



Article

# Theories of femicide and their significance for social research

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## Abstract

Almost four decades have passed since the term femicide was coined in 1976. This new word had a political purpose, in that it intended to produce changes in the social order which tolerated the violent death of women. Since that time, the word has generated a theoretical concept that encompasses the killing of a woman as a specific social phenomenon. Femicide is an effort in sociological imagination that has been successful in transforming conventional perception, public awareness, scientific research and policy making. This article undertakes to review how femicide has evolved in social research. It analyses the most important theories explaining femicide: the feminist, sociological, criminological, human rights and decolonial research approaches and their theoretical significance. It discusses Mexico as a case study, exemplifying how a new English term was then translated into another language and applied in a very specific socio-political context, so that it became instrumental in changing reality and improving the lives of women. Finally, the article proposes a framework where femicide is understood as a social phenomenon that demands an interdisciplinary approach. The authors

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recommend a systemic, multifaceted model in order to improve both scientific analysis and prevention.

### Keywords

Female homicide victimization, femicide, *feminicidio*, theories of violence, violence against women

## Introduction

Almost four decades have passed since Diana Russell coined the word ‘femicide’, during the proceedings of the First International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels, which she organized jointly with Nicole van de Ven, in March 1976. The ostensible goal of this new word was to raise awareness that the violent death of women was a crime per se, not to be confused with the gender-neutral term ‘homicide’. It had a political purpose, in that it intended to produce effects in the prevailing manner of understanding the violent death of women and produce changes in the social order which legitimized or tolerated those deaths. Since that time, and owing to joint efforts by Russell, Radford and Harmes (Radford and Russell, 1992; Russell and Harmes, 2001), the word has generated a theoretical concept, which has sought to reverse the structuring forms of patriarchal power and its correlates within the social system.

Although Russell states explicitly that the word ‘femicide’ is no more political than other terms, such as exploitation, domination or oppression, which so flourish in sociological theory, she acknowledges that her primary aim was to mobilize against something that had been invisible thus far. As Russell herself emphasizes: ‘You can’t mobilize against something with no name’ (Russell, 2015, personal communication). In this way, she is placing herself (albeit implicitly) within the school of thought which claims that naming the world produces changes in reality. For the ‘politics of naming’ (Bathia, 2005; Mamdani, 2007; Triano, 2010), words give meaning to the world, shape reality and produce social and political changes (Rivera, 2005).

In this article, we undertake to review ‘what’s in a name?’: the famous question Juliet asks Romeo, which encapsulates the central motif of Shakespeare’s well-known tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. ‘That which we call a rose’ – continues Juliet – ‘by any other name would smell as sweet’. Here, the young woman is questioning a name as a purely artificial convention that does not change the essential characteristics of the designated object: implicitly, she is refusing to accept that her and Romeo’s family names should present an obstacle to their passionate love. Unlike Juliet, we believe that the notion of ‘femicide’ has transformed conventional perception, public awareness, scientific research and policy making. In the first section of this article, we address its origin and etymology and analyse how femicide appeared and then evolved in sociological enquiry. In the second section, we ask whether femicide is useful and in what way, by reviewing five theoretical approaches: feminist, sociological, criminological, human rights and decolonial. What does ‘femicide’ describe that is lost by using other gender-neutral terms, such as: killing, murder, manslaughter or homicide? In the third section, we illustrate the Ciudad Juárez

case study as an empirical example of how this new term was translated from English into another language, applied in a very specific socio-political context, and how it disseminated and contributed to raising awareness in the Latin American region. Finally, because femicide is a complex phenomenon, in the last section we propose a systemic, multifaceted model to improve both scientific analysis and prevention.

## **Beyond the gender-neutral ‘homicide’**

In English, homicide is a noun etymologically deriving from Latin that combines two words: *homo*, man, and *caedere*, slaying. In Latin, the root *homo* belongs to the masculine gender, but in English (as well as in Spanish, Italian, French and many other modern languages), homicide is conceived as being gender-neutral: ‘the killing of a human being by another person’ (*Collins English Dictionary*, 1993), thus applying to both male and female victims. The groundbreaking contribution by Radford and Russell was to emphasize that *homicide* deletes from the sociological eye that special, gender-based evidence of woman-killing, which is different from the murder of men. Radford and Russell’s proposal was a brilliant effort of sociological imagination, in that it brought to light the differential fact of women’s violent death in a very poignant way, thus reframing it in terms of a special social and political problem. In the 1970s, this proposal formed part of a battle on several grounds, which involved reorganization of the basic structures of society, and emphasis placed on the fight against male domination and sexism (Freeman, 1972). As Rivera maintains: ‘Naming the world means putting into words what is, what was, what will be ... in order not to succumb to the crude determinism of things. It is a practice which gives order, which gives order to me’ (Rivera, 2005: 1160). Tangible and overt forms of the world around us become part of social reality, as soon as we assign words that identify and add socially meaningful content to what is ‘out there’ for us.

