

Feminicides in Porto Alegre: How many? Who are they?

Feminicídios na cidade de Porto Alegre: Quantos são? Quem são?

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ABSTRACT: *Objective:* To quantify and typify the feminicides occurred in the city of Porto Alegre from 2006 to 2010. *Methods:* Cross-sectional study that examines the sociodemographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators and the circumstances of feminicides obtained in police investigations of women murdered in the city of Porto Alegre. Statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS software, version 20.0, with the χ^2 test; $p < 0.05$ was considered as significant. *Results:* Of the 89 surveys analyzed, we categorized 64 deaths (72%) as feminicides. Most victims were young, poorly educated and exercised socially undervalued occupations. They had a history of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner and one quarter of them had registered a police report. *Conclusion:* These data indicate the magnitude of this crime and the need to identify risk situations and prevent lethal outcomes.

Keywords: Violence against women. Homicide. Gender and health.

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Conflict of interests: nothing to declare – **Financial support:** none.

RESUMO: *Objetivo:* Quantificar e tipificar os feminicídios ocorridos no município de Porto Alegre entre 2006 e 2010. *Métodos:* Estudo transversal que identifica as características sociodemográficas das vítimas e dos agressores e as circunstâncias de mortes femininas por agressão obtidas em inquéritos policiais na cidade de Porto Alegre. As análises estatísticas foram realizadas por meio do *software* SPSS, versão 20.0, utilizando o teste χ^2 e considerando significativo $p < 0,05$. *Resultados:* Dos 89 inquéritos analisados, 64 mortes (72%) foram categorizadas como feminicídios. A maioria das vítimas era jovem, com baixa escolaridade e exercia ocupações pouco valorizadas socialmente. Elas tinham histórico de violências perpetradas por parceiro íntimo e um quarto delas havia registrado boletim de ocorrência policial. *Conclusão:* Esses dados indicam a magnitude desse crime e a necessidade de identificar situações de risco e prevenir desfechos letais.

Palavras-chave: Violência contra a mulher. Homicídio. Gênero e saúde.

INTRODUCTION

Femicide is a political and legal concept of murders based on gender, or female deaths by aggression because the victim is a woman. It comprises a wide range of situations, not only the ones that take place in the domestic or family environment. The death of women represents the final stage of a *continuum* which may include rape; torture; mutilation; physical, emotional and/or sexual violence; incest; sexual harassment; genital mutilation; unnecessary gynecological surgeries; compulsory heterosexuality; forced sterilization and/or maternity; psychic and cosmetic surgeries. Whenever any of these types of violence results in death, it is a femicide¹.

The debate about the use of the term femicide or feminicide is still recent, considering it is a relatively new concept. Mexican militants for the rights of women² proposed the use of the term femicide to designate any murder of women and, feminicide to indicate the murders of women because of their gender, in which there is negligence by the State, allowing them to be considered crimes against humanity. Although in previous studies and papers we chose to use the term femicide³⁻⁶, we adopted the concept of feminicide after the creation of the Brazilian law about the women homicide⁷.

Feminicide has been provided for in legislation since the enforced Law No. 13.104/2015, which considers this type of crime as a qualifying circumstance for homicide. Thus, feminicide is considered as the murder of a woman just because of her gender, *i.e.*, when the crime involves domestic and family violence and/or disregard or discrimination against being a woman⁷. Whereas simple homicides are punished by 6 to 20 years, qualified homicides have penalties ranging from 12 to 30 years. Heinous crimes are unbailable, with no possibility for reduced penalty and subject to aggravation, with increased penalty by 1/3 when feminicide is committed during pregnancy or up to 3 months after

giving birth, when the victim is under the age of 14 or older than 60 years of age, when it is committed against people with disabilities and in the presence of the victim's ancestors or descendants⁷.

Preparing this law led to a long process of work and social mobilization among groups in the field of gender, feminism and women's rights and, even though Brazil is one of the countries with the highest number of registered homicides among women^{8,9}, the law was first received with criticism from more conservative sectors of the legal field¹⁰. Currently, in addition to Brazil, 14 countries in the Americas have drafted laws on femicide: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru and Venezuela¹¹.

