

When the Unthinkable Becomes Ordinary: Feminicide, Structural Impunity, and Collective Trauma in Mexico

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Introduction

In recent decades, femicide has emerged as one of the most urgent human rights crises in Mexico and across Latin America. It is seen framed as a form of gendered-based violence involving the killing of women because of their gender, but feminist scholars have argued that femicide are more than individual acts of violence and must be understood as a structural and political phenomenon that is rooted in gender inequality, systemic impunity, as state failure (Legarde y de los Ríos, 2006; Moráñez Fregoso, 2010). In Mexico, the persistence, repetition, and public visibility of femicide have generated a national and international concern, but also a triumphing reality that has to be named: despite the level of awareness, the episodic outrage of feminist groups and families when it occurs, the search groups like “Madres buscadoras” because of the lack of the government response and injustice, the violence continues at alarming rates, increasingly adjusting into an everyday life normalization.

This contradiction raises a critical question that extends beyond legal or criminological analysis: what are the broader social and psychological consequences of living in a context where femicide is both persistent and normalized? While existing research has extensively examined femicide through legal frameworks, policy responses, and gendered power relations, not many had focused to its trauma-performing at a collective level. This gap is particularly important in Mexico, a country characterized not only for its brutality, but also its continuity, visibility, and impunity: these conditions are central to the production of collective and social trauma (Abrutyn, 2023).

Building on this gap, this paper argues that femicide in Mexico should be understood not only as a form of lethal gendered-based violence, but as a process of cumulative, collective, and structural trauma. Drawing on theories of social trauma (Abrutyn, 2023), everyday violence (Das, 2007), and femicide as a state-related crime (Legarde y de los Ríos, 2006), this research states that femicide extends to reshape social relations, public life, and collective subjectivities. As Das

(2007) suggests, violence is not confined to moments of rupture, it “descends into the ordinary”, cucumbers embedded in daily practices, silences, and forms of social interactions. In the Mexican context, this descent is evident normalization of fear, the adaptation of routines, and gradual desensitization to gendered violence. At the same time, this normalization is neither accidental or socially neutral. Femicide and decolonial scholars have point that feminicide operates within broader systems of power that produce and sustain violence. Segato (2016) conceptualizes feminicide as a form of “expressive violence” that communicates and reinforces gendered hierarchies, while is also produced and reinforced with global and colonial logics of domination. Similarly, intersectional analyses highlight that feminicidal violence disproportionately affects women in marginalized groups (including indigenous, poor, trans and racialized women) (Viverons Vigoya, 2016). These perspectives underscore that feminicide is not only about gender, but also race, class, and colonial history.

Very importantly, the role of the state and its institutions need to be framed in this analysis. Femicide in Mexico is known by high levels of impunity, weak investigation processes, and systemic failures in protection and justice. In Mexico, approximately 90-95% of crimes go unpunished, reflecting a broader context of impunity that directly reshapes responses to gendered-based violence (Instituto Nacional de estadística y geografía [INEGI], 2023; UN Women, 2020). This gap between legal recognition and effective enforcement shows that only limited feminicide cases lead to conviction or even prosecution. This institutional failure in not just inefficiency, is a form of institutional betrayal, in which the systems design to protect us, allow the perpetration and amplification of harm (Smith & Freud, 2014).

Beyond institutional dynamics, the normalization of feminicides is also reinforced through cultural and discursive practices. Media representation play a significant role in shaping public perceptions, with narratives that usually depersonalized the killed women and their families, sensationalize violence, or implicitly blame women for their own deaths (Aldrete et al., 2024).

Such representations help the process of desensitization and moral fatigue, and frame femicide as ordinary and diminish its urgency. In this sense, normalization operates not only through repetition, but also through meaning-making. This shapes how Columbia is understood, remembered, and responded to.

Taken together, these dynamics point to the need for a more integrated framework, one that brings feminist theory, trauma studies, and human rights analysis. This paper responds to this by asking: How does the normalization of femicide in Mexico operate as a form of cultural and structural trauma, and what roles do state impunity, institutional betrayal, and public discourse play in framing this process? No addressing this question, the research looks to offer a comprehensive understanding of femicide as a phenomenon that is simultaneously material, psychological, social, and political.