In 1992, in the first anthology published on femicide with Russell, Radford defines the word as the misogynous killing of women by men, motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure or a sense of ownership of women, thus to be investigated ‘in the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society’ (Radford, 1992a: 3). Even if men are murdered more frequently than women, they ‘are rarely murdered simply because they are men’ (Radford, 1992a: 10). Femicide – claims Radford – occurs in patriarchal societies, characterized by male dominance and female subordination, through ‘social and political construction of masculinity as active and aggressive and the social construction of femininity as receptive and passive’ (Radford, 1992a: 8). For Radford it has many different forms, such as racist femicide (when black women are killed by white men), homophobic femicide (when lesbian women are killed), marital femicide and femicide committed by a stranger. When women die from botched abortions, when female babies are killed more often than male babies, when female children are neglected or starved, one should also use the term femicide (Radford, 1992a: 7).

The 1992 anthology on femicide is scattered but very rich. It presents 41 chapters written by 34 single or joint-authors, ranging from ‘domestic’ femicide in the US, racist lethal violence against African-American women and contemporary serial killing of women, to witch-hunting and lesbicide in the past, and international instances, such as the Indian rite of *suttee*, i.e. the burning of brides and widows. In the conclusion, Radford

reinforces the political thrust of this book whose purpose – she writes – is ‘to name femicide and to identify it as an urgent issue for feminist and others concerned with violence against women’ (Radford, 1992b: 351). She cites her work with Kelly, claiming that sexual violence is used by men to punish and police women, so that they behave in particular ways (Radford, 1992b: 353). One could say that Radford and Russell did not want ‘to succumb to the crude determinism of things’.

The first scientific article explicitly devoted to femicide also appeared in 1992, authored by Karen Stout. Stout examines ‘factors within ecological settings which may be associated with the killing of women by male intimate partners’ (Stout, 1992a: 29). She claims that an ecological framework allows the opportunity to merge feminist world-views with more traditional models on homicide and other forms of violence. After a detailed theoretical discussion of the different micro, meso and macro systems, Stout analyses secondary data collected in numerous archival records and statistics in each of the 50 US states. She explores the quantitative correlation between the rate of intimate femicide and the victim’s age, marital and employment status, the rate of rape, and the presence of crisis centres and shelters. In conclusion, she argues that her study provides a foundation upon which future studies can build, as it ‘has clearly named and identified intimate femicide as a social problem meriting attention and action’ (Stout, 1992a: 43). It is very interesting to note that while from the opening lines of the article Stout equates femicide to the killing of women by male intimate partners, she never defines femicide explicitly, nor does she give credit to definitions formerly available in scientific literature. In the anthology edited by Radford and Russell, she is the author of a chapter on intimate femicide (Stout, 1992b: 133–140).

Very few works used the term ‘femicide’ prior to 1992.<sup>1</sup> After 1992, both the notion of and research on femicide expanded throughout scientific literature, and sought to describe, analyse and prevent the phenomenon of the violent death of women. The complexity of this transnational phenomenon forces us to rethink how the study and its formulation were reached because, as Bhatia indicates, ‘the power of a name is such that the process by which the name was selected generally disappears and a series of normative associations, motives and characteristics are attached to the named subject’ (Bathia, 2005: 8).

One of the basic claims of sociology is that social actions are meaningful; therefore, processes of social change have always been accompanied by socially plausible ways of renaming the transformed world. If appropriate words were not available, they needed to be invented and the mere act of pronouncing a provocative term became a revolutionary event, which was transgressive of the social order. If the term is strong, namely if it captures aspects of reality that were previously indiscernible by mainstream scholarship or stereotyped perceptions, it then begins circulating and disseminating in different contexts. Subsequently, it is no longer the exclusive property of the author. Something has happened: the new term is thriving, and this demonstrates that it has a strong notion embedded within it. Alvazzi Del Frate is possibly describing this evolution in language when she says: ‘While the concept has drawn attention to the special ways in which women are selectively targeted, the definition has progressively become diluted and confused’ (Alvazzi Del Frate, 2011: 116). For Alvazzi Del Frate, a generalized use of femicide has introduced a loss of political thrust: ‘The broadening of the definition may be

connected to a growing interest in generating quantitative information of violence against women to facilitate comparability across countries and jurisdictions' (Alvazzi Del Frate, 2011: 116).

## The theoretical underpinnings of femicide in contemporary theory

Is 'femicide' useful for contemporary sociological theory? What does it describe that is lost by using other gender-neutral terms, such as: killing, murder, manslaughter or homicide? Both the anthology edited by Radford and Russell (1992) and the paper authored by Stout (1992a) were seminal works, in that they laid the foundations for further investigation.

From that point on, researchers have followed different approaches to the analysis of femicide:

1. A feminist approach, which confronts patriarchal domination at the same time as it investigates the killing of women;
2. A sociological approach, which focuses on the examination of the features special to the killing of women that make it a phenomenon, per se;
3. A criminological approach, which distinguishes femicide as a unique sector in 'homicide' studies;
4. A human rights approach, which extends femicide beyond the *lethal* and into *extreme* forms of violence against women; and
5. A decolonial approach, which examines instances of femicide in the context of colonial domination, including so-called 'honour crimes'.

