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Femicide: A Glance through Qualitative Lenses

This year, the study of femicide took a leap forward with a pioneering Special Issue on femicide in a sociological journal (Marcuello-Servós et al. 2016). Now we are taking that initiative one stage further by examining for the first time qualitative so-

ciological approaches to femicide in one collection. A forerunner to this Special Issue on *Researching Femicide from a Qualitative Perspective* is an article published in *Qualitative Sociology Review* on femicide survivor narratives among migrant women (Weil 2016a).

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The study of femicide, as opposed to the study of domestic violence, had not been "visible" until recently (Weil 2016b). In some countries, it still remains invisible. However, in general, the world is becoming more aware of issues of femicide, and organizations such as ACUNS (Academic Council on the United Nations System) and COST (European Cooperation of Science and Technology), as well as NGOs, such as WAVE (Women against Violence), EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality), EWL (European Women's Lobby), and others, have rallied round to combat the phenomenon.

Where femicide has been studied scientifically, it has been almost exclusively researched by means of a quantitative methodology. The World Health Organization (2012) highlighted the difficulty and challenge in collecting correct data on femicide as in many countries police and medical data-collection systems often do not have the necessary information or do not report the victim-perpetrator relationship or the motives for the homicide.

In one exceptional qualitative study, 30 women aged 17-54, who had survived an attempted homicide by an intimate partner, were interviewed. The in-depth interviews were conducted in six cities, as part of an 11-city case-control study to determine the risk factors of actual and attempted intimate partner femicide (Nicolaidis et al. 2003). Victims participated in an audiotaped, semi-structured, in-depth interviews of 30- to 90-minute duration. The interview enabled women to describe, in their own words, their relationship with the partner who had attempted to kill them and their perceptions of the activities and events that had led up to the

attempt (Nicolaidis et al. 2003:2). Qualitative studies of femicide in non-Western countries are rarer. There are numerous qualitative studies of African women who have survived domestic violence, but knowledge of the traumas of African women femicide survivors, or qualitative descriptions of male murderers' narratives, are almost non-existent (Weil 2016a).

This Special Issue on *Researching Femicide from a Qualitative Perspective* opens up new vistas in the study of femicide. The collection contains for the first time an article on femicide (as opposed to domestic violence) in Iceland (Freydís Jóna Freysteinsdóttir), and on the other side of the world, in Ecuador (Santiago Boira, Lucia Tomas-Aragones, and Nury Rivera). In the Special Issue, there is a pioneering attempt to develop a qualitative interview tool for the study of femicide (Anita Nudelman, Santiago Boira, Tina [Tiko] Tsomaia, Ecaterina Balica, and Sopio Tabagua). While usually the study of femicide implies research into women, one article suggests focusing on masculinity (James W. Messerschmidt), while another proposes a full-scale study of children, who are left as orphans in the Republic of Cyprus after their mothers have been killed in intimate partner femicides (IPF) during the period 2001-2014 (Andreas Kapardis, Anna Constanza Baldry, and Maria Konstantinou). As Kapardis, Baldry, and Konstantinou point out, children bereaved by the death of a mother at the hands of a father, who is most likely to be imprisoned or to have committed suicide, in effect lose both parents, but the children are often forgotten by the authorities and their families in the midst of the turmoil. Finally, nobody to date has thought

of studying the “femme fatale” as an object of femicide (Naomi Segal). The issue closes with an article explaining the difficulties with quantitative methodology in studying femicide, and the possible advantages of utilizing qualitative methodology (Shalva Weil). The Special Issue produces these highly original contributions on the study of femicide utilizing qualitative methods, or combining qualitative and quantitative methods to produce holistic accounts of heinous killings of women. It brings together scholars who have studied males, and not just females, as well as researchers who have looked at femicide in texts, as well as in narratives. The papers report from a wide variety of countries in which femicide is not normally discussed.

