Gender as catalyst for violence against Roma in contemporary Italy

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ABSTRACT   Silvio Berlusconi’s use of ethnicity and immigration as national security issues in his successful campaign for election to the Italian presidency in 2008 was by no means unique in contemporary Europe. What was surprising was the speed of his right-wing government’s legislative restriction of migrants in the form of the so-called ‘security package’, first introduced just five weeks after the election. Woodcock explores the striking fact that this ‘security package’, and the intense wave of racist violence by Italians against Roma that it legitimized and encouraged, was proposed and justified in response to media reports of Italian babies being stolen by ‘Zingari’ from the ‘nomad camps’ and of Italian women being raped and beaten by Romanian men of ‘Zingari’ ethnicity. Gender and ethnicity are the twin constitutive discourses of modern European society, and racialized subjects are necessarily gendered. The stereotype of ‘dangerous black men sexually threatening white women’ has been mobilized in a vast range of European and colonial nationalist projects in order to justify the policing of both racialized masculine subjects and women as objects of the patriarchy. Similarly, the depiction of women as hysterical, sexually vulnerable objects in need of (white) masculine protection is an old story that the Italian media recognize as a fairy tale even as they reproduce the discourse. Woodcock explores what has not been mentioned thus far, namely, that gender stereotypes are vital to the mobilization of violent racism against the Roma in contemporary Italy, and how conservative gender binaries are strengthened and policed in a time of social crisis through the stereotyping of Roma as racial threat.

KEYWORDS   ethnicity, gender, Gypsies, Italy, European migration, nomads, racism, rape, Roma, security package, violence, Zingari

Since the early 1990s Italian government policy has segregated migrants identified as Roma in the peripheral socio-economic spaces formally known as campi nomadi. It is this policy that forces both contemporary asylum-seekers and economic migrants into a much older stereotype, that of pejorative Gypsy/Zingari nomadism with its constitutive elements of sorcery and criminality.¹ Since Silvio Berlusconi was elected to a fourth

¹ Nando Sigona, ‘How can a “nomad” be a “refugee”? Kosovo Roma and labelling policy in Italy’, Sociology, vol. 37, no. 1, 2003, 69–79.
term as prime minister with a right-wing coalition government in 2008, state-sanctioned and media-fuelled violence perpetrated by Italians against people identified as Roma has increased. With a shifting conflation of racial and gendered stereotypes, Berlusconi’s government validates acts of violence against racial Others, regardless of their citizenship, as acts of ‘the Italian people’.

Berlusconi’s reliance on ethnicity and immigration as a national security issue is by no means unique in contemporary Europe. What was surprising was the speed of his government’s legislative restriction of migrants in the form of the so-called ‘security package’, approved by the cabinet just five weeks after his election. This article explores how this ‘security package’, and the intense wave of racist violence it legitimized and encouraged, was fuelled by media reports of Italian babies being stolen by ‘Zingari’ women from the ‘nomad camps’ and of Italian women being raped and beaten by Romanian men of ‘Zingari’ ethnicity. Gender and ethnicity are the twin constitutive discourses of modern European society, and racialized subjects are necessarily gendered. The stereotype of ‘dangerous black men sexually threatening white women’, which has been central to European and colonial nationalist projects, is being invoked again in order to justify the policing of both racialized masculine subjects and women as objects of the patriarchy. Similarly, the depiction of women as hysterical, sexually vulnerable objects in need of (white) masculine protection is an old story that the Italian media recognize as a fairy tale even as they reproduce the discourse. This paper explores gender as central to the mobilization of violent racism against the Roma in the Italian case, and how conservative gender binaries are strengthened and policed in a time of social crisis through the stereotyping of Roma as racial threat.

As a specialist in anti-Romani discourses, specifically in Romania, I came to write on the Italian case in response to the shocking levels of violent state intervention and the fact that, although ‘rape’ (and ethnicized masculinity and femininity) was used to mobilize the violence, this vital factor was often elided in both English and Italian sources. While an analysis of Italian political and media responses requires recognition of regional divides, and attention to the nuanced differences in political positions, this paper attempts to analyse the trans-regional mobilization of gendered racial stereotypes, across the political spectrum, from the left to the right. Indeed, an increasing number of Italian scholars point out that anti-Romani policies of the last decade have been mobilized in similar ways and intensities by both the left and the right, especially in Rome and in Florence, where large

2 In this paper, I take ‘gender’ to be an organizational concept and discursive construct rather than a reality experienced by individuals as a biological fact, together with the categories of ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘national identity’.
communities of Roma were living prior to recent deportations. This paper summarizes the main points of the Italian case and draws on the dominant images circulated throughout the public sphere in media, on posters and on websites. It traces the mobilizing power of gendered ethnic stereotypes throughout Italian society, including in online blogs and forums, virtual spaces where those without public space in which to speak can give voice to their experiences.

