

Lucia Botti

A home is a safe place only for men: the failing securitization of the “shadow pandemic” in Italy

Riassunto

Questo lavoro si propone di indagare in che misura l'applicazione della teoria della securitizzazione alla violenza sessuale e di genere (SGBV) in Italia durante le fasi più acute della pandemia da COVID-19 abbia avuto successo. Il quadro metodologico di riferimento è stato sviluppato nel 1998 dalla scuola di Copenaghen per trattare alcune questioni di carattere politico come problemi di sicurezza, compiendo un'operazione dialogica chiamata atto linguistico (*speech act*), per convincere un pubblico ritenuto credibile a mettere in campo misure straordinarie. Analizzando due revisioni alla formulazione iniziale della teoria, ovvero la macrosecuritizzazione (*macrosecuritization*) e il conseguente dilemma della securitizzazione (*securitization dilemma*), l'elaborato sostiene che il Governo italiano e il Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità non siano stati in grado di articolare un atto linguistico convincente né di implementare misure emergenziali d'impatto perché il contenimento del virus ha prevalso sulla messa in sicurezza di donne e ragazze.

Abstract

This work aims to investigate to what extent the application of the securitization theory to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Italy during the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic was successful. The methodological framework used was developed in 1998 by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies to address certain issues as security concerns, performing a dialogical operation called speech act, to convince a credible audience to deploy extraordinary measures. By analyzing two further

revisions to the initial formulation of the theory, namely macrosecuritization and the ensuing securitization dilemma, the paper argues that the Italian Government and its appointed Department for Equal Opportunities were not able to carry out a powerful speech act or implement strong emergency actions because the containment of the virus prevailed over securing women and girls.

Parole chiave: Securitizzazione; pandemia ombra; violenza di genere; Italia; COVID-19.

Keywords: Securitization theory; shadow pandemic; sexual and gender-based violence; Italy; COVID-19.

Introduction

In December 2019, the Chinese Country Office of the World Health Organization (WHO) acquired a media statement on the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission website reporting some cases of viral pneumonia of unknown cause, which were detected in Hubei province (WHO 2020). This was what was then identified as a new disease called COVID-19 during the notorious press conference held by China's National Health Commission on 20 January 2020. In the same month, as the cluster rapidly erupted outside the border of the People's Republic of China and spread all over the world, WHO declared an international state of emergency. On 11 March 2020, WHO's Twitter account assessed that COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic, due to «the alarming levels of spread and severity» (WHO 2020).

On 21 February, the so-called *patient zero*, a 38-year-old man from Codogno, was identified in Italy (Fondazione Veronesi 2020). This was the prelude to what would have happened in a couple of weeks, on 9 March 2020. On that day, with a speech that has sadly gone down in history, former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced a nationwide lockdown as a result of the rapid increase in severe COVID-19 cases, especially in Northern Italy. The new virus all of a sudden drastically transformed people's everyday lives, driving governments all over the world to adopt restrictive measures that can be analyzed through the lens of securitization theory (Buzan *et al.* 1998). In accordance

with the global tendency, Italy securitized the issue by adopting extraordinary measures to tackle an existential threat. In the Italian case, the referent object existentially threatened by the pandemic and pursuing its legitimate claim to survive were the State and its people. The main securitizing actors were national institutions, in particular, the government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Ministry of Health with its chief Roberto Speranza, who were able to focus public opinion on the need to endorse new habits and procedures that go beyond the normal political practice to contain the virus. In the end, despite some major flaws in preventing COVID-19 from spreading and taking its toll, the governmental response was effective in building trust in institutions. According to a survey conducted on 16-17 March 2020 (Demos&Pi, Demetra, La Repubblica 2020), the measures implemented by the government were welcomed by 94% of Italians, which is almost the entire population.

