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Sexual Femicide

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“The scariest feeling in the world is knowing that you’re going to die a violent, painful, terrifying death... He was choking me while he raped me. ‘This is the place you’re going to die,’ he said. I came so close.”

- Paula Potter, *Sawridge First Nation*¹

Popular understandings of sexual violence are often “limited to rape, and specifically, violent rape by disturbed strangers”². This creates and recreates the traditional narrative of sexual femicide: that is, the abduction, sexual violation and murder of women and girls by an unknown (typically serial) offender.

Yet, while many Canadians are familiar with this narrative and the crimes of known sexual killers such as [Paul Bernardo](#), [Michael Rafferty](#) and [Robert Pickton](#), there is little public awareness about other (non-serial) manifestations of sexualized lethal violence that impact the lives of women and girls. These include: sexual violence and domestic femicide, the sexualized murder of women in the context of war/conflict, and the sexualized murder of women targeted by hate crimes.

Like other forms of sexual violence, understanding *sexual femicide* – the *intentional sexual violation and killing of women and girls* – is complicated by “persistent and common misconceptions [that] shape and influence”³ how sexual femicide is examined and defined by the broader public.

Sexual Femicide and Sexual Violence Myths

Girls and women “learn about sexual danger from an early age”. Moreover, the descriptions and warnings that most women receive about sex, danger and womanhood “overwhelmingly suggest that [this] danger lies in public space”⁴ —particularly in the possibility of stranger-perpetrated sexual femicide.

While the stranger-danger/sexual predator narrative is well-known to the public, studies continue to show that the prevalence of other more-common forms of sexual violence (e.g. sexual harassment⁵, sexual assault by acquaintances of the victim⁶, and child sexual abuse⁷) are in fact lesser-known or acknowledged.

¹ MacDonald, Nancy for MacLean’s Magazine. June 15, 2015. “It Could Have Been Me”: *Thirteen extraordinary Indigenous women tell how close they came to being on the list of the missing and murdered*. p. 20.

² The Learning Network. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 13.

³ Ibid, 12.

⁴ Pain, R. 1991. Space, sexual violence and social control: integrating geographical and feminist analyses of women’s fear of crime. *Progress in Human Geography*, 15(4), 1991: 423.

⁵ See The Learning Network. June 2015. Issue 13: Sexual and Gender-based Harassment. Online:

http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/sites/learningtoendabuse.ca.vawlearningnetwork/files/Sexual_Harassment_Newsletter_ONLINE_0.pdf

⁶ See: The Learning Network. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 16.

⁷ Statistics Canada. 2009. *Child and Youth Victims of Police-reported Violent Crime, 2008*. Online:

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85f0033m/2010023/part-partie1-eng.htm> and <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85f0033m/2010023/ct006-eng.htm>

In comparison, narratives about sexual femicide are commonplace; they exist in news media, and are regularly reproduced in crime dramas and “popular ‘slasher’ films...in which male protagonists murder young, sexually attractive women”⁸.

This popular narrative on sexual femicide tends to support the following common *sexual violence myths*:

- Sexual violence is only violence when the victim is physically injured: that is, “‘real’ rapes result in the woman being murdered (or, at the very least, visibly harmed)”⁹;
- Sexual violence is perpetrated by strangers, i.e. the “dangerous and predatory...Ripper identity”¹⁰;
- Sex is necessarily dangerous for women: women “live under the continual threat of rape, and this shapes what they can and cannot do”¹¹ in relationships, including sexual relationships; and
- Male sexuality is naturally aggressive; women, in response, must be aware and take precautions to lessen “potentially dangerous interactions with the everpredatory male”¹².

Certainly, while sexual femicide incidences and offenders can fit the conventional narrative (i.e. a serial offender; a stranger; a crime that involves both rape and murder), it is important to challenge the stereotypes and myths that this narrative supports.

Overall, sexual violence myths function to shift the blame to the victims/survivors; minimize the seriousness of sexual violence; justify sexual violence; and minimize perpetrator accountability¹³. Similarly, when we simply accept the “Ripper,” “pervert” or “hunter/prey” storyline” in cases of sexual femicide, “explanations as to *why* the man murdered the woman are...rendered unnecessary”¹⁴.