A history of Romani peoples in Italy: stereotypes and anxiety

Since the fifteenth century, those who have lived in the Italian lands have stereotyped Romani peoples as embodying certain taboos and anxieties. Indeed, Roma have consistently been treated by the majority population in ways that force them into fulfilling stereotypical expectations. Historically, Roma who sought to settle down while trading were constantly expelled from towns as ‘nomads’: the first recorded expulsion of Roma was from Milan in 1493. The stereotype of nomadism is a powerful discursive frame that persists at the core of contemporary anti-Romani prejudice. This stereotype is linked to a discourse that imagines the entire people as criminal, irreverent towards religion, harbouring sinister magical powers and primitive, as evidenced in promiscuity, dancing and baby-snatching. This cluster of stereotypes has simultaneously enabled those who project them to remain settled, God-fearing and civilized, and be recognized as citizens within local administrative structures. In 1876 Cesare Lombroso’s chapter about the pejoratively named Zingari in his book L’Uomo delinquente linked these historical stereotypes to the physical constitution of the Roma as a race, thus building anti-Romani stereotypes into the foundation of western eugenics.

The stereotypical discourse was also intrinsically gendered: it was Romani women who, then and now, were portrayed as stealing babies and practising witchcraft. Italian colonialism, like other European colonialisms, was shaped by these pre-existing racial and gendered discourses. In Eritrea, for example, the Fascist regime’s policy, and expectation, upon invasion in 1935 was that colonized women were both objects of liberation and desire for Italian soldiers: semi-pornographic photographs of African women were distributed, and the colonies were made available for popular consumption in


4 Cesare Lombroso, L’Uomo delinquente (Milan: Hoepli Press 1876).
songs such as ‘Faccetta nera’ (‘The Little Black Face’). The Fascist racial hierarchy of course did not support the prospect of inter-racial marriage (sex was another story) and, on 19 April 1937, Vittorio Emanuele III prohibited ‘conjugal relations’ between colonial subjects and Italian citizens. In this way, while rape and non-conjugal sexual relations between Italian men and African women were sanctioned, the Italian state relied on gendered and ethnicized legislation to define and police Italian (as European and colonial) identity. In the course of the Second World War, Italian Roma and Sinti were also persecuted as racial Others, the previously articulated range of social behaviour stereotypes located in their supposed biological difference to ethnic Italians, even though Romani Italians fought in the Italian army.

After 1945 Sinti and Roma in Italy were segregated and marginalized by state institutions and understood primarily through a consistently racist discourse in the broader community. By the 1980s Italy had radically changed from being a source of emigrants to being a host society for migrants from Eastern Europe (including Roma) and Africa. This caused various social upheavals. Migrants found work in industries that suffered from the out-migration of young Italian men, and newly arrived women found work as carers and in traditionally female roles that catered to the needs of an ageing population at a time when extended families were becoming increasingly uncommon. Italian legislation did not keep up with the flow of migration, especially for those claiming refugee status after 1990. Even as migrants to Italy were easily incorporated into the employment market, the government did not formalize, in popular discourse or in policy, this incorporation, resulting in a situation that one author referred to as ‘permanent social emergency’.

Throughout the 1990s, Romani migrants arrived in Italy seeking asylum from the wars in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo. From 2002 (when Romanian citizens no longer required Schengen visas) onwards, further European Union (EU) accession changes made it easier for Romanian Roma to migrate to Italy. Following Romania’s full accession to the EU in 2007, in particular, there was a visible wave of Romani

5 For analyses of race, gender and Italy in Eritrea, see Ruth Iyob, ‘Madamismo and beyond: the construction of Eritrean women’, in Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds), *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 233–44.
migrants to Italy (and western Europe in general) who were often conflated with Italian Roma and Sinti, to the detriment of the latter.  

While Italian political culture must be approached with a recognition of regional divides, right-wing political groups across the country, including the Lega Nord and Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI, later Alleanza Nazionale), all sought to mobilize intolerance against migration in the name of ‘the Italian people’. The stereotypes of migrants that were widely available in everyday life and in the media in the 1990s were racialized and gendered in historically continuous ways. For example, Albanian migrants, who were predominantly men, were stereotyped as racially predisposed to violent criminality, while Nigerian women were seen as ‘synonymous with being a prostitute’. Institutional and violent acts of racism in the decade prior to 2008 are documented in a range of reports. In turn, stereotypes of Roma informed legislative decisions that further entrenched the treatment of Roma as embodiments of pejorative, historically developed images. 

