

Narrative and femicide:
a testimony to say no to relationships that kill
Narrazione e femminicidio:
una testimonianza per dire no alle relazioni che uccidono

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ABSTRACT

Femicide continues to be a current and growing tragedy worldwide. Scientific studies show that this violent and complex phenomenon often corresponds to the culmination of a cycle of physical, sexual, psychological, economic and institutional abuse, and frequently involves partners or ex-partners of the victims. Despite legislative progress and awareness-raising campaigns, the number of women killed for gender-related reasons continues to rise, highlighting the persistence of structures based on a male-dominated culture and the need for more effective interventions. The fight against femicide requires multidisciplinary interventions including legislative policies, prevention and victim support educational programmes and widespread public information actions. This contribution presents considerations, evaluations and pedagogical suggestions arising from the dialogue with A.R. Calavalle former athlete, Olympic coach and university researcher, survivor of a brutal attempt at femicide, today a consultant to the *Bicameral Commission of Inquiry on femicide and on all forms of gender-based violence*.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling, education, femicide, gender-based violence, awareness.
Narrazione, educazione, femminicidio, violenza di genere, consapevolezza.

Il femminicidio continua a essere un dramma attuale e in costante crescita in tutto il mondo. Studi scientifici dimostrano che tale violento e complesso fenomeno corrisponde spesso al culmine di un ciclo di abusi fisici, sessuali, psicologici, economici, istituzionali che coinvolge frequentemente partner o ex partner delle vittime. Nonostante i progressi legislativi e le campagne di sensibilizzazione, il numero di donne uccise per motivi legati al genere continua a crescere, evidenziando la persistenza di strutture fondate su una cultura al maschile e la necessità di interventi più efficaci. La lotta contro il femminicidio richiede interventi multidisciplinari che includano politiche legislative, programmi educativi di prevenzione e di supporto alle vittime e capillari azioni di informazione pubblica. Nel contributo vengono presentate considerazioni, valutazioni e suggestioni pedagogiche scaturite dal dialogo con A.R. Calavalle ex atleta, allenatrice olimpionica e ricercatrice universitaria, sopravvissuta a un brutale tentativo di femminicidio, oggi consulente della *Commissione Bicamerale d'inchiesta sul femminicidio, nonché su ogni forma di violenza di genere*.

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1. Femicide: lethal violence against women

Femicide is one of the most extreme forms of criminal violence against women, a tragic manifestation of a macho culture that denies them freedom, rights, dignity, often life itself. This homicidal reality, a central subject of public discourse, is neither isolated nor random: it has its roots in a culture of gender-based violence that deeply permeates society. It is the result of a form of male control that aims to annihilate women's identity and freedom, where "disobedience" is punished with violence and, increasingly often, with death (Piacenti, De Pasquali, 2014). Every year, thousands of women around the world, of all ages and walks of life, are killed simply because they are women, and the numbers are chilling. Although statistics are crucial to understanding the severity of the problem, it is through the individual stories of victims and survivors that we can grasp the full extent of the violence. This violence predominantly takes or during the home, within the family and, to a lesser extent, at the hands of permanent stalkers or during sexual assaults by individuals or male groups.

The testimonies of survivors are an essential step in addressing the extreme violence caused by femicide. They help in understanding, recognizing and preventing potential dangerous situations, raising awareness, and promoting social and cultural change. This process starts by ensuring that public discourse pays due attention to the representation of this phenomenon, while fully respecting the women involved (Belluati, Tirocchi, 2020). Based on this belief, for several years now, I have invited my colleague, Anna Rita Calavalle (henceforth A.R.C.), who was a teacher, athlete, competition judge for rhythmic gymnastics, and is currently a member of the *Bicameral Commission of Inquiry into Femicide and all forms of gender-based violence*, to my General Pedagogy classes at the University of Urbino. On 29 December 1981, in the prime of her twenties, A.R.C. endured a chilling attack.

