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The Value and Scope of the Term Femicide

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Abstract

The term *femicide* is useful in naming a wide range of sexist killings of women by men, just as “genocide” and “sexual harassment” named these respective other crimes and civil violations. Definitions and example of killings that are, and are not, femicides clarify the scope of the term. A number and variety of misogynistic killings of women can be documented. There is evidence that learning of the term of femicide has helped women to see and to combat femicides in their spheres. The term femicide has been embraced by the United Nations and by eight Latin American countries to date.

Keywords

femicide, sexism, killing, misogyny

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THE VALUE AND SCOPE OF THE TERM OF *FEMICIDE*

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The National Organization for Men Against Sexism

ABSTRACT

The term *femicide* is useful in naming a wide range of sexist killings of women by men, just as “genocide” and “sexual harassment” named these respective other crimes and civil violations. Definitions and example of killings that are, and are not, femicides clarify the scope of the term. A number and variety of misogynistic killings of women can be documented. There is evidence that learning of the term of femicide has helped women to see and to combat femicides in their spheres. The term femicide has been embraced by the United Nations and by eight Latin American countries to date.

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WHEN WE GIVE ANY COMPLEX PHENOMENON A NAME it becomes more psychologically salient in our observations and perceptions. We now seem to notice and remember instances, which previously would have gone unnoticed, and we can call it by its name to others as an issue for discussion or political response.

As an example, announcing the then-new term of *genocide* as a distinct category of crime at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal established an international precedent and awareness which has permanently changed the way the murder of specific groups of people is perceived and handled by the international community (Nenadic, 1996).

More recently, the term of *sexual harassment* was coined in the mid-1980's, giving a new name to an ugly reality of sexual bullying in the workplace, which previously had been ignored and tacitly accepted. It had long been recognized, and the subject of countless jokes, that women were often sexually pursued by male supervisors and co-workers at work. Feminist journalist, Lyn Farley, first coined the phrase *sexual harassment*. Feminist attorney Catharine MacKinnon then devised a successful path to changing civil rights law's response to such behavior. An article MacKinnon wrote as a law student became the basis for her book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (1979). She argued that sexual harassment included not only *quid pro quo* demand for sexual favors, but also a *hostile or offensive environment* harassment aimed not at obtaining sex-favors but at driving women from a workplace. The term and MacKinnon's full analysis of sexual harassment was adopted in 1980 as Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission Guidelines by Eleanor Holmes Norton and then supported by a federal Court in 1986. Today's clear penalties for sexual harassment now give millions of women in the U.S. a level of protection, both at work and in school, that did not exist before 1986.

In a very similar way, the term of *femicide* is gradually being recognized and embraced by feminist activists in many countries around the world. It has the potential to tie together a wide range of painful issues characterized by the murders of women in a wide range of circumstances. They might at first glance seem unrelated, but in truth are all manifestations of the same deep reality of women's endangered and expedient lives under patriarchy. The concept of femicide has the potential also to inspire collective actions to confront and to end these misogynous murders. This has begun in eight countries in Latin America and in the United Nations. Organizations, such as the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) and the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS), have endorsed the use of the term femicide by scholars and activists (Russell, 2012; Campbell, 2012; Brannon, 2012).

DEFINITION(S) OF FEMICIDE

Diana Russell, who introduced and championed the term femicide, has described the term in several, slightly differing ways over the years:

Femicide: The murder of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women (Caputi & Russell, 1990).

Femicide: The misogynistic killing of women by men (Russell & Radford, 1992).

Femicide: All forms of sexist killing of females by males (Russell & Harmes, 2001)

Femicide: The killing of females by males because they are females (Russell & Harmes, 2001).

All of these definitions capture the core of the term. A longer, more pedantic definition was offered by Brannon (2012):

Femicide: Killing of females by males which is caused to any significant degree, overtly or indirectly, by male supremacy; misogyny; patriarchal norms, laws, and acts; or men's sense of entitlement, superiority, and ownership of women.

It would be hard to over-estimate the enormous numbers of women's deaths world-wide that fit the above definitions. Identifying all such categories is difficult, as there is a large variation in how direct, obvious and visible are the causal influences of sexism. In some categories of murders of women, the key role played by misogyny is clear. In other categories, the contribution of sexism is more global, societal, and indirect. In light of the complexity of all social influences and social causality, it is valid to assert that sexism and misogyny causes many women to die at the hands of men.

