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Measuring femicide empirically. Theoretical challenges and methodological dilemmas

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Abstract

The term femicide features prominently in the media lexicon and common parlance, with nuances that often depart from its original conceptualization as formulated by the feminist sociologist Diana E. H. Russell in the second half of the 1970s. Despite this wide use of the term, much remains to be done in developing an operational definition of the concept whereby femicide can be more accurately gauged from the many available datasets, starting with a quantification of its extent. This paper assesses the potential and limitations of the operational definitions of femicide that have been proposed to date in Italy and internationally, in the light of current data. In doing so, we will rely heavily—though not exclusively—on new data concerning Italy which have never before been used for this purpose.

Keywords: femicide, violence against women, methodology, operationalization.

Introduction: Conceptualization of Femicide and Presentation of the Problem

From its beginnings, social research has grappled with the often daunting challenge of transforming the abstract concepts needed to understand human and social reality into elements that can be measured and tested using empirical data. The starting point of this process, known as operationalization, consists of developing an operational definition of the concept in question.

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At times, however, concepts 'get out of hand' and begin to circulate in common use even before they have been appropriately defined and measured. Femicide—to whose political and analytical importance we will return in a moment—is a clear example of such a concept. Accordingly, this paper will deal with the operationalization of femicide, with a particular focus on the situation in Italy.

The term femicide was first used in the mid-1970s by the American writer Carol Orlock (Russell 1992) as the title of a book she was planning to write. Though the book was never published, the feminist sociologist Diana E. H. Russell heard about it and was impressed by the term's evocative power: it was she who gave it the meaning it has today, and was the motive force behind its initial spread. Russell first spoke of femicide in public during the first International Tribunal on Crimes against Women, held in Brussels in 1976 (for the Tribunal's proceedings, see Russell & Van de Ven 1976). On that occasion, Russell talked about the misogynist killing of women by men or, as she later put it after refining the concept, "the killing of females by males because they are female" (Russell 2011). We are thus dealing with killings whose cultural roots are in a setting dominated by a patriarchal ideology (Radford & Russell 1992; Russell 1992; Russell & Harmes 2001). In an attempt to unpack this concept, we can define femicides as killings of women perpetrated by men produced by inequalities between the genders and in the societal relations between them. These episodes often bear the unmistakable stamp of misogyny or possessiveness. They may be marked by a sense of affirmation and legitimation of male power and superiority, and the presumed rights stemming from it, or by a manifestation of sexual violence—sadistic at times—against women (Todesco 2024; see also Grzyb et al. 2018). While these elements are here listed as if they were analytically separate, they are often intermingled in episodes of femicide.

In Russel's intentions and formulation, the concept of femicide carried a powerful political import, and should be viewed against the wider backdrop of the battles waged by the feminist movements: the aim is to politicize—evocatively and effectively—and at the same time challenge, male violence against women (Grzyb et al. 2018), emphasizing its 'gendered' nature. The purpose is to go beyond defining such acts using the classic—and generic—term homicide, which is neutral with respect to the gender dynamics that often underlie episodes in which a woman is murdered[1]. In any case, as Russell herself points out, "You can't mobilize against something with no name" (see Corradi et al. 2016, 976).

[1] In many languages, the word homicide is applied irrespective of the victim's sex, although in reality its etymology tells us otherwise: the term derives from the Latin homicidium, formed from the words homo (man) and cidium (from caedĕre, to kill). The same is true, for example, of the definition given of this serious crime in Italian law, as indicated in the current version of Article 575 of the Criminal Code—"Whoever who causes the death of a man shall be punished with imprisonment for not less than twenty-one years."

Moreover, the concept of femicide has shown itself to be an equally powerful analytical tool for gaining an understanding of certain aspects of social reality. In terms of structural gender inequalities and the resulting male violence again women, femicide stands at one end of a continuum (Caputi & Russell 1992; see also Kelly 1987) as its most extreme expression, the most brutal form of abuse and subjugation that a man can exercise against a woman. It is the final outcome, as Russell (1992; 2011) tells us, of sexist behavior escalated to true terrorization (in this connection, see also Johnson 2008; 2011; Johnson et al. 2014).

The concept of femicide is also useful for a more general understanding of murder. It is a specific and distinctive category of crime, without which it would not be possible to classify many cases of men killing women: those that are principally motivated not by criminality, nor by perennial quarrels and resentments—where the perpetrator at long last takes justice into his own hands—and not even by petty squabbles that spark a sudden explosion of violence between near or total strangers. Rather, they stem from inequality between the genders and in their relationships[2].

The importance of the concept of femicide is borne out by the close attention that supranational institutions have devoted to this heinous crime over the years, partly in response to the so-called Istanbul Convention, or in other words the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence opened for signature in 2011. This was followed in 2012 by the Vienna Declaration on Femicide, produced during a United Nations symposium held on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The Declaration defines femicide as follows:

> *Femicide is the killing of women and girls because of their gender, which can take the form of, inter alia: 1) the murder of women as a result of domestic violence/intimate partner violence; 2) the torture and misogynist slaying of women 3) killing of women and girls in the name of 'honour'; 4) targeted killing of women and girls in the context of armed conflict; 5) dowry-related killings of women and girls; 6) killing of women and girls because of their sexual orientation and gender identity; 7) the killing of aboriginal and indigenous women and girls because of their gender; 8) female infanticide and gender-based sex selection foeticide; 9) genital mutilation related femicide; 10) accusations of witchcraft and 11) other femicides connected with gangs, organized crime, drug dealers, human trafficking, and the proliferation of small arms (symposium proceedings, Laurent et al. 2013, 4).*

Russel's thinking resonates in this definition. In 2017, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) formulated two further definitions of femicide (see EIGE 2017): one of a general

[2] In this connection, see the classification of different types of homicide proposed by Todesco (2024, pp. 299-301).

nature, similar in its essentials to that developed during the Vienna symposium, and other intended for statistical purposes, which necessarily departed significantly from the first for the practical reasons we will return to later. The scourge of femicide has also been addressed in two resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly (A/RES/68/191 of 2013 and A/RES/70/176 of 2015, both entitled Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls)[3], while gender-related killings of women and girls is the subject of an entire volume in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Study on Homicide series (see UNODC 2019).