Worldwide, 60,000 murders of women are estimated every year, representing 17% of total deaths by aggression. More than half of women homicides correspond to femicides, a phenomenon with great variation in different parts of the world. There are 25 countries in which rates are very high; half of them are located in the Caribbean, and Central and South America; these regions are considered, therefore, quite dangerous for women. The countries are El Salvador, Jamaica, Guatemala, Honduras, Lesser Antilles, Colombia, Bolivia, Bahamas and Brazil¹²⁻¹⁵. El Salvador had the highest rates in the Americas in 2006: 13/100,000 women, over the level of 6/100,000¹²⁻¹⁵.

In Brazil, data presented in the Map of Violence⁹ reveal that in the 30 years between 1980 and 2010, over 92 thousand women were murdered. In the last decade, there were over 43.7 thousand murders, representing an increase of 230%. These data show the number of female homicides; however, they do not indicate how many of them are femicides. For the most part, women at most risk of being murdered are young, migrants, black or part of minority ethnicities and in situation of economic and social vulnerability. Aggressors are usually current or past intimate partners, family members, sexual violence perpetrators, pimps, human traffickers and criminals related to traffic^{13,16,17}.

Femicides perpetrated by intimate partners are common in honor-bound cultures, in which men kill women when it is believed that they did not fulfill their socially designated gender-related roles, when they want to break apart or if they maintained extramarital affairs¹⁸. Femicides are more frequent when gender relations are strict and traditional, and when women occupy a subordinate position^{16,19,20}; and in situations in which there are unequal power relations between genders, with men remaining dominant over women.

The information contained in the death certificates provide data related to age, gender, marital status, profession and place of residence of the victim, not including the author of the homicide. In many situations, medical examiners do not declare homicide as the cause of death, characterizing these deaths as caused by unspecified external causes²¹. Data from the mortality system do not allow, therefore, the characterization of femicides, making the issue of gender associated to these deaths invisible.

Since there are no Brazilian estimates on the proportion of women murdered due to gender issues, nor the number of femicides among the total homicides of women,

researchers^{3,4,9,22} consider the total number of female deaths by aggression as an approximate indicator of the number of feminicides, a resource that may result in either oversized (when the system of mortality information is fairly reliable and is located in a region where lethal violence against women is not highly prevalent) or undersized situations (when not all deaths are recorded).

The lack of studies quantifying feminicides in the Brazilian Society, as well as of a classification which allows identifying murders based on gender¹¹ are reasons that motivated the production of this work, whose objective was to quantify and typify feminicides in the municipality of Porto Alegre.

METHODS

This is a cross-sectional study presenting information about the sociodemographic characteristics of victims of perpetrators and about the circumstances of female murder, in addition to identifying the number of deaths considered feminicide. More vulnerable scenarios for the crimes were identified, and deaths classified as feminicides were compared to other female crimes caused by aggression, in which gender was not determinant.

The data were obtained in police investigation files of women murdered in Porto Alegre from 2006 to 2010. The admittance in the field was negotiated with the police officer in the only existing Homicide Police Department at the moment the study started, and the surveys regarding the murders of all females were requested, gradually made available for local consultation. Eighty-nine concluded police investigations were obtained regarding the murders of women in the period studied. The search for data in the Homicide Police Department was extended from 2010 to 2013, ending its collection due to the difficulty in finding additional inquiries. At the time of data collection, inquiries would be read aloud and recorded in audio in order to reduce the time of permanence of the research team in the police station, and also to not interfere with police activities. There was not a specific script for data collection, compiling the identification file of the cases and the final report of the inquiries with the summary of the case and the final version prepared by the police authority, pressing charges, referral to the Public Ministry or closure of the document due to lack of evidence.

A database was organized containing information on the victim, the offender and the crime, and the crime was categorized as feminicide or another kind of female homicide. The variables selected were: age, skin color, schooling and the neighborhood in which victims and perpetrators lived in. Regarding the crime, we analyzed the location, the method used, physical and sexual violence history, previous complaint, relation of the aggressor with the victim and indictment of the author.

The statistical analyses were made using the SPSS software, version 20.0, with the χ^2 test, and aimed at comparing the characteristics of murders classified as feminicides to other female homicides. The variables “previous violence” and “prior complaint to the police”

were absent in regular homicides, and therefore no statistical test was used to compare the groups, as well as “schooling”, whose percentage of ignored information was high.