Ultimately, reframing femicide as a form of collective trauma challenges approaches that focus just on criminalization or individual accountability, calling for a trauma-informed, intersectional, and decolonial response that address the structural conditions that enable violence. As the sound of women's voices every May 8th sound through the county "La policía no me cuida, me cuidan mis amigas" (The police doesn't protect me, my friends do), "El estado opresor es un macho violador" (The oppressive state is a rapist "macho") and "Por qué te espantas por las que luchan y no por las que mueren?" (Why are you afraid of those who fight but not for those who die?) this paper will encompass the demand for justice. Moreover, it highlights the importance of collective repair, memory, and resistance. Understanding femicide is a necessary step to confront the enduring conditions that allow such violence to persist.

Conceptualizing Femicide as Structural Violence

Feminicide in Mexico cannot be completely understood if we frame it as isolated crimes. Rather, feminicide constitutes a systemic form of gendered violence embedded within structures of inequality, power and institutional failure. Femicide scholars across Latin America have been key in advancing this perspective, particularly through the distinction between femicide and feminicide, this last one empathizing the role of the state enabling and perpetuating violence (Legarde y de los Ríos, 2006).

Legarde y de los Ríos (2006) reframes feminicide as a state crime, arguing that the killing of women must be understood in relation of direct acts of violence, institutional omission, negligence, and impunity that allowed such violence to persist. In this context, feminicide is not just the act of killing, but also the systemic failures of prevention, protection, and (un)justice that surround it. The state inability (or unwillingness) to investigate, prosecute, and prevent these crimes makes feminicide a siren violation to human rights. Understood like this, it directs the responsibility to structures of governance and power, not just in the individual that perpetuates the crime. Feminicide therefore, is a consequence of broader patterns of structural violence.

Building on this, Monárrez Fregoso (2010) introduces the concept of *systemic sexual feminicide*, arguing that feminicide follows recognizable patterns linked to the intersection of gender inequality, economic marginalization, and territorial dynamics. These challenge the narrative that shows these killings as random, Monárrez shows that feminicide is predictable, patterned, and socially produced. This is tied to institutional impunity, including inadequate investigations, lack of accountability, and the normalization of violence both in the state and the societal structure. So, feminicide operates as a self-reinforcing system, sustained by the interaction between social norms that tolerate violence and institutions that fail to protect us.

This structural analysis is deepened by Rita Segato's (2016) conceptualization of feminicide as expressive violence. Segato argues that such violence is a communicative act where perpetrators reinforce a certain narrative that reproduces hierarchies of gender and power.

This places feminicide not only as instrumental but also as symbolic, reinforcing the idea that women's bodies become things to dominate. Through what Segato describes as a "pedagogy of cruelty" repeated acts of violence normalize gendered hierarchies and contribute to the production of social craziness that sustain inequality. This perspective highlights that feminicide is not only enabled by structural conditions, but actively reproduces those conditions through its repetition and visibility.

The structural nature of feminicide is not experienced equally as stated before. Intersectional analyses show that vulnerability to this kind of violence is shaped by multiple forms of marginalization, such as race, class, and colonial history. Women who are indigenous, trans, poor, migrant, or with other forms of marginalization are disproportionately exposed to both violence and institutional neglect (Vivevos Vigoya, 2016). This places feminicide with crossers forms of domination, where gendered violence is intensified by other Accra of inequality. As such, understanding feminicide requires attention not only to gender, but to the intersecting structures that produce differential exposure to harm.

Despite increasing legal recognition of feminicide across Latin America, institutional responses remain limited in recognizing the structural dimensions that surround it. Carrigan and Dawson (2023) argue that legislative frameworks often focus on punitive measures while neglecting the underlying conditions of violence. This creates a paradox where genuinely is formally acknowledge, yet it continues to be reproduced due to systemic impunity and inadequate enforcement. This shows that legal recognition does not necessarily translates into elective protection or prevention, underlining the gap between formal frameworks and lived realities.