Regardless of the low level of preparedness and the «erratic decision-making process» (Capano 2020, p. 341) characterized by the massive reliance on healthcare experts due to the government's limited familiarity with that kind of emergency, Italian institutions were able to articulate a strong speech act around the rise of COVID-19. Even though the deployment of extraordinary measures to foster social distancing, such as lockdowns, shutting down of non-essential shops and restrictions on mass gatherings, were late and sometimes ineffective (Kirk, McDonald 2021, p. 5), the discursive construction of the pandemic as a threat that requires peculiar countermeasures was successful. The goal was pursued by stressing the concept of *necessity* (Agamben 2003), resorting to war metaphors, alluding to the adoption of restrictive behaviors as an individual and national responsibility, and pointing out solidarity as a tool to triumph over the virus (Boukala, Serafis 2022).

However, while the spotlight has remained focused on COVID-19 and its containment, another, more silent yet equally deadly pandemic has struck the affected countries, with a heavier impact on women and girls. It was called the «shadow pandemic» (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020; UN Women 2021) due to its hidden and under-reported character. The term refers to the

increase in the rate of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a consequence of the «widespread stay-at-home orders to curb the spread of COVID-19 [that] potentially locked women down with their abusers, creating dangerous conditions for violence» (UN Women 2021, p. 3). Feminist critique contested the use of the word *shadow* to identify such a phenomenon for several reasons. Any narrative is an «interpretation of reality that serves the interests of the group that constructs them» (Mejía Julca 2020, p. 24)¹ with a direct impact on people's behaviors and codes of conduct. The risk of comparing SGBV with the virus in a linguistic sense, using terminology like «flattering the curve» or «parallel pandemic», which is normally employed to communicate epidemic data, could affect how it is perceived and consequently how it is dealt with. Moreover, referring to SGBV as a new global challenge implicitly dispels the notion that it is instead a persistent, structural issue with a male-centric origin that existed well before the onset of the pandemic (UNGEL, 2021). However, using the word *shadow* may be considered accurate in the sense that «your shadow is with you all the time»², meaning that violence cannot be eradicated until a systemic revolution occurs through political action, education, and adequate funding.

The outbreak of cases of violence has cut across multiple countries and studies conducted on single and pooled States (EIGE, 2021; UN Women, 2021) confirmed the drastic escalation in intimate partner violence against women because of the strict stay-at-home or lockdown policies implemented. In this constellation of different but similar national situations, the global crisis has proven to be the cause of the intensification of gender-based domestic violence (Peterman *et al.* 2020). This work adopts Italy as a case study, as not only it represents one of the European countries most severely impacted by the pandemic, both in terms of confirmed cases and fatalities, but it is also where SGBV is particularly entrenched. The time span un-

¹ Quoted in Crabtree-Condor, I. (2020).

² Extract from the speech of Madeleine Kennedy-Macfoy (Education International) during the Real Talk event on «Tackling the Shadow Pandemic» hosted in December 2020 by UNGEI.

der scrutiny is the year 2020 and, in particular, the two-month period from March to May, when a national lockdown was imposed by the national government. In Italy, more than 15000 women turned to *Centri anti violenza* (CAVs) to start a personal path to exit violence during 2020, and almost 90% of them reached out to the CAV within their jurisdiction for the first time in that year, highlighting the status of emergency (ISTAT, 2021). As explained above, even though SGBV is not exceptional *per se* in our societies, the growth of its rate after March 2020 justified the adoption of extraordinary measures by governments all over the world. For this reason, this work adopts the lens of securitization theory, which was developed by three main interpreters of the Copenhagen School, i.e., Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde in 1998 and soon became a key methodological framework of the Critical Security Studies. The fundamental steps of the theory are herein analyzed and applied to the case study as follows.

The first paragraph contains an overview of securitization theory pillars and an expansion of their scope to SGBV in contexts of emergency. Here are also introduced two key revisions to the first securitization theory, which are macrosecuritization and securitization dilemma. The first indicates the situation where the entire security process is centered around a single dominant threat that creates a hierarchical order among menaces and ends up creating a scale of securitization. The latter refers to the condition in which, while the securitizing actor securitizes an issue within one sector, they can inadvertently pose a threat to another sector. This paper aims to demonstrate that in Italy the persistence of macrosecuritization of COVID-19 over SGBV and the ensuing securitization dilemma between these two threats prevented the securitizing actor from performing a successful securitization of the shadow pandemic.