With the passage of time, the concept of femicide has become increasingly confused (Grzyb et al. 2018), shorn of its political connotation as well as its precision—and, consequently, its analytical utility. In today's Italy, confusion reigns supreme, with the media labeling any case of a woman losing her life at the hands of a man[4] as femicide—notwithstanding laudable efforts to sharpen the concept's focus and return to Russel's original definition (see, for example, the parliamentary investigation by the Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta sul Femminicidio 2022).

Once the concept's content has been specified, we are faced with a far from straightforward problem: developing an operational definition whereby femicide can be gauged from concrete data, starting with a quantification of its extent. Put otherwise, how can we distinguish empirically between femicides and all the other cases where women are killed by men? This is a fundamental step in preventing the concept from 'getting out of hand', as in fact it has done in Italy. It should be borne in mind that Italy, like many other EU countries, has no legal definition of femicide that explicitly sets forth its characteristics, as it has not been codified as a specific crime or aggravating circumstance[5].

Operationalizing femicide is an intricate and challenging operation for a number of reasons that have been addressed in the scholarly literature both internationally (EIGE 2017; 2021a; 2021b; UNODC & UN-Women 2022; Dawson et al. 2024; see also the Special Subsection on Re-imagining what counts as femicide in Current Sociology, Volume 71, Issue 1 2023) and in Italy (Capecchi 2019; Todesco 2020; 2021; 2024). The present paper takes a further step in this direction by assessing the potential and limitations of the operational definitions of femicide that have been used to date in the light of currently available homicide data. In particular, we rely heavily—though not exclusively—on new data which have never before been used for this purpose. As we will show, it is precisely these data that enable us to advance knowledge in the field. Before proceeding, however, we must draw attention to a critical concern with this information—and a limitation of this study: at present, it is available for only one year (2023).

[3] For further definitions of femicide by supranational institutions see EIGE 2017, 17-19.

[4] For how these crimes are portrayed in the media, see Lalli (2020) and Belluati et al. (2021).

[5] This is not the case, for example, in many Latin American countries (cfr. ECLAC 2014). In Italy, even the so-called 'law on femicide' (No. 119/2013) neither establishes it as a specific category of homicide nor provides a legal definition.

Given the relatively small number of homicides in Italy, analyses based on these data are characterized by low statistical robustness, even though the data relate to a population rather than a sample. Another limitation of these data—and, as goes without saying, of this study—is the fact that they have not been validated by a public institution. However, as we will discuss later, it was possible to make comparisons with the earliest available official data, with satisfactory results.

As indicated earlier, the considerations presented here are based on the situation in Italy. However, they can be applied to other settings, and in particular to those where femicide—to the extent that it can be accurately gauged with empirical data—has features in common with those found in Italy.

This paper consists of four paragraphs. After this introduction to the question, the second paragraph presents the main sources used to investigate femicide in Italy and at the comparative level. The third paragraph proposes several operational definitions of the concept of femicide, with a series of considerations arising chiefly from an examination of hitherto unavailable data. The fourth and last paragraphs offers some concluding remarks, which introduce additional aspects that complicate the question of operationalizing femicide.

Measuring Femicide Empirically: The Available Data

Any attempt to operationalize a complex concept must consider what data is available for the purpose. Even the most elegant and sophisticated operationalization is of very little use without information whereby it can be put into practice as anything other than come guidelines for building a primary dataset. On the basis of Russel's theoretical-conceptual foundation (Radford & Russell 1992; Russell 1992; Russell & Harmes 2001), we need to know four things to classify a killing as a femicide: the victim's sex[6], that of the perpetrator[7], the relationship between them, and the motive for the murder. Finding the latter information is the most problematic, as it is generally not provided in official statistics (in this connection, see the review by Corradi et al. 2018), or if it is, it tends to be incomplete. The reason for this is easy to see. A ministry's statistics office, or a national or supranational statistical institute, is unlikely to light-heartedly risk its reputation by putting out information that has a hefty margin of uncertainty, is difficult to

[6] Here we refer to sex rather than gender identity because the latter information is often more difficult to obtain, given that not all individuals disclose this identity. We will return to this far from straightforward question in the conclusions to this paper.

[7] If we wish to go beyond Russel's conceptualization, knowing the perpetrator's sex is not always strictly necessary in reality; again, we will return to the question in the conclusions.

define unequivocally and, were that not enough, often emerges long after the fact—when the killing comes to trial, for example—after data on the alleged crime have already been collected by the appropriate agencies (see Todesco 2020; 2021; 2024)[8]. However, being aware of the dynamics that triggered the violence—and hence of whatever role inequalities between the genders and in their relations may have played—is essential in order to recognize a femicide, naturally with an unavoidable margin of error.

Where information about the motive is lacking, the relationship between killer and victim can be used as a primary means of classification. Though this is a widely used approach, it suffers from limitations—as we will see in the following paragraph—which cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, certain episodes can be classified as femicides with a fair degree of certainty on the basis of the killer/victim relationship alone: take, for example, the case of a john who kills a sex worker.

There are a number of official Italian and comparative datasets that can be used in trying to operationalize femicide (see, for a synthetic view, Table 1). As can readily be imagined from the foregoing remarks, however, none is entirely satisfactory for the purpose. If not otherwise indicated, all of the datasets referenced here consist of information collected and usable only at the aggregate level. There are thus no microdata files relating to single crimes which would make it possible to perform customized analyses. Needless to say, this in itself is a far from inconsiderable drawback, given the very specific and distinctive features of the offense we are seeking to operationalize. Moreover, these datasets tend only to quantify the incidence of this crime, possibly providing some information on the parties involved, but little more. It is thus impossible, for example, to compare the characteristics of femicides with those of other types of homicide (in this connection, see Todesco 2021).

