

Two Global Pandemics: Femicide and COVID-19

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Abstract. Both femicide and COVID-19 are global pandemics, only the former has not been recognized as such, while the latter has. Nearly 90,000 women were killed by men, mainly their partners and family members in 2017, the last year for which we have statistics. Since the coronavirus outbreak and lockdown in many countries, there has been a surge in domestic violence and femicide globally. Clearly, there is no systematic data yet. However, the article describes recent reports in the spike in violence against women and femicide in different countries, ranging from Europe to South America. Violence against women is inextricably tied to issues of power and control. Even if the social order has changed and there is more gender equality, the fact remains that this is still a male-dominated world, today dedicated to combating the virus, but not yet dedicated to eradicating the other pandemic of femicide.

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1. Femicide and Coronavirus

Femicide, or the killing of women because they are women, is a global phenomenon, which occurs in every society and at every level. Until recently, it was not a visible problem at all (Weil 2016). A total of 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017, the most recent year for which we have statistics (UNODC 2018). Nearly 60,000 women were killed by intimate partners, former partners, or family members. 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.

Femicide, like the coronavirus, occurs in every society indiscriminately and spreads at an incalculable rate. While coronavirus is lethal, so too femicide has to be eradicated. The difference between covid-19 and femicide is that coronavirus is sudden and unpredictable, whereas femicide is constant and, unfortunately, predictable.

2. Femicide in Europe and in the World

From 2013-7, I chaired a European Union-funded COST (Cooperation on Science and Technology) Action entitled “Femicide across Europe” with a Management Committee of 80 representatives from 30 European countries. At the termination of the Action, we edited a volume summing up our intense activity over four years, which included the establishment of working groups in Europe on the definition of femicide, on data assessment and gathering, on patterns of culture which affect femicide, on prevention of the murders of women (Weil, Corradi and Naudi 2018). In 2015, we held a training school in the quarters of the police force in Rome with graduate students and police personnel. In February 2016, I addressed the Italian Parliament in Rome on the subject of femicide; this was the first discussion on femicide per se that had been held there. In 2018, we established the European Observatory on Femicide, based in Malta and today in Cyprus and Germany, which is dedicated to gathering qualitative as well as quantitative data on femicide.

During the duration of the COST Action, I also attended three different meetings of the United Nations to promote the recognition of the word ‘femicide’, and to call for guidelines to prevent the gender-related killings of women and girls. Until 2016, only the subject of violence against women had gained recognition (Simonovic 2016), but not femicide per se. While each country has national laws and policies regarding the lethal killing of women, it became obvious that femicide is a global

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phenomenon, which demands international collaboration in order to eradicate. The same is true of the coronavirus, which has been declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a global pandemic; femicide has not. To date at the time of writing, WHO has not gone further than putting out ‘tips’ how to be careful about domestic violence during the coronavirus (WHO 2020).

3. The impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence

COVID-19 has indeed impacted upon domestic violence and femicide. All countries have reported an increase in domestic violence, and femicide rates are on the rise, even in China, where statistics are sometimes unreliable.¹ In 2020, the United Nations issued a report entitled “Global Responsibility, Global Solidarity” in which they noted that “... accompanying the crisis has been a spike in domestic violence reporting, at exactly the time that services, including rule of law, health and shelters, are being diverted to address the pandemic (UN 2020). With families isolated in their homes, children are also facing the rapid increase of online child abuse.” Furthermore, the threat and closure of women’s shelters has meant that some women and their children are thrown back to live with their assailants in frightening circumstances. With greater isolation, women are less in touch with social networks and support groups, and helplessness is increasing.

In Turkey, the hotlines are inundated with complaints by women, who are suffering both mental and physical violence at the hands of abusive partners. In Brazil, the state hotline “Ligue 180” reported an increase of 18% in calls in one week in March alone. In France, the Interior Minister, Christophe Castaner, publicly admitted that domestic violence had increased by 30% since the lockdown.² In 2018, the High Council for Gender Equality declared that 11,000 additional places were needed for emergency shelters, but by the end of 2019, only 1,000 places were scheduled.³ Additional cases of severe domestic violence may remain unreported, in situations in which the only way to inform the authorities is by internet or by phone, and these may be prohibited or confiscated by an abusive partner.

