



# Femicide

Parveen Ali and Michaela M. Rogers

## Learning Objectives

Having read this chapter, you should be able to understand:

- What is femicide and where is it practiced.
- The impact of femicide on victims and others.
- The complexity of femicide and its impact on children whose mothers are murdered.
- Risk factors associated with femicide.
- The Implications for future research, policy and practice.

## Introduction

Every day hundreds of women become victims of femicide in many different scenarios and circumstances across the globe. They may be killed by their intimate partners, family members or others in the context of domestic violence and abuse (DVA), intimate partner violence (IPV), family violence, honour-based violence, dowry-related violence and or any other form of violence against women. Women are also killed in armed conflicts and wars because they belong to the opposite group and because they are women. Every day, thousands of girls and women also become victims of female infanticide, sex-selected foeticide, genital mutilation-related

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femicide, femicide connected with gangs, organized crime, drug dealing, human trafficking and the proliferation of small arms (Laurent et al. 2013; Eklund and Purewal 2017).

This chapter provides an overview of femicide, starting with a critical discussion of the contested nature of definitions and terminology. It also highlights the diversity of practices that can be classed as femicide. Although rates of femicide are notoriously difficult to establish due to variations in definitions, methodologies, reporting and recording, some data on prevalence is offered to illustrate the widespread nature of this pernicious crime. While the range of diverse acts considered to be femicide is under-researched, so are the impacts on children; the *hidden victims of femicide*. Therefore, attention is paid to the intersection of femicide and children's experiences to highlight the extensive and long-term consequences when mothers are murdered. The chapter ends with some discussion of risk factors and risk management before advocating for future research into femicide, which is needed to inform policy and practice.

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## Definitions and Terminology

Killing or murdering women and/or girls simply because of their gender is termed as femicide (Weil and Kouta 2017). Russell (2011) extended this understanding to include the distinction that in cases of femicide it is primarily men who are killing women and girls. However, femicide can be perpetrated by anyone including strangers or family members such as father, brothers, mother, sisters and other family members albeit a large majority of murdered women are killed by their current or former intimate partner. Regardless of the context, women are killed in various situations because of hate against women (misogyny), because women are considered less valuable in a patriarchal world and because they are less able to defend themselves. In this way, femicide is a misogynistic practice that can be understood within a broader feminist political framework (Grzyb and Hernandez 2015). There are several definitions provided for various terms related to femicide and these are shown in Box 1.

### Box 1 Definitions and Alternative Terminology

#### Definitions

**Femicide:** The intentional killing or murdering women and/or girls simply because they are female.

**Femicide:** The killing of females by males because they are female.

**Femicide:** The intentional killing of females by men and of females by other females in the interests of men.

**Racist femicide:** The racially motivated killing of women by men of a different race.

**Serial femicide:** The sexually sadistic killing of women.

**Female infanticide:** The killing of female infants.

**Alternative terms**

Femicide, lethal killing of women, female homicide, female homicide victimization, gendercide, manslaughter, honour killings, wife murder, uxoricide.

**Associated terms**

Intimate femicide, intimate partner femicide, intimate partner homicide, romantic femicide.

Femicide has been defined using gender neutral or male-centred terminology, including ‘lethal killings of women’, ‘female homicide’, ‘female homicide victimization’ and ‘manslaughter’. When conducted in the context of DVA, femicide is described as ‘honour killings’, ‘wife murders’ or ‘uxoricide’. Use of gender-neutral terms takes the attention away from the gendered nature of this crime (Weil 2018). Box 2 provides a summary of various acts classed as femicide, which are described in the existing literature.