As hostility to the eastern European and African migrants grew stronger in the 1990s, so too did anti-Romani sentiment, often the result of the slippery categories of identity wherein Romanian Roma and ethnic Romanians could be conflated or differentiated according to the (racist) discourse of the speaker. The clear targets of a core part of Berlusconi’s 2008 ‘security package’, for example, were ‘nomads’. This term could be understood as referring to anyone living in the authorized and unauthorized ‘nomad camps’ throughout Italy, regardless of their citizenship status. Even Romani refugees from settled communities were called ‘nomads’ by

the authorities because they were Roma and allowed no option but to settle in the makeshift camps on the peripheries of cities. These camps were—and continue to be, where they remain—rarely serviced with water, electricity, rubbish collection or public transport by the Italian state; they are policed and perceived as sites of illegal activity rather than of enforced poverty and social segregation. There are an estimated 130,000–160,000 Roma and Sinti in Italy, of whom some 18,000 people—the official Italian government figure is 12,346—are non-Italian Roma living in camps.\textsuperscript{12} Italian Roma and Sinti are also part of the camp population, and they are often treated as badly as non-Italian Roma.\textsuperscript{13} The ‘nomad camps’ were originally manifestations of the Italian government’s unwillingness to grant refugee status to the influx of Roma fleeing wars in the former Yugoslavia. Italian policy towards non-Romani refugees from those wars, and from Romania and Albania in general, made the acquisition of legal residency papers difficult for those wanting to claim refugee status.\textsuperscript{14} Policy, rather, encouraged individuals to work without permits in the private care industry, out of sight in private homes and without state protection. These carers now form a huge workforce supporting Italy’s ageing population, comprised of millions of (specifically female) migrants from Romania and Albania.

Nando Sigona, an academic and activist for Romani rights, explains that the discursive construction of Romani refugees as ‘nomads’ effectively precludes them from being understood as ‘refugees’ or ‘citizens’.\textsuperscript{15} In the very term ‘nomad’, a Romani survivor of war is made into the stereotypical ancient wanderer who is directed by primitive instinct. Italians also project older stereotypes of Roma—as uncivilized, musical, violent, sexual or without loyalty to state or religion—on to those categorized as ‘nomads’ today. As the ‘nomad camps’ forced Roma to live in dire poverty, without access to schools, and working piecemeal jobs without registration papers, the Italian government created a population against whom the ancient stereotypes could be employed once again, and to great effect.

\textsuperscript{12} Nando Sigona, ‘The “problema nomadi” vis-à-vis the political participation of Roma and Sinti at the local level in Italy’, in Sigona and Trehan (eds), Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe, 272–92 (275).

\textsuperscript{13} About half of the officially estimated 150,000 Roma in Italy are said to be non-Italian. Those Roma who migrated from the former Yugoslav states during the wars now have their own children who were born in Italy but, as they have not been given documents or integrated into the system, they continue to be considered non-Italian. See the report by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), Campland: Racial Segregation of Roma in Italy, Country Report Series no. 9 (Budapest: ERRC 2000).

\textsuperscript{14} Russell King and Nicola Mai, Out of Albania: From Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy (New York: Berghahn Books 2008), 84–7.

\textsuperscript{15} Sigona, ‘How can a “nomad” be a “refugee”?’.
Berlusconi’s ‘state of emergency’

Italian nationalism and society has been gendered and racialized in intensely unique ways since the formation of the Italian state. Today, Berlusconi’s government harks back to recognizable modes of intersectionality between gender and race. While there is a vast literature analysing gender, race and nationalism as inseparable, constitutive identity discourses, scholarship and activism focused on race and gender vis-à-vis policy and community in Italy since the establishment of the European Union have failed to address these twin discourses as interdependent.

The radical and rapid intensification of anti-Romani legislation and hate speech in the early months of Berlusconi’s government in 2008 continued the focus of his election campaign. In October 2007 the press reported that a woman it repeatedly described as ‘the wife of a retired Italian admiral’ had been raped and murdered by a Romani Romanian man in Rome. This sparked an intense wave of Italian legislative activity and citizen violence against Romanian, Albanian and Romani individuals across Italy, as well as the reinvigoration of specifically anti-Romani racism. The description of the victim as the wife of a military man signified to the broader society that ‘even’ middle-class, married, older women were not safe: all white Italian women were potential victims of sexual violence by non-Italian men.

On the first day of November, two days after the attack, the Italian government passed Law Decree 181/2007 entitled ‘Espulsione di cittadini comunitari per motivi di pubblica sicurezza’ (Expulsion of local citizens for reasons of public security). This decree gave local representatives of the interior ministry the power to expel any European citizen identified as a threat to public security. Expulsions were to be decided by prefects without a hearing, and approximately twenty individuals were expelled in the first twenty-four hours after the law’s implementation.

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forty were expelled within the week, and hundreds over the next three months. All Romani men were identified, and vilified, as sexually aggressive threats to Italian women and, as such, to Italian society in general. One survey published in Corriere della Sera reported that 70 per cent of Italian respondents said they didn’t think co-existence with Roma was possible, but it was Romanian citizens—perceived to be linked to Romani ethnicity—who were specifically targeted. On 4 November 2007 ‘several hundred Italians marched in Rome declaring that they were giving all Romanian immigrants ten days to leave Italy’.

