



# Femicide: A social challenge

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Femicide is more than a neologism – it signifies death and violence. The term denotes a violent phenomenon; moreover, it designates murder with intent. All femicides are expressions of extreme violence – death at the hands of another human being. Femicide is, above all, a lethal crime perpetrated against a woman or girl. Different institutions around the world (the United Nations, World Health Organization, Council of Europe, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, to mention but a few) are now striving to combat this terrible phenomenon, in its local and global dimensions.

Several authors (e.g. Campbell and Runyan, 1998; Lagarde et al., 2010; Radford and Russell, 1992; Russell and Harmes, 2001), as well as institutions, have urged that this specific type of murder should be distinguished from homicide, but this is not solely an issue of nomenclature. Initially, femicide denoted a political intention, as we shall see in this Special Issue. Subsequently, it came to represent not only a feminist targeting of patriarchal hegemony, but also a significant global challenge of a major order (cf. *Femicide: A Global Issue that Demands Action*, edited by Laurent et al., 2013). It is the duty of all to eradicate violence in all its dimensions, especially when the outcomes are death, injury and injustice.

A long trail of significant milestones, in the literature on femicide, point to the relevance of clarity in the distinction between ‘simple’ murders and femicides. If all

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murders are defined as homicides, we thereby conceal important details of this form of extreme violence. This is not a gender or a feminist issue: words permit us to perceive and understand the world and our daily life; we similarly require accurate conceptualization to relate to and develop scientific findings. In its origins, the use of the term 'femicide' signalled political connotations. As we shall read in this Special Issue, this particular leitmotif originated in the mid-1970s with impetus from Diana E Russell, to be taken up in the 1990s by J Campbell in the USA, R and R Dobash in the UK, with an adaptation to the Mexican and Latin American context offered by M Lagarde and JE Monarrez Fragoso.

This Special Issue addresses international perspectives on femicide, considering theoretical explanations, empirical analyses and public policies; it incorporates articles from different perspectives, different countries and embracing different theoretical approaches. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first Special Issue on Femicide within the discipline of sociology. As an interdisciplinary issue, it sets a challenge to professionals and humankind as a whole: we hope it will prove a significant step forward towards establishing convergence in research clarity and a consensus on definitions, drawing together a structured corpus of knowledge that can help improve the efficacy of policies for femicide prevention.

The COST Action IS1206 initiative, entitled 'Femicide Across Europe'<sup>1</sup> has enabled us to promote this issue. This group forms a network of 78 experts from 30 countries, forming a pan-European coalition on femicide.

## **A lethal phenomenon: Zero tolerance**

Paraphrasing Ray (2011: 127), femicide constitutes the most extreme form of violence against women and girls. It occurs in many parts of the world; in fact, few societies are free of it. There are, however, a number of prevalent forms, as stated by the WHO, 'Femicide is usually perpetrated by men, but sometimes female family members may be involved. Femicide differs from male homicide in specific ways. For example, most cases of femicide are committed by partners or ex-partners, and involve ongoing abuse in the home, threats or intimidation, sexual violence or situations where women have less power or fewer resources than their partner' (World Health Organization, 2012: Box 1).

To external observers, femicide might be interpreted simply as 'senseless violence'; however, this ostensibly 'senseless' condition implicitly denotes and refers to a cultural pattern that has an underlying rationale. The concept of femicide arose specifically in opposition to the 'reasonability' of this extreme form of violence against women – not only within patriarchal social systems, but also in any other cultural contexts where it is 'justified'. For the most part, femicides occur in the private sphere, concealed from the public eye. Prevention of these deliberate murders requires they be rendered visible. Traditionally, femicide in the home enjoyed something akin to the principle of non-intervention – families as independent republics – each home with its own rules; nobody had the right to comment or interfere. However, in many countries, the domestic space is no longer a zone free for privatizing violent behaviours. Since femicide was named, there has ceased to be any place for the inviolability of the home. Femicide overrides the imagery of inviolability (McClain, 1995) and neutrality in the face of this violence.

