



Identifying femicide locally and globally: Understanding the utility and accessibility of sex/gender-related motives and indicators

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Abstract

Femicide, the gender-related killing of women and girls, has received an unprecedented rise in international attention in the past decade, prompting increased discussions about how to define and measure femicide. Following a review of definitions and indicators, this article examines the utility of numerous sex/gender-related motives and indicators (SGRMIs) for distinguishing femicide from other homicides as well as the accessibility of these indicators in data sources typically accessed by social science researchers. Specifically, using a comprehensive database whose primary focus is femicide, the presence of SGRMIs in male-perpetrator/female-victim homicide – those killings most closely aligned with the concept of femicide – is compared to other perpetrator–victim gender combinations. Results show that multiple SGRMIs are more common in male-perpetrator/female-victim killings than other homicides, meaning they are useful for distinguishing femicide as a distinct type of violence. However, accessibility to information is weak with high proportions of missing data. Implications of these findings for prevention are discussed, including how data biases may be putting the lives of women and girls at risk and the need to emphasize prevention as the priority for data collection rather than administrative needs of governments.

Keywords

Data, femicide, feminicide, gender, indicators, prevention, sex

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Introduction

The phenomenon of femicide is not new; however, its dramatic rise in international attention is unprecedented, largely because of its prevalence in Latin America where multiple countries have established legislation identifying specific punishments for femicide or have established femicide as its own offense.¹ One consequence of this attention are increasing global discussions about how femicide should be defined, how it is distinct from homicide, and how differences can be operationalized. These answers are crucial for effectively producing and understanding femicide statistics within and across countries which, in turn, inform the development of appropriate prevention initiatives and punishments (ACUNS, 2017; Weil, 2016).

One of the most comprehensive efforts to address these questions is *The Latin American Model Protocol for the Investigation of Gender-Related Killings of Women (Femicide/Feminicide)* (Sarmiento et al., 2014). The protocol documents how femicide might be identified by reviewing sex- or gender-related motives, signs and indicators that capture the context surrounding femicide and its various subtypes (e.g. intimate partner femicide, familial femicide). While the protocol specifically targets criminal justice investigations, it serves as a crucial starting point for researchers aimed at measuring femicide, documenting trends within and across countries, and better informing prevention efforts. Continuing to move discussions forward, a 2016 special issue of *Current Sociology* focused on femicide as a ‘social challenge’ that requires ‘accurate conceptualization to relate to and develop scientific findings’ (Marcuello-Servós et al., 2016: 967–968). The ultimate goal of the special issue was to work toward ‘establishing convergence in research clarity and a consensus on definitions, drawing together a structured corpus of knowledge that can help improve the efficacy of policies for femicide prevention’ (p. 968).

These and other more recent efforts to improve definitional and conceptual clarity (e.g. Dawson et al., 2018, 2019; Walklate et al., 2019; Weil et al., 2018) recognize that, to date, most research documenting femicide has incorporated one of two approaches: (1) a focus on all killings of women – ‘female victim homicide’; or (2) a focus on the most common femicide subtype – ‘intimate femicide’ or ‘intimate partner femicide’ (Dawson and Gartner, 1998; Stout, 1992; UNODC, 2013). These two approaches are common, in part, because of the ease with which one can identify femicide using victim gender or victim–perpetrator relationship, but these approaches can also be criticized for the same reason. Simply put, considering only sex/gender and/or relationship when identifying femicide is problematic for a complex phenomenon that is difficult, if not impossible, to reduce to one or two determinants. These two approaches have also remained common because of perceived difficulties in identifying *a priori* motivations for these acts (e.g. Campbell and Runyan, 1998). However, we argue that this is exactly what criminal justice officials do so it should also be possible for researchers to do so with access to, and improvements in, available data.

While it is integral that criminal justice actors accurately identify femicide for punishment consistency and appropriateness, they are not typically in the business of conducting research. However, they can help facilitate more evidence-based data, first, by collecting more nuanced and appropriate information to better inform the development

of prevention initiatives and, second, by making these data more accessible to researchers who play a crucial role in understanding how to prevent and respond to male violence against women and girls. This includes the production of accurate statistics which, in turn, informs more effective legislative, policy, and program responses locally, nationally and globally. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has repeatedly underscored the importance of improving femicide data (e.g. ACUNS, 2017), which requires collaboration across sectors and, specifically, among researchers, communities, criminal justice officials, and governments (Dawson et al., 2019; Vives-Cases et al., 2016; Walby et al., 2017; Weil, 2016).

To examine the relevance of previously identified sex/gender-related motives and indicators for understanding femicide, this article is divided into four sections. First, we review definitions used in femicide research, including those that define femicide subtypes, identifying the challenges of achieving definitional consensus.² Second, drawing largely from the Latin American Model Protocol (hereafter referred to as ‘the protocol’), we briefly summarize potential sex/gender-related motives or indicators for femicide and its subtypes (hereafter referred to as SGRMIs). Third, we explore the utility and availability of SGRMIs to distinguish femicide from other homicides by examining homicide data compiled from triangulated information contained in several administrative data sources in one Canadian jurisdiction. The final section of the article will discuss the global implications of our findings for moving forward with more accurate documentation and prevention of femicide.

Our central argument builds on the findings of our study – that many SGRMIs do clearly distinguish femicide from other types of homicide, but current available data do not consistently allow for their documentation, precluding real preventative change. We argue that this situation stems from the ongoing legacy of public patriarchy (Walby, 1990) and requires that we prioritize the prevention of male violence against women and girls rather than the administrative needs of patriarchal social structures when it comes to identifying data crucial for collection and analyses. Only by doing so can professional and academic efforts improve the efficacy of policies developed and implemented to prevent femicide.