The first dataset we will discuss is produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)[9], which each year presents information on homicide in countries around the world. Among the variables needed to identify a femicide, this dataset shows the sex of the victim, but not of the perpetrator. Information about the motive is scantly, and does not make it possible to determine what dynamics might arise from gender inequalities. There are filters for homicides committed in connection with criminal activities, organized or otherwise, those that are socio-political in nature, with or without terroristic connotations, and, lastly, a vague category for ‘interpersonal’ homicides. By contrast, fuller information is provided about the relationship between perpetrator and victim. Here, there are filters for victims who are current or former intimate partners, other family members, and perpetrators who are known and unknown to the

[8] Moreover, not all of the information in the official statistics is systematically updated to reflect facts that come to light later.

[9] See https://dataunodc.un.org/, section on Intentional Homicide–retrieved 20 June 2025.

victim. The UNODC intentional homicide data includes a specific section for gender-related killings of women and girls, in a clear nod to Russel's theoretical and conceptual view of femicide (Radford & Russell 1992; Russell 1992; Russell & Harmes 2001); the information here chiefly concerns killings by intimate partners, former partners, or other family members. We will explore the reasons for this in the following paragraph.

Table 1. Comparative and Italian datasets that can be used in trying to operationalize femicide.

Source	Type of source	Type of dataset	Unit of analysis	Availability of variables required in operationalizing femicide	Advantages	Limit
UNODC	Official	Comparative	Country (aggregate level)	Sex of the victim Motive (not detailed) Relationship between perpetrator and victim	Official dataset Information at the worldwide level Specific section for gender-related killings of women and girls	No information about the sex of the perpetrator Scant information about the motive Microdata not available Femicides classification does not occur during data collection
EUROSTAT	Official	Comparative	Country (aggregate level)	Sex of the victim or of the perpetrator Relationship between perpetrator and victim (not detailed)	Official dataset Information at the European level	No information about the motive No information about the sex of the victim and of the perpetrator Scant information about the relationship between perpetrator and victim Microdata not available Femicides classification does not occur during data collection
ISTAT (using Ministry of the Interior data)*	Official	Single country	Country (aggregate level)	Sex of the victim or of the perpetrator	Official dataset	No information about the motive No information about the sex of the victim and of the perpetrator

						No information about the relationship between perpetrator and victim Microdata not available Femicides classification does not occur during data collection
EURES	Unofficial	Single country	Homicide (microdata)	Sex of the victim Sex of the perpetrator Relationship between perpetrator and victim Motive	Multi-years survey Data for certain variables is validated through comparison with the statistics produced by the Ministry of the Interior Microdata available	Unofficial dataset Femicides classification does not occur during data collection
Survey collected by Lorenzo Todesco	Unofficial	Single country	Homicide (microdata)	Sex of the victim Sex of the perpetrator Relationship between perpetrator and victim Motive	Microdata available Femicides classification occurs during data collection A comparison with official data reveals strong similarities in homicides figures	Unofficial dataset Single-year survey

* More information available in specific publications

The European-level data on intentional homicides posted by EUROSTAT are of little help in measuring femicide empirically[10]. While there is data on the sex of the victim or, alternatively, the perpetrator, there is no information of any kind that would make it possible to determine the killing's motive, or at least the context in which it took place. As regards the victim/offender relationship, the dataset shows only episodes involving current or former intimate partners or family members.

[10] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database, section entitled Detailed datasets—Population and social conditions—Crime and criminal justice—Recorded intentional homicide and sexual offences — retrieved 20 June 2025.

For Italy, the official source for information on intentional homicides—the basis for trying to identify femicides—is the Ministry of the Interior, which collects and publishes data on the episodes reported by law enforcement to the judicial authorities. The Ministry prepares reports in homicides and gender violence[11]. Only bare-bones information is provided, however: the victim's sex is indicated but not that of the alleged perpetrator, and killings of women are broken down by those in 'family/relational contexts', i.e., family related and intimate partner related homicides, and then by those perpetrated by current or former intimate partners.

The data on intentional homicide collected by the Ministry of the Interior are also the source for the analyses of this crime by ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which undoubtedly provide the most compete body of information on the subject. Some of this data is presented on the portal[12], which shows the number of homicides according to the sex of the victim and alleged offender. Some distinctions are made regarding the type of crime (for theft or robbery, mafia homicides, terrorist homicides), though this is of no use whatsoever in determining whether killings are femicides. No information is provided about motives or the relationship between victim and alleged offender.

Much more useful information for quantifying femicide is given in an ISTAT publication addressing homicide specifically as part of the 'Statistiche report' series, which is generally issued annually[13]. The most recent available report (ISTAT 2024), shows the numbers of homicides by the victim's and perpetrator's sex, both separately and in combination, as well as by victim/perpetrator relationship (intimate partner, former intimate partner, other family member, other acquaintance, perpetrator unknown to the victim, as shown in the tables annexed to the publication[14]. In addition, the report also shows homicide figures by motive, viz., 'Confrontational disputes, altercations of trivial origin, personal resentment', 'Economic reasons' (including theft or robbery), 'Mental illness', 'Crimes of passion', 'Interruption of a serious illness affecting the victim'. Though this classification could undoubtedly be improved, it is nevertheless a significant advance both for research on homicide in general, and on femicide specifically. The same ISTAT report also quantifies gender-related killings of women and girls, which we mentioned in our discussion of UNODC, and which are here defined in the same way: women (regardless of age) killed by a current or former intimate partner or another family member. ISTAT then combines this information with the type of motive, which is necessary in order to identify femicides committed outside the family and intimate relationships. We will return to this topic in

[11] https://www.interno.gov.it/it/stampa-e-comunicazione/dati-e-statistiche/omicidi-volontari-e-violenza-genere — retrieved 20 June 2025.

[12] See https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1,Z0840JUS,1.0/JUS_CRIMINAL/DCCV_AUTVITTPS - retrieved 20 June 2025.

