

Why not femicide? The cultural politics of naming gender-based killing of women in the U.S.

Abstract:

Second-wave feminism in the U.S. was characterized by creating an expansive definition of violence that brought issues like sexual and domestic violence into public discourse. Yet, despite the term “femicide” being coined in the United States during this same period of heightened feminist mobilization, it failed to gain traction as a meaningful analytical category for understanding lethal gender-based violence in the U.S. Drawing on archival data from Berkeley’s Clearinghouse on Femicide, this paper analyzes the competing categories and political disputes that prevented both the term and the phenomena from becoming central to U.S. feminist and public discourse on violence against women.

Keywords: gender-based violence, femicide

Introduction

The term *femicide* refers to the killing of females for being female. It is broadly understood as a political hate crime against women and girls, though some discussions have expanded it to include feminized subjects¹. Over the past decades, international organizations have promoted the use of “femicide” as a global indicator to measure lethal violence against women, following legislation and institutionalization of the term in countries like Mexico and Brazil. Despite this global diffusion—and the fact that it was coined in the U.S.—*femicide* remains largely absent from public discourse in the U.S., except when it is used to characterize the violence that happens outside of the U.S.¹

This absence can be interpreted in two ways: either this type of crime is presumed not to occur in the U.S., or it reflects deeper struggles around how such violence is named

¹ The term femicide appears in U.S. public discourse to refer to gender violence happening in the Global South, specially in reference to drivers of immigration in Central America or characterization of political regimes such as Cuba and Venezuela. The term appears in Congressional Hearings as part of security issues or assistance. See (Congress.gov 2007a; 2007b; 2019; 2020; 2021)

and interpreted. The latter scenario points to a meaning-making problem: the coinage, recognition, and measurement of femicide are not merely quantification or legal matters, but issues of knowledge production and cultural resonance.

As Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) argue, social problems do not gain visibility solely because of their factual occurrence or harmful characteristics. Rather, they emerge through processes of collective definition, meaning-making, and competition for public attention. Their salience depends on factors such as the availability of public attention, the resonance of their interpretive frames (Snow and Burke 1986), and the competition with other social issues for visibility. In this sense, social problems are best understood as competing categories whose legitimacy and urgency are negotiated in relation to one another.

This framing allows us to reconsider the absence of *femicide* in U.S. discourse. Rather than interpreting it as evidence of the phenomenon's nonexistence, I argue it should be understood as the outcome of competing knowledge projects. These dynamics began with the knowledge project initiated by second-wave Feminists in the 1970s and have continued through ongoing political struggles over the boundaries and definitions of gender-based violence (Frazer and Hutchings 2020).

Expanding the definition of violence: dominance and anti-violence feminist knowledge project

As part of second-wave feminism, U.S. feminists engaged in a knowledge project aimed at expanding the definition of violence against women. This effort redefined previously normalized acts—such as harassment, battering, and rape—as harms contributing to gender inequality.

During this feminist momentum, several new categories emerged to occupy the attention space of social problems. Some became institutionalized through legal mechanisms, while others gained cultural traction as part of a broader feminist repertoire against patriarchy and sexism. Some of the successful categories that expanded the definition of violence against women were established through a civil rights framework, allowing for its recognition to be

made as a matter of discrimination rather than violence (Reynolds 2022; Saguy 2000). In contrast, some others were framed as violent crimes to be dealt with through the criminal justice system (Jackson 2015; Matthews 2005). Feminists approached violence against women from two overlapping but distinct paradigms: dominance and anti-violence. Together, they helped expand the spectrum of what counted as violence—from symbolic representations of sexism to the killing of women—often using testimonies to convey how these various forms of violence shaped women's lives.

The 1970s saw the coinage of *marital rape*, destabilizing the idea that marriage gave unrestricted access to men of woman's bodies (Uggen et al. 2021); *sexual harassment* was coined and introduced into legal frameworks regulating workplace and educational environment relationships in the mid 70s through the use of legal ambiguities to claim it as a form of discrimination (Uggen et al. 2021; Reynolds 2022); *domestic violence* and *wife-battering* became key to the dispute of what constituted a public issue (Sweet 2021; Goodmark 2022; Schechter 1982), and *rape* became the central category occupying the space of attention in the fight against violence against women (Matthews 2005). The success of these categories depended on contingent collaborations between liberal and radical feminists, as well as on unlikely coalitions with conservatives concerned with preserving family values and sexual morality (Cooper 2019; Whittier 2018).

