

1 A SHORT GENEALOGY OF FEMINICIDE AND DATA ACTIVISM

On May 11, 2015, Argentine journalist Marcela Ojeda tweeted in frustration and outrage at the news of two separate murders from different parts of the country. Suhene Carvalhaes Muñoz and Chiara Paez, both young women, were beaten to death by their partners.¹ Ojeda tweeted: “Women actors, politicians, artists, business women, social activists . . . women, all of us . . . are we not going to raise our voices? THEY ARE KILLING US.”² The call to action circulated through her network and far beyond and led to a massive uprising in the streets of Buenos Aires and across the country. Hundreds of thousands of people turned out at the seat of Argentina’s national government and in more than 120 other cities in the country in early June 2015 (figure 1.1).³ They chanted and raised signs and placards that said “#NiUnaMenos” (not one less [woman]). The hashtag and the protests in public spaces traveled virally across Argentina, Latin America, and the world. In ensuing years, public demonstrations spread rapidly to Uruguay, Chile, Mexico, Perú, El Salvador, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, Spain, and beyond, and were increasingly linked to gender rights issues such as street harassment, the wage gap, the legalization of abortion, and *machista* (sexist) culture. Recognizing murder as the culmination of many forms of gendered violence, the movement also took up the slogan #VivasNosQueremos, which translates to “we (women) want to stay alive” or “we (women) love being alive.”

These massive mobilizations were first and foremost about challenging femicide. That the protests traveled across Latin America and beyond echoes the fact that the concepts of femicide and feminicide have a long history of crossing South-North borders, undergoing translation, transmutation, and adaptation to local feminist contexts.

The first documented use of the term *femicide* in English occurred in an 1801 book and referred to the killing of a woman. Linked to gender oppression, *femicide* was first used



FIGURE 1.1

Ni Una Menos mobilization in Buenos Aires in 2015. Courtesy of Fabian Marelli and La Nacion/Argentina.

by the South African activist and scholar Diana Russell in testimony to the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels, Belgium, in 1976, to assert that the homicides of women and girls took a distinctly misogynistic form.⁴ In her subsequent coedited book with British scholar Jill Radford in 1992, the two authors provided a more explicit definition of femicide as “the misogynist killing of women by men.”⁵ That is to say, femicide constituted a crime motivated by the victim’s subordinated gender status as a woman (or girl). Because of that, these crimes took distinctly different forms than the murders of men (or boys).⁶ Men are not frequently violated and killed in their homes, for example, and men’s bodies are not typically desecrated in brutal and sexualized ways. Included within Radford and Russell’s formulation of femicide were explicitly misogynist acts of murder against women and girls such as honor killings and female infanticide, as well as more widespread but equally extreme forms of violence such as the killing of a woman by her intimate partner. Femicide as a concept seeks to reframe fatal violence against women from a “private” matter to a structural phenomenon.

This chapter provides some background on femicide and data activism as a base for reading the rest of the book. It traces a short genealogy of the terms *femicide* and *feminicide* and describes other activist, feminist, Black feminist, and Indigenous framings of

structural violence against women. *Data activism*—understood as the production and circulation of data for the purposes of social change—has long been integral to challenging gender-related violence. This includes data activism that preceded the widespread use of digital technologies, when records were kept as paper files, newspaper clippings, and ledgers. In the years following the Ni Una Menos uprising, there has been a surge in the practices of femicide data activism, as well as growing scholarly attention on data activism.

FEMICIDE TO FEMINICIDIO TO FEMINICIDE

Just as Radford and Russell's book about femicide was published, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed and the now infamous disappearances and murders of women in the US-Mexico border town of Ciudad Juárez started to become publicly known. From 1994 until 2001, the homicide rate in Juárez increased by 300 percent for men, while it increased 600 percent for women.⁷ Esther Chávez Cano, resident of Juárez and an accountant by training, was one of the earliest people to document the killings in Juárez by physically clipping articles and obituaries from newspapers and saving them in physical files. In 1993, she cofounded the Grupo 8 de Marzo women's rights group and, in 1999, went on to found Casa Amiga, the first women's shelter in Ciudad Juárez.⁸

The antifemicide activist ecosystem in Juárez was robust and involved many actors from diverse perspectives, often working in coalitions. Grupo 8 de Marzo and Casa Amiga came to the topic from feminism and women's rights. Other groups, like Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Bring our daughters home), were primarily comprised of family members who were consistently denied access to justice for their daughters' murders. Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa started building on Chávez Cano's documents. They began keeping records, lists of names, and newspaper clippings. They organized protests and lobbied the press and international community to pay attention and take action.⁹ Various groups banded together to form a social movement called Ni una más. The coalition took its name from a 1995 phrase written by poet and activist Susana Chávez Castillo, depicted in figure 1.2a, who was from Ciudad Juárez. She wrote, "Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerta más"—Not one less woman, not one dead [woman] more.¹⁰ You can see this slogan in action in figure 1.2b, a poster published by Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa protesting the feminicides in Chihuahua, the Mexican state where Ciudad Juárez is located. Sadly, outrageously, Chávez Castillo herself was the victim of femicide in 2011 and never lived to see how her words were taken up four years later by the global Ni Una Menos movement.



FIGURE 1.2

(a) A poster protesting feminicides in Juárez published by family-led activist groups dated sometime between 1999–2006. The text reads, “Not one dead [woman] more! Not one less woman in Chihuahua!” Courtesy of the Esther Chávez Cano Collection, New Mexico State University Library, Archives and Special Collections. (b) “Ni una mujer menos, ni una muerta más” are words drawn from the poetry of Susana Chávez Castillo who was from Ciudad Juárez and who was killed in a feminicide in 2011. Courtesy of Zerk, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

While the murders in Juárez have often been depicted with sensational, “true crime” types of storytelling that paints such violence as the exceptional and pathological work of serial killers, feminist investigations have pointed to the structural conditions that have fomented such gender-related violence. One of the earliest works to try to use data to document the scope of the murders of women in Juárez was the 1999 book *El Silencio Que La Voz de Todas Quiebra* (The silence that the voice of all [women] breaks). The authors did not yet use the terms *femicide* or *feminicide* to describe the problem, but they did scour official data and news articles to undertake a statistical analysis of deaths and disappearances of women in Juárez between 1993 and 1998. The writers assert that the problem is the public culture of “silence, self-censorship, complicity, and negligence” that permits the murder of women and girls.¹¹ This climate invisibilizes and normalizes gender-related violence: it is not seen, it is not named, it is simply part of the fabric of everyday life.