**Box 2 Different Types of and Contexts for Femicide**

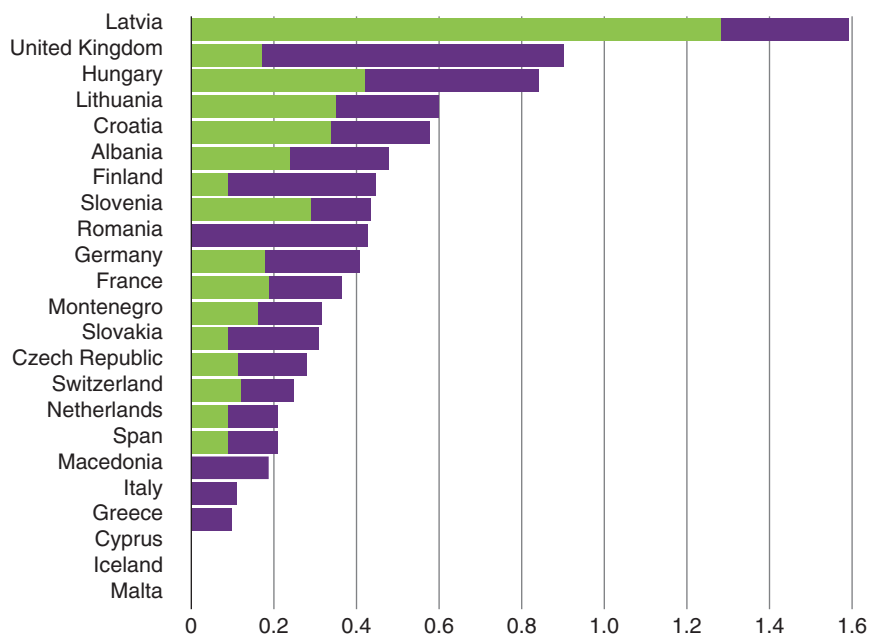
- Killing of women because of DVA/ IPV.
- Torture and misogynist slaying of women.
- Killing of girls and women in the name of ‘honour’.
- Killing of women and girls in the context of armed conflict.
- Dowry-related killings.
- Killing of women and girls because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Killing of aboriginal and indigenous women and girls.
- Female infanticide.
- Sex selection foeticide.
- Genital mutilation-related femicide.
- Accusations of witchcraft.
- Femicide connected with gangs, organized crime, drug dealers, human trafficking and the proliferation of small arms.

**Prevalence**

Available evidence suggests that perpetrators of most women murdered are someone they know, often their husband or intimate partner. This is exemplified by the fact that 58% of the 87,000 women killed intentionally in 2017 were killed by their intimate partners or family members. This means that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. Among these, more than a third (30,000) were killed by their current or former intimate partner

(United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2019). An examination from media and Internet sources of every single murder of an elderly woman committed between 2006 and 2015 revealed that all the cases in Israel were exclusively intimate partner femicides (Campbell et al. 2003). About 67% of the women killed by their partners are killed with a gun, which suggests that access to guns plays an important role (Campbell et al. 2003). It recognised that women could also be perpetrators of femicide, either as lesbian partners or kin; however, the phenomenon is rare. According to available data, the largest number (20,000) of all women killed worldwide was in Asia, followed by Africa (19,000), the Americas (8000), Europe (3000) and Oceania (300). Evidence from Europe suggests an average annual rate of 0.4 victims of femicide for every 100,000 women. Countries including Montenegro, Lithuania and Latvia appear to be worst in this regard. The perpetrator usually is a partner; however, in some countries such as Lithuania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, most femicides are committed by family members. From 2013 to 2017, 30 European countries joined a COST (Cooperation on Science and Technology) project called ‘Femicide across Europe’ (see Fig. 1, which depicts femicide rates across Europe).

While research on DVA and other forms of gender-based violence is increasing, evidence related to femicide is still scarce. However, femicide appears to affect women in all parts of the world. In particular, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the



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Source Eurosta

**Fig. 1** Femicide in Europe (2019) 2 years later. (Adapted from <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Europa/Femminicidio-in-Europa-due-anni-dopo>)

rate of femicides has drastically increased and around 50,000 women are being murdered every year (Weil 2020). This is because the stay-at-home measures increased the levels of isolation for women and girls. While there is no systematic data gathered on femicide during COVID-19, there are a few empirical reports available. For instance, in Spain, there were 18 femicide fatalities from the beginning of 2020 till mid-March 2020 (Weil 2020). In Argentina, 86 femicides have been perpetrated since the beginning of 2020. In Turkey, 18 women have been killed since the lockdown. In the United Kingdom, nearly three times as many women were murdered in March 2020 by men.

