DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

Resistant vulnerability: Voices of dissent from the Panjabi minority in Italy

Sara Bonfanti

DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 9, Issue 2
Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

DiGeSt is hosted by Ghent University Website: *https://www.digest.ugent.be/*

Resistant vulnerability: Voices of feminist dissent from the Panjabi minority in Italy

Sara Bonfanti
ERC HOMInG Research Fellow, Dept. Sociology, University of Trento
sara.bonfanti@unitn.it

Abstract
Set in Brescia, an Italian city with a sizeable Indo-Pakistani minority, this article considers the media panic that honor killings raised and echoed nationwide since 2006. Based on extensive ethnographic work, the article draws from participant observation and personal narratives shared with Panjabi locals to investigate such 'cultural crimes', pondering which status of victim is (self-)ascribed to '*Brown* immigrant' women. While the remnants of a Mediterranean culture of 'honor-and-shame' is almost forgotten today in the country, the repressive control that South Asian women seem to endure within their domestic environments saw the simultaneous condemnation from different social actors. As racialized Islamophobia escalates, the protection of migrant/ethnic women from honour-related violence (HRV) becomes more complex: who is entitled to 'defend' them? When and where can these women raise their own voices? The intersectional resistance that Panjabi women in Italy oppose against the objectification inflicted on them by family, community and public discourses (liberal feminist, multicultural or chauvinist) can barely be heard. Concurring with critical literature on HRV, this article argues to critically interrogate the idea of culture as a motivation for violence against minority women but also recognizes the pervasiveness of such narrative in the strenuous efforts waged by the same subjects in voicing their distress.

Keywords
Honor-and-shame, Femicides, Culturally oriented crimes, Xenophobia, Gendered racism

Introduction

> Gender violence is a violence whose meaning depends on the gendered relationship in which it is embedded. The anthropological perspective emphasizes culture and context rather than psychological or biological dimensions of violence, examining the perspective of family, community, state and the world. This is a global phenomenon, but its manifestations are highly variable, depending on local systems of meaning, kinship structures, gender inequalities and level of violence in the wider society (Merry 2009: 19-20).

This article aims to engage with the existing dissonance between empirical reality and critical literature on so-called *honour* crimes. While recent critiques on culturalist, stereotypical and mainstream feminist discourses about gender-based violence in minority communities abound (and should be taken much more seriously by the jurisprudence case by case), ethnographic research reveals that such discourses and practices are part and parcel of the lived experience of the victims themselves and their families, and reflect back on the collective narratives which are conveyed in the media and public space. As I present a case that emerged during my prolonged research with Panjabi (im)migrants in Italy, I contextualize this study of ethnicity and migration within the broader social context of a country beset by recession and mass discontent at the peak of its nationalism since the Fascist era, i.e. 2018-2019, when anti-immigration policies became normalized under the right-wing and populist government led by the League Party (see also De Matteo 2018; D'Alimonte 2019). While focusing on *honor* related violence (generally understood as the punishment of girls and women for sexual or societal indiscretions which bring shame on the family; see Welchman, Hossein 2005), here I wish to explore the effects that public discourse and social media may have on the political debate. In particular, I consider the civic mobilization that arose after yet another honor killing of a Pakistani young woman living in Italy. If gender intersects with other axes of difference, then forms of GBV or VAW (gender-based violence or violence against women) impinge on and reveal the existence of multiple discriminations, often bounded with ethno-cultural diversity and 'race relations' (Gill & Brah, 2014).

In this article, I will first present my fieldwork setting (the migration driven super-diverse city of Brescia in) northern Italy), then question the moral panic over two honor killings that occurred within a much contested immigrant minority (the Pakistani one, the most sizeable in town and deemed as representative of radical Islam, sometimes charged with Jihadi terrorist allegations; Vidino 2017, Bonfanti 2020), and the emergence of ambivalent discourses over women's rights and vulnerability. My article intends to demonstrate how these critical events, judicially named 'cultural crimes', have contributed to reshuffling social stances over gender and migration altogether in Italy, as the country steered towards mounting racism and islamophobia, in spite of an encompassing intention among all parties to vow for gender equality and 'protect women first'. According to Sara Farris, who names the startling intersection among nationalists, feminists and neoliberals as 'femonationalism' (Farris 2017: 3), all three stakeholders converge around a common belief that 'gender relations in the West are more advanced and must be taught to Muslim women who are otherwise taken to be agentless objects at the mercy of their patriarchal cultures' (ibid. 7-8). My argument builds upon ethnographic evidence of the public engagement against honor related violence in a specific critical location to counter ask: whose gender is in danger then, and what kind of social protection is established along a line that connects liberal feminists and rightist nationalists?

As we shall see, the apparent common end of protecting migrant young women against honor-related violence, proceeds through different arguments. Mainstream Italian feminism seeks to empower women themselves so that they may denounce and liberate themselves from patriarchal domination. Chauvinist political parties reaffirm instead the need to shield those women from a toxic masculinity which would be intrinsic to their culture,

which has to be watched, criminalized and punished as severely as possible. In theory, the former argue for an active liberation of Brown women in Italy from the yoke of family control on their sexuality, the latter appeal for a repressive intervention against those very families whose feral habits are argued to be the norm. In practice, the everyday reception of such claims and the participation of citizens in public events that defend and support migrant women's rights swing between one pole and the other, revealing the unresolved debate on gender (in)equality and cultural difference, as well as the dissonance between what goes in courts and what reverberates in popular discourse.

While as an author I intend to denounce the culturalist approaches that still circulate widely and orientate the judicial reading of GBV within migrant communities in the West (another replication of an Orientalist trope), the aim of this work was to reveal to what extent this racist and sexist perspective is solidly imbued in Italy (and to a certain extent elsewhere across Europe) and is shared by different stakeholders, up to the point of having been incorporated by many "Brown, migrant women (and men)" themselves, like the informants whom I here quoted. As a result, this article tries to open up a debate on the legacies and strategic re-appropriation of such fraught discourse, therefore partaking in the mission of an anthropology going public (Borofsky, 2019).