Defining and classifying femicide

Femicide definitions have evolved over time, but no single definition has been accepted among researchers (Corradi et al., 2016; Weil, 2016). Feminist pioneer Diana Russell first used the term in 1976 but did not provide an explicit definition until 1990. At this time, femicide was defined as ‘the murder of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women’ (Caputi and Russell, 1990: 34). Several years later, Radford and Russell (1992) defined femicide as misogynistic killings by men. The goals were to draw attention to the pervasive violence women experience from men, to bring people together to address the problem, and to urge governments to legislate against femicide and sentence killings appropriately.

By 2001, the definition evolved to the killing of females by males for being females, encompassing all forms of male sexism including entitlement, pleasure, or expectation of compliance and differs from previous definitions focusing on misogyny (Russell, 2001).

Further, using females instead of women and males instead of men acknowledged that infants, young girls and adolescents are also killed for gender-related reasons (Russell, 2001). In 2012, in an introductory speech to the United Nations Symposium on femicide, Russell recommended that ‘the killing of one or more females by one or more males because they are female’ remain the definition. However, in some world regions (e.g. Latin America), the term *femicide* is more commonly used, as discussed below.

Some authors have included intentional killings of females in their definition (Ellis and DeKeseredy, 1996; Mouzos, 1999). The element of ‘intent’ is common across legal and criminological perspectives (WHO, 2012), but is problematic because it excludes acts resulting from repeated domestic violence that may unintentionally cause death (Russell, 2001). Under Russell’s definition, intent is not required; the death of a female by her male partner is femicide even if he did not mean to kill her, referred to as ‘covert femicide’ (Russell, 2001: 18). Some researchers further classify femicide into subtypes using victim–perpetrator relationships. For example, Russell (2001: 21) divided femicide into partner femicide, familial femicide, other known femicide perpetrators, and stranger femicide.

Similarly, ‘the protocol’ recognizes both ‘active’ (intentional) and ‘passive’ (unintentional) femicide and, within these broad categories, classifies 14 femicide subtypes distinguished by relationship or motivation.³ Although these categories were generated in Latin America, they are relevant to global discussions because of the universality of femicide and the conditions under which it occurs. Gender inequality – the root of femicide – transcends geographic locations and, according to the United Nations Report of the Secretary-General, femicide is not confined to specific cultures, regions, or groups of women (Alvazzi del Frate and Nowak, 2013).

Benefits and challenges of definitions of femicide

The broadest femicide characterization was first adopted by Campbell and Runyan (1998), who revised the definition to encompass killings of women by males and females, regardless of motivation or relationship. This definition eliminates the need to obtain detailed information on circumstances surrounding deaths, making it a common choice for international comparisons (Alvazzi del Frate and Nowak, 2013; Mujica and Tuesta, 2014). The main limitation of this approach is accuracy; arguably, not all female homicides are femicide so this broad definition may overestimate femicide rates (Mujica and Tuesta, 2014). Similarly, Russell’s (2001) definition pertains to killings of women by men rooted in sexist motivations, which would not necessarily include all female homicides. Therefore, Russell (2001) suggests that, when relying on female homicide rates, researchers should use ‘woman killing’ instead of altering the definition of femicide. By adopting ‘woman killing’, attention remains focused on female deaths without classifying every female homicide as femicide.

Intimate femicide

Intimate femicide, also referred to as intimate partner femicide, is the most common type of femicide globally. From Argentina to South Africa, to Canada, and the UK– women

worldwide are vulnerable to violence by male partners (UNODC, 2018). This type of femicide captures killings by perpetrators who have/had an intimate partner relationship with victims (Dawson and Gartner, 1998; Etherington and Baker, 2015; UNODC, 2018). Focusing on intimate violence only, however, does not resolve difficulties in identifying femicide because researchers vary as to whether they include family-perpetrated killings, such as brothers or fathers, and intimate relationships are not always consistently defined (e.g. causal sexual encounters, initial dating relationships).

Another point of divergence among intimate femicide researchers is whether homicides committed by female intimate partners should be included (Widyono, 2008). According to Russell (2001), femicide is exclusively perpetrated by men against women. However, several researchers have explored the idea that women can perpetrate femicide, including those in same-sex relationships (Glass et al., 2004; Muftić and Baumann, 2012). For example, Glass et al. (2004) argue that indicators are similar for both male-perpetrated and female-perpetrated intimate partner femicide, including prior violence that may increase in frequency or severity, jealousy, control, and victim efforts to end the relationship. Russell (2001) acknowledges females can act as agents of patriarchy and of male perpetrators; however, she prefers the term ‘female-on-female murder’ instead of amending her definition. This term also captures the killing of women and girls that involve female family members.

Non-intimate femicide

Non-intimate femicide encompasses various femicide subtypes, including killings associated with gangs, human trafficking, and sexual violence (Etherington and Baker, 2015; Sarmiento et al., 2014). Many of these femicidal contexts may also relate to intimate settings, however. For example, sexual femicide may be committed by someone who did or did not have a relationship with the victim, involving sexual aggression before or after death (Sarmiento et al., 2014). Stranger femicide typically occurs at a much lower rate than intimate femicide and, thus, intimate femicide research continues to be prioritized. The World Health Organization, for example, argues the best way to reduce femicide overall is to focus on reducing intimate partner violence (WHO, 2012).

Femicide

More recently, ‘femicide’ is used to describe killings of women in specific world regions. Derived in Latin America, the term femicide (or *feminicidio*) emphasizes government unresponsiveness to killings of women and girls (Fregoso and Bejarano, 2010; Sanford, 2008). Specifically, femicide captures both private and public violence, including state culpability when they fail to hold perpetrators accountable (Lagarde de los Ríos, 2010). While primarily used in Latin America, some European countries such as Spain and Italy have recently adopted the term (Spinelli, 2011) and, arguably, it is appealing more broadly because of the emphasis on state culpability and inadequate responses to killings worldwide. Given Russell’s political goals when she first introduced the term femicide, this should not be a point of disagreement across definitions or researchers.