[13] See https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1,Z0840JUS,1.0/JUS_CRIMINAL/DCCV_AUTVITTPS (retrieved 20 June 2025) — retrieved 20 June 2025).

[14] https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/le-vittime-di-omicidio-anno-2023/ - retrieved 20 June 2025.

the next paragraph. There can be no doubt that this has brought significant progress in quantifying femicides in Italy, if we consider that until recently (see Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta sul Femminicidio nonché su ogni Forma di Violenza di Genere 2017, 5) ISTAT considered femicides to include only those murders of women perpetrated by men in the family (and thus by current or former intimate partners or other family members). Nevertheless, a number of critical problems remain, as we will see in the following paragraph.

The official data we have presented here have a structural limitation affecting their usefulness in measuring femicide empirically: by their very nature, they tell us nothing about whether the motive for an individual crime arose out of inequalities between the genders and in their relations, or, if there is more than one motive, about whether such inequalities outweighed the other factors leading to the murder. To have information of this kind, it is necessary to use unofficial data which have not been produced and validated by local, national or supranational public institutions. For this kind of data, the EURES—Ricerche Economiche e Sociali[15] Survey on Intentional Homicides in Italy[16] can claim pride of place: for its longevity—information has been collected since 1990—and because the data for certain variables is validated through comparison with the statistics produced by the Ministry of the Interior (EURES 2017, 6). Moreover, the information is available as microdata files, with detailed information for each individual crime. Consequently, customized statistics and analyses can be produced. Not surprisingly, this data source is widely used for homicide research in Italy, and especially for studies focusing on femicide (see, for example, Corradi & Piacenti 2016; Piacenti & Pasquali 2014; Todesco 2021; 2024).

The EURES dataset on intentional homicides in Italy is constructed via a methodical review of news coverage in the media (see EURES 2017, 6), gleaning the information of interest in this context (when available)[17]. Though this approach has undoubted merits—it accesses data that is not contemplated by official statistics, for example—it also has a number of far from negligible drawbacks (see Todesco 2024, 19-20). First, the information given in the media about a homicide is not always accurate, as routine reporting tends to perpetuate stereotypes and clichés. Second, there is a high number of missing cases for many of the variables in the dataset, either because the information in question did not reach the media, or because they did not report it; naturally, the media neither have an interest in nor are required to systematically collect all of the information that goes into the EURES dataset. In addition, no checks whatsoever are carried out on the reliability of most of the data collected by any public body, nor would checks be possible,

[15] A private research institute.

[16] See https://www.eures.it/category/ricerche/ — retrieved 20 June 2025.

[17] The media are not the only alternative to official data as a source of information: case files, for example, contain detailed and reliable information on individual crimes. Though they have been used in several studies (for example, Dobash & Dobash 2015 2020), they are by no means unproblematic (see, about this, Todesco 2024, 311-312).

since this is information that is not available in official statistics. To keep the effects of these problems to a minimum, it is advisable to use the EURES survey—like any media-based dataset—only for the variables that are not available in official sources, and are simpler and more straightforward to obtain. In any case, a large number of papers on lethal violence now published in leading international journals refer to data from the media (see, to mention but a few, Flynn et al. 2016; Liem & Koenraadt 2007; Malphurs & Cohen 2002; Salari 2007; for Italy see Solinas-Saunders 2024; Tosini 2020); this is also true of two of the very few texts on homicide in Italian (Chinnici & Santino 1989; Todesco 2024).

The EURES dataset provides all of the information needed to identify a homicide: the sex of the victim and the alleged perpetrator—which can also be combined—the relationship between them, and the killing's motive. For the latter, however, one problem must be acknowledged: EURES's definition of femicide differs significantly from that proposed by Russell (Radford & Russell 1992; Russell 1992; Russell & Harmes 2001). According to the institute's researchers, Russel's intuition shows "great evocative power but is not equally valid from an epistemological standpoint" (EURES 2017, 5). EURES chooses to classify all killings of women by men as femicides, regardless of the context and motive. By doing so, it contributes to the enormous confusion we mentioned earlier which in Italy surrounds the concept of femicide. Information regarding a murder's motive in the EURES dataset should thus be treated with caution in attempting to identify femicides, as it is not collected with the necessary sociological attention to any inequalities between the genders and in their relationships underlying these crimes, and the specific impact they may have on the dynamics leading to lethal violence.

Lastly, mention should be made of a further unofficial dataset that can provide useful information for identifying and investigating femicide. Consisting of never-before-used data on homicides in Italy in 2023, this dataset was assembled by one of the present authors on the basis of a review of the national and local online media: daily newspapers, periodicals, magazines, news sites and content aggregators[18].

The level of femicide coverage in this study can only be estimated by referring to the coverage rate of the broader phenomenon of homicide, for which official data are available; from this perspective, the results appear largely satisfactory. The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT 2024) recorded 334 voluntary homicides in Italy in 2023, with 217 male victims and 117 female victims. Based on the investigation conducted by one of the authors, the corresponding figures are 339, 220, and 119, respectively. The two sources exhibit a remarkable degree of convergence, at times matching with near-perfect precision, when comparing disaggregated figures by victim's age and citizenship (results not shown, available upon request). The reason for

[18] The dataset is preserved in Lorenzo Todesco's institutional repository and may be made available upon request, in the interest of transparency and replicability of this study.

these minor discrepancies—which can also be observed among official data sources (see, for example, the differences between ISTAT 2024 and the data on voluntary homicide published on the IstatData portal[19] — is easily explained (see ISTAT 2024, Methodological Note): data on voluntary homicides are collected for operational purposes and are therefore subject to revisions that may arise after the initial collection and dissemination stages. Such revisions may concern the legal classification of the offence during the investigative phase: a crime initially recorded as voluntary homicide may, in the course of the investigation, turn out to be a different type of offence (for example, involuntary manslaughter) or even a death not caused by another person. Likewise, an incident that initially appears to lack criminal intent may later be reclassified as voluntary homicide, as a result of subsequent investigative developments and forensic analyses. This is why data released at different times may reveal minor discrepancies.

