



EMERALD
STUDIES IN
CRIMINOLOGY,
FEMINISM
AND SOCIAL
CHANGE

FEMICIDE

PROBLEMS, POSSIBILITIES
AND PREVENTION

EDITED BY

KATE FITZ-GIBBON &
SANDRA WALKLATE

Femicide

EMERALD STUDIES IN CRIMINOLOGY, FEMINISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Femicide: Problems, Possibilities, and Prevention

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Journal of Criminology, Canadian Ethnic Studies, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Violence Against Women and the *Women's Studies International Forum*, and in a co-authored book with Marie Segrave entitled *The Borders of Violence: Temporary Migration and Domestic and Family Violence* (Routledge).

Introduction: Defining, Counting, Preventing Femicide

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Abstract

Femicide – the killing of women and girls – has gained increasing prominence on global and national agendas since the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, amongst others, started to embrace femicide as a worldwide issue. The term femicide, whilst contested, was first deployed by Diana Russell in 1976 to draw attention to the killing of women simply because they are women. Since that time, attention on the killing of women and girls in a wide range of different contexts (from intimate partner femicide to war-related femicide) has grown in significance alongside the increasing attention being paid to the disproportionate presence of this kind of violence in the lives of Indigenous women and girls. This introduction focusses on these global developments and concerns about femicide since Russell coined the term in 1976. It offers a general overview of the definitional issues associated with femicide alongside the problem of counting paying a special attention to what is included and excluded by these practices. In so doing, it makes connections with the possibilities for prevention. This chapter also offers an outline of the contributions in this collection and a rationale for the structure of the book as a whole.

Keywords: Femicide; counting deaths; counting femicide; preventing femicide; femicide observatories; violence against women; intimate partner violence

Femicide: Problems, Possibilities, and Prevention, 1–8

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Introduction: Defining, Counting, Preventing Femicide

Femicide – the killing of women and girls – has gained increasing prominence on global, national and local agendas over the last five decades since the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, amongst others, embraced femicide as an issue of global concern. The term femicide, whilst still contested, was first deployed by Diana Russell in 1976 to draw attention to the gendered killing of women and girls. Since this first articulation femicide has become a space of global concern reaching across the domains of academia, policy, practice and activism (Di Marco & Dawson, 2024; Vega, 2023). In the face of the increasing attention directed to this issue, sometimes driven by rising community awareness surrounding the killing of women and girls, violence against women more broadly has been declared a national crisis in some jurisdictions (see, e.g., recent declarations in Australia and England and Wales). Moreover, the inclusion of women killing an indicator within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has focussed the attention of the international community. This was a significant step forward since the Millennium Development Goals were silent on the topic of violence against women. Nonetheless, issues of contention in how best to define, measure and respond to femicide, remain.

The purpose of this edited collection is to explore some of these contentions, to examine the gaps, elisions and conflation to be found within them and to offer a view on ways in which this field of investigation might move forward. To do so, this collection brings together an international team of researchers all of whom have different theoretical, empirical and practice expertise in this field. This introduction offers an overview of what is to come in this book and a perspective on some of the ongoing measurement, definitional and tensions to be found in this field of investigation and the pages that follow. These issues can be summarised broadly under three headings: defining femicide, counting femicide and preventing femicide. For the newcomer to this field, this introductory chapter will make some observations about these issues against the backcloth of counting deaths more generally.

Historical Approaches to Contemporary Problems

Wernimont (2019, p. 22) observes:

The tracking and enumerating of death has a long history with roots deep in Anglo-American religious and civic practices that make it clear that death counts are anything but neutral registers. Rather, they exist in complicated techno-social assemblages that permit certain kinds of being and becoming for both the living and the dead.