We adopt the strong term of 'research approach' advisedly (rather than simply, 'strand' or 'context') because it encapsulates basic, theoretical connotations that single out and define a special domain of enquiry. For analytical purposes, we review each approach separately, although there is a fair degree of overlap among them. Feminism has proved successful in mainstreaming gender in sociology, criminology and decolonial studies. Culture is the basic tenet of both decolonial and sociological theory – and a vision of society's structural inequality always underlies the study of gender, crime and human rights.

*The feminist approach* to femicide is not confined entirely to political mobilization. Since 1976, and owing to a wealth of now classical women's studies (Cameron and Frazer, 1987; Caputi, 1987; Russell and Harnes, 2001), this approach has been part and parcel of scholarly literature. The basic underpinning of this approach is the notion of patriarchy, namely, a society that is male-dominated and thus oppressive and lethal for women. According to proponents, 'oppressive views of women are not only culturally sanctioned but also embedded in and expressed through all social institutions' (Taylor and Jasinski, 2011: 342). The fundamental tenet of patriarchy is power; where power is distributed unequally between men and women, violence is the tool men use to keep women under their control. The power tenet is not exclusive to femicide; it has been applied to studies on capitalism, the welfare state, gender regimes and citizenship

(Kantola, 2006; Orloff, 1993; Walby, 1990, 2015). Violence as an outcome of the unequal distribution of power has also been extended to femicide from studies on the more general phenomenon of violence against women (Hester et al., 1995).

The feminist approach's strong argument is founded in hard facts, namely: the rates of violence against women, rape and femicide, as well as the unequal distribution of the employment rate, cost of paid labour and status between genders, which are still prevalent throughout societies in both the global North and South. The weak argument is a difficulty in perceiving change, as male status has been greatly modified since the 1970s, thanks to feminist mobilization: if 'gender stratification shaped both the situational and motivational contexts for female homicide victimization' (Taylor and Jasinski, 2011: 346), what happens when gender stratification changes?

A second weakness is operational. How can we capture the misogynist motivation, the assumption that this particular woman was murdered, 'simply because she is a woman'? (Bloom, 2008: 147). We either assume that the mere fact of belonging to the female gender makes any woman a potential victim – however, this would amount to a very generic hypothesis with little empirical significance; or we demand further details on the perpetrator's motives, his relationship with the victim and the circumstances of the event. As Bloom highlights: 'Most commonly, women die at the hands of an intimate partner. Other forms of femicide include dowry-related deaths, "honour" crimes, and sexual violence. Measuring femicide is problematic for a number of reasons related to the data available. If the murder is recorded in the criminal justice system it may be impossible to tell why or how it took place' (Bloom, 2008: 147).

*The sociological approach* to femicide looks at detailed empirical evidence of the killing of women. Since the mid-1990s, authors have moved in a different direction from Radford and Russell, and they are more in line with Stout's article of 1992. Sociology investigates not violent *individuals*, but violent *situations*, 'the contours of situations, which shape the emotions and acts of the individuals who step inside them' (Collins, 2008: 1). A turning point in developing this approach was the 1998 guest editors' introduction to a special journal issue on femicide. Campbell and Runyan recognize the merits of the advocacy perspective for sensitizing the public. But without clear support from available data, they avoid imputing a misogynist motive and argue that femicide is the homicide of women, regardless of the perpetrator's motive or status (Campbell and Runyan, 1998: 347; see also Campbell, 2008: 57). In this case, empirical research aims at identifying contexts, types of cases, perpetrators' profiles and murder incidents where gender relations play an important role, but they are not the only explanation. A similar approach is used by Frye and associates in New York City (Frye et al., 2005), Dobash and Dobash (2008) in the UK, Gonzalez-Mendez and Santana-Hernandez (2012) in Spain, Iezzi (2010) and Corradi (2014) in Italy, and Titterton (2006) in the USA.

All these authors seek a diagnosis of cases and contexts, in order to establish how to prevent the violent death of women in an effective manner. They strive to understand the killing of women by qualitative or quantitative data collection and aim to identify risk factors, in order to prevent lethal violence. The main tenet of the sociological approach to femicide is that women and men are murdered in very different social circumstances and by different types of perpetrator. The fact that a high rate of women are killed by their intimate partners, or in a family setting, while a high rate of men are killed in a

non-intimate or family setting, makes femicide a social phenomenon per se. 'Scholars must examine more carefully the distinctive characteristics associated with the killing of women versus men' (Campbell and Runyan, 1998: 348).

The *criminological approach* to femicide emerged after the turn of the millennium and has recently expanded into the fields of epidemiology and public health research. However, increasing interest in the phenomenon has not always been paralleled by an increased, clear-cut use of the term femicide. In the extant scientific literature, we can distinguish different ways of denoting the same social event.

One cohort of studies applies the term femicide broadly, to indicate the killing of a woman (Bonanni et al., 2014; Campbell et al., 2003; Mouzos, 1999; Muftic and Baumann, 2012). Most of the authors emphasize that only adult women fall into this category, although the age from which a female is deemed to be adult varies in fact between 15 and 19.