The research site: Brescia as an urban lab of gender and migration troubles

Located in Lombardy, northern Italy, Brescia is a mid-size wealthy industrial city with a high share of immigrants (about 22% of residents are registered as 'foreign nationals', ISTAT 2020) clustered in suburban ethnic ghettoes (Anderson 2012). The notorious quartier Via Milano turned over the past fifteen years into Mini-Punjab, inhabited and attended by a concentration of incoming migrants from the homonymous Indo-Pakistani region. After completing a PhD between Italy and Panjab where I lived with diaspora families investigating generational turnover, I have since engaged in a postdoc collaborative project where I have enlarged my scope trying to understand the nexus between home and migration with South Asians across Europe (see acknowledgments). Besides other locations in England and Holland, for the last few years, I have conducted a significant portion of my fieldwork in Brescia, visiting private homes and spending time in communal spaces where Indians and Pakistanis met on a regular basis, not the least, in worship houses (Bonfanti, 2022).

Hindustani and especially Punjabi migration to Italy (as elsewhere in southern Europe) started in the late Eighties after the infamous anti-Sikh pogroms taking place in India in 1984 (Chopra 2013). By the early 2000s, a hundred thousand had settled in Italy, mostly hired in the informal agricultural market, some then shifting to manufacture jobs, in due time managing to get regular long-term visas to stay and eventually reunite their families. To date (Caritas 2020), national figures report over 150 thousand Indian nationals and about 130 thousand Pakistanis living in Italy, besides an estimate of almost 30 thousands having already gained Italian naturalization. Brescia, which could lure low-skilled labour migrants with both farm and industry job offers, became a favourite target destination for incoming immigrants. As a matter of fact, once a man from a *pind* (a Punjabi village) has settled down in a new location abroad, an informal bail chain takes over: almost entire Punjabi villages are said to have moved to Lombardy in two to three decades (Azzeruoli 2016; Bonfanti 2016a, 2022). Migrants' relocation depends not only on a country's resource infrastructure and attitude to welcoming strangers (Alba, Foner 2015), but also on the active presence of a hub of co-ethnics who can support newly arrived ones. These bridgeheads often take the lead in their community's accommodation figuratively and literally, almost remaking one's village anew. *Desh/pardesh home abroad* is what Punjabis maintain for Southall *Chota-Panjab* in the UK since the 1950s, but the saying could easily apply, more recently and on a smaller scale, to Brescia Mini-Punjab. The reproduction of an ever expanding ethnic network in resettlement comes at the expense of a polarization between minority and majority groups. According to my local respondents over the years, social life in Mini-Punjab was more conservative than

in the homeland, and female sexuality was a prime matter of concern especially for second generations coming of age (Bonfanti 2015, 2016b).

Brescia is sadly known across Italy for two of the more ominous ethnic femicides of the last decade. In both cases the Pakistani community is the protagonist, the first immigrant minority in the city (over 20 thousands are listed in the province out of a total of almost 130 thousands estimated nationwide). In both dramas, twelve years apart, it is a young Pakistani-born woman who grew up in Italy to fall victim of her close kinsmen, executed by her father as a form of atonement, whom she has damaged in the honor (*izzat*) of the family, failing to respect the *purdah* code (roughly translated as 'purity'), unrestrained in her desires and sexuality. Following Soldati (2011), such gender unequal moral code is paramount in the process of cultural transmission within Punjabi households. Yet, this well-seated cultural representation of transnational *purdah* rules neglects the harsh socio-economic realities which most of the Punjabi diasporas, especially in southern Europe, have experienced for the last twenty years. The chronic job insecurity, lack of long-term integration measures, coupled with little prospects to adequately raise one's reunited family and project the offspring up the social ladder, have been an ongoing burden for those male first-time migrants and paterfamilias which saw their personal status hopelessly worn out. Running the risk to psychologize a social response, it is credible to assume that keeping under control women in the family (young adult daughters in particular) had become the normal expectation shared by immigrant men who would otherwise fail to conform to patriarchal normativity. According to criminologist M. Grzyb (2016), applying Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence to honor-killings among migrant communities in Europe might explain the dynamics of violence against women in contexts where patriarchal power is undermined due to unforeseen structural conditions. In 2006, twenty-year-old Hina Saleem was stabbed to death by her father and uncle, according to the news chronicle for having become "too Western" (she worked nighttime in a restaurant and had moved in with an Italian man). In 2018, nineteen-year-old Sana Cheema, returned to Pakistan against her will rejecting an arranged marriage and was then strangled by her father and brother, who were first discharged and nowadays still awaiting a new trial upon pleading guilty.

Following the reconstruction of Hina's murder as it was reported in the judicial proceedings (and then covered in the media), this case put a watershed in the perception of honor crimes in contemporary Italy, shifting the memory of its Mediterranean roots to the routes of the Middle East and South Asia (Sacchi 2011; Ciccozzi & De Carli, 2019). Confronting migrant women's rights to their 'proper living' in migration as understood by their (Muslim Shi'a) community, Hina's honor killing received a sensationalist coverage from the media. This was partly due to the emergent discourse on human and women's rights on a global scale, but also to the specific political and ideological circumstances of a national context where right-wing governments were increasingly promoting xenophobic measures. On the one hand, the construction of this and other apparently similar cases in Italy as 'honor killings' was instrumental in political discourse to strengthen the representations of Islam in terms of cultural and moral backwardness, a powerful warrant to deport or marginalise immigrants. On the other hand, the judicial proceedings of this case hit the news when shedding light on the motivations of Hina's father (who never invoked honor, but simply declared that she "was not living rightly") and on the ways the judges' evaluations were formed, interpreting the unstated cultural motives of the man as an aggravating rather than an extenuating circumstance. This is all the more interesting in a country like Italy, where 'honor' was considered a mitigating factor in the Penal Code until 1981, and the notion of honor killing is deeply seated in common sense (Bettiga-Boukerbout 2005, Roia 2018).

