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UNVEILING THE SHADOWS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON UNDERSTANDING FEMICIDE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS

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Abstract

Femicide, the intentional killing of women based on their gender, is a pervasive and disturbing issue globally, with South Africa experiencing alarmingly high rates. This systematic literature review examines the socio-cultural determinants of femicide in South Africa. Through a comprehensive analysis of scholarly articles, reports, and studies, the review aims to enhance our understanding of the multifaceted nature of femicide in the country. Taking a socio-cultural lens, the review investigates factors contributing to femicide, such as gender norms, patriarchy, cultural beliefs, and practices. The review explores the intersections of gender, violence, and culture, analyzing the consequences of femicide on victims, families, communities, and society. Identifying gaps in knowledge, the review emphasizes the need for further research and policy development. It concludes by providing recommendations for interventions, policies, and strategies to prevent and address femicide in South Africa. This review serves as a crucial tool to promote dialogue, and guide evidence-based interventions against femicide.

Keywords: Femicide, Unveiling Shadows, Socio-Cultural Determinants, Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Femicide, the deliberate and systematic act of killing women based solely on their gender, stands as a harrowing and pervasive issue that reverberates across the globe. This deeply disturbing phenomenon, driven by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and gender inequalities, shatters life, and perpetuates a culture of violence that strikes at the heart of society (Okech, 2021; Whittington *et al.* 2023). Among the nations grappling with alarmingly high rates of femicide, South Africa

emerges as a poignant example, where the sinister convergence of various social, economic, and cultural factors has given rise to a crisis that demands urgent attention (Mathebula *et al.* 2022a). The current study delves into the unsettling realm of femicide, exploring its manifestations, underlying causes, and the specific case of South Africa, to shed light on the pressing need for comprehensive societal change and international cooperation to eradicate this violation of human rights.

The tragic act of murdering women, often by an intimate partner, constitutes a distressing reality that cannot be ignored. Shockingly, statistics in South Africa indicate that this form of violence is responsible for a sizable portion of female homicides, encompassing a staggering range of 40% to 70% (Dekel and Abrahams 2021; Tintswalo *et al.* 2022). This harrowing trend underscores the insidious nature of domestic violence and highlights the vulnerability that women can face within their relationships. The researcher argues that these statistics serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive efforts to address the roots of this issue, ranging from education and awareness campaigns to legal reforms and support systems, all aimed at eradicating the pervasive threat that intimate partner violence poses to women's lives.

Research shows that the rate at which women are abused, violated, and tragically killed in South Africa continues to be a source of profound concern and an undeniable blight on our society (Standish and Weil, 2021; Ngidi, 2022; Uzobo and Ayinmoro, 2023). During the period spanning from July to September 2022, there were a total of 7,004 cases of homicide. This represents a rise of 841 occurrences when compared to the equivalent period in 2021, as reported by the Police Recorded Crime Statistics report for the second quarter of the fiscal year 2022/23 (South African Police Service, 2022). The above escalation signifies a percentage increase of 13.6%. However, the data encompasses the second quarter of the fiscal year 2022/23, spanning from July 1st to September 30th. Minister Cele observed that these statistics contrasts with those from the corresponding period in 2021, a time when South Africa was navigating the impacts of COVID-19 and operating under varying lockdown levels 2, 3, and 4 (South African Police Service, 2022).

These acts of violence unfold within an alarming context, where the very people women should be able to trust—those they know intimately, those they love, and those who should safeguard their well-being—have, instead, become agents of harm. Mathebula *et al.* (2022a) argues that in a society where the bonds of trust and kinship are meant to provide solace and security, the very foundations of safety are eroded for countless women. The above statement underscores the unsettling truth that these acts of violence are not isolated incidents, but rather a systemic and deeply ingrained affliction. Therefore, the researcher postulates that women should be given every opportunity to flourish and thrive by the society. However, women find themselves trapped in a perilous reality where danger lurks not just in the shadows, but within the intimate spheres of their lives. As the argument of Mathebula *et al.* (2022b) stipulates that through the halls of policy-making and public discourse, they serve as a stark reminder that the fight against femicide is not merely a statistical exercise, but a moral imperative that demands a comprehensive and coordinated response. Although Uzobo and Ayinmoro, (2023) argue that such sentiment alluded to by the above author is a call to confront the profound gender inequalities that allow such atrocities to persist and to dismantle the structures that perpetuate a culture of violence against women. Therefore, as South Africa and the world at large confront the haunting specter of femicide, the urgency of change becomes unmistakably clear, and the imperative to protect and empower women becomes an unequivocal mandate for progress.