To summarize, femicide/feminicide definitions differ according to discipline, researcher, or geographic location. Varying definitions demonstrate difficulties in defining, measuring and comparing femicide and its subtypes. However, across definitions, one commonality exists – femicide is the killing of a woman or girl and, therefore, these killings always have some gender-motivated element. Femicides are not ‘isolated, sporadic or episodic cases of violence; rather they represent a structural situation and a social and cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in customs and mindsets’ (CEDAW, 2005: 27). However, femicide/feminicide indicators may clarify the most appropriate approaches to defining and measuring this phenomenon. We turn to a summary of potential indicators below.

Sex/gender-related motives or indicators for femicide/feminicide

Sex/gender-related motives/indicators (SGRMIs) are characteristics that signify whether and how the act was rooted in perpetrators’ misogynistic attitudes. Indicators may capture contexts, including motivations, in which killings occurred, specific perpetrator or victim types and manifestations of violence. Femicide reinforces cultural norms that dictate what it means to be a woman, including subordination, femininity, and fragility (Sarmiento et al., 2014). To understand femicide, then, it is important to assess how perpetrators might use such references when deciding to kill women, such as ideas of male dominance, bias, and disregard for a woman or girl’s life. These beliefs make perpetrators feel that they have authoritative control over victims’ lives or bodies, including to punish or kill to maintain social order (Sarmiento et al., 2014).

As the implementation of femicide legislation continues, Latin American countries have identified femicide indicators (Carrigan and Dawson, 2020; Dawson et al., 2019). Each country’s legislation lists circumstances under which a homicide can be classified as femicide. Many femicide indicators are similar across countries with relevance to femicide globally, including when victims are killed by intimate partners, when perpetrators try to re-establish relationships, the presence of children, or when victims were pregnant. Sexual violence, mutilation, and public disposal of the victim’s body are among non-intimate partner femicide indicators identified by one or more countries, although arguably these could also be indicators for intimate partner femicide. Other femicide indicators, perhaps more relevant in Latin America, although not exclusively, include killings in the context of gang activity, human trafficking, and/or drug smuggling.

A large volume of literature has evolved identifying factors that increase the risk of femicide victimization and/or perpetration. Drawing from the protocol, Table 1 lists some victim, perpetrator, pre-incident and incident characteristics with potential for capturing gender-related elements of killings. For example, with respect to victim age, elderly women and young girls are physically vulnerable, arguably increasing risk of femicide. These acts typically occur in familial contexts (e.g. intimate, familial femicide) or in sexual violence cases (e.g. sexual femicide). Moreover, minority and/or migrant women are also at increased risk due to discrimination, lack of social supports, and greater cultural acceptance of violence against women. As such, it is important to collect victim-specific information to highlight elements that increase the recognition of such

Table 1. Victim, perpetrator, pre-incident, and incident characteristics as potential gender-based signs or indicators of femicide compiled from Chapter V of the Latin American Model Protocol for the Investigation of Gender-Related Killings of Women (Femicide/Femicide).

Victim characteristics	Perpetrator characteristics	Pre-incident characteristics	Incident characteristics
Child/elderly	Perpetrator male	Prior social service contact	Victim substance use
Minority/migrant women	Perpetrator substance history	Prior police contact	Perpetrator substance use
Born outside host country	Perpetrator mental illness	Recent separation	Victim and/or perpetrator home
Victim substance history	Perpetrator suicide attempt	Prior threats against victim	Knife/blunt object
Victim suicide attempt	Perpetrator illegal occupation	Estranged relationship	Femicidal motive ^a
Victim mental illness	Perpetrator suffered child abuse	Partner/familial	Sexual assault
Victim illegal occupation		Premeditation	Mutilation
LGBTQ/trans victim		Exploitation	Excessive force
Victim disability		Evidence of gang activity	Victim body nude
		Evidence of prior injuries	Proximate method ^b
		Violence against prior victims	Multiple methods
			Multiple perpetrators
			Proximate cause of death
			Femicidal circumstances ^c
			Others injured
			Crime at work
			Perpetrator remains on scene
			Perpetrator confessed
			Symbolic violence ^d
			Vital zone injuries
			Victim disappearance
			Injuries to subdue the victim
			Prolonged attack
			Multiple crime scenes
			Motive: group initiation
			Motive: group territory

^aFemicidal motive includes revenge, hatred, jealousy, honor killings, sexual assault, spurned, concealed birth or custody battle.

^bPerpetrator often kills a femicide victim with their hands or a close-range weapon.

^cIndicators of circumstances surrounding death include sexual assault, domestic disputes, lovers' triangle, disputes over illegal activities (drugs/alcohol).

^dMessages, values, and impositions that reproduce notions of domination, exclusion, and inequality of women. Examples include mistreatment of pets and breaking of objects, especially those with special significance – family photographs, souvenirs, gifts.

killings as gender-related. Similarly, perpetrator characteristics can offer insights into who is more likely to commit femicide. For example, the perpetrator's involvement in illegal activity such as prostitution or human trafficking may suggest they perceive women as property or objects.

With respect to pre-incident characteristics, in intimate femicides for example, the protocol emphasizes that prior police contact, use of social services, prior threats, previous violence, and recent separation can provide information on gender-related elements of killings. Focusing on the incident, femicides perpetrated by groups may relate to group territory, initiation, forced disappearances, and exploitation. For example, women may be abducted and killed by gang members engaging in human trafficking or prostitution. Perpetrators may also commit group femicide whereby one member must prove themselves before joining the group. A femicide investigation must identify perpetrator motivations, including perceived benefits and consequences, to discover what prompted the femicide (Sarmiento et al., 2014). As such, the protocol further recommends assessing various indicators to determine if the killing was rooted in gender inequality, such as cause of death and context, location, power imbalances between victims and perpetrators, and victim risk level immediately prior to femicide. During the investigation, the victim's body can also provide key evidence about perpetrator motives, such as the injuries sustained, cause of death, sexual assault, mutilation, excessive force, prolonged attacks, torture, and injury location.