The expansion of the definition of violence gave rise to tensions within the feminist movement. Dominance feminists, who were constituted by mostly white feminists, conceptualized violence as male dominance enacted through sexuality. Under this view, all heterosexual, patriarchal institutions—including cultural representations—were implicated and understood as violence. Although they diagnosed dominance and inequality as structural, they often relied on the law and state power to punish individual men (Fischer

2022). In contrast, anti-violence feminists focused on structural violence without equating cultural representations with violence itself. They foregrounded state violence and emphasized intersectional analysis, attentive to the ways race, class, and sexuality shaped women's experiences.

Though these differences are now clearly delineated in retrospect, at the time the distinctions were fluid and the political work more nuanced. Coalitions involved ongoing negotiations and disagreements over what counted as violence and what its implications were. While some categories, like rape and domestic violence, became central, others relied on how persuasively they could be linked as causes of these two. It was in this work of drawing connections and expanding definitions that deeper structures of meaning were negotiated.

The Knowledge Project of Gender-Based Violence and the Coinage of Femicide

Amidst the diverse narratives on gender-based violence, the term *femicide* emerged in the U.S. to highlight lethal violence against women. In 1976, U.S.-based scholar and activist Diana Russell participated in the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Belgium. The tribunal, a grassroots feminist response to the 1975 U.N. World Conference on Women in Mexico City, sought to build international feminist solidarity and expand the definition of violence against women (Russell 1977). It aimed to reconceptualize violence as a continuum that included psychological, sexual, symbolic, and lethal harm.

An important outcome of the tribunal was the first Take Back the Night rally, which would become a central piece of the anti-rape and anti-sexual violence movement in the U.S. As part of the U.S. delegation, Russell introduced the term *femicide*, framing the killing of women as a political crime:

We must realize that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide. We must recognize the sexual politics of murder. From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for “honor”. We realize that femicide has been going on a long time” (Russell, 1976)

Testimonies presented at the tribunal focused heavily on wife-killings and intimate partner femicide. Russell and others framed *femicide* as a threat that followed rape, thereby constructing a continuum of violence that emphasized not only physical harm but also symbolic terror. Femicide, in this formulation, functioned as both an act and an omnipresent threat shaping all women’s lives.

The coinage of femicide was deeply tied to the political and cultural context of the late 1970s—a moment when feminists were grappling with backlash, the prevalence of violence within sexuality, and the explosion of sexually explicit and violent content in mainstream media. As Carolyn Bronstein suggests, this was a moment of rupture in which radical feminists took sexual violence and its representations to the battleground (Bronstein, 2011).

Given this context of heightened feminist consciousness around violence against women, the subsequent trajectory of femicide presents a striking puzzle. Despite emerging from this very milieu of successful feminist activism, *femicide*, paradoxically, failed to resonate widely within either feminist or public debate. Instead, lethal violence against women continued to be classified within existing homicide categories, stripped of its gendered dimensions and analytical power.

This paradox prompts a central question: How did femicide—despite being coined in the United States during a period of vibrant feminist mobilization—fail to gain traction as an analytical category for understanding lethal gender-based violence?

To answer this, I draw on archival data from feminist organizations that sought to make sense of and politicize lethal violence against women. I begin by presenting two key moments when this violence captured public attention, then follow how feminists framed these events, and explore the political and ideological reasons why the term femicide failed to resonate

Data and Methods

This paper draws on archival materials from the Records of the Clearinghouse on Femicide, located at The Schlesinger Library. These papers belonged to the only organized effort to document and coin the term femicide, led by Chris Domingo, who worked closely with Diana Russell. Domingo played a key role in gathering and distributing data on the killing of women, supplying information to researchers and feminist networks during the 1980s and 1990s. The Records on the Clearinghouse on Femicide provide insights into media coverage of high-profile femicide cases, correspondence among feminist activists and scholars, and newsletters both from the Clearinghouse and other feminist outlets. Ty both media and feminist organizations. This material offers an initial mapping of how lethal violence against women was framed by feminist organizations during this time.

The archival material also revealed references to other feminist organizing efforts against lethal violence, guiding the research toward additional groups such as the Combahee River Collective, the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murder, the Women's Coalition to Stop the Green River Murders, and others. Notably, many of these were led by or closely affiliated with sex worker organizations. While this paper focuses most extensively on the records of the Clearinghouse on Femicide and its efforts to promote the term femicide, future research should examine the archives of these other organizations to deepen the analysis.