Her fiancé, from whom she had broken off the relationship a few days earlier, asked her for one last meeting to say goodbye and to wish her a happy New Year. She agreed to the meeting, unaware of what awaited her: when she arrived at the agreed location, he shot her in the face before taking his own life. It was a tragedy within a tragedy, during a time when femicide was not widely discussed and was considered an "invisible" phenomenon. Sensitivity and attention towards women who had been harmed were not as pronounced. On the contrary, they were sometimes seen as provocateurs, and therefore, guilty of what happened to them. The following is the account of A.R.C., who recounts with profound clarity, narrates the story from the tragic ending she was forced to endure as its unfortunate protagonist.

"When Gregorio shot me, I found myself alone, filled with guilt. After he shot me and went into the next room, I heard him raise his rifle. Fearing he would come back to finish me off, I ran down the stairs. Instead, as I was knocking on the doors and begging for help, I heard a shot. That's when I realized he had killed himself. His mother told me: "It's your fault!" At the time, there was still no social or psychological support. It was simply a news story, surrounded by all the gossip you can imagine arises in a small town where almost everyone knows each other and thinks they know how really happened. Every time I hear about a femicide, all the anguish I have dealt with for years floods back. There have been cases that made me cry like I have never cried for myself. Lucia Annibali, for example, who, like me, is from Urbino and was scarred, just like I was. I have asked myself a million times: "why do men go to such extremes? And why do we women allow to demolish our self-esteem? Why do they want to strip away our independence and freedom?" I learned, in the most painful way, that one of the biggest mistakes is thinking, "This won't happen to me". Because I had left Gregorio. I was still in love with him, but I was worried about his future, our future together. If he hadn't found his way, he would have gone back to losing himself, as ultimately happened. He asked me to meet him one last time to say goodbye. He insisted, so I agreed to see him. As soon as I arrived, he started reproaching me, saying that I wasn't close to him enough, that I didn't pay enough attention to him, and that I was too busy. I was in a hurry to get back to my athletes. At that time, I was coaching. I had only come because he had asked, and he had said he had a present for me. As we were saying goodbye, he said: "wait, I'll go get that thing I have to give you". I saw him disappear into the other room. I stood in the doorway, facing away. I just wanted to leave. I didn't even see him come back towards me. All I know is that I felt myself being thrown upwards. I thought: "why am I flying"? Then I fell and saw the blood on the door, I understood. I remember that at that moment, I felt no pain. Instinctively, I put my hand on my face and felt the hole. I told him: "what have you done?" He said: "no one can have you anymore". I said: "call an ambulance". He answered, "I won't call it until you swear that you'll say it was an accident". Then he walked away. I feared he was going to reload his rifle and come back to finish me off, so I ran down the stairs. It was probably fear, the adrenaline that kept me going. I was still calling for help, knocking on doors, when I heard the shot. And I understood. He had killed himself. Fortunately, A.R.C. reacted: "I immediately realized that feeling sorry for myself would not help me. I remember that during the first few days in hospital, I was sobbing all the time. Then it was as if another Anna Rita came to talk to me: "it doesn't make sense to keep going like this", she told me, "if you are still here and alive, it means there is something you can do in this world. Do it". It was at that moment that I turned the page".

From 1981 to 2024, many things have changed. First and foremost, a name has been given, at least in Europe, to this abhorrent and unacceptable crime, and stricter punitive measures have been adopted for those who commit

heinous act of violence against women (Dino, 2023). It is now widely and legally recognized (Buccoliero, 2014; Donadi, 2015) that the term femicide refers to the intentional and voluntary killing of a woman because of her gender, often at the hands of a partner, ex-partner or casual lover, the so-called *intimate partner femicides*, perpetrated by those who abuse power to achieve the total annihilation of the feminine.

Referring to A.R.C.'s testimony, the strength of political and legal initiatives is affirmed. Italy's Law 119 of 2013¹ is considered its crowning achievement, as forms of prevention and response to gender-based violence. The aim is to eradicate women's physical, psychological, sexual, moral, and economic subjectivity, including forms of domestic violence and intrafamily witnessed violence (Reale, 2011; Bonura, 2016).