The second paragraph concerns one of the fundamental concepts at the basis of securitization, the speech act, which is the dialogic operation through which the securitizing actor identifies a threat as existential for the referent object. This section's main character is the Italian government through its Department for Equal Opportunities and its former Minister Elena Bonetti, who

oversaw the Ministry during the first phases of the pandemic. Her speech act was mainly built around the “Libera Puoi” campaign, which was created by the securitizing actor to sponsor the hotline 1522 for women in danger during the lockdown.

The third paragraph conceptualizes extraordinary measures that were enacted by the government and authorized by Parliament, which worked as a formal audience. It contains an analysis of three reports released by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into Femicide and All Forms of Gender-Based Violence (in Italian, *Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul femminicidio, nonché su ogni forma di violenza di genere*) and the so-called Freedom income for women victims of violence (in Italian, *Reddito di libertà per le donne vittime di violenza*), which could have been a successful intuition if it had not been underfunded.

1. *Securitization of sexual violence and working methodology*

The Copenhagen School endorsed a critical approach to security studies, which inherited from constructivism the pillar of intersubjectivity. Even though security can be approached both from an objective (real) and subjective (perceived) perspective (Wolfers 1962, p. 151; Buzan *et al.* 1998, p. 30; Wertman, Kaurert 2022), securitization theory stresses the subjective angle, focusing on the importance of «language and power relationships to ideas of security» (Mackenzie 2010, p. 203). In other words, the dialogic relations among the actors involved define whether an issue pertains to the realm of ordinary politics or requires the creation and adoption of extraordinary tools. According to the main securitization theorists, security has to be considered a negative exception, which fills the void of failing routine procedures (Buzan *et al.* 1998, p. 29). Security is therefore constructed via a series of social practices (Bigo 2002; Leonard 2010) that constitute the *speech act*, namely the action of framing a matter as a security concern. It is performed by a *securitizing actor*, who starts the securitization process by declaring in danger a *referent object*, namely the subject of an existential threat that

expresses a legitimate claim to survive (Buzan *et al.* 1998). The intersubjective character of this practice is also detectable in that a successful securitization only occurs when a *credible audience* recognizes the referent object as existentially threatened and authorizes, morally or formally (Balzacq 2005), the deployment of emergency measures.

Securitization theory intends to broaden the traditional military-oriented and state-centered concept of security encompassing the security agendas of other sectors, such as the economy, the environment, society, politics, or health. However, feminist critique (Hansen 2000, 2006; MacKenzie 2010) pointed out the lack of a gendered perspective and the reluctance of the Copenhagen School to explicitly engage with feminist scholarship. Securitization of SGBV has been investigated in contexts of conflicts (Hirschauer 2014, 2020; Mackenzie 2010; Meger 2016), and this work assumes that the pandemic exacerbated the violence against women and girls, exposing them to a level of insecurity and vulnerability comparable to that of a war. This article focuses on female subjects while recognizing that men and boys were not exempted from the risk of sexual violence and domestic abuse during COVID-19 (Warburton, Raniolo 2020). Although equally severe, SGBV is herein analyzed due to its higher frequency. Moreover, as explained by Buzan *et al.* (1998, p. 27), «if a given type of threat is persistent or recurrent, it is no surprise to find that the response and sense of urgency become institutionalized». Unfortunately, crimes committed against women perfectly fit this category.

Few studies have been conducted on the correlation between the securitization of SGBV and the spread of the pandemic (Al-Ali 2020; Baysa-Barredo 2020; Chen 2020), and none on European soil. Questioning the possibility of achieving a more inclusive and rights-centered securitization of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia, Baysa-Barredo (2020) highlights the disproportionate repercussions of the pandemic on vulnerable categories, such as women and girls, especially if homeless or displaced, indigenous, disabled or LGBTQIA+, who did not benefit from the securitization of the virus in the region. Chen (2020) came to similar conclusions by studying the gendered effects of COVID-19

securitization in Timor-Leste. She denounced the silence of academia when analyzing previous epidemics that had been securitized, such as HIV/AIDS, Zika or Ebola, despite the empirical data indicating that women and girls are exposed to higher risks of SGBV and intimate domestic violence.

