

The circle of virtue. From strengthening the institutional framework to improving statistical quality and from statistics to policy implementation

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Abstract

Istat (Italian National Statistical Office) started to study violence against women launching a first national survey on 2006, after an accurate planning phase. The survey has enabled the developing of indicators to analyse the phenomenon in Italy through the production of evidence-based data. In addition, thanks to the replication of the same survey in 2014, it was also possible to observe the evolution of the phenomenon over time (in terms of, for example, incidence, frequency, victims' propensity to report, etc.).

On 2017 the Institutional Agreement between Istat and the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Equal Opportunity has been settled aimed at building the integrated data collection and processing system envisaged by the Action Plan against Sexual and Gender-based Violence, according to the specifications and modalities provided therein, defined as “integrated system of violence against women” .

The Agreement has been not only an institutional effort to implement the provisions of national Law (n.119 of 2013), but also the way to boost the production of information from different sources of data, in line with the 3Ps strategy of the Istanbul Convention (Prevention, Protection and Prosecution). Moreover, the agreement strengthened the cooperation among data producers both public (such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Justice at national level and the Regions, at the local ones) and private entities (as NGOs), deeply engaging in combating gender-based violence.

From May 2022 the statistical efforts to provide quality data to observe the phenomenon of gender-based violence has been boosted from a new legal framework (Law n.53/2022) which gives even more relevance to the systematic production of statistical data on violence against women. The new legal framework commits Istat, Ministry of Interior, Justice, Health to measure violence against women, focusing on its causes, dynamics, consequences, looking at regularly monitoring the phenomenon and the victims' protection. This involves continuous work on improving the quality of both existing administrative and survey data, as well as innovating methodological tools and exploring new fields of research: experimental statistics (*big data*) and machine learning process has been set up to analyse data base provided by the Department of Equal Opportunity's help-line, or studying the protocols of territorial governance networks to combat violence against women.

The paper describes the impacts of institutional mechanisms on improving data quality and innovation processes and describes some of the best practises adopted and their results on data production.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, innovation, legal framework, multi-sources system, data producers

1. Introduction

Measuring violence against women (VAW) is not easy since it encompasses several forms and stays often hidden. In many cases the perpetrator of violence is a family member and therefore is hard to talk about and to report it. The survivor of violence feels lonely and has to cope with the idea that once the violence disclosed, consequences would change the life of her loved ones. The emotional and psychological reactions that develop as a consequence of episodic or continuous violence are very complex.

Data from administrative sources can be used to describe some aspects of VAW while dedicated surveys are crucial to provide the closest figures to the real picture and to understand the dynamics of the violence.

Istat started to study violence against women launching a first national dedicated survey on 2006, after an accurate planning phase. The survey has enabled the developing of indicators to analyse the phenomenon in Italy through the production of evidence-based data. In addition, thanks to the replication of the same survey in 2014, it was also possible to observe the evolution of the phenomenon over time (in terms of, for example, incidence, frequency, victims' propensity to report, etc.).

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011), the so called Istanbul Convention, ratified in Italy in 2013, underlines, for the first time in Europe, the cultural basis of violence and the importance of eradicate them, as well as the importance to measure violence in order to eliminate it.

Istat and the Italian Presidency of the Council – Department of Equal Opportunity (DEO) signed an agreement in 2017, with the aim to build up an integrated system aimed to answer to the Convention, following a multi-sources approach in order to collect all relevant statistics, from survey and register statistics, and to be progressively updated.

2. Theoretical framework

The Istanbul Convention requires States to offer a holistic response to violence against women, through the “4 Ps approach”: Prevention of violence through sustained measures that address its root causes and aim at changing attitudes, gender roles and stereotypes that make violence against women acceptable; Protecting women and girls who are known to be at risk

and setting up specialist support services for victims and their children; Prosecuting the perpetrators; adopting and implementing state-wide integrated Policies that are effective, co-ordinated and comprehensive.

Italy ratified the Convention in 2013 and since then of all actors involved in fighting violence against women have moved to a further commitment.

