

Gender violence: femicides in Argentina^{*}

Ana María Fernández[§]

Summary. *This paper presents the research results on femicides carried out in Argentina during the period 2008-2009 (Fernández et al., 2009). We emphasize one of the main outcomes: suicide-homicide tension linked to inconsistencies in keeping case records. From this point, we question how femicides can be covered up, among patriarchy, ferociousness and State abandonment.*

Key words: *Femicides, statistics, suicide-homicide tension, patriarchy, state*

The murderer of women is the most extreme form of sexist terrorism. To comprehend its political meaning, it was necessary to coin a new word. Diana Russel used this word for the first time in 1976. This concept «removes the obscuring veil of non-gendered terms such as homicide and murder» (Caputi, 1992, p. 15). It shows the inequality between genders and the socially determined facet of these deaths. It is useful because it points out the social and general condition of such violence (Radford-Russell, 1992). Besides, it allows us to distance the analysis from individual naturalized poses that usually blame the victims, represent aggressors as 'crazy men', or consider these deaths as 'passion outcomes'.

In countries such as Mexico, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic the term in use is feminicide. Meanwhile in Honduras, Guatemala, Chile and Argentina femicide is the term used. Nevertheless, the meaning of the concept remains the same: it describes the murder of women based on gender motives. It is the most extreme form of violence wielded by men

^{*}Received: 08/09/2012 - Revision: 20/09/2012 - Accepted: 07/10/2012

Self-declaration of compliance with ethical standards: 05/12/2012

[§]Chair Professor and Researcher, Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), Argentina. Tel. (005411) 4899 0743. URL <http://www.anamfernandez.com.ar>. E-mail amfernandez20@gmail.com.

Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies, XVII, 2/2012

against women in their eagerness to take, keep or increase domination, power, control and ownership over them.

There are three types of femicides (OPS, 2002): intimate femicides, non-intimate femicides and linked femicides. The first one refers to murders perpetrated by men who are or were in an intimate, familiar, conjugal or similar relationship with the woman. The second one denotes murders perpetrated by men who are or were not in an intimate, familiar, conjugal or similar relationship with the women. And the third one includes women and female children murdered in a “firing line” of a man trying to kill a woman. A sub-category has been specified within this third type. It gathers people –generally sons and daughters- murdered by the femicidal to punish and psychologically destroy the woman he considers his ownership (Casa del Encuentro, 2011).

Quoting Jane Caputi, femicide «is not some inexplicable phenomenon [...] it is an extreme expression of patriarchal ‘force’» (1992, p. 205). The woman he kills he considers his and only his own. These social subtleties operate making gender violence crimes and impunity possible, as impunity favours the increase and reproduction of femicides (Fernández, 2012).

In Argentina, when it comes to femicide, there are no official statistics. Since 2008-2009, through its Femicides Observatory, NGO Casa del Encuentro counted the cases based on 120 newspapers and news agencies. Though specialists, relatives and victims recognise the work of this organization, and its legitimacy, it practically does not receive State support. Yet, the figures it publishes are the ones officially consulted even by different state departments.

According to the data, in 2008, 207 femicides were carried out. Most of them were perpetrated by husbands, concubines, couples, boyfriends, ex-couples or relatives. 16 murderers were of security forces officers. In 2009, 231 femicides were registered. 182 were intimate femicides. 13 murderers were security forces officers. In 2010, 275 femicides were registered. 225 were intimate femicides. 17 murderers were security forces officers. In 2011, 311 femicides were registered. This implies a 37% increase from 2008. In 2012 during the first semester, 130 femicides were recorded (Casa del Encuentro, 2011). We are reaching almost one femicide a day.

These tolls clearly show an alarming increase in femicides. Even when the gender violence rise may be considered part of a general escalation in violence, it should not be forgotten that gender violence is a specific phenomenon. It is necessary to bear in mind that the gender violence profile is changing and femicides characteristics change with it. Early studies on gender violence pointed out that women’s deaths at the hands of their partners used to be the fatal result of many years of violence. Nowadays,

we witness women being killed by boyfriends or lovers even when they have been in a relationship with them for a few years or months (Fernández, 2010). International studies have confirmed that women aged between 15 and 34 years old are the ones in the greatest danger (WHO, 2005).

During 2008-2009 a research was carried out under my guidance. It was requested by the National Health Ministry and it was titled “Análisis de la mortalidad por causas externas y su relación con la violencia contra las mujeres” “Mortality from external causes analysis and its connection to violence against women”. It consisted of a quali-quantitative descriptive-exploratory study which linked women’s mortality from external causes with gender violence (Fernández et al., 2009).

Based on the Ministries vital statistics, we mapped women’s mortality from external causes in all of Argentina, including death from suicide, homicide or accidents. Also, one year we published news about deaths linked to violence against women in the most important national newspapers. Similarly, we analyzed the way these deaths were recorded, not-recorded and under-reported in a public hospital. In addition, we interviewed key informants. Both the methodology and the research team were put together in a trans disciplinary fashion (Fernández, 2011).

