

FEMICIDE AND THE MEDIA: Do reporting practices normalize gender-based violence?



SUMMARY

Feminist activism in the context of the novel coronavirus has cast renewed light on an extreme form of gender-based violence: femicide. Several countries in Latin America reported spikes in femicide in the early months of state-wide lockdowns, even in places where laws against femicide are in place. Research shows that lack of implementation and enforcement of laws, as well as data gaps and gender and other forms of discrimination all contribute to impunity. This policy brief presents evidence and makes recommendations to address another factor in the persistence of femicide: media reporting. It makes the case for a role for the news media in challenging, rather than reproducing, harmful stereotypes and attitudes. It also suggests a gender-sensitive and rights-based approach to femicide reporting that leverages and adapts existing frameworks to address femicide in specific country contexts.

Femicide: a social and political phenomenon

Femicideⁱ refers to the gender-related killing of women which often culminates in socially and politically tolerated murder. It constitutes the most extreme end of a continuum of gender-based violence (GBV), violating women's right to life and freedom from violence, torture, and gender-based discrimination. Femicide is a global phenomenon that takes place in both private and public spheres, though more than half of the 87,000 women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by intimate partners or other family membersⁱⁱ.

The collection of data to visibilize and track femicide is imperfect, however, and often falls well short of providing an accurate picture. In part this is because the definitions of the term vary by geography, discipline, and sector.ⁱⁱⁱ While such variation can complicate global monitoring initiatives, efforts to reach global consensus on a singular definition may be less pressing than efforts to consolidate definitions and align data collection priorities at the regional or country-level.^{iv}

In Latin America in particular, the increasing recognition of femicide is due in no small part to feminist and women's rights movements whose efforts have been instrumental to the passing of laws against femicide across much of the region.^v The legal codification of femicide^{vi} is a key strategy for country-level response because it both recognizes femicide as an extreme manifestation of GBV, and can spearhead the creation of specialized institutions and services.^{vii} Laws against femicide are not magic bullets, however.^{viii} As a growing body of research shows, even where robust laws are in place, implementation and enforcement are seriously lacking.^{ix} The implementation gap in femicide laws is due to many factors, including resource, data, or capacity shortfalls,^x gaps in political will and social empathy, and gender and intersecting forms of discrimination that thrive even where laws against femicide are in place.

The rise of femicide during Covid-19

Data on GBV during the Covid-19 pandemic from around the globe show an intensification of sexual and physical violence, and especially domestic violence, leading to calls to address a "shadow pandemic."^{xi} Several countries in Latin America reported spikes in femicide in the early months of public health lockdowns. In a single month, Argentina reported 19 femicides and El Salvador reported nine.^{xii} Brazil, meanwhile, reported a 56 per cent increase in femicides in multiple states in March alone,^{xiii} while Guatemala recorded 140 femicides between March and June.^{xiv} In Mexico, for every 100 women who died as a result of Covid-19, 367 women were victims of femicide, surpassing a 3-to-1 ratio between February 28th and April 13th.^{xv} The data provided by women's organizations across the region suggest that even these dire state reports undercount actual femicide deaths.

In part, such violence can be traced to well-intentioned public health measures to curb the spread of Covid-19. During lockdowns, millions of women were forced to "shelter-in-place" in unsafe homes and were unable to access formal and informal networks of support.^{xvi} The drivers of femicide existed before the pandemic, however, and addressing these requires a multi-pronged approach that extends beyond gender-responsive public health policies to also change social norms.

Femicide and the media

The news media does more than describe events—it also communicates and shapes social values and meaning.^{xvii} When the news media reports on femicide, it can reflect and shape societal interpretations of the violence that has occurred.^{xviii} Research from a wide variety of countries including Canada, Mexico, Jordan, and South Africa, for example, indicates that the way that femicide is reported all too often helps reinforce inadequate state responses to femicide by representing this violence as normal or by blaming victims, particularly those that are considered of low social status.^{xix} Research in Guatemala shows that media reporting tends to mirror rather than challenge the social, political, and economic dynamics that contribute to femicide and its normalization.^{xx}

Case study: Guatemala

Thousands of femicides have been committed in the aftermath of Guatemala’s genocidal civil war (1960 – 1996). Widely-circulated national newspapers report stories of violence and femicide almost daily, providing the public with often sensationalized information about the victims and their killers, and advancing theories about the motive for the violence and what should be done about it. The problem with mainstream media reporting on femicide in this context, like many others, is not that all femicides are unreported,^{xxi} but that reporting practices reinforce gender and intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion that assign stigma and value according to the victims’ perceived social status.