Together, these perspectives remark the claim that feminicide in Mexico is a structural condition produced through interconnected systems of gendered power, inequality and state failure. This framing is essential for moving beyond individualized explanation and looking at it

with a broader social and political context. Moreover, understanding femicide as structural violence provides the necessary foundation for the central argument that this persistence and normalization generate collective and cumulative forms of trauma in a social context.

From structural Violence to Collective Trauma

Understanding femicide as structural violence provides necessary context, but it remains insufficient without analyzing its psychological, social, and cultural consequences. This section argues that femicide in Mexico operates as a form of cumulative and collective trauma, reshaping not only individual experiences of rage, fear and grief, but also broader social meanings, relationships, and normalization.

Traditional psychological approaches to trauma have largely centered on individual experiences, often framed in clinical models such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While this is very useful to understand the impact of direct harm, they are limited in context where violence is chronic, visible, and socially embedded. In these contexts, trauma cannot be placed in individual pathology. It must be understood as a social process that emerges from sustained exposure to harm and from the conditions that allow that harm to continue.

Abrutyn (2023) enlightens this shift through the concept of social trauma, defined as a form of collective injury that arises when communities experience repeated disruptions to shared meanings, programs and social cohesion. Social trauma then, is produced when violence becomes embedded in collective life shaping how people understand themselves, others, and the world around them. In the case of femicide in Mexico, the persistence and visibility of violence (mostly accompanied by impunity) create conditions in which trauma becomes cumulative and normalized, rather than exceptional.

This process is connected to Das's (2007) notion of "descent into the ordinary" which describes how extreme violence becomes integrated into everyday life. Violence is not a rupture of social order, it becomes woven into daily routines, silences, narratives, and forms of social navigation. In context of a society that lives feminicides everyday, this descent is evident in the normalization of fear, the modification of everyday practices, and the internalization of risk as a constant condition. Women adjust their movements, families adapt their expectations, and communities develop strategies of vigilance and avoidance. In this way, violence does not just occur, it structures the conditions of daily existence.

The normalization of femicide does not imply the absence of trauma, but rather it shows how many adjustments people need to do to survive psychically. When violence is repeated and expected, it produces chronic and cumulative trauma that may not always be recognized as such, yet they have an important psychological and social impact (Herman, 1992; Abrutyn, 2023). These include desensitization, anticipatory fear, and diminished sense of safety and trust (Das, 2007). Over time, such exposure and responses can affect collective ability for empathy and response, contributing to what we understand as a social habituation of violence, where repeated exposure reshapes emotional and moral responses to harm (Alexander, 2012; Abrutyn, 2023).

At the same time, trauma is not only produced through direct exposure to violence, but also through the ways in which institutions and social systems respond (or fail) to it. The absence of justice, the persistence of impunity, and the normalization of inadequate institutional responses contribute to an environment in which harm is not only experienced, but also validated and reproduced. This dynamic aligns with the concept of institutional betrayal, where institutions that are trusted to protect, exacerbate trauma through neglect, inaction, revictimization and harmful responses (Smith & Freud, 2014). In this sense, trauma is both a consequence of violence and a product of the structures that sustain it.

This dynamic is extremely visible in the experiences of families and communities affected by femicide. Research on the psychosocial consequences of femicide in Mexico demonstrates that the impact extends far beyond the loss, producing enduring effects on the grief process, fear, social isolation, and disruptions in identity and daily life (Bernáldez Jaimes & Rodríguez Aguilar, 2023). These findings show how femicide generates secondary and collective victims, whose lives are shaped not only by violence itself, but also by institutional responses that often fail to provide justice and recognition, for example the collectives of “Madres buscadoras” that place the family members of the victims as the primary search actors because of a lack of institutional resources and with that, a lack of trust, responsibility, and accountability. The accumulation of these experiences contributes to the formation of a broader collective memory of violence, which will reshape how future violence is perceived, anticipated, and navigated (Alexander, 2012).

