



## Femicide in Cali Colombia: A view from public health

Feminicídio em Cali Colômbia: Uma visão da saúde pública

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** In most cases, violence against women is committed by their partners or ex-partners and this violence is a global public health problem that almost always ends in their death. Femicide is understood as the murder of a woman just for the fact of being a female individual, perpetuating gender inequality. **Objective:** To analyze femicide in Cali from its epidemiological characterization. **Materials and methods:** A descriptive population-based study was carried out using secondary sources that included 287 records of violent deaths of women. 53 cases between 2017 and 2019 were identified and analyzed, which were investigated and classified as femicide by the Crimes Against Women Unit of the Prosecutor's Office. The epidemiological characterization was conducted based on the information provided, which was useful to identify the study variables: age, method, place of occurrence, imprisonment of perpetrator, and sentence. **Results:** Femicide occurred between the ages of 9 and 89, with stabbing being the most commonly used killing method. A conviction was executed only in 18.9% of the total cases. **Conclusions:** Femicide occurs at any age and has a high impunity degree mostly because of an ineffective judicial system.

**Keywords:** Femicide; gender violence; gender inequality. (Fuente: DeCS, Bireme).

### Resumen

**Introducción:** En la mayoría de ocasiones, la violencia contra la mujer, es cometida por su pareja o expareja, siendo un problema de salud pública mundial que casi siempre termina en un feminicidio. Este se entiende como el asesinato de una mujer por el hecho de serlo, perpetuando la inequidad de género. **Objetivo:** Visibilizar el feminicidio en Cali a partir de su caracterización epidemiológica. **Materiales y métodos:** Se realizó un estudio descriptivo de base poblacional de fuentes secundarias, a partir de 287 registros de muertes violentas en mujeres, de los cuales se identificaron y analizaron 53 casos atendidos en la unidad de vida de delitos contra la mujer de la Fiscalía entre el 2017 al 2019, tipificados como feminicidio. La caracterización epidemiológica se realizó con base en la información suministrada que permitió identificar las variables de estudio: edad, mecanismo, lugar de ocurrencia, medida de aseguramiento del victimario y sentencia. **Resultados:** El feminicidio se presentó entre los 9 y 89 años, el mecanismo más utilizado fue el arma corto punzante. Sólo en el 18,9% se ha dictado sentencia condenatoria. **Conclusiones:** El feminicidio se presenta en cualquier edad, tiene un alto grado de impunidad en muchas ocasiones por la ineficiencia del sistema judicial.

**Palabras clave:** Feminicidio; violencia de género; inequidad de género. (Fuente: DeCS, Bireme).

### Resumo

**Introdução:** Na maioria das vezes, a violência contra a mulher é cometida pelo companheiro ou ex-parceiro, tratando-se de um problema de saúde pública mundial que quase sempre culmina em feminicídio. Isso é entendido como o assassinato de uma mulher pelo fato de ser uma delas, perpetuando a desigualdade de gênero. **Objetivo:** Tornar visível o feminicídio em Cali a partir de sua caracterização epidemiológica. **Materiais e métodos:** Foi realizado um estudo descriptivo de base populacional de fontes secundárias, a partir de 287 registros de mortes violentas de mulheres, dos quais foram identificados e analisados 53 casos, atendidos na unidade de vida por crimes contra a mulher da denúncia pública (fiscalia) entre 2017 e 2019, classificados como feminicídio. A caracterização epidemiológica foi realizada com base nas informações prestadas que permitiram identificar as variáveis do estudo: idade, mecanismo, local de ocorrência, medida de segurança do agressor e pena. **Resultados:** O feminicídio ocorreu entre as idades de 9 e 89 anos, o mecanismo mais utilizado foi arma branca. Apenas em 18,9% houve condenação. **Conclusões:** O feminicídio ocorre em qualquer idade, tem alto grau de impiedade em muitas ocasiões devido à ineficiência do sistema judicial.

**Palavras chave:** Femicídio; violência de gênero; iniquidade de gênero. (Fonte: DeCS, Bireme).

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## Introduction

Femicide is the consequence of one extremely violent culture against women which occurs in private and public contexts and accounts for the deaths committed by abusers, sexual criminals, or their partners<sup>(1,2)</sup>.