The factors outlined by the protocol help characterize and describe gender-related elements of femicide, identifying specific indicators that capture signs, contexts, and motives that may signify when homicides should be classified as femicides. However, few if any studies have systematically examined their utility for distinguishing femicide from homicide and how accessible this information is from common data sources accessed by social science researchers.

Examining the utility and accessibility of sex/gender-related motives and indicators for femicide

The current study: Data, objectives, and analyses

Data used were drawn from an ongoing research initiative documenting all femicide and homicide in Canada.⁴ The objectives and analyses described below focus on Canada's most populous province – Ontario – for which data collection has occurred the longest and is the most complete ($N = 4839$).⁵ First, we assess the *utility* of available SGRMIs to differentiate across four perpetrator-victim gender combinations: (1) male-perpetrator/male-victim homicide⁶ ($N = 2823$); (2) male-perpetrator/female-victim homicide ($N = 1527$); (3) female-perpetrator/male-victim homicide ($N = 342$); and (4) female-perpetrator/female-victim homicide ($N = 147$).⁷ We do not purport to classify each case as a homicide or a femicide; rather, we wish to determine general patterns in the presence of SGRMIs, specifically comparing killings that most closely align with the definition of femicide – male-perpetrator/female-victim cases. In addition, while the protocol states understanding whether a killing is gender-related does not depend on the existence of more or fewer indicators, we assess whether male-perpetrator/female-victim homicide had more SGRMIs than other homicide gender-combinations.

Second, to assess *accessibility*, we examine available information for each SGRMI using the proportion of missing information. We acknowledge accessibility may depend, in part, on whether this information is relevant to a homicide, increasing the likelihood that information is documented and, subsequently, available to collect. One distinguishing homicide feature is the gender of those involved; thus, we examine missing-information proportions for the full sample as well as by each perpetrator–victim gender combination separately. It is expected that information for SGRMIs would or should be more accessible for cases involving female victims if capturing gender-related elements specifically.

Results

There were significant associations among SGRMIs and perpetrator–victim gender combinations (see Table 2).⁸ Recall that an SGRMI would be a good indicator of femicide if it was significantly more likely to be present in male-perpetrated/female-victim homicide compared to other perpetrator–victim combinations. Pre-incident and incident characteristics demonstrated the most variation across perpetrator–victim gender combinations with male-on-female killings having significantly higher proportions of potential SGRMIs compared to other killings. Specifically, the proportion of pre-incident characteristics more common among male-on-female homicides were prior police contact (42%), recent separation (38%) prior threats against victims (65%), estrangement (25%), intimate/familial relationships (82%), and premeditation (60%). With respect to the incident itself, more common characteristics for male-on-female homicide were femicidal motive (38%), sexual assault (19%), mutilation (7%), excessive force (38%), body found nude (23%), proximate methods (e.g. beating; 64%), multiple methods (18%), and femicidal contexts (57%). Other variables did not differ significantly in male-on-female killings or were more common among the other types of homicide.

Results in Table 3 show the average number of potential SGRMIs is also significantly higher, on average, in male-on-female killings (8.126) compared to other homicides, consistent with the expected increased presence of SGRMIs in killings most closely aligned with femicide. As such, the SGRMIs vary across the gender combinations with male-perpetrated/female-victim killings being the most distinct, supporting their potential utility in differentiating femicide and other homicides.

Given the above, then, how accessible are the SGRMIs from traditional data sources? Table 4 shows 39 of the 52 SGRMIs that were available for examination in the current study, representing 75% of those identified in the protocol. This demonstrates one level of accessibility: the variables were included in the study and information was available for at least some cases from the data sources accessed. However, the more valid indicator of accessibility – how often information was available for each SGRMI – proved to be weak in the data examined for the total sample as well as across perpetrator–victim combinations. Of specific interest, given the study focus, was available information for male-perpetrated/female-victim killings. Missing information ranged from a low of 3% for victim age to a high of 96% for perpetrator history of child abuse. In other words, information on age of victim was almost always available, but information on perpetrator history of child abuse was seldom available.

Table 2. Comparing proportion of SGRMIs in homicides by perpetrator–victim gender, 1985–2012 ($N = 4839$).^a

Variables	Male perpetrator female victim %	Male perpetrator male victim %	Female perpetrator male and female victims %
V. Characteristics			
V. child/elderly	23	14	45***
V. non-white	43	70	62
V. born outside Canada	40	48	31
V. substance history	28	54***	36
V. suicide attempt	9	13	6
V. mental health	27	43	24
V. illegal occupation	45	83	84
P. Characteristics			
P. substance history	68	80	72
P. mental health	73	73	82
P. attempt/died by suicide	28***	4	12
P. illegal occupation	37	83***	38
P. child abuse	61	72	86*
Pre-incident characteristics			
Social service contact	25	4***	24
Police contact	42***	3	18
Recent separation	38***	–	7
Prior threats	65***	11	35
Estranged relationship	25***	–	7
Partner/familial homicide	82***	39	73
Premeditation	60***	56	43
Incident characteristics			
V. substance use	30	73	51
P. substance use	55***	82	79
Location V/P home	81	56	74
Knife/blunt weapon	40	51	54**
Femicidal motive	38***	12	17
Sexual assault	19***	1	2
Mutilation	7***	2	5
Excessive force	38***	28	24
V. body nude	23***	4	7
Proximate method	64*	56	60
Multiple methods	18*	14	12
Multiple P.	12	49***	35
Proximate cause of death	62	53	60
Femicidal circumstances	57***	26	32
Others injured	13	19***	9
Crime at work	3	9***	4
P. remains on scene	42	20	53
P. confession	86	82	84

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.^aMale perpetrator was removed from dependent variables.