Sana's honor killing, perpetrated in the homeland during a return trip organised by her family in order to arrange her marriage despite her disagreement, tragically occurred twelve years after Hina's murder. Different life (her)stories triggered similar reactions from the public opinion, possibly more vehement now that the memory of the former murder came back to mind at a time when xenophobia had been mainstreamed by the ruling party to reap

populist consent (the League Party had just come to power in March 2018). The allegiance between liberal and far-right wings, White feminism and nationalism could not be more timely.

Ethnographic evidence: revisiting fieldwork notes

My encounter in the field with honor crimes dates back to the first interviews and focus groups I administered to Punjabi youths in northern Italy between 2012-2014, when investigating arranged marriages (a mid-range covenant between 'forced' and 'love' ties). In this section, reviving my work five years later while engaged in urban ethnography (Wessendorf, 2014), I am interested in seeing the discursive power of HRV in spontaneous civic events that were organized in the city of Brescia to publicly disseminate knowledge about this *specific* form of violence against women. It's the discursive construction of exceptionality on the ground of a cultural bias that I wish to emphasize and problematize. Since the victims of such honor killings were Pakistani young women, i.e. immigrant, *Brown* and Muslim females, the underlying message conveyed was that these ominous events were forms of gender violence entrenched in ethno-religious diversity. In the following paragraphs, I will reconstruct my participation in two different public events arranged to denounce HRV and to support preventative measures to protect women at risk from such 'cultural crimes'. This is continuous with the classical colonial narrative, defined by Spivak (1985) in her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' as 'White men saving Brown women from Brown men', with White women replacing men in this instance. What if, instead, feminists stopped talking mechanically about culture in the context of domestic violence against minority women, be they Muslim or not (Razack, 2021)?

Rallying for Sana

Sunday, 13th May 2018. A month after Sana Cheema's disappearance in Pakistan; a week since her murderers (father and brother) pleaded guilty. Off the metro, I step out under overcasting clouds and walk towards Piazza Rovetta, a court nestled between La Loggia, the main city square and S. Faustino, the historical city centre undergoing gentrification. An advert in my FB inbox notified that 'Muhammadia Islamic Centre', aka the Pakistani-run Mosque in town, promoted a public event open to all, in order to mourn their fellow co-national and co-religious Sana Cheema. A 1.5 generation Italian-Pakistani, Sana was a 25 year old young woman, who lived in Brescia with her family of origin, and was employed as an office clerk in a driving school. Apparently a well-integrated and independent young woman, Sana had been taken back to her village in Gujrat (Pakistani Punjab) in April, and found dead the day before her planned return to Italy. After weeks of investigation, the father self-confessed: he had murdered his own daughter who would not abide to an arranged marriage back 'home', while having a love affair with a fellow Italian-Pakistani guy in their country of residence. Though I had first heard about the dramatic episode on national TV news, it was with Tahira[1], one of my close research participants (a female cultural-mediator, whom I had talked to on the phone about the murder, but who had immediately resigned from participating in today's rally), that I was fully blown away by the 3 'ans' of the drama. Anxiety, anguish, and anger were the emotions that sieved through my informant's word as she tried to make sense of yet another '*honor killing* at home'. 'Home' was then the special place where her many ambivalent and multiscale belongings resonated: home as a family/community, country of origin, city of settlement. 'Home' as a material space of safety, familiarity, and comfort, and at the same time as a symbolic realm where forms of (self-)confinement, social inclusion or exclusion were being exercised (Bonfanti, 2021).

Today, I am expecting a protest march or a sit-in, as originally posted online, but the rally seems more of a picket; plans must have changed due to poor weather forecast or to

[1] Compliant with research ethics standards, I use pseudonyms throughout the article whenever referring to participants.

the meagre turn up of participants. I move through curious but wary passers-by and a couple of local TV crews, and join the small crowd standing and murmuring in an atmosphere of loiter. The audience is made up of Italians, mostly mid-age bourgeois looking couples, and of a fair share of Pakistani men. Few veiled 'Brown' young women and hoodied 'White' girls stand up facing the crowd and holding banners in Italian that denounce violence against women. I assume the first might have been Sana's family friends or neighbours, and the latter her former school-mates from the high school which she used to attend. Their slogans plea for justice naming the latest victims of femicides in the country, be these Italian natives or immigrants from various backgrounds. The local women's rights association (with a famous Italian showgirl and campaigner, Jo Squillo) and the CGIL (workers' trade union to which Sana's father was affiliated, as a labourer in the city for over 15 years) are both present, alongside with the Pakistani Islamic Association and other Muslim Leagues (such as the Senegalese Mourides and the Moroccan Women of Italy). I cannot grasp what the key message behind the organized rallying is: many and diverse standpoints are exposed, or disguised and barely perceptible.

I strike up a quiet chat with an old Italian man, who resides in Fiumicello (west of Brescia, just off the Mini-Punjab zone where I did my most critical fieldwork and Sana lived too; Bonfanti 2022). He recalls having renewed his driving-licence at the office where the girl worked just a few months ago, and that "her *genuine* manners like all Pakistani young ladies" had remained with him since. His comment builds on a common 'positive' stereotype in the city that constructs Muslim migrant femininities as honest and yet submissive, in opposition to the perceived deceit associated with their male counterparts. We all observe unfailingly a minute of silence, in remembrance of Sana, "a Pakistani daughter of Brescia", as the prior city Deputy for housing policy states, breaking the ice and speaking aloud. Sana's connections and the city's big names take turns at the mic: her friends rise in defence of girls' self-determination; the echelons from the Pakistani Mosque summon the media not to exploit an abhorrent occurrence, inscribed in a man's *raptus* or in the vilest tribal legacy, to misrepresent Pakistani nationals or even the Islamic *ummah.* All pronounce their claims in more or less broken Italian, reaping rounds of applause when they insist on the sound accommodation of the Pakistani community in Italy (integration is a word yet to come), and forecast its thriving future out of a blessed balance between East and West, tradition and modernity. The strategic re-appropriation of Orientalist tropes (Said 1979) by those who recognise themselves as being Eastern by background but Westernised after years of settlement becomes a useful communication tool to soothe unresolved cultural divides.

