

DEFINING FEMICIDE

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My Warmest Greetings to all of you!

Being here with you today is one of the most thrilling experiences in my life. Having struggled for more than 37 years to advocate for the importance of the adoption of the term *femicide* in the United States and many other countries, I had never imagined that I would have the honor to address a United Nations Symposium on Femicide in my lifetime.

Rashida Manjoo, the UN's Special Rapporteur on violence against women, emphasized in her Summary Report of an expert group meeting on October 12, 2011, the importance of adopting a clear definition of femicide in order to carry out effective investigation and prosecution of these lethal crimes. It is my important task today to provide you with what I consider to be the best definition of femicide to use globally. I shall begin by describing a brief history of this important concept.

The first time the term *femicide* was used in public in the modern age, was when I testified about these lethal misogynist crimes at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels, Belgium in 1976. This was a four-day radical feminist global women's speak-out attended by about 2,000 women from 40 countries, which Simone de Beauvoir saluted as "the beginning of the radical decolonization of women."

The beginning and the end of this testimony follows:

We must realize that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide. We must recognize the sexual politics of murder. From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for "honor," we realize that femicide has been going on a long time. But since it involves mere females, there was no name for it before the term femicide was coined.

Then, after numerous cases of femicide in San Francisco were listed, my testimony concluded by my saying:

Men tell us not to take a morbid interest in these atrocities. The epitome of triviality is alleged to be a curiosity about "the latest rape and the latest murder." The murder and mutilation of a woman is not considered a political event. Men tell us that they cannot be blamed for what a few maniacs do. Yet the very process of denying the political content of the terror helps to perpetuate it, keeps us weak, vulnerable, and fearful.

These are the twentieth century witch-burnings. The so-called maniacs who commit these atrocities are acting out the logical conclusion of the woman-hatred which pervades the entire culture.

Recently, this has resulted in several pornographic movies whose climax is said to be the actual killing and dismembering of a woman. These so-called "snuff" movies are now being imitated. For example, a movie shown in the U.S. is advertising that it is impossible for audiences to tell whether the killing of the woman is real or not.

The women slaughtered in "snuff" movies have no names. The names of those I have read out to you today will soon be obliterated. No demonstrations have accompanied them to the grave, no protests rocked the city, no leaflets were passed out, no committees were formed. But today we have remembered them. And tomorrow, we must act to **stop femicide!**

As will be evident to you, this testimony wasn't written in the sort of language that one finds in UN documents!

It is the language of the Western women's liberation movements to whom we are all greatly indebted for initiating and pursuing the struggle to combat many different forms of violence and sexual abuse of women and girls.

Although this testimony didn't provide an explicit definition of femicide, it nevertheless makes clear that the term *femicide* refers to the misogynist murder or murders of women.

In the first book I co-edited in 1992, titled, *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, Jill Radford and I defined *femicide* simply as "the misogynist killing of women by men." In my second co-edited volume titled, *Femicide in Global Perspective*, I redefined *femicide* in 2001 as "the killing of females by males **because** they are female" (p. 3). Finally, due to the fact that a small percentage of women **also** kill females **because** they are female, I recently adopted a definition that closely resembles the one published in a UN document on May 7, 2012: i.e., that "femicide is the killing of a female because she is a female."* [*Economic and Social Council, Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Twenty-second session. p. 4, para. 26]. My only objection to this definition is that it only applies the killing of one female because of her gender. Clearly, it should also apply to from one to many millions of females. Thus I now define femicide as **the killing of one or more females by one or more males because they are female.**

I suspect that many of you here today have also heard of the term *feminicide*. When I was invited to a Seminar on Femicide in Juarez, Mexico, in 2004, that had been

initiated by a radical feminist anthropologist and Congresswoman, Marcela Lagarde, she asked me for my permission to translate *femicide* into Spanish as *feminicide*. Of course, I consented.

However, in 2006, Lagarde redefined feminicide, adding to my 2001 definition of femicide, **the impunity with which these crimes are typically treated in South America**, especially by the misogynist departments of justice, or injustice, as well as the misogynist police forces. Now I understand that she and her supporters are claiming that Lagarde **coined** the term *feminicide*.*

But it's not appropriate to consider the redefinition of a term as constituting **coining** it. Furthermore, a sound definition must separate the phenomenon being defined from the response to it. So, for example, if a man who is a wife batterer finally kills his wife, he is likely to be guilty of femicide. If he is arrested and found guilty of this crime, then by Lagarde's definition, **he is no longer guilty of feminicide**, because the case wasn't treated with impunity. This demonstrates why Lagarde's revised definition of feminicide must be rejected. In addition, it is not a user-friendly term, since it is difficult to pronounce. It took me years to master its pronunciation. Try it yourselves in the lunch break, and compare it with saying femicide.

Unfortunately, a very destructive conflict had developed in many Latin American countries based on whether feminists have chosen to adopt the term *femicide* or *feminicide*. The feminists who have adopted *feminicide* typically refuse to work with those who have adopted *femicide*, and vice versa. I very much hope that this unfortunate situation won't spread to other countries.

For this reason, I was very distressed to read that Ms. Manjoo stated in her UN Summary Report that "adopting feminicide in English could prove useful when State accountability was at stake"* [*paragraph 9, p. 4]. I strongly oppose this suggestion, for reasons that are hopefully obvious by now. I consider it vitally important to stick with only one term, namely femicide, regardless of the primary language spoken in the country that adopts it.

Since my definition of femicide is but a small but important modification of the UN's definition, I assume that all of you here will be in favor of adopting it.