Table 3. Average number of gender-based motives/indicators present by perpetrator–victim gender Ontario, Canada, 1985–2012 ($N = 4839$).^a

Variables	Mean	
Male perpetrator male victim ($N = 2823$)	6.0393	$F 132.043$
Male perpetrator female victim ($N = 1527$)	8.1126***	
Female perpetrator male victim ($N = 342$)	7.1784	
Female perpetrator female victim ($N = 147$)	6.440	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

^aThis analysis only includes cases where victim and perpetrator gender were identifiable.

While minimal information was expected for the latter and some other variables (e.g. perpetrator mental health, substance abuse history), more information was expected for other SGRMIs given their relevance to femicide. For example, despite research showing that recent separation is a risk factor for intimate partner femicide, information for this variable was missing in 66% of the cases – a similar proportion to the other gender combinations for which it is less likely to be a risk factor. Further, sexual assault was missing in more male-perpetrator/female-victim cases (28%) compared to the other combinations despite the increased likelihood of its presence in the male-on-female killings. Finally, overall, the proportion of missing information was somewhat lower for incident indicators compared to victim, perpetrator, and pre-incident indicators. This provides some tentative support for the fact that the investigatory focus remains on the incidents themselves rather than the broader relationship context and surrounding circumstances, which is especially problematic for intimate partner femicide.

In summary, while accessibility is high because many variables were the focus of data collection in data sources examined, the proportion of missing information – the second and stronger accessibility measure – is low for many, often crucial SGRMIs. We acknowledge that it is not always possible to know why data were absent – it was not a fact in the case, was not a focus of the investigation, was not mentioned, or was not recorded. Except for the first reason – not a fact in the case – the other explanations may be attributed to the reality that administrative data are not compiled for research. Therefore, information not seen as relevant by those investigating or prosecuting will not be routinely collected and recorded. However, many of these SGRMIs would be relevant to the criminal justice process and so it begs the question as to why the data are not recorded and where these facts get recorded, if not in official records, when used for prosecution and sentencing. The answer to this question is crucial given that high proportions of missing data pose difficulties for more systematically documenting SGRMIs which, in turn, inform the development of femicide prevention initiatives. Below, we look to the concept of public patriarchy (Walby, 1989, 1990) and the ongoing gender data bias to better understand this situation.

Table 4. Accessibility of 39 gender-related motives/indicators for femicide, Ontario, 1985–2012 (*N* = 4839).^a

Variables indicator of femicide	Missing %				
	Male P. female V.	Male P. male V.	Female P. male V.	Female P. female V.	Total
V. Characteristics					
V. age child/elderly	3	6	8	1	5
V. ethnicity non-white	40	64	67	54	56
V. birth outside Canada	49	70	75	65	63
V. substance history	73	78	62	50	75
V. suicide attempt	82	96	90	76	90
V. mental health	72	90	78	52	82
V. illegal occupation	82	79	76	55	79
P. Characteristics					
P. substance history	83	88	80	87	86
P. mental health	75	92	86	72	86
P. suicide attempt	9	18	22	22	17
P. illegal occupation	93	87	93	89	90
P. child abuse	96	98	93	93	97
Pre-incident characteristics					
Social service contact	83	75	80	76	78
Police contact	59	72	71	74	68
Recent separation	66	66	62	61	66
Prior threats	61	73	75	74	68
Estranged relationship	28	55	39	52	46
Partner/familial homicide	–	–	–	–	–
Premeditation	64	51	58	51	57
Incident characteristics					
V. substance use	33	44	36	29	40
P. substance use	62	76	71	79	71
Location V/P home	9	8	15	16	10
Weapon knife/blunt object	73	68	63	74	70
Femicidal motive	22	18	30	33	23
Sexual assault	28	18	24	23	22
Mutilation	30	18	21	23	23
Excessive force	37	20	27	26	28
V. body nude	32	20	24	25	25
Proximate method	5	6	10	3	6
Multiple methods	34	16	21	22	24
More than one P.	–	–	–	–	–
Proximate cause of death	10	10	19	18	11
Femicidal circumstances	39	28	29	25	33
Others injured	36	23	25	22	28
Crime at work	26	9	14	16	16
P. stays on scene	43	29	35	37	35
P. confession	80	81	78	80	81

^aMale perpetrator removed from list of femicide indicators.

Discussion

Data on femicide remain difficult to access and collect locally and globally (Dawson et al., 2018, 2019; Marcuello-Servós et al., 2016; Walby et al., 2017; Walklate et al., 2019; Weil et al., 2018), especially in some world regions (e.g. South Africa, Latin America) and for some groups of women and girls (e.g. Indigenous, immigrants and refugees, women living in rural and remote regions, women with disabilities). For many countries, basic data collection remains the best-case scenario (e.g. sex of victim/perpetrator, cause of death), but these data are often collected by official agencies and not easily accessible by researchers, advocates, or violence prevention organizations. The current study demonstrates the utility of SGRMIs for distinguishing femicide from other types of homicide. Therefore, this is crucial information for femicide research and related prevention initiatives. However, the study also underscores that many important contextual factors related to femicide are not regularly or routinely included as part of data collection efforts given that one-quarter (25%) of the potential SGRMIs identified by the protocol were not available in the database examined.⁹ Furthermore, there were significant and high proportions of missing information for many of the existing variables. As such, we argue that SGRMIs must become a routine part of data collection efforts by official responding agencies (e.g. police, prosecution) and other state organizations (e.g. statistical agencies), which requires an emphasis on prevention goals rather than solely administrative needs.

It could be argued that the results of this study are unique to the database examined and, since findings cannot be generalized more broadly to other countries, the situation may be better elsewhere. However, we argue that the implications of the current study's findings remain important for at least two key reasons. First, an examination of femicide was the project's initial and primary focus (Crawford et al., 1992, 1997; Gartner et al., 1999) and remains an ongoing priority (Dawson, 2016). Therefore, existing empirically-based research on the killing of women by men informed the project's development and data collection instrument, emphasizing variables relevant to understanding femicide (e.g. sexual violence, prior police contact, separation). In addition, data collection covers close to four decades with information triangulated from multiple data sources, including coroner/medical examiner records, Crown attorney files, court documents, and media coverage. Thus, the database is unique for both its original focus on femicide specifically, compared to official data sources, and its comprehensive coverage – to the extent possible – drawing from multiple sources. As such, the missing variables and information are even more concerning.

