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Article: *Re-imagining what counts as femicide*

# Re-imagining what counts as femicide

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## Abstract

This Special Subsection on *Re-imagining what counts as femicide* brings together five original articles which, from different perspectives, seek to push, challenge, and redefine what counts as femicide. The contributions offered here excavate the *conceptual issues* of what, who, and where femicide ‘counts’. In order to do so, the articles engage with epistemological and *methodological* questions regarding how different bodies of evidence on femicide are formed and which take priority, the *ethical* implications of including or excluding deaths from counts of femicide, and prospects for *legal* intervention, specifically in Latin America, in contributing to who and what is counted as femicide. Together, these articles seek to challenge how existing concepts of femicide and approaches to counting have focused policy and practice attention on some women’s lives whilst neglecting to count (and thereby acknowledge) others.

## Keywords

Data, femicide, gender, homicide, measurement, violence against women

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The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2019) *Global Study on Homicide* reports that 137 women are killed every day across the world: the equivalent to nearly six women every hour, or one woman every 10 minutes. These deaths are evidenced by the increasing availability and range of data sources for counting femicide. In 2016, the *UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women* extended a directive to all member states to introduce country-specific ‘femicide observatories’, noting that the benefits of counting would allow a more comparable and consistent understanding of the nature, scope and trends of sex/gender-related killing to emerge globally. Alongside this call for established femicide observatories, an assembly of feminist advocacy projects, digital civil society platforms, mortality datasets, homicide indices and open-source datasets from international non-governmental agencies has developed each posing their own methodological conventions and approaches to what ‘counts’ as femicide.

Efforts to count femicide currently stretch across domains of (public) health, justice and civil society, which each vary in their modes of sex/gender disaggregation but share the challenges of missing or incomplete data and conceptual ambiguities (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003; Walklate et al., 2020) inherent in comparative research in a global context (Dawson and Carrigan, 2021). Therefore, while femicide has come to be understood as a global problem, there is a gap in critical scholarship which interrogates *what* counts as femicide, *who* is invisibilized in official data counts and *how* we should count femicide if we are to produce counts that meaningfully capture the extent of the problem globally.

This Special Subsection on ‘Re-imagining What Counts as Femicide’ seeks to address this gap by bringing together five original articles which, from different perspectives, seek to push, challenge and redefine what counts as femicide. The contributions offered here excavate the *conceptual* issues of what, who and where femicide ‘counts’. In order to do so, the articles engage with epistemological and *methodological* questions regarding how different bodies of evidence on femicide are formed and which take priority, the *ethical* implications of including or excluding deaths from counts of femicide, and prospects for *legal* intervention, specifically in Latin America, in contributing to who and what is counted as femicide. Together, these articles seek to challenge how existing concepts of femicide and approaches to counting have focused policy and practice attention on some women’s lives while neglecting to count (and thereby acknowledge) others.

This collection brings together international perspectives on issues of global relevance, with local application. It includes article contributions from Australia, Brazil, the United Kingdom and South Africa. The articles explore issues salient to understanding whose lives (and deaths) are counted and, perhaps more importantly, whose lives are not counted; issues which are pertinent across the Global North and Global South and sociological agendas. The contributions offered here strengthen dialogue between sociological theory and data, and build upon significant interventions offered in previous issues, including a Special Issue on Femicide published by *Current Sociology* in 2016, edited by members of the *EU COST Action on Femicide* (Marcuello-Servós et al., 2016). This Special Subsection offers a timely development of issues explored by Marcuello-Servós et al. (2016) in three ways.

First, this collection considers a re-imagining of what can and should count as femicide, and the implications of this for contemporary sociological theory, policy and

practice. The term ‘femicide’ was initially coined to highlight the ‘sexual politics of murder’ and politicize men’s violence against women Barberet and Baboolal, 2020; Russell, 2012: 1) and has since become the domain definition within various fields and disciplines invested in preventing femicide. While the incredible breadth of sector and advocacy initiatives is a key strength of the field, it also creates challenges for meaningful global comparison. To date, there is no agreed international standard for how to count the gendered killing of women, nor is there a universally accepted definition of what constitutes ‘femicide’. Even more, though required for comparison, the push to harmonize and standardize the measurement of femicide raises concerns regarding hierarchies of competing forms of knowledge.