One of the strongest research findings was the suicide-homicide tension. With this expression, we refer to two problems:

- a) the fact that the most frequent women’s suicide statistics do not match with those found in the Ministry’s records;
- b) the modification of suicide-homicide statistics ratio when it comes to women’s death.

According to the consulted forensics and international bibliography (UNODC, 2011), the most frequent male murder modes are: fire weapons shooting and hanging, not discounting other modes that may be used. The most likely female suicide modes are: poisoning with insecticide, overdosing with psychotropic drugs, cliff jumping and jumping under trains or subways. Rarely, were hanging, fire weapons shooting and weapons used.

Suicide modes found in our research turn out to be surprising: in almost every province most women’s suicides are by «intentional self-inflicted wounds by hanging, strangling or suffocation at home», and secondly, by fire weapon shooting (Fernández et al., 2009).

International reports (UNODC, 2011) establish that in most countries statistical trends is suicides over homicides. In Argentina, the proportion is 2.2, which means that, eventually, in the general population, suicides are double that of homicides. In our research, we observed that in some

provinces, this proportion may be substantially larger (Fernández et al., 2009).

Provinces where suicides widely exceed homicides are the same places where registered suicides by hanging, strangling, suffocation at home and fire weapon shooting are highest. It is not just that recorded suicide modalities do not match the usual female suicide modalities but also that women's homicide by hanging, strangling or suffocation and fire weapon shooting becomes almost inexistent. Analyzing these divergences, we found that 35% of the women's suicides were recorded as «intentional self-inflicted wound by hanging, strangling or suffocation at home». Nevertheless, only 1.5% of the cases were catalogued as homicides. This large difference in percentages between recorded suicides and homicides by the same modality, is at least to be suspected (Fernández et al., 2009).

How can it be that most likely female suicide modalities recorded don't match international patterns? Is it that a change has occurred in female suicide modalities? Is it that there is a specific suicide mode in Argentina? Or is it that we are facing a situation of covered up femicides?

Generally, when a woman is murdered, in the public arena a suspicion of femicide is possible. Forensics have clearly pointed out how to recognise a case of femicide. Nevertheless, police and justice systems continue to overlook it. When is it likely to be a femicide case? According to forensics:

- when the woman has been pregnant in the past year;
- when there does not exist a suspicion of suicide;
- when the murder was not preceded by suicide attempts.

It has been proved that many abusers become more violent during pregnancy because they can't stand to share "their" woman.

As for death modality, when a woman's death arises from other ways other than cliff jumping, jumping under trains or subways, overdoses with psychotropic drugs or poisoning with insecticide, a homicide is to be strongly suspected.

In regards to this last point, forensics establish that generally, a woman's suicide is preceded by previous attempts (Fernández et al., 2009). This brings us to an important contrasting factor to distinguish between homicide and suicide.

Therefore, in forensic terms, if a woman killed herself at the first try, by an unlikely modality and she had been pregnant in the past year, it is highly probable that we are dealing with a femicide.

As it has already been said, if there are statistical, prevalence and methodology inconsistencies in suicide and homicide records, we may presume that a significant number of cases recorded as suicides may actually be covered up femicides.

For this to be possible, explicit and implicit complicities – whether calculated or naturalized – are necessary, in addition to extreme bureaucratic neglect. How is it possible to cover up these homicides? Is it so easy to pass women's homicide for suicide? When we started spreading our research findings in an academic environment, we were regarded quite sceptically. It was not like that with people looking after gender violence victims: they have proved over and over again that in this area anything may happen (Fernández, 2010).

We consider that various strategies may be operating simultaneously when homicides are covered up or recorded as suicides.:

- cover up by official organisms agents': when ambiguous cases are hurriedly cleared up, suicide cases can be suspected to be in fact homicides. Even more if the hurry involves cremating the body. To pass off a homicide as a suicide, you must count on some physician's consent to certify death, a police officer to alter the crime scene, judges not properly investigating, and the media rapidly giving a version of events as a suicide or accident, etc. Therefore, this task is more likely to be accomplished by powerful, well-connected and wealthy men. The cover up could be over murders of: women who knew too much, threatening to divorce, to report some illegal operations; girls killed at 'parties' of those known as "sons of the power". We shouldn't dismiss the government's complicity involved in these operations. At the same time, unsolved homicides, women's disappearance or possible suicides are usually involved in the slave trade business. These covered up femicides are linked to strong corruption centres;
- patriarchy's weight in obstructing investigations: in spite of the abovementioned arguments, not every time will we face official complicity or malice in covering up a homicide. Patriarchal force usually works in implicit, un-thought ways, through an effective action of deeply established gender social imaginaries (Fernández, 1993). It is important to differentiate these cases from explicit cover up operations. If a husband kills his wife and then calls the police crying and he says «my wife killed herself» usually no one would even think in looking forward. Possibly, there won't be any investigation to prove or dismiss if that death was preceded by gender violence. The chance of this man not telling the truth is overlooked or believed. It means that a man's lie remains unthinkable. What gender violence studies systematically point out also remains overlooked. That is, for women, the home is more dangerous than the streets (OVDCSJN, 2012).