A crying voice in Urdu comes last and finally breaks the incongruous stillness of the moment. a young woman in her twenties, wrapped in a black *chunni*, hurls invectives against an opponent which I do not quite understand. Out of bafflement and worry, I turn with an inquisitive look at Harpreet, my Indian Sikh friend who has come there with me straight from the 'Festival of Peoples' (an intercultural event held that same morning in town). Born in Panjab and moved to Italy after his dad at age 14, Harpreet knew Sana too, through common networks in the local Hindustani community. He puts an index over his lips and mimics the gesture of 'tell you later'. In the absence of my closest Italian-Pakistani informant Tahira, Harpreet becomes my improvised interpreter. I can see the dismay in a hundred eyes lowering. It is not only that the White Italian audience does not understand Urdu, but also that many within the same Hindustani community there attending do not wish to engage in conversation with a subaltern voice, raised by a defiant young woman. Revitalizing Spivak's intuition (2010), whereas speaking implies a transaction between speaker and listener, subaltern talk, if it ever happens, does not achieve the dialogic level of a communication exchange. That girl's attempt at breaking free of patriarchal rule is neither understood nor supported that day. A storm breaks the party, small throngs disperse away. We walk together soaking under the rain: if I wish to know that girl's passionate words, my friend and informant would prefer not to talk clutched in public transport.

Harpreet's translation clangs my heart: why should *we* stay there contending that what happened (and should never have happened) is a personal, familial, communitarian – tribal, national or religious informed- tragic issue, while we do not contest that the real reason behind it all are the "wicked rumours"[2], the malicious gossip, which boils on and on among the diaspora Pakistani households 'here and there' – in Brescia and Gujrat? Natters that continuously mine one's reputation, and put the burden of upholding the honor (*izzat*) of entire families on girls' shoulders, leaving them culprits of whatever wrongdoing, and vulnerable to become victims sacrificed to collective atonement? Like Mernissi argued (2003) with regard to Muslim female sexual self-censorship, gossip is a controlling tool which can not only ruin women's image but that of the whole family in the community, and it is often steered in manipulative ways by elderly 'aunties'.

As I travel back home, this last argument echoes in my head: how great must be the power of those blethers, if Harpreet fears people overhearing his report of such a *j'accuse*, and if even Tahira evades the gathering not to expose herself to perilous community rumours? As children of immigrant parents from the Subcontinent who had grown up in an Italian city, both my informants had their share of vulnerability to protect from unwanted social exposure. The first, as a Sikh young man, not to trespass his boundaries of being akin to the same Hindustani background despite not being Muslim and privately rebutting any honor-and-shame normativity. The other, as a Pakistani young woman who had been blackmailed since her divorce (from a cousin married back in Pakistan to please her father's will), and strived not to be seen as a White(ned) feminist due to her precarious role as a cultural mediator in Italian social services. Whatever their inner clashes of morals, their outer behaviours of aloofness sounded like a learnt skill, much needed in order to navigate divergent expectations from multiple audiences (Throop 2012). After all, it is not only the ethnographer who may be a 'vulnerable observer' in critical moments during fieldwork (Behar 1996); informants may just be as liable to break their hearts while engaging with the life events that us researchers claim to understand on their behalf. Reflexivity here is a duty that I need to exercise from a distance: overwhelmed with emotions as we were that day, words falling short (Rose 1997; Stoetzler, Yuval-Davis 2002).

Networking for the prevention of honor crimes

Friday, 22nd March 2019. On the weekday of Islamic prayer, passing-by men with their head covered with *kufi*, I return to Brescia after a few months, invited to be a discussant at the International Conference "Anthropology of honor crimes in the third millennium. Networking to save lives". The event, promoted by the Municipality, the Region and a series of NGOs, is organized by *Casa delle Donne* (the local women's shelter) and hosted by the AIB (Association of Brescia's Entrepreneurs), touting a liaison between the business world and feminist associations. I find myself in a skyscraper in the financial heart of the city. The room is busy but not crowded, it is clear from the disappointment sighed by Piera Stretti, historical leader of the women's shelter, that a slice of the desired audience is absent; in fact, the very women invoked as objects of the patriarchal oppression here denounced, immigrant (Brown, Muslim) women, are totally missing today.

The invited speakers are of the highest national and international level. Each intervention contributes to depict the patchwork of honor crimes as a socio-cultural bundle hard to unravel. Magistrate Roia (from the High Court in Milan and author of "Crimes against Women", 2018) opens the session tracking the stages of recognition for "cultural crimes" in the Italian jurisprudence. He starts out with a critical reflection on the ethnocentrism of the Law, by asserting that the role of one's culture, intended as a shared repertoire in un/making the laws and sanctioning illicit behaviours, is not only that of the *Others*, but also and above

[2] This common day refrain is effectively portrayed in the drama "What will people say?"(2017), a fiction movie inspired by real events: the story of Nisha, daughter of a Pakistani family in Norway, who is kidnapped to Pakistan by her parents when her father finds her in bed with a boyfriend.

all "ours". Many in the public nod their head. It is easy to recall that only in 1975 the reform of family law in Italy expressly outlawed the use of physical force by a man on his offspring and wife, the Latin *ius corrigendi* which pertained to the *pater familias*. Even more recent is the abolition, in 1981, of the Italian national version of 'honor crimes' and 'reparative marriages'[3]. That *domopolitics* (a term coined to describe the securitizing politics of countries as national homes, Walters 2004) is first and foremost an everyday politics of gender reproduced in the home (Lonergan 2018) is a subject far too often reduced to feminist claims[4]. The gendered inequality intrinsic to the domestic space actually crosses places and times, and stands as a transcultural social issue, universal in its particular expressive modalities.

