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The global femicide epidemic

From Italy to South Africa, femicides are increasing. To counter this, we must confront ingrained norms and demand swift legal action

'*Per Giulia e per tutte*' ('For Giulia and for all') echoed through the streets of Italy in mid-November 2023. Thousands of women, activists and supporters gathered to protest and show solidarity with the 22-year-old student Giulia Cecchettin, who was killed by her ex-boyfriend on the night of 11 November 2023. The outrage over the murder of the young student unleashed a wave of protest that was audible far beyond the country's borders in the weeks after the incident.

Browsing through the page Women for Change on Twitter/X triggers a wave of emotions which constantly sways back and forth between disbelief, grief and anger. The South African NGO is dedicated to women's rights and documents all the cases of murdered women in the country. South Africa's femicide rate is five times higher than the global average; on average, nine women were murdered there every day in 2022. A quick glance reveals a seemingly never-ending series of posts titled 'In Memory of', each featuring a portrait of a smiling women — a tribute to all the woman and girls whose lives were abruptly cut short. One of them is Nombulelo Jessica Michael, a social worker who was attending a gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) case in court on the last day she was seen alive.

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The deaths of Nombulelo and Giulia account for a series of murders of women all over the world — femicides. The term describes the most extreme form of gender-based violence. In 2022, the UN registered 89 000 cases of intentional killings of women and girls worldwide. Fifty-five per cent of these murders are committed by (former) intimate partners or perpetrators from the victim's own environment. Despite general homicide rates decreasing, femicide cases have been rising continuously in the last two decades. And still,

these figures only paint a fragmented picture of a blunt reality: a significant number of femicide victims (around 40 per cent) remain unaccounted for in the UN report, as they are not categorised as gender-related killings due to variations in criminal justice recording and investigation practices across nations.

With the start of the new year, it is high time to highlight the pressing need for continuous advocacy initiatives and policy implications aimed at promoting societal transformation and confronting the fundamental factors contributing to gender-based violence. But the challenge requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the intersection of underlying power dynamics in the form of a patriarchal society, racism and structural inequalities.

Dismantling the roots

Giulia and Nombulelo were two different women, on different continents, who became victims of the same alarming global crisis of gender-based violence, affecting women and girls in diverse cultural, economic and political contexts. In patriarchal societies, the omnipresent grip of traditional gender norms reinforces a culture where violence against women is normalised. This norm transcends borders and adapts to different cultural contexts while maintaining its oppressive nature.

Those stereotypes and prejudices continuously foster expectations of femininity and masculinity, weaving dangerous narratives of victim blaming. As a result, it is common for the public discourse surrounding gender-based violence and femicides to be marked by the *inappropriate behaviour of a young woman who is drinking alcohol and is walking home alone at night,* rather than being centred on expressions of grief, condolences and righteous indignation. In this regard, media portrayals and narratives must shift and tell the stories from the victim's point of view, avoiding stylistic instruments drawing from love tragedies and sensationalism.

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But what other causes are there for the rise of femicide cases? The Covid19 pandemic, which forced people to stay locked up at home, intensified the extent of violence against women immensely. It also pushed people into financial uncertainty and economic distress, which became a crucial driving factor for gender-based violence. Government authorities, women's

situations, such as shelters and other help centres.

rights activists and civil society partners worldwide were reporting significantly increased calls for help to domestic violence helplines during that time. Disrupted support systems, the intensification of pre-existing tensions, overwhelmed healthcare systems and restricted mobility made it challenging for victims to seek help and support.

More than this, food insecurity is also intertwined with women's exposure to domestic violence. The economic roles of women, especially as full-time unpaid caregivers, are associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing violence, as highlighted in a UN report. Additionally, women with income experience a greater sense of safety and reduced perception of violence (except for those who out-earn their partners) — portraying the harmful power dynamics perpetuating femicides and gender based-violence and their connection to women's economic dependence. Consequently, we need to prioritise initiatives that enhance financial independence, providing women with the resources and support needed to escape abusive situations, such as shelters and other help centres: in 46 European countries, 3 087 shelters provide 39 130 beds for women and children, but because of capacity and space issues, it is impossible to provide accommodation for all those seeking help.

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When looking at the emergence of femicide and gender-based violence, it is also important to acknowledge that racism amplifies the vulnerability of women and girls — particularly those from marginalised communities. In the context of femicides, racial dynamics intersect with gender-based violence, creating compounded challenges for women of colour. The Femicide Census, which documents women killed by men in the UK, reveals the ethnicity of only 22 out of 110 victims. This lack of data in the documentation of the victims' ethnicity leads to insufficient conclusions and examinations, which disregard cultural circumstances, influences, as well as intercommunal disparities. Experts suggest that women from ethnic minorities and indigenous groups may encounter discrimination due to factors like ethnicity, language and religion. This bias puts them at higher risk of various adversities, such as limited access to healthcare

or higher risks of experiencing violence by strangers. Finally, many women of colour fear engaging with the police in the first place due to concerns about discrimination or lack of support, hindering effective strategies to address the vulnerabilities faced by marginalised communities.

It is imperative that these issues extend to law enforcement. Legal and policy responses cannot be blind to structural inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalised communities. It is crucial to ensure that activist groups, NGOs overseeing femicide data processing, along with family members remembering victims and other stakeholders dismantling harmful narratives, gain increased visibility in the debate.

Legal change in progress?

From Italy to South Africa to America, in recent years there have been major efforts by feminist movements, NGOs and international organisations to put femicides on the political agenda. But how successful have these movements been? As a study by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) suggests, the prevention of femicide is closely linked to legal responses to domestic violence. A societal rethink makes up only one part of the equation — legal consequences and political implications must follow.

When looking at Italy's recent implementations, one strong deficit becomes apparent immediately: the government's spending on countering gender-based violence was more than doubled in the last decade, however, the femicide rate has remained stable. The reason for this is that a large amount of money is put towards the treatment of the victims instead of the prevention of femicides. In South Africa, the opposite has happened: the South African National Assembly recently passed the *Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Bill 2023*. The legislation aims to enhance the criminal justice system's response to gender-based violence through improved law enforcement, police training and legal processes. At first glance, this seems to be a progressive implementation, however, the initial optimism of advocates, supporters and activists was quickly dampened: the South African Social Development Minister Lindiwe Zulu squandered 100 million rands meant to assist survivors of gender-based violence by mismanaging the allocated money and transferring funds to nonfunctional civil society organisations without GBVF mandates — an example for the gap between legislative intent and effective implementation in reality.

However, one thing is clear: we should never stop telling the stories of Giulia and Nombulelo and all the other women and girls around the globe who were brutally murdered. Their stories should lead to collective action, which demands not just sympathy but systemic change and constantly amplifies the voices of the silenced.



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