The following data for each homicide were obtained with a reasonable degree of certainty—despite originating from non-official sources—and a limited number of missing cases: number of parties involved, alleged perpetrator/victim relationship, situational context, motive, whether there were witnesses and other injured parties, place, weapon and modus operandi, sex, age, citizenship and criminal history of both the victim and the alleged perpetrator, post-crime behavior, timing of arrest and post-arrest behavior of the latter where applicable. With regard to the specific crime of femicide, further information is also available on the involvement of minors, any prior romantic relationships between the victim and the alleged perpetrator, the decisions and timing surrounding any separation, as well as previous episodes of threats and violence between the individuals involved.

The main difference between this dataset and the EURES survey is that femicide—conceptualized according to Russel's framework (Radford & Russell 1992; Russell 1992; Russell & Harmes 2001) —is a specific and distinctive form of lethal violence. Accordingly, for classification purposes each killing is broken down by multiple parameters, including the contributing role played by gender inequalities. Only those episodes whose lethal outcome can be completely or preponderantly explained by such inequalities are classified as femicides. The killings where there are insufficient grounds for such a classification are excluded or in particularly uncertain cases flagged as doubtful. Femicides are classified upstream, at the time data is collected, rather than downstream as is necessary when using the EURES survey and the official datasets described above[20].

[19] See https://esploradati.istat.it/databrowser/#/it/dw/categories/IT1,Z0840JUS,1.0/JUS_CRIMINAL — retrieved 20 June 2025.

[20] Among unofficial data sources, mention should be made of the regular publications issued by the Casa delle Donne per non Subire Violenza (Women's House to Avoid Violence), a counseling center in Bologna (https://femicidiocasadonne.wordpress.com/ricerche-pubblicazioni/ — retrieved 25 May 2025; see, for the more recent one, Casa delle Donne per non Subire Violenza 2023). Here again, reported data is collected from the media—with the advantages and drawbacks that entails, and with no validation procedure. The operational definition of femicide is based—at least in intention—on Russel's framework (Radford & Russell 1992; Russell 1992; Russell & Harmes 2001).

Operational Definitions of Femicide: Weaknesses and Strengths

In moving from the theoretical and conceptual framework to an operational definition of femicide—or in other words, when seeking to assign a definition to this crime for statistical purposes (see EIGE, 2017)—we come up against a number of knotty problems, and must come to grips with the limitations in data availability outlined in the previous paragraph. As we will discuss shortly, a common approach is to refer in particular to the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, rather than the circumstances surrounding the killing.

One statistical definition of femicide has been proposed by the European Institute for Gender Equality on the basis of official data on worldwide killings of women. The institute (see EIGE, 2017) notes that it is difficult to extrapolate the intent to kill arising because of gender inequalities from administrative data, and all the more so if data is obtained from police reports. In addition, the institute states that, more or less the world over, a high percentage of female victims of homicide are killed by partners or ex-partners. In view of these facts, EIGE proposes a statistical definition whose central element is the concept of intimate femicide (see Brookman, 2005)—i.e., femicide committed by a man in a couple or otherwise sentimental relationship, whether current or interrupted. Femicides, them, can be operationalized as killings of women by their intimate partners, present or past, living together or apart. Moreover, EIGE's definition of femicide includes deaths of woman, girls and adolescents as a result of practices that are harmful to women, notably genital mutilation and unsafe abortions.

One critical aspect must be pointed out straightaway, as it concerns only the EIGE approach: the proposed definition in question covers much more ground than the others, as it applies well beyond purely voluntary acts. It thus includes gender-based violence resulting in harm severe enough to cause death, even if it is not intentional. This is a matter that must be carefully weighed, especially because of the doubts it raises. While we are clearly dealing here with conduct and decisions stemming from inequalities between the genders and their relations, there is no explicit intent to kill. This definition of femicide thus includes episodes that in national legal systems could be classified as multiple types of crime: in Italian legislation, for example, as willful homicide (omicidio volontario) and as involuntary manslaughter (omicidio preterintezionale/omicidio colposo). Moreover, such episodes are not always immediately identifiable from the datasets discussed above.

In 2022, the United Nations Statistical Commission asked the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) to developing an operational definition of femicide (UNODC & UN-Women, 2022) which was to serve as guidance for future data collection and the production of statistics

on as global a level as possible. The UNODC/UN-Women definition differs from the EIGE proposal in making explicit reference only to intentional homicides, highlighting the problematic nature of expanding the scope beyond such killings. By contrast, it is in full agreement with the EIGE regarding the centrality of intimate femicide in defining this crime.

However, UNODC and UN-Women emphasize that it is also necessary to consider killings outside an intimate partner relationship, as many femicides take place in the family sphere in a more general sense. Accordingly, killings of women by current or former intimate partners or other family members, including blood relatives and relatives by marriage or adoption, should be considered as femicides: take, for example, the women who are killed for reasons associated with the honor and reputation of the family as a whole (see, for example, D'Lima et al., 2020), or dowry killings (see, for example, Oldenburg, 2002). This proposed operational definition can already be put to immediate use with currently available official datasets, as has been done in the UNODC website section on gender-related killings of women and girls mentioned above, which chiefly shows killings of women by current and former partners and other family members. ISTAT also focuses on this specific category of homicides, as Italy (see ISTAT, 2024, 10) has chosen to follow the statistical framework for classifying femicides developed by the United Nations through its agency UNODC.