Mexican sociologist Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso, from the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Ciudad Juárez, was the first academic to theorize and develop the concept of feminicidio in relation to the murders in her city.¹² Drawing from the work of Radford and Russell, Monárrez Fragoso expanded the idea to mean not only the gender subordination of women by men, but also the role of institutions such as the state and the church in creating a climate of impunity.¹³ Monárrez Fragoso also pointed to the intersection of the Juárez murders with neoliberal economic policy, the rise of the *maquiladoras* and the feminization of their labor force, the migration of rural women, the ongoing presence of intimate partner violence (still accounting for at least 30 percent of murders in Juárez between 1993 and 2007), and the predominating culture of machismo and subordination.¹⁴ Building on these connections to culture, Mexican scholar Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos wrote, “Feminicidal violence flourishes under the hegemony of a patriarchal culture that legitimates despotism, authoritarianism, and the cruel, sexist—macho, misogynist, homophobic and lesbophobic—treatment reinforced by classism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination.”¹⁵ Indeed, Mexico was no stranger to a climate of impunity around violence. In the Mexican Dirty War, a Cold War-era regime of state violence supported by the United States, thousands of citizens, young people, and students were disappeared and executed by the state.

Lagarde y de los Ríos, an anthropologist by training, took up the issue of feminicide when she ran for a seat in Mexico’s federal legislature in 2003. She was elected and then proceeded to undertake one of the most thorough government-sponsored country-level studies of feminicide to date, a fourteen-volume report issued in 2006 that eventually led to the codification of feminicide in Mexican law in 2012. In the process of her legislative work, Lagarde y de los Ríos built on the significant theoretical

shifts introduced by Monárrez Fragoso in which *feminicidio* means both the killing of a woman or girl for gender-related reasons and also the linking of those killings to human rights violations and to the climate of impunity created by state inaction. Lagarde y de los Ríos thus framed femicide as a crime of the state, an assertion that has been upheld in international courts of law.¹⁶ This is to say that the state was systematically failing to ensure the most basic human right for more than half of its citizens.

This formulation has laid the groundwork for drawing these murders out of the private and interpersonal sphere of life (typified by misogynist media framings, which often depict them as “crimes of passion”) and demanding public action and public accountability for the widespread, systematic discrimination they represent. Whether a gender-related killing happens as part of domestic violence in the home perpetrated by an intimate partner or from a sexual assault perpetrated by narcotraffickers in public space, Lagarde y de los Ríos would say that both constitute *feminicidal violence*. Both crimes violate women’s human rights because they are gender-related crimes; both are made possible because of state negligence and because of widespread, systematic discrimination, including gender inequality and unequal access to economic opportunity.

Monárrez Fragoso’s and Lagarde y de los Ríos’s contributions also laid the groundwork for more intersectional elaborations of the concept of *feminicidio* and for its adaptations into contexts outside of Juárez and Mexico. Countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay, and Colombia adopted legislation defining and criminalizing *feminicidio* in the 2010s. Yet the theoretical shift around *feminicidio*—as a crime that implicates the state—is not a settled matter. Before and during this work, other Latin American scholars such as Montserrat Sagot Rodríguez and Ana Carcedo Cabañas had translated *femicide* as *femicidio* and undertook important investigations of violence against women in the context of Central America. *Femicidio* is also used by activists and state officials in other Latin American countries such as Venezuela and Argentina, and many countries passed laws codifying *femicidio* (see table 1.1 for a full list).¹⁷

In the past decade, activists, journalists, and academics based in the United States and Canada have taken note of the work on femicide and femicide by their Latin American counterparts and traveled some of these concepts back into the English language. For example, in 2010, Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano published an important edited volume called *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*, which summarizes some of the Latin American theoretical innovations and brings them to an English-speaking audience. Fregoso and Bejarano land on *femicide* as a term to mean the murders of women and girls founded on a gender power structure and intersecting with racism and economic injustice. Other scholars writing in a North American context have worked to further the understanding of femicide and femicide back

into English.¹⁸ Canadian scholar Paulina García-Del Moral has written about *feminicidio* as a resonant frame for transnational and local activism, as well as argued for a more decolonial and intersectional conception of femicide in the interest of understanding the violence that Indigenous women in Canada experience.¹⁹ Significant transnational exchanges on feminicide have been led by Indigenous women. For example, in 2020, the Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas organization (ECMIA; Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas) organized multiple sessions at their annual gathering about the feminicide of Indigenous women, including one on data production and one on legal frameworks.²⁰ These were led by activists from North and South America, exchanging diverse conceptions of gendered colonial violence as well as data practices and legal strategies to challenge it.

The rising tide of global feminist activism sparked by Ni Una Menos in 2015 has also helped Latin American conceptions of femicide and feminicide, as well as Latin American feminisms more broadly, to travel into the English-speaking world. While Ni Una Menos may have appeared to some people to arise suddenly, it was built on Argentina's long history of human rights and feminist organizing. This includes the prominence of the Abuelas and Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who, since 1977, have silently protested the disappearance of their relatives in Argentina's Dirty War. It includes the rising tide of the Buen Vivir movement (1990s–present) linking gender rights to Indigenous rights and led by Indigenous groups such as Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas por el Buen Vivir, as well as three decades of national *encuentros*—annual conferences and organizing events focused on convening women, trans people, nonbinary people, and *travestis*.²¹ The transnational spread throughout the Latin American region was bolstered by decades of continent-wide organizing like Encuentros Feministas de América Latina y Caribe (EFLAC), Encuentros Lésbicos-Feministas de América Latina y Caribe (ELFLAC), las Cumbres Continentales de Mujeres Indígenas de Abya Yala, and more. As Maria Florencia Alcaraz writes, there was “fertile ground” for Ni Una Menos, which consisted of many social relations—physical and digital—and relational infrastructure laid over decades.²² This powerful transnational infrastructure is what Gago and Gutiérrez Aguilar are referring to in their essay “Women Rising in Defense of Life.” They write, “We are part of the hope for an internationalized insubordination-in-action.”²³ While such a phenomenon might appear as a sudden flash, this is a case where decades of popular and community-based feminist organizing from the South laid the groundwork for global, ongoing impact.

Ni Una Menos was also responsible for placing calls for better data and information at the center of political debates about feminicide. One of the five main demands of Ni Una Menos in Argentina in 2015 was to “create a single Official Registry of victims of

violence against women. Produce official and updated statistics on femicides. We can only design effective public policies by understanding the scope of the problem.”²⁴ This demand was only partially met in the form of the National Registry of Femicide from the Argentina Justice System, created in response to movement demands in 2015, but activists criticize it for the length of time it takes to publish information, the lack of inclusion of trans women and travestis, and the duplication of efforts across the executive and judiciary branches of government. Moreover, the Ministry of Women has struggled to retain public servants who are charged with implementing more comprehensive data collection of gender-related violence.²⁵ As we will see, the most complete national registries of femicide in Argentina, as elsewhere, continue to be produced by civil society and not by governments.

#SAYHERNAME, #MMIWG2, AND FEMINICIDE ACTIVISM IN NORTH AMERICA

In the United States and Canada, there are other important framings of gender-related violence that have been and continue to be the subject of intense organizing and data activism. Indigenous and Black women’s groups have long been organizing against fatal gender-related violence, as well as linking this violence to multiple forces of structural domination, including patriarchy, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and economic violence (see the glossary in chapter 8 for precise definitions of these terms).