According to Elias (1994), the civilization process encircles violence and transforms this type of phenomenon into despicable and abject behaviour. In a Weberian view, only the state – as rule of law – has the right to exert the monopoly of violence. However, this expulsion and rejection of violence from the public setting should also be applied to domestic, familial and intimate violence. Moreover, violence should not be tolerated in any form beyond the legal, nor should it be legitimized under the rule of law. For the same reason, the concealment of intimate violence should be held to be unacceptable: concurrence on this precept would open a new portal to the eradication of femicide. There is patent need for the visible protection of women and girls, even where it involves intervention within the family, home, or honour patterns, in order to protect potential victims from their aggressors. Article 12 of Human Rights Declaration<sup>2</sup> could be rewritten to include an additional point: *No one shall invoke his/her privacy, family, home or correspondence, or his/her honour and reputation to exert any kind of violence against any other member of his/her family, especially to women or girls.* Private violence is no longer a private business; it is a public and global issue.

There remains, however, a problem of consensual definitions in this connection, because there is no extant, internationally instituted canon on femicide. Furthermore, femicide presents some particularities in different languages and social contexts. Therefore, although freedom and equity underpin this fight against murder with intent, theoretical and practical contributions from both sociology and social sciences are still required, in order to facilitate the best course of action to confront this lethal phenomenon.

## A step forward

We converge with the opinion of those pioneers in the study of femicide who maintain that it is crucial to name this phenomenon, to theorize and to identify its circumstances, as well as the imaginaries and social contexts of this misogynous and criminal practice. In this issue, readers will find two types of contributions. On the one hand, we bring discussions at a theoretical level. On the other, we offer situated and contextualized analysis. These are essentially intertwined: the threads of an unfolding narrative, directed towards presenting the challenge of visibility as a crucial landmark in the development of both awareness and prevention.

At the outset, the article by Consuelo Corradi et al. delves into *theories of femicide and their significance for social research*. Femicide is reviewed as a neologism, from its origins through its recent developments. It could be expressed as ‘an effort in sociological imagination that has been successful in transforming conventional perception, public awareness, scientific research and policy making’. The aim of this article is to ‘propose a framework where femicide is understood as a social phenomenon that demands an interdisciplinary approach’. Prevention requires a systemic, rather than a simplistic approach, founded in coherent and consistent theoretical foundations.

*Femicide is a more than a criminal behaviour.* It encompasses a cultural, political, legal and penal framework. Myrna Dawson’s article focuses on the *criminal justice responses to the killing of women over four decades, as a fact of punishing femicide*. Over the last decade, there has been a growth in the range and number of policies and

instruments to help and attend women, provide intervention in femicide and in instances of violence against women. Canada is one example that illustrates how specific legislation and legislative and policy initiatives have dealt with the phenomenon and with the dearth of reliable data. Following Dawson, 'priorities for future research that address the role played by dominant stereotypes in punishment related to particular types of femicide as well as some women's increased risks' should be highlighted.

The *transformation of femicide from an academic concept into a frame for political struggle, and into a crime in the context of Mexican feminist activism against the murders of women* is the focus of the contribution by Paulina García-Del Moral. The voices of activists delineate a path for a transnational advocacy and the modes of interaction between the transnational and local levels. She employs the concepts of 'Ferree's work on the "resonance" and "radicalism" of feminist frames' (Ferree, 2003, 2012) to analyse '*feminicidios*' in the Mexican context where, after institutionalization, state and society are now situated in a different position in terms of the management of violence and justice.

As stated earlier, femicide is the most lethal form of violence against women. Magdalena Grzyb (2016) proposes an *explanation of honour-related killings of women in Europe through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and masculine domination*. She discusses and explains *the dynamics of violence against women in migrant communities in Europe*, evaluating honour as a symbolic reference. In many aspects, this violence is a result of a cultural clash where symbolic patriarchal power is undermined by other structural and social conditions.

It is precisely the structural and systemic conditions that play a primordial role in the Mexican context, where 'femicide' is translated as 'feminicidio', broadening its context and meaning with the concept of impunity and a particular state's action. Martha Patricia Castañeda Salgado analyses *femicide in Mexico, through academic, activist and artistic work*. She dissects 'feminicidios' as an interwoven outcome of 'increasing social and structural violence in Mexico', adopting academic, activist and artistic approaches from a feminist point of view.