The alarming prevalence of femicide, characterized by the deliberate killing of women based on their gender, constitutes a grave and pervasive issue globally, with South Africa experiencing notably high rates of such violence (Zara and Gino, 2018). This systematic literature review (SLR) aims to comprehensively investigate the socio-cultural determinants of femicide in South Africa, shedding light on the intricate web of factors contributing to this egregious crime. By scrutinizing existing scholarly articles, reports, and studies, this review endeavors to deepen our comprehension of the multifaceted nature of femicide within the country, specifically through the sociocultural lens (Ndlovu *et al.* 2020; Davidson, 2021; Brysk and Faust, 2021). Within the South African context, this review seeks to unravel the complex web of gender norms, patriarchal structures, deeply rooted cultural beliefs, and practices that perpetuate femicide. It explores the

intricate intersections of gender, violence, and culture, delving into the far-reaching repercussions of femicide on the victims, their families, the affected communities, and society at large. Moreover, the review identifies critical gaps in knowledge, highlighting the pressing necessity for further research and the development of evidence-based policies to address this pressing issue. In conclusion, this review presents a series of recommendations for interventions, policies, and strategies aimed at preventing and addressing femicide in South Africa. By serving as a vital resource, this review not only promotes essential dialogue but also offers guidance for the implementation of evidence-based interventions to combat femicide in the country.

2. Methodology

Academic research suggests that when examining a particular subject, scholars should undertake the following key steps: a) amalgamate and assess existing studies, b) establish connections among pivotal concepts, c) pinpoint areas of deficiency and d) propose or establish a course for prospective research endeavors (Van Dinter *et al.* 2021). To achieve this, the researcher followed the scoping review on understanding femicide in South Africa and its socio-cultural determinants. A scoping review is considered as a method of review that quickly identifies the fundamental concepts within a research field, along with the primary sources and types of evidence accessible. It can be conducted as an independent project, particularly in cases where the subject area is intricate or has not been thoroughly reviewed previously (Munn *et al.* 2018). The researcher chose to conduct a scoping review because victims of femicide, tragically, cannot provide direct accounts or participate in traditional research methods due to their deaths, necessitating a comprehensive overview of existing literature to understand this critical issue. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) introduced a framework comprising five stages: (1) formulating the research question, (2) identifying pertinent studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) charting data, and (5) summarizing findings. In this paper, the researcher integrates the data charting step with data summarization, as recommended by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) for conducting a scoping review.

2.1. Identifying the research question

According to Muka *et al.* (2020), crafting a clear research question hinges on refining the research aim; without a clear aim, the research question may not effectively guide the development of a search strategy. In the current study, the objective is to unearth the socio-cultural factors contributing to femicide in South Africa. According to Muka *et al.* (2009), a well-crafted research question aligns with the study's aim and can be effectively developed using frameworks such as PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparisons, Outcome), PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome), or SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type), which are tailored to the analysis type. Given that this study employed a narrative descriptive analysis, researchers utilized the PEO framework (Population, Exposure, Outcome) to formulate the research question (refer to Table 1 for details). The research question was what are the socio-cultural factors contributing to femicide in South Africa as revealed by existing literature?