For example, following a spate of murders of Black women and girls in Boston in 1979, the Combahee River Collective organized a march of hundreds of people to memorialize their lives, protest their deaths, and challenge the lack of justice families had received, both from the judicial system and from the media. The collective kept records on the women murdered and published a pamphlet for self- and community defense (figure 1.3). Here we see one of the earlier examples of “counting femicide.” In this marked-up draft with notes, the numbers of Black women killed increase from six, to seven, to eight, and finally eleven. While the numerical precision is important, the authors end the pamphlet by saying that it is not only about these eleven women but also about the “1000s and 1000s of women whose names we don’t even know. As Black women who are feminists we are struggling against all racist, sexist, heterosexist and class oppression. We know that we have no hopes of ending this particular crisis and violence against women in our community until we identify *all* of its causes, including sexual oppression.”²⁶ Here, the Combahee River Collective insisted on an intersectional approach to understanding the root causes of gender-related violence. They refused a single-axis analysis that would attribute the violence in their community to *either* sexism *or* racism. Counting was central to this campaign, and yet the

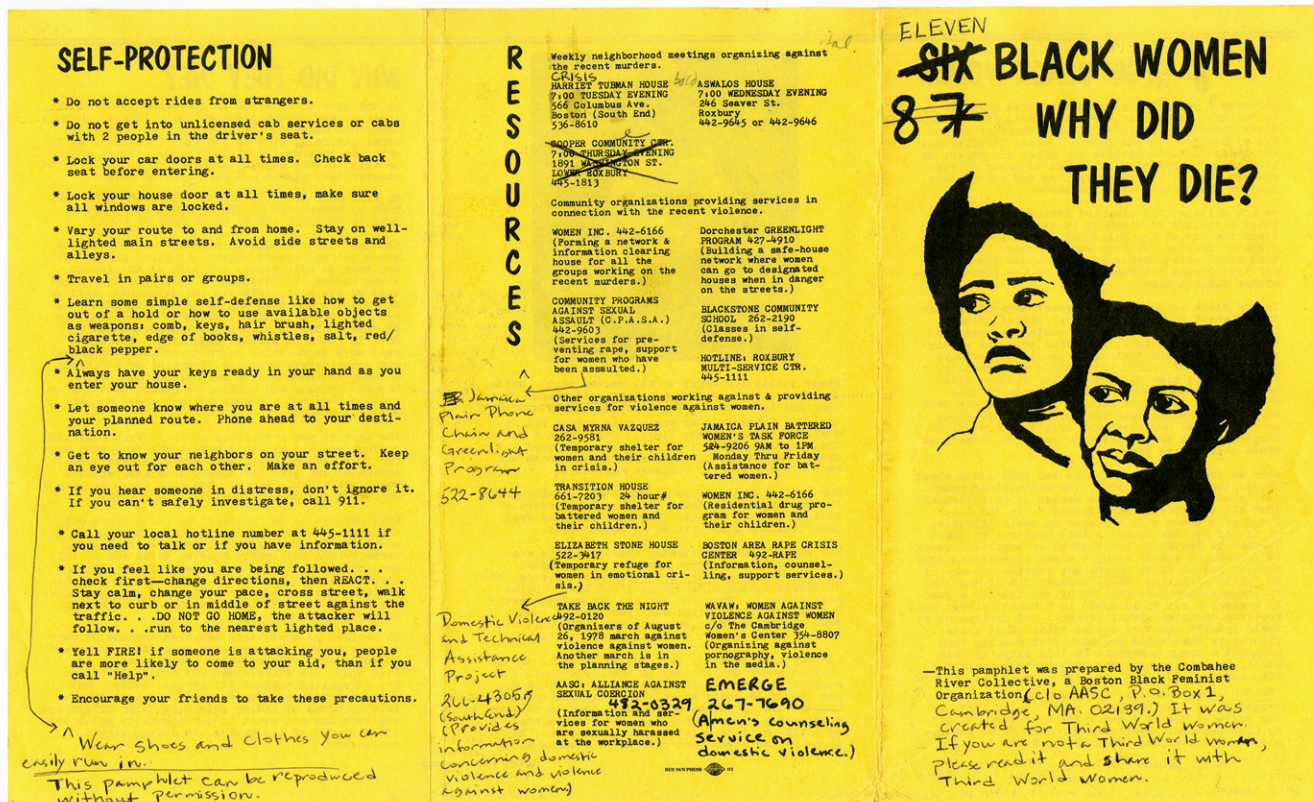


FIGURE 1.3

Combahee River Collective pamphlet, *Eleven Black Women: Why Did They Die?* (1979). The collective circulated more than eighteen thousand copies of the pamphlet in both Spanish and English. Courtesy of the Barbara Smith Collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Pamphlet originally published by Red Sun Press.

goal was not to produce a single comprehensive number. Rather, the pamphlet used counting to open a conversation about the countless women whose names we don't even know.

This early organizing in support of Black women finds an echo in contemporary campaigns like #SayHerName, which seeks to uplift the stories of Black women and gender nonconforming people who are killed in police violence in the United States. Their lives and deaths are often invisibilized by the larger narrative around anti-Black police killings, which focuses on men, as well as pervasive underreporting in the media due to long-standing racism that constructs Black women victims as less worthy.²⁷

In her work on Black femicide and the Black Lives Matter movement, political theorist Shatema Threadcraft traces the #SayHerName campaign back to “the United States’ most iconic necropolitical warrior, one Ida B. Wells.”²⁸ In the *Red Record*, published in 1895, Wells collected reports of Black lynchings published in the white press to systematically present the scope and scale of these brutal racialized killings and to challenge the white narratives that circulated about them.²⁹ Here *necropolitics* means mobilizing the politics of death, especially as they intersect with state power—who is targeted for death, who kills, and, most importantly, what their deaths mean.³⁰ This is a concept from Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe that focuses on how death chances are distributed by the state—on how people from subordinated groups are marked for death and the ways in which their deaths are normalized. Necropolitics, then, involves not only the empirical fact of the disproportionate deaths of specific groups of people but also the performative and discursive element of interpretation around what those disproportionate deaths *mean*. Another way to think about necropolitics is to ask the question, “In a particular society, whose deaths matter?” And, following geographer Lorena Fuentes, what are “the discourses that visibilize, differentiate, and/or obscure the bodies of victims”?³¹

While Threadcraft describes the Black Lives Matter movement’s necropolitical achievements in reframing Black police killings as unjust, she outlines tensions for #SayHerName to be able to do the same for Black women: “Activists concerned with stemming Black femicide should reflect on the fact that the movement has relied on amplifying the spectacle of death in a context in which Black women suffer from a severe spectacular violent death deficit. . . . what can stand in the place of this public spectacle, when what they are dealing with are a greater number of wholly private murders. What, then, will motivate people to rally around the bodies of our Black female dead?”³²

Even studying the phenomenon is challenging because of missing data, underreporting due to media bias, and because Black women are killed in less public and therefore less visible ways than Black men.³³ As Kimberlé Crenshaw and colleagues write, “There is currently no accurate data collection on police killings nationwide, no readily available database compiling a complete list of Black women’s lives lost at the hands of police, and no data collection on sexual or other forms of gender- and sexuality-based police violence.”³⁴ In response, advocates like Black Femicide US, Black Girl Tragic, the African American Policy Forum and Andrea Ritchie have created important databases of Black women and gender nonconforming victims of violence that they use in advocacy, support for families, consciousness-raising, and movement building.

