

Shifting the focus of femicide research: The challenges of studying perpetrators from a global sociological perspective



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Over the past decades, gender-based violence has become a central topic in social sciences, as well as other academic fields. The increasing alarm about this form of harm-doing has shaped a new academic and institutional landscape in many regions of the world (Dawson & Mobayed Vega, 2023). In this context, the expanding use of the terms femicide/feminicide—the intentional killing of women and girls based on their gender—has become an indicator of social change, shifting social discourses and political transformation.

While the definition is not without analytical and methodological debate, there is consensus regarding its purpose: it aims to

highlight that these killings are not isolated events, but social actions defined by how perpetrators see their victims. From this perspective, culture is key, as it provides the context in which gender unfolds and violence is performed. This was the original intention of the term when it was coined by Diana Russell (1977). Femicide underscores the gendered nature of certain forms of violence and, therefore, denounces a pervasive pattern in how femininity and masculinity are conceived.



"In memory of all those women killed by those who said they loved them". Tigre, Buenos Aires, Argentina. July 2020.

However, most efforts have been devoted to identifying and describing the "bigger picture" of this phenomenon. This approach has impacted the existing literature: most of the studies are quantitative in nature and focused

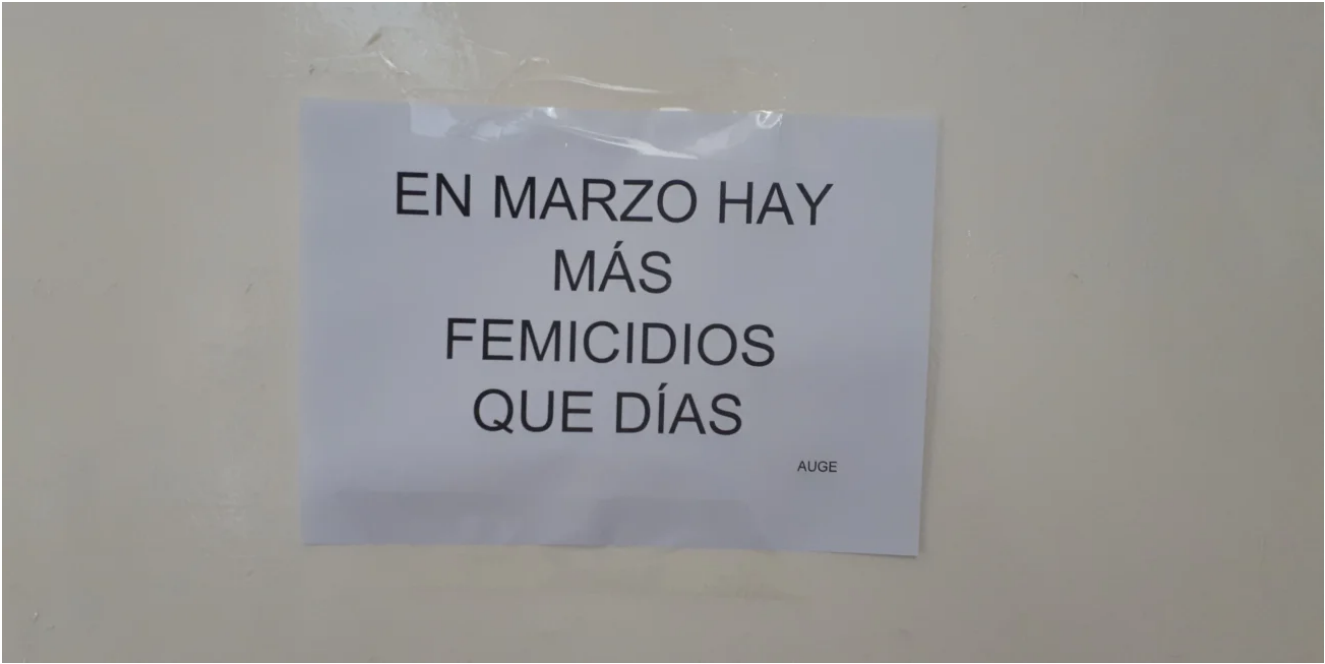
on the victims. Sociological studies reproduce this same trend, by identifying risk factors, developing risk assessment tools, discussing legal frameworks, and describing the overall patterns linked to femicide.