These issues are addressed in the first contribution to this Special Subsection, ‘Re-imagining the Measurement of Femicide: From “Thin” Counts to “Thick” Counts’, where Sandra Walklate and Kate Fitz-Gibbon compare the (in)visibility of gendered social structures and relations underpinning femicide. They consider the implications of a move from ‘thin’ counts, often produced by administrative data, to ‘thick’ counts, which capture a wide range of intersecting violence(s) over different times and places. Their analysis reminds us that femicide counts represent an accumulation of acts of ‘slow violence’ embedded within social structures that foster men’s violence against women, and potentially alludes to a tension between retaining the political heritage of a concept and narrowing its parameters for the purpose of global comparability.

This balance of ‘principles and pragmatism’ is unpacked further in the second contribution to this collection, ‘What Is femicide? The UN and the Measurement of Progress in Complex Epistemic Systems’, where Sylvia Walby analyses femicide as an ‘indicator’ of progress and its development within what she terms an ‘ecology of epistemic systems’. Interpreting indicators as assets, Walby analyses the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals and how multiple, seemingly contradictory, approaches to conceptualizing gender and violence are represented by indicators of progress. This analysis demonstrates how indicators are imbued with power, conditions and obligations, and are not merely technocratic or neutral objects to be reproduced. These contributions have significant implications for sociology as a discipline, including ongoing ‘paradigm wars’ between quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry (Oakley, 1998) and crises for empirical sociology in the age of data proliferation (Savage and Burrows, 2007).

Second, this collection provides a critical commentary on practices of counting which inform social and policy responses to femicide and seeks to unpack which femicides are made visible or invisible as a result. Often, as Merry (2016: 4) writes, technocratic knowledge often ‘appears pragmatic and instrumental rather than ideological’ but in turn can create concerns over ‘stripped down’ numbers that have been decontextualized. The use of such data has nevertheless continued, evidenced by calls to establish large-scale, data collection systems which are considered central to reducing gender inequalities (Vives-Cases et al., 2016). Generating data on femicide is therefore a key strategy for ensuring accountability and shaping policy priorities for prevention. Without these data, there is no evidence to inform policy makers on which interventions are effective, to inform service providers on how and where resources should be allocated, to inform legislators on the implications of criminalization, for media to inform public opinion and discourse, or for feminist advocates to promote change.

These issues are addressed in the third contribution, 'Spectacularizing Narratives on Femicide in South Africa: A Decolonial Feminist Analysis', where Floretta Boonzaier analyses cases of femicide reported in a national media database in South Africa and how this informs public thinking about the gendered killing of women. Boonzaier applies a decolonial feminist theoretical framework to situate femicide within a longer history of settler colonialism and slavery, arguing that spectacularized, graphic reports of femicide reinforce colonial narratives where Black women's bodies are 'hyper-sexualized, hyper-visible' and objectified (see also Boonzaier, 2018). This analysis demonstrates how the killing of women is not only gendered, but racialized and classed, and that key social institutions can shape public discourse by reproducing existing stereotypes. The database used in this analysis also highlights the issues of reporting bias in media sources and the implications for their use as data sources in counting femicide.

Administrative data present similar challenges to building nuanced analyses of the social and political contexts of femicide. Engaging directly with the question of who counts as a victim of femicide, Rachel Condry and Caroline Miles report on their empirical analysis of administrative homicide data and parricide case studies in the fourth contribution, 'Who counts? The Invisibility of Mothers as Victims of Femicide'. Condry and Miles identify that in comparison to non-domestic homicide, women are over-represented as victims of parricide, but data specifically on mothers killed by sons are obscured by the limited disaggregation of data. Supplementing cases collected from a large police force in England and Wales, they expand upon their analysis with data from domestic homicide and mental health reviews, media reports and court appeals to highlight the intersecting inequalities experienced by matricide victims: as women, mothers, some as middle-aged or older carers of mentally ill sons, from minority communities, or with their own disabilities. These contributions from Boonzaier, and from Condry and Miles, have implications for how we think about connections between data, evidence and policy on femicide, and what is lost in translation as these areas develop in the future.