Table 1. PEO framework

P-Population	E-Exposure	O-Outcome
Women	Abuse	Femicide

2.2. Identifying the relevant studies

The researcher utilized ScienceDirect and Google Scholar to identify relevant articles, customizing the search engines to include articles from 2010 to 2024. Inclusion criteria encompassed articles published in journals during this time to capture the latest data on the phenomenon, as well as grey literature such as conference proceedings, books, and book chapters. Exclusion criteria focused on omitting non-peer-reviewed articles and review papers to ensure data credibility. The search keywords employed were "femicide," "unveiling shadows,"

and "socio-cultural determinants," with no specified research approach or country of publication to broaden the scope of the search.

2.3. Charting and summarizing the data

Table 2. Data Charting

Source	Title	Methodology	Findings
Kouta <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Understanding and preventing femicide using a cultural and ecological approach. In <i>Femicide across Europe</i> (pp. 53-70). Policy Press.	Qualitative	The study found that traditional beliefs that men have a right to control or discipline women make women vulnerable to violence by intimate partners. The study found that certain cultural and social norms may support several types of violence.
Brysk and Faust, (2021)	Contesting femicide: Social movements and the politics of men's violence against female intimate partner. <i>The Sage Handbook of Domestic Violence</i> , 2, pp.2-19.	Mixed Methods	Economic abuse includes tactics of not only financial control, but also financial exploitation, debt generation, damage to property and possessions, and work and education sabotage. Economic abuse is a hidden form of intimate partner violence.
Cullen, Dawson <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Intersectionality and invisible victims: reflections on data challenges and vicarious trauma in femicide, family and intimate partner homicide research. <i>Journal of Family Violence</i> , 36, 619-628.	Qualitative	The study found that physical assault is "merely the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience. The role of socioeconomic status – or poverty – and its impacts on risk of violence in combination with sex and/or gender and gender identity or expression, race/ethnicity and other identities also remains largely unexamined in official data sources and those regularly accessed by violence prevention researchers.
Davidson (2021)	Speaking femicide. <i>American University Law Review</i> , 71(2), 377-446.	Qualitative	Femicide statutes and prosecutions elsewhere may give us ideas for identifying and proving the gendered dimensions of violence, which has proven difficult in the context of American hate crimes.
Okech (2021)	Feminist digital counter publics: Challenging femicide in Kenya and South Africa. <i>Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society</i> , 46(4), 1013-1033.	Literature Review	The prevalence of violent sexual crimes against young girls and women in South Africa has led to studies that seek to draw a correlation between the traumatic violent history of apartheid and current manifestations of heteropatriarchy. The study found that class, age, and race shape male experiences of masculinity that in turn lead to violence against women.
Bernal-Gomez and Molina-Villegas (2023)	Femicide risk indicators in Mexico by means of community theory and Intersectional Feminism variables. <i>Applied geography</i> , 156, 102979.	Quantitative	Violence against women is a complex problem that requires immediate attention in countries such as Mexico, where the number of reports of violence continues to rise. Theory and Intersectional Feminism can be applied to the case of femicide in Mexico and that they manage to conceptualize, to a certain degree, the dynamics of this crime.
Caroppo <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Unveiling the Dark Nexus: a systematic review on the interplay of mental health, substance abuse, and socio-cultural factors in femicide. <i>Legal Medicine</i> , 102334.	Literature Review	Many forms of femicide emerge worldwide as people's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors evolve (intimate partner femicide, femicide-suicide, religious femicide, honor, revolt femicide) and state of vulnerability. A tiny percentage of femicides occur at the hands of subjects with diagnosed mental disorders, and controversies exist regarding the possible link between femicide and the use of drugs and/or alcohol and other factors.
Standish and Weil (2021)	Gendered pandemics: suicide, femicide and COVID-19. <i>Journal of Gender Studies</i> , 30(7), pp.807-818.	Mixed Method	The study asserts that suicide rates will increase for women and girls to unprecedented levels as a direct result of pandemic public health measures and it is also our contention that the gendered impact of COVID-19 will lead to an upsurge in another harm induced by the global health order to stay at home: femicide.