This is the context in which Berlusconi fought his election campaign: in the midst of media-fuelled and organized racist rhetoric and actions against the exaggerated sexual threat of Romani men against Italian women in public space. Throughout the campaign, the Italian media continually reported stories of Italian citizens, mostly groups of young men, beating and even killing random and innocent men identified as ethnically Romani or eastern European. Since the October 2007 case of the admiral’s wife, sexual violence against Italian women in public space has been the relentlessly-referred-to rallying cry driving the media, government and popular vigilante frenzy. In that case, the issue of class was also raised in the press, and discussion focused on how the victim was a working middle-class woman, at home in public space and yet, clearly, still vulnerable to rape and murder therein. This single case was taken up by Berlusconi and his colleagues across the political right as a sign of the times, as a demonstration that ‘even’ the secure middle classes were being figuratively and literally ‘attacked’ by migration. To the working classes, who had already been experiencing the belt-tightening, stressful effects of new economic and employment

20 Ibid., 2.
21 The murderer was an ethnic Rom with Romanian citizenship, and as there are a large number of ethnically Romani Romanians, and a large number of Romanian migrants in Italy, it stands to reason that there are Romanian Roma among them. In addition, Romanians are perceived by Italians, along with Albanians, as the most significantly different European ethnic migrant group.
24 The media emphasis on the victim’s status as the wife of an admiral in the Italian navy, and as a quiet Catholic woman, consistently constructed her as fulfilling the ideal of Italian femininity.
measures, a single threat, that of non-Italian men to Italian women, that could be shared across regional and class divides enabled a new sense of solidarity on the basis of masculine ethnic nationalism.

In May 2008 Berlusconi assumed his fourth term as Italian prime minister, supported by a right-wing coalition that had campaigned on the claim that irregular migrants were causing a ‘national security emergency’ in Italy. Berlusconi was already well known for Law 189/2002, the so-called Bossi–Fini law of 2001 that tightened regulations on foreign residents. This legislation made a standing job offer a requirement of the ‘entry for employment’ category, and abolished permits for employment-seeking migrants, thus linking the residence permit to the working contract and increasing the number of cases in which expulsion was justified.

On 21 May 2008 the Italian cabinet unanimously adopted the even more restrictive provisions known as the ‘security package’ (Law Decree 92/2008), proposed by Interior Minister Roberto Maroni (of the Lega Nord). In brief, the package has four sections. The first enabled the expulsion of EU and non-EU citizens in Italy sentenced to more than two years’ imprisonment, and made being an ‘illegal’ resident an aggravating offence subject to a jail sentence one-third longer than would be applicable to Italian citizens. Renting property to a ‘foreign citizen illegally residing in the Italian territory’ became an offence punishable by imprisonment and property confiscation. In addition, Article 6 amended Law Decree 267/2000 to give mayors ‘the competence to adopt “urgent regulations for security reasons”’, and municipal police access to databases of the interior ministry. Article 7, ‘participation of the Army in territorial control’, was used by the Minister of Defence in July 2008 to deploy 3,000 soldiers across Italy in operations of population surveillance and control.

The second section of the package brought in tougher measures and higher costs for EU citizens and Third Country Nationals (TCNs) applying for residence and seeking work in Italy. European citizens now needed to register with the authorities after showing evidence of ‘sufficient economic resources . . . to sustain themselves’ on arrival. The entry of EU citizens and

27 Ibid., 6.
their family members might be limited ‘for reasons of state security [or] preemptory reasons of public security’.  

A draft law proposed by the government on providing public security was the third section of the ‘security package’ and included the recommendation of prison sentences for those who used children for begging, as well as for ‘illegal entrance in the Italian territory’. It made it compulsory for money transfer agencies to obtain a copy of the residence permits of TCNs, and extended the length of detention in a centre for ‘irregular immigrants’ from 60 days to 180 days.

The final section was the declaration by the Council of Ministers of a ‘state of emergency in relation to the settlements of nomad communities in the regions of Campania, Latium and Lombardy’, which had immediate and violent consequences for Roma. As highlighted by many NGO reports, the power to declare a state of emergency (under Article 5 of Law 225/1992) is restricted to cases of ‘natural calamities, catastrophes or other events that according to their intensity and reach need to be faced by extraordinary powers and means’, a condition that the Italian government applied to the very existence of the so-called ‘nomad camps’ in the regions stipulated. As Massimo Merlino points out, the ‘emergency ordinances’ that were included authorized local prefects to implement various measures as well as to use police and military personnel in doing so,

in light of ‘the extremely critical situation generated by the presence of numerous irregular and nomad foreigners who are permanently installed in the urban areas’. The government holds that ‘the precariousness of those camps has caused situations of serious social alarm [among] the local populations’.

On 26 May, five days after the ‘security package’ was approved, Maroni announced that a census of all ‘nomads’ would be conducted. It was clear, therefore, that Romani people, labelled and stereotyped as ‘nomads’, and socially and spatially segregated as such, were the primary targets of the legislation. It is vital to examine how gender stereotypes and roles functioned as a catalyst for the development and implementation of this legislation.

