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Femicide in Italy : A modern phenomenon deeply rooted in country's cultural past

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A spate of recent high-profile murders has put focus on the role of patriarchy and misogyny in persistent rates of anti-woman violence in Italy.

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Shoes dyed red have become an emblem in Italy's protests against anti-woman violence. Salvatore Laporta/KONTROLAB/LightRocket via Getty Images

"Femicide is not a crime of passion, it is a crime of power," wrote Elena Cecchetti [after her sister](#) was killed in November 2023.

Italian student Giulia Cecchetti, 22, was killed allegedly by her controlling ex-boyfriend, Filippo Turetta, a fellow student at a university in Padua. Not being able to handle the breakup, Turetta [lured Giulia into one last shopping trip together](#) before killing her, prosecutors claim. Her body, [with more than 20 stab wounds](#), was found at the bottom of a ditch. Turetta fled to Germany, was caught [and is now behind bars awaiting trial in Italy](#), according to the latest reports from Italy.

Cecchetti's case has grabbed headlines in Italy [and worldwide](#). But it is not unique. Femicide - [the act of killing women on account of their gender](#) - is worryingly common in Italy. At least [109 women were killed in Italy in 2023](#) ; more than half were murdered by a partner or an ex-partner.

International [comparisons on femicide rates can be difficult](#), but those who do track such numbers suggest that Italy's femicide problem has been persistent. So much so that cultural organization [the Institute of the Italian Encyclopedia Treccani](#) chose "femicide" as [2023's word of the year](#).

In an attempt to address the high rates of femicide, on Dec. 12, 2023, a new law went into effect in Italy titled [Provisions for Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence](#). Although the law strengthens protection for women by broadening the definition of unlawful conduct related to domestic violence and by increasing penalties for offenders, the legislation has its limits.

One of the ministers who proposed that law, Eugenia Maria Roccella, [emphasized how laws had failed to protect Giulia Cecchetti](#), or "any other women who did not suspect the violence brooding in the heart of the man who claimed to love them."

Indeed, Elena Cecchetti pointed at a cultural factor in the killing of her sister and other women in Italy : a patriarchal society in which male violence and control has long been accepted. "[Monsters](#)

[are healthy sons of the patriarchy and rape culture](#),” she said.

The Roman rule

Femicide is a cultural phenomenon with deep roots that go back millennia.

Many premodern societies were patriarchal and violent, but Italy is in many ways unique. The legacies of the Roman Empire, Italian Fascism and Roman Catholicism still loom large. Each, I would argue, has contributed to a modern Italy in which male violence has been normalized.

The history of Rome is [inseparable from misogyny and rape](#) ; it is present in the city-state’s origin story. When Romulus found his newly born city bereft of women, he trapped unmarried girls and women from the neighboring Sabine tribe and kept them as Roman concubines. By the time the Sabines sought revenge, many of the tribe’s daughters and sisters were either carrying or had given birth to Romans. [The women](#), so the story goes, ran onto the battlefield as live shields to [secure peace between their fathers and Roman captors](#).



Pietro da Cortona’s painting ‘Rape of the Sabine Women.’ [Wikmedia Commons](#)

Roman women were treated as second-class citizens. During [gladiator fights](#), women were allowed to [sit only in the worst seats](#), next to the slaves. Women’s disobedience resulted in severe physical punishment, with instances of Roman women being [kicked to death, drowned and thrown from windows](#).

Higher social status did not protect women. Emperor [Nero’s first wife and his mother were murdered on his orders](#) ; Nero’s second wife was kicked to death while pregnant. Even [Vestal Virgins](#), holy Roman priestesses, [were buried alive](#) if they violated their vow of chastity or let the eternal flame die.

While prostitutes and actresses [were traded, raped and killed](#), noble women were subject to “[the right to kiss](#).” Through that law, male relatives were allowed to “test” women to make sure they had not drunk wine. Violating that “right to kiss” and the no-alcohol policy [was punishable by death](#).

Misogyny was so endemic that Roman law [focused on preserving a woman’s chastity](#) rather than on

punishing the perpetrator in the case of rape. Roman centurion [Lucius Verginius killed his daughter](#) to protect her chastity from an abuser, Appius Claudius.

This misogynist culture has been celebrated through art, education and cinematography. For example, works by Giambologna, Rubens, Poussin and Picasso all depict the rape of Sabines, with pieces [on display in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) and in [Florence's Accademia Gallery](#).

