

Femicide in Belgium: quantification, data and analysis

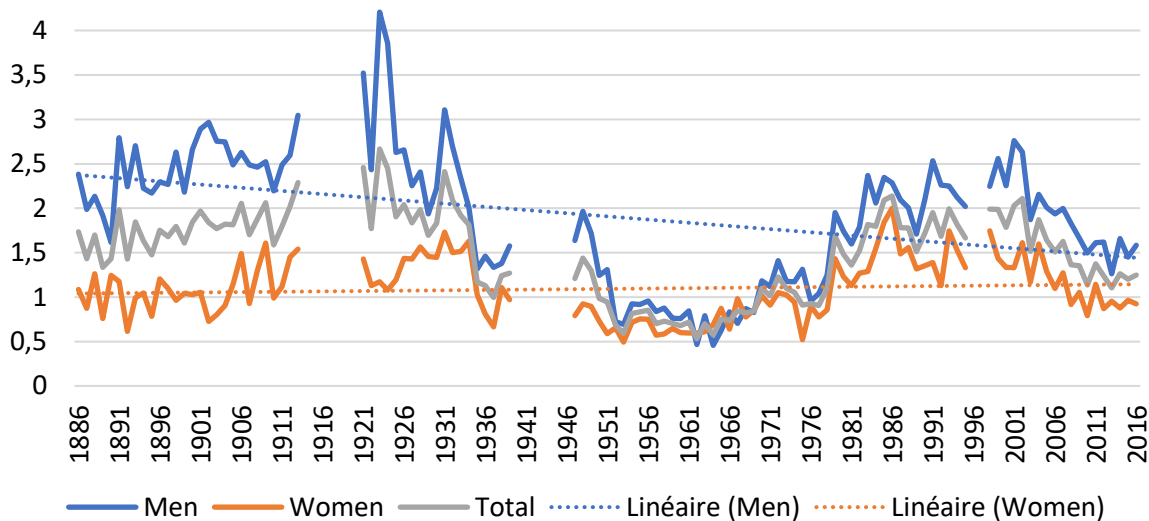
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Trends in homicide mortality since the nineteenth century point to an overall decline, which can be explained by four factors: the reduction in male rivalry conflicts, the transition of lethal violence from the public sphere to the family sphere, the abandonment of interpersonal violence by the elites, and lastly changes in legislation, which tends to repress violent behaviour more and more (Eisner, 2003; Mucchielli, 2008).

This overall reduction needs to be qualified, as it mainly concerns homicides committed against men. The average number of women killed per homicide is changing less favourably (see Figure 1). It therefore seems essential to study these deaths in order to understand their particular reasons and to have an impact on their numbers, with a view to reducing them. Women who die as a result of homicide are victims of a man in 80 to 90% of cases, and most often in the context of family or intimate relationships.

Intimate partner homicide (IPH) is clearly a gendered phenomenon. Indeed, when we look at homicide rates in general, men account for up to 80% of victims (UNODC, 2014). However, women account for around two-thirds of IPH victims (UNODC, 2014). One study also showed that women are six times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than men (Stöckl et al., 2013).

Figure 1: Homicide mortality rate from 1886 to 2016 (per 100,000 inhabitants) without WWI and WW2. (Plavsic & Van Cleemput, 2020)



IPHs are also a way of studying domestic violence. Violence cannot be measured satisfactorily by taking into account only complaints made to the police or cases brought to trial and resulting in a conviction. The number of complaints can vary depending on several factors, and the number of acts of violence remains an approximation, a grey figure. The continuum of violence can only be quantified by its most extreme aspect, namely homicide. It is this phenomenon that is the most remarkable and the most objective for measuring the evolution of violence against women, *a fortiori* in an intimate relationship.

In June 2023, Belgium adopted a law against femicide. It aims to define and take action against these gender-based murders by collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data. As well as highlighting these murders and the profile of the people involved, the aim is to improve care for victims and training for those working in the field.

The term femicide was first used in Brussels in 1976 by Diane Russell, who defined it as "the murder of women by men because they are women" (Radford & Russell, 1992). This definition is not set in stone and has taken four forms in the new Belgian law, which distinguishes between intimate femicide, non-intimate femicide, indirect femicide and gender-based homicide. We are particularly interested in femicides occurring in the context of a relationship (current or former), and will therefore refer in this study to IPH of women, or femicides in the context of an (ex-) relationship.

One method used in several countries to study IPH is the Domestic Homicide Review, i.e. a retrospective review of cases of homicide perpetrated in the context of an (ex-) intimate relationship. The aim of this method is to improve knowledge of the phenomenon, learn from the way in which these cases have been handled, and formulate avenues for improvement in terms of prevention (Bauwens et al., 2023). Our study is developed within the framework of such methods.

