

# FEMICIDE

## The Killing of Women and Girls Around the World

Claire Laurent

Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) Vienna Liaison Office

### WHAT IS FEMICIDE?

---

ACUNS has published a book on femicide. I will present the main arguments found within this publication.

Femicide and/or gender-related killings are defined as: the killing of a woman because she is a woman, or the killing of a girl because she is a girl.

Femicide is the **extreme manifestation** of existing forms of violence against women.

For a case to be considered femicide, there must be an **implied intention** to carry out the crime, as well as a **demonstrated connection** between the crime and the gender of the victim.

Why can we say that a woman is killed for the simplistic reason that she is a woman? Women do not know equality, as many are considered less valuable than men. Many are consequently victims of violence.

Violence against women is **institutionalized** through family structures, social and economic frameworks, and cultural and religious traditions. As it is institutionalized, many people do not recognize that violence against women is in fact a crime. Such leads to impunity. This is why it becomes difficult for some women to **recognize** that there is in fact something wrong with the way others treat them.

Femicides are **not isolated incidents** arising suddenly and/or unexpectedly. Instead, they can be thought of as the ultimate act of violence, experienced as part of a broader **continuum of violence** and discrimination. In recent years, there has been a **noticeable increase** in the rates of killings of women.

### DIFFERENT FORMS OF FEMICIDE

---

#### 1. The murder of women as a result of intimate partner violence

- A study from the UNODC has revealed that in many countries, intimate partner and/or family-related homicide is the major cause of female homicides.
- Intimate-partner femicide is likely to be **significantly underreported**.
- One study from the Daphne Programme indicates that there are approximately **3,500 intimate partner violence-related deaths** every year in Europe. In fact, women account for more than 77% of all victims of intimate partner and/or family-related homicide, with women between the ages of 35 and 44 at noticeably higher risk.

- In 2010, 127 women were killed by their partner in **Italy**. Roughly two women per week are killed by an intimate partner in the United Kingdom.
- In **Honduras and Costa Rica**, 60% of femicides are perpetrated by an intimate partner or male family member.
- In **Mexico**, 60% of women murdered by their partners had previously reported domestic violence to public authorities.
- The **United States Department of Justice** observed that in 2008, **firearms** were the most commonly employed weapons used by men to murder women in the United States. Male intimate partners were responsible for nearly two-thirds of the murders.
- A doctor of the **American Medical Association** stated that, “**one-third** of all women’s injuries coming into our emergency rooms are no accident. Most are the result of acts of violence. And frequently they occur over and over until the woman is killed.”
- The main problem is that domestic and/or intimate-partner violence is **not visible**, as violence is **widely accepted as a legitimate part of family life** by both women and men.

## 2. The torture and misogynist slaying of women

- Misogyny encompasses “an entrenched prejudice against women”, as well as a pathological hatred of them.
- One form of misogyny is that of **serial killings** of women:
- A blue-collar worker who pleaded guilty to murdering 48 women represents the largest death toll of any serial killer in American history.
- Belgium has also witnessed cases of serial killings, as evidenced by the 1996 trial of **Marc Dutroux**, who was accused of murdering, raping, abducting and imprisoning six girls, aged eight to nineteen.
- In **India**, a rape is said to occur every 22 minutes. Most cases go **unreported** – a product of the extreme shame and dishonour thought to be bought upon the victim’s family. A recent gang rape of a 23-year-old medical student on a public bus – where she was tortured with an iron rod leading to her death two weeks later – has sparked uproar in the country. Shockingly, only a month later, yet another case of seven men raping a woman occurred, and was subsequently reported in the media.

## 3. The killing of women and girls in the name of “honour”

- Honour killings are committed with high levels of impunity in many parts of the world.

