

The contribution of Citizen Generated Data (CGD) for measuring gender-based violence (GBV) in Italy. A quality issue for the official statistic.

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Abstract

The measurement of GVB, even if much progress has been made alongside, is still hampered by difficulties and limitations, concerning content, methodology, regularity and timeliness of existing data. At the same time, the data revolution, with a greater volume of data coming from different sources and a changing relationship of individuals and communities with data, represents an exceptional challenge for the official statistics and to fill gender-related data gaps. This claims also for greater citizen and stakeholder's participation in planning and data-related activities and National Statistical Systems (NSS) have to broaden their scope to a "data ecosystem" that include, adopting a participatory approach and giving due consideration to the voice of citizens, all actors that generate data. In this regard new and alternative data sources may complement existing gaps providing exceptional insights on underreported phenomena, enabling additional analysis and reducing the statistical burden. Nevertheless, most of the time these data are not produced for statistical purposes and, given their operational nature, NSOs face challenges to leverage such an opportunity. Within this framework, Istat, in collaboration with the National Department for Equal Opportunities, developed a multi-source approach to collect, analyze and publish data from different sources on GBV, including administrative and alternative ones, devoting particular effort to enhance value also of non-traditional data sources such as citizen generated data (CGD) on the topic. To this aim, data underlining services offered by specialized agencies for women victims of violence, such as anti-violence centres and shelters and calls directed to the national helpline 1522, have been integrated in the NSS enabling a mutual win-win outcome for both data producers and users as well as for the statistical ecosystem as a whole. Such a process required a great variety of competences and activities and has to undergo a constant monitoring in order to ensure data quality, comparability and usability.

The paper aims at discussing 1) the main steps that led to the integration of the above-mentioned data into the integrated informative system on GBV in Italy, with particular emphasis on those activities that most affect the quality along the whole statistical value chain (needs assessments, collection, processing, analysis and interpretation) 2) the role of the continuous involvement of respondents as data providers and users in order to ensure data collected comply with the principles governing official statistics 3) the role of Istat in improving data collection capacity of data producers by coordinating the whole process.

Keywords: Gender based violence (GBV), Citizen generated data (CGD), Multi-source approach

1. Introduction: aim of the paper and main issues

The phenomenon of gender-based violence, even if much progress has been made alongside both at national and international level, is still underestimated and affected by a high dark figure, when considering official police and criminal justice statistics. These data reflect both the reporting behavior of the victims and the operation of the criminal justice system and their operational and administrative nature hamper the possibility to go much in depth to gain the “how” and “why” of the phenomenon.

Survey-based data contribute to fill the gaps posed by police and criminal justice statistics, in regard to both data availability, comparability, timeliness and pertinence. Survey data allow collecting data on the characteristics of victims and perpetrators as well as on the violence dynamics according to the most recent data needs in terms of scientific and social relevance. Nevertheless, they also have some limitations, related to costs and survey implementation, the statistical burden on respondents and, given the high sensitiveness of the topic, lots of experience is required in order to capture sound and comparable data.

The multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, moreover, requires the adoption of a multisource approach that inform on its different aspects and determinants in line with the 4P model defined by the Istanbul Convention¹ (Prevention-Protection-Prosecution-Integrated Policies). Bringing together data informing on each of these elements is of particular relevance in order to provide an integrated and detailed informative representation of the phenomenon, allowing for monitoring over time and space and capturing changes both in regard to its characteristics and the preventive countermeasures implemented against it.

¹ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011)

In this regard, Istat, in collaboration with the Department of Equal Opportunities in 2017 adopted and implemented a multi-source informative system on gender based violence. More in particular, the aim was considering, analyzing and disseminating data that, ranging from survey-based ones to those of administrative nature, provide an updated and pertinent instrument for monitoring the phenomenon on a long-term basis. Within this framework, different initiatives have been planned, implemented and carried out.

In the following chapters due consideration will be dedicated in particular to the implementation of a monitoring system based on citizen-generated data concerning the protection-side of the phenomenon: namely based on data collected and provided by specialized services for women victims of violence: antiviolence centres, shelters homes and the national helpline 1522. The focus will be on the methodological and operational phases that enabled to enhance the value of data and information collected, to harmonize methodology and conceptual definitions and to implement a data collection system for those units that did not collect data on a regular basis. This allowed broadening the informative capacity of the official statistics recognizing the value of alternative data sources.