Second, while not generalizable, the study's results reflect those from other research on homicide, including research that has specifically examined missing data. These studies have underscored the ongoing difficulties documenting homicide despite it being perceived as the most reliable form of violence on which to gather information (e.g. Riedel and Regoezi, 2004).¹⁰ With respect to femicide specifically, in an extensive review of the feasibility of using administrative data, Walby et al. (2017) found that some important information for understanding gender-related violence was collected by some countries, but completeness of data was not always consistent, similar to our argument about data accessibility. Further, they noted that data which could deepen an

understanding of femicide – and prevention – were less routinely collected (e.g. sexual elements, gendered motivations).

Given the results of the current study and what is known about the situation globally (UNODC, 2018; Walby et al., 2017), we need to ask why data important to the prevention of femicide, and male violence against women and girls generally, are not systematically and routinely collected. Drawing from Walby's (1989, 1990) concept of public patriarchy, we argue that a key contributor is the historical and ongoing impacts of patriarchal social structures, including historical and contemporary decision-makers for whom the collection of these data was and is not seen as a priority. These same decision-makers continue to act as gatekeepers of these data, when it is available, deciding who and how the data will be used.

Defining patriarchy as a 'system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women', Walby (1989) theorized that there are two major forms of patriarchy: private and public. Private patriarchy excludes women from most areas of social life except the household whereas public patriarchy does not exclude women from certain areas but rather subordinates them in all areas. The form of patriarchy most prevalent today, similar to what Walby (1989) argued about Britain at the time, is public patriarchy, which impacts what we know, and what we seek to know, about social life and related phenomena, including male violence against women and girls. For example, the criminal justice system is a patriarchal, traditionally masculine institution and, as such, the recording of data for police investigations and prosecutions will reflect this fact. Underscoring this point, despite feminist research demonstrating the importance of understanding relationships between victims and perpetrators in preventing domestic violence, this study showed that the investigatory focus – at least as represented by available recorded data – remains on the incidents themselves rather than the broader relationship context and surrounding circumstances.

Therefore, the ongoing impacts of public patriarchy as described by Walby (1989, 1990) produces a gendered data bias, which has, most recently, been highlighted by Caroline Criado Perez in her book *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019). Specifically, whether intended or not, Perez argues, women's lives are put at risk because data have primarily been based on, or generated for and by, men and this situation largely continues today. With respect to homicide specifically, we argue that data collection instruments were initially designed to capture what are (and remain) the greater proportion of male-on-male homicide and this continues to put women and girls at risk of male violence. We use Canada as an illustrative example of why policy-makers must reconceptualize the purpose and goals of data collection and analyses to address the historical, current, and emerging data gaps identified by feminist researchers and others concerned with the prevention of male violence against women and girls. Arguably, the situation as described in Canada represents one of the 'best-case' scenarios for data collection on femicide globally and is similar for many peer countries (e.g. Australia) or world regions (Europe). The ongoing data gaps identified, however, mean that there remain significant research and data challenges that will be even more pronounced in many other countries and world regions.

While the killing of all women and girls (and men and boys) is included as a core focus of data collection for Statistic Canada's Homicide Survey, data are limited, not

easily accessible, and have little focus on justice and accountability. Despite the fact that women and girls face the most danger from men they know – male partners and family members – few variables specifically capture SGRMIs on a consistent basis (e.g. sexual elements, prior violence in the relationship by male partners, role of separate/estrangement, prior police contacts or court orders, other system contacts, the presence of children and stepchildren and so on).

As one example, while the variable ‘history of family violence’ was added to the Homicide Survey in 1991, it focuses on family violence more broadly (e.g. spousal abuse, child or parent battering) between family members, and does not capture the direction of the violence.¹¹ Therefore, it is not known whether the accused, the victim, or both perpetrated the violence. Furthermore, if there were multiple homicide victims, it is only necessary for the accused to have been previously violent against one family member to record a history of family violence. Finally, a history of family violence is not available for homicides that occurred between dating partners (Burczycka and Conroy, 2018), likely because the variable label is ‘a history of *family* violence’. In addition, while information on prior criminal convictions is collected for both victims and accused, there is no reliable way to determine if these were domestic violence-related convictions because there is no such offense in the Canadian Criminal Code. Therefore, despite prior violence against the victim being one of the most common SGRMIs for femicide, the Homicide Survey is not able to adequately, or consistently, capture this information as currently designed.

The Homicide Survey also does not collect case-based information on the criminal justice processing of a homicide that can link characteristics of the victims, the accused or the incidents to sanctions imposed. Beyond the initial charge laid – which often changes – outcomes of the court process – if the offender did not die by suicide – are not consistently recorded anywhere in Canada (e.g. conviction, sentence, not criminally responsible by reason of mental disorder) so that patterns in punishments by case characteristics or those involved could be examined. As such, it is difficult if not impossible to understand how society – in this case, represented by the criminal justice system – responds to these crimes nationally or how this may vary by victims and perpetrators. In fact, it is well recognized that little attention is given to variation in official responses to crime across Canadian jurisdictions, and internationally, despite recognition that courts operate in distinct environments impacting how cases are processed and disposed (Roberts, 1999; Tonry, 2007; Ulmer, 2012). The relative impunity of some femicide perpetrators, including state actors, has been an ongoing concern in many world regions and the lack of focus and related data on investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of perpetrators globally has been noted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (ACUNS, 2018).

