Introduction

Diana Russell first used the term “femicide” when testifying at the 1976 International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women (Radford and Russell, 1992: xiv). Femicide is the gender motivated killing of women and the most extreme form of violence against women. The killing of women by their male intimate partners, current or former, is referred to by Walklate et al. (2020) as intimate femicide. It is the most common form of femicide worldwide (UNODC, 2018), and the focus of this chapter. In adopting the term “intimate femicide” here, we acknowledge that there has been some debate over the terms femicide, feminicide, and homicide (Pierobom de Avila, 2018), but following on from our earlier work (Walklate et. al., 2020), we wish to note the value of emphasising both the intimacy present in these fatal relationships and the gendered nature of the act of homicide.

This chapter provides an overview of the prevalence, nature, and risk of intimate femicide worldwide. It is structured into four parts. In Part 1 the prevalence of intimate femicide globally is examined, with reference to international statistics alongside regional and country level data. This section also examines the ways in which data on intimate femicide are collected and the degree to which women’s deaths from intimate male violence are “counted” at the local, national, and global levels. In Part 2 we examine the body of scholarship which has sought to develop better understandings of the nature of intimate femicide, victim and perpetrator characteristics, and the circumstances of its occurrence. Building on this analysis, Part 3 focuses upon risk factors and risk assessment in relation to intimate femicide. The chapter concludes by examining the changing face of intimate femicide globally in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for systematic data collection to better understand women’s risk of fatal violence from their male partners and ex-partners at this unprecedented moment in world history.

Quantifying and Counting Intimate Femicide

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2013) estimates that 38% of women murdered globally are killed by an intimate partner. While clearly establishing that intimate femicide is a global problem, the WHO (2013) also notes variances in the prevalence of the killing of women by a male intimate partner across the world with, for example, intimate femicide accounting for 55% of femicides in the South-East Asia Region. More recently, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in their 2018 Global Study on Homicide Report found that 87,000 women were victims of femicide.
in 2017, of which 30,000 women were killed by a current or former intimate partner (UNODC, 2018). This figure was an increase in prevalence from an estimated 48,000 killings of women by an intimate partner or family member in 2012 (UNODC, 2018: p. 10).

When prevalence rates in the available data are examined at the country level it is apparent that there are particular countries worldwide where women face heightened risks of men’s fatal violence (Walklate et al., 2020: pp. 33–36). In El Salvador, for example, the country with the highest femicide rate in Latin America, this translates to the killing of a woman every 18 hours (Donovan, 2019). Across Europe, the UNODC (2018) provides country level data which shows a higher-than-average risk of intimate femicide for women living in Albania, Croatia, Hungary, and Lithuania as compared to other European countries. In Australia, where family violence has been declared a national crisis (Fitz-Gibbon, 2021; Stott Despoja, 2019), at least one woman is killed every week by men’s violence (Cussen and Bryant, 2015). Women in Asia are the least likely globally to be killed by a male intimate partner (UNODC, 2018), as indicated in this data.

While these headline prevalence rates exist, there is a dearth of dependable and comprehensive femicide data in most countries, and there is no reliable global tally of such deaths. One study of international prevalence rates found that only 66 countries, mostly high-income, out of a total of approximately 95 countries globally had useful data on intimate femicide (Stockl et al., 2013). Tragically, and despite issues with incomplete data, available evidence suggests the number of intimate femicides have not decreased but rather have increased in recent decades, such as in the United Kingdom (Brennan, 2016), and in Australia (Cussen and Bryant, 2015), reinforcing both the importance of counting and highlighting its limitations in achieving sustained change. While variance in the presence and quality of country-specific crime data is a well-documented phenomenon globally, it is important to note that efforts to improve responses to and the prevention of intimate femicide worldwide are ultimately hampered by the lack of consistent and coordinated prevalence data (see also Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2020). The need for improved femicide data collection has been recognised by the UN special rapporteur on violence against women, who, in 2016, called for the establishment of country-specific femicide watches (Simonovic, 2016). Alongside this call, action has emerged in a body of scholarship which has sought to improve understandings of why quantification is important and what is achieved through counting (see, inter alia, Walklate et al., 2020; Merry, 2016; Walby et al., 2017). On this point, Walklate et al. and others have emphasised the importance of viewing counting as but one part of a meaningful response in taking account of women’s deaths. They are realistic as to the value of data in this space:

Data alone won’t save women’s lives but counting the killing of women by men is a way of valuing women’s lives, accounting for gendered killings and a tool for further action. Data is not sufficient to change and save women’s lives, but it is necessary.

(Walklate et al., 2020)

As Engle Merry (2016: p. 222) has commented, “We rely on numbers alone at our peril.” Be it the power of the UN special rapporteur’s call for action on femicide watches, or perhaps what Engle Merry (2016) has identified as the “seductions of quantification,” the last decade has seen growing documentation of the risks faced by women victims of men’s violence. The establishment of several campaigns at the local and national levels have sought to count the killing of women by men, mostly within intimate partner relationships, though some include those killings which occur outside of an intimate partner relationship. These initiatives include campaigns by feminist civil society groups, such as Counting Dead Women in Australia (Destroy the Joint, 2018; Cullen et al., 2018), the Femicide Census in England (Brennan, 2016; Long et al., 2020), the Women Count USA (Schreyer and Health, 2019), and the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability (2019). When combined with more institutionalised exercises, such as family violence death reviews (see, for
example, Dawson, 2017), this activity represents significant if nascent steps towards more systematic counting of intimate femicide.

To date, however, there are still only a small number of countries with specific registries of intimate femicides (Vives-Cases et al., 2016). Within these registries, campaigns, and counts, there are particular gaps and patterns of invisibility. The failure to embed systematic, comprehensive counting of intimate femicides has particular consequences for women from marginalised, diverse, or remote communities. In the slow violences of gender violence that end in “honour” killings (Shalhoub-Kervorkian and Daher-Nashif, 2013), in the staging of femicide as something else (Bitton and Dayan, 2019), in the impunity of woman killing in Ciudad Juarez (Livingston, 2004; Leal, 2008), in the disappeared, lost, and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada and Australia (National Inquiry into Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Higgins and Collard, 2019), and in the invisibility of/missing cases of older women (Roberts, 2021), the killings of women from marginalised or minoritised communities, by their intimate partners, are less likely to be reflected in official statistics. Their killings are further shrouded or obscured.

In addition, counting femicides fails to capture the incalculable number of women’s untimely deaths caused by intimate partner violence. A woman may survive an act or acts of violence at the hands of her violent intimate partner or partners. The aftermath of such violence, however, including significant economic and health impacts, may end her life earlier than would have otherwise been the case (see, for example, Franzway, 2015; Webster, 2016). The link between male intimate partner violence and women’s untimely death is deeply embedded in the social, economic, cultural, and political structures that devalue women’s lives and fail to adequately protect, support, and restore women from the immediate and ongoing, sometimes intergenerational, harms that arise from such violence. The ongoing failure to systematically count intimate femicides and to create a framework that would capture all the current invisibilities and absences reflects the lack of value accorded to women’s safety and their lives (Walklate et al., 2020) and raises broader questions about how and whether counting alone will be enough. The increasing presence of visual and artistic memorialisations (such as the Red Shoes campaign in Mexico [Telesur, 2016]) that has expanded into a broader Red Shoes – Global Day of Solidarity and the Redress project by artist Jamie Black remembering missing Indigenous Women in the US (Ault, 2019) reflects the creation of alternative or additional ways in which the killing of women by men can be remembered or made to count.

Thus, prevalence statistics and what they reveal about the nature and extent of intimate femicide, need to be considered with caution. The value of such statistics in promoting debate and policy concern about femicide, however, is beyond question. One way in which the value of such statistics is demonstrated is the increasing presence of empirical work focused on understanding the nature of intimate femicide.