Below are further reflections from our witness:

"We must acknowledge that Europe is ahead compared to other continents. In the United States, for example, there isn't even a word for it. The word femicide is not known because, from a judicial standpoint, there is no distinction between common crimes, such as general homicides, and murders that occur specifically against a woman because she is a woman. That's the meaning of femicide. So, it's already a significant step forward that our legislation and our courts are prepared to recognize that this crime, this issue, exists: it must be addressed in a particular way, as a separate matter. All of this stems from the Istanbul Convention, which was signed by all European Union member states (at that time, including the United Kingdom), who made a concrete commitment to fight this phenomenon. It is undoubtedly a phenomenon that didn't arise just now but has existed since the dawn of time. In fact, precisely because it has existed for so long, it's challenging to eradicate, just think of mythology... and how Zeus behaved with all his women".

Femicide and gender-based violence have their deep roots in a historical past founded on a culture marked by masculinity. Women were unable to express themselves openly and freely, had limited education, and were primarily seen as mothers and sexual objects of men (Ulivieri, 2013). Statistics seem to show that it occurs most often in a context of domestic, social and/or cultural, relational violence; it has deep historical roots linked to forms of discrimination, oppression, and hatred towards women, historically considered inferior beings, in both the domestic and social spheres². All this has often led to justifying the brutality of male violence against women, even in modern societies where they continue to be victims of various forms of violence up to the extreme form of femicide. To this, we can add gender stereotypes, social norms, and everyday language that contribute to maintaining an imbalance of power between men and women. Media narrative of femicide cases often uses language that downplays the violent act, presenting it as a "crime of passion" or a "crazy act", distorting the reality of a structural gender problem, certainly not framing it properly (Saccà, Belmonte, 2021). This lexical choice helps to conceal the underlying power dynamics and perpetuates a collective imagination that justifies or minimizes violence against women. Furthermore, the media representation of femicide often focuses on the victim's details, her private life, or the alleged reasons that drove the aggressor to the extreme act, shifting attention away from the real problem: a society that, in its many forms, continues to legitimize gender violence. Despite decades of battles for women's rights and legislative progress in many countries, the number of femicides continues to rise, highlighting the persistence of a deeply rooted male culture within our social and linguistic structures. In some parts of the world (Pakistan, West Bank), violence against women is simply defined as a "domestic incident", justified as a crime of honor, a practice abolished in Italy only in 1981. We emphasise this last aspect because we feel it is important to highlight how, until just a few years ago, socio-cultural conditioning and pressures persisted that were oriented towards defining gender-based violence, i.e. cheating, mistreatment, rape and killing, as an ordinary phenomenon (Ulivieri, 2014).

There are various laws and awareness campaigns (WHO, 2021), yet cases of femicide are on the rise, and studies on the subject indicate that the causes are diverse. Firstly, the persistence of a very strong male culture still prevails, both explicitly and sometimes less overtly, in many societies: gender stereotypes and inequalities create a fertile ground for gender violence. Domestic violence is one of the leading causes of death among women, not only in Italy but in many parts of the world, and the perpetrators of these murders are almost always partners or ex-partners of the victims, confirming how femicide is deeply linked to power dynamics within intimate relationships (Alvazzi del Frate, Nowak, 2013).

The patriarchal structure of societies, which promotes male dominance, the subordination of women, and social inequity between genders, is often identified as one of the main causes of femicide. This culture fosters the

1 Law No. 119/2013 introduced, within the criminal and procedural law framework, a series of preventive and repressive measures aimed at combating gender-based violence against women. This legislative provision complements the previous Law No. 66 of 1996, which condemned gender-based crimes but was insufficient to address and suppress the phenomenon of femicide and the various forms of women's subjugation in our country.