Competing Categories to Name Lethal Violence Against Women in the U.S.: Serial Killings and Domestic Violence

During the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. public discourse on crime was shaped by rising anxiety and the expansion of tough-on-crime policies (Vronsky 2021; Fischer 2022). One of the several categories that shaped the crisis of crime was the figure of the Serial Killer, for which the FBI declared an epidemic in the 1980s (Vronsky 2021). Among the prominent figures that emerged from this context was the serial killer, which the FBI declared an “epidemic” by the 1980s (Vronsky 2021). Some of the earliest feminist mobilizations around lethal violence against women arose in response to these cases—often classified in the media and by authorities as serial killings.

The fact that these cases occupied space in the public sphere shows that the events were being collectively defined as pressing social problems. Moreover, the massive cultural production surrounding serial killers –from news coverage to documentaries and “murderabilia”—testifies to the obsessions with these crimes.

The framing of serial killings was understood as a general problem of crime, for which researchers and media focused on trying to understand the motives of the perpetrators. In such framing, the psychological profile of the perpetrator was at the center, and the victims were only proof of the monstrosity of the individual perpetrator. Under the label of serial killings, the gendered components of the different cases were ignored, even though most victims were female or feminized subjects and showed signs of sexual violence.

Serial killings were portrayed as public-space crimes committed by strangers, and the killers themselves were depicted as exceptional, enigmatic individuals. This framing was in tension with feminist efforts to redefine violence as something that occurred within the

private sphere, perpetrated not by monsters but by ordinary men—husbands, boyfriends, and fathers. As a result, serial killings and domestic violence were not linked as part of the same continuum of gender-based violence. They were not only seen as separate problems but also as mutually exclusive narratives.

By contrast, domestic violence —particularly wife battering—became one of the most resonant frames through which lethal violence against women was understood. While serial killings may have shocked the public, their emotional and political impact depended on the victim's perceived social value. Domestic violence was more efficiently shocking American families, as it was a direct threat to traditional family values.

The killing of women as part of the framing of domestic violence was understood only as an extreme consequence of battering. Lethal violence then became a way of measuring the potentiality of violence that people had to prevent rather than acknowledging its occurrence as a problem in and of itself. Lethal domestic violence became a preemptive framing where the focus was placed on the battered women's movement.

When lethal domestic violence did attract public attention, it often did so not because of the harm inflicted on women, but because of the violence some women enacted in self-defense. Media coverage frequently fixated on cases in which women killed their abusive partners, placing them in competition with narratives of victimhood. As Van Wormer and Roberts(2009) note, before the battered women's movement created services for women to escape from violence, intimate partner killing rates were roughly equal between men and women. But once women had access to shelter and support, the rates of women killing male partners declined—while the rates of men killing women remained largely unchanged (Van Wormer and Roberts 2009).

Lethal violence, when framed as a domestic violence issue, was also framed through the lens of sexual deviance. With the rise of sexual liberation and the growing visibility of pornography, certain wife-killings were reframed as accidents during consensual “rough sex”. This defense tactic shifted the blame toward the victim, portraying her as sexually impure and thereby absolving the perpetrator of intentional harm.

Feminists pushed back against these framings, arguing for the structural nature of violence against women. Yet their efforts to categorize and politicize these killings were fractured. Categories competed for public attention, and were sometimes constructed in opposition to one another. In some cases, one category’s legitimacy depended on discrediting another; in others, their conceptual boundaries barely overlapped.

Feminists battling lethal violence were not a monolith, and while they agreed upon the big framings of violence against women, they were deeply divided on issues of sexuality and the relationship between cultural representations and real-world violence. These tensions and disagreements were, to an extent, shaped by the intersection of race, class, and sexuality. In the next section, I examine how different groups framed lethal violence—and how these divergent frameworks prevented ideological alignment and coalition-building.

Feminist competing framings of lethal violence against women

In the case of serial killings, the responses to the cases of sexual serial murders were profoundly divided by representations of race and sexuality, which ultimately shaped one of the first feminist interventions to make lethal violence against women visible. In 1979, after Boston had been terrorized with the serial murder of black women, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) was the first organization to frame the killings in Roxbury, Boston,

as both sexist and racist crimes. Their pamphlet entitled “Six women, why did they die?” stated:

It is true that the victims were all Black and that Black people have always been targets of racist violence in this society, but they were also all women. Our sisters died because they were women just as surely as they died because they were Black (Combahee River Collective, 1979).