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## Impacts on Families

Femicide not only results in the killing of a girl or a woman but also destroys the lives of their family members including parents. When femicide involves women with children, the impact on their children is considerable, as they lose their mother. In some instances, children are also killed by their father and other family members. If children survive, they not only lose their mother, but may also lose their father because of imprisonment or suicide. However, very little research is available on this most vulnerable, but overlooked population who experience the most drastic and lifelong impact of the loss of their prime caregiver (Weil 2018). A study conducted in Italy found 1600 children of women murdered between 2001 and 2016; among them, 84% were aged 18 or under, 40% of them had witnessed the killing and 44% saw their mother's dead body (Ferrara et al. 2018). Twenty percent of the children also lost their father who killed themselves after killing children's mother. The authors highlighted that research involving children who lost their mother through femicide is extremely limited (Weil 2018). Box 3 details the high-profile murder of Nicole Brown Simpson.

Another study conducted in the Netherlands identified all children bereaved by parental intimate partner homicide and described demographics and family circumstances and assessed their prior exposure to violence at home and to the homicide itself. Findings revealed that during 2003–2012, 256 children lost one of their parents (87.1% lost their mother) due to 137 cases of intimate partner homicide (Alisic et al. 2017). On average, the children were 7.4 years old at the time of the homicide (51.1% were boys) and most of them were immigrants (59.4%). The majority (84.4%) of children were exposed to previous violence at home. Most of these children had not received any social services or mental health care. Findings also suggest that most of the children (58.7%) were present at the location when the killing took place, with varying levels of exposure. Further research is essential to understand this important issue, so appropriate support mechanisms and services can be developed for orphan children of women victims of femicide to support them in overcoming the impact of witnessing/experiencing abuse in the family and the killing of their mother (Alisic et al. 2017; Ferrara et al. 2018).

**Box 3 The Killing of Nicole Brown Simpson**

On the evening of 12 June 1994, US professional football legend O.J. Simpson attended his daughter's dance recital as did his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson. Afterwards, Brown Simpson had dinner with family and friends at Mezzaluna restaurant where waiter Ronald Goldman worked. While there, Brown Simpson's mother forgot her glasses. Goldman volunteered to drop them off at Brown Simpson's house.

Later that night, Brown Simpson's dog, a white Akita, was discovered by a neighbour walking in the neighbourhood by itself and with bloody paws. Just after midnight, the dog led to the discovery of the bloodied bodies of Brown Simpson and Goldman outside her home. The first police officer to arrive at the scene on 13 June 1994 described the master bathroom as being lit with candles. The bathtub was full, the television was on, a cup of half-melted ice cream was on the downstairs banister and her children were asleep in their rooms.

Brown Simpson, aged 34 years, was found brutally murdered on the sidewalk outside her home, stabbed 12 times, along with her friend, Ron Goldman, aged 25, who was stabbed 25 times. The story exploded quickly as Brown Simpson was identified as the ex-wife of legendary professional football player O.J. Simpson. On 13 June, police went to O.J.'s house while he was returning from Chicago and found a trail of blood from his vehicle to the front door and a bloody glove matching one found by Goldman's body. He had agreed to turn himself in but then fled on June 17. Millions of TV viewers watched as Simpson led police on a low-speed chase in his white Ford Bronco. According to anecdotal evidence, Simpson was carrying his passport, a disguise and \$8750 in cash. Eventually, Simpson gave himself up. He was charged with two counts of murder.

O.J.'s preliminary hearing lasted 8 days, 30 June to 8 July. The municipal judge found there was enough evidence for him to be put on trial. There was extensive evidence linking Simpson to the crime: his blood was found at the murder scene; blood, hair and fibres from Brown Simpson and Goldman were found in Simpson's car and at his home; one of his gloves was also found in Brown's home, the other outside his own house; and bloody shoeprints found at the scene matched those of shoes owned by Simpson.

