

A large crowd of people, many wearing pink hats, at a Women's March rally. The text is overlaid on the image.

The intersectional approach to violence and the support of victims

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Movements

- Feminist mobilisations: from Non Una di Meno to the Women's March
- Key word: the **intersectionality of struggles**
- 'This is a women's march, and this women's march represents feminism's promise against the pernicious powers of state violence. And it is an inclusive and intersectional feminism that brings us all together in the struggle against racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, misogyny and capitalist exploitation.' **Angela Davis**



Research

- Leslie McCall: “it could even be argued that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in collaboration with related disciplines, have made so far”
- In reflection on **gender-based violence** too, the concept of intersectionality has become increasingly important (Sokoloff 2005)
- It challenges the idea that the phenomenon affects all women in the same way.
- It highlights how women’s experiences are shaped by the coexistence of multiple axes of oppression.

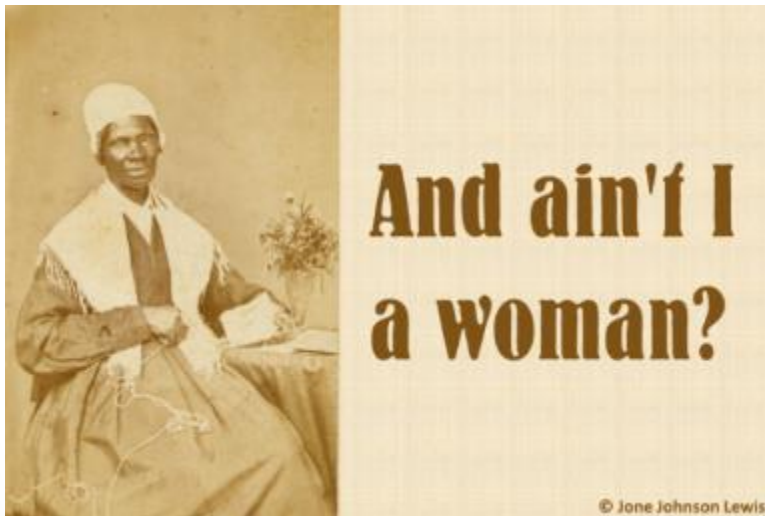
Differences between women

- Awareness of differences between women has, in fact, accompanied feminist thought from the very beginning.
- The insights on which it is based have roots in **Black feminism, lesbian feminism, and socialist and Marxist feminism**, respectively for their attention to race, sexual orientation and class.
- Roots in early feminism
- From the 1970s onwards: a “shock” for white and heterosexual feminist thought
- But also a critique of anti-racism, the New Left, identity-based strategies within gay rights movements, and so on.

GENEALOGIES

Sojourner Truth

- Speech by the formerly enslaved abolitionist and women's rights activist **Sojourner Truth** at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, entitled "Ain't I a Woman?" In it, Truth's experience as an enslaved woman — and the labour she endured — challenged those who refused to recognise women's rights by appealing to women's supposed fragility. So the question becomes: which women are we talking about? Aren't I a woman?



Eleanor Marx



- Article by **Eleanor Marx** from 1891 or 1892, *Women's Trade Unions in England*: in response to liberal feminists' refusal to accept legal protections for women workers, Eleanor Marx argued that the conservative leaders of suffrage organisations had more in common with a laundress than Rothschild did with one of his employees. This highlights the importance of **class** (working class versus propertied bourgeoisie, including bourgeois women).

Post-war period

- **Claudia Jones**, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!* (1949)
 - The specific problems faced by Black women had long been overlooked by workers' organisations: occupational segregation in domestic work, wage inequality not only with men but also with white women, and everyday violence.
 - Even "chauvinist" ideologies that see the kitchen as the most appropriate place for a woman forget that Black women are not in their own kitchen, but in someone else's.
 - The paternalism of the white progressive bourgeoisie and the difficult alliance with white women
 - "For the progressive women's movement, the Negro woman, who **combines in her status the worker, the Negro, and the woman**, is the vital link to this heightened political consciousness."

