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"There Was No Other Option": Femicide Perpetrators' Sensemaking on Gender and Violence in Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Abstract

Femicide has received growing attention as an important social issue in Argentina and other Latin American countries. Currently, most of the sociological, psychological, criminological, and public health research available on the topic focuses on victims rather than perpetrators and has tended to be quantitative or from an etic perspective. Understanding how perpetrators make sense of violence and the femicide to contextualize, justify, or legitimize their crimes is crucial in preventing future crimes. A secondary analysis of thirty-three narrative interviews of convicted femicide perpetrators in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires was conducted. Interviews were coded in MAXQDA20 and analyzed thematically using deductive and inductive codes surrounding gender and violence. Three themes were salient in the analysis: violence as a resource triggered by abandonment; violence as denied harm-doing, justified contextually; and violence as the emotional transfer of pain. Threat of abandonment and necessity to physically communicate emotional turmoil emerged as themes where adherence to traditional gender norms was mechanized into violence. Few participants characterized themselves as violent men although they were all serving sentences for violent crimes. Violence was normalized and frequently justified by perpetrators. Participants viewed themselves exceptionally and contested the meaning of femicide and gender-based violence (GBV). This analysis offers recommendations for primary violence prevention and GBV interventions to center young men and potential perpetrators of intimate partner violence and femicide. In doing this, the burden of femicide prevention shifts from victims to perpetrators and the society at large.

Keywords: femicide, feminicide, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, violence against women, human rights, intimate partner homicide, public health, sensemaking, thematic analysis

Introduction

FEMICIDE—THE MURDER of a woman motivated, at least in part, because of her gender—is a gendered phenomenon, a public health issue and human rights violation (UNODC, 2022; WHO, 2002). As with other forms of domestic violence, femicide is underreported, underinvestigated, and underprosecuted (Biehler-Gomez et al, 2022; Dobash and Dobash, 2017; Fernández, 2012). Most of the data, statistics, and research on femicide are quantitative in nature (Stöckl et al, 2013); although evidence-based risk factors exist both for experiencing and perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV), there is a gap in understanding how perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV) make sense of the aggression. Understanding GBV from a qualitative emic perspective is crucial to building appropriate and effective violence prevention interventions and policy (Evans et al, 2018). Moreover, identifying the meanings and rationalities involved in harm-doing has proven to be central in designing programs for violent men and for engaging men in violence prevention policies (Jewkes et al, 2015).

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Previous research on femicide perpetrators has illustrated the relevance of understanding the stories that men tell to comprehend the social norms and interactional resources used in cases of GBV (Di Marco and Evans, 2021; Hearn, 1998; Mathews et al, 2015; Presser, 2013).

Between 2007 and 2017, there were 2,638 recorded femicides in Argentina, and in 2018, Argentina recorded the third highest number of registered femicides in Latin America (Statista, 2022). In keeping with global data on the perpetrators of female homicide, the vast majority of the perpetrators were close to the victim either as an intimate partner or family member (Matienzo, 2018). Before 2009, the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of femicide and violence against women sent a clear message—the crime was one of passion, and not a systemic phenomenon (Fernández, 2012; Segato, 2010). Although a series of laws to prevent and prosecute violence against women were enacted in 2009, unpunished murders of women remain high and have garnered the attention of human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Femicide was added to the Argentinian Penal Code in 2012. Although there is ongoing debate about the exact definition of femicide, this analysis will utilize the legal definition from the Argentinean penal code, which is, "a crime of murder perpetrated by a man against a woman in the context of gender violence" (Rodriguez-Ferrand, 2012). The law includes femicide as a type of aggravated homicide. Although legislative acknowledgment is progress, Argentine lawmaker Gabriela Alegre noted "... legislation and prison sentences are not enough. We have to confront the problem by changing the culture and educating people" (BBC News Mundo, 2020).

A challenging, yet relevant research question is how femicide perpetrators make sense of their crime. This article characterizes the sensemaking of femicide by the perpetrators in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. By focusing on the cultural ideas that convicted femicide perpetrators draw on in justifying their violence, the authors attempt to identify key meanings and rationalities involved in the neutralization of GBV. Moreover, in analyzing the data from a public health and human rights perspective, we provide recommendations to inform upstream violence prevention strategies targeting potential perpetrators of IPV, femicide, and other forms of GBV in Argentina.

Methods

Design

We conducted a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected from male femicide perpetrators in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The parent study sought to collect life-course narratives from femicide perpetrators (Di Marco and Evans, 2021). Interviews were conducted in three Federal and Municipal Penitentiary facilities in Buenos Aires between 2018 and 2021.