Sexual Femicide: Realities

Sexual femicide is the sexual violation and killing of a woman by a man or “men motivated by the socially constructed right to do so, their superiority over females, pleasure or sadistic desires towards women, or the assumption of ownership over women”¹⁵.

Examples of sexual femicide include:

- The strategic sexual violation and murder of women and girls as a means of political or territory weaponry *in war/armed conflict*¹⁶;
- *The abduction, sexual violation and murder of women and girls* by an offender with no relationship to the victim. In the sexual femicide of Tori Stafford, Justice Thomas Heeney noted of the perpetrator: “You have snuffed out the life of a beautiful, talented,

⁸ Duggan, M. November 2011. Relating Rape And Murder: Narratives Of Sex, Death And Gender. By Jane Monckton-Smith, Review. - *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume51(Issue6) Page p.1072To-1074: 1073.

⁹ Ibid, 1074.

¹⁰ Duggan, M. November 2011. Relating Rape And Murder: Narratives Of Sex, Death And Gender. By Jane Monckton-Smith, Review. - *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume51(Issue6) Page p.1072To-1074: 1073.

¹¹ Pain, R. 1991. Space, sexual violence and social control: integrating geographical and feminist analyses of women’s fear of crime. *Progress in Human Geography*, 15(4), 1991: 425.

¹² Ibid

¹³ The Learning Network. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 14.

¹⁴ Duggan, M. November 2011. Relating Rape And Murder: Narratives Of Sex, Death And Gender. By Jane Monckton-Smith, Review. - *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume51(Issue6) Page p.1072To-1074: 1073.

¹⁵ Laurent, C., Platzer, M. & Idomir, M (Eds)(2013). *Femicide: A global Issue That Demands Action*. Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) Vienna Liaison Office, p. 101.

¹⁶ McKenzie, D. UNICEF. *Even where fighting has ended, sexual violence scars children and women in DR Congo*. Online: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/drcongo_35223.html

vivacious little girl.... And for what? So that you could gratify your twisted and deviant desire to have sex with a child”¹⁷;

- *Acts of sexual femicide in the context of hate crime.* For example, crimes which “target Indigenous women [that are] acts of racist and misogynist violence” are also often sexual femicides¹⁸. Reports by the Native Women’s Association of Canada and Amnesty International show that violence against Indigenous women and girls is pervasive, and includes unprecedented numbers of sexualized femicides. Cases include the sexual violation and murders of Cindy Gladue, an unnamed 15-year old girl in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the attempted murder of Rinelle Harper in the last year alone. Today, Indigenous women and their allies “are speaking up in an attempt to change the way we perceive the girls and women we continue to lose at an appalling rate”, and to “consider the historical context that led to here”¹⁹. Similarly, women of colour overall experience extra vulnerability to being targeted for sexual violence and harassment: studies have found that the “fears of women of colour were also structured by race but, in addition to concerns about sexual assault, [as] they saw themselves at risk from racist harassment and violence”²⁰;
- *Acts of domestic femicide.* It is significant to note that past sexual violence is associated with increased risk of murders of women in violent relationships. Jacquelyn Campbell’s *Danger Assessment Tool* queries: “Has he [partner] ever forced you to have sex when you did not wish to do so?”²¹. A positive reply indicates heightened risk of lethal violence. With this in mind, it is possible that some domestic femicides are also sexual femicides.

Over many decades, advocates have reframed sexual violence as an issue of power and control, sexism and inequality²², as opposed to a crime merely about sex. The examples of sexual femicide presented above, support the latter framing of sexual violence.

Certainly, sexual femicide echoes messages of misogyny and punishment, in which women’s violation are justified by social norms, the offender’s attitudes, or both. That is, “the motivation behind the sexual act is simply because the victim is a woman; and the death is sexual simply because the victim is a woman”²³.

