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Understanding and preventing femicide using a cultural and ecological approach

Christiana Kouta, Santiago Boira, Anita Nudelman and Aisha K. Gill

Introduction

Femicide – the killing of a woman or girl, in particular by a man (often an intimate partner), on account of her gender – is not only a complex phenomenon but also a leading cause of premature death among women globally (Corradi et al, 2016; Vives-Cases et al, 2016). To effectively manage or prevent cases of femicide – and other forms of violence against women – it is therefore necessary to comprehend the sociocultural and ecological parameters that may influence it (Vives-Cases et al, 2016). While viewing femicide from a cultural perspective increases its complexity, it is nevertheless essential to consider not only how Western and non-Western cultures influence myriad individual, organizational, communal and societal attitudes regarding male violence against women, but also how these attitudes can in turn determine public policies and the state's actions in relation to such violence (Flood and Pease, 2009; Gill et al, 2016; Vives-Cases et al, 2016). In taking such a cultural

and ecological perspective, this chapter seeks to explore and understand femicide in European countries.

While the literature suggests that many approaches can be used to understand and prevent violence against women (Gill, 2018), the effectiveness of the ecological model, which emerged in the late 1970s (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), has been emphasized in particular. The ecological model posits a multifaceted approach that was initially applied to the study of child abuse in the social field. It has since been applied to explaining other forms of violence, particularly domestic violence. On the premise that no single factor can explain violent behaviour, the World Health Organization (WHO), for example, also adopts a multicausal perspective in its approach to explaining violence (WHO, 2002). The ecological perspective offers not only a useful working methodology for achieving a broader vision of a problem that we want to understand (Vives-Cases et al, 2016) but can also be applied to promote educational initiatives, interprofessional collaborations and community- and population-based efforts to prevent and decrease violence (WHO, 2012).

Certain cultural and social norms may support different types of violence. For example, traditional beliefs that men have a right to control or discipline women make women vulnerable to violence by intimate partners (WHO, 2009). Given that femicide can be viewed as a sociocultural phenomenon, the ecological model becomes a 'socioecological' lens through which to effectively analyse many social problems, including femicide and violence against women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). Thus, this perspective facilitates understanding of the numerous sociocultural factors that either put people at risk of violence or protect them from experiencing or perpetrating violence, as understanding these factors is important in terms of determining risk of femicide. According to Boira et al (2017), a relationship exists between the different factors of the ecological model's subsystems regarding understanding intimate partner violence, and they argue that this

interrelationship increases the risk of femicide. The model also indicates that social elements such as patriarchal values or the role of the family may increase that risk (for example, in a rural setting as a consequence of social control, in traditional family environments or when the action of the state is fragile) (Vives-Cases et al, 2016). Similarly, it is important to note the closeness of the relationship between culture and symbolic violence, and how this form of symbolic violence is present in the daily environment in which femicide and violence against women occur across many cultures (Thapar-Björkert et al, 2016).

Sociocultural approaches highlight the influence of social norms, values and cultural beliefs that are widespread in a given society (Corradi et al, 2016) and which are essential to researching femicide because analysing sociocultural factors related to intimate partner violence and femicide – and how these manifest in culturally diverse settings (Kouta et al, 2017) – is integral to understanding and preventing femicide. Cultural differences affect all spheres of society and, specifically, the ways in which gender relations are structured in terms of power relations and the different manifestations of gender violence (Gill et al, 2016). To develop a better understanding of the prominent role that culture plays in gender violence, it is essential to address the complexity of a contemporary global Europe.

Thus, in order to develop a better understanding of the prominent role that culture plays in gender violence, this chapter addresses the relationship between culture and femicide in the context of a contemporary global Europe – a conglomeration of native and foreign cultures formed by various migratory movements throughout history – and, drawing on the relevant literature, determines appropriate ways to respond to and prevent femicide (Gill et al, 2016).