A great deal of research has attempted to identify the risk factors involved in IPH. These include a history of battering, separation (physical or through the initiation of legal proceedings), stalking, substance abuse, mental illness, and access to firearms (Campbell, 2012; Campbell et al., 2003, 2009; Campbell & Glass, 2009; Spencer & Stith, 2018). It has also been shown that the greatest risk factor for IPH is previous domestic violence (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007). Jealousy, a woman's desire to leave her man, and control seem to be the most common motivations for IPH in women (Elisha et al., 2010; Spencer & Stith, 2018). Some have observed socio-demographic specificities within these couples, such as a greater age difference between partners than in the average population (Mercader et al., 2004), or an over-representation of disadvantaged groups among male perpetrators of IPH (Kivivuori & Lehti, 2012). They are also older, more likely to be in employment, less likely to have been convicted, and have fewer prior convictions than non-IPH offenders (Caman et al., 2017). Finally, other risk factors present among IPH perpetrators are non-fatal strangulation, prior rape of the victim or threats with a weapon (Spencer & Stith, 2018).

To carry out our historical analyses, we used three sources: the death statistics collected by the Belgian Statistics Office from the municipalities that kept cause-of-death registers (1886-1976); the death statistics published in the Public Health Yearbooks (1954-1993), and the Death Bulletins (1998-2021). For the most recent data, we used the press from 2017 to 2023, which we compared with the results of the court databases.

Until now, the lack of official monitoring of the number of femicides in Belgium has led associations to take responsibility for counting the number of victims via the press. We followed this approach by systematically collecting articles that appeared in the press and mentioned a femicide that had occurred in Belgium, from 2017 to 2023. We extracted socio-demographic and contextual information about the cases, which is often very rich when several newspapers are taken into account. It is common to find the full identity of the perpetrator and victim, their age and address, as well as the circumstances and description of the murder scene. These events are generally of particular interest because of their extraordinary nature and are therefore reported in detail in the press.

As this source of data is subject to a number of biases (lack of communication from the public prosecutor's office on a case, confusion in the information, lack of exhaustiveness), we decided to compare it with an official source: data from court databases, from which we requested an extraction of cases brought before the courts.

Our corpus consists (as at 31 October 2023) of 176 femicides that occurred between 2017 and 2023 in Belgium. Of these, 85% occurred in the context of a relationship between (ex-) intimate partners and are therefore IPH.

These data from the press were compared with the data contained in the death bulletins and the data from the public prosecutors' offices.

Every death in Belgium is recorded on a death certificate, completed by the doctor certifying the death, and sent to the local authorities for entry in the Civil Status Register. Since 1998, this has been coded according to the WHO ICD-10 nomenclature, with certain codes indicating a link between the death and a situation of conflict with the partner, ill-treatment or difficulties linked to separation or divorce. In fact, these codes are used almost exclusively in suicides of men in which marital conflict or divorce is mentioned (Plavsic & Sanderson, 2020). This proves that death certificates are not filled in taking into account the context of the death, which is why we believe that it would be useful to complete this information after an investigation or trial in order to better quantify IPH. This source is therefore unreliable for identifying cases of intimate partner homicide, which is why we turned to data from the press and public prosecutors' offices.

The database of public prosecutors' offices is completed with varying degrees of care, depending on the period and the judicial district. Its application is fairly recent, its integration with police databases is not yet fully complete, and its use is not intended for statistical purposes. We requested an extraction of the data relating to the cases we identified via the press in order to cross-reference the information from each of these sources. This revealed a number of errors on both sides, but only a very small discrepancy, showing that the press provides an approximate reflection of the reality of the number of cases of femicide without being exhaustive, and that the accuracy of the public prosecutor's office in characterising the facts is improving (Vanneste et al., 2022). Problems may arise, for example, from the fact that a case is initially classified as assault and battery, then the death of the victim reclassifies the facts as murder, which may not be systematically modified in the database. This approach therefore makes it possible, on the one hand, to test the completeness of the press on cases of femicide, and on the other hand, to test the correct encoding of justice databases. Are femicides correctly recorded as murders or assassinations, with the aggravating facts stipulating that it is a homicide in the context of a (former) relationship between intimate partners?

In addition to these comparisons of sources, we are seeking to identify the characteristics of the people involved in women's IPH. Do they have particular characteristics compared with other couples? For example, we have identified age differences within our sample that are comparable to the national average, but with much more frequent extreme differences. Some research points to a lack of means for the victim to escape this violent situation, whether through a lack of action by the authorities, geographical or family isolation, or simple ignorance of existing alternatives. IPH is most often preceded by other forms of violence (harassment, threats, physical violence), and there are often antecedents recorded by the police or noticed by family and friends. We will try to highlight these difficulties and antecedents by analysing the cases reported in our corpus.

In this study, we are aiming for a more in-depth analysis of the profiles of perpetrators and victims of femicide, the means used and the circumstances (ongoing or terminated relationship, presence of a triggering event such as pregnancy or a break-up, etc.) in order to fuel the political debate and suggest the introduction of systematic reporting in line with the new law passed in June 2023 in Belgium. We have already suggested the introduction of an information-gathering system specific to homicide cases, and more particularly in the case of IPH (Vanneste et al., 2022).

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