Combahee River Collective

- **Black feminism in the 1970s:** a critique of a monolithic and essentialist view of womanhood; multiple oppressions and specific relations of domination experienced by Black women; the blindness of white feminism.
- Combahee River Collective, ***A Black feminist statement (1977):***
 - Black feminists' struggles were obscured both by racist and anti-feminist forces, and by the elitism of the feminist movement and racial liberation movements;
 - The simultaneity of class, race and sex oppression — and, for the first time, the oppression of heterosexism was also denounced;
 - The personal is political — and includes race and class, as well as sex;
 - Alongside Black men against racism, against Black men against sexism;
 - Against the capitalist exploitation system, and therefore implicitly also against white women for whom many Black women work;
 - Black women's freedom liberates everyone because it requires the destruction of all systems of power and oppression.

Bell Hooks

- **Bell Hooks**, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black women and feminism* (1981)
 - “When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women”
 - Invisibility of Black women



Adrienne Rich

- **Adrienne Rich**, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980)
 - There is no space for lesbian women either within feminist movements or within movements for sexual liberation.
 - Within feminist movements, their existence is obscured by the heterosexual majority; within liberation movements, their existence is obscured by the visibility of gay men.



Chandra Mohanty

- **Chandra Talpade Mohanty,**
Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses (1984)
- Critique of Western feminist theoretical and political production on women in the “Third World”:
 - Construction of an image of a homogeneous and systematic oppression of “other” women — victimisation, passivity, and the status of “objects” of feminist discourse and politics.



WHAT IS MEANT BY INTERSECTIONALITY

Kimberlé Crenshaw

- ***Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine (1989)*** coins the legal term “intersectionality” to discuss the discrimination and violence experienced by Black women in the United States.
- *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* - shows the rigidity with which law is conceived — a rigidity that reveals how the notion of sex discrimination is understood in relation to white women’s experience. Likewise, racial discrimination is really framed around the protection of Black men. Black women are excluded from this framework.
- An image of a **road intersection**, and the impossibility of deciding from which direction the vehicle that caused the collision came.

Meanings of intersectionality

- First of all, **intersectionality is a notion used to describe people's position at the crossing of social categories**, or axes of differentiation: sex, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, ability, and so on.
- However, the word intersectionality was born above all from the need to find a name for the **conditions of multiple discrimination** experienced by people subject to the simultaneous effects of various power structures.
- In this sense, intersectionality rather describes the **interconnection between “axes of power”** (Nira Yuval-Davis), criticising “single-axis” approaches (Kimberlé Crenshaw), that is, approaches based only on gender, or only on race, ethnicity or class, for the analysis and critique of “social divisions”.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Different levels

- K. Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* (1991) > focusing on rape and domestic violence, and on the situation of Black women, distinguishes between three forms of intersectionality:
- **Structural intersectionality**, which describes the position at the intersection of different factors of oppression, in particular sex and race, and the effects of this condition in terms of the experience of violence;
- **Political intersectionality**, which highlights the risks of invisibility and marginalisation faced by some groups of women, especially Black women, in both anti-sexist and anti-racist discourses;
- **Representational intersectionality**, which examines cultural constructions, showing that even at this level it is necessary to consider the specific positioning of different groups of women at the intersection of different social categories.

Different «axes»

- **Attention to different axes:** alongside gender and skin colour, also migration status, class, sexual orientation, ability/disability, and so on.
- Not all women experience violence to the same degree or in the same way. Social differences affect both the **experience** of violence and the chances of escaping it and receiving help.
- By contrast, **intervention strategies** are often shaped by ideas based on the situation of middle-class women belonging to ethnic and sexual majorities.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND RACISM

Racism

- **Racism:**
- In the narrow sense, a view based on the assumption that some **human races** are biologically and historically superior to others.
- In the broader sense, a set of manifestations or attitudes of intolerance arising from deep-seated and entrenched social prejudice, expressed through forms of contempt and marginalisation towards individuals or groups belonging to **different ethnic and cultural communities**. We therefore also speak of racism when there is no explicit reference to “race”. Racist attitudes and behaviour may be driven by origin, religion, migration status, and so on....