The researcher utilized data charting to retrieve specific information from PRISMA for scoping review (refer to Table 1). This involved examining authorship, publication year, subject matter, research approach, and key discoveries. To effectively synthesize the gathered data, the researchers closely examined the main findings to derive the overarching themes of their study. Subsequently, the data (refer to Table 2) underwent thematic analysis through inductive content analysis techniques.

3. Findings

The researcher has noted femicide, as the intentional killing of women based on their gender, is a widespread and deeply concerning problem with global implications. The study reiterates the fact that it is not confined to a single region but has a far-reaching presence. Moreover, South Africa experiences disproportionately high rates of femicide, indicating the urgency and severity of the issue within the country (Sibanda-Moyo *et al.* 2017; Ndlovu *et al.* 2020). The researcher argues that there is a need for immediate and comprehensive action. Nonetheless, the study's sociocultural lens reveals that femicide in South Africa is deeply rooted in gender norms, patriarchal structures, and cultural beliefs and practices (Pengpid *et al.* 2018; Maguele and Khuzwayo, 2019). Even though, the consequences of femicide extend beyond individual victims, impacting families, communities, and society. These far-reaching consequences emphasize the urgent need for intervention and prevention strategies. This underlines the complex and multifaceted nature of the problem. Therefore, the review concludes with a series of comprehensive recommendations, covering education, legal reforms, community engagement, data collection, and cross-sector collaboration. These recommendations provide a roadmap for addressing femicide in South Africa.

3.1. Prevalence and patterns

The scholarly review of the literature uncovers a troubling prevalence of femicide in South Africa, showing significant variations across regions. It sheds light on the diverse patterns of femicide, encompassing intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and honor killings, among other forms. Young women, especially those from marginalized communities, bear a disproportionately heavy burden of this issue. Femicide, defined as the deliberate killing of women due to their gender, stands as a grave concern in South Africa, carrying severe health and social repercussions (Pengpid *et al.* 2018; Meel, 2018; Mathews *et al.* 2015). Abrahams *et al.* (2014) conducted a retrospective national survey to compare female homicide rates in South Africa in 1999 and 2009. Their study discovered that the rate of female homicides per 100,000 female population significantly decreased from 24.7 in 1999 to 12.9 in 2009 (Abrahams *et al.* 2014). However, there was no notable difference in the rate of intimate partner femicide between the two time periods. The analysis employing logistic regression showed that suspected cases of rape in non-intimate femicides increased significantly in 2009 compared to 1999 (Abrahams *et al.* 2014). This study underscores the urgency for evidence-based national-level efforts to prevent violence. Meel (2018) examined the incidence of female homicides in the Transkei sub-region of South Africa from 1993 to 2015. The study revealed that, despite a decrease over time, the average rate of female homicides during this period remained three times higher than the global average. Furthermore, firearms appeared as a leading cause of death, with a higher average death rate attributable to firearms when compared to stab injuries or blunt trauma (Ndlovu *et al.* 2020).

Mathews *et al.* (2015) conducted a cross-sectional investigation into intimate femicide-suicides in South Africa, using data from homicides committed against women aged over 13 years in 1999. Their findings showed that among perpetrators of intimate femicide, 19.4% committed suicide within a week after the murder. According to Mathebula *et al.* (2022b), their research revealed that the primary determinant of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) was the fear of the husband. The above finding is supported by Maguele and Khuzwayo, (2019) contended that the risk of IPV is more intricately linked to the characteristics of the perpetrator rather than those of the victim. Moreover, Mwaba *et al.* (2021) explored personal storytelling as a form of activism to prevent femicide in Türkiye. They found that personal storytelling can provide healing from experiences of violence, but it is influenced by contextual factors such as listener reaction and social support networks. Pengpid *et al.* (2018) conducted a cross-sectional survey among women attending antenatal care and general outpatient clinics in Thailand to assess the prevalence and correlates of sexual assault within the intimate partner violence (IPV) context. They found that 27.5% of women reported sexual assault within their relationships in the past 12 months.

Sexual assault was significantly associated with physical violence and suicidal behavior. This study highlights how distinct types of IPV can co-occur and contribute to poor mental health outcomes. Personal stories also have the potential to shape broader discourses about violence against women and empower survivors for collective action against violence.