However, to study the correlation between securitizing COVID-19 and SGBV it is useful to consider two further additions to the first version of the Copenhagen School's securitization. At first, the theory focused on mid-level examples of securitization, indicating that «egotistical collective political actors (often but not always states) mainly construct their securitizations against (or in the case of security communities with) each other» (Buzan, Waever 2009, p. 254). Almost ten years after theorizing this process for the first time, Buzan and Waever (2009) proposed shifting the focus to the gap between the mid-level and the supra-system level, where the entire human population becomes the referent object for examining high-level securitizations. They posited that the whole security process can be organized around a single dominant threat, creating a hierarchical order among threats and a consequent presence of scales in securitization. This concept can serve in the analysis of the securitization of SGBV during the pandemic in Italy, as already suggested by a similar study conducted in Colombia (Nyrup Vigsø, Smedemark Christensen 2021). Macrosecuritization paved the way for another further intersectoral issue that lacks conceptualization in the original theory of the Copenhagen School. This is the so-called securitization dilemma, which has emerged quite recently in scholarly works and is still in the early stages of development. Watson (2014) was the first to introduce the concept as a circumstance involving intersectoral or interlevel competition. In this scenario, when a securitizing actor attempts to securitize an issue within one sector, they can inadvertently pose a threat to another sector. The definition was expanded by Van Rythoven (quoted in Olesker 2018, p. 5), who introduced the idea of unintended consequences related to any securitizing move «that the securitizing actor may not predict at the time of securitization».

Both the concepts of macrosecuritization and securitization dilemma are useful in explaining how the process developed in Italy. The Italian cabinet built a speech act claiming that the higher rate of SGBV cases due to the adoption of restrictive measures to counter the pandemic was an existential threat that required prompt actions; however, macrosecuritization of COVID-19 prevailed in the Government's speech act, resulting in all other threats, including intimate partner violence against women and girls, being organized around the main menace. Therefore, a securitization dilemma emerged: should the Italian government continue securitizing COVID-19, reiterating measures that confine women at home with their abusers, or should it desecuritize COVID-19, focusing on SGBV securitization but facilitating the spread of the virus? The answer is provided by the analysis below.

2. *Speech act and reception from the audience*

According to Buzan *et al.*, «a successful speech act is a combination of language and society» (1998, p. 32). Accordingly, it should reflect a specific «grammar of security» (1998, p. 33), based on the use of terminology that heavily emphasizes the concept of imminent threat, the need to take strong corrective action quickly, and the social authority of the securitizing actor(s) that enounces it. Almost two weeks after the imposition of a national lockdown, on 24 November 2020, the Department for Equal Opportunities and its former Minister Elena Bonetti (in Italian, *Ministra per le pari opportunità e la famiglia*) launched an institutional communication campaign called “Libera Puoi”. Following the adoption of confinement measures, in response to the increase in reports from women living with abusive partners, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers via its competent Department sponsored the 1522 hotline, which is available 24/7, and the corresponding app that allows women in danger to seek help and information safely, without the risk of being overheard by their aggressors. The reason why “Libera Puoi” worked as a speech act is detectable in the specific use of words, such as «For many women, home is not a safe place» or «You should

stay at home, but if a home is only a place of violence and fear for you and your children, you can seek help»³. Moreover, those were pronounced by famous personalities of the entertainment industry, mostly singers and actors, on behalf of the Department for Equal Opportunities. In the video message that was shared on TV and on the main social media platforms, it is possible to catch a recurring use of «inclusive plural pronouns like ‘our’, ‘us’ and ‘we’» (Balzacq 2005, p. 186) to create a sense of unity and a common concern among the audience.

There is at least another public declaration by Bonetti confirming the hypothesis that the Department she led was trying to perform a speech act. In an interview given to AGI on 23 November 2020, the Minister claimed that:

As violence thrives on silence and solitude, it isolates its victims. All community spaces must work together to build the necessary trust for a victim to open the door and escape from violence. All institutions, including schools, law enforcement, associations, and the sports and cultural world, should extend a helping hand beyond that door, alongside the extraordinary network that currently accompanies and supports women on their path out of violence. This network revolves around CAVs, shelters, associations, and law enforcement. It is evident that a cultural shift is necessary and urgent [...] This is no longer acceptable. Violence has no justification, and I will never tire of saying it⁴.