Another focuses on 'intimate partner femicide' as a more accurate term used to designate the most frequent situation in which an adult woman is killed (Dixon et al., 2008; Frye et al., 2008; Taylor and Jasinski, 2011).

However, a different group refers to 'intimate partner homicide', generally implying that this is a special sub-set of the more general field of homicide studies (Campbell et al., 2007; Corradi and Stöckl, 2014; Dugan et al., 2003; Stöckl et al., 2013; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2012). An expert group prefers the term 'female homicide victimization' (Pridemore and Freilich, 2005; Stamatel, 2014; Titterton, 2006).

Finally, we encounter a heterogeneous group of authors who have further innovated terminology by using a range of terms, such as: 'lethal intimate partner violence' (Dobash and Dobash, 2011), 'women homicide offending' (Deweese and Parker, 2003), 'women victims of lethal violence' (Dobash et al., 2007), 'women dying from IPV' (Abrahams et al., 2009) and 'fatal intimate partner violence' (Pereira et al., 2013).

All these studies enter into meticulous detail, in terms of specifying age, race group, citizenship of victims, level of gender equality and beyond. They focus, in particular, on the relationship between victim and offender that singles out the killing of a female, as opposed to a male victim. However, they take definitions for granted and do not discuss any variation in terminology. Authors using the terms 'femicide' or 'intimate partner femicide', either explicitly or implicitly, place themselves in the feminist framework. One of the most recent, significant efforts in criminology, the *Handbook of European Homicide Research* (Liem and Pridemore, 2013), never mentions femicide, but does analyse 'female homicide'. The work is tacit testimony to the fact that mainstream criminology tends towards the conservative on this issue, preferring 'intimate partner homicide' and its many variations, to the groundbreaking, and more innovative, 'femicide'.

Following Stout's (1992a) suggestion that femicide be studied within an ecological, multilevel framework, researchers integrate the analysis of macro-level processes (such as evolution of gender equality, employment, immigration and policies) with a specific event, victim and offender characteristics. Examples of this theoretical complexity are, inter alia, Dugan et al.'s (2003) analysis of the effects of levels of domestic violence resources on intimate partner homicide in 48 large US cities; Muftic and Baumann's (2012) exploration of similarities and differences between female-perpetrated and male-perpetrated femicide incidents; and Stamatel's (2014) discussion of differences in the

levels of female homicides and gender dynamics across 33 European countries. Notwithstanding the variation in terminology, there is a consensus among researchers: a history of domestic violence has been found to characterize no fewer than 50% of intimate partner femicides; the strongest predictors of lethal risk are detected at the individual level; advances in gender equity tend to decrease the risk, with a potential backlash occurring when women begin to attain equal status with men.

In the last decade, and especially after the 1993 UN General Assembly affirmed that violence against women constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedom of women, *the human rights approach* to femicide has also emerged. In 2012, alarmed by the fact that femicide was increasing all over the world and remained unpunished, ACUNS, the Academic Council of the United Nations system, organized the first Symposium on Femicide in Vienna. The goal of this seminar was to urge member states to undertake institutional initiatives to improve femicide prevention and provision of legal protection for violence survivors. In keeping with its broad aims, ACUNS describes femicide as a wide-ranging phenomenon, comprising murder, as well as torture, honour killing, dowry-related killing, infanticide and gender-based pre-natal selection, genital mutilation and human trafficking. To date, ACUNS has brought out three publications on femicide as a global phenomenon (Domazetoska et al., 2014; Filip and Platzer 2015; Laurent et al., 2013) and is in the planning stages of a fourth.

*The decolonial approach* to femicide has been championed by researchers such as Shalhoub-Kevorkian, particularly within the context of Middle East and North African (henceforth MENA) countries, and in relation to ‘crimes of family honour’. According to Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002), the criminal justice system, as well as the external socio-cultural context in MENA countries, contributes to exonerating the perpetrators of femicide – while the female victims are themselves often blamed for the criminal actions, and sometimes killed as a result. Crimes perpetrated against women in such countries as Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority (PA) are considered to be private, rather than public issues, and deemed to belong within the realm of the family. For example, in the Jordanian Penal Code, also applied in Israel’s West Bank, males receive reduced penalties, while premeditated murder can benefit from ‘mitigating circumstances’: males were sometimes exempted from punishment. In her research in the PA, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002) discovered deliberate misinterpretations of the evidence, as well as exoneration from blame being granted to perpetrators. She attributes the discriminatory legal practices to the external social and political pressures exerted on the judicial system, which needed to address ‘more important’ issues than honour crimes. In one case, the accomplice was released, while the murderer was given a light sentence. ‘Serving a nation under a political banner becomes a license to kill females, in order to preserve the honor of those who claim to have been part of the struggle’ (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002: 597).