Reporting on the place where a victim’s body is discovered, for example, often reinforces the view that GBV is a punishment for women who violate their expected gender roles.^{xxii} If a woman’s body is discovered in a “public” setting— next to a highway, in a ravine, or a hotel room, for instance—the media often presents her as a sex worker or as connected to a gang (see Box 1). As noted by a feminist activist in Guatemala City, *“If the death is in the public sphere she is blamed, she is criminalized. She is blamed because ‘why was she there?’, or she is criminalized because ‘surely she was involved with the gangs.”* Such information is routinely accompanied by partially-covered photos of cadavers and descriptions which sexualize the victim (*“she was found in the nude”*) or describe torture (*“the victims were found beheaded”*).

Box 1

Excerpts from typical news media reporting on femicide



“The cadavers of two women, with signs of torture, were abandoned on the highway at kilometer 238, on the route between San Marcos and Quetzaltenango ... The victims were presumed to be between 25 and 30 years old. Preliminary information suggests they could be sex workers, this account has not been confirmed.”



“Police investigators suspect that getting involved with gang members cost three women their lives ... The bodies were located in a wooded area with signs of having been abused.”

Another issue is the heavy-handed use of quotes explaining cause of death offered by police and state authorities at the scene of the crime. The quotes, which typically lack grounding in evidence, reinforce assumptions that femicide victims were involved in “bad activities” (e.g., sex work), with “bad people” (e.g., gang members), and had “bad families” (e.g., who failed to control the victims’ actions). The effect of these textual and visual representations is that femicide victims are dehumanized to the point where they are not considered ‘true’ victims, and this has implications beyond the realm of media representation.

The impact of discriminatory media reporting practices

Discriminatory news media coverage of femicides has several harmful impacts. First, it obscures the root causes of GBV, which include the unequal distribution of power according to gender and its intersections with race or social class. References to “gang violence” or “sex workers,” for example, not only perpetrate harmful stereotypes about some of the most

marginalized groups of women, but also against some of the most marginalized groups of young men, who are represented as a monolithic group of violent criminals. Similarly, references to “crimes of passion” or “jealously” in reporting on violence in the “private” sphere, such as “family” violence, reinforce long debunked myths about the causes of domestic violence.^{xxiii} In-country activists also point out that the practice of printing explicit images of cadavers widens the empathy gap for femicide victims, especially when the victims belong to marginalized racial and economic groups.^{xxiv}

These dynamics feed into a broader problem: lack of implementation of existing laws.^{xxv} Media reporting practices lend symbolic support to widespread impunity for femicide by engaging in a practice of ‘victim blaming’.^{xxvi} And while the public’s focus is trained on the social and moral worth of individual victims and their social circles, institutional failures to prevent, investigate, and prosecute femicides go unaddressed.

Towards a gender-sensitive and rights-based approach to femicide reporting

Initiatives to change reporting practices are important mechanisms for achieving broader societal change. Fortunately, moving towards a gender-sensitive and rights-based approach to femicide reporting does not require reinventing the wheel: existing frameworks can be leveraged and applied in ways that are fit for context and which respond to the concerns of local anti-violence movements and groups. In fact, states have clear pathways for working with women’s civil society organizations to promote non-discrimination in media reporting of femicide. Specifically, the adoption of codes of ethics or regulatory guidelines aligns with international human rights frameworks and regional protocols (See Box 2).^{xxvii}

Box 2

Frameworks to bolster national efforts to promote gender-sensitive and rights-based approaches to femicide reporting

International

- 01. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Article 5(a):** States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women (UNGA, 1979).
- 02. CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 19 on Violence Against Women, Specific Recommendation D:** Effective measures should be taken to ensure that the media respect and promote respect for women (CEDAW, 1992).

Regional

- 03. Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women “Convention of Belem Do Para,” Article 8(g):** State parties agree to undertake progressively specific measures, including programs to encourage the communications media to develop appropriate media guidelines in order to contribute to the eradication of violence against women in all its forms, and to enhance respect for the dignity of women (OAS, 1994).
- 04. Latin American Model Protocol for the Investigation of Gender-Related Killings of Women (Femicide/Feminicide):** Calls for informative and responsible media coverage of femicide, including through the adoption of codes of ethics. It is important that States, civil society, and the media agree on the appropriate mechanisms to guarantee informative coverage of femicides, in accordance with international standards on the matter, taking as basic principles respect to the human dignity of the victims and their next of kin, transparency and impartiality in the coverage of information (Sarmiento et al., 2014).

The practical application of these existing frameworks should be guided at the country level by context-relevant research and data. In Guatemala, for example, news media should put an end to the printing of cadavers of femicide victims, a practice that violates the dignity of victims and their families while exploiting and sensationalizing femicide. Second, media outlets should review and revise their information sourcing practices to limit the use of stereotypes and avoid speculating on motives. One way to achieve this is by requiring reporters to reach out to GBV specialists and women’s rights activists for information on context, rather than relying solely on law enforcement. Where femicide is pervasive, national femicide observatories can be important sources of data and drivers of accountability, especially when they are well-resourced and integrated into national strategies to end GBV.