Femicide does not differentiate between social, ethnic, cultural or economic conditions and presents in all contexts. Experts say that macho culture which is common in developing countries is evident when women move out of the roles which are imposed on them and this triggers violent reactions which often times ends in homicide<sup>(1)</sup>.

Diana Russell maintains that femicide is the intentional murder of women because they are women which can be related to the concept of symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu, which is used in the social sciences as a social relationship in which the domineering exerts some type of indirect violence, not necessarily physical against the dominated who might not be aware that said practices are against them, which results in them being accomplices in the domination to which they are subjected<sup>(3)</sup>.

In this direction, other authors point out that femicide is "the murder of a woman in which the violence is expressed against her, perpetuating the gender inequality which becomes a universal phenomenon, which ratifies the historical subordination, strengthens the power in relationships and legitimizes the violence against the supposed inferiority, framed in the absence of effective policies which permit the protection of their rights<sup>(4)</sup>".

In that sense, gender violence is the extreme manifestation of relationships of power and inequality<sup>(5)</sup>, and the reasons which frame them show the manner in which the rights of women, the definition of legal and political norms which blame women, women as object of abuse, and the preservation of established decisions in a relationship of gender inequality in contempt for women are all unknown<sup>(6)</sup>.

Preconceived and stereotypical beliefs of women can generate expressions of femicide victim blaming which becomes problematic because the different social agents do not always consider the reality that a woman was murdered but rather the moral and social implications that led to the criminal act<sup>(7)</sup>.

Violence against women is one of the worldwide problems which is actually being made visible by various organizations on a global level<sup>(8)</sup>. The rates of domestic abuse and femicide are especially high in Latin America, a region with the second highest rates of homicides of women in the world, only surpassed by Africa<sup>(9)</sup>. Within the 25 countries which present high and very high rates of femicide, 14 of these are in Latin America and the Caribbean, including El Salvador with the highest number of perpetrated femicides with 345 total cases, followed by Argentina with 251, and Honduras with 235. Mexico is one of the countries which is permanently an unsafe territory for women, data from the Executive Secretary of the National System of Public Security, signal that Mexico City and Ecatepec are the municipalities with the

highest numbers of registered femicide cases in the country with 341 cases between January through October in 2020<sup>(10,11)</sup>.

In Colombia, it is difficult to determine the real situation of femicide due to the major difficulty of the lack of information and the underreporting of data, also there is divergence in the concept of homicide and femicide; this divergence was resolved when the 1761 Law of 2015 went into effect in which the Penal Code was introduced, the autonomous criminal type of femicide in its simple and aggravated modalities; in the first, the legislator recognizes that the motive is to murder a woman because she is a woman, and in the second it is recognized in Colombia that the murder of a woman after a sexual assault is an aggravated femicide<sup>(1,12)</sup>.

In Latin America, Colombia occupies the second position in crimes against women with a 71.27%. Likewise, crimes in the environment of the couple or ex-partner registered one of the highest increases between 2000 and 2006, occupying the second position at the global level with a 51.28% after Chipre<sup>(13)</sup>.

Some studies have identified that women are mostly murdered by their partners, ex-partners or family members motivated by jealousy, disobedience, the woman's desire to end the relationship, among others. Also, different types of mechanisms exist which perpetrate femicide such as the use of firearms which is the most frequent, followed by cold weapons and less frequently being strangulation, hanging and burning<sup>(14)</sup>.

According to data from the Colombian Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in 2014, there were 1007 cases of femicide in Colombia, with the most number of events being in Valle del Cauca with 119 cases which represent 19.8% of the total number of cases. In 2015 the same institute reported 344 cases until May of that year of violent deaths of women with the highest figures in Valle del Cauca at 75 cases (21.8%)<sup>(15)</sup>.

As previously described, the purpose of the present study was to make visible the phenomenon of femicide based on the epidemiological characterization in Cali, Colombia between 2017 and 2019, since this is the city in the region of Valle del Cauca which has the highest number of cases of gender violence.

## Materials and Methods

A population-based descriptive study of secondary sources was done of 287 reports of violent deaths of women between 2017 and 2019 reported in the prosecutor's office; of these, 53 cases treated in the Crimes Against Women Unit were identified and analyzed in the same period of time and typified as femicide according to Colombian legislation. The epidemiological characterization of femicides was done using the database provided by said unit which permitted the identification of the sociodemographic study variables of victims such as age, occupation, marital status and education level; day and hour of occurrence of the events; mechanisms utilized and the process status.