3.2. Socio-cultural determinants

The review finds several socio-cultural determinants that contribute to femicide in South Africa. The literature reveals that gender norms deeply rooted in patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and the objectification of women play a significant role (Kouta *et al.* 2018; Caroppo *et al.* 2024). Cultural beliefs and practices, such as gender-based discrimination, harmful traditions, and societal tolerance of violence, perpetuate the problem. Femicide, the killing of women because they are women, is a critical issue in South Africa with devastating consequences for individuals and society. Understanding the socio-cultural determinants that contribute to femicide is crucial for developing effective interventions.

This literature review examines several socio-cultural determinants found in the provided articles. The first article by Zinyemba *et al.* (2022) explores men's conceptualization of gender-based violence (GBV) directed towards women in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. Through semi-structured interviews with adult males, the study reveals that socio-economic factors such as poverty and substance abuse are perceived as key factors aggravating GBV. In the above-mentioned study, participants also found cultural factors related to the patriarchal system and diminishing value of respect between men and women as root causes of GBV. Additionally, participants expressed concerns over the feminization of GBV, asserting that men can also fall prey to GBV. The second article by Maguele *et al.* (2019) presents a scoping review protocol aiming to map available evidence on socio-cultural factors influencing intimate partner violence (IPV) among young women. While this article does not provide specific findings or analysis, it highlights the importance of understanding these factors in order to guide future research and interventions. The third article by Ross *et al.* (2022) focuses on South African university women's perspectives on intimate partner violence through a qualitative study conducted among female university students in Limpopo. The findings reveal four main themes: cultural beliefs, the university's role in intimate partner violence, likely outcomes of intimate partner violence, and future interventions. Cultural beliefs were identified as perpetuating violence against women, with financial security and housing resources being factors that keep women in abusive relationships.

The study also highlights limited knowledge of intimate partner violence and the lack of actions to reduce it among university students. The fourth article by Gibbs *et al.* (2017) examines the prevalence and factors associated with recent IPV among post-partum women in eThekweni Municipality. The study finds a 10.55% prevalence of IPV victimization among post-partum women in the clinic setting. Logistic regression models show that relationship power and depressive symptoms are significant factors associated with IPV victimization. Mobility limitations are also found to be significantly associated with IPV victimization. Socio-economic factors such as poverty and substance abuse, along with cultural dynamics related to patriarchal systems and diminishing respect between men and women, are identified as key contributors to gender-based violence directed towards women which in some instances leads to the killing of women by their spouses (Mathebula *et al.* 2022b). The fifth article by Mathews *et al.* (2015) explores the process of disclosure of child sexual abuse among female children in South Africa. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with female children aged 8-17 years and their caregivers, the study reveals that nearly half of the children did not disclose immediately due to fear of caregivers' reactions. The process of disclosure was influenced by multiple factors such as fear, disbelief related to parental style, and identification of an intermediary confidant. In conclusion, these articles provide valuable insights into several socio-cultural determinants that contribute to femicide in South Africa.

3.3. Intersectionality and context

The study reflections do align with the original intention of intersectionality, which means recognizing that women experience multiple competing burdens of racism and sexism. In the instance of violence, the physical assault is “merely the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience” (Ruiz *et al.* 2023). They are also burdened by poverty, childcare responsibilities and the lack of job skills. As a result, certain social characteristics receive more attention in data collection, such as age, country of birth, and socio-economic status, while others, like disability, gender identity, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, are less easily captured. Despite being a central focus of intersectionality, race/ethnicity remains particularly challenging to measure accurately. This difficulty in systematically understanding how different identities intersect to amplify the risk of violence or hinder safety has led to a lack of reliable research on groups that are frequently marginalized and vulnerable to violence. In South Africa for example, the concept of intersectionality also draws attention to the combined effects of other social identities and so explores their compounding impact on risk and safety such as age, disability, rurality, and so on. The role of socioeconomic status – or poverty – and its impacts on risk of violence in combination with sex and/or gender and gender identity or expression, race/ethnicity and other identities also remains largely unexamined in official data sources and those regularly accessed by violence prevention researchers (Gibbs *et al.* 2017; Waller *et al.* 2022).