- Women and/or girls are killed because they are said to have **committed a crime** typically related to **choice of partner**, education and employment, mode of dress, behaviour and/or contact with men who are not relatives.
- The **behaviour of the woman** is viewed as **casting shame upon her family**, and only with her death can honour be restored to the 'fallen' family. Should the family refuse to act, they may be subjected to harassment and/or exclusion by their community, as well as pressure to commit the crime itself.
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has estimated that **5,000 women** are murdered by family members across the globe each year in honour killings.
- Honour killings take **many forms**, including: direct murder; stoning; women and young girls being forced to commit suicide; and women being disfigured by acid burns, leading to death.
- Honour crimes are usually committed by **male family members** as a means of controlling the woman.
- In some cases, a **family council** is established in order to decide whether a woman should be killed and, if so, how.
- Honour-related crimes often go unreported, are rarely investigated, and usually go unpunished.

#### 4. The targeted killing of women and girls in the context of armed conflict

- **During armed conflict**, women/girls experience all forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence, perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.
- Such violence is often used as a **weapon of war**, to **punish or dehumanize** women and girls, and to **persecute the community** to which they belong.
- Reports of this practice were found during the **Bosnian conflict**, where 200,000 to 500,000 women and girls were raped. These occurrences happened in the victim's homes in front of their family or were committed in large-scale detention camps. It was not uncommon that, soon after the rape, the woman was killed.
- In **Rwanda**, it was estimated that 200,000 to 500,000 women and girls were victims of sexual violence, and that "rape was systematic and was used as a 'weapon' by the perpetrators of the massacres".

#### 5. The dowry-related killings of women

- Dowry is a **cultural tradition** in which the family of the bride gives cash and presents to the family of the groom.
- It was originally intended to support new couples beginning their married life. However, India's **prevailing patriarchy** as well as rising economic demands has turned dowry into a **commercial transaction**. This reinforces the **financial dependency** of the woman on their husband.

- Violence against women often increases when a family requests a larger dowry after marriage or shows dissatisfaction with the dowry that they have received.
- Young women are murdered, or are driven to suicide by **continuous harassment and/or torture perpetrated by the groom's family**.
- Many countries adopted **anti-dowry laws** beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, but legal enforcement has proven to be rather inefficient for a number of reasons, including:
  - Investigation and prosecution hampered by corruption
  - Insensitive police personnel
  - A sense of social and cultural apprehension towards this type of murder
  - A general tendency on behalf of investigators to dismiss dowry deaths as 'suicides', 'kitchen accidents', or merely as events related to family disputes

## 6. Female infanticide and gender-based sex selection feticide

- Female infanticide has been known to take such forms as the **induced death of infants** by suffocation, drowning, neglect and/or exposure to danger by other means.
- In sex-selective abortion, **abortions target female fetuses**.
- In countries where sex-selective abortion is predominant, the rise in sex-ratio imbalances and the normalization of the use of sex selection is caused by deeply embedded discrimination against women within marriage systems, family formation, and inheritance laws.
- In the Indian state of Kerala, it is estimated that about 25,000 female newborns are killed every year.
- It is estimated that nearly 600,000 girls are missing in India each year as a result of sex-selective abortions.
- Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Montenegro, Albania, Vietnam and Pakistan have all showed an **unnatural gender ratio** at birth over the past six years, with numbers ranging from 109.9 to 117.6 boys per every 100 girls.
- This lack of women has already produced numerous consequences including **abductions and the sale of young girls** to secure a wife for a son, as well as the trafficking of girls from neighbouring countries for similar purposes.

## 7. Genital mutilation related femicide

- Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a **destructive operation**, during which the female genitalia are partly or entirely removed and/or injured for non-medical reasons. Most often, the mutilation is performed before puberty, typically on young girls between infancy and the age of fifteen.

- **Infected wounds and unhygienic operations** frequently lead to death.
- According to the UNFPA, **infant mortality rates are higher in countries where FGM is practiced**. Furthermore, “death rates among babies during and immediately after birth are also higher for those born to mothers who have undergone FGM/C”.
- FGM is prevalent in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as well as among immigrants in Australia, Europe and the United States.