## Statistical analysis

The collected data was stored in a database in Excel and was loaded into Epi-Info 7 for subsequent analysis. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the qualitative variables, whereas quantitative variables were analyzed through descriptive methods.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations for information management were maintained, such as confidentiality and anonymity as defined by international and national guidelines<sup>(16,17)</sup>. The study was approved according to the No. 01 Minutes of February 03, 2017 by the Ethics and Bioethics Committee as well as the No. 450-621118-26 Minutes of February 15, 2018 by the *Dirección General de Investigación* of the Santiago de Cali University. The Prosecutor's office was willing to provide the data related to the cases typified as femicide, according to the judicial privacy indicated by each case.

## Results

The analysis of the variables of the study are presented, keeping in mind that some are protected by the process privacy of the Prosecutor's office, which creates an ethical barrier in obtaining other data that would provide a better understanding of the behavior of this event.

Regarding age, results showed the occurrence of femicide had a range of 9 to 89 years, with an average of 34 years, with the group of 20 to 29 years at a 43.5% (CI 95% 29.84% - 57.72%), which has the highest frequency. Single women were the main victims at a 45.3% (CI=95% 31.56% - 59.55%). In reference to employment status, the most affected were women from various occupations with a 34% (CI=95% 21.52% - 48.27%).

Regarding education level, the highest frequency was high school graduate with 49.1% (CI=95% 35.06% - 63.16%) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of femicides, Cali 2017-2019

Variable	n=53	Total	
		Fr/ (%)	CI (95%)
<b>Age group</b>	Less than 20 years	4(7.6)	2.09-18.21
	20-29 years	23(43.4)	29.84-57.72
	30-39 years	13(24.5)	13.76-38.28
	40-49 years	6(11.3)	4.27-23.03
	50-59 years	4(7.6)	2.09-18.21
	60+ years	3(5.7)	1.18-15.66
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	24(45.3)	31.56-59.55
	Married	6(11.3)	4.27-23.03
	Common Law	22(41.5)	28.14-55.87
	Widow	1(1.9)	0.05-10.07
<b>Occupation</b>	Unemployed	1(1.9)	0.05-10.07
	Student	2(3.8)	0.46-12.98
	House keeper	8(15.1)	6.75-27.59
	Various jobs	18(34.0)	21.52-48.27
	House wife	14(26.4)	15.26-40.33
	Unknown	5(9.4)	3.13-20.66
	Cook	1(1.9)	0.05-10.07
	Independent	4(7.6)	2.09-18.21
<b>Education</b>	Elementary	19(35.9)	23.14-50.20
	High school	26(49.1)	35.06-63.16
	Technical	4(7.6)	2.09-18.21
	Professional	1(1.9)	0.05-10.07
	Unknown	3(5.7)	1.18-15.66

In reference to the day of the week, femicides occurred with the most frequency on Sundays at 20.8% (CI=95% 10.84% - 34.11%). Regarding the time of occurrence, it was between 6 am and 6 pm (Table 2), at 56.6% (CI=95% 42.28% - 70.16%).

**Table 2.** Femicides according to day and time of occurrence

Variable	n=53	Total	
		Fr (%)	CI (95%)
<b>Day</b>	Monday	6(11.3)	4.27-23.03
	Tuesday	7(13.2)	5.48-25.34
	Wednesday	9(17.0)	8.07-29.80
	Thursday	10(18.9)	9.44-32.00
	Friday	6(11.3)	4.27-23.03
	Saturday	4(7.6)	2.09-18.21
	Sunday	11(20.8)	10.84-34.11
<b>Time</b>	6 am - 6 pm	30(56.6)	42.28-70.16
	6 pm - 6 am	23(43.4)	28.14-56.87

The mechanism most utilized to commit femicide was short stabbing weapon at a 47.2% (CI=95% 33.30%-61.36%). followed by fire arms with 30.2%. In terms of perpetrators, 45.3% (CI=95% 31.56% - 59.55%) had charges pressed against them. Finally, 18.9% had been convicted (CI=95% 9.44% -31.97%) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Mechanisms of femicide and judicial process