Feminicides were categorized by the analysis of the data contained in the inquiries, case by case. The criteria for classification were based in the study by Ana Carcedo¹⁶, and included murders of women perpetrated by current or former intimate partners, in which either the author confessed or there was evidence against them; deaths with sexual violence, including murders of prostitutes in their work place; deaths with genital mutilation or disfigurement of the victim’s face; disproportional use of lethal means; and executions related to traffic, in which the fact of being a woman was considered as a potentializing factor for the crime. Murders which were not considered feminicides included accidental deaths in shootings, fights, robberies or even executions in which the issue of gender was not proven to be the trigger for violence.

The article was part of a larger research named “Femicides – Female homicides in Rio Grande do Sul”⁵. There is no conflict of interests in this study, and the Project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Public Health School, protocol n. 473/09.

RESULTS

This study estimated that approximately 200 police inquiries would be found, along with data regarding female deaths by aggression registered in the Mortality Information System (*Sistema de Informação de Mortalidade – SIM*), in Porto Alegre, from 2006 to 2010. All female deaths were considered as a search parameter and an indirect indicator of femicide, once this may occur at any victim’s age, also reaching children and elderly women. However, only 89 inquiries were made available by the Homicide Police Department, representing less than half of the women killed by aggression in the period. Table 1 presents the

Table 1. Female deaths by aggression (Mortality Information System of the Informatics Department of the Brazilian Health System) and inquiries (Homicide Police Department /Department of Public Safety), Porto Alegre, 2006–2010.

Year	SIM/DATASUS Deaths by residence	Deaths by occurrence	Homicide Police Department	
			n	%
2006	32	38	23	72
2007	44	50	25	57
2008	45	54	20	44
2009	39	46	9	23
2010	47	50	12	26
Total	207	238	89	43

SIM/DATASUS: Mortality Information System of the Informatics Department of the Brazilian Health System (*Sistema de Informação de Mortalidade do Departamento de Informática do Sistema Único de Saúde do Brasil*).

number of female deaths available in SIM in the Informatics Department of the Brazilian Unified Health System (*Departamento de Informática do Sistema Único de Saúde do Brasil* — DATASUS) according to the place of residence (207), location of occurrence (238) and data on the inquiries (89), corresponding to 43% of the total female deaths by aggression according to the place where they live.

Therefore, the information presented in this article refer to 89 police inquiries on female murders occurred in Porto Alegre from 2006 to 2010. The classification of female deaths allowed categorizing 64 cases as feminicides, representing 72% of the total inquiries studied. Most feminicides (39 deaths) were classified as intimate, meaning these were crimes perpetrated by current or former partners — husbands, boyfriends, fiancées or dates. From the 21 deaths that took place in public places, 10 of them presented sexual violence (8 out of these 10 victims were prostitutes) and 10 were executions of women in traffic environments, in which the fact of being a woman was determinant for their death.

Regarding demographic characteristics, both victim and aggressor are predominantly young, although perpetrators are a little older than the women. It was observed that, proportionally, more young women die by feminicide than by other types of female homicide, once 84% (54) of victims were aged 40 years old or less, whereas this percentage was 56% (15 deaths) for the other ones. Black women represent 20% of the female population in Porto Alegre²³, characterizing, therefore, an excessive mortality rate of black women in all types of homicides, representing 23% of feminicides (15 women) and 60% of the remaining murders (15 women). The comparison between feminicides and other female deaths presented statistically significant differences regarding the age of the victims and the relation victim/perpetrator. It was found that, in 78% of feminicides, the aggressor was known by the victim (50 deaths) (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the scenarios and characteristics of the crimes, comparing feminicides to other deaths. The most frequent location was the victim's household, in 67% of feminicides (43 deaths) and in 48% of other crimes (12 deaths). Although no statistical test was performed, an important difference between victims of feminicide and other women was the history of prior violence, present in 83% of feminicides (36 cases) and absent in the remaining ones. As for previous reporting of these situations of violence to police authorities, 50% of the victims (18 women) had denounced the aggressor through the Bulletin of Occurrence. It should be noted that women who filed complaints were not necessarily the same ones with a history of violence on the part of the aggressor.

DISCUSSION

In 2012, according to the Map of Violence, Porto Alegre ranked eighth in the national order of female deaths by aggression, with a rate of 6.6 female homicides per 100 thousand women⁹. In the Map of Violence, the data come from SIM, not allowing the identification of how many of those are feminicides.