Defining femicide from a cultural perspective

Our working definition of femicide includes the killing of females by males merely because they are females. In this way, we adopt both the proposal in the Vienna Declaration on Femicide (Laurent et al, 2013) and all the definitional aspects discussed in Chapter 2. On that basis, the current chapter proposes that the different forms of femicide encompass – but are not limited to – intimate partner-related killings (Vives-Cases et al., 2016), honour crimes, dowry-related murders, forced suicide, female infanticide, gender-based sex-selective foeticide, and the targeted killing of women during wars and in the context of organized crime. Understanding femicide from a cultural perspective thus involves considering the specific nature of femicide crimes, for example, analysing murders of women which have been committed in the name of ‘honour’ by their partners, former partners or family members, as in such cases the murder can be a consequence of adultery, homosexuality, divorce, attempted sexual assault or refusal to marry (Gill, 2018). Addressing these crimes from the perspective of culture not only involves encountering potential differences between European countries and the cultural specificities of the peoples who inhabit them, but obliges us to confront the hegemonic culture, where the ‘expert’s’ voice (that is, social actors that generate accepted social discourses – politicians; religious, economic and cultural leaders; journalists; and in some cases researchers) is often placed alongside subordinate and much less visible aspects of culture which are manifested in practices, norms, beliefs and so on. In this sense, a cultural dialogue can radically affect how we define and explain the causes of femicide, in that it makes us broaden our perspective on and understanding of the many factors at play that can lead to femicide (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif, 2013).

Further, adopting a broader definition of femicide implicates circumstances that perpetuate misogynous attitudes and/or

socially discriminatory practices against women (Gill, 2018), because this broader definition encompasses, for example, cases of death caused by or associated with gender-based selective malnutrition or trafficking women as prostitutes and drug mules (Gill et al, 2016). As it is often difficult to decide whether women and girls have been killed because of their gender, researchers investigating femicide generally include all killings of females in the first stage of analysis and then differentiate between cases that are more or less influenced by gendered contexts and motives (WHO, 2012; Balica and Stöckl, 2016; Vives-Cases et al, 2016).

Why use a cultural perspective?

Attempts have been made to explain femicide using different positions, paradigms and theoretical perspectives; of these, the ecological model and the multicausal approach proposed by Corradi et al (2016) are suitable, as they accommodate the incorporation of cultural elements into explanations of the complex phenomenon of femicide.

As Kouta et al (2017) indicate, in various European countries, cultural factors contribute to instances of femicide. It is therefore crucial to analyse how each country addresses aspects such as, for example, masculinity and femininity, gender equality, domestic violence and femicide laws, patriarchal ideology, traditional values, the role of religion in society, culturally specific forms of femicide, and media coverage of femicide and violence against women. Although patriarchy remains dominant in European societies, each European country has its own specific context in which the factors identified above interact. These differences should be taken into account in order both to explain and to prevent incidences of violence against women, including femicide, because it is impossible to understand femicide without considering the particular cultural environment in which it occurs. This cultural approach must also acknowledge the manifestations of a country's local and foreign cultures, and

how they relate to one another. The interactions of differing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours may be positive or negative and may represent either protective or risk factors for femicide. For example, as Nudelman et al (2017) note, in the case of migrant women suffering gender-based violence in Europe, the interaction between different cultural realities can prove crucial in terms of exacerbating these women's risk of femicide. Nudelman et al's (2017) research also explores several important factors that contribute to this risk in terms of the host state's attitude towards migrant women, any language or legal barriers in the host country, pressure from the women's local community in the host country and the women's access to support resources. Weil (2016), too, reports incidents where migrant women were forced to marry or were abducted by their husbands and suffered severe domestic violence in both their native and host countries, in her research on 'failed femicides'. Male control over women's lives, bodies and sexuality is strengthened by 'culturalization', because, as Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif note, it is males who act within a patriarchal structure, who plan, implement and turn a blind eye to women's needs, who silence abuse, who fail to address women's calls for help and who are able to stop the killing (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif, 2013: 18).