MURDERS OF WOMEN THAT ARE NOT FEMICIDES

To clarify femicide, it may be helpful to identify the killings of women by men that do not qualify as femicides. These include killings of women by individual men, and killings of women by legitimate social authority, both when her gender appears to be immaterial

Killing individual males that are not femicides:

- 1. Accidental or random killing of women (stray bullets; bombs; auto accidents...)
- 2. Killing for economic or other self-gain (to get money, property, eliminate witnesses, etc.)
- 3. Politically motivated killing (Assassinations of Indira Ghandi and Benazir Bhutto are examples.)
- 4. Person-specific killing (e.g. in revenge, individual hatred...), where gender was immaterial.
- 5. Killing motivated primarily by racism, homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, etc., where gender appears to be largely immaterial.

Killing by legitimate social authority that are not femicides:

- 1. Legal executions of women for capital crimes committed, if the legal process is unbiased by gender.
- 2. Deaths of females from social policies or practices which had accidental or unforeseen effects on women. (The widely-used early contraceptive drug 'Premarin' was later found to promote cancer.)
- 3. Deaths of females from practices or policies which impact *poor or impoverished people in general*, but are not gender-specific. (Scarcity of medical facilities, transportation, parks, and safe housing in many impoverished areas undoubtedly contribute to high mortality rates there, for both sexes.)
- 4. Deaths of females from practices or policies which impact or target *people of color in general*, or which target particular racial or ethnic groups, but, are not gender-specific. (The near extermination of Native Americans by European and American colonialists was not aimed only at Native American women.)
- 5. Deaths of females from practices or policies which target or impact *GLBT people or 'homosexuality'* (in-general), but, are not directly gender-specific. (Throughout Western history both male and females have been persecuted, and sometimes killed, for any evidence of homosexuality.)

FORMS OF FEMICIDES¹

Despite the preceding non-femicide killings of women, the majority of instances in which men kill women probably *are* femicides. To comprehend this issue more fully it will be helpful to examine the scope and variety of femicides. Below are listed twenty forms or categories of femicide, with a very brief discussion of each. They range from those in which misogyny is obvious and central, to those in which the contribution of misogyny and male supremacy is below the surface. This is not a definitive listing, but it will establish the vast scope of femicide.

¹ The references for this section are drawn from the decades that Diana Russell was most actively researching and writing about femicide.

- 1. Women separated from men and then mass executed. In an atrocity in an engineering school Montreal in 1989, a heavily armed young man invaded a classroom, ordered all the male students out to safety, shouted at the women “You’re all fucking feminists!” and then opened fire, murdering fourteen women. A suicide note blamed all of his many life failures on women. There was also a “hit list” of 15 famous women that he hoped to kill (Caputi & Russell, 1992, p.13).
- 2. Mass killings of women as a political or war tactic. These mass femicides have occurred recently in Bosnia, Algeria, and most extensively in Latin America. Guatemala has been described in a UN report as the most dangerous place to be a woman in the Western hemisphere. An entire book (Fregoso and Bejarano, 2010) is devoted to detailed accounts of femicide in Central and South America. More recently, ISIS and Boko Haram’s attacks, sexual slavery, and murder of women have targeted women and girls.
- 3. “Honor” killings of women by culturally “shamed” male relatives. In much of the Middle East and in Central Asia, and elsewhere femicides are perpetrated by various male family members and in-laws, who by patriarchal custom feel they have the right to control females (Chesler, 2017, 2018). In some Middle Eastern, Asian, and African countries, women believed to have lost their virginity or lesser offenses are killed by their father, brothers, or other male relatives. Killings of young girls are most often by their fathers, or other males, such as brothers, in the immediate family. Elderly women unprotected by husbands are also vulnerable.
- 4. “Witch” persecutions, in Saudi Arabia and Africa today, and historically in Europe, and the US. In the 16th and 17th centuries, in Europe and Britain, large numbers of women, estimated to range from 200,000 to nine million were brutally tortured and killed (Caputi & Russell, 1992, 13). This was done with the full backing of legitimate authority, through papal bulls and the church-sponsored torture manual *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). Centuries later, in colonial America in Pilgrim Salem, women were executed as “witches.” Incredibly, killings of women accused of being “witches” continue even today, in Saudi Arabia, in Zimbabwe, and in South Africa (Watts, Osam & Win, 2001, p. 91).
- 5. Suttee: the killing of widows by the husband’s family, typically by burning, largely for economic reasons. Until recently, hundreds of such macabre killings were recorded annually in India (Kelkar, 1992, 112). This form of femicide is most common in India, but there have been accounts of widow-sacrifice among Chinese, Greeks, Egyptians, Scandinavians, Slavs, Maoris, and some Native Americans (Stein, 1992, 62).
- 6. Female Infanticide, especially in China and India today. Infanticide is known in all cultures, and is always directed primarily at girls. One study of Chinese census statistics estimated 345,000 cases of female infanticide in 1983. Nicholas Kristof (1991) found that 1990 Chinese census data showed that 5% of all infant girls are unaccounted for. (p.140/Hom) In India there have been castes and tribes in which not one female child was left alive. The Bedees, a branch of Sikhs, were known as koree mar, or “daughter butchers” (Janssen-Jurreit, 1992, 69). In recent decades, ultrasound technology has been used to identify female fetuses. The girls are then aborted, resulting in a skewed sex ratio with more men than women.
- 7. Serial-killings, a series of murders of women by one man. These sadistic murders, in which one man mutilates a number of victims in separate incidents, almost exclusively target women. Beginning with the unsolved case of Jack the Ripper in England, whose victims were not raped, but sexually mutilated and disemboweled. A surge of serial murders has occurred in the U.S. beginning in the 1950s: Ted Bundy; the “Hillside Stranglers;” the “Coed Killer” Ed Kemper; and David Berkowitz (Son of Sam). These femicides are often marked by extreme sadism and cruelty. Police

