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How to tackle the femicide epidemic

Covid-19 has exacerbated gender-based violence. Fighting patriarchal power structures and gender inequalities is essential in putting an end to it

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the increase in domestic violence rates has led the United Nations to declare a 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence. In the most brutal cases, the violence has led to murder – or 'femicide', as the World Health Organisation calls the killing of women *specifically because of their gender*. This is distinct from male homicide because of the power differentials that underline femicide; most cases are perpetrated by current or ex-partners and emerge from a context of abuse, control, violence, and intimidation.

'Femicide' as a label aims to draw specific attention to the gendered nature of the victimisation. Domestic violence is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. The threat of violence, and the presence of abuse, serve to grant the perpetrator power and control over their victim. A study by WHO and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine show that more than 35 per cent of all murders of women globally are reported to be committed by an intimate partner, as opposed to 5 per cent of male murders. 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day.

Domestic violence's correlation with times of crisis

Although we do not yet have the data on the increases of femicides, many countries have evidence of a much higher demand for domestic violence support services since the pandemic broke out. In some countries, calls to helplines have increased five-fold as rates of reported intimate partner violence increased alongside the Covid-19 pandemic. In Mexico, refuge services saw a 77-fold increase in demand. There has been much research that shows prevalence of domestic and sexual violence increases during times of crisis.

"The 'gender-blind'

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lockdown measures had resulted in an increased risk of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) for those confined at home with abusers."

Covid-19 national lockdowns that have materially exacerbated isolation for victims. The closure of face-to-face health services, support services, and even local amenities has reduced opportunities for victims seeking help. The closure of schools and youth services meant that children living with domestic violence and abuse also faced being cut off from support and respite of the school day. Dubravka Šimonović, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, also critiqued the 'gender-blind' lockdown measures which had resulted in an increased risk of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) for those confined at home with abusers.

The danger of a gender-neutral approach

Despite the framing of 'femicide' as a distinct outcome of gender-based violence, however, there is still a general lack of accountability for perpetrators. In 2018, the United Nations invested €50 million to focus particularly on femicide in Latin America, where 98 per cent of gender-related murders are unprosecuted. Part of the problem lies in reticence to connect patriarchal power structures to the prevalence of femicide. Instead of seeing an increase in gendered framing of DVA, we are instead witnessing an increasing trend towards gender neutrality. This is occurring in a wider context of rolling back of women's rights more broadly, including increased abortion restrictions around the world, and increased reactionary responses to so-called 'gender ideology'. There has also been an alarming roll back in international cooperation around gender-based violence through the push back against the Istanbul Convention.

In July this year, Turkey withdrew from the convention despite the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) noting this would 'deepen the protection gap for women and girls during a time when gender-based violence against women is on the rise'. Some countries like the United Kingdom have only signed, but not ratified, the Istanbul convention. In 2021, UK launched the Domestic Abuse Bill in parliament. This, however, frames DVA in gender-neutral terms. Indeed, domestic abuse murders in UK government procedures are still framed as 'domestic homicides'. In contexts such as this, the term 'homicide' is framed as a gender-neutral term which refers to the killing of a human being by another person.

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For advocates of remaining with one umbrella term, a key advantage is that it focuses on the act of killing and applies to victims of all genders. This approach also reflects the fact that not all murders of women are related to gender-based violence; 42 per cent of global murders of women in 2019 were by perpetrators who were not partners or family members. However, gender remains an important aspect of understanding violence, as males commit 90 per cent of murders worldwide. This has led some campaigners to call for the naming of 'male violence' as the key issue, regardless of the gender of the victims. Gender-neutrality under the guise of inclusivity serves to obscure the role that patriarchal systems and gender-inequality play in violence worldwide.

In considering the response to femicide, countries also need to take into account the living victims of femicide, namely the children that are left when their mothers are killed. In 2018, Italy became the first country in Europe to pass a law for *orfani speciali*, or special orphans. The fund financially supports a range of issues; scholarships, legal aid, and funding for medical and psychological care. All too often children are left with sparse and oversubscribed services with a postcode lottery of support provided by charities and NGOs. The UK Domestic Abuse Bill has designated children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, marking a distinct change from their previous peripheral recognition as witnesses and bystanders.

Femicide is preventable

Femicide as a term hones our attention to the gendered dynamics murder related to domestic violence against women. In reality, however, femicide is overlooked, undercounted, and under-prosecuted across the globe. Although there has been some attention paid to the shadow pandemic of gender-based violence, the burden of this has fallen on the shoulders of already under-resourced NGO services.

It is essential to remember that femicide is actually a symptom of a much wider problem. It is patriarchal norms and gender inequality that are both the cause and consequence of gender-based violence in society. To effect change, we need to address systematic gender-inequality, societal tolerance of violence against women, and properly fund resources and services to support victims to access help as well as perpetrators to be held

accountable and have targeted interventions to effect change. Femicide is not an inevitable part of life. It is preventable.



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