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN, GIRLS, AND TWO-SPIRIT PEOPLE

During the same time period that women's groups were bringing the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez to public attention, activism led by Indigenous women was surging in Downtown Eastside Vancouver, the unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* (Squamish), and *səlilwətał* (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations in present-day Canada. Since the late 1980s, Indigenous women had been gathering in the Downtown Eastside to protest missing and murdered women in their community by holding signs with photographs of their relatives. Among them was prominent MMIWG2 activist Mona Woodward of the Cree, Lakota, and Saulteaux peoples. She began demonstrating following multiple relatives being affected by violence, including her sister, Eleanor "Laney" Ewenin, who was murdered in 1982 and whose case has still not been brought to justice.³⁵

On February 14—Valentine's Day—1991, a small number of people, including Woodward, gathered to mourn the death of a beloved Coast Salish woman who had been sexually assaulted and murdered. Her mother and other family members staged a small memorial to her life.³⁶ This gathering became annual and has grown to encompass many thousands of participants in Vancouver as well as spread to more than twenty cities in Canada and the United States. It is known as the Women's Memorial March and its annual theme is *Their Spirits Live within Us* (figure 1.4). Each year, the march moves slowly through the Downtown Eastside neighborhood and makes stops at sites where Indigenous women have last been seen or where they were killed. The march honors individuals, and family members often speak. But since the beginning, it has also challenged the structural conditions and cultural representations that produce such violence. This has involved keeping a count and publishing a list of disappeared and murdered women in the Downtown Eastside area. More than 970 names have been added to the list since the march started, and seventy-five names were added just in the year 2019.³⁷ A pamphlet passed out at the 2001 Women's Memorial March read: "WE ARE ABORIGINAL WOMEN. GIVERS OF LIFE. WE ARE MOTHERS, SISTERS, DAUGHTERS, AUNTIES AND GRANDMOTHERS. NOT JUST PROSTITUTES AND DRUG ADDICTS. NOT WELFARE CHEATS. WE STAND ON OUR MOTHER EARTH AND WE DEMAND RESPECT. WE ARE NOT HERE TO BE BEATEN, ABUSED, MURDERED, IGNORED."³⁸

The Women's Memorial March, along with many other Indigenous-led efforts, laid the groundwork for the growing movement across North America now known by its hashtags—#MMIW, #MMIWG2, #MMIP—and by its slogan, *No More Stolen Sisters*.



FIGURE 1.4

The Women's Memorial March, pictured here in 2017, has been held every year on February 14 since 1991 and it has spread to more than twenty cities across the United States and Canada. Courtesy of Vancouver Is Awesome (<https://vancouverisawesome.com>). Photo by Dan Toulgoet.

Indigenous organizers and scholars have been unequivocal in linking this violence to settler colonialism. Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson states plainly, "Canada requires the death and so called 'disappearance' of Indigenous women in order to secure its sovereignty."³⁹ Others have challenged the gender binary itself as a settler colonial construction of gender—a toxic ideological import from Europe—that has been wielded as a tool to disrupt Indigenous family relations and plunder Native communities for generations.⁴⁰ These scholars definitively establish the links between gender-related violence, the disruption of Indigenous kinship, and the dispossession of Indigenous land.

Contemporary Indigenous feminist scholars like Sarah Deer of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation build on this legacy of linking gender-related violence to colonial violence and speak of the paths to multiple forms of sovereignty—land sovereignty, body sovereignty, and soul sovereignty: "It is impossible to have a truly self-determining nation when its members have been denied self-determination over their own bodies."⁴¹ In parallel, Latin American Indigenous leaders have led the development of the concept

of *cuerpo-territorio*. This is an analysis from Lorena Cabnal, Mayan Q'eqchi'-xinka healers, and other Indigenous feminists and community defenders that links violence on the body (*cuerpo*) to violence on the land (*territorio*) because so many Indigenous women are killed in defending their land or protecting their water from destruction by man camps, extractivist industries, and toxic public-private partnerships.⁴² The group Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas (National Coalition of Indigenous Women, CONAMI), based in Mexico, calls these deaths *ecofeminicidios*. These concepts show how deeply gender-related violence against Indigenous women is intertwined with *colonial dispossession*—past, present, and ongoing. Femicide is a kind of final dispossession in which all rights have been stripped and stolen—the rights to land, sovereignty, language, and traditions, along with the very right to life itself.⁴³ Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes how Indigenous bodies are themselves political orders. This means that the body sovereignty of Indigenous women and two-spirit people is a direct threat to the authority of the settler state and thus becomes a target.⁴⁴ In 2023, Indigenous activists and femicide scholars came together to assert that the mainstream formulation of femicide is characterized by “a failure incorporate a focus on colonialism and the systemic racism/discrimination that shape the experiences of violence of Indigenous women and their peoples.”⁴⁵ These scholars and activists demonstrate how the gender-essentialist, single-axis frame of Russell and Radford’s definition of femicide as “women killed by men” is not expansive enough, nor precise enough, nor historical enough to appropriately describe this violence.

Much of what is demonstrated in scholarship is corroborated by reports from national inquiry commissions and advocacy groups, such as the prevalence of gender-related violence against Indigenous women at sites of resource extraction.⁴⁶ Still, the crisis persists and official data about MMIWG2 is widely known to be missing, poor quality, fragmented, misclassified, or purposefully shielded from public view by the state. This has prompted a growing number of Indigenous-led activist and civil society efforts to collect the data, such as Sisters in Spirit (Canada), the Safe Passage project (Canada), Sovereign Bodies Institute (North America and beyond), and Emergencia Comunitaria de Género (Mexico). Geographer and cofounder of Sovereign Bodies Institute Annita Lucchesi (Northern Cheyenne) has written that negligent and discriminatory institutional practices cause Native women “to disappear not once, but three times—in life, in the media, and in the data.”⁴⁷ She has always carried with her the date of the first Women’s Memorial March: “The march was in February 1991 and I was born in May 1991. There was never a time in my lifetime where my people weren’t advocating for my right to live a life free from violence as an Indigenous woman. My right to

not be murdered or go missing. As the keeper of an MMIP database now, that means something to me. I'm a part of an intergenerational commitment to ending this crisis that existed before I was born."⁴⁸