figures indicate that as many as 3,200 serial-murder femicides occur annually (Bland, 1992).

- 8. Deaths from *female genital mutilation* (FGM). Genital cutting or mutilation of girls, primarily in central Africa, and often leads to infection and sometimes death. A United Nations study in 1986 reported that the lives of 75 million women and girls had been scarred by female genital mutilation (Hom, 1992). The most authoritative recent estimate is that more than 120 million women and girls have been subjected to female genital mutilation (Dorkenoo, 1999). The most extreme and damaging form, infibulation, is practiced in Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Kenya, Mali, and Nigeria. Forms of FGM are also carried out in India, Malaysia, Indonesia, parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and among some immigrants to Europe, Canada, and the U.S. This brutal practice is sometimes inflicted on baby girls just a few days old, in others on girls of about seven years, and in others, on adolescents. Immediate fatal infections are not uncommon, and FGM later greatly accelerates the spread of AIDS (Russell, 2001).
- 9. Killings of women used in prostitution, by “johns” or by pimps. Being beaten, abused, and perhaps killed by a pimp or by “johns” must be seen as part of the “career” description of being used in prostitution. In a detailed study, 65% of the prostituted women had been beaten and physically abused by “johns” (Silbert & Pines, 1981). A Canadian commission (1985) found that the death rate of women in prostitution was forty times higher than that of the general population. In one year in New York City, two hundred prostitutes were reported murdered (Rosen, 1981). Police and authorities are often indifferent to these murders.
- 10. Rape and murder. Although only a small percentage of rape victims are also murdered, the fear of being killed is a major part of the trauma of these crimes. In countless popular film portrayals of rape, the rape victims’ murder is either shown (*Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, *Death Wish*), or seems about to happen (*Cape Fear*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Leaving Los Vegas*, *Blue Velvet*, *Lipstick*, and *Extremities*).
- 11. Killings by current or former husband, partner, lover, or boyfriend. From a detailed description of every murder by gunfire in the U.S. for one week (Magnuson, 1989), Russell calculated that 100% of the killings of women by their intimate partners could clearly be seen to be femicides.
- Campbell found that of the reported femicides in Dayton Ohio in 1980, the immediate motivation was “male jealousy” in 64% of the cases, and overt insistence on “male dominance” in another 18% (1992, p.99). Male jealousy in these cases was not based on reality, but on male attempts to control, possess, and own the woman whom he then killed. Oakun (1986) estimated that over nine years from 1974 to 1983, “well over 19,000”... women died from physical abuse and other conjugal violence.
- 12. Executions of women, disproportionate to men, for killing of a spouse. Women who are executed for committing murder, by due process of law, are not considered femicides, unless the law is gender-biased against women (as it was most notably in the medieval church-ordered “witch” persecutions.) Many legal observers of domestic violence prosecutions have contended that women, who kill spouses far less often than do men, and most often in self-defense, typically receive more severe treatment than do male killers, including execution (Mills, 2002).
- 13. Legal denial of abortions and contraception, resulting in more women’s deaths. Wherever women are denied the right of choice, thousands die each year of botched abortions. In Portugal alone, it was reported that about 2,000 women each year die of abortions that went badly (Russell and Van de Ven, 1976).
- 14. Infecting women with AIDS by rape, widespread in Africa and the Caribbean today. The spread of AIDS also signifies a massive wave of femicides which is devastating