In the parent study, unstructured narrative interviews were conducted to encourage a conversation guided by the topics addressed by the participants and to ensure that emergent themes were addressed (Corbally, 2014). This approach was originally chosen to allow the sequences of events brought up by the men to be analyzed. Interviews began by asking the participants to tell their life stories and, in later sessions, to describe their intimate relationship. Follow-up questions, paraphrasing statements, and interjections were used as probing strategies. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim in Spanish.

Participants

Participants self-identified as cis-gender males older than 18 years, who were serving a sentence for an "aggravated homicide due to femicide" for a crime that occurred within the last 5 years. For this study, the authors used the Argentinean Penal Code's definition of femicide, which is "a crime of murder perpetrated by a man against a woman in the context of gender violence" (Rodriguez-Ferrand, 2012). Although we recognize the theoretical and political distinctions between femicide and feminicide (Carrigan and Dawson, 2012), the decision to use the legal definition of this country was based on an attempt to maintain coherence with the Argentine judicial framework. As a result of these inclusion criteria, all participants were men who murdered their female partners based on their gender. Some participants were serving a sentence for femicide in addition to other charges.

In the resulting sample, 39% ($n=5$) of the men completed primary school, 46% ($n=6$) had completed high school, and 15% ($n=2$) had university degrees at the time of the crime. The proportion of men with higher educational credentials in this group of interviewees was purposefully higher to encourage a comparison. The average age of the participants at the time of the interview was 32 years, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest being 48. Forty-six percent ($n=6$) were between 18 and 25, 31% ($n=4$) were between 26 and 35, and 23% ($n=3$) were 36 years or older when the crime was committed. At the time of the interviews, 38.5% ($n=5$) of men were between 18 and 25, 38.5% ($n=5$) were between 26 and 35, and 23% ($n=3$) were between 36 and over.

The average time in prison for the sample was 4 years.

Thirty-three narrative interviews were conducted, with 13 men in 3 correctional facilities in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Most participants were interviewed at least twice, two participants were interviewed only once, and one participant was interviewed seven times. Some spoke only briefly about the femicide, while others declined to speak about it entirely. The variance in the number of interviews was due to logistical considerations and the desires of the participants. Most interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes. Among the participants, nine participants committed femicides of their wife, current girlfriend, or regular sexual partner. Among the remaining four participants, two committed femicides on their former girlfriends, and two committed femicides on women they knew only briefly.

Data analysis

For this secondary analysis, interview transcripts were coded to identify how participants made sense of harm-doing and the femicide itself. The secondary analysis also included a review of the interviewer's notes for each interview. The analysis adhered to standards of rigor and validity in qualitative research by close collaboration between

members of the data collection, analysis, and writing team (Thomas, 2011).

A thematic analysis was conducted in MAXQDA 20 using memos, thick descriptions, and a combination of *a priori* and inductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After an initial read of the interviews, memos were made to summarize the broad topics within each case. All transcripts were coded using eight *a priori* codes determined by the literature: presentation of the self, definitions of violence, prior relationships, index relationship, prior experiences of violence, upbringing and socialization, legal/judicial trajectory, and explanations of femicide. Certain codes (i.e., presentation of the self) were reported from the emic perspective, but analyzed using an etic framework. Moreover, open codes were created based on their relevance in the interviews. Furthermore, maps in MAXQDA 20 were created to establish relationship between the codes (Smith, 2015).

The inductively created codes were then collated into seven broader categories: abandonment, possessiveness, triggers, contexts, justification, emotional transfer, and denial of harm-doing. A deeper analysis was conducted within the most frequently coded sections that related to this research question. Based on a constructivist perspective (Boyatzis, 1998), these sections were analyzed with an eye toward sensemaking, gender, and violence, to go beyond the semantic or explicit data (i.e., the words transcribed), and identify the underlying ideas, assumptions, and meanings.

To present the results of this article in a contextualized manner, the authors organized the following section in the three themes analyzed and explore each one of them by briefly describing the cases.

Ethics

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the information they shared would be used. Both written and verbal consent was obtained before enrolling a participant in the study. The informed consent form was designed in compliance with the guideline numbers 2857/2006 of the Argentinian National Scientific and Technical Research Council (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas—CONICET) "Guidelines for ethical behavior in Social and Human Sciences." Before implementation, the study was reviewed by the Bioethical Committee "Dr. Vicente Federico del Giúdice" of the National Hospital Prof. A. Posadas.