Today's special guest is Nazir Afzal, a member of the OBE (Order of British Empire), known for his twenty-year work as General Attorney in a hundred cases of "Honor Crimes and forced marriages". Afzal uses a simultaneous interpreter to reconstruct the spiral of "gender-based ethnic violence", which he briefly dismisses as a corollary to British post-colonial history and faltering multicultural policies. Afzal himself was born in London to an immigrant middle class Pakistani family, and he intertwines his life and professional experience, appealing to the emotions that the violence inflicted in domestic environments (understood in a broader sense, as an extended family or peer community) activate in both the legislators and the public opinion. Of his many cases, he isolates as a turning point that of "Banaz Mahmod", a twenty year-old Londonese girl of Kurdish-Iraqi origin, strangled by her cousins after the rumour spread that she had kissed a man disliked by her family at a Metro station. According to Afzal, not only the tightening of the sentence imposed on the guilty parties (life imprisonment), but also a new educational approach to promoting personal freedom and women's rights in the preventive phase was yielded from that case. Since 2010 in fact, thousand courses taught by young men and women belonging to BME (Black or Ethnic) minorities have entered the curriculum of secondary classes in public schools, with the hope that 'peer to peer education' can be effective in counteracting codes of honor upheld in one's family or community[5].

The sociological literature on HRV honor-related violence has grown steadily in the 2010s across the UK, countering the failures of multicultural policies and taking a fresh look at how racism and particularly Islamophobia have contributed to reframe the approach to domestic violence when committed by members of immigrant minorities. As Reddy (2014) argued, honor-killings became almost a sub-species in English legal practice, and their perpetrators a subaltern species of crime-prone human beings. Like Pratt Ewing (2008) had pointed out, with all the attention directed at the Muslim woman as victim, how the Muslim man was being depicted in such accounts remained unquestioned: his stereotypical figure negatively connoted and almost impossible to redeem. A significant advancement in the interpretation of honour-killings seen from the UK has been put forward by Aisha Gill and colleagues. On one side, a transnational approach to HRV in the Kurdish diaspora reveals that a bundle of local conditions (legal, social, political) enable the endurance of such crimes (Begikhani et al. 2016). On another, that the culturalist view of honor-related violence, by perpetuating the narrative on non-Western cultures as inherently uncivilised, misses out exploring the intersection of culture(s) with other axes of differentiation and inequality beyond gender, such as race and religion (Gill and Brah, 2014).

[3] In the Italian civil code, "reparatory" or "rehabilitating" marriage was a legislative device through which all charges of rape, sexual assault and/or abduction were dropped if the offender married his victim. This compromised family law was masterfully staged in the film 'Divorzio all'Italiana' (lit. Italian-style divorce) directed by P. Germi in 1961, well before the 1974 referendum which turned civil divorce legitimate.

[4] It is worth remembering that *domus, dominus* and *dominium* (the house as a property, its rightful owner and the exercise of house-holding) are the Latin formulae for understanding patriarchy in XVII-century Natural Law (on which liberal thought then developed).

[5] Banaz's love (and death) story was then transposed into a film in 2012, which is freely available online: http://fuuse.net/banaz-a-love-story/

Vis à vis the British situation, the anthropologist Piera Cavenaghi (2013) reports the dissonant voices of young women from South Asia in Italy, whom she interviewed with the focus group method about matrimonial choices or coercion. According to the scholar, in the face of relatively recent immigration, Italy's official position on honor crimes tends to be confined to cultural rhetoric and to a generic appeal for the defence of human rights. While examining the declaration rendered by Hina Saleem's father (the first tragic victim of honor killings in a Pakistani family in Brescia), the tension between honor-and-shame emerges, a dynamic well rooted in the anthropological literature of the Mediterranean (Peristiany 1966; Sacchi 2008). I think of the informal conversations I held over the years with many young South Asian informants. Malicious gossip is the elephant in the room when talking about female sexuality and kinship relations. No anthropologist (no one indeed) could ever sympathize with parricidal fathers, murders of their own daughters. Yet, how not to see that the object of scrutiny and hatred, the honor at stake, rather than being the in-violated body of a virgin is the immaculate prestige of the family, of which these girls embody the enormous burden? How not to understand that the escalation of violence occurs when the mechanism of scandal reaches its peak, which shatters a family always on a tightrope in immigration contexts, feeling distressed for their social and moral status even when they return to the homeland?

If these authoritative anthropological interpretations, endorsed by Afzal, leave the audience baffled, the only Italo-Pakistani guest authorized to speak on behalf of “his people” takes the floor. Jabran Fazal leads the cultural association "Pak Brescia", which has tried since 2017 to build a bridge between the most disputed minority in town and local interlocutors. In his ceremonial words, the openness to dialogue returns, but above all the red thread between Italy and Pakistan of a certain "family culture", on which to base the possible construction of a "common house". Though the statements of this pacifying Italian-Pakistani leader are met by reassuring assents of the attendants, the presumption of some family inviolability remains problematic. Is it only this small world the heart(h) of healthy social life, once purged from its threats, from alleged “pathological drifts or ethnic-religious barbarism”? Fazal is quick to point out that there is nothing Islamic about honor crimes, but that it is only *tribal* violence and hideous ignorance. His words make wonder: Is it not this sacrosanct family ideology that should be constantly critiqued instead? Does not intersectionality also apply to the “family in question” (McKie & Callan 2012), when its lived environment is a global and disputed modernity embedded in a domestic space where alternative ideas about being a man and a woman, a mother and father, a sister or brother can(not) find room for realization?