Gender and migration status

- a) An intersectional reading of violence against migrant and refugee women, as a problem in which different axes of power and the resulting structural inequalities intersect;
- b) A critique of representations of violence against women involving foreign victims and perpetrators, and of the effects of these representations on prevention and response work;
- c) Reflection on the limits of some feminist and anti-racist discourses against violence towards women, which struggle to give due weight to the specificity of migrant and refugee women's experiences and to incorporate those experiences into calls for change.

a) Experience of violence

Istat survey (2015):

- Foreign women, particularly women from the EU and non-EU countries in Eastern Europe, **are more exposed than Italian women to physical and sexual violence by partners and former partners over their lifetime**: they have experienced twice as many rapes or attempted rapes by partners and former partners, and the figure is also higher for violence committed by non-partners. By contrast, a higher proportion of Italian women have experienced less severe sexual violence, such as harassment by strangers.
- In the last 5 years, almost all nationalities (with the exception of Chinese women) have reported cases of physical violence — and, in the case of Moroccan and Romanian women, also sexual violence — at rates higher than Italian women.
- 4.9% of foreign women suffer violence in their current relationship, compared with 2.8% of Italian women.

- ✓ **Foreign women have experienced physical or sexual violence to a similar extent to Italian women over their lifetime → 31,3% e 31,5% over the lifetime**

But among foreign women

- ✓ **More physical violence → 25,7% compared with 9,6%**
- ✓ **More rape and attempted rape → 7,7% compared with 5,1%**
- ✓ **Less sexual harassment → 7,1% compared with 16,5%**

Among nationalities the women reporting the highest levels of violence are:

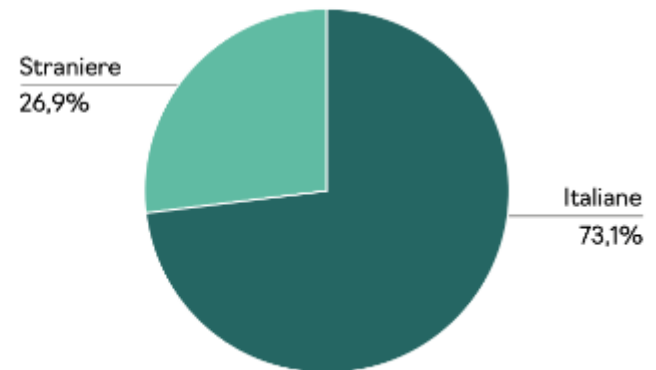
- ✓ **Moldovan women (37,3%),**
- ✓ **Romanian women (33,9%),**
- ✓ **Ukrainian women (33,2%)**
- ✓ **Moroccan women (21,7%)**
- ✓ **Albanian women (18,8%)**
- ✓ **Chinese women (16,4%)**

Femicide data in Italy

- **One victim in five is foreign**
- Eures: overall, between 2000 and 2016, 649 foreign women were killed, representing 22.4% of the total (3,000). In 58.9% of cases, the perpetrators were also foreign, while in 41.1% of cases the perpetrator was Italian.
- 2024: foreign victims represented a quarter of all victims (24.2%)
- Casa delle Donne di Bologna: Femicides in Italy 2024

Nazionalità	Numero assoluto	%
Italiane	76	73,1
Straniere	28	26,9
Totale	104	100

TABELLA 2



Structural factors

- **Migratory or refugee status causes vulnerability and exposure to violence**, due to the xenophobic but also sexist orientation of laws, policies and services aimed at this part of the population. For example, there may be difficulty leaving a violent husband for fear of losing a residence permit, a lack of support networks, or reluctance to expose one's family and community to police intervention.
- **Occupational segregation** in certain sectors, particularly domestic work, is also relevant. Being confined to care and domestic work can be a risk factor for experiencing gender-based violence, especially in the homes where one works.

Problems of visibility

- Gender inequality interacts with, and is reshaped by, its intersection with other systems of power and oppression.
- These systems also affect the difficulties in bringing violence to light and in accessing protection and support services.
- What needs do these services address? What idea of “victim” are they built around?

