

Erbe: Domestic violence, a plague in U.S. and Italy

BONNIE ERBE - Scripps Howard News Service
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Domestic violence has reached epic proportions in Italy — so much so that Prime Minister Enrico Letta this month issued a 12-point legal decree imposing harsher penalties for perpetrators of all manner of such abuse, ranging from stalking to rape to murder.

But women's rights advocates in that country say the problem is not a lack of laws against domestic violence. It's a lack of charges against, and arrests and prosecutions of, the mostly male offenders, The New York Times recently reported. It is also a lack of resources to help women who are stuck in violent relationships get out and stay out.

This situation warrants attention for several reasons. First, Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world: an average of 1.4 children per woman as of last year (the replacement rate is at least 2.0). The reason for that is Italy also possesses a huge concentration of educated women. At one point in the past decade, it sported the highest rate of female PhDs in the world. An educated female populace is not as subject to high rates of domestic abuse as an uneducated one. When a woman can earn a good living on her own, she's less likely to be trapped in an abusive relationship. She has options. She can leave.

Italy's domestic violence problem is similar to our own. It worsened during the great recession, reaching historic levels, according to a

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experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime," it said. The findings "underscore the heavy toll that sexual violence, stalking and intimate-partner violence" places on its victims. "Violence often begins at an early age and commonly leads to negative health consequences across the lifespan."

American women are raped with horrifying frequency. The CDC's survey found that nearly one in five U.S. women have experienced rape or attempted rape sometime in their lives.

When attempting to explain societal violence, one easily conjures the following: poverty, lack of education, a denigration of women by violent movies, videos and so on. Those elements are all present in American culture. I'm not sure whether they all apply in Italy or not. But one unexpected factor does tie our domestic violence plague to theirs.



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Earlier this month, a report published in the journal Science found that climate change (and the more virulent storms and rising temperatures it produces) is tied to increasing violence around the world, including increased domestic violence.

The report, by researchers at Princeton University and the University of California at Berkeley, "found similar patterns of conflict around the world that were linked to changes in climate, such as increased drought or higher-than-average annual temperature. Examples include spikes in domestic violence in India and Australia; increased assaults and murders in the United States and Tanzania. ..."

That is quite a mouthful, I understand. But it also provides some insight into otherwise inexplicable events: the senseless murder of an Australian tourist in Oklahoma this week by three teenagers self-described as "bored," or domestic violence in U.S. homes, or the murder of a Sicilian woman by her ex-husband in front of their son and the man's subsequent taking of his own life.

There must be a common thread to such insanity. Perhaps climate change is it.

(Bonnie Erbe, host of PBS' "To the Contrary," writes this column for Scripps Howard News Service. Email bonnie.scrippshoward@gmail.com. See shns.com.)

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