



Alive!

## How to Counter Femicide Starting from School

Vive!

### Come contrastare il femminicidio a partire dalla scuola

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ABSTRACT

The training of teachers and students is essential in combating femicide, a sadly widespread phenomenon deeply rooted in gender inequality and violence against women. Teaching gender equality and raising awareness of human rights from the early stages of education can shift mindsets and prevent violent behavior. For teachers, proper training allows them to recognize signs of abuse and intervene promptly, while also fostering an inclusive and respectful school environment. For students, targeted educational programs focused on participatory activities, which may include open discussions, interactive workshops, and expert testimonies, can help create a culture of non-violence and respect.

#### KEYWORDS

Education, femicide, equality, inequality, respect.  
Formazione, femminicidio, parità, disuguaglianze, rispetto.

La formazione di docenti e studenti è fondamentale per contrastare il femminicidio, un fenomeno tristemente diffuso e profondamente radicato nelle disuguaglianze di genere e nella violenza contro le donne. Educare alla parità di genere e sensibilizzare sui diritti umani sin dalle prime fasi dell'istruzione può trasformare le mentalità e prevenire comportamenti violenti. Per i docenti, una formazione adeguata consente di riconoscere segnali di abuso e di intervenire tempestivamente, oltre a promuovere un ambiente scolastico inclusivo e rispettoso. Per gli studenti, programmi educativi mirati e incentrati su attività partecipative che possono includere discussioni aperte, *workshop* interattivi e testimonianze di esperti, possono contribuire a creare una cultura di non violenza e rispetto.

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## 1. What we mean when we talk about femicide: legal instruments

The 20th century will be remembered as the era of major achievements for women. Since 1975, with the new Family Law, which recognized equal parental rights for women, abolished patriarchy, and canceled the *ius corrigendi* (right to discipline), women have embarked on a path of emancipation. This journey has led them to become global citizens and assume leadership roles once thought unattainable (Ulivieri, 2015). However, the acquisition of new rights and leadership positions has not corresponded to the eradication of widespread and cross-sectional phenomena such as gender violence and femicide. Femicide, and violence against women in general, remains a topic of ongoing discussion, particularly regarding whether it requires a specific term for a violent act that presents in diverse forms and is, thus, not always easily recognizable. Some researchers and lawmakers focus solely on physical violence or sexual assaults involving penetration (DeKeseredy, Schwartz, 2001), arguing that including other types of abuse, such as psychological, verbal, or economic, makes it harder to pinpoint the causes (Gelles, Cornell, 1985, p. 23). However, this approach overlooks the fact that these forms of abuse can be just as damaging as physical violence: particularly psychological abuse, which can have a lasting impact on a woman's mental and emotional health (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee *et alii*, 2008). Femicide today refers to the intentional killing of a woman or girl, often by a partner or family member, as the most extreme manifestation of gender-based violence. The term emphasizes the systemic and structural nature of this violence, rooted in gender inequality and misogyny. The term femicide was coined in 1976 by South African criminologist D. E. H. Russell during the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women held in Brussels. It refers to the killing of a woman as a woman, stressing that these crimes often stem from a patriarchal culture that discriminates against and oppresses women.

According to Russell and Caputi (1992), among the first scholars to develop the concept, femicide is “the killing of females by males because they are female” (p. 3). This concept has been expanded by authors such as Lagarde (2006), who emphasized that femicide includes not only the act of murder but also a set of behaviors and social structures that perpetuate violence against women. Volpato (2013) describes machismo as a persistent phenomenon tied to gender stereotypes that confine both men and women to rigid roles. Volpato argues that the psychological processes underlying machismo contribute to the subordination of women and manifest in various areas, such as work, politics, and media. Specifically, Italy is portrayed as a laboratory for a “new sexism”, characterized by a combination of traditional and modern elements that hinder progress toward equality. In this perspective, it is therefore clear that there is a need to promote an education aimed at preventing gender-based violence, emphasizing the importance of addressing gender stereotypes from childhood to counteract the cultural roots of violence (Altamura, 2014).

Countries that ratify CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, UN, 1979), commit to eliminating discrimination in laws, policies, and practices at the national level, promoting gender equality through effective legislative measures, ensuring equal rights for men and women in both public and private spheres, and dismantling gender stereotypes and traditional practices that perpetuate discrimination. A further step was taken within the UN framework with Agenda 2030, which ties gender equality (SDG 5) to quality education for all (SDG 4).

The World Health Organization (WHO) 2013 report titled «Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-Partner Sexual Violence» provides a global overview of violence against women. It focuses on both intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. According to the report, approximately 1 in 3 women (35%) globally have experienced either physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner in their lifetime. Intimate partner violence is the most common form, with 30% of women worldwide having experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a partner. Such violence has significant consequences on physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health.

