

# Femicide in Austria

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Austria is one of the few EU countries where regularly more women are killed than men. In 2017, it was the only one. But what does this different profile of female homicides tell us? What is the reason for the different situation in Austria? And above all: What can we do about it?

The word femicide was long used in English to mean specifically the "killing of a woman", as distinct from homicide, "the killing of a person". It was only later that a decidedly feminist meaning was added, coined by Diana Russell, a US sociologist, to mean the "hate" killing of a woman by a man. While it is a woman-specific situation, it certainly affects people who are not female, and some women more drastically because of intersections of oppression. For example, a non-binary person (that is, a person who has a gender identity apart from "male" and "female") can also be a victim of femicide if the killer perceives the person as female. The same applies to trans men, that is, men who were defined as female at birth. Some murders, for example, of non-white and trans women, can be even more violent where their oppression as women is compounded by other forms of oppression (in this case racism and transphobia), which then usually translates into higher murder rates.

The term "femicide" has five different meanings in modern usage, some of which allow for multiple interpretations. There is the sociological approach, which primarily deals with the "why" question of femicides and makes no distinction as to who committed the murder and deals with all killings of sexually oppressed people. Here, the peculiarity that murders of women are most often committed in their primary environment, for example, their home, which is predominantly not the case with men, should be emphasised. This definition is also taken further with the so-called "decolonial approach" which focuses especially on violent crimes against women due to (post-) colonial power structures.

The human rights and criminological approach is an attempt to create a guide for civil law to categorise femicide and impose sanctions against it. The definitions here are therefore relatively unimportant for political assessment, if we don't trust the bourgeois state and its judiciary and legislature.

The last and probably best-known approach is the feminist concept of femicide, which is primarily intended to highlight the patriarchal, systematic patterns of violence in our society. The best-known definition using this approach is: "murders of women by men because they are women". This definition is intended to cover all male sexist behaviours as far as possible (femicide being the pinnacle of patriarchal male violence against women) and is also deliberately distinguished from "female-on-female murder", which is based on other sexist behaviours. The term is also often criticised for its broadness, which makes it difficult to address and criticise problems precisely, as well as solve them specifically.

In Latin America, the feminist movement, which has a very strong focus on violence against women and the fight against "machismo" ("male, chauvinistic socialisation and society"), used the term very commonly from the 1990s onwards. There are a lot of femicides in the region, an average of 12 women are killed

every day in Latin America and of the 25 countries with the highest femicide rates, 14 are Latin American. Marcela Lagarde coined the term "femicide" to emphasise why the murder of women is also a failure of (state) institutions and to further point out the systemic nature of the problem. In 16 Latin American countries, there are now separate criminal offences for femicide or at least for gender-specific killings. This "progress" is of course not primarily due to the term itself, but due to the strong and militant anti-sexist movement in Latin America, especially under the banner of "ni una menos" ("not one less", that is, against the killing of one more woman) a movement that started in Argentina.

But what is the purpose of the term ?femicide?? Is it not a bit too vague to be useful as a political category? Yes and no. On the one hand, the term does what it is supposed to do quite well. It provocatively draws attention to a specific grievance in society that is normally made invisible, as most experiences of marginalised groups are. Namely, under what circumstances and why women are killed. The objection that it implies that virtually every murder has a sexist motive is only justified to a limited extent. Sexism (as well as other forms of social oppression) is a fundamental and systematic part of our society, and thus also a fixed component of our socialisation as well as of the entire social relations. We are all shaped by our circumstances. Conversely, this also means that in many violent crimes against socially oppressed people, it is precisely this oppression that plays a role (even if it is often unconscious). What is a problem, however, and what is often emphasised by radical feminist circles, is the focus on men and male violence. It is true that the vast majority of femicides (and murder overall) are committed by men, similar to other violent crimes. At the same time, however, the conclusion should not be drawn that this is about an inherently ?male? problem, that is, to portray "the man" as the enemy of the woman. This is clearly a systematic, social problem. Men and women are both shaped by our systematically sexist world, but the results are very different for men and structurally much more likely to lead to violence. Attributing the problem to an abstract, ahistorical patriarchy is too inaccurate. There are patriarchal structures (which have existed in various forms for a very long time) in our social system, but the social system that concretely forms and reproduces them is capitalism and not the abstract "male supremacy". Capitalism (our economic and social system) benefits enormously from adapting patterns from older societies and systematically playing oppressed people against each other as well as being able to make more profit from them. This is what makes the maintenance of such structures possible in the first place and, which is of course most important in capitalism, profitable.

