Family Service of Peel - Peel Institute on Violence Prevention

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November 25th Elimination of Violence Against Women

The United Nations general assembly officially designates November 25th as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. What was initially enacted to honour the deaths of the Mirabal sisters Maria Teresa, Minerva, and Patria has now gained recognition for women's human rights on a global scale. Standing with the United Nations, the Peel Institute on Violence Prevention (FSP-PVIP) recognizes the social urgency of gender-based violence and dedicates this issue to contest the widespread universal phenomenon of femicide.

Femicide can be dated back to 19th century England, but its modern usage can be accredited to the 1970's feminist movements, with Diana Russell popularizing the term to describe "the killing of females by males because they are female". Globally femicide is recognized as separate from homicide due to motivations being rooted in misogyny. Femicide takes on several forms: domestic femicide, non-intimate femicide, female infanticide, honour crimes, dowry practices, lesbophobic femicide, racial femicide, and sexual femicide. According to the United Nations global study on homicide, a staggering total of 87,000 women and girls were victims of femicide in 2017.

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Foreword

On this United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the Peel Institute on Violence Prevention (FSP-PVIP) has dedicated this issue to the gendered crime of femicide. The information used for the following articles is drawn from global and international perspectives as well as particulars on the Canadian context.

The social consequences of the pandemic have placed women and girls in more vulnerable positions to be at risk of experiencing violence, and made it much more difficult to escape unsafe situations. This heightened vulnerability is reflected in the increase of incidence of femicides and reported domestic disturbances during the pandemic. It is important to note that data collection on femicides is inaccurate and lacks specificity; however even with the mentioned flaws, current data points to the fact that minority women such as women of colour, trans women, indigenous women are more at risk of femicide. Unfortunately, much of the information presented in this newsletter will not be shocking as many readers will recognize all these information to be true.

As usual, this issue of the FSP-FSP-PVIP newsletter aims to highlight issues, to spark discussion that will hopefully lead to action. Action in the form of focused research that will inform policy; in the form of activism that will generate social change; in the form of improvement of penal codes that will improve not only accountability of perpetrators, but also safety and prevention for potential victims.

Mexican academic Marcela Lagarde is the originator of the term Feminicide. What was originally supposed to be the English translation of the term femicide ended up garnering its own meaning. The direct translation of femicide to Spanish is femicidio which means homicide. To account for the difference, Lagarde revised femicidio to feminicidio, which translates to English as feminicide. Now recognized as a separate term, feminicide expands on femicide to account for the role of the state and state actors as being complicit with the murders of women and girls. This revised definition allows us to properly examine the state as a patriarchal institution and its motivations for allowing such violence to continue without repercussions.

12%

increase in police calls related to a domestic disturbance between March and June 2020

According to Statistics Canada, in 2020, 160 women and girls were killed in Canada, averaging about one woman every 2.5 days. Several Canadian news outlets refer to this as the "shadow pandemic" with strained access to women's shelters and helplines due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Feminists and activists alike have spoken out on the public health restrictions imposed on Canadians arguing women may have no choice but to stay with men who may be abusive toward them. Statistics Canada reported a 12% increase in police calls related to a domestic disturbance between March and June 2020: the height of the mandatory lockdown period.

In Canada, there is a lack of data differentiation between femicide/feminicide and homicide. The Canadian Femicide Observatory reports that this is more so for racialized women, with missing information on race/ethnicity in 65% of known femicide cases in 2020. This sparse coverage and the possibility of already staggering statistics being worsened by adequate data collection emphasize the need to incorporate the language of feminicide into global conversations on femicide. Indeed, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) reported that 93% of media coverage in Ontario portrays femicide as an individual event rather than a structured form of gendered violence. FSP-PVIP asks its readers to question and reflect on why disparities in femicide data speak to the social urgency of this phenomenon.

Impacts Against Visible Minority Women

The Peel Institute on Violence Prevention (FSP-PVIP) adopts an intersectional approach to this article. Coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw, intersectionality is an analytic tool to examine how individual categories of identification affect a person's privilege and oppression. FSP-PVIP recognizes that while all women face common oppression under the patriarchy, differences exist due to regional, ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds. Moving forward, this article will discuss how femicide impacts different groups of women in the Canadian context.