Understanding Intimate Femicide: Typologies and Motivations

Beyond efforts to count the toll of men’s fatal violence against women, there has been a significant body of scholarly work which has examined the scenarios within which men commit intimate femicide, their personal circumstances, that of their victim, and relevant situational features in which the femicide occurred (Boxall, Rosevear and Payne, 2015). This work has advanced in diverse ways, including the psychological model (which has lost favour in recent years, see Dekeseredy, 2011: p. 59) and the cultural and ecological models (Kouta et al., 2018), the sociological model (see, inter alia, Dawson and Carrigan, 2020), and through a legal perspective. While much of the work done to advance understanding in this field has focused on non-fatal intimate partner violence (see, for example, the foundational work of Johnson, 1995, 2005), there is a smaller body of intimate femicide focused work. This research has proposed a number of different ways in which we can better understand and, ultimately, predict and prevent this fatal form of intimate partner violence.
The work of Dobash and Dobash has been critical in building understandings of the profile of men who commit intimate femicide and the circumstances within which they do so (Dobash and Dobash, 2015). Referring to the “ordinary man” who kills their female partner “out of the blue,” Dobash and colleagues (2004, see also Dobash et al., 2009) found that men who commit intimate femicide typically have “more conventional” histories than men who kill in other contexts of male violence. Of significance, the murder study by Dobash and Dobash (2015) found that the presence of conflict within the relationship, coupled with the often-masculinised traits of jealousy and possessiveness, were common dynamics present prior to the act of intimate femicide.

Motivation-based explanations for understanding the perpetration of intimate femicide have also been proposed. In 1994 Australian criminologist Ken Polk in his ground-breaking book *Why Men Kill* set out in detail the motivations which underlie the killing of women, including by their male intimate partners. In his analysis of Australian coronial court files, Polk (1994: p. 28) illuminated the dominant feature of masculine possession as an underlying theme to cases of sexual jealousy and/or where women were killed during the period of relationship separation. He argued that “exceptional jealousy is a common threat through many accounts of masculinity, intimate homicide” (Polk, 1994: p. 32). Polk’s findings have been supported more recently by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018: p. 11) in their Global Study on Homicide Report, which found that women continue to bear the heaviest burden of lethal victimization as a result of gender stereotypes and inequality. Many of the victims of “femicide” are killed by their current and former partners . . . the deaths of those killed by intimate partners does not usually result from random or spontaneous acts, but rather from the culmination of prior gender-related violence. Jealousy and fear of abandonment are among the motives.

Polk’s analysis lay the foundations for a challenge to the notion of intimate femicides as occurring spontaneously or in the “heat of the moment” and highlights the extent to which jealous and controlling men will plan their acts of lethal violence. As Polk (1994: p. 31) notes, “these are planned homicides rather than a swift upswelling of passionate rage.”

There are numerous other examples of scholarly work that seeks to categorise intimate partner violence more broadly and the killing of women by their male intimate partners specifically. Noteworthy here is Johnson’s (2006) typology, which, while focused on non-fatal violence, has informed understandings of the risk inherent in the lives of women prior to their killing. Johnson argues that intimate partner violence can be organised into four types – coercive controlling violence (also referred to as intimate terrorism), violent resistance, situational couple violence, and common couple violence. The legacy of such work is evident in the emergence of common risk assessment and management frameworks across Western jurisdictions. The formulation of “types” of intimate partner violence has been critical in framing the risk assessment tools and informing practitioners’ judgement on the circumstances within which women face risk of serious violence or fatality (Boxall, Rosevear, and Payne, 2015). It is important to note that many of these tools rest on the assumption that violence in a relationship escalates. This assumption and what it means have yet to be fully excavated. The recent work of Boxall and Lawler (2021) is illustrative of the work remaining to be done on this issue. Setting aside the problematic influence of such questions, it is to the assessment and management of women’s risk of intimate femicide that we now turn.