An additional determination from the Emory University Institutional Review Board was obtained for the purpose of the secondary data analysis; the study was found to be exempt due to its nature as a deidentified secondary analysis. Any reference to a specific participant in the results and discussion uses an assigned pseudonym. The pseudonyms used here are different than those used in the parent study.

Results

Three themes emerged from the data: (1) violence as a resource triggered by abandonment, (2) violence as denied harm-doing, justified contextually, and (3) violence as emotional transference of pain. These themes provided coherence to the stories told by the perpetrators.

Theme 1: Violence as a resource triggered by abandonment

The theme of abandonment and its biographical impacts emerged as a prime aspect in the interviews. The reference to loss of relatives, friends, and acquaintances draws on specific culturally available ideas of the effect that this event has as a means of managing moral character and motive. Abandonment was mentioned as a "because motive" (Schutz, 1962) and simultaneously as a neutralization technique (Sykes and Matza, 1957): it was referenced to rationalize and explain away their act, and to manage its moral implications. Losing a relative, being abandoned by a father, and experiencing the fragmentation of their social networks, among other events, were brought up to give meaning to their lives and specifically to the act of violence.

Participants who talked about loss in their lives mentioned these experiences as triggers for how they projected suspicion and accusations about leaving onto their partners. This suspicion was mechanized by controlling their partners' movement, employment status, access to money, and who they spent their time with. High levels of control were established early, setting expectations for the relationship. When challenged or if partners sought to change this dynamic, participants felt disrespected and that unspoken agreements had been violated—principally manifesting as a violation of gender norms. This was illustrated both in the unequal acceptance of previous abandonment in their own lives and in freedoms afforded in the intimate relationship.

For instance, Santiago's mother left him, his father, and his two sisters. His mother's departure was a large turning-point in Santiago's life and connections can be seen from how he processed that experience to how he spoke about his partner and women in general. In speaking about his mother, Santiago frequently utilized narratives around gender roles by speaking about how her actions were antithetical to what a wife or mother "should do." Santiago blamed his partner entering the workforce as a pivotal moment when the relationship worsened. When his partner started working, he said "she developed a taste for money" and repeatedly stated suspicions that she was planning on leaving him. The femicide occurred when she said she would leave, and he strangled her.

> We grabbed each other and I hit her with a hard punch. And she fell back right there in the living room. And she kept screaming. She would not stop saying that I was a beast, an animal and I don't know what else. When the son-of-a-bitch was her. It's very unfair. And I wanted for her to stop screaming because, I don't know. In the moment she said was going to leave me. That she was going to leave. And I strangled her.

Santiago's accounts illustrate two cross-cutting aspects of this theme. First, it shows how male-chauvinistic norms are intertwined in the rationalizations of the perpetrators. Ideas and expectations about money, work, and social roles were central components in his account. As Hearn (1998) and Presser (2004) point out, the fact that offenders provide these explanations suggests that accounting for the crime by referring past abandonment experiences (in this case, the fear of losing their partners) is, in the perception of the man,

a legitimate resource to make sense of the crime. Second, Santiago's case highlights that victim blaming—as a neutralization technique and, more broadly, the use of available narratives about women (Di Marco and Evans, 2021)—persists as a dominant rationalization strategy: it is a valid message to communicate their action.

In another case, Tomas' late wife started packing to leave after she found out that her husband had been giving her antidepressants without her knowledge. He felt he had no other option than to kill her. He said,

> I felt the escalation, that she was leaving, that if she left, I would not be able to help her, that it would be too late. And I felt angry that there was no other option.

Tomas took out a gun with the intention of scaring his wife into staying and shot her when she continued to try to leave. Her leaving triggered a fear that he would not be able to protect her making him feel unable to fulfill his masculine protector identity (Young, 2007). Counterintuitively, he said he shot her because he would not be able to protect her if she left.

The control and possessiveness over a female partner are key meanings woven in perpetrator's explanations. Tomas' story represents an exceptionally illustrative case: he medicated her as a control strategy. As proposed by Segato (2010), femicide can be understood as a communication act: not only does it indicate the position the victim should have, but it also represents—when considering the striking similarities in the cases—a broader message to other women and men. Control over female bodies is a recurrent topic in these interviews and an inseparable aspect when talking about abandonment.