28 Ibid., 8. Note that Maroni also declared that in the future this legislation would be used to expel EU citizens who did not make a minimum income threshold, which would include many who live in the ‘nomad camps’.
29 Ibid., 9. For a new study of the ways that ‘begging’ is gendered (with women beggars violating the stereotypical feminine role of caring for children), see Stefan Benedik, ‘On the streets and in the bed: gendered and sexualised narratives in popular perceptions of Romani migrations within Central and Eastern Europe’, in Sigona (ed.), *Romani Mobilities in Europe*, 11–19.
31 Ibid., 10–11.
Berlusconi’s Italy: white men protecting white women from ‘other’ men

On 10 May 2008, in the first days of Berlusconi’s new government, an Italian woman in Naples claimed to have caught a young Romani woman from a nearby ‘nomad camp’ trying to steal her baby from her apartment. In response to this claim, and a frenzied flurry of media reports, groups of Italian men and boys attacked local ‘nomad camps’ and individuals who were ethnic Romanians as well as Roma. Despite the arrest of the young Romani woman and police patrols ostensibly attempting to stop the violence against Roma, on 13 May a group of between 300 and 400 Italians, led by women, attacked a ‘nomad camp’ causing great destruction. On 13 and 14 May, police evacuated large and small Romani camps, leaving many to seek shelter in camps in other cities, but also establishing a new, larger camp for the evacuees. This new camp was designated by means of a police cordon and residents were afraid to leave, while their old homes and all their belongings were burnt down by Italian citizens, and then bulldozed by the local council. Surveys conducted after these events found that 75 per cent of the inhabitants had lived in a single camp for four years, and that the average length of time for living in one camp was 7.5 years. The people who were so spectacularly segregated and cordoned off by the state as ‘nomads’ were not in fact nomadic.

The Italian parliament—chastised in part by media fascination with the women-led popular violence, portrayed as an act by ‘the people’ reduced to desperate measures—hastened the introduction of the ‘security package’. It was necessary to wait until 21 May 2008 (for the approval of the Council of Ministers and publication of the law in the Official Gazette), yet the Mayor of Naples announced the appointment of a ‘special commissioner’ for the ‘Roma emergency’ on 14 May. Police and the army were used to patrol the streets and, while this was explained later to international investigators as protection for Romani victims from Italian vigilante crime, the popular violence against Roma was in fact encouraged by politicians. The Interior

33 For the long list of Italian vigilante crimes against Romani camps during these days, see FRA, Incident Report. The camps had also been attacked by groups with Molotov cocktails in December 2007.
34 See FRA, Incident Report, 8, note 20.
35 The ministers used the widely accepted term ‘Rom’ in the emergency decrees, although the pejorative terms ‘nomadi’ and ‘Zingari’ continued to be used in the media and in statements by politicians. It is worth noting that pejorative meanings are discursively attached to the word ‘Rom’ as well.
Minister Roberto Maroni was quoted as saying: ‘that [violence] is what happens when gypsies steal babies, or when Romanians commit sexual violence. In this way, politicians have constantly misrepresented racist violence—a problem of Italian society—as a ‘Romani problem’. Umberto Bossi, the Lega Nord leader, stated that ‘people do what the state can’t manage’, implying thereby that the state’s role was to support the actions of ‘the people’ rather than to control violence and prejudice.

These comments highlight a feature of the waves of physical and legislative violence in Italy in 2008 and 2009. Namely, that the racial stereotyping of Romi relied on gendered profiles: Romani men as primitive rapists and a sexual threat to Italian women; and Romani women as baby-snatchers. Both of these stereotypes embody the broader stereotype of Roma as ethnically primitive and uncivilized in terms of being unable to control supposedly biologically determined masculine (sex) and feminine (motherhood) traits. The new legislation concerning the expulsion of ‘foreigners’ would be implemented on the basis of a census, announced by the government on 26 May, that would fingerprint and register all Roma in camps. In June 2008 Maroni declared that mayors would close down unauthorized camps without adequate water and electricity supplies, and that only ethnic Italian Roma and Sinti would be allowed to settle in authorized camps. ‘Foreign’ Roma, including those born in Italy to Yugoslav-born parents, would only be allowed to use so-called ‘transit’ camps, and only for a period of up to three months. In this way, the new ‘security package’ went even further towards making nomadic non-citizens out of Roma who had been born in Italy or had lived there, sometimes for decades.