Moreover, the collective dimension of trauma is deeply combined with processes of meaning-making. Femicide does not only produce suffering, it also reshapes how violence is understood, narrated, and integrated into social life. As violence becomes normalized through repetition and public discourse there is a risk that it is no longer perceived as unacceptable, but as inevitable (Das, 2007; Aldrete et al., 2004). This shift has significant implications, as it can reduce the perceived urgency of response and the reproduction of violence through silence or even resignation.

However, normalization does not eliminate resistance. Research on collective trauma says that even in context of sustained violence, communities actively engage in process of reinterpretation, memory-making, and resistance (Alexander, 2012). In the case of femicide, feminist movements, families of the victims, and collective actions play a central role in resisting normalization by naming violence, reclaiming memory, and demanding justice. These practices demonstrate that trauma is not only a condition of harm, but also a site of potential transformation, where new meanings and forms of solidarity can emerge. An example of this in Mexico are the

new policies achieved by resistance movements and pressure to the government that are now in place and are named after the women they harmed in such contexts, like Ley Valeria, Ley Monse, Ley Olympus and Ley Ingrid. This is the stand we take with the phrase “si tocan a una, respondemos todas” (If you touch one of us, all of us will respond).

Taken together, these perspectives show how femicide in Mexico produces not only structural violence, but also collective and cumulative trauma that reshape social life at multiple levels. Understanding this dynamic allow us to move beyond the approach of violence as isolated to a recognition of enduring and relational nature of it (Abrutyn, 2003; Das, 2007). This conceptualization grounds the analysis of how state institutions and public discourse contribute to reproduction or disruption of this through processes of intention institutional betrayal, and normalization.

State Impunity and Institutional Betrayal

While femicide in Mexico is often framed as a problem of criminal violence, that perspective undermines the central role of the state in enabling and reproducing harm. This dynamics cannot be fully understood without examining how state institutions actively shape conditions under which violence persist. Despite the legal recognition of femicide as an specific crime in Mexico, enforcement remains inconsistent and ineffective. Official data indicates that approximately 93% of the crimes are not reported or investigated and and 1 of every 4 deaths of a women is classified as a femicide, revealing the structural impunity (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2023). This is a broad figure because there is not an statistic that places the number of feminicides investigated. This that's reflects a structural context in which accountability is the exception, rather than the norm. This translates into weak investigative processes , misclassification of cases, and limited prosecution outcomes. As a result, the gap

between formal legal frameworks and lived realities remains big, reinforcing the conditions under which violence can continue.

This gap does not show just inefficiency, it also reflects deeper institutional logics. Carrigan and Dawson (2023) argue that legal frameworks addressing feminicides in Latin America often prioritize punitive responses while failing to confront the structural conditions that produce violence. In doing so, they tend to look at femicide like individual criminality. This creates a paradox where femicide is formally acknowledge as a human rights violation, yet reproduced through institutional inaction and fragmentation.

The consequence of this institutional failure is much more than a legal outcome. Smith and Freud (2014) argue that trauma is intensified when institutions that are expected to protect, instead contribute to harm through neglect, inaction, or inadequate responses. In the context of femicide, this institutional betrayal is experienced in multiple forms. Families of the victims encounter bureaucratic obstacles, lack of transparency, victim-blaming narratives, and prolonged delays in justice process. These experiences do not only follow violence, they become part of the trauma itself, reinforcing feelings of abandonment, mistrust, and helplessness.

Institutional betrayal also operates through broader patterns of state response that support the way of placing women's lives as disposable. When cases remain unsolved, tan the perpetrators are identified and not incarcerated or play in a justice process, when violence is minimized os misclassified and when accountability is absent, the state communicates a form of indifference that normalizes harm. Segato's (2016) show thin in her argument that femicide functions within a broader system of power in which violence in a mechanism to reinforce hierarchies. In this sense, institutional response or not-response contribute to the social meaning and reproduction of violence.