Understanding the power and influence of these historical practices sets the stage for making sense of who, and what, counts as femicide in the 21st century. To summarise, from the 1760s onwards when counting deaths first emerged as

a relatively systematic practice, such counts focussed primarily on the economically active, white male. It was this person whose contribution to the life of the whole community because of their economic power mattered. As such, historical practices of death counting were typically rooted in the economic consequences of such deaths. Here it is possible to discern not only their gendered consequences but also their colonial consequences. As empires were built, such practices travelled the world primarily as one way of monitoring wealth. In so doing, they also left a colonial legacy framing whose lives mattered, and whose did not. Indeed, as [Wernimont \(2019\)](#) articulates, even under plague conditions some deaths counted more than others, and those deaths which were valued were nearly always related to the economic impact of such deaths.

These observations, taken together, point to the epistemological mark left on the measurement of death and whose death counts. This mark continues to resonate today in relation to the measurement of femicide specifically. Within this frame, the legacy of why some deaths are seen and counted more readily than others can be traced. Concomitantly some deaths are disappeared and consequently not counted as readily as others. Awareness of these presences and absences, and the debates they generate, is key to making sense of contemporary understandings of the global problem of femicide.

The concept of the trace, as articulated by [Fassin \(2011\)](#), clearly brings the past into the present for femicide studies since it assists in understanding how the nature of counting is such a prescient issue for this area of investigation. It especially draws attention to the body and its physical absence or presence in informing counting practices. Thus, it affords the requirement for a physical trace, a body, to 'speak to' what happened. The absence of a (dead) body has often meant the life it represented cannot be counted. These historical traces also leave a psychological trace: a desire to render lives meaningful, to make them count above and beyond numbers. Each of these traces is competed for in femicide studies both in how to define femicide and in how to count the lives lost. Whether adopting the view of an academic, activist or policy-maker, all of whom have differently engaged in efforts to define, measure and 'account for' women's lives lost, there is a shared concern as to how effective definitions and counting can focus prevention efforts. Each of these definitional theme of counting and their connections with prevention are presented in this edited collection, and it is worth saying something about each of them here.

Identifying Differences in Approaches to Defining Femicide

Any excursion into the literature on femicide quickly reveals the extent to which it remains a contested concept (see, inter alia, [Dawson & Carrigan, 2020](#); [Dayan, 2018](#); [Howe & Alaatinoglu, 2019](#); Weil et al., 2018). Some elements of this contestation derive from how femicide is, or is not, recognised within the law and do or do not match Diana Russell's initial articulation of femicide. Russell defined femicide as the killing of females by males because they are female. This definition has itself been variously extended, for example, the use of the term 'feminicidio' to direct attention to the complicity of the state in such killings (see [Lagarde y](#)

de los Ríos, 2006) and incorporated in various legal frameworks defining femicide especially throughout Latin America (see [Pierobom de Avila, 2018](#)). Russell's influence discerned in the circumscribed focus on this kind of killing is reflected in the definition of intimate femicide/intimate partner femicide found in the work of [Walklate et al \(2020\)](#) and [Fitz-Gibbon et al \(2023\)](#). A fuller exposition of the different articulations of femicide and how it is defined can be found in the report published by [EIGE \(2021a\)](#) with the contributions in the edited collection drawn together by [Dawson and Vega \(2023\)](#) further illustrating the nature and influence of different contexts, which result in differently nuanced understandings of what counts as femicide.

Debates on definition and awareness of different definitional frameworks are important since definitions frame who, and what, is counted as femicide. In other words, definitions can render visible or invisible kinds of acts under consideration in this field. [Weil \(2016\)](#) made the case for the importance of recognising femicide as a social fact in the Durkheimian sense since without such recognition such acts would remain invisible. Since she made this intervention, it is evidently the case that there is a greater recognition of femicide as a social fact. At the same time, there is also greater debate over what the term means, what might be included under this heading and how it might be measured (see, e.g., the discussion by [Walby, 2023](#)). This inevitably leads to the second theme to be addressed here: the problem of measurement.