Istat-Irpps CNR study

Findings on the services provided by the 338 organisations included in the survey:

- Basic services such as reception interviews, guidance and referral to other local services, psychological counselling and legal advice were available in more than 90% of anti-violence centres/services;
- Job-placement support/work autonomy support (83.4%), access to secure accommodation such as refuges at undisclosed addresses (82%), specialist centres/services carrying out risk assessment (77.5%), and specialist services supporting housing autonomy (73.4%) were also reported.
- Problems areas:
- Work for foreign users: fewer than half of the centres (48.1%) provide linguistic and cultural mediation, and only a quarter provide specific services for migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women (25.4%).

b) Representations

- Differential treatment of news stories according to the nationality and skin colour of the aggressor and the victim.
- **Overexposure of cases of violence involving foreign perpetrators and Italian victims:** a device of racist, colonial-style discourse that portrays immigrant men as “animals”, “savages” and “hypersexual”, dangerous to “our” women, turning the problem of sexual violence into a problem of immigration and security;
- **Invisibility of the everyday violence experienced by migrant and refugee women,** who are racialised, inferiorised and marginalised: if every female body is devalued by the structural sexism from which violence against women originates, some bodies (Black and migrant bodies) are worth less than others.

“Our women” and “the others”

- **“Defending our women”**: this erases the reality of male violence against women in general (the violent man has the house keys) and also erases the reality of foreign women victims of violence, because the victim supposedly being defended is the white, native woman, not the migrant woman — even less so if she is Black.
- **The migrant and refugee woman** becomes instead an ideal figure through which to represent the violence of an “other” culture, or culture as such, because the backward culture, hostile to women’s freedom, which shapes individual behaviour, is always the “other” culture.
- Foreign women are represented as **passive victims** of their own culture, and more specifically of men from their own national, religious or cultural group.

In brief

- **Overexposure** of cases of violence involving foreign perpetrators and Italian victims: violence as the result of “wild” and foreign masculinity..
- **Overexposure** of cases of violence that can be used to portray migrant and refugee women as passive victims of a supposedly monolithic culture.
- The real focus is not the violence suffered by the woman, but the otherness of customs and traditional norms, or the brutality of “ogres” who bear the marks of the foreigner.
- **Instrumentalisation** of violence against foreign women for political purposes, leading to anti-immigration policies.

Stereotypes and responses to violence

- **Stereotypes** include: the docility of Asian women, the dependence of Latin American women on their men, the passivity of African women in relation to family norms, and so on.
- They can also influence prevention and response work with foreign women victims of violence: labels, compassionate rhetoric, and an emphasis on **victimhood** can end up inhibiting women's own agency and resilience

c) Politics

- Reflection on intersectionality, in Crenshaw's work and afterwards, stems from criticism of anti-sexist and anti-racist discourse, because of their inability to recognise and give voice to minority women, especially Black women.
- White, middle-class feminism has too often shaped the fight against violence around the needs of the majority subject.
- The anti-racist movement has more often been engaged on the anti-violence front in order to combat the stereotype/instrumentalisation of the Black or foreign rapist than to highlight the forms of violence suffered by foreign women.

What is to be done?

- Migrant and refugee women need to play a leading role in the design of anti-violence initiatives and needs assessments.
- It is important to show how migration and asylum policies heighten the risk of violence and make it harder to bring violence to light and to leave abusive situations.
- Public responses to violence need to be rethought: anti-violence services must be linguistically and culturally competent in order to provide welcome and protection to all women victims of violence.
- The goal of gender justice should be linked to the broader goal of social justice.

VIOLENCE AND LESBOBITRANSPHOBIA

Sexual orientation and gender identity

- In Italy and Europe, statistics on domestic and gender-based violence do not normally record victims' sexual orientation or gender identity, so we do not have data that allow us to compare the frequency and type of violence experienced by lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women with that experienced by heterosexual and cisgender women.
- Qualitative studies show that violence in intimate relationships and outside the family context experienced by these groups of women requires at least the same level of attention and political response as that experienced by heterosexual cis women.
- Trans women, within the LGBTI population, are the most exposed to physical and sexual violence (FRA 2020).