Vicente killed his partner when she was trying to leave. His girlfriend was exhibiting signs of depression after a miscarriage. He had begun being intimate with other women although he and his girlfriend were still living together. One day, she began packing a bag to leave and he barricaded them both in their home to prevent her from doing so. He said,

> She wanted to leave. She wanted to leave my house. And I said no. And that's what happened. It was that she was leaving, she was putting things together, which I had also bought. And I said no. That she couldn't leave whenever she wanted. That it was my house. And she wasn't going to leave, just like nothing from one day to the next … You can't do that to someone. You can't get out of here, move on up and then grab your panties and leave. And so, we are at the end of it.

In describing the femicide, he explained that he beat her, and she hit her head. He continued to beat her even after she was unresponsive. Vicente's situation demonstrates how stringent gender norms related to control, possession, and power inside of the home can turn into fatal violence.

Even though Vincent had been in prison for 4 years by the time of the interview, the vivid description of the femicide and his strong defense of the crime prompt the question about the experience of violence. The feeling of righteousness of a violent crime is deeply rooted in the moral beliefs that the offenders have, reproduce, and enact (Katz, 1988; Müller, 2021). Vincent's defense of the legitimacy of the act resembles other cases, in which abandonment is used to justify the violence. Making sense of the femicide as a righteous act was a frequent cross-cutting aspect of the interviews.

This theme followed a consistent formula. The perceived violation of gender norms (i.e., the role of wife or girlfriend, the financial hierarchy) triggered violence as a means of communicating disapproval and restoring the gendered hierarchy. Violence was presented as a restorative and vindictive strategy in the intimate relationship (Hearn, 1998; Kimmel, 2002): when they feared losing their ability to control their partner (in any way), these men felt compelled to use explicit violence to reposition themselves. As Presser (2013) highlights, the fact that IPV appears when power is in jeopardy is grounded in dominant cultural discourses that set gendered positions.

Interestingly, the inverse logic was also referenced by participants describing hypothetical situations of what would have happened if they did not get violent. In those situations, participants indicated that if they did not get violent, their preferred gendered hierarchy would be disrupted. Describing hypothetical and counterfactual scenarios, by contrasting what happened and what could have occurred, allowed them to evaluate their stories within an optimistic and self-righteous frame (Labov, 1982, p. 226).

This theme aligns with previous analysis on formula stories that situate individual sensemaking within the established narratives in predominant value systems (Boira and Marcuello, 2013; Elisha et al, 2010). For these men, violence was viewed as a means to create and maintain social position as well as an expression of emotion and preferred outcome of the situation. This bolsters preexisting research on violence as restorative in reestablishing gendered moral and social standards (Kimmel, 2013).

Theme 2: Violence as denied harm-doing, justified contextually

Participants frequently did not self-identify as people who perpetrated violence despite the fact that all participants had committed femicide. This was evidenced by frequently repeating, "I'm not a violent person" or "I'm not like the other guys in here." This pattern affirms prior studies that concluded that perpetrators "exclude themselves from a problematic social group of 'violent offenders'" (Presser, 2004). To avoid stigmatization or being labeled negatively, offenders usually divert blame away from themselves.

Participants who maintained this presentation of themselves emphasized understanding the context of the femicide. In stressing the context of the femicide over the outcome of the event (death), perpetrators used stories of moral decency and denial of gendered motives. This self-impunity was illustrated in multiple participants specifically stressing, "you need to understand the context." "Context" referred to normalized experiences of violence. Therefore, in the minds of perpetrators, whether one defines themselves as a violent person or not is dependent on prior exposure and experiences of violence. For individuals who have witnessed or experienced violence, these experiences are all relative. This strategy to deflect stigmatization, rationalize the crime and, possibly neutralize it has been identified in previous studies (Di Marco and Evans, 2021; Hearn, 1998; Mathews et al, 2015).

In some instances, context referred to the situation in which someone was raised and the role that violence played in their upbringing. This included references to crime and violence at a young age either in their community or through interaction with juvenile detention centers. As Hearn (1998) found, the normalization of violence is not only the actual naturalization of harm, but also a rationalization strategy to justify a crime. Jorge said "stealing, stabbing and shooting was all I knew." Alonso, Pedro, and Mateo all described the intersections between the development of violent patterns and interactions with the criminal justice system before committing femicide. Pedro said, "jail is crime school" to characterize how his outlook and behavior was honed during his time in juvenile detention centers. Mateo described how his indoctrination into petty crime was learned from observing older peers who he admired during his adolescence.