KEY TERMS

I have narrated a short genealogy of some key terms that describe and bring to light fatal gender-related violence: femicide, feminicide, MMIWG2, the Say Her Name movement, and Black women killed in police violence. All of these are insurgent necropolitical concepts aiming to reframe fatal gender-related violence, to move it out of the private sphere and place it into a structural, systemic, and public context. In this book, I will use *feminicide* most of the time for two reasons. First, as I stated in the introduction, the center of gravity of this book is feminicide data activism in Latin America. Feminicide is the framing concept that the majority of the data activists and civil society groups that we interviewed and worked with use. Second, as elaborated by Largarde y de los Ríos and built on by Latin American feminist theorists as well as transborder scholarship like that of Fregoso and Bejarano, it is a concept that, in contrast to femicide, can hold more intersectional consideration of how and why the violent killing of women happens and persists. But my choice to use *feminicide* is not to castigate those who use *femicide* or any other framing of gender-related killing as politically incorrect. Grassroots groups and individuals know best what framing concepts to use for their work. When I speak about the data activism of a specific group, I will name the violence as they name it and draw from their framing concepts and motivations to describe the work.

Women in this book is a political category that includes cisgender and transgender women. This is true for the vast majority of activists that we interviewed who produce data about feminicide. This is in contrast to legislation about feminicide in which governments mostly use *women* to refer to cisgender women and exclude transgender women (see table 1.1). When I speak about gender-related violence that includes genders other than women, such as nonbinary people, trans men, two-spirit people, travestis, or others, I will use *feminicide and gender-related killing*.

You may have also noticed that I am using the term *gender-related violence* instead of the more common term *gender-based violence*. This decision comes out of discussions with my collaborators on the Data Against Feminicide project. We decided to use this term to indicate that understanding feminicide requires an intersectional perspective. It is a term that is also favored by Rashida Manjoo, former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.⁴⁹

Finally, throughout this book I will frequently reference the interlocking systems of power that result in gender-related violence and inequality. These include terms like *settler colonialism*, *cisheteropatriarchy*, *white supremacy*, and *racial capitalism*. If these are new concepts for you, see the glossary in chapter 8, which contains short definitions of each.

LAWS AND OFFICIAL DATA ABOUT FEMINICIDE

Femicide is gathering energy in national and international law, policy frameworks, and governance. It has increasingly featured in public and policy debates, especially in Latin American countries. In the past two decades, public pressure from feminist and women-led movements has led to the passage of legislation that criminalizes femicide or feminicide in nearly all Latin American countries. Table 1.1 lists all of those countries (and one territory) in the Americas with laws about femicide or feminicide.⁵⁰

Table 1.1 shows that eighteen countries and one territory have passed laws codifying and criminalizing femicide or femicide since 2007. All are part of Latin America where feminicide activism, advocacy, and public uprising has been strongest. Despite legal advances, feminicide laws differ in definition and scope. In some countries, such as Nicaragua and Argentina, feminicide has been defined to consist of only intimate partner violence, which means that gender-related murder perpetrated by a stalker, a family member, a client, or a stranger would not be covered. Depending on the context, this could be leaving out a large proportion of feminicide cases. Moreover, the vast majority of feminicide laws do not protect the rights of transgender women. Legislation in only four countries and one territory explicitly mentions trans women, gender identity, and/or transfeminicide. This means that fifteen countries adopt an implicit definition of *women* to mean only cisgender women. That said, activists in many countries are challenging this exclusion—in the streets, in the media, and in the courts.⁵¹

At the bottom of table 1.1 is a list of countries in the Americas that do not have laws about femicide or feminicide. The regional differences are striking, with legal advances on feminicide being led by the Latin American region. Despite extremely high rates of female homicide, countries in the Caribbean and Northern America largely do not have legal definitions, frameworks, and protections in place for one of the most basic human rights: the right to life, liberty, and security of person.⁵² In the United States, murder represents a leading cause of death for women under forty-five, higher than diabetes, stroke and heart disease across races.⁵³ Homicide is the second leading cause of death for Black women and girls under twenty, responsible for more than 15 percent

Table 1.1

List of countries and territories in the Americas that have laws about femicide or feminicide

Country	Femicide/ Feminicide	Year	Covers more than intimate partner violence?	Includes trans women?	Government publishes official data in some form?
Argentina	Femicide	2012	N	Y	Y
Bolivia	Feminicide	2013	Y	N	N
Brazil	Feminicide	2015	Y	N	N
Chile	Femicide	2010	Y	Y	Y
Colombia	Feminicide	2015	Y	Y	Y
Costa Rica	Femicide	2007	Y	N	Y
Dominican Republic	Feminicide	2014	N	N	Y
Ecuador	Femicide	2014	Y	N	PARTIAL
El Salvador	Feminicide	2011	Y	N	Y
Guatemala	Femicide	2008	Y	N	Y
Honduras	Femicide	2013	Y	N	N
Mexico	Feminicide	2012	Y	N	PARTIAL
Nicaragua	Femicide	2012	N	N	N
Paraguay	Feminicide	2016	Y	N	Y
Peru	Feminicide	2013	Y	N	Y
Panama	Femicide	2013	Y	N	Y
Puerto Rico	Feminicide	2021	Y	Y	PARTIAL
Uruguay	Femicide	2017	Y	Y	PARTIAL
Venezuela	Femicide	2014	Y	N	N

Countries in the Americas with *no legislation* about femicide or feminicide include:

- **Northern America:** Canada, Greenland, and the United States
- **Central America:** Belize
- **South America:** Guyana and Suriname
- **Caribbean:** Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Bahamas, Barbados, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and Grenadines, Antigua, and Barbuda

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of deaths in 2018.⁵⁴ Asian women who were spa workers were targeted in a mass killing in Atlanta in 2021. White, rich, and/or elite women are not exempt, and their cases often gain more media attention. While the United States and Canada do not have laws, they have begun to strengthen legal protections for related phenomena like intimate partner violence and MMIWG2. In the United States, the most expansive federal law is the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which outlines provisions for services and programs to prevent various forms of gender-related violence but stops short of defining femicide as a separate crime or the murder of women as a violation of their civil rights. In fact, this is one of the main challenges of legal reform: writing legislation that recognizes, defines, and provides redress for femicide as a structural, public problem rather than an interpersonal, private problem; a violation of civil rights and human rights, not (only) a personal dispute or “domestic” or “intimate” matter.

