

9-2021

My Years Campaigning for the Term "Femicide"

Diana E. H. Russell

Professor Emerita, Mills College, diana@dianarussell.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), [Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Language Description and Documentation Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#), and the [Theory, Knowledge and Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Russell, Diana E. H. (2021) "My Years Campaigning for the Term "Femicide"," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 6: Iss. 5, Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2021.06.05.06>

This Femicide: Diana Russell's Work to Name the Misogynist Killing of Women by Men is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

My Years Campaigning for the Term "Femicide"

Keywords

femicide, women, killing, murder, theory, naming

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

MY YEARS OF CAMPAIGNING FOR THE TERM *FEMICIDE*

Diana E. H. Russell*

Emerita Professor, Mills College, USA

*Published posthumously. Diana Russell submitted this essay to *Dignity* before her death in 2020. As a feminist sociologist, Dr. Russell, published many ground-breaking, research-based articles and books on violence against women. She was a dedicated feminist activist, who stood in protest outside sites associated with violence against women. When publishers turned her work away because it graphically showed the harm being done to women, she published it herself (*Against Pornography: The Evidence of the Harm*, 1994). This series of articles focuses on her advocacy for the term *femicide* to name the misogynist murder of women and girls by men.

To learn more about Diana Russell's scholarly and activist work, please visit her website at <https://www.dianarussell.com/>

KEYWORDS

femicide, violence against women, killing, murder; theory, naming, patriarchy, misogyny, International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women

I INTRODUCED THE TERM *FEMICIDE* for the first time over forty years ago, at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels in 1976. Belgian feminist Nicole Van de Ven and I had organized this unique event and were delighted that approximately 2,000 women from forty countries attended. We used the term "crimes" to refer to any and all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression of women.

Author Carol Orlock had originally coined the term *femicide* but had not published it. When I first heard of it in 1974, I became excited by this new word, seeing it as a needed substitute for the gender-neutral word "homicide." *Femicide*, which I now define most simply as "the killing of females by males *because they are female*," wasn't simply a new word. It did not only mean the killing of women, or any killing of women by men. It is a conceptual tool, a term that specifically points to and politicizes the sexist, patriarchal, misogynistic killing of women and girls by men.

Just as the term *sexual harassment* helped feminists to campaign to recognize and combat these crimes and resulted in legal decisions which made sexual harassment a transgression of women's civil rights, so the concept of *femicide* can help feminists to engage in concerted campaigns to combat these massive and misogynistic crimes.

Since 1976, I've engaged in a number of efforts to inspire feminists in the United States to adopt the term *femicide* instead of using gender-neutral terms, such as murder or homicide. These included authoring articles on *femicide*, and writing/co-

editing the first two published anthologies on femicide: *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, (1992) and *Femicide in Global Perspective* (2001).

I believe that feminist researcher Jacquelyn Campbell, at John Hopkins University, was the first to undertake empirical research on femicide (1992, 2003, 2012). Now she has other U.S. and Canadian scholars joining her in this endeavor.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) has always confronted the frequent killing of wives/partners by their husbands. NCADV however did not always conceptualize these murders as *femicides* or see their connections with other such acts, such as femicidal rapes, femicides involving the abuse of female children, or femicides of prostituted women and girls. At a national conference co-sponsored by NCADV and NOMAS in 2012, a Keynote Panel entirely on *femicide* included Jacquelyn Campbell, Robert Brannon, and me. We hoped this would lead to more awareness and incorporation of this useful concept by feminist activists.

In 1990 I travelled to England to attend a Conference, and met a British feminist activist and researcher Jill Radford, and was greatly impressed by the work she had done. I decided to invite her to edit the anthology with me. We decided that we'd both find contributors to our anthology in our respective countries. Our anthology, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (1992) was published in Canada and in Oxford, Singapore, and Sydney. It drew favorable commentary from some leading feminists known for their work against violence:

This creative collection defines for the first time where the sexist face of genocide meets the genocidal face of sexism. *Femicide* is a milestone in comprehending a social world that wants - even loves - women dead. -- Catharine A. MacKinnon

The first of its kind -- and a classic. This book should be required reading for everyone: college students and their professors, policy makers and business people, lawyers and judges, police officers and members of the clergy. It raises our consciousness and inspires resistance to femicide. -- Phyllis Chesler

Eight years later, I decided to co-edit another anthology on femicide. I invited Roberta Harmes to search the international literature for all the articles on femicide that she could find, including scholarly articles. This anthology, *Femicide in Global Perspective* (2001), included detailed chapters about the history of femicide, how it had been defined over time, and introduced typologies of different types of femicides, etc. Other authors wrote chapters about femicide in Australia, Canada, China, Israel, and five African nations: South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

SUCCESS IN MEXICO AND LATIN AMERICA

In 2004, I was invited to speak at a Seminar on femicide in Juarez, Mexico. Juarez had long been the "femicide capital" of Mexico. Epidemic numbers of femicides involving young girls had been perpetrated in that city, on the border of Mexico, and the United States. The majority of these young girls had been raped, tortured, mutilated, and killed over a period of several years. The police appeared to do little or nothing to try to solve these femicides, despite the devastating impact on their families and the communities where they had lived. For this reason, it was decided to hold the seminar on femicide in Juarez.

The thirty mostly female invitees to the seminar were primarily women from Mexico, with a few from Guatemala, and also the United States. An additional audience of about forty women were also present in the large hall. Congresswoman and professor of anthropology Marcela La Garde chaired the seminar. She was the charismatic leader who had organized the event and invited me to be the guest of honor. La Garde introduced me and then declared:

Sometimes a book changes history. Diana Russell and Jill Radford's book, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, is such a book.