Femicide and Its Definition

It is difficult to produce exact definitions of femicide (cf. Corradi et al. 2016), but usually it is considered to be the murder of women because they are women. Recently, femicide has also included the murder of girls because they might have grown up to be women (Weil and Mitra 2016). The Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe 2011) is the first legally binding instrument to create “a comprehensive legal framework and approach to combat violence against women” (see: Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe 2016:23), but it is focused on preventing domestic violence, protecting victims, and prosecuting perpetrators, and does not necessarily address itself to the final outcome of violence against women, namely, femicide. The United Nations Human Rights Council (2012), when discussing the definition of femicide,

referred also to female infanticide, dowry-deaths, clandestine abortions, honor killings, maternal mortality, and deaths arising from harmful practices or neglect of women and girls.

The Vienna Declaration (2013) dealt specifically with femicide and produced a very wide definition of the phenomenon. The term “femicide” is understood as: 1) the murder of women as a result of domestic violence/intimate partner violence, 2) the torture and misogynist slaying of women, 3) killing of women and girls in the name of “honor,” 4) targeted killing of women and girls in the context of armed conflict, 5) dowry-related killings of women and girls, 6) killing of women and girls because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, 7) the killing of aboriginal and indigenous women and girls because of their gender, 8) female infanticide and gender-based sex selection femicide, 9) genital mutilation related femicide, 10) accusations of witchcraft, and 11) other femicides connected with gangs, organized crime, drug dealers, human trafficking, and the proliferation of small arms (Laurent, Platzer, and Idomir 2013).

Femicide has been studied in different situations and typologies have been produced to include intimate partner violence, stranger murder, so-called “honor” killings, dowry marriage murders, and more. In its original formulation, in the first anthology published on femicide (Radford and Russell 1992:3), femicide is defined as “the misogynous killing of women by men” to be investigated “in the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society.” The murder takes place against a background of hate and contempt

of women. A fascinating question is whether the “femme fatale” can be considered as a femicide, since it is often understood that the woman herself invites her own murder, either by loving her man too little or too much. Nevertheless, she is in fact the primary victim of male violence. As Segal shows in her article in this volume, “In the French confessional narrative, the woman is always somehow at fault for the protagonist’s failure...she dies and he lives to tell the tale, recounting it to another man who listens and absolves.” Segal compares the femme fatale as a form of femicide as it is portrayed in three French fictions from the 18th to the 20th centuries—Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* (1753), Mérimée’s *Carmen* (1845), and Gide’s *L’Immoraliste* (1902). She then compares the significance of the life and death of Princess Diana with these fictional examples of femicide. In a fascinating collective, reflexive genre, Segal asks how did our love for her bring on her violent death.

The definitions that have been proposed by researchers and activists affect the way the phenomenon has been studied. In Iceland, a country in which femicide has never been studied before, the researcher defined femicide as the murder of a woman by a partner, former partner, or a murder perpetrated because of passion. According to this definition, 11 femicide cases of women and girls killed during the years 1986-2015 were considered out of 16 femicides carried out during this time period. The data were analyzed qualitatively by means of court verdicts and media reports. Sexually-related femicide cases were prominent. Alcohol consumption was found to be a factor in all partner femicide cases, in addition to the

low socio-economic status of perpetrator and victim, and the murder was associated with patriarchal views. In former partner femicide cases, jealousy and possessiveness were found to be major themes, but not alcohol consumption. It is doubtful that these conclusions could have been reached if quantitative analysis alone would have been used.

In addition, while masculinity has been studied in its own right, and while recently femicide has been more widely examined, the obvious relationship between the two has virtually been ignored in femicide studies to date. Messerschmidt examines Raewyn Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” and more recent discussions of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. He suggests the ways dominant, dominating, and positive masculinities can be applied to two types of femicide: intimate partner femicide and “honor” femicides. This kind of insights could not have been reached by mere quantitative analyses.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research into femicide is often more difficult to carry out than a pure quantitative study, not least because the victims of femicide are not there to tell the tale. Life-histories of victims, as told by the victims themselves, are out of the question. The qualitative researcher, therefore, has to rely on survivor narratives or life-histories of survivors, who are difficult to locate and to gain acquiescence to interview (Weil 2016a), or has to interview family members, or even perpetrators. Even in the case of interviewing, what is needed is

a highly skilled craft requiring a repertoire of specialized tasks and the exertion of personal judgment (Kvale 2006). Despite these obstacles, qualitative research into femicide can still have advantages (Shalva Weil).

