



Mariana Berlanga Gayón*

Femicide, A “Normal” Crime

The battle to transform language is one of the characteristics of our era. The different feminisms existing in Mexico and the world show that. In recent years, we women have begun to take the floor after centuries of silence, or, rather, after having been repeatedly silenced. However, when we take the floor, we also change language. So, it is appropriate to ask what the power of words is. To what extent can the revolution in language cause changes in women’s reality?

Today, it’s commonplace to see changes in the letters in some words; grammatical rules are even transformed to reflect other realities. This means that, one way or another, we are changing the symbolic order. What tangible consequences might we expect from these little-big changes? How can we measure the impact of these new ways of speaking?

* Mariana is a professor and researcher at the Mexico City Autonomous University (UACM); you can contact her at berlanga_mariana@hotmail.com.

In Mexico, for example, we have included the word “femicide” in our vocabulary to speak of a very specific—if recurring and normalized—crime. A brutal crime, whose effects are often minimized. A crime that cannot be understood if not for the inequality in the living conditions of men and women, but also if not for the other structural elements that make it possible and even justify it: increasingly precarious working conditions, racism, class bias, the complex power relations of a consumer society, etc. Femicide refers to the murder of a woman for simply being a woman or other gender-related reasons; but, while all women are targets of femicide, not all of us are equally vulnerable.

Today, Mexico is the world’s most dangerous place for women. For thirty years, we have been denouncing the problem, which continues to grow year by year. Official sources say that in the first half of 2020, thirteen women were murdered every day. This is the highest number in the country’s history. Unfortunately, the two years that follow-

ed have not registered a substantive drop. In June 2023 alone, eighty officially recognized feminicides occurred.¹

I mention the numbers to give the reader an idea of the dimension of the problem, although we know that there are not actually any trustworthy figures, as the Inter-American Human Rights Court stated in its findings in the 2009 Cotton Field case.² This is precisely something that shows the authorities' lack of political will to resolve the problem. The good news is that, despite this, today it is possible to talk about this violence, which used to be "invisible." To do that, we have had to revolutionize our way of expressing ourselves in everyday life, but also in the field of jurisprudence.

If we think in terms of language, it is interesting to remember that when we began to talk about "feminicide" in Mexico in the early 2000s, we were told that it wasn't such a big thing. Government authorities on all levels said that we feminists were exaggerating, and several sectors of society questioned the relevance of the term, saying that the murders of men were just as important. We're talking about a country in which justice is practically inaccessible for the majority of the population. In that sense, the question was understandable to a certain extent: Why make the differentiation between the murders of men and of women?

According to the Spanish Royal Academy of Language, a crime is a "grave offense," "a wrongful or reprehensible action." In this sense, we can say that all murders are equally reprehensible because they put an end to the life of another human being. However, the act that the word "feminicide" refers to has a particular logic: this is a crime that cannot be explained without taking into account women's place in our society; that is, what is expected of them, the treatment they usually receive, and the little that they are valued. In this sense, speaking of feminicide is strategic when what it involves is the denunciation of

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a social problem and making visible the violence that until very recently was considered "normal," and even in some cases, "deserved."

The best-known precedent for using this term can be found in the 1992 book by Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*.³ It is important to point out that Russell was already a pioneer in the use of the term, when she was the first to introduce it into the legal field when she testified at the 1976 International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels.

However, the first definition of "femicide" as such is the one Russell and Radford put forward in their book: the murder of women by men, motivated by hatred, degradation, pleasure, or a feeling of ownership of women; in the end, they summarize it as the misogynist murder of women by men.⁴

It is important to note that this first definition is understood as part of feminist theoretical background knowledge. In that sense, feminicide is the extreme of an anti-woman continuum of terror that includes a large number of kinds of verbal and physical abuse such as rape; torture; sexual slavery (particularly in prostitution); incest and extra-familial sexual child abuse; physical and emotional mistreatment; sexual harassment (by phone, on the street, in the office, and in the classroom); genital mutilation (clitoridectomy, excision, infibulation); unnecessary gynecological operations (unneeded hysterectomies); forced heterosexuality, sterilization, or maternity (through the criminalization of contraceptives and abortion); psychosurgery; denial of food to women in certain cultures; and cosmetic surgery and other mutilations in the name of beauty. If these forms of terrorism end in death, they are feminicide. This nuanced definition puts the emphasis on the fact that it is systematic and gradual violence; and that is just what so-called "Third-World" feminists will later take on board in light of the Mexican reality and that of Latin America in general.

We should remember, then, that in the early 2000s, Marcela Lagarde proposed using the term "*feminicidio*" (feminicide) as a possible translation of the English word "femicide." In addition to being a professor and researcher at the UNAM, at that time she was also a federal deputy heading up the Special Commission to Investigate and Follow Feminicide-Related Investigations in Mexico and with the Administration of Justice in the Fifty-ninth Legislature of the Chamber of Deputies (2003-2006).

From the point of view of anthropologist Lagarde, translating “femicide” (which means the murder of women) literally as “*femicidio*” was not enough. In her view, that is a term equivalent to “homicide,” which is why she preferred the word “feminicide,” since the aim was to highlight the whole group of crimes against humanity associated with the murder and disappearance of women. Lagarde defines feminicide as the group of crimes against humanity involved in the murders, the kidnappings, and the disappearances of little girls and women in the framework of institutional collapse. It is the break-up of the rule of law that favors impunity; that is why feminicide is a crime attributable to the state; and it happens when historical conditions generate aggressive hostile social practices against the integrity, development, health, freedoms, and the lives of women.

