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## FEMICIDE IN THE AMERICAS

Daniella Hernández

Femicide has no borders, affecting women on a global scale, however, in the past twenty years, it has become especially prevalent in Latin America. Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman note that the first cases of femicide in Latin America were recorded in the early 1990's in Mexico (2010). The passing of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) in 1993 created many border jobs specifically targeted to hire women in the maquiladoras because of their supposed ability to assemble parts with their "small hands" (Nauman 951). After the expansion of the maquiladoras, the number of women in the workforce doubled, making women more than 80% of the population working in these assembly lines (Nauman 950-1). Additionally, "there is a perception that women are generally 'supplementary wage-earners' whose income is either extraneous to that of the household--just for luxuries-- or it merely complements that of the male head" which devalues women in their work and as people. (Nauman 951). It is, in part, because of attitudes such as these that so many women are victims of femicide in spaces of rapid economic change.

Femicide has continued to rise and is now prevalent in other Latin American countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. According to Jennings, femicide is not just the "murder of a woman or women but also to a system in which women are targeted for various forms of violence because they are women" (Jennings 344). Furthermore, its heinous nature sets femicide apart from other forms of violence. Other defining characteristics of femicide include "the disappearance, torture, rape, mutilation and murder of hundreds of young women" (Jennings 343). Femicide is a violent act towards women with a purpose that is endorsed on a political and institutional level due to the fact that it has not ceased as a social problem.

This paper examines the contributing factors that lead to femicide in Latin America as well as the related crisis of transfemicide. An extensive literature search was conducted in which three main factors were identified. The factors are (1) impunity, (2) sexism and (3) post-civil war effects. These factors highlight the complex nature of femicide in Latin America. Impunity allows for individuals to get away with committing

crimes and avoid being held accountable for their actions which is unfortunately all too prevalent in many countries in Latin America, especially those affected by the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s.

This culture of impunity in many Latin American countries paves the way for crimes such as femicide to go unpunished and uninvestigated. In most cases, impunity was a direct effect of sexism where the people in power, usually in the government or in the military were males. Sexism is a patriarchal belief that males are superior to females and thus abide by strict, Christian-Judeo gender roles. The same men with patriarchal mentalities were in charge of armies during the civil wars of the late twentieth century. They trained the men how to kill and aided them with the necessary resources to execute their slaughters which were later used on women. Femicide also includes the killing of transwomen, better known as transfemicide. Christian-Judeo values influenced the way in which many people treated transwomen. Transphobia is what ultimately took the lives of many transwomen via harassment, assault, and murder who were delegitimized not only as being women, but also as being human.

## **Methods**

I conducted a literature review on femicide in Latin America by using databases such as Sociological Abstracts, Project MUSE, Gender Watch, and ERIC, and searches of journals such as *Aztlán* and *Latino Studies*. My initial keywords included “femicide”, “hate crimes” and “Latin America”. However, this led to articles that did not specifically utilize the word femicide or did not treat female homicide as a separate issue. I then added keywords such as “gendered violence” and “misogyny” which led to more specific articles on violence against women. My research became a collection of primary and secondary data collection. Several of the articles included personal stories and testimonies of family members who had lost a daughter, sister, or friend to femicide in Latin America.

From my initial searches, I gathered ten journal articles in which I found the four recurring themes. This helped guide and narrow my direction for my research further. However, I found that news articles or interviews were the most effective in giving insight to what femicide genuinely felt like for many communities affected by the violence. Reading about femicide in a scholarly journal article as secondary data was more passive and detached. News reports and interviews gave more insight into the depth of the issue and stated direct causes of femicide such as impunity. I found this method most effective because it asked the witnesses of femicide to recount their stories which were then supported by scholarly work.

I turned to internet to search for various newspapers in Latin America and found personal narratives and testimonies. I conducted this search by using the Spanish word

“feminicidio” which generated several newspaper articles about incidents of femicide in Latin America. A total of 16 articles were used in this project; the articles used different methods such as qualitative, quantitative, testimonies, secondary and primary data. Most of the articles were in English and a few were in Spanish from scholars who resided in these countries and conducted research themselves on femicide and/or gendered violence. The authors of the articles came from different disciplines such as Political Science, Justice studies, Civil Rights studies, Sociology, Economics, Women’s studies, and Women’s History which offered an interdisciplinary and diverse perspective on femicide in Latin America. Overall, the articles ranged in publication dates from 1999 to 2017 to offer background on the history that influences femicide as well as current information that reveals why it continues to occur in present day.