So, in principle, the concept of femicide does make sense and one can certainly use the term in political discussion. However, it is neither clear nor precise, which means that it is not necessarily useful in every situation. Therefore, a clearer discussion is needed within the anti-sexist movement in order to fill the term with life so that it can be used as an instrument of analysis. Calling every murder of a woman a femicide is certainly striking and, unfortunately, it is all too often correct, but it also leads to an inaccurate use of a term that is supposed to help combat the problem it describes.

To come back to Austria: Almost all of this year's murders of women, there have been 14 so far, were committed by an intimate (ex-)partner. This is in line with an international trend. According to UNODC (in 2017), the global share of female homicide victims is 19 percent, but for intimate partner and family homicides it is 64 percent and for intimate partner homicides it is 82 percent. In addition, most murders that are committed by women in intimate partnerships are in self-defence and/or after a long experience of violence in the relationship. What is special about Austria is that it has a very low murder rate in general and a vanishingly low rate of gang crime, which estimates suggest probably causes the most murders of men, worldwide. That is why more women are killed than men.

The ill-intentioned and, above all, uninformed, might claim that there are only a few murders a year and this does not suggest a systematic pattern. If anything, they might add, one should be much more

concerned about the murders of men, since they make up a larger part of the world total. First of all, every murder is terrible, and it is a central task in the struggle for a just society to abolish everything, for example, poverty and socialisation that leads to them. But, with the figures on murders of women, we must also state quite clearly that femicides are "only" the very top of a very, very deep iceberg.

Committing murder is logically the most drastic form of violence that sexism can take. Before that comes domestic violence, sexual violence, verbal and physical harassment and much more. The things that make these things "possible" and thus more tolerable or "normal" are objectification, unequal treatment in education and work, double and multiple burdens through additional housework and child care, economic dependence, the ideological higher status of the man, the pressure to bear the emotional burden of the partner, and many other things. These connections are not accidental, they have a system role in the way reproduction takes place in capitalism.

Under these circumstances, it is especially important to draw attention to specific aspects of social oppression and to fight against them. "Just" because not all relationships lead to the murder of a person, doesn't mean that there isn't an enormous amount of violence and sexist oppression that we need to fight against. But this now leads to another question: what can we actually do?

In Vienna, at least since September, the feminist, autonomous collective "Claim the Space" has organised a rally after every femicide in Austria. The aim of this is to commemorate the victims, to give vent to one's own anger and grief, but also to literally take the space for this and related issues and to draw attention to the systematic problem. In principle, this is good and important and has also significantly led to a change in the (media) discussion (the word femicide, for example, has only recently been used in Austria). One of their appeals makes this clear:

"We want to make space for a substantive discussion about patriarchal violence and what a further politicisation of femicide will look like. We want to share our knowledge about feminist practices and struggles and think together about what our common practice in Vienna against patriarchal violence should be. And we want to create a space to talk about our anger, but also about our sadness, our powerlessness, our demoralisation."

While the work of the collective is very important, there are some points that need to be made beyond these demands. One problem lies in restricting the analysis and organising of this struggle to FLINTA (i.e. women, lesbians, inter-, non-binary-, trans- and agender people). It is completely understandable that people with a specific oppression often do not feel comfortable in contexts where other people are present who (socially speaking) benefit from this oppression. At the same time, the fight against femicide requires a common struggle of all people who are oppressed and/or exploited under capitalism. This also includes men. Men are not the "oppressors" in this system, even though many are certainly sexist-oppressive or benefit from women being oppressed. The oppressors are those who wield power in this system, who try to play people off against each other to prevent collective action and struggle.

