

# Femicide: narratives of gender crimes<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Femicides are violent deaths of women resulting from power struggles between men and women. This was a qualitative study that used the tool of narratives to analyze police investigations of female homicides in Porto Alegre, in the years from 2006 to 2010. Ninety-two police inquiries conducted by the Homicide Division of Porto Alegre were studied and six cases that were considered representative of intimate femicide, femicide with sexual abuse, death through execution or connection and sex worker femicide were selected. The presence of gender crimes characterized by cruelty, similar to those found in regions of high violence and misogyny, was observed. This study sought to give visibility to femicide as a crime of political nature and had the aim of denouncing these preventable deaths, whose victims are mostly young black women, sex workers and residents of districts marked by drug trafficking and poverty.

**Keywords:** Homicide. Femicide. Female deaths due to assault.

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## **Introduction**

Homicides can be considered to be an end to the course of life of men and women marked by violence. Male mortality due to aggression has been historically higher than female mortality, presenting rates that are up to ten times greater. This may be one of the reasons why female deaths caused by aggression have been so poorly studied.

In Brazil, in 2010, there were 44,827 male homicides, representing a coefficient of 45/100,000 men, and 4,465 female homicides, with a rate of 4.6/100,000 women. Regarding female homicides, Brazil is the seventh among 84 countries worldwide (Waiselfisz, 2012).

Unlike male homicides, female homicides predominantly have a single directional factor: most of them are committed by men against women, and these men are acquaintances of the women. Murders of women cannot be understood as accidental or pathological: the greatest risk factor is being a woman, and they are killed because they live in patriarchal societies (Carcedo, 2010).

One of the inaugural acts of the struggle against gender violence in Brazil was the “Who loves does not kill” campaign, which took place during the 1970s. It started with the murder of a Brazilian socialite by her boyfriend after they broke up. The perpetrator was considered innocent by using the arguments of “defense of his honor”. This occurrence mobilized society and the women’s movement, but the term femicide was not yet being used.

Homicides due to gender conflicts have been called femicides, which is a political and legal term used to refer to this type of death. Thus, any manifestation or wielding of uneven relationships of power between men and women that culminates in the death of one or more women is considered to be femicide (Carcedo, Sagot, 2000).

This type of crime can occur in various situations including: death perpetrated by an intimate partner, serial crimes, sexual violence followed by death, associated femicides or extermination (Carcedo, 2010). Femicide is at the farthest point of the misogynistic violence continuum and can occur along with other forms of extreme violence: torture, forced prostitution, corrective rapes, beating, mutilation and deprivation of freedom for women (Russell, Caputti, 1992). Therefore, the concept of femicide contributes towards undoing the argument that gender violence is a private and personal issue, and places it as a political and social occurrence.

More than half of the homicides of women correspond to femicides, and this phenomenon presents high prevalence in various regions of the world. In South Africa, the femicide rate is 8.8/100,000 women; in the United States, 3.4/100,000 (Mathews, 2008); and in Brazil, 4.6/100,000 (Waiselfisz, 2012). Central America presents higher femicide rates, especially in three countries: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, which are experiencing extreme situations of human rights violations (Carcedo, 2010; Prieto-Carrón et al., 2007).

Murdered women are generally adolescents and young adults. In some countries, the victims are predominantly poor, living in unsafe urban areas ruled by drug trafficking and gangs, in which safety is virtually nonexistent (Campbell, 2007; Oliveira, Geraldles, 1998).

Femicides have thus been associated with situations of economic deprivation, sexist and aggressive masculinity, involvement with organized crime, drug and people trafficking, armed conflicts and places where there are high murder rates among men (Meneghel, Hirakata, 2011). In various countries, a large proportion of the murdered women had histories of repeated violence and had tried to break up their relationships before being killed, especially during the last three months prior to the crime (Grana, 2001).

The present text had the objective of narrating stories of women who were murdered due to gender inequalities. These stories were obtained through police inquiries by the Homicide Division of the municipality of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul.