The results bolstered previous research on crime as a means of attaining and maintaining access to masculine expression in youth culture such as taking girls out, going dancing, buying cool clothing, and accessing alcohol and drugs (Byrne and Trew, 2007; Ellis, 2017). Similarly, participants referenced learning that what they were told about what an education can get you did not line up with what they were seeing in their daily lives. That is to say that there was a disbelief that completing education could secure employment or a more comfortable lifestyle. This idea was especially prevalent among participants who grew up in neighborhoods with low socioeconomic status. Many cited their departure from formal education as a turning point toward criminal and potentially violent behaviors (drugs, crime, gang activity etc.), as other studies about violence and crime have indicated (Jarman, 2019).

Perpetrators emphasizing their own victimhood within a larger context was also common among perpetrators who felt that their case did not have a gendered motive. In such cases, perpetrators used context as a rationale for self-impunity when referring to community norms around violence—including blaming the antifemicide movement for their imprisonment. Men felt that the charge of femicide had been pinned on them to justify the existence of the social movement.

For example, Joaquin and his friends' crew went to intimidate a man who had hit his friend; at the time the same man was dating one of Joaquin's ex-girlfriends. The situation turned violent, and Joaquin ended up killing the man. Joaquin's ex-girlfriend "got in the way" of the situation and he killed her. He said, "My ex was there, she had put herself in a situation where she didn't belong ... When the [men] are fighting, you don't have to intervene, she got in the way." He claimed that because she was a former girlfriend, the courts charged him with femicide even though the interaction was not motivated by her or her gender.

> I mean, it didn't look good. And you see that what matters is that it looks good, that they create the story to say it in some way. It doesn't matter that ... there was really no intention of hurting her or that something like this had never happened, something so heavy. No. It just matters how they fit things in, the situation. And besides, we must not lose sight of this happening at the moment when they bring to light this [thing] of femicide and want to make it an important issue, then they need cases. And I'm not a scapegoat, because what happened happened, but it wasn't femicide. It wasn't that I wanted to kill her because of her status as a woman. I don't know what that means. But to be honest, I feel like I'm a victim of this shitty context.

Self-identifying as someone who perpetrates violence, acknowledging the agency that perpetrators of violence have, and accepting responsibility for the charge are differentiating factors between those who desist from criminal behavior and those who do not (Liem and Richardson, 2014). This theme could be interpreted as condemning the condemners (Sykes and Matza, 1957), by using a dominant cultural discourse focused on antifeminist rhetoric. This was evident in denying the role that gender played in the occurrence of violence, appealing to higher loyalties, and blaming the antifemicide movement and the courts for the "label" used.

Furthermore, when appealing to higher loyalties, participants focused on notions of loyalty to a crew and defending one's honor—traditionally masculinity reinforcing motivations—rather than acknowledging responsibility for the murder they committed. Participants would neutralize their action by assuming that similar dynamics happen in all relationships, blurring the gender-specific aspect of their crime, and positioning themselves as victims or scapegoat of antifemicide laws.

A subtheme of not identifying with or understanding the specific term femicide was also present. Some interviewees explicitly talked about their confusion of the term and others directly expressed disagreement with the concept: "It makes no sense," "It's a discriminatory legal figure," "There is not equivalent law for women." Along with presenting themselves as victims with no agency in the judicial system, confrontation with the term femicide highlighted the political nature of the crimes (Segato, 2010). This aspect of the theme identified in the accounts underscores two elements. First, it illustrates the contextualized nature of the crime and the sensemaking (i.e., using current discourses in Argentina public debates, reproducing hegemonic patriarchal speeches). Second, it evidences that the foundations of the crime are linked to the legitimacy of certain stories to instigate and sustain harmful actions (Presser and Sandberg, 2015).

Theme 3: Violence as transference of emotional pain

The final theme was violence as a tool to transfer and communicate emotional discomfort and pain. In the interviews, the use of violence was a recurrent and central topic addressed by the participants. After a fight about him coming home later than expected and dinner getting cold, Santiago's girlfriend went out dancing. In the fight that ensued, he described violence as the transference of his emotional pain by saying,

> When she arrived [home] we fought and yes, I slapped her. But I swear, it was something stronger than me. It's just that your girl puts you in that place of suffering, leaves you there, and [a man is] a machine where anything can happen. And she escaped one blow, crying and carrying on. [pauses] After everything that's

> happened, I see it differently. It was the first time something like this had happened. But I swear to you, I lived it like I couldn't contain myself. And she was doing that to me.