As stated before, the effects of institutional betrayal are cumulative and collective. As communities repeatedly witness the failure of institutions to deliver justice, trust in the state systems collapse and expectations of protections diminish (Smith & Freud, 2014; Abrutyn, 2023). This is both political and psychological, helping to create insecurity and normalized vulnerability (Das, 2007). Over time, such conditions reinforce the perception that violence is inevitable, unchangeable, ordinary (Das, 2007; Alexander, 2012). In this way, impunity actively shapes the conditions under which violence becomes normalized and internalized (Abrutyn, 2023).

At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that the responses of femicide are not just because of the state. While it remain pervasive, efforts have been made to address femicide through legal reforms, specialized investigation units and public policies (Legarde y de los Ríos, 2006; Carrigan & Dawson, 2023). But these efforts encounter structural limitations, including lack of resources, inadequate training, and complicated cultural norms within institutions, when limit effectiveness (Carrigan & Dawson, 2023). As a result, reforms often remain partial and inconsistent, failing to produce the systemic transformation that is required to prevent violence and support victims.

This analysis highlights the need to move beyond approaches that treat justice just with legal accountability. While prosecution and punishment are necessary, they are not enough in comentarte where institutional dynamics themselves contribute to harm (Carrigan & Dawson, 2023). Addressing femicide requires also transforming the institutional cultures, practices, and power relations that sustain impunity (Legarde y de los Ríos, 2006; Segato, 2016). Such a shift is essential for disrupting the cycle of mutual reinforcing of violence and trauma (Abrutyn, 2023).

Media, Discourse, and the Normalization of Femicide

While femicide is sustained through structural inequalities and institutional failures, its normalization is also produced and reproduced by discourse. Media representations, public narrative and everyday language take a crucial role in shaping how violence is perceived, interpreted, and responded to. Here is argued that femicide is also a discursive phenomenon in which the meaning-making process contribute to the normalization, desensitization, and social reproduction of violence.

Many research has demonstrated that media coverage of femicide frequently show narratives that minimize the structural framework of gendered-based violence. A systematic review by Aldrete et al. (2024) identifies recurring patterns across international and Latin American contexts, including victim-blaming, sensationalism, and depersonalization. Victims are often described through reductive or stigmatizing frameworks, while perpetrators are contextualized in ways that mitigate responsibility. Such representations hide the systemic conditions underlying femicide and reinforce the discourse of individualized crimes that disconnect this violence to broader power structures.

These discursive patterns have significant implications on what violence is collectively understood. When femicide is repeatedly presented through sensationalized narratives, it contributes to the process of desensitization, reducing emotional and political impact of each case (Aldrete et al., 2024). This dynamic aligns with broader theories of social trauma, which states that repeated exposure to violence can reshape collective responses to harm (Abrutyn, 2023). Rather than generating mobilization, risk to violence becomes part of the expected social life.

Beyond formal media, everyday discourse also plays an important role normalizing femicide. Language influence what is prevented as acceptable, inevitable, or questionable in a society. As Das (2007) argues, violence becomes embedded in the ordinary not only through repetition, also in the way it is narrated, silenced or placed in daily life. In the Mexican context, this reflects in narratives that frame violence as unavoidable or that attribute responsibility to the

victims. These discursive patterns contribute to the internalization of violence as a normalized social condition, shaping how individuals anticipate and respond to risk.

Also, discourse is not only a reflection of reality, it is an active participant in its production. Segato (2016) shows how gendered-based violence is a part of a broader system of power. Media narratives and public discourse shape the meanings attached to violence and its victims. When femicide is represented in ways that divert responsibility and diminish its severity, these representations contribute to the reproduction of gendered power relations. In this sense, discourse operates as a mechanism through which violence is socially legitimized and normalized.

At the same time, discourse can be used as resistance. Femicide movements, activists, and independent media have played an important role in challenging dominant narratives by reframing femicide as a structural and political issue. Practices such as naming the victims, document and moralize cases, and publicly denouncing institutional failures disrupt processes of depersonalization and invisibility. These counter-discourse efforts allow to see the human dimension of violence, place accountability, and connect individual cases to broader systems of inequality and injustice. While dominant narratives can contribute to desensitization and the fragmentation of public response, counter-narratives demonstrate that meaning-making processes can also challenge normalization and demand accountability.