They drew attention to crimes against women by creating a link with racist crimes to articulate the complex lived experience of black women, mostly subsumed to one of the two categories, both in black spaces and feminist ones. While they were articulating the intersection of gender and race, they emphasized the inequality and racist treatment that they faced vis-à-vis white women. The Roxbury murders had enlightened racist policing logics that assumed violence against white women was more relevant than violence against black women. While the Roxbury murders were happening, white women’s rape cases were being quickly classified as a serial problem, and resources were mobilized to prosecute “a serial rapist”(Williamson 2017). In contrast, black women’s murders were assumed to be “no news”, “related to kinship” and the black community, and therefore, assuming “any other black man” could be the perpetrators. At the same time, the victims were mostly portrayed as “prostitutes” and “drug addicts”. In this context, the Combahee River Collective aimed to “serialize” the killings of black women in response to the racist treatment they were receiving by the media and authorities (Williamson 2017). In this sense, they did not call for a different category to make sense of lethal violence against women, but to be acknowledged as subjects within the already existing categories. Via their pamphlet they tried to broaden the definition of what this violence entailed by pointing out that “violence against women cuts across all racial, ethnic, and class lines”, and that “the

fabric of violence against women” included sexist media representations, pornography, and even the response of the black male community to suggest that women should stay home, reminding the readers that one of the victims had been found dead in her own apartment.

The CRC pamphlet emphasized the iteration of premature deaths of black women as an expression of “the cultural and experiential nature of black oppression”. The killings of

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black women were soon subsumed into the broader concern of systemic racial oppression and brutalization of black people, and the organizing efforts that derived from coalitions like the “Coalition for Women’s Safety”(CWS) showed the racial tensions between white feminists and the black community around the organization of the “Women’s Safety Month”. The CWS committee highlighted the problematic framing of white feminists organizing the Take Back the Night rallies because they decided to protest in communities of people of color and the racist implications of this. The Roxbury Murders and their feminist responses show the framing of violence made by CRC, which included the acknowledgment of sexist cultural representations, and the tension between public and private violence. Through this first case, we can see an apparent agreement on how pornography is being brought into the bigger picture of lethal violence against women; however, even if secondary, the nuanced stances on pornography and sex work become quite relevant to the possibility of coalition building and consensus around violence.

Years later, similar dynamics unfolded on the West Coast. In San Francisco, feminist group Women Against Femicide (WAF)—closely affiliated with Diana Russell and Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media—mobilized in response to a string of murders committed by the Trailside Killer (1980-1982). WAF adopted the term *femicide* and drew explicit parallels between the murder of women as political crimes and lynchings as racist

crimes². Like the CRC, they sought to politicize lethal violence by framing it as structural and systemic. They borrowed the moral authority of anti-racist struggles to bolster their claim that femicide was a political crime. Yet, unlike the CRC, WAF did not address racial differences among the victims, media representations, or law enforcement responses. Nor did they mobilize for all women equally.

In Los Angeles, during the same period, the Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murder, led by Margaret Prescod, organized in response to the killings of Black women later attributed to the “Grim Sleeper” (1986). Like the CRC, Prescod’s group emphasized the racialized neglect these cases received, particularly because many victims were described as “prostitutes” and “drug-addicts”. Once again, violence against Black women was seen as routine, their deaths treated with indifference by media and law enforcement alike.

Despite temporal and geographic proximity, archival records from the Clearinghouse on Femicide do not show collaboration between WAF/Clearinghouse and the Black Coalition. Their lack of connection reflects a broader pattern: feminists working to politicize lethal violence were often divided along racial and ideological lines, strongly disagreeing in their approach to sexuality and sex work.

These two paradigmatic cases of serial killings illuminate key ruptures within feminism at the time: what has been called by some scholars “the sex wars” and show how competing frameworks for defining violence were shaped by deeper tensions over sexuality, race, and political strategy. Dominance feminists in the West Coast, including

² During the mobilizations organized by WAF, Vice Mayor Carol Davis “spoke on the connection between the Pt. Reyes killings and the murders of black women and men by the Ku Klux Klan” (Clearinghouse on Femicide, Memory and Rage,). In later iterations of leaflets, the parallel of femicide with lynchings became a foundational narrative resource of the campaign of femicide.