Santiago and Marcos both expressed wanting to make their partner feel the same pain physically that they were feeling emotionally. Santiago said, "she made me feel disposable" after his partner bought a store-bought cake for his birthday instead of making a homemade cake herself. In all of the fights that he described, he framed the violence as a reaction to something that she had done. He justified violence against his partner as manifestations of his emotional reactions to nonviolent acts from his partner. "She went out dancing," "she bought a cake instead of making one," "there were messages from another man on her phone"—these acts hurt his feelings or made him feel threatened and he physically hurt her to communicate his pain.

Both Santiago and Marco explained their violence as being prompted by suspected infidelity. Furthermore, both described a situation of escalating violence in their relationship. Marcos drew on masculine provider narratives that he felt were violated. He was hurt at his wife's suspected infidelity saying, "after all I had done for her. After putting a roof over her head and providing for her." Marcos described the fight that ensued after he had gone through his partner's phone and found messages from another man.

> It was like I was gathering smoke. And I exploded. I erupted. I grabbed a jar and threw it at her. With all the strength I had. I didn't think, I just wanted to unload. And I threw a bottle at her. She broke down and started crying and screaming. And I hit her. I wanted to unload. I wanted her to understand what I felt inside. Like that rage.

In another case, Tomas's wife was exhibiting symptoms of depression after her children grew up and moved out of the house. She wanted to start spending more time outside of the home and get a job to fill her time. Tomas was deeply hurt by this notion. He said,

> I think she was depressed because she didn't have a purpose. And there I realized that she wasn't taking me into account. I know it's not best to say something like this, but what about me? Because I understand the kids are gone, but I was still there. That was very painful ... It's crazy. I couldn't stand it. It was very, very hard. I didn't know how to handle the situation.

In Alonso and Juan's cases, the murder of their ex-partner and partner, respectively, was linked to communicating anger at their partner's decisions. Alonso's ex-girlfriend had gotten married to someone else while he was in prison. He said, "I went to see her and she was talking about her husband and she was rubbing it in my face." In defense of this machismo reaction, he said "she was going to fuck me over ... I had to fuck her over before she fucked me over." Juan killed his wife when she decided to buy tickets to her preferred vacation destination instead of his. A few months before the femicide, Juan had been fired from his job for someone else's mistake. Although he was frequently belittled and mistreated at work, he did not report any violence or aggression toward his male counterparts.

Both Alonso and Juan's stories reflect the broader perceived morality in maintaining a gendered power dynamic that situates the perpetrator as in charge and their partner's action as a violation of that hierarchy. The only option, from their perspective, was to communicate that discomfort and perceived violation through violence.

In contrast to men who focused their accounts on the contexts, the judicial system, and their upbringing (placing the locus of explanation externally) (Di Marco and Evans, 2021), the aforementioned cases organized their stories by emphasizing an emotional reaction. The femicide was explained as a sentimental response to a prior wrongful act; hence, violence was performed on a blameworthy victim. This type of explanations has been identified in previous studies (Di Marco, 2022; Dobash et al, 2009), in which the aggression is depicted as a consequence of another action and, to some extent, an action out of the control of performers.

The theme of transference of emotional pain was presented by the interviewees as an experiential description of violence (Katz, 1988). The harm they described and how the actions of their partners/ex-partners were presented were not only a narration of how they felt—which has been explored as the phenomenological basis of GBV (Elisha et al, 2010; Watt, 2011)—but also a way to rationalize the femicide (using "believable" and "communicable" stories) (Presser, 2013). Hence, this theme contributes to a broader understanding of how perpetrators make sense of femicide by focusing on the sensible domain of the violence performed: their aggression is seen as righteous and defensive at the same time.

Discussion

This article was an inquiry into how femicide perpetrators make sense of their crime. The authors identified three main themes revolving around the meanings and use of violence. These topics were ways to rationalize their actions and provided a way to understand how femicide, gender norms, and expected roles are interconnected.

First, experiences of abandonment were presented as a biographical turning-point that triggered possessiveness. In the conversations, this topic had a dual role. First, based on perpetrator's stories, they appear to have a significant impact on controlling behaviors. Second, and most importantly, it was used as a legitimate justification for violence, since being abandoned is experienced as a worse outcome than inflicting violence. The risk of abandonment was presented as part of a victim blaming rationale (Sykes and Matza, 1957) to deal with the moral consequences of the crime and, hence, highlights that violence is used as a valid resource when power is perceived to be in jeopardy (Presser, 2013).