Women of Colour (WOC) in Canada experience unique violence at the intersection of race and gender. Women of visible minority status are often constructed as "the other". Meaning, WOC do not meet the standard of femininity society has set out for the "good" female. Common stereotypes amongst WOC such as promiscuity, criminal prone, unsophisticated, uneducated, and submissiveness "justify" violence as being okay. This suggests that a binary between normal and abnormal prevails due to the belief of these notions as "just the way things are". According to Statistics Canada, one-third of homicide victims were identified as visible minorities in 2019.

Indigenous women experience femicide at a rate of approximately six times higher than non-indigenous women and girls. Continuing legacies of settler-colonialism place indigenous women in vulnerable positions due to a lack of education, health care, housing, and poor socio-economic conditions, leaving them susceptible to violence. Femicide then becomes exacerbated by notions of indigenous women's bodies as disposable by the criminal legal system. As a result, the prominence of indigenous femicide led to the Government of Canada launching a national public inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls by recommendation of the United Nations.

WOC and women a part of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to be subject to overkill. According to the Canadian Femicide Observatory, this kind of femicide is defined as the excessive use of violence, multiple methods of violence, and mutilation during or after killing. The insidiousness of this crime suggests deep-seated hatred rooted in racist, transphobic, and homophobic ideology. This suggests diversion from socially acceptable norms of the "real" women subjects WOC to increased forms of violence. According to OAITH, trauma was the most common cause of death of all femicides in Ontario for September 2021.

Commonly shared narratives suggest that the everyday lived experience of Canadian women and girls is affected and exacerbated by the fear of femicide. The Canadian Violence Against Women Survey reported that 66% of women were followed in a way that frightened them, and 32% received unwanted attention from a stranger. To combat this, women make daily decisions to regulate their behaviour, exterior appearance, and tone of voice as a continuous effort to appease the male gaze. For example, 31% of women reported avoiding walking beside men, and 61% said they checked the back of their seats before driving. By using feminicide and intersectionality as the framework for this article, the FSP-PVIP encourages questioning the motives of power relations and structures of dominance that make this violence appear as a part of everyday life.

Risk Factors

Research has shown that cases of male victims of intimate partner homicide have decreased; however, the same cannot be applied when the charts shift towards women. Rather, data continues to show the increase of women victims in intimate partner femicide, with the percentage increasing from 54% to 72%. One factor often disregarded is the victim/killer relationship with familial ties generally taken less seriously. According to the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, of the solved cases for femicide, 48% are committed by a spouse, 22% by a family member other than a parent, and 6% by a stranger. A multisite case-control study also revealed one of the leading factors to be lack of employment as well as access to a firearm.

In the years of 1921 to 1988, there was a study held in Toronto and Vancouver that analyzed 670 cases of femicide to determine victimization risks that increase the killing of women. One of the perspectives used was the motivational perspective which looked at threats such as status and economic competition as a motivational tool to inflict violence on women. These threats were apparent in intimate and private acts of violence. The data revealed that women who were perceived as having a high status and challenging male dominance were at a higher risk of experiencing intimate and private acts of violence. Women who also have little to no access to economic and social resources are at a higher risk of potentially becoming victims of violence by their partners. Geography and environment have also proven to be a risk factor. Focusing on the Canadian context, research conducted in the years of 1921 to 1988 showed an increasing amount of femicide cases that occurred twice as much in Toronto compared to Vancouver. This revealed that there are variations between urban and rural settings which increase the likelihood of femicide.

Recent research on surveillance technology has revealed some interesting findings on the role they play in violence against women. There is a problematic assumption that surveillance technology helps create a safer environment for victims of violence. This assumption is problematic because it fails to recognise how surveillance technology has limited the option of privacy and security. Surveillance technology gives access to stalkers who wish to obtain victim's private information. For instance, one of the leading tools that stalkers use to invade their victim's privacy is social media. Social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat give their users access to their victim's locations if they have their location system turned on. What is troubling is that people are unaware of these surveillance systems that are automatically set up on numerous apps that are used on a daily basis.

Lastly, age and sexuality has also been proven to be a risk factor. Various reports in Canada have also revealed that older women are currently one third of victims of femicide, as well as transgender women whose likelihood of vulnerability to victimhood of femicide continues to increase. Overall, this research has revealed that risk markers are time, culture, and place dependant as each context is ought to produce different social processes that produce femicide.

