the least represented by traditional gender roles, but they tend to underestimate controlling behaviours. In large cities, young men have some prejudices about sexual violence more often than older men and also more often than men of the same age living in small places.

Monitoring gender stereotypes is crucial not only to overcome the persistent and entrenched causes of gender-based violence, which are still in place as we have shown, but also to look at improvements in social and cultural changes. With this in mind, the study of gender stereotypes in different areas of public life, such as women in politics, education (with particular reference to STEM), the economy, and digital society, is very important, and data on these dimensions are lacking. Despite some improvements, implicit barriers to human rights and equal participation in public/economic life still remain entrenched in our society.

It is therefore not surprising not to find the gender dimension in the new challenges of tomorrow's society and economy, such as the debate and the data related to the role of women in a current discussion about climate change, urban policy and digital society (Moser, 2015; Tummers, 2015).

Thus, there is also a need to rethink the issue of gender equality in the broader context of urban policies, addressing the global challenges of the SDGs by rethinking the design and planning actions of the urban environment.

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