Following Leila Ahmed’s classic formulation (1992), Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2003) pursues the idea that the discourse of colonial domination by the West has turned some practices, such as ‘honour killings’, into a symbol of resistance to the colonizers. Therefore, in a colonial situation, relying on an analysis of Islamic culture or of Western culture is overly simplistic. She proposes an expanded definition of femicide, thus: ‘Femicide is the process leading to death and the creation of a situation in which it is impossible for the victim to “live.” That is, femicide is all of the hegemonic



masculine-social methods used to destroy females' rights, ability potential and power to live safely. It is a form of abuse, threat, invasion and assault that degrades and subordinates women. It leads to continuous fear, frustration, isolation, exclusion and harm to females' ability to control their personal intimate lives' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003: 600–601). This definition contributes to understanding that femicide is not a gender issue alone, but also a political issue.

By 2013, the theme gingerly explored a decade earlier by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002: 583), namely that violence against women is exacerbated by the violence of the Israeli occupation, reaches its zenith (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif, 2013). Here, the researchers examine femicides among women in the central Israeli town of Ramle,<sup>2</sup> and claim that the crimes are not 'honour crimes' but femicides 'empowered by the wider context of colonization and the increasing spatial segregation of Palestinian communities'. The study thus eschews cultural explanations of femicide, and turns to the manner in which politics, economic disadvantage, racism and spatial segregation in a colonial context contribute to femicide. According to the authors, it is not the 'honour crimes' but the colonization by the Jewish state which results in a disproportionate number of femicides among Palestinian women in this city.

Naturally, there are limitations to the decolonial approach. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian herself demonstrated in 2003, femicide is rampant in MENA countries and embedded in patriarchal judicial systems. It may not necessarily be attributable to the everyday violence of colonization. More research is therefore indicated, in general, on the subject of 'honour crimes'. Kulczycki and Windle (2011) have shown that, despite the prominence of the subject and the public debates on 'honour killings' in MENA countries, there is a paucity of data. Of 40 articles reviewed on the subject, only nine contained primary data while 11 presented original secondary analyses. Most studies focus on legal systems and the characteristics of victims and perpetrators. There is little evidence from the literature of a decline in the tolerance towards these crimes.

Another issue of the decolonial approach is that 'honour crimes' occur among migrants from MENA countries to other Western countries, such as Germany, where the Germans are not the colonizers but the hosts. According to Ercan (2015), in Germany 'honour killings' acquired a particular meaning after the 2005 murder of a Turkish resident, Hatun Sürücü, and came to symbolize a culturally specific form of violence. It could be argued that the migrants experience marginalization, but whether this would account for the incidence of femicides among refugee and migrant populations in non-MENA countries remains unknown.

In the light of the five different approaches to femicide, we can conclude that it is a *complex social phenomenon*, requiring macro, meso and micro theories, as well as multifaceted explanations, that are sensitive to socio-historical contexts and structures of interaction among individuals. We return to these arguments in the last section. However, before doing so, we would like to discuss the very special way in which the term femicide was disseminated among Mexican women's movements and academics. This is an interesting case study, illustrating how sociological imagination produced a new term in English that was subsequently translated into another language and applied in a very specific socio-political context, so that it became instrumental in changing reality and improving the lives of women.

## **Femicidios: The Ciudad Juárez case and state failure to protect women**

Ciudad Juárez (Mexico) is probably the most infamous single city of femicide in Latin America, and possibly in the entire world. Since 1993, the victims' families and groups of organized activists have denounced the kidnapping, sexual violence and brutal murder perpetrated against hundreds of women, most of whom were young, low-wage factory workers. Since 1998, and after Radford and Russell, activists quickly took up the term femicide to designate these incidents and funnelled it first to the local media, and later to the Chihuahua state and federal government (Wright, 2011). By 2006, the city's story was so notorious that it inspired *Bordertown*, a Hollywood blockbuster. Activists acknowledge that using this new, theoretical, feminist notion was instrumental in raising awareness, as it had the capacity to condense into a single term the misogynist motivation of violence, the vulnerability of women and girls, and the imbalance of power between men and women in Mexican society (Monárrez Fragoso, 2002). Being able to denote these deaths using a single, dense term recognized and accentuated the difference between killing men and women and put this focus at the centre of public attention, as we noted in the previous section.

As a result of this extended progression in awareness raising, Ciudad Juárez became the prime reference for criticism against the Mexican state's institutional and cultural bias. *Femicidios*, narco-culture, organized crime and structural violence are all closely related in Mexico, as is the case in other Latin American countries. To date, Ciudad Juárez still lacks an official data collection on femicides. Extant scientific literature indicates that, between 1993 and 2001, 200 women were murdered while 100 were kidnapped and raped in a town with a total population of fewer than 500,000 (Monárrez Fragoso, 2002: 286). In 2009, the Mexican Federal Parliament, in cooperation with UN Women, established the Special Commission to Follow up on Femicide, henceforth CESF, which issued the most comprehensive report on femicide and gender-based violence in Mexico (CESF, 2012). According to this report, in 1995, 2000 and 2005 Ciudad Juárez had the third to fourth highest record of femicide in Mexico (CESF, 2012: 49). Notably, in 2010, the rate of femicides in the Chihuahua state stood at 32.8 out of 100,000 women (CESF, 2012: 27), by far the highest rate in the entire country. This record is also a paradigm of state failure and the need for research and action against violence.