Simpson was defended at trial by infamous lawyers, Johnnie Cochran and F. Lee Bailey. They claimed Simpson was framed by racist police officers. After an 8-month trial and 3 hours of deliberation, Simpson was acquitted on 3 October 1995. In later years, the Brown and Goldman families sued Simpson. He was found liable for damages for the wrongful death of Goldman and battery of Brown. A \$33.5 million civil judgment was lodged against O.J. On 3 October 2008, he was found guilty and sentenced to 33 years in prison. He was released from prison in 2017.

Following Brown Simpson's death, her children, Sydney and Justin, who were just 8 and 5 years old at the time of the killing, went to live with their maternal grandparents. However, 2 years later, a family court judge ended this temporary guardianship and restored O. J. Simpson's full custody of the young children despite his being on trial in the wrongful death suit.

The ruling was of no surprise as it reflected the overwhelming tendency in California's custody proceedings to award children to their biological parents. However, Sydney and Justin's grandparents were open about their concerns as their lawyer, Natasha Roit, released the following statement: 'we love Sydney and Justin and pray for their safety and well-being as they return to their father'. Asked whether she thought the children were being exposed to risk, Roit said, 'absolutely'. However, the judge refused to allow the consideration of allegations about the killing of Brown Simpson and Goldman to be considered. Roit had argued that Simpson's record of spousal abuse alone made him an unfit parent. The judge noted that there was no evidence O.J. Simpson had ever abused his children. The children grew up to live away from the glare of public scrutiny.

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## Children of Murdered Women: The Hidden Victims of Femicide

As noted, the children of murdered women are a neglected group and not much is known about their demographics; they are hidden victims in the context of femicide. The impact on children depends on their age, level of understanding, attachment with parents, experience of the situation (if they have seen domestic abuse or saw the murder of their mother) and availability of support by health and social care systems, family members and others. Children may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychosomatic symptoms such as enuresis (involuntary urination at night), encopresis (soiling of underwear with stool by children who are past the age of toilet training), sleep disturbance, behaviour problems, anger, tantrums, passive and aggressive behaviours, flashbacks, dissociation, anxiety and depression. Box 4 offers a reflective account highlighting the impact on a child whose mother was killed by her partner in the presence of the child (Naas 2018).

### Box 4 Reflections After Femicide: Coping

*'When people ask me how I managed, I tell them there were times when I don't think I ever really managed at all. I dropped out of college, I lost my job, I moved around a lot. I tried medication, I tried therapy and, when nothing seemed to work in the way I needed it to, I became extremely desperate for peace. I stopped eating. Days would pass, but I would never feel hungry. Even drinking water became an impossible task. I was convinced that my grief had*

*a life of its own, that it was growing through my anguish, that it was stronger than the person underneath it all. I tried bargaining with God to bring my mother back. Late at night I would walk down to the alley where she was killed and replay the incident inside my head. I would drive my car around Vallejo every night for months until the sun came up because my grief made me delusional enough to believe that if I just looked hard enough, I would find her again.'*

The impacts experienced by the children of a murdered mother with regard to trauma, anger and guilt, guardianship and fulfilment of needs, disruption in routine and environment, and expression of feelings are described below.

## **Experiencing Trauma**

Losing one's mother at any age is traumatising; however, as a child, it is even more traumatic as a mother is a fundamental attachment figure in a child's life. Separation from a mother causes separation anxiety among young children who cannot understand the reason for their mother's absence. The trauma experienced can have a lasting impact on a child's personality and development (Ferrara et al. 2015). In addition, if a child/children witness intimate partner violence between parents or have seen their mother being killed, the impact becomes more dramatic. Surrounding events and stressors can further compound the issue and make coping difficult. For instance, soon after the death of their mother, children may be interviewed by police, social services and other organisations and may be subject to court interventions and welfare decisions (van Nijnatten and van Huizen 2004). They may or may not have an opportunity to understand the situation or ask questions. In fact, they may get discouraged from asking questions contributing to unresolved questions in their mind as voiced in the following quote by a woman who lost both her parents as a child: 'everyone believed they were protecting me, but what goes around in a child's head when they are bereaved needs to be voiced. Otherwise, it can grow into a world of fantasy that is often more terrible than the reality' (Naas 2018).