The day after, on 24 November 2020, Premier Giuseppe Conte publicly admitted: «Due to the restrictive measures we had to implement to counter the spread of the virus, we unintentionally generated profound social, and even psychological, distress. This has also been a contributing factor to femicides. Femicides have tripled during the lockdown, reaching the alarming average of one every two days»⁵. Regardless of

³ Literal translation of the Youtube video of the campaign recorder in Italian, quoting: «Per molte donne la casa non è il luogo della sicurezza» and «bisogna stare a casa, ma se la casa per voi e per i vostri figli è solo un luogo di violenza e paura potete chiedere aiuto».

⁴ D’Agata 2020.

⁵ Videoconference of the event “Dalla parte delle donne: il ruolo fondamentale dei Centri antiviolenza”, which was organized by the Senate in anticipation of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (24th November 2020).

its inaccuracy⁶, the Prime Minister confirmed the presence of a securitization dilemma that overshadowed SGBV. By recognizing the priority of establishing a national lockdown, heedless of the consequences that could have fallen upon women in abusive relationships, Prime Minister Conte curbed the effectiveness of Minister Bonetti's speech act. Minister Bonetti herself confirmed a negative correlation between containment and rise in violence, commenting on the growing rate of women who contacted the number 1522⁷: «From the beginning of the epidemic, one of our main concerns has always been the consequences that staying at home would have on the most fragile groups»⁸.

As theorized by scholars, the securitizing move aims at persuading the audience to welcome and authorize the adoption of extraordinary measures. However, the audience is probably one of the founding elements of securitization theory that has been least conceptualized (Wertman, Kaunert 2022). The point of view adopted by this article is Balzacq's (2005), claiming that an audience could be a combination of different audiences. He pinpointed the presence of two components: the moral support of the public and the formal support of the institutions (in this case, Parliament) that can trigger the decision-making process. The case study herein proposed shows that while the Italian Parliament agreed on the deployment of operations that might have deviated from normal political practice, the moral support of the public, and in particular of women's associations and CAVs network has been wavering. In an official press release, network D.i.Re⁹ (2020a) asserted that in March-April 2020

⁶ President Giuseppe Conte most probably misunderstood data. According to «Dossier Viminale» published by the Ministry of the Interior on 15th August 2020, during the two months of national lockdown, a total of 12 women were murdered, only one of whom was not within a family or romantic context. This figure represents half of the 24 femicides recorded during the same period in 2019, meaning a half, not a triple, with approximately one femicide every five days.

⁷ In March 2020 there were 716 contacts (there had been 670 in March 2019), while from April 1 to 18, 2020 there were 1037 contacts (397 in the same period in 2019).

⁸ Retrieved online from <<https://www.1522.eu/aprile-picco-delle-telefonate-al-1522/>>, 05.12.2023.

⁹ *Donne in Rete contro la violenza* association brings together more than 82 women's organizations in a single network of CAVs to address male violence

there was a 74.5% increase in requests for support compared to the monthly average of contacts recorded in the 2018 survey. In the words of Antonella Veltri, D.i.Re President, data confirm that CAVs constitute a primary focal point for women, alongside public services such as the 1522 number, even if they have never been a concern of DPCMs (D.i.Re 2020a). To corroborate this position, D.i.Re launched several advocacy actions to interact with the Government between March and May 2020. Among these, it is important to mention a letter to Minister Bonetti dated 16 March 2020, which emphasizes the need for a national synergy to counter the shadow pandemic and highlights criticalities such as the lack of ad hoc funding mechanism for CAVs, reaffirming the securitization dilemma that prioritized COVID-19 over SGBV (D.i.Re 2020b)¹⁰. Another letter addressed to Prime Minister Conte and relevant members of the Government was sent on 24 March 2020 and stressed the urgency of revising the way funds were being transferred from the State to CAVs. Ahead of Minister Bonetti's proposal to introduce an extraordinary fund to support women victims of SGBV, D.i.Re suggested streamlining the process by eliminating Regions as intermediaries between the sender and the receiver of the financing (D.i.Re 2020c).

