

Topic 2: Growing Femicide in Honduras

Femicide: History and Prevalence in Latin America

The term “femicide” is defined by the World Health Organization as “violence against women from a wide range of acts” and in common parlance is usually recognized as the intentional murder of women in a situation where they were disadvantaged due to their gender. Many reasons are attributed for femicide, from the weakness of women making them an attractive target for serial killers to the high rate of honor/intimate killings involving a spouse, partner or significant other¹ to the cultural and institutional indifference towards such killings.

Although the term has been around since the 19th century, it did not become popular in usage until the 1970s feminist movements and the writer and activist, Diana Russell, publicized the word in her presence at the Crimes Against Women Tribunal in 1976, attributing it to activist Carol Orlock. Ever since then, the word has seen increased use. The issue also began to face increased scrutiny, with the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) and other international organizations monitoring and keeping records of instances of femicides.

Even though it is an international issue, Femicide is by far most predominant issue in Latin America. Half of the top 25 countries with the highest average femicide rates² are Latin American countries, with Honduras ranking 7th. The rate in many of these countries has remained constant, and even increased in the years since the study, as political instability and drug crime have also increased in the region. In Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras in particular, the rate of femicide has increased rapidly to the point where the OHCHR has investigated and news media around the world have reported on the killings. These countries are also notorious for their generally high homicide rates. In Honduras, the country with the highest murder rate, a person died nearly every hour in 2012 and, on average, almost every 1,000th person in the country was killed³. Neighboring countries have been just as bad with El Salvador recently peaking to a high of 108 deaths per 100,000 individuals, a rate of more than 1 per 1,000 not seen in the region since the turn of the century. However, the rate of femicide is by far worst in Honduras and the focus of this committee lies on the alarming trend of rapid increase in such crimes over the past decade.

Dramatic rise and disproportionate femicide rates in Honduras

El Salvador has seen a massive spike in homicides since 2012, however, Honduras has seen an over 264% increase in femicides from 2005, when the country’s homicide rate was at a low of 45 deaths per 100,000 individuals⁴. Tragically, 95% of these murders go uninvestigated as many murders are culturally tolerated or unimportant to an otherwise occupied police force. Dealing

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1. The WHO estimates that 35% of murders of women worldwide are committed by an intimate partner while 5% of murders of men are committed by an intimate partner
 2. These rankings are for average number of femicides per 100,000 females from 2004-2009
 3. The country became famous for this statistic as 20 people were dying a day in the country, nearly a death an hour rate; The death rate in Honduras in 2012 was about 93 people per 100,000, a roughly 1 in 1000 death rate
 4. It could be argued that the homicide rate also increased during this period leading to a increase in femicides, however, the increase in the homicide rate over the same period was about 80-90%

with a high amount of drug trafficking and gang violence, the police force and military are frequently unhelpful in dealing with such crime. Also, there exists a very negative past history of the military in the country and a deliberate violence towards politically active women who attempt to tackle social and institutional problems and are targeted by gangs and institutional stalwarts as a result. Berta Cáceres is an example of a significant figure who was heavily involved in environmental and indigenous activism and was assassinated by military for her activism against the military's interests.

To understand the rampant institutional bias against women in Honduras, one has to examine the past history and the cultural standards of the country. In 2009, a coup occurred against the elected president of the country. The military and courts, traditionally key institutional powers in the country, were responsible for removing him and also appointed a successor. The military uses its influence to carry out actions that it sees fit and is protected by the courts, who turn a blind eye towards the death of female activists and abuse of women by violent gangs. A cultural nature of patriarchy and conservative gender boundaries are seen as significant contributors towards this indifference and acceptance of such violence in Honduran society.