Studies such as those by Sanz-Barbero et al (2014) and Balica and Stöckl (2016), which address the situation of migrant women who suffer gender-based violence in European countries, highlight the forms, causes and contexts of gender violence. Others explore not merely the legal, economic and sociocultural barriers these women face (see, for example, Martínez-Roman et al, 2017), but also how the violence affects them in terms of their quality of life, societal exclusion and health (Fernbrant et al, 2014). Globally, the gender-related killing of women and girls is associated with structural discrimination, that is, discrimination related to gender, culture and class (Kouta et al, 2017). Furthermore, in Western societies, structural discrimination

not only persists, but is glorified in certain cultures, such as in misogynistic and racist contexts.

Broadly, the literature indicates that femicide is often influenced by sociocultural dynamics and practices and that cultural practices can exercise a strong influence within a community or country. According to Weil and Mitra vom Berg (2016), cultural and social practices such as marriage at an early age and arranged and dowry marriages may lead to femicide. The killing of women in relation to dowries or to 'save the family honour' is a tragic occurrence and an explicit illustration of embedded, culturally accepted discrimination against women and girls (Gill, 2018), as the act of murder may sometimes be encouraged by other family members (WHO, 2012). In addition, it seems that what can be seen as a 'culture of femicide' encourages abortions of female babies in Indian society.

Adopting the ecological approach allows us to extend our consideration of femicide beyond the individual circumstances of the victims and perpetrators. It also enables us to identify how the biological, social, cultural and economic factors in each case can either reduce or increase a woman's risk of violence and death (Boira et al, 2017), because it exposes the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community and sociocultural elements (Heise, 1998). For Fulu and Miedema (2015), the ecological model highlights the ways in which global movements leave their mark on the social structures, relationships and experiences of men and women. Providing an understanding of the multidimensional causes of violence can thus enable us to more effectively respond to and prevent different forms of violence against women.

It is important to note that certain cultural factors exacerbate the risk of femicide occurring. Taking that into account, Corradi et al (2016) propose a multicausal model based on three levels of explanation, each of which identifies the empirical variables associated with femicide. The first level includes variables related to individuals' psychological organization, psychosocial

habits and interactions at the micro level. The second (meso) level examines the networks and subsystems of the relationships through which the couple, the extended family and the other actors involved are linked. Finally, the third (macro) level incorporates complexity science and sociocybernetics analyses (Castellani and Hafferty, 2009) ‘along two axes, from a linear–Cartesian to a systemic approach, and from a static to a dynamic model’ (Corradi et al, 2016: 13). These ecological, systems and multicausal perspectives may be of significant help in understanding the phenomenon of femicide (Freysteinsdóttir, 2017).

Nevertheless, studies show that gender-based violence and femicide are not usually discussed or analysed from an ecological or socioecological perspective (Corradi et al, 2016). This oversight often leads to a lack of cultural and gender sensitivity when addressing such acts of violence among the general population across Europe, and even more so when addressing acts of violence against women from cultural minorities and migrants in specific European contexts. This lack of sensitivity also creates additional barriers to identifying potential victims and developing meaningful ways of relating to minority/migrant women, their families and their communities. Moreover, sociocultural misunderstandings and/or insensitivity when addressing gender-based violence hinder appropriate care and prevention, and may even result in femicide.

To understand the specific sociocultural and ecological context in which femicide takes place, it is important to focus both on local and minority cultures within Europe and the interactions between them. In the case of migrant women in Europe who are victims of ongoing gender-based violence, for instance, the interaction between their different cultural realities may lead to an increased risk of femicide caused by myriad factors that also act as barriers to their seeking assistance (Nudelman et al, 2017). By helping to formulate effective, culturally appropriate and preventative measures in response to femicide, the ecological

approach can further our understanding of and responses to these issues.