As a qualitative sociologist, I am interested in understanding the reasons behind people's actions. In this context, a key question to be asked is 'why?'. What motivates a person to perform such an extreme form of aggression? What stories and beliefs instigate these ways of harm-doing? And, most importantly, how can we prevent them? As Alfred Schutz (1976) discussed, understanding the subjective point of view is an unavoidable and necessary step to comprehend a

social problem. Exploring the narratives and social trajectories of perpetrators is fundamental since they are key drivers of such violence. Unfortunately, only a few scholars examined the rationalities of those who commit the crime. I believe that the usual answers to these questions are based on prejudice, lack of evidence and enduring myths. This goes hand in hand with the current obsession of academics and state officials to produce standardised numerical data (Val Suárez, 2021).

Focusing our research questions on the aggressors' worldviews implies, at least, two major challenges for sociologists working with a global approach (i.e., paying attention to the interconnected nature of a

phenomenon and the knowledge production systems). The first one relates to comparisons. How can we analyse common patterns of violence in different countries, while maintaining a nuanced approach? How can cultural sensitivity be balanced with the understanding of cross-cutting practices and logics? Can we analyse actors in heterogeneous scenarios from a qualitative perspective? Of course, this challenge is not specific to femicide studies: it is linked to an inaugural debate in qualitative methodology (i.e., associated with the Chicago School) about its scope and context. Yet, it is also a crucial and ongoing debate amongst the members of the Global Qualitative Sociology Network.



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"In March there are more femicides than days". Santiago de Chile, Chile. March 2022.

In this day and age—in which most of the attention is being directed to prevention—going beyond local realities and examining transnational aspects in the lives and perspectives of these men is fundamental. While focusing attention on context-specific domains has been key in theory-building and in producing information suitable for public policies, comparison between places

with different social circumstances forces us to engage in a broader conversation about gender, violence, and institutions. Comparison, which has always been a central element in qualitative methodologies, fosters a better understanding of social phenomena, even when considering diverse geographical realities. Hence, developing sensitising concepts or finding broader patterns with this empirical inductive approach might push the envelope to better describe these killings.

Two examples illustrate this point. First, similar notions of love and intimate relationship emerge when interviewing these men. The blurry boundaries between the coercive control, jealousy and 'passion' are

integral parts of the interviewee's ideas of what a romantic relationship is. Second, from a perspective focused on the social capital, another example is the role of male friendships. Identifying the role of bystanders in ignoring, rationalising and, ultimately, covering up violence are common across countries. This key element in their lives only appeared when the principal of openness was adopted in the interviews.

A second challenge relates to the existing categories and discourses about gender-based violence and femicide. The dominance of official State discourses, institutionalised guidelines and statistical approaches has cemented ways of

viewing, thinking, and studying this issue. Naturally, the theories developed are tied to the geographical nature of knowledge. The key role of international actors in this topic (most notably, the United Nations on Drugs and Crime) is fundamental to understanding the current state of affairs. As Raewyn Connell (2007) argues, the production of theories and terminologies is grounded in uneven relationships between regions. Mainstream terms are usually imported into the Global South through a global network of institutions, including scientific organisations, academic journals, educational institutions, and standardised intervention programs.

This prompts the question: which

categories are dominating this field and are being used uncritically? This challenge underscores the need to rethink how femicide is understood, formulated, and scrutinised. For instance, how can we analyse the nature of the overused risk factors associated with femicide? What does, for example, adverse childhood experiences (ACE) mean to these men? The hegemony of this term—as well as other medicalising categories—result in reifying lived circumstances or events, without actually achieving a sociological understanding of their processes.



"Feminism for everyone". Mexico City, Mexico. September 2022.

I do believe these two challenges are not contradictory. Promoting an inductive qualitative study of perpetrators in different countries and challenging pre-existing terms to address this issue (motivation, trauma, hatred, denial, etc.) concur with a bottom-up

methodological approach. It is through empirical analysis that we can build theory and contest dominant discourses that have infiltrated academia.

In my mind, both challenges should be addressed to stimulate a useful and open sociological discussion of femicide. Deciphering the perpetrators' worldviews, accounting for the underlying logics of this crime, and challenging pre-established categories are necessary steps to pursue a nuanced understanding of this problem. The reluctance to directly inquire about the offenders and not problematising discursive hegemonies hinder our collective reflections on this issue.

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