Challenges

- Sexual orientation and gender identity can be factors that increase exposure to violence or intensify its harmful effects, because of the various forms of discrimination experienced in other areas of life, their intersection with other axes of discrimination (skin colour, nationality, class), and the weight of lesbobitransphobic prejudice.
- Belonging to a sexual minority can affect the chances of escaping violent relationships: poverty, social and emotional difficulties, feelings of shame, and difficulty accessing support resources and services, also because specialist services are scarce and not widely known.

Challenges

- Often there are no services able to support and welcome LGBT+ people.
- Among police forces, social and health services, and anti-violence services, there is a lack of proper training for professionals on the specific issues faced by LGBT+ people.
- LGBT+ people do not fit the stereotype of the “deserving victim”.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION

The impact of socio-economic factors

- Francesca Bettio and Elisa Ticci, *Violence against women and economic independence* (2017), using data from the 2012 EU survey on violence against women conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA):
- Living in an economically deprived household greatly increases the likelihood of experiencing abuse of any kind — physical, sexual and psychological violence from a partner, or sexual harassment from non-partners.
- Having paid work, especially for women in deprived households, can be a protective factor.
- However, women who work outside the home are nevertheless more exposed to the risk of sexual harassment.
- A medium or higher level of education is another important protective factor against abuse by partners or non-partners.
- But a higher level of education is also linked to a greater risk of sexual harassment.

Class and gender

- Violence changes form, settings and targets as emancipation progresses, diminishing in some cases, perhaps the most serious ones, while shifting into other situations.
- What matters, however, is not only women's "human capital", but also the level and quality of the partner's or society's "human capital": a man — husband or boyfriend — with a low level of education doubles the risk of physical and sexual violence, while if the woman earns "too much" compared with her partner, there is a risk of backlash (partners who feel their masculinity and economic role threatened).
- The analysis of, and response to, violence against women must not separate gender from class, nor class from gender.
- An intersectional perspective is essential for designing appropriate policies.

What is to be done?

- Anti-violence policies must involve workplaces, training and entry into professions, and the reintegration of those who have lost their job or are looking for one. Workplace support for employees who are victims of abuse — for example by facilitating changes in working hours or duties — offers a better chance of keeping a job and leaving abusive relationships.
- Invest in employment and essential welfare provision — housing and services — for victims living in socio-economically deprived conditions, for example through a “freedom income” scheme.
- Act on the structural inequalities that make access to work, resources and economic independence particularly difficult for some groups of women.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND OTHER INEQUALITIES

Age and other characteristics

- Istat: the women most at risk of physical or sexual violence are the youngest women (aged 16 to 34), single women, separated or divorced women, and students.
- Emerging trends: an increase in very young women and girls under 18 turning to anti-violence centres.
- There is also the issue of the invisibility of violence experienced by older women.
- Eures report: family homicide increasingly affects older people, mostly older women; victims aged 65 and over account for 30.1% of the total (49 in absolute terms in 2018), compared with 18% in 2000. The average age of victims has also risen, from 45 in 2000 to 48.8 in 2018.

Disability

- Istat data show that for women with disabilities, the risk of rape is twice as high as for women “without functional limitations”: 10% for the former, compared with 4.7% for the latter.
- The risks also increase in cases of stalking: 21.6% of women with disabilities have experienced persecutory behaviour, compared with around 14% of other women.
- Challenges include:
 - difficulty recognising violence, especially when it is perpetrated by the caregiver.
 - difficulty being believed, especially in the case of intellectual disabilities.
 - difficulty accessing services — telephone services inaccessible to people with hearing disabilities, architectural barriers for people with mobility disabilities, and so on.

In conclusion

- The notion of intersectionality does not make us less aware of the cross-cutting nature of violence, but it allows us to pay attention to the many dimensions of disadvantage and discrimination that interact with gender.
- Awareness of the difficulties and specific needs of particular target groups can lead to more effective policies, more competent services, and better practices for welcoming and supporting victims.

Essential bibliography

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THANKS!