women in much of the world. The highest rates are in seven southern African nations, including South Africa, where over one-fifth of the population is infected. South Africa also is said to have the world's highest rate of rape (St. John, 2000). The confluence there of a male-dominant culture, high rates of rape, female genital mutilation, and an epidemic of AIDS, create a vast, uncounted number female victims, whose deaths are patently femicides (Russell, 2001). The rapid spread of AIDS in Caribbean countries is also fueled by "irresponsible sexual behavior" including refusing to use condoms (Relly, 2000).

- 15. Killings influenced by viewing erotomisogyny. Erotomisogyny is "pornography" that is sexually arousing to men while also portraying a woman being hurt, harmed, or raped (Brannon and Poran, 1996). Experimental laboratory research has shown that erotomisogyny increases hostility to women, and callousness to women's pain, and heightens some men's acknowledged likelihood of raping (Layden, 2010; Weaver, 1991; Russell, 1993; Brannon, 1991). A variety of other facts have linked erotomisogyny with femicides. Some men have copied the rape-femicide they watched on a video. Serial killers have talked of how violent pornography stimulated their urge to kill women.
- 16. Killings of women seen as devalued and less protected by law, such as women of color, poor women, Native American women, lesbians, etc. There is evidence that women in various socially-devalued categories are more likely to be murdered. Killings of Native American women, often by rape-and-murder, are at chronically high levels. Murders of Native American women in Alaska are seven times the rate for white U.S. females (Singer, 1992, p.172). Lynching of black women in the U.S. often included rape and sexual abuse, revealing the element of misogyny. There have been rape-murderers who attacked only Asian women (Russell, 1992, p.163). Killings of poor women of color in general elicit little interest or coverage from news media (Grant, 1992).
- 17. Neglect of female infants, leading to deaths. The patriarchal favoritism of sons, seen in many cultures, results in unequal treatment by parents and a frequent neglect of girls needs for health care and nutrition. Sometimes girls are deliberately neglected until they die. A United Nations study reported that approximately one million female children die each year from neglect (Hom, 1991, p.138).
- 18. Inadequately-tested and lethal birth-control methods for women. Feminists have charged that women's health has been jeopardized by doctor's lack of concern with women's health issues. Widely used and prescribed bisphosphonate drugs are found to cause damaging micro-fractures in women's bones (Pizzorino, 2013). Many deaths have occurred from medical practices that have badly impacted women's health.
- 19. Deaths from unneeded breast implants, and other cosmetic surgeries. Some women have died from the complications of surgical efforts to maintain their attractiveness to men, guided by sexist norms of female youth and beauty. Such deaths are to some degree caused by sexist norms, although the woman's own compliance with those norms is a more immediate cause.
- 20. Economic disadvantage of women. Womens earning significantly less than men can lead to women now having access to health care, more dangerous and stressful jobs, inadequate diet, living in high-crime neighborhoods, and other life-shortening factors. Such accepted economic inequalities, over time, cause more deaths among women. Thus women predictably die, as a consequence of sexist values, economics and practices which make their lives less secure.