To meet the requirements of Istanbul Convention, in 2017 Istat signed an Institutional Agreement with the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Equal Opportunity, aimed at building the integrated data collection and processing system envisaged by the Action Plan against Sexual and Gender-based Violence, defined as the “integrated system of violence against women”.

Since then, Istat has started to create the system through several activities, including developing new surveys and methodologies, and involving all relevant actors.

3. Methods

The Agreement between Istat and the Department of Equal Opportunity represents the institutional effort to implement the provisions of the national law (Law n.119 of 2013) that ratifies the Istanbul Convention.

Following the Istanbul Convention “3Ps structure” (Prevention, Protection, and Prosecution), the idea of Istat was to define a data warehouse built by connecting administrative sources and survey data, as shown in the Annex. In the integrated system, data are organized on several areas:

The phenomenon: data on prevalence of violence, its forms and dynamics, characteristics of survivors and perpetrators, the attitudes towards violence against women. This means all information referring to the Prevention, in the way these data allow to better understand violence against women.

The way out: data on the specialised support services and the survivors asking for help there, giving information that relates to the Protection pillar of the Istanbul Convention.

The Criminal Justice chain: data from the Justice System and Law Enforcement agencies that are related to violence against women, giving some information on the Prosecution.

The 4th pillar related to state-wide integrated Policies that are effective, co-ordinated and comprehensive, is reflected in the way the system is built, based on the effective cooperation and the active engagement of all actors involved in fighting against gender-based violence.

The signature of the agreement led to a strengthened cooperation among Istat and the other entities engaged in combating gender-based violence. The active involvement of the other actors is in fact part of the strategy to build the integrated system on violence against women.

The cooperation followed different patterns, according to the different type of data producer. In some cases turned out in formal agreements of cooperation, as those signed with the Ministry of Health in 2019 and 2023 and the agreement with the Ministry of Justice signed in 2021. A new approach of cooperation developed with representatives of NGOs and Regions led to an inter-agencies working group (2021).

3.1 The cooperation with the Ministry of Health

The work carried out through the common efforts of Istat and the Ministry of Health is an example of good practices of cooperation between institutional producers of data.

Istat enhanced the cooperation with the Ministry of Health with the signature of a common agreement in 2019 (renewed and further developed in 2023) assuring regular provision of data related to gender-based violence from the health care system.

Some of these data were already collected by a number of health care facilities but the activity depended on the single initiative and was limited across the territory, lacking of harmonization and coordination.

As a result of the collaboration, since 2020 were realized information on the access of women to the Emergency Room of hospitals and data on the hospitalizations of women with reference to specific diagnosis, together with demographic data of the victims. The aim is developing the study of consequences of violence on women in terms of health and monitoring such data, distinguishing the effect due to the increasing use of specific measure to identify victims, the so called “Linee guida Codice Rosa”.

In fact in November 2017 the Ministry of Health adopted the National guidelines for Emergency Room of healthcare facilities “Path for women suffering violence” which provide healthcare facilities and hospitals with operational tools to recognize violence and identify all its aspects and actors. The guidelines aim to support the victim, evaluate the risk, to precisely document the violence and direct the victim to the local network supporting survivors of gender-based violence.

Collecting and analyzing data on gender-based violence represents the possibility to monitor the phenomenon as well as the capacity of the workers in the healthcare sector to detect the violence.

3.2 Working together with the civil society organizations

The Istanbul Convention identifies the specialised support services for survivors as crucial to assure what is defined as the Protection of women and girls suffering violence. The Protection area can be monitored only thanks to the contribution of the civil society organizations (CSO), the specialized services against violence.

The helpline against violence and stalking “1522” is the first possibility to help women, where women find the first concrete response, while the Anti-violence centres (AVC) and the Shelters have a crucial role in supporting women along their pathways out of violence.

Therefore, since 2018, Istat has been building a system of data collections, based on a network with NGOs and local government, in collaboration with DEO, the Regions and the National Research Council. The system includes annual data collections about the characteristics of the specialised services and the characteristics of women seeking for help there.