**Assessing Risk of Intimate Femicide**

There have been numerous studies undertaken in recent years to inform better predictions, assessments and management of women’s risk of intimate femicide. These studies have embraced the concept of risk in similar ways in which the embrace of risk as a measurable concept has taken a
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hold of the criminal justice policy agendas more generally (see, inter alia, Mythen, 2014). Sometimes this work has had a direct input into the development of risk assessment instruments and risk management frameworks informing practitioners’ ability to predict and ultimately to prevent fatal acts of violence against women (see, inter alia, the work of Campbell, 1995). While elsewhere we have problematised the reliance on traditional risk narratives to inform policy responses to intimate femicide (see Walklate et al., 2020), here we accept the influence of the risk narrative in recent years and explore some of the work which has sought to identify risk factors of intimate femicide.

In Canada, where there is a strong history of provincial based domestic violence death reviews (Dawson, 2017), a 12-year review of domestic homicide incidents revealed risk factors common to the killing of an intimate partner, including a history of violence in the relationship, actual or pending relationship separation, obsessive jealousy, threats to kill and/or threats to attempt suicide, escalation of violence, victim isolation, perpetrator unemployment, and a sense of fear among the victim (Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, 2015). These risk factors have been found elsewhere, including in research from the United States (Campbell etc al., 2007), Australia (Johnson et al., 2019; Polk, 1994), and England and Wales (Dobash et al., 2004).

Highlighting the important role of the health system as a potential site for early intervention and prevention, research has pointed to pregnancy and the time immediately preceding and following the birth of a child as a key risk factor (World Health Organisation, 2011; Campbell, Garcia-Moreno and Sharps, 2004). For those women who are already experiencing intimate partner violence, research has found that the severity of that violence can increase during the pregnancy period and following childbirth (Taft, 2002). This reflects broader research, which, somewhat alarmingly, has found that femicide is the leading cause of death for women during pregnancy and in first year postpartum (Cheng and Horan, 2010; Palladino et al., 2011; Lin and Gill, 2011).

In recent years there has been increasing recognition of the presence of acts of non-fatal strangulation (Glass et. al., 2008) and coercive control preceding intimate femicide (see, inter alia, Johnson et al., 2019; NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, 2015). Notably a study conducted in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) found that coercive and controlling behaviours were present prior to intimate femicide in all cases under review (NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, 2015). Increasing recognition of the high-risk nature of these forms of violence have led to significant calls for improve detection, earlier intervention, and in some instances, stand-alone criminal justice system responses to these recognised risk factors. Both coercive control and non-fatal strangulation now feature in several high-risk assessment tools employed across Western countries and, in some UK, US, Canadian, and Australian jurisdictions, have been introduced as stand-alone criminal offences (Douglas and Fitzgerald, 2014; Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2019). The jury is still out on the extent to which initiatives of this kind impact upon rates of intimate femicide. However, debates on the nature, extent, and appropriate intervention points in relation to intimate femicide have arguably taken a new turn during the global pandemic in the light of the associated public health policy interventions implemented throughout 2020–2021.

Intimate Femicide During the Pandemic

A question which emerges here is the degree to which the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates a shift in our understandings of intimate femicide – both its risk and its prevalence. As has now been well evidenced, throughout the coronavirus global health pandemic, there has been a documented increase in the frequency and severity of men’s intimate partner violence (see, inter alia, Carrington et al., 2020; Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon and True, 2022; UN Women, 2020). These developments have taken a particular toll in those jurisdictions where “stay at home” regulations have been in place (UN Women, 2021) with the wider impact of the likely economic ramifications of the pandemic in terms of economic insecurity, job losses, and violence(s) against women yet to unfold (EIGE, 2021).
To date, it is unclear how extensive the changing complex nature of intimate partner violence is, and the evidenced heightened associated service demands during the pandemic might extend to a heightened perpetration rate of intimate femicide over this period. What is potentially clearer is that the gains made in many jurisdictions in responding to and supporting women and children living with violence will suffer as the economic and other consequences of the global pandemic take a firmer hold (UN Women, 2021). At this juncture it is possible that some lessons might be taken from the wider literature on the impact of crises on violence(s) against women, including intimate femicide, more generally.