Alongside this, Daniela Bandelli and Giorgio Porcelli propose a counterpoint with their article, '*Femminicidio*' in Italy: *a critique of feminist gender discourse and constructivist reading of the human identity*, going beyond the feminist gender discourse on femicide. They utilize Foucault's theory of biopolitics and Habermas's theory of the public sphere to argue that 'the hegemonic gender interpretation of femicide reflects the specific vantage point of feminist groups while it is not the result of any inclusive public reflections on the causes of this social phenomenon'. They consider that the gender discourse of femicide contributes to 'the advancement of a social constructivist paradigm in the interpretation of self in postmodern society'.

Janet Stamatel proposes a complementary contribution from data analysis with her article on *the effects of detrimental drinking patterns and drug use on female homicide victimization rates across Europe*. She focuses on national-level patterns of alcohol and drug use. Stamatel takes these as predictors, controlling for other known structural correlates. Her findings show that 'cultural drinking patterns were not significantly related to female homicide victimization in this sample of countries, but detrimental drug use was'.

Augusto Gnisci and Antonio Pace provide a critical and methodological article, *Lethal domestic violence as a sequential process: beyond the traditional regression approach to risk factors*. They address risk factors, broadening the variables to account for and assess sequential behavioural patterns as a concept to study *femicide as a dynamic process*.

Finally, one of the most important challenges is *making femicide visible*, as Shalva Weil describes. She proposes seven hypotheses to explore femicide and the sociological vision and literature on this topic. Weil ‘postulates possible reasons for the invisibility of the phenomenon, such as the unpleasantness of the subject, scope, its conception as a radical feminist idea, fuzziness, its identification with other concepts like genocide, and methodological difficulties in researching it because of the impossibility of researching dead women first-hand, missing data and the difficulties in comparing data cross-nationally’. The challenge is to enhance the visibility of femicide in societies and in social sciences, in general, and sociology, in particular.

## Implications for the future

At different COST Action IS1206 meetings on ‘Femicide across Europe’, we reached the conclusion that the demarcation and definition of femicide beyond its pristine political target are important, but not critical. Death and crimes remain, independent of their definitions. However, we, as human beings, need to have clear definitions in order to function, analyse contexts and data scientifically, and underpin public policies and social strategies, to allow us to work to eradicate this form of violent crime. This represents a challenge for all the social sciences, with sociologists leading the field and having the capacity to build a robust theoretical framework that will allow us consider, understand, transform and steer current global pathology.

This Special Issue is a modest attempt to raise the awareness of people and specialists who encounter femicide and to create both a way to take action and a substantive dialogue among them. We need to show the consequences of invisibility, to demonstrate the social impact of non-action far more emphatically – and we need to convince the different sectors to collaborate on policy changes that could save women’s and girls’ lives. Femicide prevention demands a context-based, systemic approach that is both top-down and grass-roots oriented, to build a better and clearer picture of what is happening. This, in turn, will contribute towards the implementation of evidence-based public policies and practice. As human beings, we are called to improve life for one another. Femicide has to be completely eradicated.

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## Notes

1. See more information at: [www.cost.eu/COST\\_Actions/isch/IS1206](http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS1206) (accessed 1 February 2016).
2. It states: ‘No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.’

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## Author biographies

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Consuelo Corradi is Professor of Sociology and Vice-Rector for Research at Lumsa University, Rome, Italy. She holds a PhD in sociology and a master's in social research from the University of Rome, La Sapienza. In 2010–2012, she was the principal investigator in an Italian Ministry of Research funded study on violence in close proximity. In addition, she is partner or consultant senior expert in EU funded projects on gang violence, rape, femicide and intimate partner violence. She is Vice-Chair of the COST Action Femicide Across Europe network, 2013–2017. Her current research interests concern femicide prevention, including intimate partner homicide, and the

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Shalva Weil is a graduate of the LSE (Hons.) and Sussex University, UK. She is Senior Researcher at the Research Institute for Innovation in Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel and Research Fellow in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, at UNISA (University of South Africa). She specializes in migration, ritual, ethnicity, gender and violence. She has published 80 articles in scientific journals, including *European Societies*, *Man*, *Human Organisation*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and *Ethnic Groups*. Her books include: *India's Jewish Heritage* (Marg), *Karmic Passages* (co-edited with David Shulman; Oxford University Press) and *Roots and Routes: Ethnicity and Migration in Global Perspective* (Magnes). Shalva Weil has served as Executive Member of the European Sociological Association (ESA); Chair of the ESA Qualitative Methods RN (Research Network) 20; Board Member of the ESA Gender RN 33; and Editor of the ESA's Newsletter *European Sociologist*. Dr Weil runs an empowerment programme for slum migrant women of Caucasian origin in Israel. She has researched intimate partner femicide among Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. She serves as Chair of the COST Action IS1206 on Femicide Across Europe, coordinating 30 countries to combat femicide, and is a contributor to the ACUNS publications *Femicide 3* and *4*.