The translation of femicide into Spanish was promoted by Marcela Lagarde and gave a major boost to academic analysis and political mobilization, not only in Mexico, but throughout Latin America. Lagarde, along with other Mexican researchers, such as Monárrez Fragoso, pushed for a translation that did not adopt the English term 'femicide' literally. *Feminicidio* (instead of *femicidios*) tends to be employed in Spanish as the one notion that best expresses the violent death of women and girls, because it incorporates the semantic field of connivance of state and public institutions as relevant factors in femicide. Ciudad Juárez and the Mexican case reveal the effects of impunity in a context of a failed state. Institutions and individuals fail in a state where the Weberian consensus about the monopoly of violence is not successfully controlled by the state. This is one of the elements that produces what Monárrez Fragoso defines as: 'systemic sexual femicide'. This is 'the murder of a girl or woman committed by a man, where one can find all

the elements of the unequal relationship between the sexes: the generic superiority of man against gender subordination of women, misogyny, control and sexism. Not only is the biological body of the woman murdered, but the cultural construction of her body ... is also killed' (Monárrez Fragoso, 2008a: 23).

For a number of Latin American researchers and activists, the violent death of women should be considered genocide (Atencio, 2015; Hernández, 2015). Femicide as a global genocide is an argument used and promoted by Russell and others (Laurent et al., 2013). However, authors such as Schröttle remind us that the concept of genocide includes a number of features like the systematic destruction of a racial, ethnic, religious group or people; or mass killing, such as the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup>

Femicide, understood as 'the systemic murder of women' of certain socio-economic characteristics, is clearly discernible in Mexico. This is a key element. 'Case n.12498 Campo Algodonero', filed with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), represented an internationally recognized landmark (Lagarde, 2010; Monárrez Fragoso, 2008b) that stood out in the systemic sexual femicide taking place in Ciudad Juárez. The IACHR recognized the responsibility of the Mexican state in cases of femicide and charged it with violating human rights. Since 2009, the CESF, acting as an official body of the Mexican state, has raised awareness on *feminicidios* and promoted approval of laws and provisions for gender equality.

Outside Mexico, even where states are strong and institutions seem solvent, *the problem is not impunity, but apparent impotence*. More repressive and proactive laws against gender violence and femicide do not eradicate the phenomenon. Beyond the translation and etymologies, the underlying issue is *the chronicity of the murders as a form of structural violence* that manifests itself shamelessly with the systematic killing of women. Perhaps the definition by Monárrez Fragoso (2008b: 13), 'the term femicide means simply the murder of a woman', is therefore the starting point from which to resume the diagnosis and prevention.

## **Femicide as a complex, violent phenomenon**

Femicide is the result of a violent interaction, whereby a woman or a girl dies, i.e. an extreme and direct form of violence as part of an interpersonal process within a larger social context. We propose to consider femicide as a particular case of violent phenomena that can be interpreted by a comprehensive, theoretical framework. Intimate relationships and family relationships can be understood as a particular system of communication and codes where proximity and personal interaction are larger and denser, so that love and hate may acquire moments of emotional stress. Just as for many other social contexts, intimate relationships and family relationships are an area where violence also exists in its most primal forms (Dixon et al., 2008; Frye et al., 2008; Iezzi, 2010). The feminist approach rightly struggles against sexism and patriarchy, but it has not eliminated men's emotional outbursts, nor solved the trickle of cases in those societies where the state is more gender-sensitive than was the case 30 years ago but has not eradicated violence against women. Societies that are becoming less patriarchal still experience ruptures, couple tensions and outbursts, ending with violence against women and femicide (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Ross and Babcock, 2010; Stark, 2010; Winstok, 2011).