## **Anger and Guilt**

Anger and guilt are normal emotions that most people experience through their life. However, these feelings and emotions can be more strongly felt by children of murdered women and especially if they have seen the murder of their mother. Such children may have witnessed conflict and abuse, the process of separation and disputes over child contact and residence (Ahmed and Montanez 2019). They may have tried to defend or protect their mother, find help, before and after her death,



and may have been left with the dead body of their mother for some time. In addition, some may also witness the suicide of their father. Children exposed to such circumstances may blame themselves for the issues between their parents or for not being able to stop violence or murder as highlighted in Box 5.

**Box 5 Reflections after Femicide: Guilt**

*'After mama was killed, I was overtaken by guilt: guilt for leaving her that afternoon when perhaps the only thing that would have saved her was my continuing to stand in between her and my father, and guilt for not recognizing that my father could be capable of such extreme violence because his primary method of abuse had always been psychological.'* (Ferrara et al. 2018).

**Fulfilment of Needs**

Children may lose both parents, are left without a guardian or may end up with surrogate parents. They may be raised by their grandparents or family members, or foster parents who may or not be able to understand or fulfil all their needs depending on their financial condition and other responsibilities (Laurent et al. 2013). Children may be unable to articulate their needs effectively (Tucker 2012). In situations where the perpetrator is given a short-term prison sentence, he may still be able to reclaim access to his children. This then means that children and especially those who are aware of their mother's killing by their father must live with their mother's killer and this would have a considerable impact on their mental health. In the UK, a public discourse is emerging, however, to remove custody rights from femicide perpetrators to prevent them from reconnecting with their children following their release from prison. Argentina and Italy are among the first countries that have adopted laws to protect the rights of such children and remove custody rights from perpetrators. Italy has gone one step ahead and minors who share their family name with the parent convicted of killing the other parent can request to have it changed. When it comes to appointing guardians, the law gives priority to other relatives and family members (Laurent et al. 2013).

**Disruption in the Everyday Environment**

Losing parents and living with grandparents or other guardians means that children are displaced from their own home and familiar environment. They may be exposed to a different routine and regulations depending on their carers, and this means that children have to adapt to the situation. They may also have to change schools and lose touch with their usual social environment, further complicating the situation (Alisic et al. 2015). Such disruption may also have an impact on children's ability to articulate their needs and may lead to their assumptions about the availability and reliability of a 'new family' (Alisic et al. 2015).

## Expressing Feelings

Orphaned children are often raised by their paternal or maternal grandparents and both parties may have very different motivations and factors affecting their ability to raise children (Laurent et al. 2013). For example, maternal grandparents and other family members may be going through grief and bereavement processes themselves and may not like to talk about the perpetrator or they may express hate towards the perpetrator. Likewise, paternal family may experience shame and guilt and a sense of responsibility towards the action of the perpetrator. They may also express a victim-blaming attitude by talking negatively about the victim (the children's mother). This may have an impact on children and their ability to communicate their own feelings about their parents. If living with a maternal family, they may not express love and affection towards their father and anger or resentment towards their mother. Similarly, when living with the father's family, they may not be able to express love and affection towards their mother and anger or resentment towards their father. In both scenarios, children may live with unresolved issues for a long time or for life.

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## Stigma

In almost every culture, women are often blamed for the abuse they experience. Similarly, murdered women are often blamed for their murder. For instance, in the case of honour killing, a woman is killed because she has done something to dishonour her family and community. Such victim-blaming attitudes also mean that children of the women killed in the name of honour are shunned, stigmatised and made to feel embarrassed and ashamed by the society. They may be taunted and bullied by other children and adults within and outside family or may have to hear negative comments and remarks about their mother. They may find themselves in situations where they must defend their mother. They may also have to experience negative remarks, comments and attitudes because of their father's action of killing their mother. In both ways, the impact on children's physical and mental health could be catastrophic.