3. Deployment of extraordinary measures: a success for who?

Floyd (2016) focused on extraordinary measures as the unity of measurement of a successful securitization process. According to the author, in its initial formulation the Copenhagen School theory dealt with two problems: first, the subtle balance between non-exceptional security policies and emergency measures which serves to define whether securitization can be defined as successful or not; second, the constructivist inherent

against women from a gender perspective.

¹⁰ The full text of the letter can be retrieved from <<https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/C.A.-Ministra-Bonetti-REV.pdf>>, 05.12.2023.

vice of the theory under which the effectiveness of securitizing move is assessed by scholars and not by security practitioners. However, in liberal democracies, securitizing actors hardly ever resort to exceptional security measures to tackle a threat. Usually «in order to overrule common law in a period of emergency, Parliament must pass new laws explicitly stating what the government can do. In this way, the rule of law is preserved, rather than suspended» (quoted in Floyd 2016, p. 1). Floyd reflected on the concept of *extraordinary* as linked to a) enacting new laws; b) the conferral of new emergency powers to be withdrawn at the end of the crisis; c) a State's existing emergency legislation being used for the first time to deal with a new emergency. Converting these preconditions into actions means that a securitization process proves to be successful when the existential threat entails a securitizing move that is followed by a change of behavior by the securitizing actor; «and also the action taken is justified by the securitizing actor with reference to the threat they identified and declared in the securitizing move» (Floyd 2016, p. 2).

In the Italian case, the massive use of DPCMs¹¹ has been contested because these do not require the involvement of Parliament, neither before nor after their issuance. In this sense, they can be considered extraordinary measures, as DPCMs grant emergency powers to contain a circumstance of crisis. As explained in the former paragraph, these ministerial decrees were expressly intended to counter the epidemic but omitted the shadow pandemic. According to the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, since 23 March 2020, Premier Conte adopted 19 DPCMs on the containment and management of the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19, none of which contained provisions regarding SGBV. In 2020, the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into Femicide and All Forms of Gender-Based Violence (in Italian, *Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul femminicidio, nonché su ogni forma di violenza di genere*) released and approved

¹¹ In Italian: *Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri*. In the Italian legal system, DPCM constitutes an administrative act that is immediately effective from its publication in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*.

three reports that, despite not being legally binding, demonstrated that the attention of the formal audience was focused on the problem. Those were:

(a) Measures to tackle the issues of women victims of violence, CAVs, shelters, and anti-violence and anti-trafficking desks in the epidemiological emergency situation by COVID-19 (in Italian, *Misure per rispondere alle problematiche delle donne vittime di violenza, dei centri anti violenza, delle case rifugio e degli sportelli anti violenza e antitratto nella situazione di emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19*), approved by the Commission on 26 March 2020 (Doc XXII bis n.1);

(b) Report on data regarding gender and domestic violence in the period of application of containment measures for the emergency from COVID-19 (in Italian, *Relazione sui dati riguardanti la violenza di genere e domestica nel periodo di applicazione delle misure di contenimento per l'emergenza da COVID-19*), approved by the Commission on 1 July 2020 (Doc XXII bis n.2); and

(c) Report on governance of anti-violence services and funding for CAVs and shelters (in Italian, *Relazione sulla governance dei servizi anti violenza e sul finanziamento dei centri anti violenza e delle case rifugio*), approved by the Commission on 14 July 2020 (Doc XXII bis n.3).

In particular, Doc XXII bis n.1 welcomed the adoption of additional social protection measures for women victims of violence following the pandemic, leveraging security storytelling and using words like «extraordinary» and «emergency» (2020, p. 7). These measures included: (a) extending extraordinary leave from work for reasons of violence, as provided for in Art. 24 of Legislative Decree of 15 June 2015, No. 80; (b) modifying the methods to access parental leave provided for in the current emergency situation by Decree-Law of 17 March 2020, No. 18, ensuring that restrictions on accessing these benefits apply only in cases of cohabiting spouses; and (c) introducing, for the duration of the emergency, a fund to provide financial assistance to women placed in protective custody and lacking economic independence. Regarding this last arrangement, a potentially significant measure could have been the introduction of the