Roman patriarchal legacy is prevalent in pop culture, too. From “[Quo Vadis](#)” to “[Ben-Hur](#)” and “[Gladiator](#),” movies have glorified a violent time in which strong men were venerated.

Meanwhile, many contemporary men are - as it has been recently claimed - [obsessed with the Roman Empire](#).

So too are cultural industries. Cinecittà film studios' gladiator series “[Those About to Die](#)” has become [an international hit](#).

For a certain type of modern man, Rome represents an escape from [egalitarian norms](#), allowing them to reclaim a perceived loss of male power.

The Fascist touch

Italian society also continues to be influenced by fascism, an ideology [steeped in male violence](#).

Fascism, introduced to Italy by Benito Mussolini in the 1930s, held [procreation as the main woman's duty](#). Women were defined in terms of their full subordination to men and in regards to [their role in the family and in motherhood](#).

Nearly 100 years later, the legacy of fascism is alive in Italy. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni praised Mussolini in her youth, and her own right-wing political party, Fratelli d'Italia, is a [descendant of the Italian Social Movement party](#) that was [founded by former fascists](#).

And as a new TV show about Mussolini's rise, “[M : Son of the Century](#),” shows, the fascist leader remains in the national consciousness. So too does the [toxic “masculinism”](#) that became associated with fascism, finding a new audience among incels as a [rationale to legitimize anti-woman violence](#).

The Catholic grip

Catholicism has also, I believe, helped [normalize patriarchy and misogyny](#) in Italy.

Catholicism is at the core of the so-called “[Madonna-whore complex](#),” in which women are seen as being either chaste and virtuous or promiscuous and immoral. Theorists have long explored how that dichotomy is [steeped in misogyny](#). Stereotypes based on [that dichotomy](#) have been used to justify perpetrators' violence against women.

Take the example of Roman baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, who [was raped by her painter-mentor](#), Agostino Tassi, in 1611 at the age of 17. She gave testimony in court, was physically tortured during the trial and treated as a promiscuous seductress.

Tassi was protected by the pope and set free ; Gentileschi, despite being [a brilliant artist](#), was shamed and erased from public memory for centuries.

The influence of Catholicism has also contributed to customs and a legal system that can make women more vulnerable. Italy's abortion laws allow Catholic doctors to "[conscientiously object](#)" to performing a termination, forcing women seeking the procedure to [travel across the country or abroad](#).

Meanwhile, Catholic [doctrine on contraception and abortion](#) has forced women – even those made pregnant through rape or facing high-risk pregnancies – to give birth.

Research also suggests the Catholic Church's teachings on divorce may [cut off a route of escape](#) for women trapped in violent relationships.

The deadly passion

Meanwhile, Italy's patriarchal traditions have bled into law and society in other ways.

The mandating of extreme leniency to those implicated in [the killing of "spouses, daughters and sisters caught in illicit sex"](#) was written into the country's penal code until 1981. And even today, public figures refer to "[crimes of passion](#)" and "[honor killings](#)" in reference to the killing of women involved in "illicit" sexual relations.

Femicides do not occur in a vacuum ; they are the outcome of a society that legitimizes violence against women. And while I believe changes to the law to better protect Italy's women are welcome, looking at the country's culture – both past and present – may also be a necessary step. Until then, Italy's daughters will not be safe, or fully free.

[Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager](#), Associate Professor of Critical Cultural & International Studies, [Colorado State University](#)

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- [Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager](#), [Colorado State University](#)

D^r. Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager is an Associate Professor of Communication, Education Abroad Advisor, and a Director/Leader of Summer Education Abroad programs in Italy. She is holder of three International Communication Association Top Paper Awards (2020, 2016, 2012), and a number of communication studies Capstone Awards. Her research and teaching interests are in intercultural and international communication, European studies, conflict, cultural memory, international cinematography, and critical media studies. Feminist perspectives on communication and business leadership with a global mindset are further areas of her scholarly focus. She has published in venues such as *Communication, Culture, & Critique* ; *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* ; *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Journal of*

Intercultural Communication Research, Journal of Language & Social Psychology, Crossings : Journal of Migration and Culture and Connections : European Studies Annual Review, as well as chapters in a number of edited volumes. D^r. Khrebtan-Hörhager also works with the ISE (Institute for Shipboard Education) as a Global Scholar/Co-Director of Global Studies/Intercultural Specialist (last sailed with SAS in Spring 2018). She previously taught at the University of Colorado Denver (Department of Communication Studies) and University of Denver (Department of Languages and Literatures : German and Italian).

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