## Responding to Children Affected by Femicide

It may help them to talk about the issue and to ask questions in a supportive environment; however, they may not get an appropriate response from their carer. They may be pressured not to talk about it, or their version of events is negated, or their questions are ignored (Ferrara and Bernasconi 2017). Such approaches are often used with positive intentions by family members but effectively reduce the opportunities to mourn their loss.

## Femicide Risk Factors and Risk Assessment

Risk assessment for femicide is, by necessity, targeted at prevention (Hart 2008). This is predicated on the notion that some femicides are preventable with an assessment and the management of risk factors such as previous history of violence, stalking and other known concerns. Risk assessment relies on the identification of vulnerabilities and dynamic risk factors within the context of the presenting situation, relationship and other relevant information. An assessment of the interactions of these factors and the level of risk can inform the management of risk. Effective risk management must take into account the dynamic nature of vulnerability and risk factors and tools have been developed for this purpose, e.g., SARA (Spousal Assault Risk Assessment) (Kropp and Hart 2000). Such models for assessment are rooted in evidence and empirical research, which have examined risk and risk factors and the correlates of repeat violence, the escalation of violence and killing. Risk factors can be identified using an ecological approach to explore risk at individual, interpersonal, community and social levels (see Table 1).

**Table 1** An ecological approach to understanding risk factors for intimate partner femicide (adapted from Baldry and Magalhães 2018)

Category	Risk factor
Perpetrator (individual level)	Substance misuse Criminal history Previous IPV Possession of firearms Victims of child abuse/exposure to IPV Mental health problems Social disadvantage
Victim (individual level)	Substance misuse Mental health problems Previous IPV (same or different partner) Social disadvantage Social isolation
Victim–perpetrator relationship (interpersonal level)	Relationship status (separated or still cohabiting) IPV (previous or same relationship) Stalking Children from another relationship
Community	Insufficient social support network Insufficient community resources Lack of coordination between community resources Attitudes accepting of violence against women Lenient legislations
Lethality violence-related risk factors	Attempted strangulation Threats to kill with a firearm Extreme fear of being killed on the part of the victim

## Future Research: Improving the Evidence Base

Despite some evidence of risk management and prevention strategies, the lack of appropriate reporting and systems to enable the identification of potential victims and perpetrators and an increased understanding of the dynamics and motives of murder, the evidence base is nascent in relation to various forms of femicide. While understanding is increasing, and reporting mechanisms are improving, significantly more knowledge through research is needed as well as changes to policy and practice. These are needed to develop robust mechanisms and systems to truly capture and understand the extent of femicide and its impact through better reporting and recording of the crime by criminal justice and other agencies.

It is also evident that not enough information is available about the children of murdered women and their experiences because of many different factors, including the age of children (affecting their ability to express), how children are perceived in the society with regard to their knowledge and understanding and lack of understanding about their needs. Further research is needed to understand the perspective of children, the placement of children, contact with the perpetrator (maybe the father) and the impact of their experiences on their health through longitudinal and multi-centre studies. Such research will help professionals in relevant fields and disciplines to understand the impact on children and, therefore, may help them to recognise the need of putting children's right to well-being and safety first (Birchall and Choudhry 2018).

Understanding and responding appropriately to children's needs at the time of their experience is also crucial. Such children should be placed in a familial environment with familial people. They should also be provided with appropriate services to ensure access to counselling and other social care and mental health services to minimise the social, health and mental health impacts of the experience. In addition, efforts are needed to highlight the issue of femicide and to develop appropriate measures and strategies to reduce/eliminate the prevalence of femicide internationally.

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### Summary

- Femicide is a diverse phenomenon and is known by various terms across the globe.
- Femicide leads to the killing of women, mostly by men, just because of their gender.
- Children are the hidden victims of femicide as there is a rather modest evidence base that describes their experiences post-femicide.
- A better understanding of femicide is needed to improve policy and practice responses across a number of sectors.

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