so-called «Freedom income for women victims of violence» (in Italian, *Reddito di libertà per le donne vittime di violenza*), quoted in Art.3, comma 1, of DPCM of 17 December 2020, No. 172. This extraordinary income provides for «a maximum of 400 euros per capita on a monthly basis for up to twelve months and intended for women victims of violence, alone or with minor children, that rely on a CAV recognized by the Region [...], in order to support their autonomy». Following the worrying increase in intimate domestic violence during the national lockdown, the Government allocated 3 million euros that were taken from the 2006 Fund for policies related to rights and equal opportunities (in Italian, *Fondo per le politiche relative ai diritti e alle pari opportunità*). With the DPCM of the 1 of June 2022, these resources were increased to 9 million euros (INPS 2022). However, this amount is considerably low and insufficient to meet the needs of the women who applied for it. According to D.i.Re. (2021), «it is a shell intervention [...] a maximum of 625 women throughout Italy will be able to benefit from it, considering that CAVs of the D.i.Re network alone host more than 20,000 women every year». Moreover, for this intervention to be successful, the Government should have allocated 48 million euros. Another similar provision, that falls within the category of emergency measures, was announced by Minister Bonetti in April 2020, when she unblocked 30 million euros with a decree driven by an emergency procedure that did not require strategic planning from the Regions. However, these resources are not new or extraordinary but simply money that should have been allocated to CAVs and shelters the year before, as provided by a DPCM published on 4 December 2019 (Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità 2020; Guerra 2021).

Finally, it is possible to conclude that no specific measure was designed to handle the crisis *ad hoc*. Both the two National strategic plans on male violence against women 2017-2020 and 2021-2023 (in Italian, *Piani strategici nazionali sulla violenza maschile contro le donne*), despite referring to the time frame of the pandemic, were not specifically designed to counter SGBV increase as a consequence of national restrictive policies.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically exacerbated the problem of violence against women, especially in domestic contexts. The health emergency and social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus have had a significant bearing on the increase of this phenomenon, pointing out a persisting securitization dilemma when institutions try to equally deal with these two overlapping threats. As discussed in the previous sections, from the macrosecuritization perspective, in Italy COVID-19 became the core threat around which all the other issues including SGBV were organized. The consequence was that the securitizing actor, represented by the Government and its Department for Equal Opportunities, prioritized the securitization of the virus over SGBV.

This is evident when looking at the speech acts delivered by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Minister for Family and Equal Opportunities Elena Bonetti, where they admitted to having set the national agenda on countering the pandemic through control and containment measures, even at the risk of endangering women and girls that cohabited with violent partners. Although their speech acts framed SGBV as an existential threat to women and girls, it is argued that the issue was not treated as overarching and urgent as COVID-19 was. The consequent attempts to convince the audience of the need to undertake extraordinary measures to tackle the shadow pandemic were scant and lacked targeted effort. In light of that, it is concluded that institutional speech act was only partially successful due to the persistence of the securitization dilemma.

Similarly, most of the extraordinary measures pursued by the Government were enshrined in DPCMs, which by nature do not require previous authorization by the Parliament. This paper considers Parliament as the main formal audience to be persuaded regarding the adoption of emergency actions, while the public works as a moral audience. However, in the case study under scrutiny, the analysis of the moral audience is incidental since Italian citizens showed that they have cultivated quite strong trust in the institutions during the most criti-

cal months of the pandemic. The only direct critiques to this government strategy came from organizations that work with women and girls victims of violence, such as the case of D.i.Re network that has been scrutinized in a previous section. Unlike what happened in Colombia, where «the lockdown resulted in a decrease in the rates of all crime in Bogotá except for the rates of femicides, which increased by 8.6%» (Nyrup Vigsø, Smedemark Christensen 2021, p. 78) and the public response against the Colombian Government's failures in addressing SGBV took people to the streets, in Italy there have been no such experiences. As reported by D.i.Re., in most cases extraordinary measures consisted of the allocation of funds that were deemed to be extraordinary but actually were just regular resources previously blocked by bureaucratic delays and then unblocked with *ad hoc* decrees (as for the case of *Reddito di Libertà*).

It is therefore possible to conclude that the securitization of the shadow pandemic did not work in Italy, as both the attempts to convince the audience of the urgency to deploy extraordinary measures and the actual deployment of those measures were weak and subordinated to overcoming the virus.

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