There is limited literature examining the relationship between crises – whether natural, humanitarian, or financial – and femicide. However, the dearth of academic investigation into both the relationship between crises and femicide and the phenomenon of femicide more broadly constitutes an identified gap in current research (Weil, 2016). There is a larger body of literature examining the relationship between crises and gender-based violence. Over the last decade this work has established that the consequences of global crises are gendered (True, 2013). Research following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (Bhattacarya, 2013), the Australian bushfires (Parkinson and Zara, 2013), and natural disasters in several countries (Harville et al., 2011), work in India (Rao, 2016), the Philippines and Vietnam (Nguyen and Rydstrom, 2018), Iran, (Sohrabizadeh, 2016), and Japan (Yoshihama et al., 2019) has consistently demonstrated the heightened risk of intimate partner violence and increased stresses in family life during and post-crisis life as a result of disasters. It is unclear, however, the degree to which this risk extends to cases of fatal violence.

Anecdotally, media coverage has, at times, throughout the pandemic pointed to a causal relationship between government enforced periods of lockdown and heightened prevalence of intimate femicide. In the United Kingdom, for example, in April 2020, the campaign group Counting Dead Women identified 16 alleged domestic abuse killings – including intimate femicides – which had occurred over a ten-day period (Grierson, 2020). It was suggested that this rate was over three times higher than the average number of deaths recorded for the same period over the last decade (Grierson, 2020). Campaign head, Karen Inglis Smith, explained,

We have to be cautious about how we talk about increases in men killing women... But we can say that the number of women killed by men over the first three weeks since lockdown is the highest it’s been for at least 11 years and is double that of an average 21 days over the last 10 years. (Grierson, 2020)

Similar concerns have continued to emerge throughout the pandemic in other countries, including in Spain (Trujillo, 2020) and Algeria (Ghanem, 2021). Despite a number of femicide observatories continuing to gather data on femicides during 2020, the absence of any systematic data collection of intimate femicide rates during the pandemic (Weil, 2020) renders making sense of the impact of the pandemic problematic. To date, it is unclear to what degree COVID-19 will shift the dial on the global prevalence of intimate femicide and the extent to which new risk factors may emerge and take precedence during the pandemic and into the recovery period. However, from the review of the material presented here on what is already known about intimate femicide and the difficulties in both ensuring that women’s lives and deaths count and are counted, it is perhaps not too much of a leap of the imagination to suggest that the dial will shift in ways in which women’s lives continue to fail to count.

**Taking Women’s Lives and Safety Seriously at a Global Level**

Concern about intimate femicide, the killing of women by their male intimate partners, has risen up the international agenda in recent years. At the same time, it is possible to observe an all-too-common failure at the government level across the globe in tackling intimate partner violence with
the level of attention (and resources) it merits. As we have argued elsewhere (see Walklate et al., 2019), while there is increasing attention from a legal, human rights, or public health perspective to the risks and harms of intimate partner violence and intimate femicide, there is an ongoing need for those in power to devote the resources required to meaningfully address and prevent this largely predictable form of lethal violence.

This chapter has overviewed the ways in which we have come to understand intimate femicide, its prevalence, and its risk. While the prevalence of the killing of women by their male intimate partners varies within and across regions and countries, and we know that the effects, impacts, and outcomes of social stratifications grounded in sexism, racism, ableism, and misogyny influence the production of counts, it is apparent from over three decades of scholarship that intimate femicide is a global problem and one in which the recognised high-risk factors and explanations through which we come to understand its perpetration are relevant in many different geographical settings and jurisdictions. Shared understandings and learnings can, and should, facilitate a global movement not only to take women’s lives seriously but to count their deaths and take meaningful strides towards preventing them.

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