Many of these legal reform efforts include mandates for improved collection of data and publication of statistics. Often these are due to demands from advocates specifically requesting such provisions, as we saw in the case of *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina in 2015. For example, a 2021 law passed in Puerto Rico ordered the systematic collection of data about femicide and transfemicide, stating: “If there are no reliable and comparable data collection mechanisms for a certain type of crime, there will be no appropriate ways to understand it nor effective strategies to combat it.”⁵⁵ All recent laws regarding missing and murdered Indigenous people in the United States have provided extensive provisions for improving data collection and statistics, though the implementation leaves much to be desired from the standpoint of grassroots groups, advocates, and families.⁵⁶

But legal mandates get complicated when they run up against funding challenges like the neoliberal austerity measures increasingly being implemented in Latin America or bureaucracy challenges like the fragmentation of agencies, each addressing a part of the issue or collecting part of the data with no agency fully responsible for data production. For example, despite numerous provisions for data collection around MMIP, federal legislation like *Savanna’s Act* in the United States is out of compliance with its own directives and criticized by the Indigenous families and communities whom it was meant to serve.⁵⁷ Research by the *Iniciativa Latinoamericana por los Datos Abiertos* (ILDA; Latin American Initiative for Open Data) in Argentina that explored government data collection around femicide corroborates this: “The strong fragmentation of this space in institutional, legal and occasionally political terms, makes it difficult to coordinate who is responsible for reporting and in what way on this particular type of crime.”⁵⁸ In addition, there is almost universally a lack of training and knowledge about the gendered and racialized nature of violence for public sector employees who handle

and classify cases on the ground, such as police and medical examiners. MMIWG2 reports highlight the persistent racial misclassification of Indigenous women by the state.⁵⁹ Moreover, there is the added informational complexity of what needs to be known in order to determine whether a murder was motivated by gender—namely, the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the motive for the murder, and the types of prior violence that the person may have suffered. In a 2022 analysis and report called *Datos Para la Vida* (Data for life), the Mexican nonprofit Data Cívica found that authorities did not properly record data fields that they were required to collect by law in order to determine whether a violent death constituted a femicide. The report found that the government also failed to record variables that would help disaggregate violence faced by women on the basis of racism, ableism, heteronormativity, and other intersectional power dynamics.⁶⁰ The fact that these data prove so challenging for agencies to accurately record, adding a time and resource burden to each case, has led the UN and some government officials to suggest that the violent death of a woman should be considered *by default* to be motivated by gender, thus shifting the burden of proof onto officials to prove otherwise.⁶¹ For example, in August 2020, Alejandro Gertz Manero, attorney general of Mexico, recommended that all murders of women be investigated as femicides.⁶² However, there is the distance between what authorities say and what actually happens on the ground. Sociologist Mariana Mora studies femicide in Costa Rica and states that the official party line is that state investigators should assume that every killing of a woman is a femicide and later rule it out, but this is not actually followed in practice.

As nations grapple with these difficulties, regional and international efforts have stepped in to try to help provide both data standardization and technical guidance to governments (and, in some cases, such as Mexico's, to provide international accountability in the face of government inaction⁶³). For the past four decades, transnational networks of feminist groups, largely led by Latin American women, international NGOs, and supranational agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations (UN) have held conferences and released reports on the topic of femicide/femicide. These have framed the topic as a global issue of gender inequality and invariably highlight the lack of reliable, comparable data. Surveying this work, sociologist Sandra Walklate and colleagues have posited the potential value and challenges of working toward a *global femicide index*, a set of standard methods to count, map, and measure the prevalence of femicide across countries.⁶⁴ In 2015, Dubravka Šimonović, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, called for establishing a *femicide watch*—an observatory effort to count, collect, and monitor data about gender-related killings—in every country.⁶⁵

In 2014, amid this intense and growing international coordination on femicide, the UN published an important technical guidance document about femicide. Titled *Latin American Model Protocol for the Investigation of Gender-Related Killings of Women (Femicide/Feminicide)*—and from here on out I'll just call it the Latin American model protocol—it outlines a baseline set of definitions, data fields, and procedures for official government data collection about femicide for use by, among others, police, medical examiners, forensic experts, public sector data analysts, and social workers.⁶⁶ It is called the Latin American model protocol because the UN developed it mainly with professionals in the Latin American region.

Some key contributions of this document include a working definition of femicide/femicide as gender-related killings that are rooted in the structural subordination of women. It also elaborates two key categories of femicide (here I use *femicide* because this is what the report primarily uses). *Active or direct femicides* include intimate partner femicides, misogynist murders, so-called honor killings, female infanticide, hate crimes against lesbians, and more. *Passive or indirect femicides* include deaths from unsafe abortions, maternal mortality, deaths linked to organized crime, and deaths linked to negligence. In the latter category, the state is implicated due to its role in creating an unsafe environment for women that diminishes their life chances, reduces their reproductive autonomy, and creates a climate of impunity where women are disproportionately killed and justice is not served. The Latin American model protocol also outlines a typology of fifteen kinds of femicide that the authors found to be common in the Latin American experience. The categories of femicide in the Latin American model protocol have been influential for federal governments and, as we will see in chapter 5, for data activists as well. But coming in at two hundred pages of technical documentation, the protocol is dense and there are numerous institutional barriers to governments just jumping in and adopting it.

As public conversation around femicide in Latin America surged following the Ni Una Menos uprising, ILDA started investigating how they could contribute to addressing some of the institutional barriers from a public sector data perspective and from a Latin American regional perspective. ILDA often works with government officials on open data and information systems and sought to understand whether a common femicide data standard would be useful to governments and what such a standard might involve. In 2017, they developed a project around femicide data standardization that sought to analyze how femicide data are constructed in different countries, what variables are included, and how open the data are. From this work, they released a preliminary data standard that described a baseline for how public agencies can register femicide cases.⁶⁷

ILDA piloted the data standard in workshops with federal and provincial officials in Argentina and Uruguay and, drawing on their feedback, drafted a fifteen-page guide that builds on the Latin American model protocol with a more specific protocol for standardizing the registration of femicides for public agencies.⁶⁸ The ILDA guide has flowcharts for data collection and case registration processes, plus a series of sixty-six variables recommended to be collected about each case. ILDA recommends that government agencies collect key information that, following legal definitions, will help determine whether a murder constitutes femicide, such as the relationship between perpetrator and victim, whether there was sexual aggression, and whether there were prior complaints filed against the perpetrator. As ILDA's work progresses, they publish updates to their guide and recommended registration processes, such as the flowchart in figure 1.5 that serves as a visual tool to help identify a crime as femicide and advises adhering to a quarterly and annual schedule for reviewing cases. Shifting processes and protocols in one country—not to mention a whole region—is slow work, but former research director Silvana Fumega was cautiously optimistic: “We’re seeing some governments taking what we put out as an ideal structure and comparing to what extent they have that in place or not, which is a good sign that at least it’s being taken as a reference. We know that what we’re suggesting is an ideal.”⁶⁹

Despite legal advances in Latin America, technical guidance, and persistent political pressure on femicide, governments are still unable to produce reliable public data about the phenomenon. In the final column of table 1.1, our research team attempted to catalog which countries with legislation on femicide publish any form of official data about the phenomena. We did not judge the completeness of the data, just whether or not the government publishes anything. Even so, only around half of the countries represented publish any official data about femicide. In Mexico, sociologist Julia Monárrez Fragoso notes, “national statistics do not document the reason for the murder, the relationship between victim and victimizer, nor the various types of violences that the women suffered prior to being murdered. [. . .] In the face of such absences, it is necessary to find alternative means to understand femicides with greater precision.”⁷⁰ And one of the main findings in Canada’s multiyear MMIW national inquiry is that “there is no reliable estimate of the numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA persons in Canada.”⁷¹