### **Impunity**

Impunity is the lack of being held accountable or punished for harmful actions and is by far the largest cause of this self-perpetuating cycle of violence in regard to femicide. Many of the attackers were men who in one way or another had significant political power and could evade being held accountable for their actions. Many of the victims of these abuses never had the courage to report the crimes because they that authorities seldom pursued the cases and that justice was seldom served.

During Guatemala’s 36 year long civil war, “government troops under Rios Montt’s command massacred 1,771 people and forcibly displaced at least 29,000” (Patterson-Markowitz et al. 82). This resulted in a total 200,000 people being killed during the war. Of these, “1,445 case of rape and sexual violence against Maya-Ixil women” were classified as genocide (Patterson-Markowitz et al. 83). 100,000 indigenous women were wrongfully accused of collaborating with the guerrillas and many were raped as part of a war tactic to terrorize their ethnic communities (Patterson-Markowitz et al. 83). Guatemala’s former president Colom, had promised in 2008 to “declassify and make public all military archives relating to the conflict” of all the killings under General Rios Montt but nothing was ever accomplished (“Amnesty Report: Guatemala 2011” 3).

Guatemala is known as “killer’s paradise” for the fact that impunity is so common that many of the murderers are able to avoid being sentenced, let alone prosecuted (Bellino 7). In Guatemala specifically, “state complicity in the crime is revealed by the investigator’s inability or unwillingness to protect women’s rights and conduct comprehensive investigations to punish violators of those rights”, this is what ultimately results in “less than 2 percent” of the “nearly 700 reports of sexual violence each month” where a suspect is identified and charged (Bellino 6). That means that only 14 out of the 700 reports are able to identify a suspect—a perpetrator of femicide. To correctly analyze impunity, we must critically observe the population that is being targeted. In the cases of

femicide in most of Latin America, it is the lower socio-economic class, dark skinned women who are being murdered and tortured by men. Femicide is intersectional and specifically seeks to target the most disenfranchised members of society. The killers are not targeting the light skinned, wealthy women of the country, they target the marginalized because they know that the government will not persecute the perpetrators. Historically, indigenous people have been wrongfully targeted for various forms of violence. The United States of America would not be one of the world “superpowers” without the same violence that was directed towards the indigenous people in this land.

Ogrodnik and Borzutzky state that “when the state fails to hold the perpetrators accountable, impunity not only intensifies the subordination and powerlessness of the targets of violence, but also sends a message to society that male violence against women is both acceptable and inevitable” (60). In Guatemala this has created a toxic culture in which some men believe that the killing of women is normal. Individuals become desensitized to this form of violence which allows for the dehumanization of women and justifies their mass killings.

### **Sexism**

Sexism was another leading cause for femicide and transfemicide which was also associated with impunity. The culture of sexism allows for the rape and violence against women. In her study of violence in Guatemala, Cindy Forster describes how women are viewed by society after they have been raped. In these cases, the women who were raped, were abandoned by their husbands, claiming they did not want “her dishonor” (Forster 61). She goes on to also state that “before the rape the husband’s power in his marriage was probably secure, not it was shattered” (Forster 61). It is ideologies such as these that have contributed to a negative treatment of women who have fallen victims to sexual violence.

Sexism is deeply rooted in Catholicism and its definitions of values, morals, and ethics. The concept of *mala mujer* or bad woman, is one that emerged through the influence of Roman Catholicism in the Americas. This concept shames any woman who is sexually liberated, sentencing them to public shame, humiliation, and even dehumanization. “The concept of *mala mujer* serves as a paradigm for unequal gender relations and works as the inverse of sexism, since promiscuous men were a class apart from ‘fallen women’” (Forster 61). The Catholic church defined women as “loose” who were sexually liberated beings and as a result, when they were raped by an individual, courts would not allow for their cases to be taken seriously, rather their supposed “promiscuity” was seen as a valid reason to disregard them altogether (Forster 61).