The UNODC/UN-Women definition also has the undoubted merit of addressing the operationalization of femicides committed outside the family, which the EIGE approach in 2017 neglects[21]. To do so, UNODC/UN-Women considers the following set of circumstances and modi operandi that should, with a fair degree of certainty, be indicative of the role played by inequalities between the genders and in their relations in motivating killings of women and girls:

> *the homicide victim had a previous record of physical, sexual, or psychological violence/harassment perpetrated by the author of the killing; ii) the homicide victim was a victim of forms of illegal exploitation, for example, in relation to trafficking in persons, forced labour or slavery; iii) the homicide victim was in a situation where she was abducted or illegally deprived of her liberty; iv) the victim was working in the sex industry; v) sexual violence against the victim was committed before and/or after the killing; vi) the killing was accompanied by mutilation of the body of the victim; vii) the body of the victim was disposed of in a public space; viii) the killing of the woman or girl constituted a gender-based hate crime, i.e. she was targeted because of a specific bias against women on the part of the perpetrator(s) (UNODC & UN-Women, 2022, 9, 11-14).*

Where at least one of these circumstances obtains, killings of women by perpetrators outside the family, either known or unknown to the victim, are to be considered as femicides.

[21] Subsequently, the EIGE (2021a; 2021b) also developed reflections in this regard.

It should be borne in mind that all of this information is not currently provided in the official datasets. Accordingly, it will be necessary to begin a data collection campaign using administrative, judiciary and prison sources (see, again, UNODC & UN-Women, 2022, 16-17). Uncoincidentally, the first publication based on this operational definition (UNODC & UN-Women, 2023) refers only to episodes arising between current or former intimate partners or other family members.

Lastly, a further operational definition of femicide has been advanced on the basis of the EURES survey of intentional homicide in Italy (see Todesco, 2024, 236-237). Though this is an unofficial dataset, it provides a decidedly larger amount of information than the sources assembled by local, national or supranational public institutions. As we will see, this definition shares some features with those discussed so far, but also shows significant differences due chiefly to the fact that the motive for the murder is given in the dataset. According to EURES data for 2015-17 and the associated survey form[22], all cases of women killed by men involving any of the following relationships between perpetrator and victim are classified as femicides, regardless of motive: spouses, current intimate partner, former spouse or intimate partner, suitor/desired woman, molester/molested woman, client/sex worker, enslaver-exploiter/slave-exploited woman. In these cases, the perpetrator/victim relationship as such is already sufficient to indicate an interactional dynamic where inequalities between the genders and in their relations—the key element in femicide—are very likely to have played a prominent part in the crime.

With other types of perpetrator/victim relationship, episodes of lethal violence stemming from the following motives can be considered femicides: prostitution, passion, child custody, questions of honor, molestation and stalking, and sex-related homicide. In addition, homicides occurring for other motives but accompanied by sexual violence are also considered femicides[23].

Following this review of proposed definitions of femicide, a few words are in order concerning a series of aspects that are distinctive of these definitions and whether data to which they can be applied are available. The first and potentially critical aspect affects all of the operational definitions presented here: the fact that they automatically regard episodes between current or former intimate partners as femicides merely because of the relationship linking perpetrator and victim. To be sure, there is no lack of reasons for doing so. The social gender structure rooted in patriarchal cultural models encapsulates in a heterosexual sentimental relationship those implicit

[22] Here and immediately below, the present authors will use the terms employed by EURES, even though we do not necessarily agree with them or consider them appropriate.

[23] In this operational definition, homicide motive and perpetrator/victim relationship were aggregated, because—as will be recalled—EURES does not collect motivational data with the necessary sociological attention to any gender inequalities underlying the crime. When classifying an episode of lethal violence by motive, it was thus decided to refer only to circumstances that indicate with reasonable certainty that the decisive role of gender inequalities that characterizes femicide in fact existed.

and explicit power dynamics deriving from, and at the same time producing and strengthening, gender inequalities. Moreover, all studies focusing on lethal violence between current or former intimate partners (see, for example, Brookman, 2005; Campbell et al., 2007; Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Enander et al., 2022; Enander et al., 2021; Kafonek et al., 2022, but there are many more) almost invariably point to abnormal levels of male jealousy and possessiveness carried forward by the social gender structure itself, and/or the woman's decision to break off the relationship, not return to it, or not begin a relationship, as the cause that triggers the killing. These are all clear features of the dynamics of a femicide, and are deeply intertwined in a combination that in many cases figures largely in producing the lethal outcome.

The dataset on 2023 homicides in Italy assembled by one of the present authors has made it possible for the first time—at least for Italy—to determine how many murders involving current or former intimate partners can be classified with reasonable certainty as femicides. As mentioned earlier, this classification takes place upstream, when all available elements that refer to or are indicators of gender inequalities are assessed for each homicide. Of the 57 murders involving current or former partners in the dataset, 47 (or, to put it in percentage terms despite the small numbers, 83%) can clearly be classified as femicides: at the root of these episodes, we often see male jealousy and the woman's desire to escape the relationship.

By contrast, if we focus on killings of women by male intimate partners than cannot be classified with any certainty as femicides, the lion's share consists of episodes whose motives are obscure, even though this is the sort of information that the media reports with gusto, and if known is readily obtained. Next come the lethal episodes that appear to result primarily from the perpetrator's psychiatric problems.

In the light of these data, we can conclude that regarding all killings of women by their male intimate current or former partners as femicides leads to an overestimation of their extent that, while certainly not exorbitant, is far from negligible; a minority (almost one out of every five cases) thus risks being misclassified. We will return to the question at the end of this paragraph, as we draw our argument to a close.

The second somewhat problematic aspect is the fact that the operational definition of femicide propounded by UNODC/UN-Women (2022) puts all episodes involving family members and relatives outside the couple in this category. This is an approach that differs from that taken by EIGE (2017), and in the light of the Italian homicide data for 2023 seems questionable, to say the least: of the 25 killings of women by male relatives other than current or former intimate partners, only two are femicides[24]. In the latter cases, moreover, lethal violence resulted from a

[24] The present authors' analysis of the microdata files from the EURES survey of intentional homicides in Italy for the period 2015-17 shows a similar situation. Detailed numbers are not presented here for reasons of space, but are available on request.

dynamic arising within the couple relationship. In one, a father killed his daughter for having defended her mother from an attempted femicide motivated by jealousy and possessiveness; in the other, a son-in-law killed his mother-in-law together with her daughter for the same reasons.