Sexual Femicide: Impacts

The conflating of male violence with male sexuality, the popular narrative (e.g. sexual femicide reported in the news, crime dramas, ‘slasher’ films), and the statistical prevalence of sexual violence overall, culminate to suggest that “the constant threat of sexual violence is [an] inevitable ‘part of the natural environment’” for women and girls²⁴. In this way, the threat of sexual femicide has an impact on *all* women and girls.

¹⁷ CBC News. May 2012. Judge calls Tori Stafford killer a ‘monster’ at sentencing. Online: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/judge-calls-tori-stafford-killer-a-monster-at-sentencing-1.1180907>

¹⁸ Amnesty International. *Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls: Understanding the numbers*. Online: <http://www.amnesty.ca/blog/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-and-girls-understanding-the-numbers>

¹⁹ MacDonald, Nancy for MacLean’s Magazine. June 15, 2015. “It Could Have Been Me”: Thirteen extraordinary Indigenous women tell how close they came to being on the list of the missing and murdered. p. 19.

²⁰ Pain, R. Gender, Race, Age and Fear in the City. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 38, Nos 5–6, 899–913, 2001: 906

²¹ Campbell, C., Daniel W. Webster and Nancy Glass. 2009. *The Danger Assessment: Validation of a Lethality Risk Assessment Instrument for Intimate Partner Femicide*. Volume 24 Number 4. April 2009, 653-674: 655.

²² The Learning Network. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 13.

²³ Chiotti, J. Relating Rape And Murder: Narratives Of Sex, Death And Gender. By Jane Monckton-Smith, Review. *Journal of Sexual Aggression* (November 2012), Vol. 18, No. 3, 374-376: 374.

²⁴ Pain, R. 1991. Space, sexual violence and social control: integrating geographical and feminist analyses of women’s fear of crime. *Progress in Human Geography*, 15(4), 1991: 423.

The fear of sexualized crime can lead women to modify their behaviour, lifestyle and sexual practices, as well as impose limitations on where women choose to travel, live or work. The pervasive fear of crime overall and specifically, *sexual* crime, impacts women, girls and their activities differently than men²⁵.

Finally, the realistic threat of sexual femicide means that all forms of sexualized intimidation can have a significant and lasting psychological impact on women. In one study, a “survey into women’s feelings when they are ‘flashed at’ (i.e. male genital exhibitionism) showed that reactions can vary from amusement to fear of death”²⁶.

Recommendations

Addressing the root causes of sexual femicide means challenging social norms that minimize or condone sexual violence. We can do so in the following ways:

1. Identify and challenge popular media messages that normalize or conflate violence with sex, women and girls.
2. Identify and challenge popular media messages that normalize male sexual aggression, or conflate violence with sex and masculinity. To learn more about this, see [White Ribbon’s Draw the Line campaign](#).
3. Recognize the connections between non-lethal acts of sexualized violence (such as sexual harassment, online sexual violence or sexual abuse) and lethal forms of violence against women. The root causes and attitudes are the same. This highlights the importance of taking *all forms* of sexualized violence seriously. To learn more about this, see [Ontario’s Draw the Line campaigns](#).
4. Recognize the impact of sexual violence in the lives of women and girls. Fear of sexualized crime has an impact on women and girls, whether they experience it personally or not. Studies show, for example, that children took “on their parents’ ideas about danger and that girls in particular would comply with their parents’ rules after a certain age and begin to regulate their own exposure to the places they had learned were dangerous”²⁷. Ensure that any safety measures you teach to young people in your life, particularly girls, acknowledge that girls and women are never to blame if they are targeted for sexual violence.
5. Attend events like Take Back the Night or December 6 memorials, which acknowledge and honour the impacts of sexual violence and femicide in the lives of women and girls.

²⁵ Pain, R. Gender, Race, Age and Fear in the City. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 38, Nos 5–6, 899–913, 2001: 910

²⁶ Pain, R. 1991. Space, sexual violence and social control: integrating geographical and feminist analyses of women’s fear of crime. *Progress in Human Geography*, 15(4), 1991: 421.

²⁷ Pain, R. Gender, Race, Age and Fear in the City. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 38, Nos 5–6, 899–913, 2001: 909.