DATA ACTIVISM AND FEMINICIDE

Indeed, the vast majority of scholarly works, commissions, and advocacy reports about femicide lead with the fact that data about this violence are either completely absent

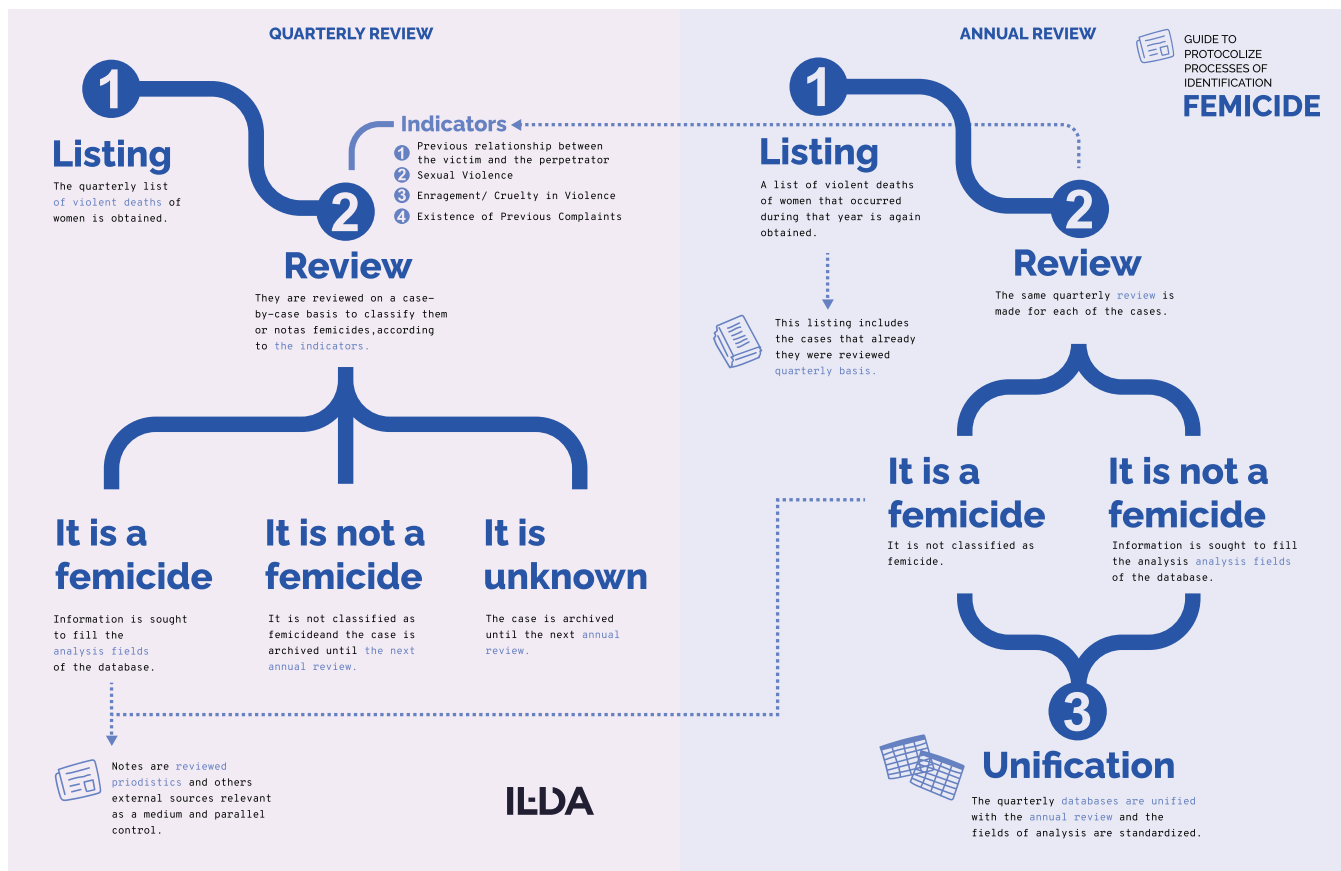


FIGURE 1.5

ILDA’s flowchart to identify femicides. They propose that organizations collecting data undertake a quarterly review and an annual review of all cases and then unify the results. Courtesy of ILDA. Graphic design by DataSketch. Graphic adaptation for this book by Wonyoung So.

or else sparse, unreliable, unavailable, untimely, neglected, misclassified, or not public. This is a phenomenon called *missing data* that we will explore further in the next chapter. An increasing number of grassroots activists and civil society groups, particularly in Latin America, have turned to the production and circulation of *counterdata* not only to fill in missing data or to counter official data, but also to challenge the hegemonic systems that produce gender-related violence in the first place: cisheteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and more. They use their data to confront state bias and inaction, to galvanize media and public attention, and to help heal wounded communities.

This work fits under the broader umbrella of *data activism*, a concept that foregrounds the use of data and software to pursue collective action and exercise political agency. Critical data studies scholar Stefania Milan characterizes data activism as an emerging social movement tactic and draws parallels between data activism and media activism. In both cases, citizens and people are taking advantage of widely available digital tools of production to “uncover stories of injustice or change.”⁷² In Milan’s framework, codeveloped with scholars Lonneke van der Velden and Miren Gutiérrez, there are two types of data activism: reactive and proactive.⁷³ *Reactive data activists* resist datafication and data surveillance practices. *Proactive data activism*, on the other hand, may have any number of objects of struggle. What proactive data activists share is that they “create, mobilize, solicit, appropriate, or crunch data in view of supporting alternative narratives of the social reality, questioning the truthfulness of other representations, denouncing injustice and advocating for change.”⁷⁴ Grassroots counterdata production about femicide falls into the latter category and undertakes all of these actions with data, with a particular emphasis on the act of *creating* datasets and databases that document cases of femicide. These datasets are often manually crafted (row by row, case by case, person by person) and constitute data produced outside of—and often in opposition to—mainstream counting institutions like governments and corporations.