Only a newcomer to the field of Romani rights would be surprised by the few, and ineffective, international institutional responses to the gross violations of human rights that have occurred in Italy since May 2008. This is despite the best efforts of NGOs such as the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) and OsservAzione. By the end of 2009, just three major reports on Italy had been produced, by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the EU’s Fundemantal Rights Agency (FRA) and the Open Society

38 The European Parliament resolution, ‘Census of the Roma on the basis of ethnicity in Italy’, P6_TA(2008)0361, Strasbourg, 10 July 2008, was critical of these measures as violating multiple European conventions, although there has as yet been no response to the Italian implementation of the census, despite pressure from a range of NGOs. The resolution is available on the European Parliament website at www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-/-EP//-/TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0361+0+DOC+XML+V0//-/EN (viewed 27 August 2010).
Institute (OSI). In 2008 there was a single formal visit, and statement, from the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights. The EU did not protest when Berlusconi’s policy of fingerprinting Romani minors in 2008 began, even though it had not received the response to its objections that Italy had promised. Nor has the EU responded to NGO demands for a justification of this inaction.

The mobilizing power of rape

On 14 February 2009, the rape of a fourteen-year-old Italian girl in the Caffarella Park in Rome became a prime example of how Italian society and Berlusconi’s government use incidents of sexual violence to intensify both patriarchal control of women and racism as part of the same project of national identity formation. Following the incident, which the young victim claimed was perpetrated by men with ‘Arab’ accents, one with two fingers missing, local Italian youths attacked and hospitalized groups of innocent Romanian men in the area. By 18 February, the police had declared they had arrested the culprits. The faces of two men were shown in all media outlets: two dark-skinned and poor-looking men who the viewers were told had been arrested in the ‘nomad camps’ in and just outside of Rome. Neither man was missing any


43 For the best overview of the whole sad story as well as of the media and police use of racialized scapegoats, see Amos Luzzatto, ‘An excuse for a new wave of racism’, EveryOne (online), 2 March 2009, available on the EveryOne Group website at www.everyonegroup.com/everyone/MainPage/Entries/2009/3/2_A_case_of_rape_in_Rome_is_exploited_by_politicians_and_racist_patrols.html (viewed 27 August 2010).
fingers, and they were Romanian citizens with Hungarian Romani names. Romanian media and commentators eagerly highlighted the fact that the men were Hungarian Roma who just happened to be Romanian citizens.

There was no subsequent story in the mainstream press about the well-being of the rape victim. The Italian government leapt into action, however, to push through the final text of an emergency decree and, indeed, the ‘security package’, including authorization for the formation of community security patrols. Roberto Maroni described these as ‘groups of unnamed citizens’ working to ‘assist the police by bringing to their attention events that might be damaging to urban security’.44 On 23 February Berlusconi introduced the emergency decree that set a mandatory life sentence for the rape of minors or any attack in which the victim was killed.45 (It is worth juxtaposing the speed with which this decree was enacted with the fact that it was only in 1996 that Italian law changed a Mussolini-era statute defining rape as a ‘crime against the patrimony’ to a ‘crime against the person’, highlighting just how recently the Italian courts recognized that a woman exists as an individual outside the patriarchal family.46 It is also worth noting that, in Italy as in other European countries, national surveys show that victims primarily experience sexual violence at the hands of someone they know, mostly their intimate partner.47)

Within a week, Italian police had bulldozed the camps where the two Romanians, aged 20 and 36, had previously lived. The right-wing Mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, promised that all ‘illegal nomad camps’ in the city would be dismantled, making homeless 20,000 people, by his own estimate. Alemanno thereby managed to link Roma with stereotypical nomads and the camps with illegality when, in fact, they were government-sanctioned, controlled and policed spaces of segregation.

Three weeks later the police admitted, after pressure from the media and NGOs, that the men they had paraded as the captured rapists had in fact been cleared, not as a result of their unwavering protestations of innocence or statements that they had not been in Rome at the time of the crime, but because DNA tests showed no link between the men arrested and the perpetrators. The police still refused to release them on the grounds that they could jeopardize the ongoing investigation, yet their admission of false arrest raised questions in the media about racial profiling and the (im)possibility of

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44 Quoted (English translation) in Richard Owen, ‘Italian minister calls for rapists to be castrated’, The Times, 16 February 2009.
a fair trial. Mainstream journalists reflected on whether Italy was indeed becoming too racist, but none wrote about how the rape had been used to provoke a reaction by the patriarchal state or to displace the violence, both sexual and otherwise, on to racialized men. In the week after the rape at Caffarella Park, the daily *La Repubblica* published 82 articles—and, in the month following the event, 176 articles—about foreign citizens and crime, causing a ‘moral panic’.

But no one asked why it was ‘rape’ and not ‘racism’ that was constantly the focus of media reports, or indeed what that ‘racism’ meant for female victims of sexual violence.

The comments of Italian politicians regarding the incidence of rape in public spaces also became a focus of the media. Roberto Calderoli of the Lega Nord (Minister for Legislative Simplification) said that chemical castration was ‘the only answer’. Berlusconi himself famously defended the effectiveness of sending an extra 30,000 soldiers on to the streets to prevent rapes by stating that they would continue to occur unless there were ‘as many soldiers as pretty girls’. While Calderoli and Berlusconi are generally perceived as given to extreme and outlandish comments, their responses were widely reported. And the reactions of the media and the broader public are telling.