Acknowledging Variability in Approaches to Counting Femicide

As intimated previously, definitions of femicide inform how it is, or is not, counted and these counting practices differently highlight the range of voices occupying this field ([Vega, 2023](#)). Two main ways of counting femicide currently co-exist. One is referred to as administrative. These data are largely driven and produced by what is defined in law as femicide or is included under homicide categorisations and the associated criminal justice counting processes. The second source of counting is that generated by femicide observatories. These observatories exist in numerous jurisdictions around the world and were largely formed following the United Nations ([ACUNS, 2017](#)) call by the Former Special Rapporteur for the establishment of femicide observatories and/or watches in every country worldwide.

These different counting practices (one informed by the law, the other by what the observatory defines as femicide, which may sometimes reflect the law and sometimes not) make it difficult to talk with global consistency and precision about the nature and extent of femicide (see further [EIGE, 2021b](#)). By way of illustration, [Walby and Towers \(2017\)](#) have pointed out that administrative data (emanating from legal frameworks) do not consistently or accurately record the sex of the victim or the perpetrator and simultaneously observatories do not necessarily record femicide as informed by the law but on what they judge by their own definitions to count as femicide. Each of these data sources consequently has gaps and, as [Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon \(2023\)](#) have argued, these

gaps often result in ‘thin’ counts. Moving beyond ‘thin counts’ requires an expansion of the lens through which we count to include a fuller range of harms and lives lost to male violence. This expansion is needed to achieve what [Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon \(2023\)](#) have termed ‘thick’ counts. A thick count would provide visibility to women’s deaths typically disappeared, or unacknowledged, within official counts – such as those women who die by suicide following histories of intimate partner abuse (see [Fitz-Gibbon and Vasil](#), in this collection) as well as the killing of women because they are women during war (see, *inter alia*, [Weil, 2023](#)).

As such, and as briefly demonstrated here, counting femicide is fraught with difficulties rendering the capacity for accurate assessments of the nature and prevalence of this phenomenon challenging. This has a range of impacts including how attention is focussed in efforts to prevent femicide. Indeed, across the international, regional and national levels, definitions and methods of counting have significantly informed government and grassroots efforts to prevent femicide. This is the third theme to which we now turn.

Preventing Femicide Rendering Male Violence Visible

[Merry \(2016\)](#) has observed that if the desire of measurement is to provoke policy change, then relying on the numbers as support for such change can be tricky. Yet, as [Mintrom and True \(2022\)](#) suggest without numbers the opportunity for policy intervention is significantly diminished. However, for prevention to be put in place and to be effective there must be an evidence-based understanding of cause. Yet, it is evident that contestations over the definition and approach adopted to counting femicide have impacted on evolving understandings of the cause of such deaths.

To take perhaps a somewhat obvious example – the work of [Bitton and Dayan \(2019\)](#) as well as [Ferguson \(2015\)](#) illustrates how women’s deaths by male violence might be concealed or staged and become defined and measured as a death resulting from an alternate cause – like an accident. Thus the role and impact of male violence is invisibilised. An example from another context, but where again the cause of women’s deaths can be disappeared, is through the work of the Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019). This work has sought to bring to the fore the historical and systemic invisibility of the true cause of Indigenous women’s lives lost in Canada. Taken together, these two examples point to the ways in which the act of femicide in and of itself can not only be hidden but also denied through the (mis)categorisation of women’s deaths. Here, it becomes apparent that preventing the full range of deaths which occur as a result of men’s lethal violence against women needs to be acknowledged.