Within a broad movement, there must certainly be space for people with specific oppressions to meet separately and organise specific areas of struggle and formulate their own political positions. It is also important to ensure that people with certain social privileges do not dominate the whole movement, which happens often because of certain structural power imbalances. This requires democratic structures and procedures (for example, quotas within alliances or for certain committees and roles) that counteract this and give marginalised people the place in the movement that they deserve.

There is also a certain problem with the position of "Claim the Space" in relation to parties and party-based organisations. They are often accused of appropriating protests, which of course should not be the case.

At the same time, the logical conclusion to not cooperate with certain organisations is a serious misconception. What is needed is a strong alliance that can lead a movement composed of diverse groups, democratically legitimised, and clearly positioned. The tactics of the "Autonomes" (including the exclusion of parties and party organisations), even if they are not always wrong per se, do not lead to what the struggle against femicide needs - a movement that can not only address demands, but fight for them.

This movement also has to be an internationalist one. Femicide and violence against women are not purely Austrian problems. It was not long ago that the body of Sarah Everard was found in the UK, killed by a police officer. In India, self-defence committees organised by women and LGBTQIA+ people, fight against offenders when the state will not. Globally, an estimated 736 million women, almost one in three, have been subjected to intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life (30 per cent of women aged 15 and older). It is an international problem and needs an international movement. The racist position of many European Governments, which creates the narrative of femicides being a result of 'different' cultures, is blatantly wrong and tries to separate us, when the truth is that every country has a problem with sexism and therefore structural violence, because capitalism constantly reproduces it. The specific form this violence takes, can of course be different in every country but this does not change the structural issue which is relevant in every single country. So, any movement we try to build around this horrific issue needs to have connections and an overview of the international dimension of femicides.

But what should such a movement actually look like? What kind of demands does it need? For revolutionary communists, the first question is clearly related to the class struggle. Within the capitalist system, the workers have the most power, in that they can build up extreme pressure by refusing to work.

A movement of oppressed people always needs to seek a connection to the workers' movement and have a focus on the working class if it is to have any chance of success. Of course, demands cannot be won only through labour struggles, but when it comes to the long-term fight against sexism, this is essential. At the moment, however, the left is at a point where this is difficult to implement. A first step in this direction would be a united front between different (left) groups with the aim of drawing in the trade unions and organising strong protests.

Such a movement must of course demand that measures to protect women from violence should be expanded. There are many different approaches to this, and these should be further elaborated within such a movement. Women's shelters and counselling for perpetrators are examples of important concepts and things for which much more money must be spent.

Even though we demand such things from the state, we do not rely on it. The bourgeois state is an instrument of oppression of the ruling class and it is no accident that it plays a role in the inaction regarding femicide. Therefore, we have to think about building our own self-defence structures made up by the oppressed against the frequent violence. This is not about autonomous small groups that go around to scare men, but about a collective organisation of sexually oppressed people who train themselves to achieve protection especially through mass mobilisation and actions and thus actively defend themselves where the state fails and will always fail. There are many examples of this worldwide, especially in Latin America and India.

Finally, this movement must also break with the capitalist system. This sounds a bit premature, considering how far we are from such an alliance, let alone a movement. But as explained earlier, the systemic nature of violence against women under capitalism is no accident. Capitalism will reproduce these relations of oppression over and over again. Improvements that have been fought for and won will be taken back in

bad situations of class struggle unless there is a fighting movement to defend them. It is a constant swimming against the tide. If we want to finally overcome sexism, and with it femicide, we need a different social system that operates on a different economic basis and thus allows for a different socialisation of society. We can only achieve this if we overthrow capitalism and fight for communism, where there is no systemic oppression and exploitation anymore.

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