Effectively responding to and preventing femicide

The ecological approach focuses on the interplay between individuals, their personal relationships (including those with their families) and their communities, as well as with wider bodies, such as services, institutions and legislation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Boira et al, 2017). This approach can identify how the influence of country-specific biological, sociocultural and economic factors can either reduce or increase the risk of violence and death (Boira et al, 2017). Thus, when implementing public policies, drawing on an ecological approach would allow for a more integrated analysis that could accurately identify femicide risk factors, and these could then be incorporated into policies and strategic action programmes (Kouta et al, 2017).

Given that the term femicide is not widely known and is often misunderstood or confused with homicide (simply the killing of one human by another without reference to the victim's gender), femicide often goes unreported as a very particular type of murder. However, recommendations based on both ecological and multicausal approaches may enable policy makers and professionals in relevant fields to better comprehend the issue and respond in meaningful and effective ways (Laurent et al, 2013). A thorough understanding of femicide in specific sociocultural contexts should be promoted to enhance culturally sensitive awareness, care and prevention, which may in turn enable potential victims to overcome barriers to seeking assistance and support. To achieve this end, it is essential to work simultaneously across all relevant levels of society and to involve professionals such as healthcare providers and educators, members of the judiciary and police, authorities

and other functionaries dealing with gender violence, as well as communities and women at risk (Gill et al, 2016).

All relevant service providers dealing with gender violence across Europe should receive intensive training that imparts cultural/social knowledge of various groups in the population, as well as culturally and gender-sensitive ways to address these groups and gain their trust. In terms of victims of violence who are migrants, minorities and/or of different ethnicities, service providers must be aware of and consider the cultural and symbolic norms, beliefs and perceptions embedded in these victims' countries of origin, including the accepted types of social relationships within these cultures, since lack of knowledge and cultural sensitivity may influence victims' accessing services.

Although healthcare providers could play a crucial professional role in raising awareness of and preventing femicide, especially when dealing with minority groups and migrants, they often fail to discover or correctly identify the underlying causes of violence among women who access healthcare services; thus, they are not able to offer culturally meaningful care (Leskošek et al, 2015). To rectify this situation, they should be sensitized through appropriate training to enhance their knowledge and comprehension of the cultural traditions, beliefs, perceptions and practices regarding family and gender relations among the different population groups they serve. This training will strengthen their ability both to understand situations that occur in specific sociocultural contexts and to offer more meaningful support to victims of violence. In particular, they should develop a trust-based relationship with women who are victims of violence, including survivors of attempted femicide and/or their relatives. The knowledge and skills gained through such training will enable them to explore each woman's particular history of violence and threats against her, since specific types of threats that are made may be related to societal norms in the male aggressor's country of origin. It is therefore critical that healthcare providers be trained to ask specific questions in a

sensitive way to identify some of these warning signs at an early stage and thus prevent femicide from occurring (Gill et al, 2016; Nudelman et al, 2017).

Healthcare professionals should also be aware of the potential sources of support available to women and those to which they can refer women, in the case of formal/official support systems. These include the woman's personal support network, such as her family, friends and workmates, as well as formal/official systems of support. Women's use of the latter depends on their familiarity with these systems and perception of their effectiveness. Barriers to access arise if a woman feels that these systems pose a threat to her either because she fears stigma and discrimination or, for example, if she is member of an ethnic minority or is in the country illegally.

Legal professionals also play a critical part in dealing with gender-based violence and femicide. Unfortunately, these acts often elicit an inadequate response from the legal system, especially in the area of criminal justice. If lawyers and court officers are to comprehensively address gender-based violence and femicide, they should undergo sensitivity training. This training could lead to a stricter application of existing laws and better consideration of female gender-based violence victims in court hearings, since lack of respect for such victims generally poses a barrier to women filing complaints and seeking justice. In the case of migrants and cultural minorities, using professional mediators and interpreters from the relevant cultural community for translation and support should be encouraged. Further, since gender violence is deeply rooted in both cultural norms and gender roles, the legal system and its representatives need to be aware of such structural causes and to account for them when debating cases and making decisions and reaching verdicts (see Gill et al, 2016).