These data clearly show that adopting this specific portion of the UNODC and UN-Women definition of femicide in a country like Italy is quite problematic: outside the couple, men kill women in their family group not for reasons linked to gender inequalities, but primarily because of altercations and long-standing disputes produced by other dynamics (9 cases out of 25)[25]. Following the UNODC/UN-Women operational definition would thus introduce severe distortions in quantifying femicides, given that no fewer than 23 cases of women killed by male family members and relatives for entirely different reasons would be lumped into this category: a number entirely out of proportion with the total of 64 cases that can be identified as femicides[26]. The UNODC/UN-Women operational definition would probably work better in countries where family members and relatives kill women in the name of honor, or because of dynamics where gender has a central role, as it does in dowry killings. However, there was not even one case of this kind in Italy during 2023[27]. This demonstrates how important the social, cultural and institutional context is when formulating an operational definition of femicide, and that this context cannot be ignored in operationalizing the concept. A number of studies addressing the broader question of violence against women have reached a similar conclusion (see, for example Heise, 1998; Merry, 2006; 2011; Wies & Haldane, 2015; Buzawa & Buzawa, 2017).

The third aspect that calls for comment concerns the circumstances and modi operandi that the UNODC and UN-Women framework (2022) uses to identify femicides committed outside the family, for which—as will be recalled—no official data is available at present. This is a laudable attempt that we can whole-heartedly support: one of the chief limitations of the EIGE (2017) operational definition is precisely that it completely fails to consider these specific types of femicide. Nevertheless, we can question whether some of the proposed circumstances and modi operandi are truly effective indicators of a predominate role of gender dynamics in the lethal outcome. Clearly, such doubts do not apply to the circumstances where the killing, regardless of its motive, is accompanied by sexual violence (see item v in the list on page 12), and those where we see a substrate of hate and misogyny underlying the crime (item viii). Here it goes without saying that the urge to kill was driven by inequalities between the genders and in their relations.

This cannot be said for several of the other situations. First, automatically classifying all episodes where the woman is abducted or deprived of her liberty before being killed (item iii) raises doubts. In itself, an abduction does not necessary reveal that gender dynamics are at work.

[25] The results of analyzing EURES 2015-17 data (not shown, available on request) are on the same wavelength.
[26] Here again, the general tenor is confirmed by EURES 2015-17 data (not shown, available on request).
[27] The same can be said on the basis of EURES 2015-17 data (not shown, available on request).

Women can be abducted for purely economic reasons and held for ransom; there may be political motives involving some form of armed struggle, or religion may be a factor. None of these circumstances come anywhere near to demonstrating that gender inequalities had a key role in the killing that followed.

Citing the victim's work in the sex industry (item iv) as an indicator is no less problematic. Here again, the fact in itself is not sufficient to mean that the killing is automatically a femicide, unless the motives behind the crime are in fact linked to the sex industry. Take, for example, a sex worker killed in a bar because she witnessed—or reacted to—an attempted robbery. It would be difficult to maintain that this killing—essentially an instrumental homicide—was chiefly influenced by gender dynamics[28]. And the same can be said of the case of a sex worker killed by a relative because of a years-long dispute about a shared property.

Similar considerations apply to episodes where the victim's body was mutilated (item vi). If the mutilation was associated with sexual practices, more general forms of sadistic pleasure, or the perpetrator's misogyny, we are undoubtedly dealing with a femicide. But the story is altogether different if the victim's body is dismembered only so that it can be more effectively hidden, and the killer can avoid detection—a reason that is patently instrumental. Once again, it is the idea that a killing can be automatically classified as a femicide on this basis that is so dubious, since the question in reality hinges on the killer's motive for adopting this macabre modus operandi.

As was pointed out earlier, quantifying femicides committed outside the family from official data will call for a robust data collection about the circumstances surrounding each crime. It would perhaps then be preferable to work upstream—on the murder motive—rather than downstream in an attempt to identify characteristics that would automatically mean that a given killing is a femicide. One route that could be taken consists of identifying a series of motives/characteristics that with reasonable certainty denote femicide—as was done in developing an operational definition from EURES data—and then analyzing each individual case in the light of these motives/characteristics, determining whether or not it was a femicide from the circumstances in which it was committed.

[28] As to whether killings of women involved in robberies can be automatically included among femicides—a question where Russell herself expressed doubts (Russell & Harmes 2001) — see Todesco (2024, pp. 228-229).

Table 2. Operationalizing femicide: advantages, limits and suggestions for the use of official and unofficial data

	Official data	**Unofficial data (from the media)**
Advantages	Data are validated by official public institutions Cross-country comparative data are available	All information needed to identify a femicide is widely available
Limits	No information about some characteristics that are useful in identifying femicides Femicides not involving intimate partners cannot be identified	No validation by official public bodies High risk of incorrect data Difficult to perform cross-country comparative analyses Large number of missing cases for some information (which in any case is not provided in official statistics)
Suggestions for use in operationalizing femicide	Classify only those cases in which the victim's violent death results from the perpetrator's deliberate intent to kill as femicides At present, limit cases of femicide to killings committed by current or former intimate partners Avoid considering episodes of lethal violence committed by family members outside the couple as femicides	Identify cases of femicide upstream, at the time each episode is entered in the dataset, according to the role played by gender inequalities Flag uncertain cases, in particular, those involving current or former intimate partners Use these data only for variables that are not available in official sources, and which are more readily obtained

In concluding this review of proposed operational definitions of femicide, one further point raised by our investigation of Italian homicide data for 2023 deserves attention, as it provides a good indication of the usefulness and limitations of relying on official data in quantifying femicide[29]. As was said earlier, femicides involving family members and relatives outside the couple are very few in number, as are episodes involving individuals outside the family: only 5 cases out of a total of 64 femicides. The lack of official data about the latter episodes thus does not mean that there is a significant number of missing cases for Italy; such killings, however, are undeniably interesting inasmuch as their characteristics generally differ from those committed in the home. In Italy, the vast majority of femicide—as the 2023 homicide data tell us—are committed by a current or former intimate partner: almost 90% of the total.