Specifically, the femicides that resulted from men panicking at their partners' alleged attempted departures stressed the perceived importance of possession and control in a relationship, and a moral defense of gendered responsibilities in a romantic partnership. In the moral economy illustrated by these men (Karandinos et al, 2014), possession and control outweigh violence and the victims' well-being. While the authors cannot know whether their partners actually intended to leave them, perpetrators believed that

their partners' intention triggered a violent response. Most importantly, this theme is an indicator of how physical violence can be perceived as a legitimate means of controlling women (Segato, 2010). Tomas felt that if his wife left, he would have no way of protecting her from the world (his perceived responsibility as a man) and there would be nobody to take care of him domestically (the responsibility projected onto her as a wife).

Some participants, such as Vincente, portrayed masculine provider narratives. They believed that because they have provided housing and economic support to their partner, their partner has relinquished their right to leave. When their partner tried to leave, violence was seen as a way to enforce their own moral order. This is mirrored by the conclusions of Dobash and Dobash (2011) who state that violence is used "to enforce their own moral order and to punish perceived transgressions from it ... their beliefs and orientations provide them with a cognitive foundation for justifications and rationales for the violence" (p. 114).

Perceived infidelity was a subtheme within abandonment. Santiago, Pedro, and Marcos all committed femicide in the same episode that they suspected infidelity and felt that this was evidence that their partner was trying to leave the relationship. While constant jealousy is a known femicide risk factor (Campbell et al, 2003), this does not fully explain the rationality behind the act. The authors observed a consistent symbolic formula for the violence that appeared within this theme: the female partner's perceived violation of gender norms triggered violence designed to communicate disapproval and reestablishment of the gender norms *status quo*. The inverse was also present in the underlying assumption of perpetrators: if they do not get violent, their masculinity will be threatened. In this way, violence was seen as a means to create and maintain a social position and to express emotions.

These feelings could result from perceived lack of control of their partner or family, or fears of infidelity and abandonment. As Hearn (1998) and Kimmel (2002) suggest, violence is used as a restorative resource. This theme supports claims that "if masculinity is based on impermeable defenses and the feeling of being in control, then violence may be restorative, returning the situation to the moment before that sense of vulnerability and dependency was felt and one's sense of masculinity was so compromised," (Kimmel, 2013, p. 177).

The second theme, that femicide perpetrators do not view themselves as violent, is crucial in understanding the cultural normalization of violence. As qualitative studies have stressed (Di Marco and Evans, 2021; Presser, 2013; Presser, 2004), participants diverted blame and responsibility for the crime. Segato (2003) coined the term *dribble* to conceptualize the maneuvers that violent offenders perform to exempt themselves from criminal responsibility. In their minds, violence was justified and the femicide was not seen intrinsically as a violent act, but a product of the circumstances.

As Ellis (2017) suggests, living in contexts of hypermasculine gender identities allows men to contest the labels of being violent and absolve themselves from guilt linked to harm-doing, independent of what their behaviors may otherwise suggest. In the case of the participants, differentiating themselves from violence through diverse rationalizations and available cultural discourses (i.e., antifeminist, patriarchal, backlash discourses) has been pointed out by a wide range of studies (Di Marco and Evans, 2021; Hearn, 1998; Presser, 2013; Presser, 2004). In this case, it is used to justify violence against women. In addition, the fact that participants attempted to negotiate the meaning of violence, responsibility, and ultimately agency was linked to the fact that they saw women as blameworthy victims. As Pereboom (2021) argues, the sense of blameworthiness features, essentially, a belief that the wrongdoer is an appropriate target of resentment.

Furthermore, application of neutralization technique theory accounts for the disconnection between committing a femicide and self-identifying as a violent person, which has been noted in other studies (Boira and Marcuello, 2013; Mathews et al, 2015; Sykes and Matza, 1957). Although the laws in Argentina have changed in the past decade to improve the language, prosecution process, sentencing, and accountability in addressing femicide, cultural dialogue surrounding gender was not reflected in the participants' transcripts. This is evidenced by participants not identifying a gendered motive, even blaming antifemicide movements, while serving a sentence for femicide.

Moreover, the fact that the term "femicide" was a matter of debate in the interviews illustrates the political nature of the crime. Participants contested the meaning of femicide, gender, and violence. The killing of women is a communicative act that transcends each specific crime (Segato, 2010). This aspect underscores that the sensemaking of the crime (and also the meanings involved in GBV in general) as inseparable from cultural context. At the same time, the foundations of the crime are linked to hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2017), the legitimacy of certain stories to instigate and sustain harmful actions (Presser and Sandberg, 2015).