### **Methodological path**

This was a qualitative study that used the tool of history narratives (Leal et al., 2007; Larrosa et al., 1995) as a methodological resource to view and analyze factors that permeate the femicide issue. Histories were chosen according to their character of singularity and represented the main types of femicide that occur in Porto Alegre. Working with narratives means valuing the qualitative dimension of the research, represented by subjective aspects within each story (Bauer, Gaskell, 2002).

This study used narratives as a device for searching for meaning. Narratives make it possible for experiences that were made invisible or sidelined within the culture to be retrieved. They also help in rebuilding identities and preserving collective memory. Society is crisscrossed by narratives that intertwine and produce dialogue with each other, thus bestowing reality on the world we live in (Ochs, 2003; Alves, 1999; Gergen, 1994; Benjamin, 1975).

Memories, life histories and personal identities are organized in narrative patterns. Histories do not simply happen. They are told, although who the narrator is and where he is are not always explicit. Sometimes, the storyteller is only one person, but sometimes the story is created jointly or cooperatively by a chorus of voices (Meneghel, Iniguez, 2007; Brockmeier, Harré, 2005). Whichever is the case, each story and each word is polyphonic, and their meaning is given by the countless contexts in which it appeared. Bakhtin (2006) called this the dialogical principle of discourse.

The narratives built in the present text had various narrators, including witnesses, families and police officers who listened to the history and may or may not have investigated the facts. There were situations in which the law of silence was stronger and they were unable to hear anything. There were other cases in which the person who died had been so devalued that no investigations at all took place. In addition to having various narrators and points of view, voices were heard, and also silence and omission produced by fear and social injustices.

In any case, the narratives brought in the present text are an approximation of what occurred. Histories were read from the police inquiries available at the Homicide Department of the municipality of Porto Alegre, and were reconstructed from the political categorization of “femicide”, which was the reference point that guided the narrative.

The present study is part of a research project entitled “Femicides and gender-based murders in Rio Grande do Sul” (Meneghel, 2010), in which 92 police inquiries referring to murders of women between 2006 and 2010 were studied, which were obtained through consultation at the Homicide Department of Porto Alegre. A thorough reading of the police inquiry was performed for each female homicide, registering data on the victim and the person indicted, and from the final report, which presented a synthesis of the statements by the parties involved, the position of the rapporteur and the indictment. The stories of the murdered women were chosen through reading and discussing the cases with the research team, after classifying the crimes as femicides or as other deaths caused by aggression.

The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Public Health School of Rio Grande do Sul and by the Research Commission of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

### **Narratives of femicides**

There are different scenarios within which femicides can occur, which makes this group of deaths heterogeneous and complex, although it can be affirmed

that they are all caused by conditions of discrimination and subordination of women in a patriarchal society.

In a study conducted in Central America (Carcedo, 2010), the scenarios of femicides were conceived as sociopolitical and cultural contexts, which produced or provided unequal relationships of power between men and women and generated violence. Old and new scenarios were described. Firstly, there were those that are already known and present in all societies: family, relationships between couples, sexual assaults perpetrated by men who may or may not be acquaintances, and the sex trade.

New scenarios encompass international trafficking networks and exploitation of women, which move huge amounts of money and reach worldwide proportions. With regard to trafficking of women, it is important that the merchandise remains alive, but if there is a threat of escape, calling for help, contacting other people or becoming ill, the woman becomes an expendable component. Lastly, there are scenarios in which women's bodies are used as means of vengeance, encompassing crimes of execution, connection and hate, perpetrated by gangs and mafias, in which bodies are mutilated, faces destroyed and, going beyond death, there is a desire to subject the other person to cruelty and to send a message to society.

In this text, we have presented six reports of femicides. They exemplify different types of this crime: those perpetrated by an intimate partner, which we have called "Chronicle of deaths foretold", and femicides with intra-family sexual violence, which we have called "Incest, sexual harassment and death". One death through execution and another through connection are reported, which are called "Killed by mistake" and "In the wrong place". Finally, the history of a sex worker is presented, which is called "Women with easy deaths". The victims were identified by means of a synthesis sentence that seemed to express the personal and social fragilities within which death was produced.