2. From citizen generated data (CGD) to official statistics. The contribution of CDG for the study of GBV. Steps and theoretical/methodological framework

Considering that in general “the world of data is changing exponentially with greater volumes of data generated and delivered in shorter time spans than ever before”² and that „the aspiration of the Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda of “leaving no one behind” places a responsibility on planners and the producers of data to ensure that the voices of citizens and, more specifically, those of marginalized groups and individuals, are included and amplified”³ also in the context of measuring violence against women and gender based violence there is a need to consider and include citizen generated data in the whole data eco-system of reference. In particular, it is of the utmost importance to frame the potential of CGD into the official national statistical system, in order to maximize the role of official statistics in providing public data for all and for the good and service of all. The 2016 United Nations (UN) Human

² UN Women, 2020, Methodological Guidelines on the collection and use of citizen generated data for reporting SDG 5 and gender specific indicators in other SDGS, New York.

³ Ibidem

Rights-Based Approach to Data (HRBAD) developed by the OHCHR, highlights the need to adopt a participatory approach involving civil society organisations (CSOs) in the process of data production with particular emphasis on six principles: participation; data disaggregation and collection by population groups; self-identification; transparency; privacy and accountability.

While „the Cape Town Global Action Plan for SDGs (UNSD 2017) identified NSOs as the necessary and appropriate leaders of interactions between producers and users in national statistical systems“⁴, NSO may still face difficulties and challenges in considering and recognizing alternative data sources, as CGD, in the National Statistical System due to several reasons, in particular with reference to their quality and statistical usability.

According to Lämmerhirt (2018), citizen generated data (CGD) are defined as *“data that people or organizations produce to monitor, demand directly or drive change on issues that affect them”*. This definition encompasses many peculiarities: a) data produced by people or organizations, b) the aim of the data production refers to monitoring or driving change c) on issues, phenomena that directly affect those who produce these data.

This means that citizen generated data originate from the needs of people or organizations to monitor and report on issues that directly affect them, with the aim of providing informational capacity and sound data. Considering the fact that CGD are produced “from inside the phenomenon”, they rely on in-depth information that rarely may be collected otherwise. In this regard, when CGD are included in the official statistical system, they can improve both quality and scope of the official statistics in different ways, in particular to the extent they broaden the scope of NSSs to that of ‘data eco-systems’ in the framework of the Data Revolution. According to the UN Data Revolution Group (2014), the Data Revolution „underpins a transformational and hybrid culture in the use of traditional, non-traditional and new sources of data for increased open access and uptake of different data for evidence-based decision making“.⁵ In this regard CGD have to be considered as an additional source, and not as a substitute one for official statistics.

CGD can fill informative gaps that are difficult to cover based on survey-data or administrative sources; they can help in reducing the statistical burden on respondents; they can help in providing additional insights and answering more questions about the “how” of a phenomenon.

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Ibidem

While the benefits of considering CGD are recognized, still different challenges hamper their immediate use. In order to be integrated within the official statistical system “CGD compilation must be consistent with international best practice and standards, and independent of government support to avoid possible influence on methodology and results”. According to Lopes (2018) there are different challenges to be overcome with reference to CGD and gender-related data: Absence of coordination among CGD-initiatives, limited collaboration efforts between national statistical offices and non-official data producers, perceived low quality of CGD, low level of trust in CGD by NSOs, insufficient quality standards.

3. The Italian Case: Data from anti-violence centres, shelters and calls to the national helpline 1522

The Italian experience in this regard is particularly noteworthy. The way Istat, in collaboration with the Department of Equal Opportunities has considered data provided by Antiviolence Centres, Shelters Homes and the National Helpline 1522 will be discussed in light of the UN WOMEN-WHO (2022) Global Technical Guidance „Improving the collection and use of administrative data on violence against women“. The above mentioned Guidance identifies 8 main steps to be followed:

- 1) Know the appropriate uses of VAW Administrative Data and identify priorities
- 2) Create a National or Subnational VAW Administrative Data Coordination Mechanism
- 3) Analyse and Align with the VAW Legislative, Policy and Data Environment
- 4) Convene a VAW Administrative Data User-Producer dialogue
- 5) Agree what VAW Administrative Data will be collected, analysed and reported
- 6) Create an implementation Plan to Collect and Use VAW Administrative Data
- 7) Implement and monitor the regular reporting of VAW administrative data
- 8) Engage in Data Communication

3.1 The process

Given the need to enrich the statistical capacity of the official statistics on violence against women and gender based violence, the Agreement between Istat and the Department of Equal Opportunities in 2017 represent the legislative e policy basis for the development and implementation of an informative statistical system on VAW that includes also alternative sources of data, such as those of administrative nature in forms and citizen-generated.