Besides this cautious spokesman of the local Pakistani community, any presence of migrant women (whether South Asian, Muslim, or else) is visibly absent. Pinky, the pseudonym of Parvinder Kaur, a young Sikh mother of Indian origin, who was literally set on fire by her husband in front of their children in 2015, rose to the stage and finally gave voice to those oppressed or violated women so far only evoked. “Identity murder” is a term which perfectly renders the anguish of a woman who, despite the surgical treatments undergone, still fails to recognize her face in the mirror every day. Recovering the etymological roots of *vulnus*, lit. wound, being vulnerable expresses the quality of being easily hurt and attacked, aesthetics of the self and social ethics mark Pinky’s life story. Her everlasting scars remind her (and onlookers) not only of a man’s *raptus*, but also of a communal ‘lack of ethics’. In her speech, Pinky consciously overturns the tables of moral codes and righteous living as a Brown immigrant woman (she is Sikh Indian and not Muslim). Four years after her personal drama, she does not waver saying that it was not herself to misbehave, but her husband: the man to whom she was entrusted as a wife, and who tried to deprive her of a life worth living. Her clear timbre, the fluent Italian in which she recalls her life story, leave petrified. When she falls silent, the whole audience, a hundred White 'native' women stand up and throw a thunderous applause. Almost embarrassed by the solidarity received, Pinky lowers her gaze. I shiver seeing how the rhetoric of the 'barbarian immigrant

minority' and of the 'saving native majority' works in this case. Yet, Pinky seems to embody this reality, and makes no secret of the gratitude she owes to the local women's' shelter, to the judicial assistance received (her husband was sentenced to eleven years of imprisonment), and the economic one: mot only was she granted subsidies for her two children but she was also assigned a protected accommodation and got hired as a permanent accountant at Confagricoltura Brescia, the local trade union organization for farming. In spite of the terrible circumstances, this Indian-born woman in Italy covers an administrative role in the sector where Punjabi male pioneers in Italy opened the way to mass economic immigration, first with the supply of hand labour in the fields, then with family reunions. Contrary to bigot expectations, the oppressed Brown woman rescued by White feminists has not been confined to domestic work but has been given a chance to make a professional career whatever the appalling journey that took her there.

I see no headscarves among the attendees: not the few ones worn by the Muslim young women who came to protest last year in Brescia to mourn and denounce Sana's case, nor even a *dupatta* on the only Pakistani girl who came along with the last speaker of the day, gay director and activist Wajahat Abbas Kazmi. The filmmaker is waging a strenuous struggle to increase gender equality within the Italo-Pakistani community, caught with a transnational eye. Since the Gujrat Supreme Court unbelievably acquitted Sana's self-confessed murderers, Abbas has launched a social media campaign # Justice for Sana, pleading for the intervention of the Italian Judiciary to rectify the blatant miscarriage of justice. It is a privilege to meet this Italo-Pakistani young man who does not hesitate to denounce the honor related threats he suffered for disclosing his homosexuality (breaking a marriage imposed on him to safeguard a heteronormative rule with which the patriarchy, not only the Hindustani one, also oppresses his male offspring). Banned from his family and community networks, but supported by local queer activists, Wajahat has recently published a book on being 'gay and Muslim' (Kazmi et al. 2018), and was sponsored by Amnesty International for the release of his documentary film 'Allah Loves Equality' on the LGBT community in Pakistan. If this man's life-history challenges the little space for diversity that the Pakistani diaspora seems to concede from the outside, to what extent does his experience resonate in a room filled only with a 'compassionate audience' of White middle class 'femonationals' (like the leader of the women's shelter patronizes)?

Preliminary Discussion

Confronting the two public events just related - a spontaneous protest against yet another local honor murder and an organized forum for debating honor crimes at large -, the scant turnaround and fragmented participation in either manifestation do not allow for final considerations. This mere ethnographic surface nonetheless accounts for an intersection of views and interests in re-defining gender and kinship, law and migration that is very much tied to the specific time and place of these apparently vain public engagements.

Like Wikan (2008) once argued for another gruesome honor murder then occurred in Sweden, it is 'in honor of' these young female victims of violence that the public opinion mobilizes. Still, what kind of honor is normalized in courts (and then popularized via the media) that barely sees the real-life experience of immigrant, Brown, Muslim women beyond the cliché of irreducible ethno-religious difference and thus *subalternity* on all means?

A decade after this debate began in the West, vis-à-vis the alleged threat of *Eurabia* (an Islamophobic conspiracy theory that foresees Europe being ruled with the law of Sharīʿah, Ye'or 2005), once gender equality seems to have been mainstreamed with few backlashes, honor crimes turn to be a seductive source of treaty for otherwise diverging interests (Abu-Lughod 2011). Following Farris (2017), 'femonationalism' is an ideology that emerges from the convergence between what are different political projects:

> Femonationalism thus describes, on the one hand, the attempts of western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through

> the touting of gender equality while, on the other hand, it captures the involvement of various well-known and quite visible feminists and femocrats in the current framing of Islam as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture. (Farris, 2017: 4).

In contemporary Italy, amid recurrent political crises, all governments have founded civic integration programs for new migrants that have often been called for or supported by feminist and/or gay rights activists. (With racialist issues being often downplayed, as if pertaining to a national history long overcome, Bonfanti 2017). This has been accompanied by the growing acceptance of right-wing anti-immigration parties into the political mainstream which often use a language appropriated from feminist discourse to make the case that migrant men, especially Muslim, pose a unique threat to the safety of all women and to the self-determinacy of women from their own communities. The interests of feminist movements to liberate all women from patriarchal domination have thus converged with the racist categorization of migrant men as sexual threats, and of migrant women as dominated subjects in need of 'saving'. There seems to run an analogy between 'honor-and-shame' (as hallowed in a family code for securing righteous living) on one side, vulnerability and protection (as enshrined in the civil law for warranting personal freedom and equal rights) on another. In both discourses though, it is the female body that matters (Butler 1993), between women's self-disposal or else their conformance to some forms of control.

As my friend in the field Tahira poured out, defending her right to withdraw from public dissent:

> You expect me to rise and fight, denounce what I saw. What's s been done to me or revealed to me, because of the job that I do. But I cannot do better than this. I hide my person from unwanted attention, and I don't disclose my view because it wouldn't pay off anyway. If I were to say what I believe now, and I have changed my mind many times already, *my* people would blame me, but also *your* feminist contacts would. Please understand it's a *no-win game*.