The above femicide-categories might be compared and classified from several different perspectives, including:

- A. *The numbers of women killed.* Exact figures could only be estimated, for any one country or internationally, but total of these multiple kinds of femicides number in the millions. From a detailed description of every murder by gunfire in the U.S. over just one week (Magnuson, 1989), Russell was able to calculate that 72% of all the reported murders of women by men should be classed as femicides.
- B. *The relation of the victim to the perpetrators.* Individuals who kill women may include 1. The woman's current or former husband, partner, boyfriend, or lover. 2. Other known men, including *family* (father, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, step-fathers, cousins) and *other men whom the woman knows* (acquaintances, friends, casual dates, neighbors, family friends, and authority figures, etc.) 3. Total strangers. Other killings of women, by law or social action, include those that are fully legal, quasi-legal; or, ignored or quietly tolerated by legal authorities; or that are predictably caused by sexist government policies.
- C. *The directness or indirectness of misogyny's influence.* This ranges from femicides in which the element of sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, etc. is highly visible and obvious, to those in which the role played by sexism is not so instantly evident, being obscured by other contributing factors, or by the less visible practices and values that maintain a patriarchal society. The all-too-common category of *intimate partner femicides* lies roughly in the middle of this continuum. On the one hand, the sexism, misogyny, and patriarchal entitlement of men who kill their own intimate partners, seems obvious. Many however have viewed these sexist crimes as "affairs of the heart" or the "madness of love;" some clinicians have argued that the killers had psychological maladjustments, possibly caused by their mothers. Such amateur psychologizing has helped to obscure the realities of male privilege and entitlement, which in fact underlie virtually all intimate partner femicides.

HOW THE TERM FEMICIDE HELPS TO COMBAT FEMICIDES

Naming major forms of abuse and injustice, which receive little previous notice, as with "genocide" and "sexual harassment," can often be an effective organizing tool. Clearly naming them is a first step toward pointing out and organizing to end these injustices. So too has the concept of femicide begun to expose the broad and recurring patterns of woman abuse, and to inspire feminist resistance and action.

A feminist activist in Croatia, Asja Armanda, appears to have been the first to connect the term of femicide to the widespread rape-murders of Croatian women in Bosnia by Serbian men during the civil war in that region (Nenadic, 1996). Learning of the new term *femicide* helped Armanda and her allies to recognize that the large number of misogynist rape-murders occurring there were a deliberate part of the Serbian war strategy; and were by definition femicides. Empowered by this insight, Croatian women asked feminist attorney Catharine MacKinnon, who had previously breathed life into the concept of sexual harassment, to bring suit in an international legal case. In a ground-breaking move, MacKinnon formally charged the perpetrators with committing femicide, in addition to genocide (1993, 1994). Naming femicide as a distinct and separate crime enabled MacKinnon to introduce as evidence a lengthy list of misogynistic crimes perpetrated only against women.

The term has had even greater resonance and utility for feminists in Latin America, where certain regions had been torn apart by epidemics of mass woman-killing. Women's activists there had been struggling for years with these atrocities when translations of Russell's term femicide reached them. In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, near the U.S. border, there had been ongoing, mysterious, gruesome mass-murders of hundred of women dating back to 1993. In 2004 Marcella Lagarde, a Mexican politician and feminist, read Russell's work on femicide, applied it to her own crusade against

these mass-murders, used it to spur political action. She created and chaired a commission on femicide in the Mexican Congress and spoke of the term throughout Latin America.

In Guatemala, years of civil war and drug terrorism had created a seemingly permanent culture of violence. Since 2000, its most glaring feature was gruesome mass killing of women. Bodies turned up constantly across the landscape. Over 5,000 women were murdered there in the last decade, virtually none of which had provoked any legal action (Shulman, 2010). Feminist activists there became enthusiastic about using the term *femicide* in political action. In 2008 after a long campaign, the Guatemalan Congress passed a law against femicide, with 28 separate articles specifying examples, and created a Presidential Commission to see to its implementation.

To date, eight countries in Latin America, including Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, and Honduras have passed some form of legislation against femicide. The goal of abolition has not yet been achieved, but it has started.

Murders of women by their intimate partners, by former or current husbands, boyfriends, or lovers, are perhaps the single most common form of femicide in America today. Yet the term *femicide*, with the conceptual clarity, links to related issues, and organizing effectiveness which it has demonstrated, is not often seen in writing about domestic violence, or other abuses of women. Naming a problem with thoughtful precision can be a powerful tool, which can only help us if we begin to use it.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Robert Brannon, Ph.D., is a social psychologist who studies empirical research on violence against women, including sexual assault and domestic violence. He has taught Women's Studies and Men's Studies courses at Brooklyn College C.U.N.Y. He Chairs the National Task Group on the commercial Sex Industry, sponsored by The National Organization for Men Against Sexism (www.Nomas.org)

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