Indeed, prior work has shown that one of the key goals of data activism is to challenge whether and how institutions see, count, measure, and evaluate particular phenomena. The 2016 report *Changing What Counts* describes numerous case studies of citizen data action that attempt to shift official institutional measurement of various things: police killings, air pollution, water access, and government pardons.⁷⁵ Civil society actors in these cases produce their own data as well as collate and combine data from diverse sources in order to challenge public sector numbers and also to challenge public sector *narratives* around these phenomena. That is to say that datasets do not operate as a bucket of disembodied facts but are in fact mobilized by activists as “a vector for the circulation of affective and emotional bonds.”⁷⁶ Scholars Kathleen Pine and Max Liboiron (Red River Métis/Michif) have discussed data activism as the deployment of *charismatic data*, data whose dramatic or spectacular nature impels different stakeholders to take action toward social change.⁷⁷ This means that datasets are—or can be strategically deployed as—acts of rhetorical and political communication. The act of registering diverse instances of gender-related killings into a dataset about femicide is an act of counting *and* an act of classification *and* a rhetorical act to assert femicide as a valid concept and a valuable thing to count. Sociologists Aryn Martin and Michael Lynch frame this as *numeropolitics* and discuss how acts of counting are also always acts of classification. To count femicide is also to select events from the world and to

assert them as feminicide and also to assert that feminicide *matters* as a concept. As Pine and Liboiron state succinctly, “measurements make things.”⁷⁸

Recent work has examined the intersection of data activism and grassroots data practices around feminicide. In *Terrorizing Women*, Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano place feminicide counterdata production practices in Latin America in a long history of observatorios comunitarios (community-based observatories), which have served to engage communities in monitoring state violence and using collective action strategies toward accountability and justice.⁷⁹ Helena Suárez Val—interdisciplinary scholar, activist, and colead on the Data Against Feminicide project—has advanced the concept of *strategic datafication* to describe the motivations behind activist production of feminicide data. Activists strategically mobilize the perceived legitimacy of data and numbers to draw attention to feminicide at the same time as they refuse the positivist epistemology of hegemonic data science; they refuse the colonial and military histories of their tools; and they refuse to have women’s and people’s lives and bodies be reduced into rows and columns.⁸⁰

In a 2019 case study on #NiUnaMenos, Jean-Marie Chenou and Carolina Cepeda-Másmela described how activist demands for data constitute both an appropriation of hegemonic technology and the production of alternative imaginaries around big data—namely, that data could and should be used in the service of gender justice.⁸¹ In studying how feminicide data circulate on social media, Helena has asserted them as *affect amplifiers*, digital cartographies that seek to translate feminist grief and rage into public action.⁸² This resonates with Lucchesi’s scholarship around using an Indigenous decolonial approach to mapping MMIWG2, in which maps and stories are used in the service of “resilience and resurgence and not just of loss.”⁸³ Lucchesi outlines how data gathering and mapping projects run the risk of replicating *data terrorism*, “the use of data to terrorize a population into submission for political, ideological, or social gain.”⁸⁴ Data terrorism describes projects that collect data and produce maps on gender-related violence against Indigenous women and girls and two-spirit people that *reproduce* and *enact* the colonial violence that they purport to describe. This is to say that such projects use data and statistics to construct deficit narratives of Indigenous women as being in need of help; they ignore the role of the settler state and its institutions in perpetuating the violence; and they create the conditions for further policing and regulation of Indigenous women’s bodies. The path toward addressing data terrorism is not to accumulate more data but rather to center Indigenous women’s data sovereignty.

These works emerge as calls for decolonizing and de-Westernizing data scholarship are growing. Movements around Indigenous data sovereignty emphasize that

colonization—in the form of settler colonialism—has not ended. Conventional uses of data participate in ongoing *epistemicide*, defined by Stephanie Russo Carroll and coauthors as the suppression and appropriation of Indigenous knowledges and data systems.⁸⁵ Stefania Milan, Emiliano Treré, Mohan J. Dutta, and other scholars in critical data studies situated many of the harmful effects of contemporary datafication as a continuation of Western European colonization and their (our) extractivist, violent knowledge regimes.⁸⁶ Numerous important concepts have been advanced for naming these regimes—among them, surveillance capitalism, the New Jim Code, automated inequality, data extractivism, data terrorism and data colonialism.

These concepts have been essential to make sense of the current moment. And yet critical data studies has the potential to do more than retroactively describe hegemonic data science practices. In his essay “Seeking Liberation: Surveillance, Datafication, and Race,” information studies scholar Roderic Crooks challenges the field of critical data studies to do more than merely describe various forms of data injustice: to actively participate in “seeking liberation” for minoritized people from those harms.⁸⁷ Building on this vision, critical data studies can be a generative site for developing liberatory approaches to data, knowledge, and power.

In her 2019 paper “Data Epistemologies, the Coloniality of Power, and Resistance,” media scholar Paola Ricaurte analyzes how present regimes of data power are violent. They are colonial in their methods for capturing and extracting value from human life. They pose a threat to humans, biodiversity, climate, and life on Earth itself. Yet Ricaurte leaves open the possibility that, through collective resistance, “we can reverse extractive technologies and dominant data epistemologies in favor of social justice, the defense of human rights and the rights of nature.”⁸⁸ She discusses María Salguero’s map of feminicides in Mexico as an example of such resistance, enacting the use of grassroots data to further justice, memory, and human rights in the face of economic and patriarchal violence. For Ricaurte, feminicide data activism represents a step toward the development of “alternative data frameworks and epistemologies that are respectful of populations, cultural diversity, and environments.”⁸⁹ Such alternative epistemological approaches are flourishing in both scholarship and activism, including data feminism, feminist data refusal, emancipatory data science, decolonial AI, Indigenous data sovereignty, queer data, and more (see chapter 8 for more on these data epistemologies).

As I stated in the introduction, throughout this book I will seek to draw out resonances between data feminism and data activism about feminicide. In our book *Data Feminism*, Lauren and I described Salguero’s map and counterdata production work as an example of the *challenge power* principle—appropriating hegemonic data science and mapping tools to visibilize (*visibilizar*) violence that is systematically invisibilized

by the state and its institutions. One of the underlying assumptions of this book is that the real-world, already-existing practices of data activists have much to offer those of us who seek to support and sustain alternative, feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous, queer, Black and/or decolonial data epistemologies. This case is aligned with Milan's recent paper outlining what critical data studies as a field may learn from data activism as it was practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁰ It also builds on the case made by feminist scholar Aristeia Fotopoulou that scholars should shift their object of research from data, algorithms, and platforms themselves toward the human practices of acquiring, analyzing, and using data, so that we may "reinststate the materiality of data, to think about laboring bodies, invisible human practices, and social relations and activities."⁹¹

CONCLUSION

Grassroots data activism about femicide invites us to imagine a data science, epistemology, and ethics that rigorously takes power and people into account; that understands how structural inequality produces missing and flawed data and develops creative strategies to mitigate that; that views data science not as a technosolutionist panacea but, first, as an intimate act of care, witnessing, and memory justice; and, second, as a vector for transformative social change. This is not to romanticize the very difficult and fraught labor of femicide data activists, which we will be exploring in more detail in the rest of this book. Rather, it is simply to offer that mainstream data practitioners and critical data studies scholars have much to learn from these reflective practices, particularly those of us who wish to mobilize data science in solidarity with movements for social justice.

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Counting Femicide

Data Feminism in Action

By: Catherine D'Ignazio

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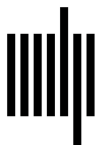
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