Adding to the complexity of data collection in Canada and its ability to understand sex/gender-related violence against women and girls, as of January 2019, Statistics Canada’s Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR), which also collects aggregate homicide statistics, has switched from gathering data based on the category of ‘sex’ to a category of ‘gender’. This means the ‘female gender’ includes persons whose current gender was reported as female, including cisgender and transgender persons who were reported as being female, and the ‘male gender’ category includes anyone who identifies

as male including cisgender and transgender persons who were reported as being male.¹² There is also a category for persons who identify as gender diverse which includes persons whose 'current gender was not reported exclusively as male or female' including those 'who were reported as being unsure of their gender, persons who were reported as both male and female, or neither male nor female'. Earlier surveys captured whether a victim or an accused was 'male' or 'female', which remains the case with the most recent Homicide Survey that uses the term 'sex' of the victim and accused, although there was limited focus on this variable (Roy and Marcellus, 2019).

Given the increasing recognition of non-binary gender and transgender identity, changes to the collection of data are warranted. However, the approach that seems to have been adopted, at least for the UCR with the removal of sex-based categories, will make it increasingly difficult to accurately track male violence against females and violence against transgender persons, including transphobic femicide. The latter data were already difficult to collect given that previous survey instruments in most countries did not typically provide the space to capture gender identity or expression.

Domestic violence death reviews, primarily operating in coroner and medical examiner offices in many Canadian jurisdictions, have sought to fill some of the above data gaps, focusing more specifically on killings of women by current/former partners, the most common type of femicide in most world regions (UNODC, 2018). Depending on time and resources, some review initiatives could access a variety of data sources, producing a more complete picture of femicide at least as it occurs between intimate partners. In fact, for cases of intimate partner femicide-suicide, review initiatives may be the *only* mechanism to comprehensively investigate these killings given there will be no criminal proceedings. Not all Canadian provinces or territories currently have these review mechanisms, however, creating an inequity in data availability – a situation reflective of some other countries where these reviews operate (e.g. Australia, United States; Dawson, 2017).

Further, the primary goal of these review initiatives is to examine intimate partner homicide (involving both female and male victims) and, while some initiatives include children killed in the context of domestic violence and third-party collateral victims, many femicides are not captured. For example, there would be no reviews of women killed by non-intimates (e.g. strangers, friends, acquaintances) or in other contexts (e.g. gang involvement, sex trade workers, human trafficking, organized crime) unless somehow linked to domestic violence. While the situation is similar in other countries, this is particularly concerning in Canada where research has shown that Indigenous women and girls are also often killed by male acquaintances and strangers, and more likely to be killed by a stranger than non-Indigenous women and girls (Legal Strategy Coalition on Violence Against Indigenous Women, 2015; National Inquiry, 2019; NWAC, 2010). These femicides fall outside the mandates of most, if not all, domestic violence death review initiatives. It is expected that Indigenous women and girls, as well as other marginalized and/or vulnerable groups of women and girls, are similarly absent from the focus of such reviews in other countries as well.

Finally, the number of cases and the materials reviewed, the voices heard, and the stakeholders and experts represented at the review table are also variable across jurisdictions (Sheehy, 2017). Therefore, while the prevention focus of domestic violence death

reviews is crucial and can contribute significantly to enhancing data to inform prevention, particularly around risk and safety, the reviews themselves exclude many types of femicide, vary significantly in focus and quality, and do not examine justice and accountability outcomes, the latter of which is also important to prevention (ACUNS, 2018).

Conclusion

The above gaps in official data sources have been highlighted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, who has been consistently calling on countries, and Canada, to improve data collection on femicide, including the establishment of femicide watches or observatories (ACUNS, 2017).¹³ Recent international work has identified strategies to improve availability, collection, and monitoring of femicide data (Vives-Cases et al., 2016; Weil et al., 2018). These include ‘political will, technical specific requirements and the involvement of different agencies – governments, mass media, police bodies, courts and professionals, who are in charge of identifying, registering and monitoring’ (Vives-Cases et al., 2016: 9). Priority clusters of actions were also identified and, according to experts’ assessment, ‘institutionalizing national databases’ was found to be most relevant, but data extracted from media coverage of femicide were judged to be most feasible. Various countries and jurisdictions have begun to extract data from these sources; however, these efforts need to be supported by political will and complemented by other data sources, which requires the reconceptualization of data collection by governments as a prevention priority, not merely as an administrative requirement (Dawson et al., 2019). However, political will cannot be generated, at least to the degree necessary, where public patriarchy continues to largely inform the hierarchy of needs related to data collection and analyses.

Given the lack of variables and measures in current data collection instruments globally that can assist with femicide prevention, the lives of women and girls continue to be put at risk. Countries are not collecting the right data or, if these data exist, official gatekeepers are not making this information accessible to researchers and organizations with a focus on prevention. As such, despite some large-scale data efforts, most countries and world regions continue to face similar challenges in documenting femicide accurately. Therefore, a crucial question is: if we cannot document femicide in a reliable and valid manner, what is the hope of ever documenting, consistently and accurately, other forms of sexual violence or gender-related violence against women and girls? Weil et al. (2018) argue that we cannot do so until there is public acknowledgment, legitimation, and recognition of femicide and other forms of violence against women and girls as phenomena worthy of study and attention. We argue that this further requires identifying and challenging the continuing impacts of public patriarchy in policies surrounding male violence against women and girls which creates a hierarchy of ‘worthy subjects’ and, subsequently, decides how these subjects will be examined, including data collected and analyzed. To begin, Walby et al. (2017) argue that a basic starting point is the routine collection of five gender dimensions of violence: sex of the victim, sex of the perpetrator, their relationship, sexual aspects to the violence, and gender motivations.