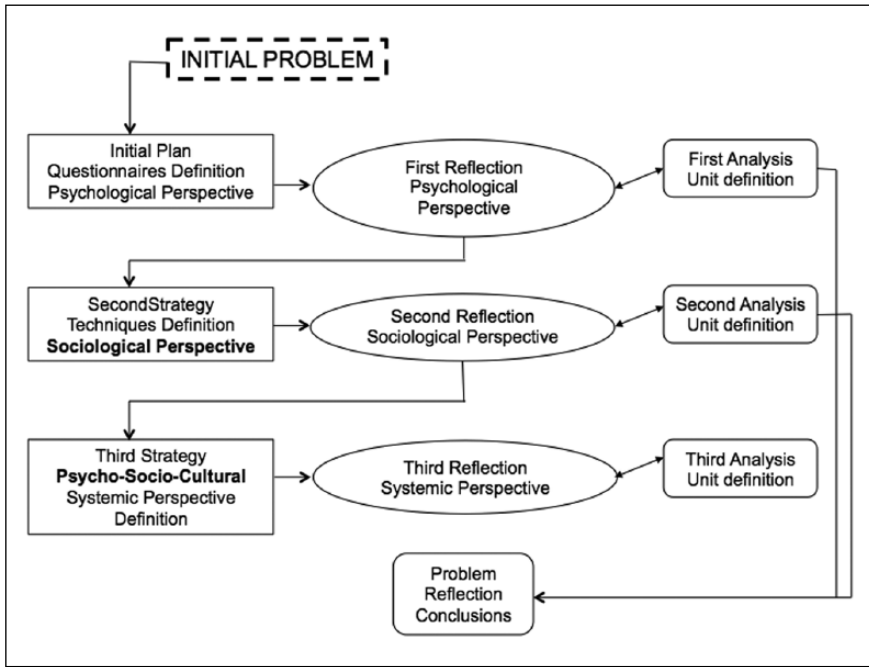
We need to give thought to the complexity of femicide as a phenomenon – in that it cannot be described simply by summing up the independent analysis of each of its constituent elements. This approach integrates analytical operations and a dynamic approach to identify the variables and factors involved in femicide. Elements of a complex system combine the inter-definition of different components with an interdisciplinary perspective (Garcia, 2006). A number of authors analyse gender violence and femicide from a comprehensive perspective that incorporates the standpoint of the victim, aggressor, other relevant actors, as well as the influence of diverse elements involved in the process of violence (Boira et al., 2013; Capaldi and Kim, 2007; Henning and Connor-Smith, 2011; Roberts, 2007; Ross et al., 2008). Finkel and Eckhardt (2013) identify five groups of theories:

1. *Intrapersonal models*, which attribute causality of violent behaviour to different individual variables, such as personality traits or consequences of events during the socialization process;
2. Models based on *subtypes* of aggressors, which classify offenders depending on how they express their violent behaviour;
3. *Interpersonal models*, which identify characteristics of the couple;
4. *Socio-cultural models*, which highlight the influence of social norms, values and cultural beliefs that are widespread in a given society; and
5. *Inclusive proposals*, which embrace a large explanatory model aiming to organize the empirical data available (Bell and Naugle, 2008; Dutton, 1985; Finkel and Eckhardt, 2013; O’Leary et al., 2007; Stith et al., 2004).

We are left, however, with basic questions such as: How can we reduce the levels of femicide? How can we prevent femicide from happening? One way to answer these questions is to revisit the ‘triangle of violence’ proposed by Galtung (1990), with its three interconnected fields – direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence – which is linked with his model of four basic needs – survival, physical well-being, liberty and identity. Galtung (1998) has not confined himself to explanation, but has always sought to resolve the underlying conflict behind violence, whatever its form. He also proposed a way to meet the visible and invisible effects of violence, by conjugating three goals: reconstruction, reconciliation, resolution. If we now recover Galtung’s approach, violence can be described using its three interconnected fields: the direct, the cultural and the structural. We also need to identify the three dimensions of femicide: the psychological, cultural and structural. Galtung’s ‘triangle of violence’ is enhanced in the contemporary version of the ecological approach suggested by the United Nations Entity for Gender Quality.<sup>4</sup> Both Galtung’s and the United Nations’ approach echo the basic theoretical underpinning of Stout’s article in 1992.

The conclusive ambition of this article consists in building a multi-causal model based on three levels of explanation, each of which identifies empirical variables that are associated to femicide:

1. *Micro level*: This includes the psychological organization of individuals, psychosocial habits and micro-social dynamics of the rituals of interaction and emotional energy of the participants;



**Figure 1.** Perspectives and reflexivity levels in unit analysis definition.  
 Source: Amozurrutia et al. (2012).

2. *Meso level:* This examines the networks and subsystems of relationship to and in which the couple, extended family and other actors involved are linked; and
3. *Macro level:* This incorporates analysis of the sciences of complexity and socio-cybernetics (Castellani and Hafferty, 2009) along two axes, from a linear-Cartesian to a systemic approach, and from a static to a dynamic model.

Figure 1 illustrates a systemic perspective, where we describe the relationship between all the stakeholders involved and, at the same time, we assess the different distal and proximal factors involved in the causes of gender violence and femicide (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Edleson and Tolman, 1992; World Health Organization, 2003). Each of these factors should not be analysed in isolation, but within what we term a ‘history of aggression’. Actors on the scene of femicide should not be understood independently of the prevailing framework of relations (micro and meso system). In this context, one might define at least four basic analytical elements: (a) risk factors (conditioned ecologically), (b) incidents in the history of intimate partner violence, (c) trajectories of tension and increasingly hostile response of different subsystems and (d) threatening episodes.

The ultimate goal of a systemic model is to assess the ‘trajectories of aggression’ with a high risk of triggering femicide. If the agents of prevention, punishment and rehabilitation were able to identify possible trajectories of aggression, they could diminish uncertainty and emotions of insecurity, and could design and test more, and better,

preventive measures. Femicide as a violent phenomenon emerges as an intricate and multifaceted system. Rephrasing Ashby's variety law: if, as we have ventured to show in this article, femicide is a complex problem, only a variety of approaches can do justice to it (Ashby, 1958).