To be sure, implementing gender-sensitive and rights-based reporting is only one of many other legal, social, and economic strategies that are needed to eliminate GBV. But given the news media’s reach, it is a strategy that holds enormous potential for impact.

Recommendations

- 01.** In collaboration with women’s civil society organizations, and leveraging existing frameworks, states should encourage news media organizations to adopt codes of ethics, which should include gender-sensitive and rights-based guidelines for reporting on femicide and other forms of gender-based violence.
- 02.** Establish National Femicide Watches or National Femicide Observatories.^{xxviii} In countries where these have already been established, states should ensure that they are well-resourced and meaningfully integrated with existing mechanisms for femicide data collection and prevention and response strategies.
- 03.** Provide financial support to feminist, women’s rights, and other civil society organizations who are using alternative forms of data collection and story-telling to bring visibility to gender-based violence and to put femicides in context (See Box 3).

Box 3

Organizations and movements working to change public perceptions of femicide



La Cuerda:

Feminist newspaper in Guatemala.

www.lacuerdaguatemala.org



Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability
Observatoire canadien du fémicide pour la justice et la responsabilisation

Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability:

Observatory which mobilizes research to prevent femicide and other forms of gender-based killings in Canada, including through critical analysis of media coverage.

www.femicideinCanada.ca

NI UNA MENOS

Ni Una Menos:

Feminist movement originating in Argentina, and which is now a collective of movements across Latin America focused on breaking the cycles of impunity for femicide.

www.niunamenos.org.ar



Urban Indian Health Institute
A Division of the Seattle Indian Health Board

Our Bodies, Our Stories:

Project initiated by the Urban Indian Health Institute in Seattle, Washington to bring visibility to the scope of femicide and sexual violence against Native women across the United States.

www.uihi.org/projects/our-bodies-our-stories/

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The United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences has defined femicide as the gender-related or gender-motivated killing of women because of their sex and/or gender, adding that it constitutes the most extreme form of violence against women and the most violent manifestation of discrimination against women. See UNHRC 2016.

ⁱUN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2019.

ⁱⁱFor example, “femicide,” “feminicide,” “gender-related” or “gender-motivated” killing are used. Latin American feminists have been at the forefront of enumerating the concept of feminicide, which, unlike femicide, is intended to draw attention towards the role of the state and its institutions for failing to prevent this violence and for fostering environments that enable impunity. See Fregoso and Bejarano (2010).

^{iv}To be sure, the lack of definitional consensus hinders data collection and comparisons at the global level. But as others have noted (see Dawson and Carrigan, 2020; Sarmiento et al., 2014), priorities for femicide data collection will necessarily be shaped by country-specific dynamics.

^vSixteen countries in Latin America have passed laws defining femicide. See Dawson and Carrigan 2020.

^{vi}In some countries (e.g., Guatemala) the law uses the term “femicide”, while in others (e.g., Mexico) the law uses “feminicide”.

^{vii}Examples include: femicide courts and mandatory gender sensitivity training for judges.

^{viii}Fuentes 2014.

^{ix}Elsberg et al. 2015.

^xMenjivar and Walsh 2017.

^{xi}UN Women 2020.

^{xii}Prusa, Garcia Nice and Soledad 2020.

^{xiii}Ibid.

^{xiv}Mazariegos and Rabanales 2020.

^{xv}Prusa, Garcia Nice and Soledad 2020.

^{xvi}See UN Women 2020.

^{xvii}Torres 2014; Butler 1993.

^{xviii}The media landscape is of course diverse in Guatemala, but as others have noted, some of the most widely-circulated daily newspapers in the country, such as Prensa Libre, enjoy an almost total monopoly over the newspaper industry. See Fuentes 2020; England 2018.

^{xix}For Canada, see Fairbairn and Dawson 2013, Simpson 2016; for Mexico, see Wright 2011; for Jordan, see Mahadeen 2017; for South Africa, see Spies 2020.

^{xx}Fuentes 2020.

^{xxi}Many femicides do of course go unreported. The point is that violence and femicide are not ‘invisible’ in Guatemala, as such.

^{xxii}Research from Mexico (e.g., Wright, 2011) and Canada (e.g., Jiwani and Young 2006; Razack 2000) highlights similar dynamics.

^{xxiii}See Chapter 6 of Progress of the World’s Women (UNW, 2018), on the drivers of violence against women and girls in families, including intimate partnerships.

^{xxiv}Fuentes 2020.

^{xxv}ECLAC 2015.

^{xxvi}Fuentes 2020.

^{xxvii}UNODC 2015.

^{xxviii}As proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. See UNHRC 2016.