On August 1, 2014, the Istanbul Convention came into force. Officially known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, this international treaty aims to prevent gender-based violence, protect victims, and punish perpetrators. The Istanbul Convention is the first legally binding international instrument to systematically address violence against women, stating that such violence constitutes a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination. States are obligated to protect women from multiple forms of discrimination. In particular, it promotes cultural changes to reduce gender stereotypes and encourage gender equality, and at article 14 it places strong emphasis on education and training to raise awareness among the public and professionals (teachers, healthcare workers, law enforcement) about gender-based violence.

The Convention also requires states to prosecute those who commit acts of domestic violence, rape, stalking, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and other forms of abuse. States must ensure that violence against women cannot be justified by tradition, custom, or religious concepts. They also commit to adopting integrated and coordinated policies across public institutions (justice, healthcare, social services) to effectively combat gender violence, collaborating with civil society organizations, and involving the media to raise awareness.

The Istanbul Convention is particularly important because it establishes minimum standards for protecting women and addresses a broad range of violence forms, including domestic violence. Nonetheless, it represents a significant global step in combating gender violence, assigning specific responsibilities to states and focusing on victim protection and violence prevention. The Istanbul Convention also recognizes the importance of statistical data in shaping policies for the prevention and fight against violence against women: the data on homicides and femicides from the Italian Ministry of the Interior and the long historical series of data – available since 2002 – reaffirm the cultural roots of violence and highlight the necessity to develop appropriate policies. The first data on homicides committed in Italy in 2023, recently released by the Italian Ministry of the Internal Affairs, indicate a slight increase in cases of intentional homicide, rising from 322 in 2022 to 330 in 2023. While the number of homicides involving men increased, the number of women killed decreased, from 126 in 2022 to 120 in 2023 (Gazzelloni, 2024).

Analysis over the years has consistently shown that over half of the homicides of women are committed by a partner or ex-partner, and around 20% by other relatives. This means that about 4 out of 5 femicides occur within the family context, either within the immediate family or extended family. These statistics highlight the domestic nature of the violence faced by women, reaffirming the need for targeted policies that address family-based violence and gender-based violence more broadly.

## 2. Prevention: The Key

Preventing gender-based violence and femicide in schools is a fundamental educational process aimed at promoting respect, gender equality, and combating stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination and violence. These interventions focus on educating young people to recognize violent or sexist behavior and develop relationships based on mutual respect and equality (Ulivieri, 2007; Gamberi, Maio, Selmi, 2010; Biemmi, Mapelli, 2023).

International regulations on combating femicide and gender-based violence emphasize prevention, especially in schools. In Italy, with the introduction of Law No. 92 of August 20, 2019 on civic education, international regulations – alongside the observance of international awareness days – have entered classrooms, requiring teachers to acquire new knowledge and skills to combat such an insidious and widespread phenomenon. Article 8 of Law 92/2019 encourages schools to collaborate with public and private entities to raise awareness, fostering emotional and sexual education programs. These programs teach students the value of mutual respect, equality, and consent in relationships. The aim is to help students recognize and manage their emotions in a healthy way, learning to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.

The introduction of perspectives like Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – an educational process that helps children, adolescents, and adults develop essential emotional, social, and relational skills – provides a solid foundation for life. SEL promotes the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions, build positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and act ethically and constructively. Through SEL, projects can be designed to promote skills such as assertive communication, anger management, empathy, and conflict resolution, which are crucial in preventing violent behavior. Introducing the SEL perspective in gender violence prevention programs can increase awareness and equip students with tools to build respectful relationships (Cahill, Kern, Dadvand *et alii*, 2019). In SEL education can also be included, particularly teacher and educator training as a tool to deconstruct gender stereotypes that fuel violence against women (Ulivieri, 2007, 2015).

Attention to gender-based violence by young people and the school community has also intensified due to social media and the speed at which news spreads. The femicides of Giulia Cecchettin and Giulia Tramontano<sup>1</sup>, tragically emblematic of rising gender violence, highlight the urgent need for both legislative and educational interventions to prevent violence against women. Their deaths not only underscore the vulnerability of women in intimate violence situations but also reveal the lack of adequate prevention and protection systems. These cases demonstrate the urgency of raising societal awareness and promoting educational programs that build relationships grounded in respect and gender equality from an early age.

Educating for active and conscious citizenship, as outlined in Law 92/2019, including through international charters and the proper use of digital tools, can involve classroom activities – either with or without expert assistance – that engage students in analyzing news online, examining the language used, evaluating media narratives, reflecting on social media reactions, deconstruction of gender stereotypes, recognition of sexist dynamics, and reference to patriarchal culture. This encourages critical thinking about the causes and dynamics of gender violence and femicide, teaching students how to recognize the roots of violence and implement strategies to counteract it.

1 Giulia Tramontano, 29, was murdered on May 27, 2023, in Senago, Milan, by her partner, Alessandro Impagnatiello, while she was seven months pregnant. Giulia Cecchettin, 22, was killed on November 12, 2023, in Porto Viro, Rovigo, by her ex-boyfriend, Filippo Turetta. The murder occurred after Giulia had decided to end the relationship, which had already been marked by abuse and violence.