In the final theme, a concerning rationality emerged in perpetrators' justification for their violent behavior; namely, perpetrators referenced that they needed to make their partners physically feel the emotional pain that they were experiencing. In this way, the femicide was seen as transference of the emotional pain the perpetrator was feeling onto their partner. Similar findings have been presented in studies where male perpetrators of violence claim that something their partner did or said made them feel inadequate, and they felt the need to show their physical control of the situation to stop that feeling (Dobash et al, 2009). Traditional views of masculinity (and machismo culture) do not prioritize (and often demonize) men emoting. Emotional regulation skills are often underdeveloped especially when this doctrine is adopted at a young age. For instance, Hearn (1988) refers to emotional illiteracy. This enables environments where violence seems the only option to communicate and deal with emotions.

Prevailing theories on this dichotomy elucidate the danger that a highly patriarchal society has in creating environments where violence can occur. At a societal and cultural level, the difference between what will make someone turn violent with their wife or girlfriend in the face of humiliation and stay calm if humiliated by a boss or peer is that they feel they are entitled to do so (Kimmel, 2013). This phenomenon was illustrated in Juan's story. He did not report getting violent with his boss because that was not within his right in that hierarchy or relationship. Conversely, he felt he had the right

to be violent with his wife when she made a decision that was different from his preference. This is an example of colonization narratives where men who feel emasculated and oppressed in their public lives present as hypermasculine and oppressive in their private ones (Viveros-Vigoya, 2016).

The three themes revolving around the sensemaking of violence explored in this article highlight two main aspects of the femicide. First, these ways to make sense of the crime were presented as legitimated explanations to neutralize, rationalize, and communicate the act: stories about being abandoned or betrayed, being an "underdog," or being the target of emotional suffering. As Presser and Sandberg (2015) stress, these meanings serve as the foundation of the violent acts and, at the same time, as a way to explain it. Drawing on Maruna and Hopes' (2015) theoretical perspective, these rationalizations were not merely individual neutralization strategies, but circulating and dominant discourses about violence, masculinity, femininity, and worth. Second, these aspects indicate the experiential aspect of violence sensemaking (Katz, 1988). Violence was seen as righteous, justified, uncontrollable, and instinctual. Men acted as a consequence of experiencing relationships and actions with these cultural lenses.

While evidence-based violence prevention programming has had well-documented success in the past few decades, the majority of the programming depends on GBV victims either identifying unhealthy aspects of their relationship or escaping once the violence has begun. Over the past 30 years, the rates of intimate partner homicide have decreased, but the vast majority of that decrease is in female murder of male partners (Spencer and Stith, 2020). Rates of male-perpetrated homicide remain high (Kimmel, 2013; Spencer and Stith, 2020). Therefore, the authors recommend designing violence prevention interventions that target harmful meanings and rationalities in potential GBV and femicide perpetrators. In doing so, the burden of violence prevention will be the responsibility of the perpetrator instead of the victim.

Limitations

As with most secondary data analysis, this analysis is limited in that the primary author was not present at the interviews. However, the original interviewer is a member of the research team and was able to advise on the nuances of the data. Another limitation is that the research team did not have access to legal files and police or hospital records. Therefore, the authors were not able to triangulate the information given in the interviews, which would have contributed to analyzing a more robust source of information. However, as this analysis sought to understand how perpetrators of femicide relate to violence and gender from an emic perspective, the veracity of the participants' accounts does not compromise the analysis.

This sample was limited to self-identified heterosexual cisgendered men and therefore excluded same-sex couples or other gender identity dyads. In addition, as the authors came into contact with participants through the Argentinian correctional facility system, the sample only includes perpetrators who were convicted of femicide and excludes those who were not charged or those who had never been prosecuted. Lastly, the sample does not include perpetrators who committed murder-suicide. This is of particular significance, as globally, the majority of premeditated femicides and family annihilations are murder-suicides (Kimmel, 2013).

Conclusions

Femicide is gendered phenomena, a public health issue, and human rights violation, methodologically difficult to study in a qualitative manner. Although legislative efforts to address femicide investigation and prosecution have been made, cultural machismo and patriarchy enable environments where femicide continues to occur. This analysis addresses the gap in knowledge about experiences of gender norms, violence, and femicide from the perspective of male perpetrators of femicide. Through this study the authors understand from a qualitative emic perspective how perpetrators of femicide make sense of the crime and the meanings involved in this process. In doing so, they are able to identify key meanings attached to women, relationships, possessiveness, and suffering, and inform violence prevention interventions aimed at primary violence prevention.

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