While feminist literature is replenished with cases of women's dissent (from Okely 1990, to Varma et al. 2016), the position (un)claimed by Pakistani women in Italy combines resistance to 'gender and racial profiling' at once, as they try to defy the intersectional vulnerability that tears apart their bodies and subjectivities. Scholars in feminist philosophy and legal theory (Mckenzie et al. 2014) acknowledge a common primary human vulnerability that emerges from the relational interdependence of our existence: however, vulnerability is not evenly distributed but is often the outcome of multidimensional systems of structural social inequality. Vulnerability cannot only be a place of description, its accountability takes the ethical dilemmas of anthropology into the compelling necessity of commitment and support to moral and political struggles (Schepher-Hughes 1995). In fact, as Guilleaumin (1992) argued thirty years ago, both racism and sexism build their ideological power upon a naturalization of human differences, of which the migrant woman is the ultimate subject.

With respect to the recent HRV episodes happened in Brescia, their harsh contestation from the White native majority (and relatively little engagement from the Brown, Muslim immigrant minority) quizzes not as much the unstated relationship between honor-and-shame in a certain Hindustani ethics (and the memory of its Italian similes), but the very possibility for the minority under scrutiny to come forth with an alternative viewpoint. Though HRV is such a transnational critical issue which deserves further elaboration, within this article I limited my focus on a registering how the *culturalist approach* in framing VAW Violence-Against-Women (when they happen to be migrant, Brown and Muslim) is supported by thick empirical evidence across many social strata, including the sufferers themselves and their families. I believe that a political agenda which aims to eradicate this gendered social plague, should first and foremost take on a listening attitude to victims as well as to the manifold actors involved in such episodes.

Since I started drafting this article, another Pakistani teenager went missing in Italy in May 2021: the case of Saman Abbas has reopened a never healed wound. Her corpse has not been found yet, but family members confessed that she was killed after refusing an arranged marriage and thrown in the local river by an uncle and cousin (the first fled leaving no trace behind, the second is to be extradited from France). Inconsistent messages came from her relatives, where piety for the victim did not equate with irrevocable condemnation of the murderers. In Pakistan, public forgiveness from the family can still redeem the killers, as per legal procedures (preventing them from capital punishment, not from imprisonment if found guilty 'beyond any reasonable doubt'). As new gruesome details emerge by dripping in Italy, racial discrimination and Islamophobia mount up in the public opinion, until the investigations and criminal proceedings will make their course. In the face of Italian scholars who have recently condemned the domestication of honor killings as being re-inscribed in the Western category of "femicide", their invocation to reconsider such forms of violence as culturally motivated crimes (which demand the presence of 'cultural experts' in the courts, Ciccozzi & De Carli, 2019), requires a deep reflection to see whether these clashing and yet influential interpretations may sustain the needs of victims at all.

Like a notable US-based Pakistani journalist stated: "Women are paying with their lives. Simply telling their stories has not saved them and will not save them. This last point is important […] but that will never bridge the vast chasm between top-down advocacy and urgently needed grassroots change" (Zakaria 2016). While the author focuses her attention on the homeland, where "maintaining honor, which translates roughly to controlling women, has become a nationalistic goal, a stand for local sovereignty" (ibidem), in the global corners where the South Asian diaspora have made their homes, moral ambivalence and cultural overlapping further complicate the lives and words of Brown, Muslim, migrant young women.

If the ethnography of gender can work towards serving the common good, like Borofsky (2019) wishes for a programmatic public anthropology, then it is from our research participants' distress (and their selective mutism) that we should get started. Feminism and multiculturalism need not be on the barricades, or else the level of gender violence could only rise par with the escalation of violence in other realms of society (Merry 2009). Given the contemporary sparks of racism and neo-fascism in Italy, which turned out evermore clear after the last political election in autumn 2022, and the new Government installed under the aegis of the majority party "Fratelli d'Italia" (lit. Brothers of Italy, led by the current PM and self-declared 'femonationalist' Giorgia Meloni), this ought better not remain only an aspiration.

Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the Author.

Acknowledgements

The Author acknowledges that this work was supported by H2020 HORIZON funding [ERC-Stg n° 678456]

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (2011). Seductions of the "honor crime". *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, *22*(1): 17-63. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1218238

Anderson, E. (2012). The iconic ghetto. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *642*(1): 8–24.

Azzeruoli, V. 2016, The (sacred) cow business: narratives and practices of the 'ethnic niche'of Indian Punjab milkers in the Po Valley. In Corrado, A., de Castro, C., & Perrotta, D. (Eds) *Migration and Agriculture* (pp. 51-65). London: Routledge.

Begikhani, N., Gill, A. K. & Hague, G. (2016). *Honor-based violence: Experiences and counter-strategies in Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish diaspora*. London: Routledge.

Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Bettiga-Boukerbout, M.G. (2005). Crimes of honor in the Italian penal code: An analysis of history and reform. In Welchman, L. & Hossein, S. (Eds.) *"Honor". Crimes, paradigms, and violence against women*. London: Zed Books.

Bonfanti, S. (2015). The 'marriage market' among transnational Indian families in Italy: designs, resistances and gateways. *Human Affairs, 25*(1): 16-27. https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2015-0002

Bonfanti, S. (2016a). Faide indiane e allarmismi lombardi: la mediatizzazione del conflitto etnico e la sua eco sulla quotidiana convivenza migranti-autoctoni, *Etnoantropologia, 3*(2): 63-76.

Bonfanti, S. (2016b). "Dislocating Punjabiyat: Gendered mobilities among Indian diasporas in Italy." In Goetz et al. (Eds.) *Bounded Mobilities. Ethnographic Perspectives on Social Hierarchies and Global Inequalities* (pp. 183-205). Bielefeld: Transcript.

Bonfanti, S. (2017). A taste of "Brownies": Shifting color lines among Indian diasporas in southern Europe. *Transnational Social Review, 7*(3): 258-272. https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1360034

Bonfanti, S. (2020). A suon di porte: percorsi abitativi di un richiedente asilo pakistano in Italia. Un approccio biografico, eds. F. Della Puppa e G. Sanò, S.I "Outside the Boundaries of Reception", *Studi Emigrazione, 220*: 599-617.