Gangs that control entire neighborhoods frequently target females, especially activists, and actually target women so often that they are known by the term “machismos” for their aggressive and violent behavior. Members of such gangs typically are overly abusive towards women and their partners. They tend to exhibit these behaviors for many psychological and sociological reasons, but these actions are often seen as normal in the gang environment and culture. A lack of economic opportunity and the prevalence of drugs have further exacerbated the proliferation of such groups and led to a further culture of femicide in the form of domestic and sexual violence, not always resulting in death.

Key Players

This committee does focus on femicide in Honduras, however, this issue is prevalent around the world. As a result, there are several countries that would be heavily involved in solving, or at least influencing, the outcome of a resolution regarding a solution or actions towards ending high rates of femicide seen in Honduras:

Mexico – Mexico has been recently facing internal discontent as the populace experience a surge of drug violence resulting in lawlessness and increasing civilian deaths in parts of the country. Instances of mass graves and missing/murdered children in northern Mexico, in particular, have drawn international attention and have put the central government in a tough position. Mexico will be eager to participate in solving issues similar to those faced by angered citizens within their country, such as the missing schoolchildren and the high rate of murder faced by individuals in northern Mexico.

Central American Countries – Honduras and other countries in Central America will undoubtedly be invested in addressing this issue as their civilian populations clamor to confront the dramatic rise in femicides and homicides in their cities. These countries, as well as Mexico, will likely look to stemming drug violence, so called “machismo” gang violence, and institutional corruption that frequently results in high rates of violence against females.

South Africa – African countries have a complicated relationship with femicide statistics due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that is a number one cause of death and frequently brought about in females by genital mutilation. The debate in this case is how and whether to count the death from AIDS toward the femicide rate. Although violence in general against females occurs regularly⁵, it is hard to keep track of deaths intentionally directed towards women since there are various potential reasons for the violence committed from vast cultural and religious overlaps throughout the continent. South Africa is one of the most developed countries in the continent and actually differentiates between generic homicides and femicides. Data points to South Africa ranking the highest outside of the Americas in terms of their femicide rate. With these facts in mind, the country has steadily decreased both homicide and femicide rates significantly since the 90s through political and social advancement but could definitely use further reductions. South Africa could be a guiding factor in how both African and South American countries can deal with cultural norms that create an oppressive environment for women and indifference towards crimes committed against them.

Eastern Europe – somewhat surprisingly, Eastern Europe ranks as one of the highest regions in regard to violence against women. This region accounts for another 7 of the 25 countries with the highest femicide rates. This region provides an interesting view into the attributing factors that cause high femicide rates. Analyzing neighboring Western Europe, which has an average femicide rate of less than 1 per 100,000 women, and comparing its societal and political norms to the east gives some interesting perspective into the potential causes of high femicide rates. Eastern Europe broke away from the USSR and developed new political systems merely two decades ago, yet the countries of the region have westernized societies and are economically well-developed. Analyzing these differences may yield a potential reason for the high rates of femicide seen in other regions around the world. Eastern European countries in the EU, or trying to gain entry to the EU, would be heavily incentivized to prove themselves as a nation complying with and improving their human rights conditions. They would also benefit from showing a high capability of maintaining security for their citizens by reducing these kinds of crime rates. One recent trend that has emerged in this region of Europe though is a backlash against refugees as a primary cause for a dramatic rise in sexual crimes against women and will be an issue that countries like Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states will be eager to address and push within the European bloc and the UN.

Discussion Points

1. What are key factors that are attributing to high rates of femicide in Central America and Eastern Europe but not in other regions such as western South America, Western Europe, and Asia?
2. What actions can be taken to limit and address the factors that result in high femicide rates? A lot of these issues are cultural and could potentially infringe on sovereignty so how can the UNODC entice countries to participate in a solution that is effective but not inflammatory?
3. What resources or incentives can the UN provide to help/influence countries to address the issue of femicide head-on?

5. Violence in Africa occurs for many reasons, not limited to cultural differences, religious differences, and political strife; Women in particular are targets for abduction, such as seen in Somalia, Nigeria and others

Sources

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