In Guatemala, several cases of rape were reported by women but no justice was ever reached. It has been stated that in Guatemala, a woman’s social status will weigh

heavily on their social mobility (Forster 56). When people made their cases public, the rest of the towns would learn that a woman had been raped and her reputation as well as social status perished. Even a woman who was wealthy could lose it all once it was learned that she had been sexually abused as was the case in San Marcos, Guatemala. Other forms of explicit sexism were the instances in which a woman was ostracized for having abortions of unwanted children as a result of rape but the men were never held accountable for raping them and impregnating them to begin with (Forster 66).

Bellino makes a point that “after the peace accords, women had increased opportunities to become socially and politically engaged, but femicide is meant to put women back in their (domestic) place” and that machismo is “rooted in official policy” (Bellino 7). Because of the high rates of femicide, many of the women are forced to stay at home for fear of being killed as soon as they leave their homes. This traps them behind the walls of their homes and does not let them become integrated members of society. This also hinders their possibilities of going to school and pursuing higher education; they are not able to get jobs either because they are forced to stay at home. Femicide interrupts their lives and spins it upside down, making the woman a powerless being in society.

In cases such as that of Norma, who was a survivor of an attempted femicide in El Salvador, she “ran to safety with her ant and uncle, changed her number, and never left the house” (Fleming 1). Her husband is a policeman in El Salvador and not even his job was able to provide security for her and their family. He filed a report and wanted justice but neighboring gangs threatened their children which is what led Norma to flee to Mexico in hopes of being able to reach the U.S. Lastly known, she was held at a detention facility in the U.S. meanwhile her family in El Salvador are still being threatened by gangs (Fleming 1).

### **Post-Civil War Effects**

The civil war in Guatemala drafted many men and simultaneously equipped them with the resources and ability to use weapons and tactics to kill others. These practices unfortunately stayed with the men of Guatemala who in turn used their training on the women (Bellino 2010). In Guatemala’s 36-year civil war (1960-1996), under General Rios Montt 200,000 Guatemalans were killed, mostly indigenous Guatemalans (Ogrodnik Borzutzky, 57). Because of political and military leaders such as Rios Montt, “post war Guatemala is plagued by new forms of violence caused by former military and police members, paramilitary and guerrilla forces, and street gangs” (Ogrodnik Borzutzky, 57).

Rios Montt was found guilty of genocide only recently in 2013. A few days later, the government changed their stance and overturned the verdict and two years later, stated that he was in poor health and thus could not attend the retrial. He was released of

the charges of genocide because the court ruled that at the time he committed the crime, it was not classified as genocide yet under Guatemalan law. They would resume hearings in early 2016 behind closed doors. Ultimately, Rios Montt was tried but not sentenced because of his dementia. It is crimes like these that go unpunished which allows for the further perpetuation of injustices in countries throughout Central American countries that experienced civil wars in the late twentieth century (“Guatemala Court: Former Dictator Can Be Tried for Genocide – but Not Sentenced” 1).

Bellino further proposed the argument that the aftermath of the civil war in Guatemala was what ultimately led to so much violence. She writes, “they were equipped with resources and strategies to commit mass atrocities”, which resulted in “the confluence of military strategies for victimization and the politics of the war’s aftermath that have produced the tragedy of feminicide” (7). By aiding recruits with the strategies and resources necessary to be able to kill others, they were indirectly teaching the men how to efficiently execute violence against women. Given the known impunity that was prevalent during the civil war it is not surprising that it continued after the war and that many recruits later used that leverage to get away with femicide.

The civil war had lasting effects on the people of Guatemala in the sense that this was ultimately what paved the way for gender norms to be more strongly enforced. Sexism is also closely related to the lasting effects of the civil wars. An example is that “unstable and vulnerable post-civil war circumstances as predisposing heads of household ‘to experience sexual and domestic violence as well as stigmatization.’ The surge in violence is also viewed as a backlash against women’s increasing presence in the public sphere” (Chazaro et al. 7). The aftermath of the civil war left many women as the heads of households as many of the men were either killed in the war or fled to the U.S. in search of job opportunities which caused a disruption in already established expectancies of women and their life duties.