This study allowed calculating the portion of deaths corresponding to murders based on gender, with 64 deaths (72%) identified as feminicides. No other Brazilian study was found that calculated the prevalence of feminicides from the data in police inquiries, since it is common^{3,4,21,22} to use the total number of female deaths by aggression as an indicator of feminicide. The percentage found (72%) is similar to the one found for other countries, in which 60 to 70% of female homicides correspond to feminicides²⁰. This finding may infer that 70% of female deaths available in DATASUS may be considered as gender-based murders.

Table 2. Deaths by aggression and demographic characteristics of victims and perpetrators. Porto Alegre, 2006–2010.

	Feminicide (n=64)		Aggression (n=25)		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
Victims					
Skin color					
White	49	76.6	10	40.0	0.001
Black	15	23.4	15	60.0	
Age (years old)					
20 to 39	54	84.4	15	56.0	0.012
40 to 59	10	15.6	10	44.0	
Schooling					
Up to primary education	32	80.0	15	93.7	* ₋
From High School on	8	20.0	1	6.3	
Perpetrators					
Skin color					
White	33	63.5	11	64.7	0.415
Black	19	36.5	6	35.3	
Age (years old)					
20 to 39	40	62.5	16	64.0	0.262
≥ 40	24	37.5	9	36.0	
Schooling					
Up to primary education	32	82.1	15	88.2	* ₋
From High School on	7	17.9	2	11.8	
Relation with the victim					
Known	50	78.0	10	40.0	0.001
Unknown	14	22.0	15	60.0	

*Test not performed due to the high frequency of data considered ignored; due to the exclusion of these data, the total number of the variables were not presented: victims' schooling (33 ignored) and perpetrators' schooling (33 ignored).

The characterization of victims showed they are young and have low income, and that there is overmortality of black women. Although those do not constitute the majority of victims in Porto Alegre, where 80% of the population is self-declared white, they correspond to 23% of femicide victims and 60% of victims of other murders, totaling 1/3 of these crimes. These data corroborate other analyses that show higher femicide rates in locations of predominant social vulnerability, black population and violent crimes²⁴⁻²⁶. In Brazil, the black population is a priority victim of homicide violence and, whereas mortality coefficients for the white population are decreasing, the ones for the black population are increasing²⁷. In addition, most female homicides are perpetrated by men, whereas less than 5% of male deaths are committed by women²⁴. In Porto Alegre, in the studied period, only two women were authors of homicides in which the victim was also a woman.

More than half femicides were intimate and carried out in the victim's households. These women were murdered in their homes, mostly by known men with whom they had

Table 3. Settings and characteristics of the crimes, femicides and deaths by aggression. Porto Alegre, 2006–2010.

	Femicide (n=64)		Aggression (n=25)		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
Location					
Household	43	67,1	12	48,0	0,094
Public setting	21	32,9	13	52,0	
Method of the crime					
Fire weapon	30	50,0	18	72,0	0,036
Other weapons/Suffocation	30	50,0	7	28,0	
Prior violence					
Yes	36	83,7	0	0,0	* ₋
No	7	16,3	14	100,0	
Prior report to the police					
Yes	18	50,0	0	0,0	* ₋
No	18	50,0	18	100,0	
Sexual violence					
Yes	15	25,9	1	4,5	* ₋
No	43	74,1	21	95,5	
Indictment					
Yes	50	78,1	19	76,0	0,618
No	14	21,9	6	24,0	

*Test not performed due to the high frequency of data considered ignored; due to the exclusion of these data, the total number of the variables were not presented: prior violence (32 ignored), prior report to the police (25 ignored) and prior sexual violence (9 ignored).

affection and intimate relations²⁸, showing that the heterosexual couple is the arrangement offering the highest risk for women¹.

It has been observed that the high frequency of female murders is accompanied by high levels of social tolerance to violence^{29,30} and by aggressions and threats perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner²⁶. In this research, 84% of the murdered women had a history of suffered violence.

The presence of a gun in the household is a risk for the occurrence of a homicide³¹. This study observed high frequency of feminicides and other female deaths caused by fire weapons. Despite the Disarmament Statute, Brazil is the country with the highest number of people killed by fire weapons in the world, being the first cause of death among young people³² and the means used in 48% of female murders²⁷.

Today, we are experiencing the emergence of new scenarios for feminicides, such as those of Central America and Mexico, in territories marked by structural violence^{16,30}. These types of feminicides were also observed in Porto Alegre, even if in smaller proportions. Similar situations were identified in regions where women are killed due to their connections to trafficking, when competing for typically male spaces, denouncing traffickers or because they are easier targets in vendettas against their mates, children and other family members.