Chile Femicidal Violence Cadastre
January– September 2021
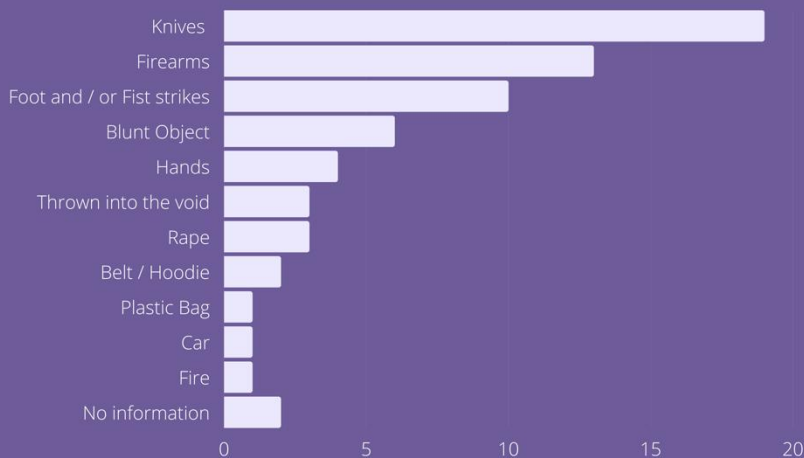
Feminicide Weapons

*In many of the cases there is more than one feminicide weapon

Research

While it is crucial that we maintain ongoing discussions about the killing of women as a specific social phenomenon, understanding the theories that can help address intimate partner-perpetrated femicide is equally just as important. To understand this phenomenon, we must refrain from using more gender-neutral terms, such as homicide, killing or murder, as doing so would disallow further understanding of how femicide is distinct from homicide. Starting off, there are five different approaches to the analysis of femicide that researchers typically follow to gain a theoretical understanding of femicide in contemporary theory.

The first approach we will be discussing is the feminist approach to femicide. Taking a feminist approach to femicide extends beyond political mobilization. This approach relies on hard facts, including the rates of violence against women and rape. The concept of patriarchy also underpins this approach; it refers to a society in which men are dominant and therefore oppressive and dangerous for women. Throughout all social institutions, women are subjected to oppressive views that are not only convenient but also culturally sanctioned. As a result of the unequal distribution of power between men and women, violence is an instrument men use to maintain their control over women.

The sociological analysis of femicide emphasizes empirical evidence of women being killed. Sociology does not concern itself with violent individuals but with violent situations, which form the emotional and behavioural responses of individuals who live within them. The purpose of empirical research is to identify contexts, types of cases, perpetrators' profiles, and murder incidents in which gender relationships play a significant role. Data collection and analysis are used to understand the killing of women through qualitative or quantitative analysis and to identify risk factors aiming to prevent violence. Sociological approaches to femicide also base their approach on the theory that men and women are murdered under different circumstances and by different types of perpetrators. The third approach, which is the criminological approach, emphasizes the unique nature of femicide within 'homicide' studies. This approach looks at lethal intimate partner violence, focusing on the relationship that the victim and offender had.

Understanding the role that each approach plays in the analysis of femicide is crucial. However, one thing that is common amongst all five approaches is that they rely on data entry which has been proven to be problematic as various data entries are commonly inaccurate. This gendered data gap has created a failure of sexual violence prevention, as decision-making process prevention is heavily reliant on data entry. For instance, in Canada there are numerous unreported cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) reported that between the years of 1960 to 2013, 662 Indigenous women and girls were missing or murdered. Statistics also revealed that 1 in 5 women identified as missing or murdered were indigenous women and girls. These findings have revealed the some of the underlying problems in data collection. Just as the five approaches discussed, many approaches fail to recognise the role of race in the discussion of femicide.

Final Thoughts

The rise of femicide cases during the pandemic era has emerged as a public health hazard affecting the wellbeing of females across the world. Standing in solidarity with Mirabal sisters' heroic sacrifice, Peel Institute on Violence prevention urge the policymakers to frame stronger legislation policies that can lay the foundation for achieving gender equality, ensuring justice to the victims of violence, and dismantling the climate of tolerance for violence against women. At a time when preventative measures are failing and socio-justice system stays passive in the face of mounting crimes against women, it becomes important for the community service providers and public to work in unison, holding policy makers and government accountable for their inertness. By keeping our collective focus on this pertinent issue, we support the empowerment of women in breaking the cycle of intergenerational abuse, and improve their lives.

Children the invisible victims of femicide