### **Chronicle of deaths foretold**

Two narratives of predictable deaths or intimate femicides perpetrated by partners are presented in this study. They followed long histories of assault and threats. Femicides perpetrated by an intimate partner represents a high proportion of this type of death in almost all regions of the world. In other words, they are a manifestation of the male domination that is historically present in all cultures (Taylor, Jasinski, 2011). Various authors have dedicated themselves to investigating femicides perpetrated by husbands, partners and ex-

partners: in these situations, there are usually reports of violence that gradually increases.

The first story relates to a thirty-year-old woman who lived on the periphery of Porto Alegre, and was murdered by her partner with whom she had had a relationship for six years and with whom she had had a daughter. The crime followed a long route of conflict and violence from the husband. In the witnesses' statements, the couple had an unstable relationship, with repeated break-ups. When the murder was committed, they were living together, although on various occasions she had sheltered in a neighbor's house to escape violence.

She was murdered on New Year's Eve, stabbed in the chest region; her body remained bleeding in the kitchen while neighbors and the aggressor called for help. There were three police records of injuries perpetrated during 2007, which did not cause any behavioral change in the aggressor. It was a predictable death, since one important risk factor for femicide is the existence of assault and death threats by the partner (Campbell et al., 2007).

Application of protective measures by institutions that provide care to women who are victims of violence is still a critical point. In a study conducted in Porto Alegre, women declared that they did not feel safe concerning the end of the assaults and threats because the aggressors were not charged and the police system, when put into action, does not respond to requests for protection as quickly and readily as required (Meneghel et al., in press; Meneghel et al., 2011).

The second death also related to a thirty-year-old woman, of lower middle class background but living with a partner of wealthy financial condition, whose occupation was connected with the judiciary system. They had a seven-month-old child, whose conception had not been desired by the father, who accused the woman of having become pregnant on purpose to trap him and ensure a share of his money.

Intimate femicide happens more frequently among poor migrant women from disfavored groups or races. However, it also happens among women of high social classes, motivated by the husband's jealousy and desire to possess the woman (sometimes the husband is older; at other times the woman wants a divorce or has had an affective involvement outside of the marriage), or in situations of disputes over assets (men who do not want to share their assets or pay alimony).

The situation reported here concerned a couple with an economic disparity and the husband did not want to share his assets and pay alimony to the daughter. According to statements from family members and friends, the husband used to

physically and psychologically abuse his partner and also threatened to kill her. He also called her a “stiff”, i.e. a corpse, an allusion to the desire for her death and a veiled threat. The wife feared for her life and had recently taken out a life insurance policy benefiting her mother. There was a history of several complaints of death threats registered with the police.

The husband was going to run for office as a city councilor and had run up debts from the campaign. He had to pay a service provider and asked his wife to make the payment because he was unable to drive. She parked the car on a public street, waiting for the creditor. She was speaking on her cell phone with her mother when she was approached. The mother heard her saying that she “had brought the money and had a small child”. The body was found gagged, arms tied behind her back and with three shots, two below her left armpit and one in the area of the heart.

The husband had an alibi for the time of the crime but, on his cell phone, there were calls to the murder suspects. Three men were indicted: the husband, as the instigator of the crime, and two executors. However, they were all declared innocent due to circumstantial evidence that disregarded the phone calls between the husband and the executors because the cell phone was far from the crime scene. The investigations were closed.

Femicide occurs more frequently in places where the State does not give guarantees and conditions of security for women who are being threatened. Shelter in halfway houses, a witness protection service, emplacement of protective measures and response to emergency calls are measures that should protect women in situations of violence and should reduce the chance of intimate femicides. This is one of the reasons why femicide can also be considered to be a State crime.