2 Today, as in the past, women are killed due to a claim of dominance and control over their sexuality and their lives, within couple and family relationships, and even within communities. Femicides predominantly coincide with uxoricides, but they also include, for example, lethal violence perpetrated by ex-partners, by fathers and brothers against young women who refuse imposed marriages or lifestyles, murders committed by gangs against lesbian women, or violence directed against mothers who are not sufficiently devoted and compliant to their children.

perception of women as the property of men, justifying violence to maintain control and supremacy (Di Nicola Travaglini, 2023).

The episodes of femicide, brutal in number and methods of aggression, are only the last link in a long chain of discrimination and abuse. Women victims of such mortifying violations often have experienced repeated episodes of domestic violence, economic control, demands for exclusivity, threats, and social isolation. This reality underscores the urgency of recognizing femicide as part of a systemic phenomenon, sustained by deeply rooted gender inequalities in culture and social structures, which inevitably permeate through the use of language capable of fueling strong prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination (Federici, 2024).

This cycle of violence feeds into a social structure that continues to undermine the value and rights of women, favoring the male figure, despite the negative judgment regarding the attitudes of sexism, possessiveness, obsession, bullying, morbidity, threats, and persecution typical of violent men who lack self-control.

The problem is exacerbated by the underestimation of complaints and insufficient support from institutions, as well as the complicity of relatives, friends, and neighbors, which contributes to erasing women's freedom and personal integrity. In recent years, many countries have introduced stricter laws to combat gender violence and femicide. Awareness campaigns and support programs for victims have been tenaciously and appropriately initiated by governments and civil society organizations. However, despite these advances, the phenomenon continues to grow. This indicates that while the legislative aspect is fundamental, it is not sufficient to solve the problem or, in any case, to stem the dramatic spread of the phenomenon. The need for profound cultural change emerges, which cannot be achieved solely through stricter laws. A collective and coordinated response is necessary, acting on various levels: from education to public awareness, from victim support to direct intervention in social structures, to avoid the harmful risk of perpetuating inequalities and gender hostilities.

2. Narrative as a didactic strategy to counter gender discrimination

For about ten years, I have been organizing university meetings on the topic of femicide, with my colleague A.R.C. as a guest speaker. We collaborate on this training project with the aim of promoting a culture of respect and affirming a “no” to femicide, both convinced that this goal can be strengthened primarily through prevention and by fostering a culture of life, respect for individuals, and consideration for one another. A.R.C.'s narrative is not limited to an autobiographical account of an event, but becomes an opportunity for confrontation, to pedagogically initiate a dialogue with the male and female students of the University of Urbino who attend the course of Motor Sciences, and with the male and female students of the master's degree in Languages, also leveraging their daily lives and emotions. Hence the reflection on some points that I will limit myself to mentioning here. Today, it cannot be said that femicide is an isolated act. Rather, it is the culmination of power dynamics that fuel gender inequality, discrimination, physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence. The masculine culture, which we have unconsciously inherited in the context of social life, fuels harmful gender stereotypes that generate a social representation of women relegated to subordinate roles and reify their existence, very often denigrating them as the property of men (Saccà, 2021).

In this context, coercive control, jealousy, possession, and aggression are used as means of control that can escalate into various forms of violence and abuse, culminating in the extreme case of deliberate and intentional murder. Behind every act of femicide, there are social and cultural structures that not only allow but often encourage and normalize gender-based violence.

In recent years, during lectures on femicide, attempts have been made to investigate students' thoughts on the topic through knowledge-based questions, as they often exhibit attitudes of “suffering/indifference” when addressing this issue. Some very sensitive students claim that discussing this topic causes them distress because “it's cruel,” and to avoid feeling bad, they prefer not to know. Others believe that femicide or gender violence are problems that do not directly affect them, while some express fatigue from discussing this subject for years, stating that “although important, it has become repetitive, heavy, and boring”. Young people, especially those who lack personal experiences of violence or discrimination, may struggle to recognize the relevance of these issues to the entire community.