In short, a femicide never being cleared up or passing for a suicide is possible because the very same patriarchal asymmetry determining gender

violence allows one to pull the strings to get data altered or to overlook the femicide evidence.

The statistics presented show clear and unmistakable cases of femicides. But if we add the covered up femicides or those cases which have never really been cleared up, the women who have disappeared, the women's suicides induced by gender violence and incestuous abuse situations, the accidental death cases occurring in a moment while the women were deeply altered by abuse and terror, etc. how great would the toll be?

If we also add the kidnapped cases of women via human trafficking and the deaths of 3,000 women a year due to illegal abortions, what would be the annual femicide toll? Isn't it a real genocide that we are facing?

Shouldn't we include here the evitable femicides? Those announced as deaths but the State involved does not apply the gender violence risk management/assessment guide. The state does not control or punish men when they systematically break judicial preventive measures, they overlook the suggestions made by the few bureaucrats who work with a gender perspective, they ease sentences given to women murderers, protect them with the violent emotion argument, etc. Are not the state's agents favoring in this manner an increase in femicides? From my point of view, this problem arises from a particular combination between the ferociousness of patriarchy and the State's lack of involvement.

The state is absent in taking care of the victims but strongly present when permitting a rise in femicide. If a State would act with this level of neglect and complicity when dealing with deaths of, let's say, some ethnic community or political group members, wouldn't the Human Rights organizations be using State genocide or crimes against humanity categories to refer to them?

It might be argued that these are not the proper terms to refer to these deaths as the actual perpetrators of women's murders as a gender violence outcome are not State agents themselves; and we could agree. Which is the proper term then? The one that clearly states the systematic complicities involved in offering men impunity mechanisms that are activated at different levels of the States' bodies. Thus, not only is the femicidal's impunity warranted but also the rise in gender crimes is favoured. Once again, we need to coin a new term. A new concept should be given birth.

References

- Caputi, J. (1992). Advertising femicide: Lethal violence against women in pornography and gorenography. In J. Radford and D. E. H. Russell (Eds.), *Femicide: the politics of woman killing* (pp. 203-221). New York, Twayne
- Casa del Encuentro (2011). *Femicidio*. Retrieved from <http://www.lacasadelencuentro.org/femicidios.html>
- Fernández, A. M. (2012). Femicidios: La ferocidad del patriarcado [Femicide: the cruelty of patriarchy]. *Revista Nomadías*, 16, 47-73
- Fernández, A. M. (1993). *La mujer de la ilusión: Pactos y contratos entre hombres y mujeres* [The woman of the illusion: covenants and contractors between men and women]. Buenos Aires: Paidós
- Fernández, A. M. (2010). Análisis de la mortalidad por causas externas y su relación con la violencia contra las mujeres. In Defensoría del Pueblo de la ciudad de Neuquén [Analysis of mortality from external causes and its relation to violence against women. To the defence of the Neuquén city]. *Violencia contra las mujeres*. Cuaderno N° 3 del Programa de Conferencias, Cursos y Seminarios. Neuquén
- Fernández, A. M. (2011). Hacia los estudios transdisciplinarios de la subjetividad. (Reformulaciones académico-políticas de la diferencia) [Towards transdisciplinary studies of the subjectivity. (Academic-political reformulation of the difference)]. In *Revista Investigaciones en Psicología*, 16 (1), 61-82
- Fernández, A. M. et. al. (2009). Análisis de la mortalidad por causas externas y su relación con la violencia contra las mujeres: Estudio cuali-cuantitativo de tipo descriptivo-exploratorio [Analysis of mortality from external causes and its relation to violence against women: Quali-quantitative methodology for descriptive-explorative study]. In *Informe Ejecutivo de Estudios Colaborativos Multicéntricos*, Comisión Nacional Salud Investiga, Ministerio de Salud de la Nación. Convocatoria 2008, Argentina
- OVDCSJN (2012). *Oficina de Violencia Doméstica, Corte Suprema de Justicia de la Nación: Estadísticas*. Retrieved from: <http://www.csjn.gov.ar/docus/documentos/verdoc.jsp>
- OPS (2002). Caicedo, Ana: *Femicidio en Costa Rica 1990-1999*. San José, Costa Rica.
- Radford, J., and Russell, D. E. H. (1992). *Femicide: The politics of woman killing*. New York, Twayne
- UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2011). *Global Study of Homicide*. Vienna: UNODC
- World Health Organisation (WHO) (2005). *Multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women*. Geneva: WHO