Variable	n=53	Total	
		Fr (%)	CI (95%)
<b>Mechanism</b>	Fire arm	16(30.3)	18.34-44.34
	Short stabbing Weapon	25(47.2)	33.30-61.36
	Blow to the head	7(13.2)	5.48-25.34
	Hanging	2(3.8)	0.46-12.98
	Strangling	3(5.7)	1.18-15.66
<b>Charges pressed</b>	Yes	24(45.3)	32.56-59.55
	No	29(54.7)	40.45-68.44
<b>Sentence</b>	Yes	10(18.9)	9.44-31.97
	No	43(81.1)	60.03-90.56

## Discussion

Rates of violence against women are shockingly high worldwide. This widespread violation of human rights affects all countries and communities. Femicide as a consequence of extreme gender violence occurs daily and in all social contexts. Being a manifestation of inequality and discrimination against women<sup>(3)</sup>.

Regarding age, 79.2% of the femicides occurred between the ages of 20 and 49, with an average of 34 years. This figure is similar to data reported by Garcia and Franco in Bogota, Colombia during the 2015-2016 period, who observed that the average age at which femicides occur was 32 years<sup>(18)</sup>. Likewise, Larrea<sup>(19)</sup>, in a study carried out in Ecuador during the years 2016 and 2017, showed that 60% of femicides occurred in the age range of 19 to 40 years. On the other hand, a study conducted by Sanz and Heras *et al.*<sup>(20)</sup>, in Spain showed that the average age of femicide was 41 years. It is important to highlight that this event is not directly related to age but to the fact of being a woman, since it can occur at any stage of her life cycle.

In reference to the marital status, married women and those in common law accounted for 52.8% of the

total. Garcia and Franco found that in 41.1% of the cases, femicide occurred in married, common law or divorced women<sup>(12)</sup>. On the other hand, Larrea<sup>(19)</sup> reported that 38% of femicide cases affected either married or common law women. These results demonstrate that femicide is related to the marital status and couples relationships.

Regarding the level of education, 49.1% of femicide cases affected women with high school education. The Garcia and Franco study showed that in Bogota. 27.9% of femicides occurred in women with high school education. This behavior may be due to the fact that most women start couple relationships at an early age, which could make it difficult to continue their education training<sup>(18)</sup>.

The mechanism utilized to commit femicide was short stabbing weapon, with 47.2%. In their study carried out in Tlaxcala, Mexico. Aguilar Hernandez and Aguilar Gutierrez found that 27.9% of femicides occurred through beatings and the difference in this mechanism could be due to the fact that the majority of these events occur in the bedroom of the victims, where it is easier to utilize domestic elements such as short stabbing weapons<sup>(21,22,23)</sup>.

On the other hand, in 2009, Huerta and Jimenez showed in their report of the Colombian Forensic Sciences Institute that 11.976 were murdered and the most common mechanism to perpetrate femicide in half of the cases was through fire arm<sup>(12)</sup>. This indicates that no specific mechanism exists.

In 54.7% of the cases where charges were pressed there were no arrests made. This result is similar to that reported by Garcia and Franco, where 49.8% of the cases did not have arrest warrant.

The level of impunity for this crime is high as evidenced in 81.1% of the cases, where no sentence was given to the perpetrators<sup>(24,25,26)</sup>. In his article "Femicide in Latin America, legal vacuum or deficit of State law?". Sacomano<sup>(27)</sup> reports that the impunity rate for femicide in Latin America reaches 98% of the filed reports. Likewise, Honduras has an impunity percentage of 95%. These results are due to the inefficiency of the judicial system and the difficulty to typify the death of women as femicide.

The results obtained in this study indicates a gradual increase in this phenomenon which greatly impacts public health and the challenge lies in creating programs that permit and integral approach to the development of public policies which make it possible to advance and transform statewide practices geared towards decreasing this event. When taking into account the social and developmental implications which characterize the regions, it is evident that the socioeconomic and cultural levels are not the causes since women are victims of femicide for the single fact of being women.

## Conclusions

It can be concluded that femicide occurs at any age and has a high impunity grade in many occasions because the governmental policies against violence towards woman have not produced the desired results. Also the lax Colombian judicial system

prevents decreasing the negative impact of this phenomenon in society.

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