While Berlusconi’s ‘joke’ was widely taken as yet another indication that his opinions are not typical of ordinary Italians, it nonetheless reflected and strengthened commonly held and heavily policed constructions of women as naturally vulnerable to men and thus needing their protection. Berlusconi perceives rape as a natural consequence of women being passive and feminine, and thereby provoking the masculine desire to rape, naturalized as an expression of heterosexual physical desire. In this way rape becomes an extension of the hetero-normative balance of the Italian state. This is an understanding that presumes that rape is an act of sexual desire, an understanding that has long been contested and indeed deconstructed by the argument that rape is not about sex but about power.

In Berlusconi’s Italy, however, being a woman is (re)defined (with military support) as the very state of being a perpetually vulnerable, potential victim of rape. Within this paradigm, a ‘real’ Italian woman is attractive in order to gain the protection (against the potential of sexual violence) of her boyfriend, her

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49 Quoted (English translation) in Owen, ‘Italian minister calls for rapists to be castrated’.


countrymen, representatives of the Italian state. In order to be recognized as the Italian ideal of ‘woman’, Italian women need to understand themselves as requiring protection from assault. Cartoons in the press, like Livio Bonino’s (Figure 1), played on this logic.

The focus on the rape of and sexual violence against white Italian women by racially ‘other’ strangers (‘unknown’, as well as ‘foreign’) in public space belies the fact that sexual violence most often occurs in the home at the hands of men known to the women.\(^{52}\) There is scant discussion about how this dominant discourse reconfirms public space as the natural domain of men, and women as therefore consensually vulnerable in the street as objects of the masculine gaze, and, by extension, potential victims of sexual violence. Likewise, there is scant discussion of the fact that the private space to which women are relegated on threat of violence is the most violent space for them to be in. The patriarchy that owns the woman does not always protect her: in fact, the statistics highlight the opposite. Even as Italian law has redefined women as citizens in their own right, they remain sexual objects unless and

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**Figure 1** Livio Bonino, ‘Scorta anti stupri’ (Escort against Rapes). The caption reads: ‘See that ugly girl? She has all the luck. She can walk around without an escort!!’ Reproduced by permission of the artist. © 2010 Livio Bonino

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\(^{52}\) Ibid., 16.
until there are provisions for the prosecution of sexual violence in the home and in the family.

The posters put up throughout Rome in 2007 by a radical right-wing group called Forza Nuova both provide an insight into how the construction of Italian women as passive victims is vital to the racism of the New Right, and also shift the semiotic boundaries of the social debate. While the group that made them is on the extreme right, the posters were pasted throughout Rome and widely seen by everyday Romans regardless of their political persuasion. They were designed to bring people into the street, and to visualize the fear-mongering scenario hysterically repeated in the press at the time. These posters can serve as examples of the historically developed discourses invoked in common discursive and physical space: the images functioned behind and beyond their politically marginal creators. One poster (Figure 2) depicts a white (implicitly Italian) woman screaming in terror, on the ground, while being assaulted by a brown-skinned long-haired man (implicitly an ethnic Rom).  

I am arguing here that we must pay attention to the fact that gender is vital to the functioning of racial stereotypes, that gender and race work together to mobilize contemporary anti-Romani racism in Italy. Not only is this crucial to understanding how the Romani man is stereotyped as sexually aggressive (hyper-masculine) but also to a recognition that this stereotypical repetition creates the ideal Italian woman as the object of masculine sexual aggression. Only white women of Italian ethnicity—as the mothers, wives and daughters of Italian men—are reported and imagined as objects to be raped.

Women in Italy and anti-Romani discourse

When Italian women displace the threat of sexual violence on to the racial Other, they are voicing their fear of and anger at violence, and simultaneously constructing themselves as Italian women requiring the protection of Italian men. This is a space from which women can demand, and receive, better legislative and medical protection from sexual violence. Women can also hold racist views and claim a speaking position of ‘essential woman’ as potential rape victim. One example is Stefi, who describes herself on her popular blog as a thirty-three-year-old of mixed English-Sicilian heritage who studied law in Italy and lives in East London. I am not claiming that Stefi’s opinion is in any way representative of ‘all women’ or ‘all white women’, but simply that it is, like all positions, a singular one in which an individual is actively engaging with the available gendered and racialized discourse. Stefi argues—to a significant following on her blog—that race

53 Note that the man in the picture also seems to be attacking the neck of the woman with his mouth, alluding, perhaps, to the legend of the (Romanian) vampire Dracula, and to the association of Roma with the occult and black magic.
should be considered an aggravating feature in sexual assault, especially now (by her logic) that the Italian law recognizes gang rape and the age of the victim as aggravating features. She writes:

For most white women being raped by a black man would be a worse ordeal than being raped by a white man. So if the victim identifies her rapists [sic] race or nationality as significant to her, this ought to be reflected in the sentence. If that leaves a rapist feeling racially discriminated against—tough—DON’T RAPE!!!