Nations are being forced to confront the issues of domestic violence, with the threat of femicide hovering in the background, but resources are being channeled towards the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and social and health services to the victims of domestic violence are being reduced. In practice, since femicide is of such low national priority, it is the NGOs who take the lion’s share. In Chile, an NGO has developed a “Feminist Emergency Plan for the Coronavirus Crisis” with strategies for collective feminist mutual aid, which include emergency plans for women to exit dangerous domestic situations, and mobilizing health professionals and carers for children.⁴ In Mexico, social sector efforts to cope with violence against women have been truncated, but advocacy organisations are valiantly trying to help.⁵

Data on Femicide during the Coronavirus

To date, there is no systematic comparative data on femicide during coronavirus, but there are a few empirical reports. In Spain, there were 18 femicide fatalities since the beginning of 2020 till mid-March, and a third occurred during the coronavirus outbreak.⁶ In Argentina, where the rate of femicide is extraordinarily high during regular times, 86 femicides have already been perpetrated since the beginning of 2020, of which 24 occurred during the COVID-19 plague. The Argentinian Femicide

¹ www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic

² www.euronews.com/2020/03/28/domestic-violence-cases-jump-30-during-lockdown-in-france

³ www.france24.com/en/20200325-trapped-at-home-domestic-violence-victims-at-high-risk-in-coronavirus-confinement

⁴ <https://towardfreedom.org/blog-blog/chilean-womens-movement-releases-feminist-emergency-plan-in-the-face-of-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

⁵ www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/13/covid-19-can-augment-violence-to-mexican-women/

⁶ www.newtral.es/mujeres-confinadas-en-casa-con-sus-agresores-que-recursos-se-han-puesto-en-marcha/20200321/

Observatory reported that one woman was killed every 29 hours during March 2020.⁷ In Turkey, 18 women have been killed since the lockdown, the majority in their homes.⁸ In the United Kingdom, nearly three times as many women were murdered in March by men -14 in all-than the average for the same period over the last decade, according to the UK Femicide Census and the NGO “Counting Dead Women.”⁹

4. Data in Israel

Israel does not have a Femicide Observatory like Italy or other countries. Statistics are not systematically collected such that police records, parliamentary data, Haaretz’s website, and NGO reports differ widely. Hotlines throughout the country report that domestic violence has increased. According to data which we have culled from ongoing media reports, there have been seven cases of femicide since January 2020, four of which occurred during the coronavirus outbreak since March. The Israeli government has not taken the threat of femicide seriously either during this outbreak of prior to it.

5. Conclusions

Femicide, like coronavirus, is a pandemic, but it has not been recognised as such. The COVID-19 virus has impacted negatively on domestic violence, and it appears that globally there is a surge in the rate of femicide. Both WHO and the United Nations are aware of what one of my respondents called “domestic terrorism”, but they have few answers in a situation that resources and public health systems have to deal first with the rising numbers of dead and sick. On April 6, 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addressed the “horrifying surge in domestic violence” aimed at women and girls linked to lockdowns by governments the world over,¹⁰ but he did not mention the likelihood of a rise in global femicide.

Violence against women is inextricably tied to issues of power and control. However much we imagine that the social order has changed and that there is more gender equality, the fact remains that this is still a male-dominated world, today dedicated to combating the virus, but not yet dedicated to eradicating another pandemic: femicide.

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⁷ www.clarin.com/sociedad/coronavirus-argentina-aumentaron-30-llamadas-linea-144-violencia-genero_0_hsNF8q3tF.html

⁸ www.dw.com/en/domestic-violence-rises-in-turkey-during-covid-19-pandemic/a-53082333

⁹ www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-domestic-abuse-uk-killings-women-girls-a9467131.htm

¹⁰ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>