### **Incest, sexual harassment and death**

The following story is about the femicide of a 19-year-old teenager, who lived in Restinga, a poor neighborhood in the southern zone of Porto Alegre. She was murdered by her stepfather with whom she had been having sexual intercourse for the past three years. She died in the house that she lived in, thus showing that, as in other crimes of this nature, many young people are killed by people with whom they have (or should have) bonds of affection and trust (Guimarães, Villela, 2011).

The sexual intercourse between the young girl and her stepfather were unknown to the victim’s mother, the aggressor’s wife. This started when she was 16 years old, according to the statement by the accused himself, which despite the

alleged consent, constituted incestuous abuse given the teenager's low power of sexual negotiation.

At the crime scene, according to a witness, there were broken plates and misplaced objects, which suggests that the relationship they maintained was not consensual. In the aggressor's statements, he stated that he killed the girl because of jealousy, because he suspected that she was seeing another man, thus justifying the crime using the old argument of "passion" (Correa, 1981).

Statements by acquaintances indicated that the victim was constantly watched, and often imprisoned at home, since the stepfather would not let her leave the house. He would pick her up after school, as a means of watching her social conduct. According to her brother, "the father kept her on a short leash and sometimes beat her". The author of the crime had been married to the victim's mother for 17 years, thus suggesting that the sexual abuse may have begun during her childhood.

The fact that the young girl was becoming an adult with the possibility of having relationships outside the family, as well as having more chance to denounce the abuses and leave the situation, may have triggered the crime, which was already being premeditated, since the stepfather told his wife that he needed to buy a gun.

In this femicide, the patriarchal domination is clear, in which male control over women meant unrestricted power, including the right to sexually abuse children, keep watch over them, keep them under coercive control (Stark, 2007) and kill them if the "right" of possession is threatened (Saffioti, 2004). The murderer was indicted and his preventive arrest was decreed. Although generalizations should not be made, we noted that crimes involving children and minors were investigated more carefully and there was greater concern regarding impunity.

### **Execution and connection: women as vengeance material**

Most murders of women occur within the domestic arena, perpetrated by intimate partners or acquaintances. However, deaths in other contexts that have less often been investigated in Brazil need to be explored, including studying the increasing mortality of women as indirect victims of urban criminality (Pasinato, 2011).

The codes of honor of the patriarchate throughout history have placed women's protection as one of men's duties and, in cases of conflict, only men would fight each other. This rule meant that women would usually not be involved in settlement of accounts between men, even in very violent contexts.

Today, criminal organizations and networks, fed by patriarchal neoliberalism, do not share these codes of conduct and are governed by the principle of profitability. Thus, women's bodies become vengeance and payback material among men who belong to mafias, trafficking networks and other criminal organizations. Moreover, women are easier to find than men, since they take care of the family as well as have less chance to escape and hide (Carcedo, 2010). Therefore, new forms of femicide have appeared: execution of women, connection crimes and hate crimes in which women's bodies become "vengeance material".

### **Killed by mistake**

We will now tell the story of an 18-year-old black girl. She lived in one of the poorest municipalities of the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre, which is known as a dormitory city and is currently a territory governed by drug trafficking. Shy and quiet, she was a student and lived with her parents. She had a temporary job leafleting in the streets.

This crime was an execution in which the victim was murdered by mistake because she was mistaken for her sister-in-law, due to their physical similarity, since they were the same age and height, they both wore braided hair and, when the victim was killed, she was wearing clothes that she had borrowed from her sister-in-law.

She was waiting for a bus at a relatively quiet bus stop when a motorcycle with two men on it approached. They shot 11 times, mainly hitting her head and chest, in other words, they shot to kill. Twelve days before this murder, her brother had been shot to death. According to witness statements, it was a vengeance murder and the avengers would also eliminate his wife. The girl was executed by mistake when she was misidentified as her brother's wife.

This type of crime has happened in other areas and shows that a significant proportion of female victims are killed during actions targeting men involved with criminality (Biancarelli, 2006).

In the area where she lived, the law of silence prevails. Thus, few people took the risk of talking about the occurrence, which hampered the investigation. Two suspects were indicted, but one of them was killed and, some days later, the other "disappeared".