Despite a considerable number of students (an average of 300 per academic year) who actively participate and show interest, there are also small groups calling for an end to discussions about femicide or expressing disinterest, claiming it is a topic already addressed in secondary schools. There exists a widespread and naive belief that gender violence is something that only concerns “others” or that it only occurs in particular contexts, such as dysfunctional families or socio-economically and culturally degraded or marginalized environments. This distorted view can make femicide appear as a remote problem, a fatal and desolate outcome simplistically relegated to certain segments of the population, rather than a collective issue that affects everyone, regardless of the social system in question.

Moreover, in some cases, the male culture is so deeply rooted in many young people that they tend to justify

or minimize violence, unwittingly reproducing gender stereotypes that normalize violent or discriminatory behaviors. Among students attending the lectures, many do not recognize certain controlling or jealous behaviors in relationships as problematic, or they underestimate the severity of psychological violence compared to physical violence, especially among those studying Motor Sciences. Some of their statements suggest that the overwhelming flow of information may lead to emotional desensitization, resulting in a loss of sensitivity toward these issues. The constant repetition of violent or shocking news in the media and social networks, accompanied by the inevitable sensationalization of certain horrific events, can lead young people to develop a sense of emotional detachment that diminishes the painful and distressing psychological impact while failing to fully acknowledge the significance and community implications.

Some young male students in the undergraduate program commented: "I don't deny that the problem exists, but it happens and will happen, that's life". Some girls, while slightly concerned, seem to want to push the thought away, as if by not thinking about it, the danger can be nullified, and with a touch of cynicism and fatalism, they say: "It's become a part of everyday life. I hope it doesn't happen to me; I would be unlucky; it won't happen to me!" Faced with an avalanche of content or the flood of information that E. Scalfari spoke about long ago, it becomes difficult for many, especially young people, to thoroughly process the information and grasp its deeper meaning. This phenomenon, namely, the inability to feel empathy or the diminishing ability to do so in the face of constant exposure to news about suffering, degenerates into difficulty in feeling compassion, chilling the propensity for human solidarity.

Furthermore, the speed at which information circulates in digital media often leads to superficial consumption. Many young people access news through social media, where information is reduced to brief headlines or concise posts. This format does not facilitate reflection or critical engagement with complex issues such as gender violence, making these topics seem distant or irrelevant to their lives. Hence, the educational project aims to bring them back to an effective sense of reality through direct knowledge of individuals who have experienced violence, seeking to help them understand the cultural and communicative implications present in our increasingly multi-ethnic and hyper-complex society. The stories of victims and survivors of femicide are not just data or statistics; they are real lives, filled with dreams, relationships, suffering, and the struggle to regain existential dignity or, at the very least, to return to everyday life (Saccà, 2022).

These stories humanely and profoundly can help young people see the person behind the news, develop an emotional connection, and reflect on the dangerous and harmful consequences of violence. These meetings should also include an invitation to express opinions and share experiences, allowing students to feel more involved and to develop greater civic awareness. Creating open discussion spaces where they can engage and reflect on gender violence topics without feeling judged is a way to encourage their active and critical participation.

It is from these premises that meetings begin in Urbino with our valuable witness, A.R.C., a survivor of gender-based violence who, unlike femicide victims, survived an attempted murder. Her testimony, like that of other victims, is fundamental not only because it represents their voice but also because it contributes to a better understanding of the insane dynamics of gender-based violence and its criminal consequences. Narrating such experiences has a cathartic and healing value on an individual level, but it is also a powerful tool for social and cultural change.

Dialoguing with A.R.C., one can perceive the importance of sharing a survival story with all the plurality of reflections and critical stimuli it offers. First and foremost, the importance of breaking the silence emerges. This silence risks covering and protecting the aggressors. The narration of women's experiences shatters this distressing and desperate cycle of isolation that follows the drama. Through narrative devices, it is possible to reaffirm one's dignity, regain denied freedom, and reclaim the power to be oneself, protecting the truth inherent in the story.

Sometimes, violence against women is accompanied by a manipulative narrative from the aggressors or their relatives, as in the case of A.R.C., who seeks to belittle or distort the facts to devalue the female figure and annihilate her identity. The autobiographical accounts of survivors are also important because they sometimes reveal cracks in the political-penal system that should promote and coordinate actions and projects aimed at preventing and/or repressing forms of women's annihilation, potentially predictive of physical elimination. Specifically, they recount how institutions have failed to protect women and how the police, courts, or social services have not always lived up to their responsibilities.