Santiago Boira graduated in psychology from the University of Salamanca, Spain and received his PhD from the University of Zaragoza, Spain. He is lecturer in the Department of Psychology and Sociology at the University of Zaragoza. His research interests focus on gender issues, intimate partner violence and men abusers. Some of his recent publications include: 'Fear, conformity and silence: Intimate partner violence in rural areas of Ecuador' (*Psychosocial Intervention*, 2015), 'Difficulties, skills and therapy strategies in interventions with court-ordered batterers in Spain' (*Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2013), 'Male abuser: Type of violence and perception of the relationship with the victim' (*Psychological Reports*, 2013) and *Hombres maltratadores. Historias de violencia masculina* (2010). He is a member of the network Femicide Across Europe, COST Action IS1206. He is also researcher of the Group of Social and Economic Studies of the Third Sector (GESES). At present he is carrying out research on femicide and domestic violence in the Andean region funded by the Government of Ecuador.

## Résumé

Le fémicide est plus qu'un néologisme. Il désigne un phénomène violent et un meurtre intentionnel. Tous les fémicides sont l'expression d'une forme extrême de violence. Il s'agit d'une « pathologie sociale ». Nous devons donc lutter à l'échelle locale et mondiale contre ces crimes atroces et méprisables. Peu de sociétés sont épargnées par cette forme de violence. Nous devons donc décrire, analyser et rendre compte de ce phénomène. Cet article explore les différentes approches internationales du fémicide en insistant sur les explications théoriques, les analyses empiriques et les politiques publiques. Il réunit des articles représentatifs des différents pays et des différentes perspectives et approches théoriques. En raison de son caractère interdisciplinaire, ce thème pose un défi aux professionnels et au public : nous espérons donc que ce travail permettra d'établir des convergences sur les résultats de la recherche, de dégager un consensus sur les définitions et de rassembler un corpus de connaissances structurées capables d'améliorer l'efficacité des politiques de prévention des fémicides. À partir des

travaux consacrés à ce sujet particulier, nous proposons de construire un discours à même de fournir aux professionnels les moyens nécessaires et le cadre cohérent pour élaborer les futures politiques de prévention des féminicides. L'appropriation multiple des résultats substantiels de cette étude permettra également des avancées.

### **Mots-clés**

Fémicide, feminicidio, violence contre les femmes, pathologie sociale, violence, questions sociales complexes

### **Resumen**

El feminicidio es más que un neologismo. El femicidio se refiere a un fenómeno violento, es más, designa el asesinato con intención. Todos los femicidios son expresiones de violencia extrema. Son de una "patología social". Tenemos que luchar contra este fenómeno atroz y despreciable en sus dimensiones local y global. Se produce en muchas partes del mundo; de hecho, pocas sociedades están libres de él. Para ello es necesario describir, analizar e informar. Aquí nos ocupamos de las perspectivas internacionales sobre femicidio, teniendo en cuenta las explicaciones teóricas sobre el femicidio, considerando análisis empíricos y las políticas públicas; incorporamos artículos de diferentes perspectivas, diferentes países y abarcando diferentes enfoques teóricos. Como un asunto interdisciplinario, establece un reto para los profesionales y la humanidad en su conjunto: esperamos que sea un importante paso adelante hacia el establecimiento de la convergencia en la claridad de investigación y un consenso sobre las definiciones, reuniendo un cuerpo estructurado de conocimientos que pueden ayudar a mejorar la eficacia de las políticas para la prevención del femicidio. Traemos aquí una construcción del discurso que emerge de las contribuciones a este número especial, que tiene el potencial para capacitar a los profesionales y servir como una plataforma coherente para las políticas futuras de prevención femicidio. El cambio puede ser implementado a través de la apropiación múltiple de estos hallazgos significativos.

### **Palabras clave**

Femicidio, feminicidio, violencia contra la mujer, patología social, violencia, problemas sociales complejos