Cooperation is not taken for granted; it requires a deep respect for each other's competences, for boundaries. It also means learning to use the same language. In this case, we can say that the system of data collections focused on the specialized support services has been built together.

This process was not easy. CSOs have their identity, some Anti-violence centres have a history of 30/40 years and have their own data collections. Moreover AVCs are very different from each other, some built their identity on the political feminist identity, they have their knowledge background to help survivors, the victim-centered approach, aimed at advocacy and based on the “reception methodology between women”.

The initiative of planning dedicated data collection was appreciated by AVCs but the implementation phase, with Istat's request for harmonization of definitions, needed an additional effort in negotiation.

Part of the strategy of cooperation was the creation of an inter-agencies working group (in 2021) with representatives of NGOs and Regions (in Italy health and social care services are responsibility of local government). This allowed to find together shared definitions, identify informative gaps and plan strategies of analysis, with the aim to design more effective policies.

4. Results

The institutional mechanisms put in place had a significant impact on improving data quality and promoting innovation processes.

As results it has increased the availability of data related to violence against women that are harmonised, regularly provided, of high quality.

Moreover the enhanced cooperation, in a virtuous circle, has launched and promoted new common projects and the activities carried out together are not limited to the planning of data collection but encompass today the identification of informative gaps, the design of new strategies of analysis at the aim to design more effective policies.

The dedicated system of data collections allows to monitor the presence of the specialized support services on the territory, that increased of 37% for Centers (385 in 2022) and of 97% for Shelters (450), the first year of the survey 2017, as well as increased the number of women supported (60,751 women contacted Centers at least once in 2022) . Collected data give also other information useful to improve the offered services.

With reference to the data collected in the healthcare system, it emerged that in 2020, when there was a sharp decline in the total accesses due to medical emergency (-39.8%), those with an indication of violence decreased with less intensity (-25.2%).

The reinforced cooperation and the production of high quality relevant statistics involving all concerned actors paved the way to define a national law that is specifically dedicated to the collection of data on gender-based violence, the Law 53 of May 2022 “Provisions on gender-based violence statistics”. The approval of the new law set up a sort of virtuous circle since statistical efforts to provide quality data on gender-based violence are boosted by the new legal framework and the provision of relevant data is today compulsory.

The new law commits Istat, Ministries of Interior, Justice, Health to measure and monitor violence against women, focusing on its causes, dynamics, consequences and the victims’ protection. The Ministries are bound to regularly provide data with specific information (set of variables) that are crucial to study gender-based violence, such as the relation between the victim and the perpetrator of violence, lacking in a number of relevant data from administrative sources. Moreover the law provides the collection of data about the specialized support services for survivors to be carried out by Istat, in cooperation with the Regions, and requires Istat to carry out the survey on violence against women every 3 years.

The engagement involves continuous work on improving the quality of existing administrative and survey data, as well as innovating methodological tools and exploring new fields of research.

The case of 1522 helpline against gender-based violence describes clearly this quality process. Calls and messages to the helplines coming from users and victims of violence are collected by the NGO which leads this public service of DEO¹. Collecting and using this citizen-generated data on VAW complements data collected through administrative sources and

¹ Data are collected by DEO since 2013 and Istat analyses them since 2018.

dedicated population surveys. These data are timely and accurate because gathered by NGOs skilled professionals of the service and analysed by Istat researchers which provide and assess their quality. The collaboration between Istat and NGOs has made it possible to improve the quality of the collection and storage process, through the refinement of the rules for classifying telephone calls, including through the use of machine learning processes of call contents.

Istat set up also experimental statistics (big data) and machine learning process to analyse the protocols of territorial governance networks to combat violence against women and to produce a sentiment analysis and emotion detection of social media.

5. Conclusions

The Agreement between Istat and the Department of Equal Opportunity has been not only an institutional effort to implement the provisions of national Law (n.119 of 2013), but also the way to boost the production of information from different sources of data, in line with the 3Ps strategy of the Istanbul Convention (Prevention, Protection and Prosecution).