This is not to undermine the significant work that has been undertaken to address, reduce and ultimately eliminate femicide. For example, [Bracewell et al. \(2021\)](#) argue strongly for a role for domestic homicide reviews as a learning opportunity for prevention efforts. Similarly, [Baldry and Magalhaes \(2018\)](#) have pointed to domestic homicide reviews/fatality reviews and the rise in risk assessment practices more generally in responses to violence(s) against women as key

moments in the development of prevention(of death)-oriented tools. The policy actions rendered possible from this kind of work certainly shift the lens from an individual one that has often been at risk of blaming the victim towards a more systemically focussed gaze. The latter paying attention to the adequacy of policies and practices broadly, and the specific interactions between professionals and the victim and/or perpetrator in the period leading up to the use of fatal violence. As the report by [Fitz-Gibbon et al. \(2024\)](#) illustrates, in relation to earlier identification of harm and opportunities to prevent the escalation of violence, much work remains to be done in joining up the dots to enhance system efforts to intervene and prevent acts of lethal violence. Such efforts, of course, must also take into account the evolving contemporary challenges in which feminism is seen as a threat to men, and concerningly, a threat that must be pushed back against (see inter alia [Bates, 2020](#); [Meger et al., 2024](#)).

About This Book

The chapters follow that grapple with these same thematic challenges of how we define, measure and ultimately prevent femicide. The first part of the book offers timely observations on 'Rendering Femicide Visible'. Cristina Fabre Rosell and Eneidia Bardho overview what has been done and what remains to be done within the continent of Europe in developing comparable indicators rendering femicide not only countable but as a result also more visible for policy-makers and practitioners. In the chapter that follows, Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Sandra Walklate ask some searching questions about the political priority of women's lives and current approaches to counting femicide emanating from the unprecedented practices of death counting during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Drawing on the increasingly available evidence pointing to the early deaths of women who have lived with violence, they ask what might be learned for femicide counts if counting practices were developed in a way that would count women's deaths both 'from' and 'with' male violence. The final chapter in this first part of the book by The chapter by Elizabeth A. Cook, Caroline Miles and Merili Pullerits pursues searching questions on the impact that understandings of what and who counts as an intimate partner have on who is included and excluded in contemporary understandings of femicide.

The second part of the book shifts its attention from making femicide visible to 'Rendering Femicide Knowable: Reflections on Practice'. This part of the book directs attention to the development and value of domestic homicide reviews/fatality reviews alongside the role of the coronial inquiry process. Each of the contributions in this part of the book brings to the fore what can be learned for future practice from these different processes of review and investigation. Drawing on the development of these practices in different jurisdictions, the chapter by Negar Katirai provides insight into the comparative lessons to be learned when taking a comparative look at fatality reviews in the United States and Australia. James Rowlands examines the value of similar models in England and Wales. Heather Douglas shifts the focus to the role of the coronial court system in investigating and drawing attention to the causes and preventability of femicide, and

what might be learned from the presence of experts in the coronial process in Australia. This focus on coronial processes is explored differently and explicitly through an Indigenous lens by Rebecca Scott Bray in the final section of this book leading inexorably the desire to improve on what is known and based on that knowledge what might be done better: the question of prevention.

The third and final part of the book focusses on ‘Rendering Femicide Preventable’. Arguably little work to date has explicitly addressed this question. In this section, Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Stefani Vasil look to extend the lens of what counts as femicide. They explore what are inherently preventable deaths, through their review of recent efforts globally to better understand the intersection between histories of men’s violence and women’s deaths by suicide. Rebecca Scott Bray in her case study examination of the coronial investigation into the death of an Australian First Nations woman, Miss Dhu, highlights the symbolic and actual harms that may be enacted by the coronial court process. This reflects deep-rooted concerns about which lives count and which do not. Looking at the question of prevention from a different viewpoint, Bridget Harris considers what role technology might play in assisting femicide prevention. The final chapter in this section by Sandra Walklate takes a deeper look at the embrace of social–ecological theory within the study of femicide and considers the extent to which this embrace facilitates and/or inhibits the possibilities for prevention.

The conclusion, written by the editors, draws these contributions together offering an overview of the insights they bring alongside some suggestions as to how this area of investigation might move forward during the latter half of the 21st century.

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