To summarize (in this regard, see also Table 2), where official data are used, information regarding the perpetrator/victim relationship is a fair proxy for identifying cases of femicide—at least in Italy and countries where this crime shows similar characteristics. However, it is

[29] Once again, the general tenor of the results presented here is fully confirmed by EURES 2015-17 data (not shown, available on request).

necessary to focus only on murders involving current and former intimate partners: in any case, few femicides are committed by other family members or relatives, or by men outside the family, so the underestimation resulting from this approach is modest[30]. The real concern, as we have seen, is that femicides can be overestimated by including killings by current and former intimate partners that in actuality cannot be identified as femicides with any certainty; in purely quantitative terms, however, the resulting overestimation would be somewhat counterbalanced by the simultaneous underestimation we have just mentioned—another point in favor of relying on the perpetrator/victim relationship, focusing on homicides involving current and former intimate partners. Using official data in this way to identify femicides entails a certain margin of error that can be considered acceptable when there are no other sources of data. If other sources exist, it is advisable to combine official and unofficial data, where the latter should preferably be of a type where crimes are classified as femicides upstream of data collection rather than downstream.

Conclusions

In conclusion, two further questions should be addressed that were not discussed in the foregoing pages but are inseparable from any reflection on the operational definition of femicide.

The first question stems directly from Russel's conception of femicide as the killing of women by men because they are women (Radford & Russell, 1992; Russell 1992; 2011; Russell & Harmes, 2001). In reality, it can be useful to extend the concept's scope to include episodes where women kill other women, but still for reasons associated with gender inequalities. There are cases where the precepts of the patriarchal cultural model are espoused by women themselves. Take, for instance, honour and dowry killings (see, for example, Chesler, 2021; Oldenburg, 2002): such femicides can perfectly well be committed by women, acting alone or in league with male relatives[31]. These cases undoubtedly fall under the heading of femicide: after all, women as well as men can kill in the name of the patriarchy. Similar points have been made by Grzyb et al. (2018) and, later, by Todesco (2024). Even the operational definition advanced by UNODC and UN-Women (2022, 8) notes that women, too, can bloody their hands, while the Vienna declaration mentioned in our opening pages does not specify the killer's sex.

[30] As we have seen, it would be far more problematic to consider all femicides committed by family members and other relatives outside the couple, as UNODC and UN-Women (2023) propose. Were this to be done, the estimate of femicides would swell to include a sizable number of cases that have little or nothing to do with gender dynamics.

[31] The same is true of homicides resulting from reproductive coercion (see, for example, Grace & Anderson 2018).

Essentially, we can say that whether or not killings of women by women due to gender inequalities are classed as femicides makes little or no difference in terms of this crime's characteristics and extent, at least in the case of Italy: it is extremely rare for women to kill other women (according to Todesco, 2024, 275, such events account for a bare 2% of all homicides recorded over a three-year period), and when they do, it is certainly not in order to reinforce and reproduce female submission. Overwhelmingly, the casualties are the killer's small daughters, or—much less frequently—their mothers. Here, then, we should speak of infanticides, or episodes resulting from the killer's mental disorders (again, see Todesco, 2024). Moreover, only one femicide committed by women is found in our 2023 dataset of homicides in Italy[32]. For the sake of conceptual and analytical precision, however, it seems advisable to consider any such episodes as femicides.

The second question concerns episodes with a specific motive which may or may not count as femicides. We have already discussed of women killed in the course of a robbery—and mentioned Russel's doubts in the matter; here we will turn to the so-called 'compassionate homicides', where the victim is killed because—in the killer's eyes—she is suffering intolerably, generally as a result of an illness, disability, or advanced age. If the killer is man—in this case, the perpetrator's sex is decisive—and the victim is a woman, in the present authors' opinion (see Sciarrino & Todesco, 2025) we might be dealing with a special case of femicide arising from a paradoxical dynamic connected with inequalities between the genders and in their relations. One of the flashpoints here can be the man's feeling of deep inadequacy: inadequacy in shouldering such a heavy burden of care, but also in coping with the woman's suffering and his own. As the skills that this involves are by no means contemplated in the construction of and socialization to traditional models of male identity (see, for example, Jackson, 2021; Ranson, 2015), it is reasonable to suggest that men are bereft of the abilities that could help prevent this type of homicide precisely because of gender inequalities.

This hypothesis—which in any case calls for further investigation—has a certain amount of empirical support: 'compassionate' homicides where a woman kills a man are far rarer than those where a man puts the woman he is caring for out of her supposed misery, despite the fact than men have considerably shorter life expectancies than women and consequently are more likely to end up being looked after. Indeed, ISTAT (2023) notes that while a large number of women were killed by men on 'compassionate' grounds in 2022, no such killings were committed by women. Possibly, the stereotypically feminine abilities we mentioned above thus have significant impact on the frequency of 'compassionate' homicides by men—and the rarity of those by women.

[32] No cases of such femicides appear in the EURES 2015-17 data.

Lastly, another line of inquiry for future research must be mentioned. To date, femicides have been classified on the basis of the biological sex of killer and victim, ignoring gender identity, but it would be necessary to determine how the latter can affect the operational definition of femicide. Notably, UNODC and UN-Women (2022, 15) list gender identity among the variables needed for a comprehensive and detailed analysis of femicides. The question, however, is anything but straightforward, given that transgender people are not always forthcoming about their status. Is the murder of a transgender woman assigned male at birth by a cisgender, AMAB man to be considered a femicide? What about when a AMAB transgender woman kills an AFAB cisgender or transgender woman? And how do we classify lethal violence involving nonbinary people? These are questions that research that intends to employ the concept of femicide must address. The proposed UNODC/UN-Women (2022, 7) operational definition cuts the gordian knot by referring only to the victim's gender identity (once available) as a woman, irrespective of the sex assigned at birth. Another route could be to analyze homicides upstream, noting whether predominant dynamics emerge that are produced specifically by the patriarchal cultural model and the resulting gender inequalities.

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