Displacing the threat of sexual violence against all Italian women on to racially ‘other’ men enables Italian women of all age-groups and classes to unite in demanding Italian patriarchal protection as Italian women. It also enables Italian women to displace anxiety about their own role in the oppression and abuse of non-Italian women. Many thousands of Romanian

Figure 2  Forza Nuova poster in Rome, 2009. The caption reads: ‘What if she were your mother, your wife or your daughter? Close the nomad camps and expel the Roma now!’ Reproduced from the Forza Nuova Rome branch website at www.fnottavo.org/immagini.asp (viewed 31 August 2010).

and Albanian women have migrated primarily to work as carers in Italian homes since 1990. As discussed below, it is widely believed in Romania and Albania that these women face high levels of sexual harassment and violence with no practical recourse to the law.

To draw on another singular example, Silvana Pallotti is a sixty-five-year-old woman in Rome who spoke to journalists about why she joined a mixed-sex community security patrol with the declared aim of protecting women after the February 2009 rape in Caffarella Park. Pallotti stated: ‘I’m angry. I’m not racist, my maid is Romanian. But Romanian men are bad, they are all bandits.’ Pallotti mentions that she employs a Romanian woman as evidence of her lack of racism, and then continues to stereotype all Romanian men as ‘bandits’. Participation in a neighbourhood committee that surveils all Romanian men enables Italian women to claim protection as Italian women, beyond class and age-group. These community security patrols also enable Italian men, across class and age-group, to perform masculine ownership and protection of public space and Italian women.

In contemporary Italy we can consider the relevance of Susan Brownmiller’s classic conclusion that rape is the means by which all men intimidate all women. I am not saying that individuals do not contest hegemonic discourses; individuals (and organizations) most certainly do contest them in everyday acts of resistance. My aim here rather is to trace the powerful state-sanctioned and historically developed discourses through which all people in Italy are constructed, regardless of whether they agree.

What does Berlusconi gain by implying that the government’s role is to protect Italian women from the dangers of non-Italian masculinity in public space? These notions of both Italian masculinity and targeted ethnic groups shore up his and his government’s own performances of control over public space, including the women therein.

Nonetheless, even if women are successfully constructed as requiring the protection of the Italian patriarchy, their brothers, their boyfriends, the

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55 For a useful overview of Albanian and Romanian women workers in Italy, see Florentina Constantin, ‘Migrating or commuting? The case of Romanian workers in Italy: niches for labour commuting to the EU’, OSI EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program paper, 1 January 2004, available on the Open Society website at www.soros.org/resources/articles_publications/articles/romanian-workers-italy-20040101 (viewed 1 September 2010).


57 Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (New York: Simon and Schuster 1975). Brownmiller also highlights the intersectionality of race and gender, and rape as vital to the policing of both.

58 For just one article discussing the agency of women in Italy acting against their construction in racialized and gendered discourse, see Heather Merrill, ‘Space agents: anti-racist feminism and the politics of scale in Turin, Italy’, Gender, Place and Culture, vol. 11, no. 2, 2004, 189–204.
Italian men and women in community security patrols, the media as well as the government and military, there is no guarantee that they will be safe or even supported. The displacement of sexual violence on to non-Italian racial groups makes it even harder to find a space to discuss the reality of sexual violence occurring primarily in the home, in private space, at the same time as it contributes to driving Italian women out of public space. The media have not reported on how those Italian women who have been raped have fared, and the government has not provided any additional support for rape victims. On the contrary, the Italian woman, whose claims that a Romani girl stole her baby began the May 2008 attacks on Roma in Naples and occasioned the government’s ‘security package’, was subsequently derided in the press as hysterical and mentally ill. Likewise, the victim’s description of the perpetrators of the February 2009 rape did not match the identity of the men police arrested after racial profiling. But the media were focussed on the sensational narrative of non-Italian rapists and not on the fact that the safety of the victim (and other potential victims) and the demands of justice required that the police find the real attacker.

Sexual violence against Italian women has consistently been used to mobilize and justify the increasingly violent anti-Romani actions and legislation in Italy in recent years. These incidents and the responses to them have reconfigured race and gender in new constellations. The process is intrinsically gendered. It cannot happen without the simultaneous gendering of racialized groups: of non-Italian men as hyper-masculine (violent rapists) and Italian women as vulnerable, requiring the protection of Italian patriarchy in the form of legislation, the military and the newly formed community security patrols. In the Italian case of anti-Romani racism, gender cannot be considered as a separate frame of analysis, as a term signifying solely what happens to women. Gender is an analytical category as intrinsic to the analysis of racism itself as it is to the formation and use of racialized discourse in post-colonial Europe.

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