The review underscores the intersectionality of gender, violence, and culture in the context of femicide. The researcher highlights how race, socioeconomic status, and other intersecting identities intersect with gender to shape experiences of violence and contribute to higher risks of femicide. The intersectionality of gender, violence, and culture is a complex issue that requires an in-depth understanding of the numerous factors at play. The provided literature sheds light on various aspects of this intersection, including the experiences of African American women survivors of intimate partner violence (Cullen *et al.* 2021). Homicide rates among transgender individuals in the United States (Bernal-Gomez and Molina-Villegas, 2023), and the role of sex, race/ethnicity, and context in school-associated student homicides (Lynes *et al.* 2021). African American women are impacted by IPV-related homicide and face unique barriers to help-seeking due to racism and racial discrimination (Ruiz *et al.* 2023). Waller *et al.* (2022) conducted a systematic review to examine African American women's experiences of rejection from providers and its effects on their ability to secure urgent aid. They identified 21 empirical studies that highlighted both formal and semiformal help-seeking pathways for these survivors. The authors recommend integrating anti-Blackness racist praxis into interventions to improve the health and well-being of this population (Waller *et al.* 2022).

4. Recommendations

The review provides recommendations to address femicide in South Africa. It calls for comprehensive legal reforms, improved law enforcement responses, and strengthened institutional support for survivors. Education and awareness campaigns targeting gender equality, challenging harmful cultural norms, and promoting healthy relationships are also recommended. The study recommends that the South African government should develop and implement comprehensive educational programs aimed at raising awareness about the issue of femicide, targeting individuals of all ages and backgrounds. Integrate gender-sensitive education into the school curriculum, starting at an early age, to promote respect, equality, and empathy, and to counteract the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. These programs should focus on challenging and changing harmful gender norms, stereotypes, and attitudes that contribute to femicide. Intersectional approaches and community engagement are essential for effective prevention and intervention strategies. Overall, the findings of this literature review emphasize the urgent need for multi-faceted, culturally sensitive, and context-specific interventions to combat femicide in South Africa. By addressing the socio-cultural determinants, systemic barriers, and knowledge gaps, it aims to contribute to a safer and more equitable society for women.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic literature review sheds light on the complex socio-cultural determinants of femicide in South Africa, a nation grappling with alarmingly high rates of gender-based violence. By analyzing a breadth of scholarly works, reports, and studies, the review underscores the intricate interplay of gender norms, patriarchy, and cultural beliefs in perpetuating this grave societal issue. Through exploring the intersecting dynamics of gender, violence, and culture, the review not only highlights the profound consequences of femicide on individuals and communities but also underscores the urgent need for comprehensive research and policy action. The findings of this review underscore the imperative for concerted efforts to address femicide in South Africa. It underscores the importance of evidence-based interventions, informed by a nuanced understanding of the root causes and manifestations of gender-based violence. By identifying gaps in knowledge and emphasizing the necessity for further research and policy development, this review provides a roadmap for stakeholders across sectors to collaborate in combating femicide effectively.

Moving forward, it is essential to prioritize the implementation of the recommendations outlined in this review, which include interventions aimed at challenging harmful gender norms, dismantling patriarchal structures, and promoting cultural practices that prioritize gender equality and respect for human rights. Additionally, robust policy frameworks and strategies must be developed and implemented to prevent femicide and provide comprehensive support to survivors and affected communities. Ultimately, this review serves as a vital resource for policymakers, researchers, activists, and practitioners, providing valuable insights to inform evidence-based interventions and foster meaningful dialogue towards eradicating femicide in South Africa. By leveraging the collective expertise and commitment of stakeholders, we can work towards creating a society where all individuals, regardless of gender, can live free from the threat of violence and discrimination.

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