Bonfanti, S. (2021). "Diversities." In Miranda-Nieto, A., Massa, A., & Bonfanti, S. (Eds.) *Ethnographies of Home and Mobility*. London: Routledge.

Bonfanti, S. (2022). L'intermediazione immobiliare in un rione indo-pakistano italiano, *Meridiana: Rivista di storia e scienze sociali*, *103*: 181-203.

Borofsky, R. (2019). "Public anthropology." In Callan, H. (Ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter. On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. London: Routledge.

Cavenaghi, P. (2013). L'onore delle donne. Un'analisi etnografica tra i migranti indiani e pakistani nel bresciano. PhD thesis, University of Trieste.

Chopra, R. (2012). *Militant and Migrant: the Politics and Social History of Punjab*. London: Routledge.

Ciccozzi, A., Decarli, G. (2019). Cultural expertise in Italian courts – contexts, cases and issues. *S.I. Studies in Law, Politics, and Society, Vol. 78,* 35-54.

D'Alimonte, R. (2019). How the populists won in Italy. *Journal of Democracy*, *30*(1): 114-127.

Das, V. (2008). National honor and practical kinship: of Unwanted women and children. In *Critical Events: anthropological perspectives on contemporary India*. Oxford: OUP.

Dematteo, L. (2018). Voci populiste: tuonare dal palco, ammiccare dalla rete. *Parolechiave*, *26*(2): 17-34.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo.* New York: Praeger.

Ewing Pratt, K. (2008). *Stolen honor*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Farris, S. (2017). *In the name of women's rights. The rise of femonationalism*, Durham; NC: Duke University Press.

Gill, A. K., & Brah, A. (2014). Interrogating cultural narratives about 'honor'-based violence. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *21*(1), 72-86.

Grzyb, M. A. (2016). An explanation of honor-related killings of women in Europe through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and masculine domination. *Current Sociology*, *64*(7), 1036-1053. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115627479

Guillaumin, C. (1992). *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir: l'idée de Nature*. Paris: Côté-femmes.
Kressel, G. (1981). Sororicide/filiacide: Homicide for family honor, *Current Anthropology, 22*: 141-158.
Lonergan, G. (2018). Reproducing the 'national home': gendering domopolitics, *Citizenship Studies*, 22(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2017.1406455
Mckenzie, C., W. Rogers, and S. Dodds (Eds.) (2014). *Vulnerability new essays in ethics and feminist philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Maguigan, H. (1995). Cultural evidence and male violence: Are feminist and multiculturalist reformers on a collision course in criminal courts? *New York University Law Review*, vol. 70, 36-99.
McKie, L. & Callan, S. (2012). *Understanding Families. A global Introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Mernissi, F. (1987). *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
Merry, S.E. (2009). *Gender Violence. A Cultural Perspective*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
Morris, R. C. & Spivak, G. C. (2010). *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea*. Chicago IL: Chicago University Press.
Nader, L. (1989). Orientalism, occidentalism and the control of women. *Cultural Dynamics*, 2, 322-355.
Okely, J. (1991). Defiant moments: Gender, resistance and individuals. *Man, 26*(1), 3-22.
Peristiany, J. G. (1966). *Honor-and-shame: The values of mediterranean society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Razack, S. (2021). Should feminists stop talking about culture in the context of violence against Muslim women? The case of "honor killing". *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, *12*(1), 31-48. https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs121202120082
Reddy, R. (2014). "Domestic violence or cultural tradition? Approaches to 'honor killing' as species and subspecies in English legal practice." In *'Honor' Killing and Violence* (pp. 27-45). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
Roia, F. (2018). *Crimini contro le donne*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
Rose, G. (1997). Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography, 21*(3): 305-320.
Sacchi, P. (2011). I delitti d'onore ritornano: prospettive antropologiche dall'Italia, in Balsamo, F. (Ed.), *World Wide Women: Globalizzazione, genere, linguaggi*, vol. 2, Torino: CIRSDe.
Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Schepher-Hughes, N. (1995). The primacy of the ethical: Propositions for a militant anthropology. *Current Anthropology, 36*(3): 409-440.
Soldati, M. G. (2011). *Purdah o della protezione. Educazione e trasmissione culturale nelle famiglie migranti pakistane: Educazione e trasmissione culturale nelle famiglie migranti pakistane*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
Spivak, G. (1985). Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow sacrifice. *Wedge* 7/8: 120-130.
Stoetzler M. & Yuval-Davis N. (2002). Standpoint theory, Situated knowledge and the situated imagination. *Feminist Theory*, *3*(3): 315-333.
Throop, CJ. (2012). On inaccessibility and vulnerability: some horizons of compatibility between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. *Ethos, 40*(1): 75–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2011.01232.x
Varma, R, Sukhwant, D. & Nagarajan, C. (2016). Why feminist dissent? *Feminist Dissent 1*: 1-32. https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n1.2016.6
Vidino, L. (2014). *Home-grown jihadism in Italy: Birth, development and radicalization dynamics.* Milan: ISPI and European Foundation for Democracy.

Volpp, L. (2003). On Culture, difference, and domestic violence. *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law, 11*(2): 393-399.

VV. AA. (2020). *XXIX Rapporto Immigrazione 2020*. *Caritas e Migrantes*. Ed. Idos, Roma.

Welchman, L. & Hossein, S. (Eds.) (2005). *"Honor". Crimes, paradigms, and violence against women*. London: Zed Books.

Wessendorf, S. (2014). *Commonplace diversity: Social relations in a super-diverse context*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wikan, U. (2008). *In honor of Fadime: Murder and shame*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ye'or, B. (2005). *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab axis*. Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Zakaria, R. (2016). Pakistan needs change at the grassroots, not just laws and advocacy. *Scroll.in*, Feb. 27, 2016 [online resource, last accessed 15/01/2022].