The police are also at the forefront when it comes to handling femicide and violence against women, as they are often the first people to talk to female victims of gender-based violence and

attempted femicide. For this reason, police officers should also undergo sensitivity training to ensure that they address these women in a culturally and gender-sensitive way, that they are adequately prepared to offer support and protect such women, and that they can encourage women to report acts of violence that may occur against them in the future (see Gill et al, 2016). Handling these issues more sensitively and more skilfully will enable police not only to collect more detailed data about incidents involving violence against or killings of women, but also to identify elements such as sociocultural factors related to religious and minority groups or migrants, and situational and risk factors that might have contributed to the reported incident. Gathering data related to femicide is fundamental, since it can assist victims by better equipping the police to identify risk factors or warning signs and make femicide more visible, and also by increasing awareness among policy makers and professionals as well as community members more broadly.

All relevant professionals and service providers should find ways to make information about gender-based violence and femicide accessible and meaningful for women from various cultural backgrounds, should develop proactive responses and should minimize any bureaucracy that could hinder the taking of urgent action. In addition, essential culturally and gender-sensitive information should be made available in various languages and formats.

Following the different levels proposed in the ecological model, awareness of femicide must also be enhanced among political policy makers at local and national levels, since they are in a prime position to address the issue and prompt change that may lead to meaningful reforms. Such change could include promoting gender equality by implementing policies that make it possible for women to leave abusive partners, for example, protection (in shelters or safe houses), financial support (child support and access to free healthcare) and rehabilitation, while

acknowledging and providing for these women's sociocultural backgrounds (see Gill et al, 2016: 1–4).

Finally, the media – printed, visual and electronic – is a major source of awareness-raising about social issues such as gender violence and femicide. At present, the latter is often regarded as a minor issue that occurs only among minority groups and thus does not present a threat to the wider society. As this attitude may lead to underreporting or sensational commentaries that increase fear and gender stereotyping, it is vital to improve journalists' understanding of femicide and to facilitate their access to reliable sources when reporting an incident of it (Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2014). In addition, femicide should be called by its name in the media, rather than by misleading terms such as 'love crime', 'crime of passion' or 'jealousy crime', in order to further promote public knowledge and awareness of the circumstances under which femicide can arise (Gill et al, 2016: 1–4).

Conclusions

The cultural perspective mediates the way in which people and institutions interpret and act in response to reality. Thus, having an understanding of culture is fundamental when it comes to facilitating understanding of the relationship between femicide and social issues such as the construction of masculinity and patriarchy, the role of the family and honour, human trafficking or migration and refugee policies. Understanding femicide using a cultural and ecological approach can develop in-depth awareness of, and responses to, gender-based violence and femicide. In fact, as Michau et al (2015) note, adopting this approach appears to be crucial in terms of prevention, as the socioecological model considers the different levels (individual, interpersonal, community and societal) involved in the causes of femicide.

Responses to femicide must take place across all these levels, that is, with individuals and victims' families; with communities, including schools and places of worship; with local and official institutions; and among relevant professionals and policy makers. Interventions should be specifically designed for different sociocultural groups and contexts, taking into account additional determinants (financial, political, environmental, occupational and migration-related) that may affect gender violence, and should consider how the multicausal effect operates in relation to femicide.

Further, culturally appropriate prevention and intervention approaches must entail community engagement education, especially in relation to intimate partner violence and the associated risk of femicide. Research and surveillance regarding killings of women remains sparse, and legislation, where it exists, is often poorly enforced and easily circumvented. Advocacy to change laws that permit these types of crimes is thus essential (WHO, 2012; Vives-Cases et al, 2016). Raising awareness of these crimes among stakeholders and policy makers by collecting and analysing available data, including court cases and other key sources of information, is especially valuable for protecting women's rights and preventing femicide. Greater awareness of and sensitivity to femicide and its causes is necessary to enact appropriate culturally and gender-sensitive and preventative measures. For minority and migrant women in Europe in particular, understanding and identifying the relationship between cultural context and risk of femicide is vital if we are to circumvent those risks and stop acts of violence before they occur.

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