La Garde described how reading this book had revolutionized her understanding about the murder of women; and that it had inspired her to organize feminists to combat the epidemic of femicides in Juarez, as well as the rest of Mexico. Initiating the seminar was only the first step.

La Garde played a major role in getting the government of Mexico to pass legislation against *femicide*. She was also responsible for disseminating the term *feminicidio* to many other Latin American countries. I was of course pleased when Marcela LaGarde arranged for both anthologies, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, and *Femicide in Global Perspective* to be translated into Spanish. Once feminists in these countries had adopted her term "*feminicidio*," or my term *femicide*, they typically went on to form feminist organizations to engage in actions to combat femicide in their countries. Several of these activist organizations also succeeded in getting their governments to implement laws against femicide.

A woman from Chile who spoke at the United Nations Seminar on Femicide in Vienna in 2012 reported that after a law against femicide was passed in her country, the number of femicides seemed to significantly decline. She explained that this was due to men becoming afraid of being charged as perpetrators of these crimes.

Latin America is the region where the term femicide has been most widely adopted, no doubt reflecting the tragic fact that femicides there have been massive and often flagrant (Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010). In Argentina, 1,808 women were killed violently from 2008 to 2016, according to NGOs. In 2016, hundreds of thousands of Argentinian women took part in a national work stoppage and protest following the brutal killing of a 16-year-old girl, which was just one of a string of "femicides" (Fulton, 2016). Protest actions took place in Buenos Aires and many other Argentinian cities. According to *the Argentinian Independent*, solidarity protests also took place in Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay, France, and Spain. The large numbers of women involved in these strikes and protests, and the impressive solidarity revealed by women in so many other countries, is striking evidence of how effective the term femicide has been in politicizing the killing of women, *because they are women*, on this continent.

ADOPTION BY THE UNITED NATIONS

I was invited by the United Nations in 2012 to speak at their first Seminar on Femicide in Vienna, on the "Best Strategies to Advance the Global Struggle Against Femicide." Other U.N. seminars have followed, as well as conferences on femicide in several countries of Europe. The U.N. held a Symposium in 2016 in Vienna titled *Combating Femicide* to discuss progress made. It stated that "femicide is globally recognized as one of the gravest violations of human rights, and the most serious form of gender-based violence."

Although the term femicide is now spreading in several countries in Western Europe, as well as Latin America, it is not yet widely used in the United States. To my knowledge only a few scholars, including Catharine MacKinnon, Phyllis Chesler, Robert Brannon, and myself, use the term with any regularity. Nevertheless, in light of femicide's demonstrated usefulness in identifying, and inspiring actions against, the misogynistic murders of women, I am optimistic that it will eventually be adopted more widely.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dignity thanks Jane Caputi, professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Florida Atlantic University, USA, for her time to comment on this essay.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Diana E. H. Russell (Born November 6, 1938, South Africa; Died July 28, 2020, USA) was a radical feminist sociologist, author, and activist. She was a pioneer researcher and theorist on violence against women and girls. Russell wrote numerous books and articles on rape (including marital rape), femicide, incest, and the misogynist murders of women, and pornography. Her landmark books include: *The Politics of Rape* (1974); *Rape in Marriage* (1982); *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse and Workplace Harassment* (1984); *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa* (1989); *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (1992); *Dangerous Relationships: Pornography, Misogyny and Rape* (1998); *The Epidemic of Rape and Child Sexual Abuse in the United States* (2000); and *Femicide in Global Perspective* (2001). For her book on incest, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (1987), she was co-recipient of the 1986 C. Wright Mills Award. Russell was working on her memoirs when she died.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Russell, Diana E. H. (2021). My years of campaigning for the term femicide. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 6, Issue 5, Article 6. Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol6/iss5/6>.
<https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2021.06.05.06>

REFERENCES

- Brannon, R. (2012). The appalling scope of femicide and value of the concept. Presentation at Plenary Session, *The Concept of Femicide and It's Connections with Domestic Assault*, NCADV-NOMAS Conference, July 23, 2012, Denver, CO.
- Campbell, J. (1992). "If I can't have you, no one can": Power and control in homicide of female partners. In Russell D., and Radford, J. (Eds.), *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*. New York: Twayne-Macmillan Publishers.
- Campbell, J., et.al. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: Results from a multisite case control study. *American Journal of Public Health*. 53, No. 7.
<https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.93.7.1089>
- Campbell, J. (2012). Recent quantitative research on femicide. Presentation at Plenary Session, *The Concept of Femicide and It's Connections with Domestic Assault*, NCADV-NOMAS Conference, July 23, 2012, Denver, CO.
- Fregoso, R., and Bejarano, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Terrorizing women: Femicide in the Americas*. Duke University Press.

- Fulton, Deidre. (2016, October 19). Argentinian women called to strike, protest after brutal attack on teenage girl. *Common Dreams*.
www.commondreams.org/news/2016/10/19/argentinian-women-c...
- Russell, D. (2012). The origins and applications of the term femicide. Presentation at Plenary Session, *The Concept of Femicide and It's Connections with Domestic Assault*, NCADV-NOMAS Conference, July 23, 2012, Denver, CO.
- Russell D., and Harmes, R. (Eds). (2001). *Femicide in global perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Russell D., and Radford, J. (Eds). (1992). *Femicide: The politics of woman killing*. New York: Twayne-Macmillan Publishers.
- Russell, D., and Van De Ven, N. (1976). *Crimes against women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal*. Milbrae CA: Les Femmes.