### **Transphobia**

Transphobia is the outward prejudice and discrimination towards transsexual and transgender people. Too often, when a trans individual is victim to either travesticidios or transfemincidios, the case will often go uninvestigated due to the fact that the government will not use their chosen name, but rather their birth name which often results in not being identified by their friends or relatives (Radi and Sarda- Chandiramani 6). Due to the fact that the majoritarian view in most countries in Latin America only accept binary, cisgender, heterosexual individuals, often times, “Las travestis y mujeres trans suelen ser recibidas más como sospechosas que como denunciantes o testigos” (Radi and Sarda-Chandiramani 6).

Even more so, this occurs most often in cases where the individual is a prostitute because of the stigma that comes with their profession. Yet even when the women have been able to find other employment, sexism and patriarchy is so embedded in society that unfortunately, the blame often goes onto the victim for the sole purpose of them being themselves. “La importancia y gravedad de estos crímenes tiende a ser minimizada y explicada por la identidad de género y/o fuente de ingresos de las víctimas, atribuyendo a ellas la responsabilidad por sus propias muertes” (Radi and Sarda- Chandiramani 5). Radi and Sarda-Chandiramani define transfemicide as “la expresión más visible y final de una cadena de violencias estructurales que responden a un sistema cultural, social, político y económico vertebrado por la división binaria excluyente entre los géneros” (4).

Many violent hate crimes against transwomen have also taken place in El Salvador. Because of high gang activity and high rates of impunity, many transwomen are being killed. Transwoman and human rights activist, Karla Avelar states that “these murders share several common denominators, including the patterns of violence, hate and persecution that underscore the extreme vulnerability that LGBTI people face in El Salvador” (Rodriguez and Colotta). Avelar stated that local gangs have forced her to escape at least six times in the last two years because of threats she has received as well as monetary demands (Renteria 2).

Many of the countries in Latin America are predominantly Catholic or Evangelical Protestant with followers who also deeply believe in rigid gender norms. In the country of Colombia for example, Cantillo Barrios states that one of the causes of femicide is due to “la dominación masculina, reforzado por la cultura judeocristiana” which constructs “roles tradicionales masculinos y femeninos a los cuales se les asigna significados y valores distintos y jerarquizados” (3). By establishing these rigid gender norms, and assigning characteristics to each gender, there is little room left for people who believe in these Judeo-Christian values to accept the fact that people do not always identify with their assigned gender at birth. This is what ultimately paves the way for homophobia and transphobia.

According to the Report on Human Rights Conditions of Transgender Women in Mexico, the Catholic Church has failed to “support increased rights for women and has actively campaigned against rights for LGBT people” (22). The same report stated that Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan from Mexico “denounced same-sex marriage, saying it would be like considering ‘cockroaches’ part of the family” (22). As a result of transphobia, communities are socialized to grow in intolerance for these individuals on the sole reason of their gender identity. When a public figure such as Cardinal Lozano Barragan takes the liberty to make such statements, many followers of the church will take his words at face value. Many of the countries in Latin America have a strong



Catholic influence which dictates the way that people view and treat each other not only in their countries of origin but also when they migrate to other countries such as the U.S.

### **Conclusion**

Femicide and transfemicide is a toxic social problem that continues to occur today. It is blatant discrimination towards women which hinders their advancement in society. This paper explored four major themes identified in articles from a variety of disciplines. The articles addressed femicide as a whole across countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Impunity is what ultimately allowed many individuals to get away with murdering and desecrating the bodies of many of the women. The culture of impunity was closely linked to that of sexism which consists of a patriarchal notion that men are to be the sole bread winners of the house and the head of the household, leaving women in subordinate roles in society, often times this means staying at home to be the primary caregiver of children and performing other household duties. It was found that the effects of civil wars often times perpetuated these forms of violence and often normalized the ways in which many of the men killed women. Lastly, I examined how all of those factors came together to explain how transphobia and sexism are related. The mixture of impunity, sexism, and post-civil war effects have made cisgender and transgender working class and poor women vulnerable throughout the Americas.

Moving forward, it is important to continue to fund and expand on this research. Many of the crimes that were reported did not find or sanction the perpetrator of the crimes and too often, many people did not have the courage to self-report due to the high impunity rates. In some countries today, police officers are failing at doing their job or also being threatened if they try to find justice for the victims. Women throughout the Americas are fighting back, in our research, activism and advocacy, we can also fight to support them.

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