Diana Russell –who founded Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM)—and WAF, argued that male domination was a universal condition and cast all forms of sexualized representation, such as pornography, sex work and consensual BDSM practices, as inherently violent. By prioritizing this understanding of violence, they downplayed experiences that differed from this framing,

This framing alienated anti-violence and pro-sex feminists, including sex workers and women of color who opposed state intervention through policing and punitive responses. When WAVPM organized pickets against strip clubs and anti-pornography campaigns, they were met with sharp resistance from organizations of sex workers and sex positive feminists. These critics objected to the moralistic tone but also to the erasure of sexual agency and above all, to the reinforcement of racialized tropes about “good white women” and “bad-hypersexualized women”.

The correspondence of the Clearinghouse on Femicide reveals the limitations of this approach. One letter reads:

Dear Clearinghouse, please find your postcard enclosed. I am indifferent to efforts to control murder of women by fighting pornography, as you and Andrea Dworkin propose. There are real women out there who need help. I also enclose a leaflet from our local rape crisis center. It seems more relevant”. (Clearinghouse on Femicide, carton 1).

This letter reflects more than just political disagreement– it reveals a hierarchy of relevance, where pornography was seen as a symbolic battle detached from the “real work” of supporting survivors. Even among feminists concerned with violence, the idea that pornography caused femicide was often perceived as a distraction or an ideological overreach.

While dominance feminists deployed energies against pornography by burning magazines while claiming “erotomisogynist speech incites femicide”, anti-violence feminists organized alternative versions of Take Back the Night that brought to center stage the victims who were systematically ignored: sex workers and black women. Along Margaret Prescod in LA and CRC in Boston, black and immigrant women were organizing in coalition with organizations like Wages for Housework and with organized Sex Workers like US-PROS Collective, and framed violence as produced by the state through the criminalization of prostitution and the hyper-sexualization and criminalization of black women and women of color. These organizations, along with sex-positive lesbians like SAMOIS, not only were against dominance feminists but they were also the ones working to document and demand justice for the serial killings of sex workers and black women.

Although WAF and later the Clearinghouse on Femicide made efforts to include women of color and practice anti-racism, their archival materials show that the focus remained largely on white victims. Their universalizing narrative of women’s subjugation ultimately reproduced racial blind spots. By using the metaphor of lynching to justify *femicide* as a political crime while failing to engage with antiracist politics in practice, they reinforced the marginalization of racialized and sexualized women’s experiences.

Domestic lethal violence

While the phenomena of femicide was treated differently within the cases of serial killings, the killing of women by intimate partners faced different narrative disputes. The sharp stance of dominance feminists against patriarchal violence needs to be understood as part of a context where the mainstream “male gaze” research was using women’s sexuality and psyche to justify domestic and sexual violence. Their strong rejection of sadomasochism was directed in part at its use to justify domestic violence (Sweet 2021). While dominance

feminists fought the “cultural causes” of sexual violence, the view about sexuality that dominance feminists developed alienated organized groups of sex workers and BDSM community that practiced what would be called “deviant” ways of sexual interaction in the case of the latter, or in the case of the former, that were seen as victims of violence.

As domestic violence focused on the survival of victims who could provide their testimony, the centrality of lethal violence was never achieved. In this way, femicide remained peripheral, eclipsed by the more narratively resonant figure of the survivor, which became the focal point of public and policy attention (Sweet, 2021). As Paige Sweet (2021) argues, the powerful discursive resource of the survivor made gender violence legible to the state and society, but only if these conformed to a narrow script of heterosexual, middle-class, sexually modest and ideally white women.

This idealized figure stood in contrast to the women often excluded from these narratives: Black women, sex workers, and drug users, whose deaths were treated as inevitable outcomes of their “lifestyles”. This dynamic created a representational hierarchy that reinforced long-standing cultural tropes of racialized and sexualized ideas of “good womanhood”. Within this context, *femicide* was folded into other narratives in ways that reinforced racialized and sexualized boundaries around who counts as a victim.

The shortcomings of *femicide* can be thought of as part of the broader critique posed by black feminists where sexual violence, and specifically rape, is “the key to women’s experiences with violence”(Collins 1998) only if it is associated with the intimate and private sphere. The centrality of rape and domestic violence as a private sphere issue and mostly white-middle class sexual-purity narrative prevented other forms of configurations of violence from being addressed and gain traction.

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ⁱ The original definition coined by Russell referred uniquely to woman, for which she later modified it to females to include both women and girls. In recent years debates continue to challenge the definition of femicide to include feminized subjects and transfemicides. Even though the definition is constantly being challenged I include feminized subjects to frame the serial killings that were committed against young men and in particular Young gay men, which are feminized as a consequence of failing to perform hegemonic masculinity.