The first step was that ***of identifying the potential sources and starting a dialogue with the data producers*** in order to rely on existing data availability and capacity and avoid additional statistical burden on them. Istat's approach, in general, when developing a new

survey or a new data collection initiative is to use the information flows already present in the territories and then standardise them in order to survey the phenomenon in a homogeneous manner throughout the country. This was also the path taken in the case of flows on specialised services against violence. The close cooperation with the regional statistics offices and with the professional associations⁶ then made it possible to identify the data needs, the available data and to prepare a questionnaire and implement a data collection mechanism that was able to detect the relevant features of the phenomenon, the organisational heterogeneities without increasing the statistical burden on the respondents too much. This way of working meant that where information flows already existed, these were adapted to the new national flow so that information from specialised services was only requested once.

The phase of identifying and standardising content was the most complex. In fact, the following needs had to be combined: to grasp the territorial specificities of such a variegated phenomenon, to fill important information gaps, to monitor the application of and compliance with national and international regulations, to collect information in a uniform and homogeneous manner throughout the country.

The questionnaires were designed and tested with the cooperation of the associations of anti-violence centres and were modified over the years to capture the specificities of the survey period and any changes in the phenomenon.

Once agreement has been found in relation to the concepts, three main data sources have been identified: Anti-violence Centres, Shelter Homes, and the National Helpline 1522.

3.2 Anti-violence Centres and Shelter Homes: The survey conduction and implementation

In this paragraph, we will see how respondents are involved in some stages of the data value chain and their ongoing involvement as data providers and users. The above mentioned process led to the decision to implement three different data collection initiatives in order to collect data on the *services provided* by Anti-violence Centres and Shelter Homes and the *characteristics of the users* of Anti-violence Centres.

In this regard Istat acts as coordinator actor in collaboration with both civil society organizations, local governments and regional statistical offices that act as an intermediary

⁶ Including: service-providers, local governments and Civil Society Organizations

between Istat anti-violence centres and shelter homes. In order to meet the different needs every regional statistical office has the option to choose how to participate in the organization and conduction of the survey, by three methods:

Method 1: The statistical office uses its own information systems and collects the required information for all the centres and shelters under its jurisdiction, ensuring the completeness, timeliness, and quality of the data collected. Subsequently, it uploads and transmits the data through the protected web area according to technical specifications provided by Istat.

Method 2: The statistical office oversees the data collection through the protected web area provided by Istat. In this case, Istat provides the Region with material for survey conduction, and is region's responsibility to send this material to the respondent units and support them in filling out the questionnaires. Even in this case, the Region ensures the completeness, timeliness, and quality of the data collected.

Method 3: The statistical office is unable to operate using either of the two previously organizational methods; therefore, Istat will handle the entire data collection process.

For the first time, in 2017, and since then Istat has been carrying out the **survey on Anti-violence Centres** and collecting information on the services offered to women. The survey is conducted annually through a web questionnaire and usually takes place between May and July. The centres receive an informative letter containing all the information regarding the survey and instructions for registering and accessing the Reporting System.

The questionnaire is organized into several sections and gathers information on the structural and organizational requirements, on the professional staff working in the centres and on the services provided to users. It also collects data on the users, in terms of contacts and access that occurred during the reference year of the survey. Finally, it gathers information on the proportion of public and private funding received and used by each centre.⁷

The survey on Shelter Homes takes place in the same period as the survey on Anti-Violence Centres, from May to July, and collects information on women and their children welcomed in the Shelters. The web questionnaire gather information about structural and organizational characteristics and requirements of the Shelter, among these, for example, telephone availability, territorial coverage, and accessibility of the structure to women with disabilities. It also collects information on the professional figures working in Shelter, on the

⁷ The latest survey, concluded in July 2023, contacted 389 anti-violence centres: of these, 345 centres completed the questionnaire, approximately 88%.

flow of users who have been welcomed into the Shelter during the survey year; the path through which women arrived at the Shelter and how their path continued after leaving the Shelter.⁸

Since 2020, Istat has also been conducting a survey on **users of Anti-violence centres**, targeting women who have started a path to escape from violence. The path to escape from violence starts when the Anti-violence centre activate a specific program to support the woman on her path toward separation and autonomy from the abuser(s). Therefore, the CAV operators must complete a new questionnaire for all women who have started, for the first time, a program to escape from violence. The questionnaire of women who started the pathway in previous years, but who are still welcomed by the Anti-Violence centre, must be selected from an archive available in the Reporting System and should be update in some sections. The reporting system remains open throughout the year to allow for gradual data entry. The questionnaire collects a series of fundamental information about the woman, such as her expressed/emerged needs during the survey year, the type of violence suffered and the perpetrator of the violence. It also collects information on the services provided to woman, such as listening, welcoming, psychological support, legal advice, economic support, and so on.⁹

With reference to the ***user-producer dialogue***, Istat established a continuous and regular cooperation between all the actors involved in order to both facilitate the data collection and reporting activities as well as to consider any changes in order to update the data collection instrument to meet the needs expressed to ensure quality and pertinence. Particular emphasis has been dedicated to the training of the operators of the anti-violence centres and shelter homes in order to ensure they have a comprehensive understanding of the overall aim of the initiative and the concepts used, to raise awareness about the importance of their participation in the surveys, and also train them on how to use the reporting system. Besides the initial training meeting, starting from 2021 they became more and more frequent. In 2023 we held 4 meetings, at different stages of the surveys.