The death went unpunished and the "death by mistake" revealed that life is worth little in less privileged areas of big cities, where the predominant population is black, illiterate and poor, living from precarious jobs and dominated by drug trafficking, thus constituting a veritable social apartheid. Gangs, mafias and criminal organizations, as seen in Ciudad Juárez and other

places in Central America (Prieto-Carron et al., 2007; Lagarde, 2004; Monarrez Fragoso, 2002), revive the patriarchal hierarchy in which women and children are the most affected groups.

### **In the wrong place**

Femicides due to connection happen when women are killed because they are in the “line of fire” of a man who wants to kill another person. These are episodes in which girls or women die because they are trying to stop a crime against other women, regardless of the type of bond between the victim and the assaulter.

This is the reason why strongly armed unknown people burst into the usually humble and unprotected homes of poor communities and, without apparent reason, massacre women who are there, often surrounded by children, sick people and elderly people. (Carcedo, 2000, p.28)

The following narrative is about the death of a 26-year-old woman of brown skin and mixed racial descent, which occurred in a public street when she was riding pillion on her boyfriend’s motorcycle. They were targeted by several gun shots from a black Citroën, with unidentified license plates and occupants.

In a statement by the young woman’s mother, she said that her daughter lived with the young man but that she was against this relationship because he was not good company. She also said that the couple lived like gypsies, moving all the time, sleeping in motels and hideouts, because he had done something wrong. “My daughter died because she was in the wrong place, at the wrong time and, especially, with the wrong person.” The mother of the young man, in her statement, said that he was involved with drugs, did not have a job, had recently purchased his motorcycle and had already been arrested due to illegal possession of a weapon.

No additional information was obtained by the police when they visited the crime scene, or from conversations with the residents of the area. According to the inquiry, “no one saw anything”, and the conclusion was that “the young man was involved with narcotics and was probably a victim of settling of accounts, a common occurrence in the criminal underworld. On the other hand, the young woman was killed because she was with him that day”. No one was indicted.

Although the crime happened in a public street, the young woman died because she was in the “line of fire” of the young man. Thus, this death was classified as a connection. It is important to highlight that the police officers’ discourse

showed that they did not recognize executions as femicides, but as settling of accounts between gangs or drug traffickers, thus failing to see the gender vulnerability, in which women are treated as “vengeance material”.

### **Women with easy deaths**

Deaths of prostitutes exemplify the social division operated by the patriarchy between disposable women, who are the property of all men, and “family” women, who must be protected through the codes of honor.

Prostitutes present a risk sixty times greater than other women of being murdered, and there is little interest from society for elucidating these crimes. This is due, above all, to prejudice against the victims and lack of credibility of witnesses in these cases. Most of the murderers are clients who seek, through this act, to obtain power, money, sexual gratification, or some other type of satisfaction. By paying for sex offered by women who work as prostitutes, men begin to treat them as merchandise that they own, such that they are subject to their owner’s will, which can also include killing them (Salfati, 2012).

Female prostitution exposes women to risks, especially those who work on the streets. In addition to physical violence, abuses, rapes and thefts are common and these offenses may culminate in these women’s murder (Moreira, Monteiro, 2009).

The story reported here concerns a 21-year-old white woman, who was semi-illiterate and poor. She was working as a prostitute in order to meet her basic needs, since she had little chance of entering the job market, as happens to thousands of women who live on the peripheries of large Brazilian cities, which makes them hostages to commercial sexual exploitation.

She was working at a prostitution point in the Restinga neighborhood and disappeared in November 2006. The body was found two days later with signs of extreme violence. She was naked, with her hands on the ground and with her knees flexed, in a position described in the inquiry as “on all fours”. The body was supported by a steel cable tying her neck to a tree, and her anus and vagina were covered in blood with traces of assault. Analysis on the semen found in condoms near the corpse matched the assaulter’s.