These accounts are a powerful and evocative call to improve legal protection, provide greater psychological, economic, and social support to victims, and promote educational policies that counter the culture of violence, discrimination, humiliation, and victim-blaming faced by women. All aspects of the events that occurred in 1981 involving A.R.C., are still present today but are not yet sufficient to eradicate a plague dramatically rooted in popular culture, unfortunately still dominated by female oppression and the dictatorship over women's bodies (Addeo, Moffa, 2020).

3. Conclusions

The narratives of survivors of gender-based violence represent a powerful educational tool for understanding and addressing femicide. They contribute to a process of societal transformation and liberation from toxic masculinity, which perpetuates discrimination, mistreatment, harassment, humiliation, oppression, abuse, and violent crime (Merzagora Betsos, 2009). However, it is not sufficient on its own. It is not just about telling autobiographical stories of pain and suffering, but about giving visibility to the structural and systemic problem of gender-based violence in its multifaceted configuration, to overcome the idea that the fear and discomfort experienced are a habit, something “normal” in the male-female relationship (Dello Preite, 2019). Through the sharing of their stories, survivors regain power, challenge silence, and contribute to raising public awareness, promoting concrete and necessary changes. With their example of determination and resilience, women survivors serve as an extraordinarily effective model for facing life’s difficulties, even when everything seems lost and they must navigate a difficult and unprecedented healthcare and social path. At the same time, the educational power of storytelling in the fight against femicide goes beyond the testimony of survivors, as it becomes a collective narrative capable of questioning the power structures that perpetuate gender-based violence, altering social perceptions, challenging stereotypes, fighting against abuses, and promoting a positive and symmetrical relationship between the sexes.

Only through conscious and critical narration can we hope to build a society free from femicide and gender-based violence (Bettaglio et al., 2018). From a pedagogical perspective, it is essential to find ways to engage and sensitize young people toward such extreme forms of violence that underlie a complex reality of oppression, inequalities, abuses, and systematic violations of women’s rights (Spinelli, 2014). How these manifestations of hatred towards the female universe are presented and discussed during developmental ages becomes crucial, rethinking new forms of dialogue, listening, and dialectical confrontation, also with a view to educational prevention. An important role in all this is played by the male gender, which must be educated and made aware of the possibility of making a difference (Gasparrini, 2020). Something is moving with listening associations aimed at men, but much needs to be done starting with education for equal dignity and respect for diversity from the earliest years of life.

Education on gender respect as a counter to violence is often limited to sporadic or formal interventions that fail to engage young people in a meaningful way, failing to make them understand that the phenomenon is widespread but still largely underestimated. Young people, at least those we have engaged with at the University of Urbino (from various regions of Italy), do not like to talk about femicide and gender-based violence, especially only in terms of statistics; however, they participate when narratives are adopted that allow for a conscious understanding of how these dynamics are connected to broader cultural models and how this affects their daily lives.

The experience in Urbino and the testimony of A.R.C. always emotionally impact young people, creating a conscious participation in the analysis and a deep understanding of how tragic it is to die simply for belonging to the female gender, and how networks of thought and actions can be created to combat misogynistic behaviors, through the construction of public discourse on femicide (Belluati, 2021). This leads us to believe that it might be appropriate to connect the issue of gender-based violence with their daily experiences, such as romantic relationships, the use of social media, language, and the attitudes prevalent in their social circles. Unfortunately, male violence against women does not only pertain to extreme incidents like femicide but also manifests in more subtle, distorted, and often insidious forms of control, manipulation, and discrimination. Young people can prevent and recognize such harmful and toxic masculinity attitudes in their lives, a goal they achieve at the end of our educational and preventive meetings concerning the brutality of a phenomenon that should never again condition life thought, and behavior models (Loiodice, 2023).

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