In the Cyprus study, Kapardis, Baldry, and Konstantinou stated the conditions under which interviews with orphans of IPF were conducted. A precondition was that the interviewer succeeded in putting an orphan at ease, establishing rapport and gaining his/her trust. The interview therefore took place at a site of the orphan's choice under conditions an orphan felt comfortable. Both a reference letter from the University of Cyprus was provided at the meetings to verify the interviewer's identity, as well as an information sheet and an informed consent form for data confidentiality and protection, and description of the content of study were provided. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and none of the orphans dropped out. A total of 14 orphans from eight femicides were interviewed. Ethical approval for the research had been obtained at a European level by the project coordinator.

An attempt to produce a standardized interview tool to study qualitative aspects of femicide has been made by a group of researchers led by Nudelman, who participated in Working Group 3 meetings on "Culture" established by the COST Action IS1206 meeting on "Femicide across Europe."¹ In

¹ The first author, S. Weil, is the Chair of the COST Action IS1206 "Femicide across Europe"; the second author, C. Kouta, is the Chair of the Working Group 3 on "Culture" within the Action.

their article in this Special Issue, they trace the way they developed a qualitative in-depth tool to interview immigrant/displaced women or women from cultural minorities, and to record the experiences of survivors of attempted femicide. The guide, the first of its kind, was designed to be flexible enough to allow for culture adaptation, the immigration processes, and the specific contexts in the host countries in Europe. Cultural and gender codes and the background in a country of origin (rural or urban, different levels of education, and so on) were given special consideration. They piloted the tool among immigrant femicide survivors: first in Spain, later in Romania, and finally in Georgia, focusing on internally displaced people. Then they analyzed the feedback from the different countries, which led to a refined and improved version of the interview guide. The hope of the authors is to produce a standardized interview guide, which could be adapted to local socio-cultural contexts, and enable further qualitative comparative studies across Europe.

Boira and colleagues' research in the province of Imbabura, Ecuador, involved two major qualitative tools: interviews and focus groups. Their study, based on the participation of 61 individuals, reported in this Special Issue on eight interviews with qualified experts and seven focus groups made up of professionals from the field of social and public services. The study comprises: a) the characterization of the dynamic of violence and risk of femicide; b) the analysis of the microsystem in relation to the family, neighbors, and professionals; c) an examination of the institutional response; and d) the assessment of the patriarchal culture, the role of the

church, and indigenism. The results point to the permanence of a naturalized, chauvinistic culture, the lack of an effective network of resources to support victims, and a rigid administrative structure.

Policy and Research Implications

Policy-makers are called upon in this Special Issue to commission qualitative, as well as quantitative studies of femicide (Shalva Weil).

The Ecuador study showed that victims have little confidence in public institutions, rates of reporting and prosecuting cases of violence are very low, and there is a perception that the aggressors are able to act with impunity, increasing the risk of severe violence and femicide.

The Cyprus study showed what its authors called "the tragic inability of the authorities" to heed numerous warning signs and threats-to-kill by the offender and so avert such murders. The orphans who are the victims of intimate partner femicides suffer psychological and psychiatric consequences, social and individual stigma, and are embroiled in complicated bureaucratic custody issues. Mostly they are "forgotten." Kapardis, Baldry, and Konstantinou call for better measures for lethal domestic violence prevention and better support of the orphans involved.

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The Icelandic case shows that it is important to educate young people about the risks of violence when sex takes place under the influence of heavy alcohol intake.

There are also research implications in the qualitative study of femicide. While the quantitative study of femicide is difficult, the face-to-face qualitative study of femicide is a challenge. That is why some researchers opt for media and court reports.

Ethical considerations are important and each case has to be examined carefully. Ethical clearance has to be obtained from university or other authorities, as well as from the people who are the objects of study.

It is the hope of these co-authors that, now that the first Special Issue on qualitative approaches to femicide has appeared, more researchers will realize the pertinence of qualitative methods and carry out legitimate research in a field which has been neglected until today.

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