Scenarios similar to this have been observed in murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, in which the bodies were disposed in ditches, dumps and wastelands, with signs of sexual violence and torture, some with their hands bound together and with signs of strangulation; and others with their bodies mutilated and insulting messages written on their skin (Prieto-Carron et al., 2007; Lagarde, 2004; Monarrez Fragoso, 2002).

The man who committed the femicide, a 20-year-old man, worked as a farm laborer close to the place where the murder took place. After the crime, he mentioned to his friends that he needed to leave town because he “had done something wrong, killing a little whore on the road”.

He was a regular client of prostitutes in the area, including of the one he killed. He denied the accusations, stating that he was not the perpetrator of the murder and was not living in the neighborhood when the crime happened. He mentioned that, when he lived in Porto Alegre, he was a neighbor of the murdered woman and had had encounters with prostitutes in the neighborhood, but denied involvement with the victim.

The police was looking for the accused when he left town. However, he already had an arrest warrant and an accusation of rape, thus showing recidivism in this type of crime. He was arrested in a municipality in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, but remains in freedom “providing services” to the community as payment for his sentence.

### **Final remarks**

The present study made it possible to discuss stories that were categorized as different types of femicide. This study also denounces misogynous violence whose perpetrators threaten, hurt and kill, but often remain unpunished.

One of the greatest challenges for studies on femicides in Brazil is the lack of official data, which prevents a view of the contexts and situations in which these femicides occur, as stated by Vania Pasinato (2011). We would add that the barriers include non-classification of femicide in the law, as well as its categorization as a common crime, rather than a heinous crime, as demanded by some feminists, considering that it represents veritable genocide of women. Non-classification of this offense means that it remains veiled and many such crimes remain unpunished, especially when the women are “nobodies”.

Despite advances in studies over recent years, deaths of women through homicide are still an invisible problem within society. The media and social institutions, even those that act against violence, reproduce the patriarchal order and downplay these deaths, blaming the victims themselves, through claiming that they were dressed improperly or were in places prohibited to their gender or in these places at prohibited times; or that they provoked the assaulter, by triggering jealousy or asking for a divorce; or that they fought back (women are also violent); or that they denounced the perpetrator to the police.

These women can also be disqualified because they live at other people’s expense, are negligent towards their children, work in the sex trade, use drugs or even are “vain”, thus presenting, from the patriarchal point of view,

indefensible conduct. Finally, there is the resource of mobilizing public opinion in sympathy towards the assaulter, emphasizing the role of father and provider and the feelings that arose through being betrayed or abandoned, thereby constructing the defense of so-called “crimes of passion” through argumentation and discourse (Correa, 1981).

One last issue that deserves to be narrated concerns the feelings of the research team. Working with female deaths due to aggression that happened in the municipality of Porto Alegre – most of them femicides – deeply mobilized the group’s feelings. Our position is not neutral but, rather, one that militates towards equality of women’s rights. Thus, it was difficult to contain our indignation when walking down this path and observing occurrences of such outrageous and cruel deaths, many of them already foretold and many of them avoidable. We believe, however, that by retelling these stories, we are playing the role of the narrator who does not want their memory to be lost, who uses narratives to denounce these occurrences and call for order, so as to bring intervention and do justice. There is a need to name what happened and report the violence in order to confront state impunity, as stated by Dora Munévar (2012).

We understand that these stories are singular and not generalizable, although they can be found everywhere where women are subjected to gender inequalities (Schraiber et al., 2007). They have the objective of arousing concern among social and health workers for these poor, precarious and disposable lives; naked lives as they were termed by Giorgio Agambem (2007). Thus, the findings of this study are intended to serve to denounce the deplorable conditions under which many women are living (or surviving), which makes them susceptible to murder simply through being women.

### **Collaborators**

The authors Stela Nazareth Meneghel, Roger Flores Ceccon and Lilian Zielke Hesler participated equally in elaboration, discussion, writing and revision of the paper. Ane Freitas Margarites, Stefania Rosa da Silva and Valmir Dorn Vasconcelos took part in the data gathering, discussion and text revision.

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