Most of the data are produced by Istat in agreement with NGOs, regional governments and National Ministries and strengthening the cooperation among all data producers was a long and difficult work, to share the same language and the same aims, and to achieve a wider view of the phenomenon.

However this is the only possible way to proceed producing good, accurate and meaningful data. Coordinated, comprehensible and comprehensive data are the results of the good cooperation of the data providers.

Common efforts in producing relevant statistics involve continuous work on improving the quality of existing data, as well as innovating methodological tools and exploring new fields of research.

The virtuous circle, that started with the cooperation between Ministries, Regions, NGOs and Istat, lead to a more and better data availability and it is strengthened by the new legal framework (Law n.53 of 2022 "Provisions on gender-based violence statistics"). This circle assures an increasing and systematic production of statistical data on violence against women. It shows that political attention to data has improved and awareness of statistics has roused.

The new law represents an achieved milestone towards improving data collection and research, as required by art.11 of the Istanbul Convention, that assure the progressive monitoring of VAW in order to plan good policies.

Although there are still further steps to be taken: the circle should be boosted by the law and fed by the active commitment of data-producers and by a better exploitation of the informative potential and transformative power of data.

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Annex

Data collection related to gender-based violence, part of the Integrated System on violence against women

Since the signature in 2017 of an Institutional Agreement with the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department of Equal Opportunity (DEO), Istat has started to create the system also developing new surveys.

In the integrated system, data are organized on several areas: the phenomenon, the way out, the prosecution.

1.The phenomenon

1.1. Violence inside and outside the family

This section describes the size of the violence against women in Italy in its several forms, as physical, sexual, psychological and economical violence inside and outside the family, as it is observed through the Women's safety surveys, carried out by Istat in 2006 and 2014, while the next edition will be held by 2024. Data are of high quality and show the prevalence of violence against women, its frequency, severity, causes, risk factors, dynamics, consequences and costs and the violence witnessing.

1.2 Sexual harassment and violence at work

Data are collected by Istat with the Citizens' safety surveys starting from 1997-1998 to 2023 (5 editions).

1.3 Violence and accesses to healthcare facilities

Since 2020 Istat together with the Ministry of Health provides annual data on the access of women to the Emergency Room of hospitals and data on the hospitalizations of women with reference to specific diagnosis, together with demographic information of the victims.

1.4 Female homicides

The historical series with national administrative data, from 2002, are provided by Istat Causes of Death Data and by the Ministry of Interior with information on femicides.

1.5 Stereotypes

With the aim to give some information on the evolution of social relations between men and women, and the impact of women's stereotypes over time Istat collect data on gender roles stereotypes and stereotypes towards violence against women among the adult population (2018 and 2023) and the student population (2023).

Since 2020, Istat is studying, with the use of big data, the sentiment and emotion analysis of violence against women and gender stereotypes in the social media, in order to understand how communication diversifies and changes even in the virtual dimension and what reactions (stimulation and propagation of violence, outrage...).

2. The way out

2.1 Helpline against violence and stalking 1522

Istat analyses data on the calls to the national helpline against violence and stalking 1522 since 2012, giving some information on the characteristics of the person calling, the type of violence suffered and the expressed needs.

2.2 Shelters and Antiviolence centres

Since 2018 Istat in close cooperation with NGOs and Regions has been building a system of data collections to gather information on the Protection System of survivors of violence, intended as the system of specialized support services mostly managed by specialized NGO's. Annual data collection are carried out about the characteristics of such specialized support services and the characteristics of women seeking for help there. Among the information collected some are related to the perpetrator of violence.

Since 2022, a new project has started on mapping the territorial governance networks against violence, in cooperation with Department of Equal Opportunity and NGOs. These are networks that arise from protocols or agreements between public and private entities in order to prevent and combat violence.

3. The path in the system of Justice

Data shown in this section do not yet give a proper description of the situation. Data relate to the reports to the police system and only few data refer to the proceedings, the convictions and the prisoners. Data are collected on annual basis by the Ministry of Interior and by the Ministry of Justice and local Offices of the judicial system.