Even with the challenges described above, while femicide is rare compared to other forms of violence against women, it allows for better documentation of the incidents

and those involved. The result is more nuanced information that can inform prevention initiatives within and across countries and aid in monitoring trends and patterns to identify emerging research, policy, and practice priorities. This information can also inform us more broadly about the prevention of non-lethal forms of violence against women and girls. Rates of lethal violence, like femicide, are often used as a social barometer of sorts for other forms of violence, signaling positive or negative trends or social change. Without clear and consistent data on femicide, however, it will be difficult to assess whether efforts to reduce gender-related killings and violence against women and girls are effective despite this objective being a clear focus of Sustainable Development Goals.

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Notes

1. Countries include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela which now all have some form of femicide legislation.
2. It is not possible to do a thorough review of this literature; therefore, we have drawn attention to the particular detail which is provided in the protocol and some other research (e.g. Russell and Harmes, 2001; Weil et al., 2018). edited book as separate entry?
3. These include intimate femicide, non-intimate femicide, child femicide, family femicide, femicide because of association, unorganized systematic sexual femicide, organized systematic sexual femicide, femicide because of prostitution, femicide because of trafficking, femicide because of smuggling, transphobic femicide, lesbophobic femicide, racist femicide, and femicide because of female genital mutilation (Sarmiento et al., 2014: 15, 16).
4. Data collection is currently completed up to and including 2012 and is ongoing for subsequent years. Data collection is part of a larger project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
5. This analysis includes all cases where perpetrator and victim sex were identified. Cases with missing victim or perpetrator sex are not included.
6. Because we are examining the potential for SGRMIs to distinguish femicide from homicides, we use the terms 'female victim homicide', 'male victim homicide', or 'killing' and femicide where appropriate in later analyses.
7. Distributions for perpetrator–victim gender combinations in Ontario are similar to patterns in Canada (Mulligan et al., 2016).
8. Because of small numbers of female-perpetrator/female-victim homicides, all killings with female perpetrators were collapsed into one category.

9. These include sexual orientation of victims or perpetrators, violence against previous victims by perpetrators, motive related to group territory and/or group initiation, victim exploitation, and so on. While the authors of the protocol argue that some SGRMIs may be regionally specific which may be a partial explanation for some factors, many factors are relevant to femicide globally.
10. Homicide statistics are perceived as a relatively reliable indicator of the actual number of killings because most are reported to police, reducing reporting bias inherent in other types of violent crime. Further, homicides are generally investigated more thoroughly than other crimes, making available information more accurate and detailed. Despite this, the quality of homicide data will vary by country and world region.
11. www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Instr.pl?Function=getInstrumentList&Item_Id=1209041&UL=1V&
12. For classification of sex and gender, see: www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=467245&CVD=467245&CLV=0&MLV=1&D=1
13. In Canada, the Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence, University of Guelph, established the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability in response to the UN call (see www.femicideincanada.ca).

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Résumé

Le féminicide, qui désigne le meurtre de femmes et de filles lié à leur sexe, a fait l'objet d'une attention croissante sans précédent depuis une dizaine d'années à l'échelle internationale, suscitant de plus en plus de débats sur la manière de définir et de mesurer le féminicide. Après avoir passé en revue définitions et indicateurs, nous examinons dans cet article l'utilité de nombreux motifs et indicateurs liés au sexe ou au genre (*sex/gender-related motives and indicators* ou SGRMI) pour distinguer le féminicide des autres homicides, ainsi que l'accessibilité de ces indicateurs dans les sources de données généralement consultées par les chercheurs en sciences sociales. Plus précisément, à l'aide d'une vaste base de données axée sur le féminicide, la présence de SGRMI dans les homicides perpétrés par des hommes et dont les femmes sont les victimes – ces meurtres étant les plus proches du concept de féminicide – est comparée à d'autres combinaisons auteur-victime entre les sexes. Les résultats montrent que les SGRMI multiples sont plus fréquents dans les homicides perpétrés par des hommes sur des femmes que dans les autres homicides, ce qui signifie que ces éléments sont utiles pour distinguer le féminicide comme un type de violence particulier. Cependant, ces informations sont peu accessibles et une forte proportion de données ne sont pas disponibles. Nous nous penchons sur les implications de ces résultats pour la prévention, notamment la manière dont la partialité des données peut mettre en danger la vie des femmes et des filles, et la nécessité de donner la priorité à la prévention dans la collecte de données plutôt qu'aux besoins administratifs des gouvernements.

Mots-clés

Données, féminicide, féminicide, genre, indicateurs, prévention, sexe

Resumen

El feminicidio, el asesinato de mujeres y niñas por razones de género, ha sido objeto de un incremento sin precedentes de la atención internacional en la última década, lo que ha provocado una intensificación de los debates sobre cómo definir y medir el feminicidio. Tras una revisión de definiciones e indicadores, este artículo examina la utilidad de numerosos motivos e indicadores relacionados con el sexo/género (*sex/gender-related motives and indicators* o SGRMIs) para distinguir el feminicidio de otros

homicidios, así como la accesibilidad de estos indicadores en las fuentes de datos a las que suelen acceder los investigadores en ciencias sociales. Más concretamente, con la ayuda de una base de datos integral centrada en el femicidio, la presencia de SGRMI en los homicidios perpetrados por hombres en los que la víctima es femenina (los asesinatos más estrechamente alineados con el concepto de feminicidio), se compara con otras combinaciones del género del perpetrador y la víctima. Los resultados muestran que múltiples SGRMI son más comunes en los asesinatos perpetrados por hombres sobre mujeres que en otros homicidios, lo que significa que son elementos útiles para distinguir el feminicidio como un tipo distinto de violencia. Sin embargo, la información es poco accesible, con una alta proporción de datos faltantes. Se discuten las implicaciones de estos hallazgos para la prevención, especialmente la forma en que los sesgos de los datos pueden poner en riesgo la vida de las mujeres y las niñas y la necesidad de enfatizar la prevención como la prioridad para la recopilación de datos en lugar de las necesidades administrativas de los gobiernos.

Palabras clave

Datos, femicidio, feminicidio, género, indicadores, prevención, sexo