## Conclusion

This article examined the evolution of the word femicide from the 1970s until today. At first, the designation was employed in a political context to produce changes in the social patriarchal order and delegitimize the violent death of women. Next, femicide evolved as a theoretical concept that had underpinnings in sociological enquiry. It was a successful effort of sociological imagination, in that it implied a vision of society – extreme violence against women deriving from gender inequality – which produced real changes: scientific interest and aspiration to an improved understanding of the phenomenon; stronger action by activists; better public policies.

Five different research approaches to the study of femicide were reviewed, namely: the feminist, sociological, criminological, human rights and decolonial paradigms, as well as their theoretical implications and current state of the art. In addition to considering the origin and etymology of the word femicide, the article also turned to the Ciudad Juárez case study as an example of effective dissemination in a local context. Finally, the article proposed a multi-causal systemic model, whereby femicide is explained as a violent act based on three tiers of explanation (the micro, meso and macro levels), and one which, as a complex social phenomenon, requires an interdisciplinary approach to be understood. This has brought us full circle, to the conclusion that 'femicide' is more than just a name. It has transformed conventional perception, public awareness, scientific research and policy making. Since thousands in the world are at risk of femicide, we hope that this discussion will be useful, both for scientific analysis and for improving the safety of women.

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## Notes

1. Russell recalls how Harmes had searched among extant literature to support this neologism and found a few antecedents in nineteenth century jurisprudence and criminology (Russell, 2008: 27).
2. Ramle is a mixed Jewish-Arab Israeli town, not situated in the Israeli Occupied Territories or in the Palestinian Authority.
3. Oral presentation at the Second Annual Conference on Femicide Across Europe, COST Action IS-1206, University of Zaragoza, 18–20 March 2015; comments made on Russell's lecture entitled 'International mass femicide: The most extreme form of genocide'.
4. 'The ecological approach aims to ensure that interventions consider and address the conditions across different levels (e.g. individual, family, community and society), which affect women and girls' risks of experiencing violence. As illustrated in the model there are biological, social, cultural and economic factors and norms at each layer that may increase men's

risk of perpetrating violence and a woman's risk of experiencing it.' Excerpt from 'Operating within the ecological model', available at: [www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/310-operating-within-the-ecological-model.html](http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/310-operating-within-the-ecological-model.html) (accessed 20 November 2015).

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## Résumé

Près de quarante années ont passé depuis que le terme de fémicide a été employé pour la première fois en 1976. Ce nouveau mot comportait alors une dimension politique visant à produire des changements dans un ordre social qui tolérait la mort violente des femmes. Depuis, le mot fémicide a donné naissance à un concept théorique désignant un phénomène social particulier, le meurtre de la femme. Cet effort d'imagination sociologique a réussi à transformer la perception conventionnelle, la conscience publique, la recherche scientifique et la prise de décision politique. Dans cet article, nous procédons à l'examen de l'évolution du concept de fémicide dans le domaine des sciences sociales. Nous analysons les principales approches visant à expliquer le fémicide : le féminisme, la sociologie, la criminologie, les droits de l'homme, les recherches décoloniales, ainsi que leurs importances théoriques. Nous discutons le cas du Mexique illustrant le calque du terme anglais dans une autre langue et son application dans un contexte sociopolitique très particulier en vue d'en faire un instrument de transformation du réel et d'améliorer la vie des femmes. Finalement, nous proposons un cadre conceptuel où le terme de fémicide est interprété comme un phénomène social nécessitant une approche interdisciplinaire. Nous proposons un modèle systémique et multidimensionnel visant à améliorer aussi bien l'analyse scientifique que la prévention du fémicide.

**Mots-clés**

Fémicide, violence contre les femmes, victime d'homicide féminin, théories de la violence, feminicidio

**Resumen**

Casi cuatro décadas han pasado desde que el término femicidio fue pronunciada en 1976. Esta nueva palabra tenía un propósito político, cuya intención era producir cambios en el orden social que tolera la muerte violenta de mujeres. Desde entonces, la palabra ha generado un concepto teórico que abarca el asesinato de una mujer como un fenómeno social específico. El feminicidio es un esfuerzo de imaginación sociológica que ha tenido éxito en la transformación de la percepción convencional, la conciencia pública, la investigación científica y la formulación de políticas. En este artículo, nos proponemos revisar cómo ha evolucionado el femicidio en la investigación social. Analizamos las teorías más importantes que explican el femicidio: los enfoques de investigación feministas, sociológicos, criminológicos, de derechos humanos y descoloniales, y su significado teórico. Se discute el estudio de caso de México, ejemplificando cómo entonces fue traducido un nuevo término Inglés a otro idioma y se aplica en un contexto socio-político muy específico, por lo que llegó a ser decisivo en el cambio de la realidad y mejorar la vida de las mujeres. Por último, se propone un marco en el que el femicidio se entiende como un fenómeno social que exige un enfoque interdisciplinario. Recomendamos un modelo sistémico, de múltiples facetas con el fin de mejorar tanto el análisis científico como la prevención.

**Palabras clave**

Femicidio, violencia contra las mujeres, víctimas de homicidio femenino, teorías de la violencia, feminicidio