#### 8. The killings of women due to accusations of sorcery and/or witchcraft

- If women are perceived to be dangerous and/or a threat to men, they may be cast as scapegoats in the form of an accusation of witchcraft and/or sorcery. Some accusations are economically motivated, for the intended purpose of taking over land or possessions.
- This **pattern of violations** includes violent murder, physical mutilation, displacement, kidnapping and disappearance, or the subjugation of women to exorcism ceremonies involving public beatings and/or abuses by shamans or village elders.
- In a study conducted in **Zimbabwe**, it was found that of the 42 cases of femicide involving women older than 50, most of the women had in fact been accused of witchcraft by male relatives prior to the killings.
- In **Papua New Guinea**, an estimated 500 cases involving the torture and murder of women accused of practicing sorcery and/or witchcraft have been reported. Here, suspected witches have been thrown from cliffs, tortured, dragged behind cars, burned, or buried alive.
- How do public authorities typically respond to such crimes? In Zambia, for instance, the average sentence was one to two years for charges of killing a woman accused of witchcraft.

#### 9. Femicides associated with gangs, organized crime, drug dealers, human trafficking, and the proliferation of small arms

- These sorts of crimes are very common in Mexico and Central America.
- The northern triangle of Central America is associated with the highest rates of homicide in a non-conflict context. While the rates of killings of men have been stable over the last decade, there has been an **increase in the rates of killings of women**.
- In Mexico, a well-known case is that of Ciudad Juárez. It is estimated that approximately **740 femicides occurred between 1993 and 2009 in Ciudad Juárez**.

- These **patterns of killings** include abduction and disappearances for short periods of time; torture and sexual assault by groups of men; murder and mutilation, particularly of the sexual organs and breasts; decapitation in some cases; and the public display and/or dumping of naked bodies and/or body parts in empty wastelands.
- Many of the murdered women come from marginalized sectors of society: they are poor, from rural areas, of ethnic origin, and are sex or maquila workers.
- In drug culture, **hurting a woman symbolizes the cohesion of the gang, demonstrates masculinity and diminishes the enemy's morale.**
- The fact that women are typically used as 'drug mules' for the carrying of drugs on their persons without concern for health or safety only reinforces their disposable value.

#### **10. The killing of aboriginal and indigenous women and girls because of their gender**

- Aboriginal and indigenous women and girls experience **extremely high levels of violence.**
- In Guatemala and Australia, recent reports indicate that aboriginal women are **at far greater risk** of being the victims of femicide, rape and other assaults, as compared to non-aboriginal women.
- According to a 2010 report in Canada, of 582 cases of violence against aboriginal women:
  - 20% involved missing women and girls
  - 67% involved women or girls who died as a result of femicide or negligence
  - 4% fell under the category of suspicious death

#### **11. The killing of women and girls because of their sexual orientation and gender identity**

- This is characterized by levels of serious physical violence that in some cases exceeds those present in other types of hate crimes.
- Women are killed in private homes or in public spaces. Sometimes blackmailers threatening to reveal their identity to the public kill them, or they are victims of abuse from public officials, in particular the police, who sometimes arrest them.

### **NECESSARY SOLUTIONS**

---

Tackling femicide is extremely difficult, especially when one considers how gender discrimination and violence against women are so **embedded within our social, cultural and economic structures.**

Responses to femicide must be **comprehensive** and involve:

- Development and implementation of strong legislation
- Gender sensitive law enforcement policies and protocols
- Awareness promotion at the grassroots level
- Support for individuals and families experiencing violence
- Realization of women's social, economic and political rights
- Educating men and boys
- Educating women and girls

States should consider the range in forms of violence suffered by women and the different types of discrimination that they encounter, in order to adopt **multifaceted strategies** to effectively prevent and combat such violence.

**States have a due diligence obligation to protect women and to prevent femicides.** They must be held accountable if they do not take appropriate action against such crimes.

When the **state fails to hold perpetrators accountable**, impunity not only intensifies the subordination and powerlessness of the targets of violence, but also sends a message to society that violence against women is both acceptable and inevitable. As a result, patterns of violent behaviour are normalized.

**Institutionalized violence against women** and their families can be present in all aspects of a state's response to the killings of women. Such can include: tolerance, blaming of victims, limited access to justice, negligence, threats, corruption, and abuse by officials.

The reservation of 33% of seats in India's local government has increased women's political participation and has also led to more gender-friendly governance. This can be thought of as a positive example.