Third, this collection critically examines developments in the field over the last decade, such as the formation and operation of femicide law and the implications of criminalization for data. The proliferation of femicide data has been accompanied by a growth in the number of countries enacting specific legislation to criminalize femicide or feminicide. Considering the implications of criminalization, in 'Criminalization of Femicide in Latin America: Challenges of Legal Conceptualization', Thiago Pierobom de Ávila and Wânia Pasinato conclude this Special Subsection by presenting a comparative analysis of legal definitions of femicide in Latin America. They consider the substantive impact that criminalization has had in practice and the extent to which these laws have increased the visibility of femicide as well as identifying the challenges of applying law in this way. The contributions offered by Pierobom de Ávila and Pasinato and also Boonzaier draw attention to southern voices and experiences of violence which move understandings of the Global South beyond geography, and towards intellectual agendas that recognize deeply embedded structures of oppression. They also highlight the influence of feminist advocacy on generating data and the intersections between femicide data and feminist activism (Corradi and Stöckl, 2014; D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020).

Brought together, these contributions demonstrate that, although the visibility of femicide and its impact is increasing, the practice of *counting* femicide remains a contested

practice with significant implications for policy, politics and sociological theory. The contributions bring into focus theoretical issues from across sociology, concerning structural inequalities imposed by systems of patriarchy and colonialism (Boonzaier), social institutions such as law (Pierobom de Ávila and Pasinato) and family (Condry and Miles), as well as the trans-societal (Walby), and seek to make visible the ‘totality of women’s experiences of men’s violence’ (Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon). Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that femicide and its representations in data are of central importance to sociology: they speak directly to how social problems materialize through and from social interactions, norms and institutions.

Interrogating *how* we arrive at a femicide count and *who* is involved in that process matters. However, these interventions are not intended to discourage counting but rather to further the debate on how we can most *accurately* count femicide. Without these data, we cannot measure the size or effect of femicide, nor can we measure change. We hope that this collection propels these debates forward in an effort to reimagine what can and should count as femicide.

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Elizabeth A. Cook is a Lecturer in Sociology in the Violence and Society Centre at City, University of London (UK). Her research expertise focuses on homicide, family, and gender, and their intersections with inequalities and harms to society.

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Kate Fitz-Gibbon is Director of the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre and an Associate Professor of Criminology in the Faculty of Arts at Monash University (Victoria, Australia). She conducts research in the field of domestic and family violence, femicide, responses to violence against women, and the impact of criminal law reform in Australia and internationally.

### Résumé

Cette sous-section intitulée *Repenser ce qui est considéré comme féminicide* rassemble cinq articles originaux qui, à partir de perspectives différentes, cherchent à préciser, remettre en question et redéfinir ce qui est comptabilisé comme féminicide. Les contributions proposées ici explorent les questions *conceptuelles* de ce que le féminicide « compte », qui il compte et où. Pour ce faire, les articles abordent des questions épistémologiques et *méthodologiques* concernant la manière dont sont élaborés les différents ensembles de données sur le féminicide et examinent lesquelles ont priorité, ainsi que les implications *éthiques* de l'inclusion ou de l'exclusion de certains décès dans le décompte des féminicides, et les perspectives du recours à *la loi*, en particulier en Amérique latine, pour mieux déterminer qui et quoi est intégré dans la comptabilisation du féminicide. Ensemble, ces articles cherchent à remettre en question la manière dont les concepts de féminicide et les modes de comptabilisation existants ont concentré l'attention des politiques et des pratiques sur la vie de certaines femmes tout en omettant de compter (et donc de reconnaître) celle d'autres femmes.

**Mots-clés**

contabilisation, données, féminicide, genre, homicide, violences faites aux femmes

**Resumen**

Esta subsección especial sobre *Re-imaginar lo que se contabiliza como feminicidio* reúne cinco artículos originales que, desde diferentes perspectivas, buscan impulsar, desafiar y redefinir lo que se contabiliza como feminicidio. Las contribuciones presentadas aquí profundizan en las cuestiones conceptuales de qué ‘cuenta’ como feminicidio, a quién cuenta y dónde. Para ello, los artículos abordan cuestiones epistemológicas y *metodológicas* sobre cómo se elaboran los diferentes conjuntos de datos sobre feminicidio y cuáles son priorizadas, las implicaciones *éticas* de incluir o excluir muertes en la contabilidad del femicidio y las perspectivas de que la intervención *legal*, específicamente en América Latina, pueda contribuir a la cuestión de quién y qué se contabiliza como feminicidio. En su conjunto, estos artículos buscan poner en cuestión cómo los conceptos existentes de feminicidio y los enfoques para contabilizarlos han centrado la atención de las políticas y las prácticas en la vida de algunas mujeres mientras han descuidado la contabilización (y, por lo tanto, el reconocimiento) de otras.

**Palabras clave**

datos, feminicidio, género, homicidio, medición, violencia contra la mujer