Together these dynamics reinforce the central argument that femicide in Mexico is also sustained by discursive processes that shape how violence is understood and internalized, contributing to the reproduction of violence and signify trauma. At the same time, counter-narratives show the possibility of transformation by language, representation, and collective action.

Toward Collective Repair, Justice, and Transformation

Affording femicide in Mexico requires a framework that recognizes its structural, relational, and traumatic dimensions. As this paper argued, femicides produces not only individual harm, but also cumulative and collective forms of trauma shaped by impunity, institutional failure, and normalized violence. If not, responses to it only centers on punitive justice and this is insufficient. A more effective response must integrate trauma-informed, structural, and transformative approaches grounded in human rights and social justice.

From a psychological perspective, trauma informed frameworks empathize the importance of recognizing how repeated direct and indirect exposure to violence affects individuals and communities over time. Research on collective and cultural trauma suggest that when harm is unresolved, it becomes embedded in social relations, shaping a perception of safety, trust, and belonging (Abrutyn, 2023). In Mexico, where femicide is persistent and unresolved by impunity, trauma is not only a reaction to violence, but a condition reinforced by institutional responses. For this, it requires an intervention that focuses on collective processes of recognition, validation, repair.

At the same time, feminist and decolonial perspectives highlight that violence cannot be separated from broader systems of power. From this perspective, preventing violence requires not only a legal reform, also a transformation of the symbolic and cultural structures that sustain gendered power relations. Decolonial scholars argue that institutional responses to violence are often shaped by colonial logics that prioritize control, hierarchy, and exclusion, so it directly impacts the effectiveness of interventions (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

In short terms, femicide needs multi-level interventions that operate across institutional, community, and cultural frames. Without such changes, reforms risk remaining superficial and asking to address the underlying dynamics of impunity. Femicides in Mexico requires a shift

from reactive and fragmented responses towards a comprehensive framework of collective repair and structural transformation. By recognizing the interconnection of violence, trauma, social structures, and state failure, it crimes possible to pathways that prioritize justice, dignity and the preemption of future violence.

Conclusion

Femicide in Mexico cannot be understood just as a series of individual acts of violence. As this paper has shown, it is a systemic and socially embedded phenomenon, produced and sustained through the interaction of structural inequalities, institutional adulterants and discursive practices. At the same time, femicide generates not only immediate harm, but also cumulative and collective forms of trauma that reshape realities. By centering a psychosocial trauma lens with feminist and decolonial theory, this analysis proposes to move beyond fragmented explanations of violence into a more integrated understanding of its broader social impact.

A key contribution lies in conceptualizing the normalization as a form of trauma response. In this context trauma becomes embedded in everyday life, manifesting through social insecurity, desensitization, and little to no expectations of protection and justice. These dynamics are reinforced by institutional patterns of impunity and institutional betrayal, in thorns the failure of the state to respond effectively to violence contributes to the production of harm. Femicide is a process through which trauma is continuously produced, circulated, and internalized.

Understanding femicide through the lens of collective trauma and normalization reveals the depth and complexity of its impact. It challenges the tendency to treat violence as episodic and look its enduring and relational nature, empathizing how harm extends beyond the individual. At the same time, this perspective pines possibilities for transformation by identifying multiple discord (legal, institutional, cultural, and communal) in which change need to occur.

In this sense, confronting femicide is not only addressing violence itself, but of transforming the conditions that allow it to become normalized and sustained. It requires recognizing the interconnected nature of violence and trauma, as well as the responsibility of institutions and societies to respond in ways that restore dignity, rebuild trust, and prevent harm. By bringing together insights of trauma theory, feminist analysis and decolonial thought, this paper contributes to a broader effort to understand and challenge femicide as a human rights crisis that demand recognition and sustain, collective action.

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