In territories occupied by traffic, there is a second State, operating as a militia, using cruelty and according to the codes of the patriarchy. In this context, deaths and executions are trivialized and have not been considered feminicides; many of them remain unsolved and investigations are closed due to lack of evidence, witnesses and clues. Even more worrisome is the fact that these deaths are not seen as feminicides, and these victims are merely referred to, by both the population and the police authority, as “trafficking deaths”. Thus, social and gender determination is deprived, removing the political connotation of these murders.

Although it was not the main objective of this paper, understanding the process of elaboration of police documents was a necessary step. The flow of a police investigation begins with reporting the incident, being followed by an investigation, recording all relevant information of the process, including witnesses’ statements, expert reports, death certificates and the final report. There was great diversity between inquiries, as some of them were closed basically blank, without data, and others were made up of dozens of pages.

A study carried out in Brazil²¹ about the homicide information system identified the need for communication and the low connectivity between the organizations in charge (public health and security) as limiting factors for the system. When beginning an investigation, the prospect was to find the same number of inquiries in SIM and the number of deaths, once all homicides should be investigated by a process initiated with the onset of an inquiry. The research group was provided with less than half of the inquiries expected according to DATASUS regarding female deaths by aggression in Porto Alegre. One of the reasons, given by the police authority, for the lower number of inquiries found would be the fact that, in some situations, deaths are recorded

in different municipalities from the one where the victim was murdered, which did not correspond to this study.

Many inquiries were still being conducted three years after the crime. In legal terms, the inquiry must be concluded within 10 days if the accused is arrested in the act or is arrested in custody, or after 30 days when the accused is released, with or without bail³³. A study carried out in Pernambuco³⁴ about the production of police inquiries observed that the average time between the different steps of the procedure always surpasses what is determined, considering the inquiry is sent from police authorities to the Public Ministry in about eight months after the date of occurrence. In Porto Alegre, the existence of many incomplete inquiries in 2013 shows the fragility of the police system in carrying out these investigations, in addition to not having a specific registry for feminicides, not even a categorization or separation by gender, making it rather difficult to search for them.

In many cases, the inquiry was closed due to the “law of silence”, a factor mentioned as an obstacle in the pursue for information in Porto Alegre, as well as in other studies and locations³⁴. There were situations in which the killers could have been arrested or indicted, but they easily blend in the urban scenario, and there was no identification of the perpetrator and indictment in 20% of the inquiries.

Incorrectly measuring the magnitude of female murders may lead to the false impression that this is a rare event. To this end, performing a broad classification of feminicide is important, including not only deaths caused by an intimate partner, in order to not underestimate the real incidence of this matter by excluding feminicides occurred in public settings.

CONCLUSION

This study allowed the identification of the number of feminicides among female murders in Porto Alegre, showing not only their high incidence, but also a pattern for gender-related violence which begins to appear in public settings, crimes with sexual violence and execution of women in trafficking disputes.

Although divergences between information systems from the fields of public safety and health are common knowledge, we consider that the study of these deaths should always include data from SIM/DATASUS, to make the information coming from the two systems compatible. It is noteworthy that police inquiries are the only source of information about the aggressor, and allow identifying the types of feminicide, even though their study is a meticulous and time-consuming work, apparently with simple results.

There is still a concept in Society that most feminicides are of intimate nature and occur behind closed doors. Structural violences of the “apocalyptic stage of capitalism”³⁵, which manifest through violence, the civil war, a second state, trafficking, gangs and mafias have not yet been perceived in their full dimension as lethal violence for women. Some female authors have already noticed these new kinds of feminicides and have been identifying and reporting them^{14,29}. These scenarios are already a reality in Brazil and are emerging in

Porto Alegre, and the history of many deaths observed in the police inquiry are not different at all from the scenes of cruelty and horror that take place in Central America and Mexico. Therefore, incorporating these other crimes to the broader concept of femicide is necessary, in order to not underestimate the real prevalence of these situations, resulting in a statistical profile which does not correspond to reality.

We hope the results of this study are a contribution for proper systematization of data related to femicide. Interinstitutional actions are required so that the records from legal, police and health sectors allow identifying how many femicides are there and who are these victims, in order to produce more effective prevention strategies of such crimes.

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Received on: 04/13/2016

Final version presented on: 10/06/2016

Accepted on: 11/28/2016