We trust that respondent's engagement would help us to achieve our research objectives; for this reason we began to use respondent's field experiences to develop resources to inform survey design. We also tried to learn and analyse respondent's needs to improve the design

⁸ During the last survey, 458 Shelters across the national territory were contacted, approximately 83% responded to the questionnaire.

⁹ The data collection for 2023 concluded last February, and over 31,000 questionnaire were collected.

of the survey tools. For instance, the implementation of an archive of questionnaires, as previously mentioned, stems from the continuous exchange with operators and the regional statistical offices. It has become necessary to follow the woman's path as she escapes from violence.

Escaping violence is a difficult and long journey that a woman undertakes through many difficulties; sometimes the process can be interrupted and later resumed. The "archive" system has made possible to preserve all the information collected over the years and to ensure that information about the women are not lost, allowing for the reconstruction of their history.

We also invest time with our users explaining how we intend to use the data collected but also understanding how they intend to use and analyse the data. This enables us to fully capitalize on the investment made in employing experienced professionals in their respective roles.

3.3 The national helpline 1522

1522 is the public utility number made available by the Department for Equal Opportunities of Presidency of the Council of Ministers, to support and help victims of gender violence and stalking. It is free, guarantees anonymity and covers different forms of violence 24 hours a day and in 9 different languages besides Italian (English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Farsi, Albanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Portuguese, Polish). This helpline provides first-rate information, help in case of emergency and provides useful information on the services and anti-violence centres active at local level that the victims of violence, or other users, can contact.¹⁰ The analysis of the phenomenon of violence and stalking that emerges based on 1522-data provides a useful insight into understanding its dynamics and characteristics, which it is surprisingly close to the profile already detected by the sample surveys conducted by ISTAT on the same topic. Data are collected following questions asked by the toll-free number operators according to a path standardized whose filter is represented by the reason for the call. Depending on the different reasons for the call the operator enters information and data, reporting what was declared by the 1522 users.

During 2022 the "call archiving platform" was changed in order to update response methods (consistent with new forms of violence and new channels of online diffusion of violence), and

¹⁰ The database relating to the services to contact is constantly updated by the Regional Administrations and Associations active in the territories: as soon as a new centre or service is activated, all the information regarding it is provided addresses and methods of provision of services that allow the 1522 operators to provide indications updated and timely.

to improve the quality of the information collected, through the adoption of filters that allow to better identify the type of caller. The definition of a new archiving platform, as indicated, responds to greater rigor needs and statistical quality of the data but also to the need to have an easier and more flexible working tool for operators committed to responding to the needs of users of 1522. The standardization process carried out on the database it also allowed further data cleaning to be carried out.

4 Lessons learned and implications for further actions

The experience gained and developed by Istat using citizen generated data provided by specialized services for the protection of women victims of violence to monitor the phenomenon of gender based violence is of particular relevance for different reasons. First of all, the Italian case shows how pivotal is the adoption of a multi-source approach and the inclusion, within the framework of the official statistics, of alternative data sources. At the same time, it clearly recognizes the importance of having established both a national and regional data collection mechanism coordinated by Istat. Under the supervision and coordination of the official statistic it was possible to ensure the development of common and harmonized data collection instruments, based on standardized and shared concepts and methodology. The establishment of a regular and systematic dialogue between data producers and users was of exceptional relevance in order to define the data to be collected and the mode of collection which resulted in more quality and comparability. The implementation of a common data collection web-portal ensured that the reporting activity can be monitored and ad hoc measures can be implemented in order to guarantee completeness. The continuous dialogue and assistance provided to Anti-violence Centres and Shelter Homes is of particular relevance in terms of a mutual learning between the official statistics and civil society organizations that are responsible for the data collection and production. The same applies in regard to the changes implemented for the reporting and analysis mechanism of 1522 data.

An open approach seems to be the most effective one in order to further consider and include alternative data sources within the framework of the official statistics. It has positive implications both in terms of data availability, it reinforces public awareness on the topic and enhance the participatory actions implemented at the societal level that result in a stronger relationship and trust in the official statistics and its quality.

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