In Italy statistics of the justice sector are affected by the lack of information on the sex of victims and the information regarding the victim-perpetrator relationship. For this reason, data collected in the integrated system on violence against women are those related to some crimes, namely stalking, sexual assault, maltreatment in the family, female genital mutilation, which can be considered crimes to majority vocation of gender.

More details are available online: <https://www.istat.it/en/violence-against-women>.

Table 1 – 3Ps structure of Istanbul Convention and mapping data in Italy

| Type of indicators | Tipo of source | Periodicity | Implementation status | Istitutions |
|--|---|-------------|-----------------------|---|
| Prevention | | | | |
| Presence and type of gender stereotypes among the adult population | Sample survey on stereotypes on gender roles and the social image of violence in the adult population | 3 years | Carried out | Istat, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| Presence and type of gender stereotypes among students | Sample survey (module) on stereotypes of and gender violence in the youth population | Periodical | Carried out | Istat, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| Sentiment analysis on gender-based violence and gender stereotypes on social media | Survey on gender-based violence and stereotypes in social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and on the web) | Continuous | Ongoing | Istat, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| Presence, frequency and type of hidden and non-hidden violence suffered by women, severity, dynamics, consequences and characteristics of violence, risk factors, costs of violence against women | Sample survey on women's safety | Periodical | Carried out | Istat, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| Presence, frequency, severity, characteristics of sexual harassment and sexual blackmail at work | Sample survey on citizen safety | Periodical | Carried out | Istat |
| Protection | | | | |
| Services offered to survivors, typology of users, organizational styles of specialist services, typology of professional figures, training of operators, types of financing | Data collection on Anti-violence Centers (CAV) and services offered | Annual | Carried out | Istat and Regions, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| | Survey on the services and services offered by shelters | Annual | Carried out | Istat and Regions, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| Demographic, social and economic characteristics of women who begin a pathway from violence at the AVC, types of violence suffered, risk factors, characteristics of the perpetrators, effectiveness of the path | Data collection on women seeking for help at the of Anti-violence centres | Annual | Carried out | Istat and Regions, in Agreemnet with DEO |
| Requests for help on the specialized helpline; reason for the call; type of violence; socio-demographic characteristics of the victims and perpetrators of violence | Recording of calls to Helpline against violence and stalking 1522 | Quarterly | Carried out | Department of Equal Opportunity |
| Access for victims of violence to the Emergency Room; Hospital admissions of victims of violence against women, characteristics of the victims and the trauma, outcomes and diagnoses | Access to the Emergency Room (EMUR); Hospital Discharge Tracking (SDO) | Annual | Carried out | Ministry of Health-Istat, upon request of DEO |
| Prosecution | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|--|---------------|--------------------|--|
| <p>Reports of gender-based violence against women, reports of perpetrators, socio-demographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators of gender violence against women.</p> | <p>Data collection on crimes, perpetrators and victims of crimes, Investigation System (SDI)</p> | <p>Annual</p> | <p>Planning</p> | <p>Ministry of Interior-Istat, upon request of DEO</p> |
| <p>Murders of women by type of relationship with the perpetrator, femicides</p> | <p>Operational homicide database</p> | <p>Annual</p> | <p>Carried out</p> | <p>Ministry of Interior</p> |
| <p>Proceedings for gender-based violence, number of defendants and positions archived, characteristics of the defendants, places of violence; procedural times of the preliminary investigation phase</p> | <p>Tracking of proceedings</p> | <p>Annual</p> | <p>Planning</p> | <p>Ministry of Justice-Istat, upon request of DEO</p> |
| <p>Convicted of gender-based violence; type of sanction; procedural times; appeals and cassation appeals for gender-based violence; characteristics of the condemned</p> | <p>Central Criminal Records Register</p> | <p>Annual</p> | <p>Planning</p> | <p>Ministry of Justice-Istat, upon request of DEO</p> |