### 3. Continuous Training in Schools: The Power of Example

It is essential that teachers and school staff receive specific training to recognize signs of gender-based violence, sexual bullying, or domestic abuse (Gilligan, 2001; Jones, 2020; Brömdal, Zavros-Orr, Lisahunter *et alii*, 2021). Educators must be able to intervene appropriately and offer support to victims, also through the Whole School Approach, an educational strategy aimed at promoting a positive, inclusive, and safe school environment for all students, involving the entire school community (Ging, Ringrose, Milne *et alii*, 2024). This approach, based on cooperation and coordination among students, teachers, school staff, families, and local communities to promote the holistic development of each individual, improve socio-emotional well-being, and create a school culture that fosters personal and academic growth, can be effective in intercepting, recognizing, and combating various forms of violence that students may fall victim to. Educators must promote an inclusive, safe, and prejudice-free school climate where all students feel respected and valued, regardless of their gender.

In an experiment lead in Cleveland area schools, 123 sixth and seventh grade classrooms were randomly assigned to one of two five-session curricula addressing gender violence/ sexual harassment (GV/SH) or to a no-treatment control. Three-student surveys were administered. Students in the law and justice curricula, compared to the control group, had significantly improved outcomes in awareness of their abusive behaviors, attitudes toward GV/SH and personal space, and knowledge (Taylor, Stein, Burden *et alii*, 2014).

Additionally, organizing meetings with families to raise awareness about the importance of gender equality education and the prevention of violence is crucial (Altamura, 2014). Parents play a key role in reinforcing positive messages received at school and in monitoring any changes in their children's behavior that may indicate emotional distress or violence they have experienced. Since much gender-based violence also manifests in the digital world, through cyberbullying or the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (revenge porn), both teachers and students need to be trained on the risks of these dynamics and the importance of respect, even online.

However, training should not focus solely on the negative, such as presenting cases of femicide. Instead, it should highlight positive role models, people and organizations fighting to change the cultural system that, often unconsciously, justifies or perpetuates behaviors that can escalate into violence.

Inviting individuals who can serve as examples of respect and gender equality, such as men and women who actively promote equality in their careers or personal lives, can help students see alternatives to traditional gender roles<sup>2</sup>. An effective activity promoted by Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Italia in middle and high schools involves simulating couple life to reflect on gender stereotypes. The class is divided into pairs, regardless of whether they are male-female, male-male, or female-female. The couples are then asked to imagine being married, living together, or being roommates, choosing whatever jobs they desire or opting not to work. They are tasked with sharing their day at the end of the evening, considering everything that needs to be done (grocery shopping, paying bills, managing children if there are any, etc.). At the end of the activity, a debriefing session is conducted to analyze the situations. It is noted that in female-female and male-male couples, there tends to be a substantial balance in the workload. In contrast, in male-female couples, there is a tendency for females to take on a larger share of care-giving and household management tasks, often at the expense of their personal and professional fulfillment.

This issue cuts across social and cultural factors. Consider the alarming data on the gender gap in financial literacy (OECD, 2024), which highlights a dramatically high number of girls and women with little awareness of the importance of economic independence and the financial tools available to them. For this reason, the structure of the new civic education law can serve as a valuable tool to spark reflection on the difficult path toward achieving gender equality, drawing on international legislation and third-sector organizations for participatory activities that allow students to put into practice what they learn in the classroom and change their attitudes.

### Conclusions

Preventing gender-based violence and femicide and deconstructing gender stereotypes in schools requires an integrated approach involving education, awareness, and concrete action (Murray & Graves 2013). It is necessary to train both students and teachers, involve families, and create safe school environments that promote respect, equality, and the recognition of human rights. The example of Marina Pisklakova, which Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Italia brings to schools through the manual *Speak Truth to Power – Coraggio senza confini*, along with par-

2 One such example is Marina Pisklakova, a Russian activist and current board member of Vital Voices, whose story is told in Kerry Kennedy's book *Speak Truth to Power*. Marina Pisklakova, an engineer, was not a victim of violence but became aware of it through the story of a friend whose husband routinely beat her. When Marina suggested that her friend leave him and report him to the authorities, her friend replied that she didn't know where to go or how to survive. Since then, Pisklakova founded ANNA, the first anti-violence center for women in Russia, demonstrating how it is not necessary to be a victim of violence to take action and showing how economic factors play a fundamental role in preventing many women from reporting abuse.



participatory activities on gender equality, the value of consent (Brian, 2020), and stereotypes, helps teachers and students reflect on attitudes and biases that convey a message of gender inequality and power asymmetry, focusing attention on their own attitudes and encouraging them to change.

In this perspective, gender-sensitive language also plays a crucial role. Helping students, starting from primary school, to reflect on how certain adjectives or actions – as well as some professions – are, in the collective imagination, attributed to one gender rather than being considered neutral can lead, through the involvement of the entire educational community via the Whole School Approach, to a substantial shift in attitudes. This shift is essential for creating an environment that is truly equal and inclusive, not just within the school but in society as a whole.

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