In several Latin American countries, however, people have opted to use the term “femicide.” Over recent decades, we have seen that, actually, the choice between a one translation and the other is not relevant; what is important is that today, we have words to designate that which in the past was called a “crime of passion” or “family violence.”

The word “feminicide” (or “femicide”) is important because it emphasizes the power relation previously established by society, denaturalizing the violence of men who think that women are objects that they own. In that sense, the word points to the individual responsibility of the perpetrator of the crime, but it also underlines the social relationship that made it possible and considers it a factor that compounds the crime.

This is not a crime of passion because the problem is not passion, but the idea that a man can end a woman’s life simply because he considers her “his.” It is also not family violence because power relations exist inside families, and it is not the family as a whole that exercises the violence, but the figure at the top of its hierarchy.

Words have the power to name realities, and if they’re not named, it is as if they didn’t exist. This is where the symbolic power stems from of the laws that first and foremost define and establish the frontier between what is and what is not a crime. In 2011, feminicide was categorized as a crime in Mexico’s Constitution, but that has not made for a reduction in the number of cases. This shows us that words are important, but the process of transforming society is long and complex. We might say that it is by

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no means linear; there are steps forward and steps back; that the struggle over the meaning of words coexists with the multiple resistances to accepting change, because once violence is normalized, a word is not enough to stop it.

In this sense, it is also appropriate to look at what the laws do not “name.” A great deal of debate has been held about the pertinence of using the terms “femicide” or “feminicide” in criminal law. However, little has been done about all the forms of violence that precede a woman’s murder and that are apparently unclassifiable.

In effect, as its very definition states, the term “feminicide” takes into account the extreme point of patriarchal violence expressed in all dimensions of life and that are, therefore, difficult to evade. We can say, then, that not all women are murdered, but that the system does put them permanently at risk. To say it in another way: many elements threaten women’s lives, although many of them manage to survive.

We’re talking here about the dynamics of “love” or “romantic” relationships, but also about the hyper-sexualization of little girls, who are taught that they must always be “desirable,” because their worth depends on it. We’re talking about the anorexia aesthetic that leads women to hate their own bodies and to want to disappear. It is no exaggeration when we say that the demand to be thin can lead to death, as the histories of women with grave eating disorders show. The violence in this case is symbolic, but it has concrete effects in women’s physical and psychological health.

On the other hand, we have the brutal violence expressed in public spaces, but perhaps the most concerning of all is the concealed variety. I am referring to the incest within families and the violence in other spaces such as the school or the Church, all institutions that usually protect the abuser. The victims are practically condemned to silence because their subordinate relationship does not allow them to accuse their attackers; sometimes they

are not even able to assume the fact that they are victims of sexual violence, leading them to blame themselves and their inability to face their abusers, but also to not be able to use the terms “abuse” or “rape.” This can end in suicides that are explained away by the “emotional instability” of a person who sees no way out and who, therefore, ends by inflicting punishment on herself.

On the other hand, we can see that men’s own sexual education and going to prostitutes contributes importantly to normalizing sexual violence. They often feel pressured by cultural codes to reiterate their masculinity, that is, to always display their power, sexual prowess, and aggressiveness. Here, we’re talking about what Argentinian anthropologist Rita Laura Segato calls the “mandate of masculinity.” Unequal wages for men and women is another problem that discourages women from separating from their husbands or life partners, creating a dynamic of dependence that favors increased violence and the circle of silences.

In Mexico, women have been jailed for having an abortion, even when what they have really had is a miscarriage. Last September 6, 2023, Mexico’s Supreme Court handed down a decision that declared it unconstitutional for federal law to criminalize abortion.⁵ However, the relationship between femicide and the criminalization of abortion is clear when we see the point to which women’s lives are not considered of value. Women seem to be at the service of society for bringing children into the world, regardless of whether their lives are in danger.

Given the complexity and multiple dimensions of the problem, the case of Mexico is clear evidence that femicidal violence is not stopped by decree; however, the fact of being able to name the problem is not a small thing. Recognizing that femicide is a specific crime with concrete consequences is a crucial step in the quest for justice for women. But not only that: naming “femicide” gives us the possibility of beginning to stop considering it “normal.” Naming femicidal violence helps us visualize other possible kinds of relationships, other kinds of teaching that can lead to a real transformation of society. It is not a matter of defending a word; it is a matter of naming a reality that was silenced for centuries and that, now, thanks to the power of the word, which has accompanied the action of many women, is coming to light. In this sense, having a term to be able to name the murders of women because they are women is, in and of itself, hopeful. Nam-

ing the crime is the first step toward its no longer being “normal.” ■■■

Further Reading

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—*Territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo Estado: La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez* (Brasilia: Departamento de Antropología, Universidad de Brasilia, 2004).

Notes

¹ Azucena Rangel, “Junio, el mes con más femicidios de 2023; Edo-mex encabeza las cifras,” *Milenio*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.milenio.com/policia/junio-el-mes-con-mas-femicidios-de-2023-en-mexico>.

² See the Inter-American Human Rights Court Cotton Field decision at <https://jurisprudencia.corteidh.or.cr/vid/i-court-h-r-883976790>. [Editor’s Note.]

³ Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell, eds., *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), <https://www.dianarussell.com/f/femicde%28small%29.pdf>. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, press release no. 314/2023, September 6, 2023, <https://www.internet2.scjn.gob.mx/red2/comunicados/noticia.asp?id=7504>. [Editor’s Note.]