Inclusion, Security, and Justice:
Exploring the Correlates of Femicides in the United States

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I. Introduction

Cross-national research and recent reviews of the literature indicate that, worldwide, the perpetrators and the victims of lethal violence are predominantly males. Although the risk of lethal victimization is significantly lower for women residing in countries with high murder rates (i.e., 11.0 per 100,000 people or higher), in Europe and in other countries with low murder rates (i.e., around 2.0 per 100,000 persons or lower), the women's risk of lethal victimization is not much different from the males' murder victimization rates (see Karstedt, 2022, for a review). Comparative research also shows that, almost without exception, females are at greater risk than males of becoming victims of intimate partner homicide (see Taylor & Jasinski, 2011 for a review). While globally, five out of ten female homicide victims (47%) have been killed by intimate partners or family members, in Europe and Asia, 55% of females who have been killed (versus 10% of males) were victims of lethal domestic violence (Karstedt, 2022, p. 82).

From 1990 to 2014, homicide rates decreased in the United States from 9.4 to 4.5 per 100,000 people. Yet an ascending trend in homicide rate was observed during the years that followed, when homicide rate per 100,000 people increased from 4.9 in 2015 to 6.8 in 2021. Even though in 2022, the homicide rate (6.3 per 100,000 people) was lower than in 2021, the recent murder and nonnegligent manslaughter rate is still higher than the rates recorded in the late 1990s, and it is much higher than homicide rates recorded in other developed countries (Statista, 2024).

In the US, men have been and continue to be overrepresented not only among homicide offenders but also among murder victims. Despite increases or decreases in murder rates over the years, the gender gap in homicide victimization remained relatively stable at the national level. Consistently, in the United States, about eight out of ten homicide victims have been males. For instance, while from 1946 to 1990, the percent of female homicide victims varied from 19% to 26% (Smith & Kuchta, 1995), from

2000 to 2015, 79.7% of the homicide victims were males and about 20.3% of the victims were females (Fox & Fridel 2017, p. 38). On average, from 2010 to 2017, almost half (44.3%) of female homicide victims versus 5% of male homicide victims were killed in the United States by an intimate partner (Fridel & Fox, 2019, p. 32).

Although for the past decades, women have been underrepresented among both homicide victims and offenders (Fridel & Fox, 2019), the rate of women murdered annually in the United States surpasses the femicide rates recorded in other developed countries of the world. As recent statistical information shows, in 2021, the femicide rate per 100,000 women was 2.90 in the United States versus 1.00 in Canada, 0.80 in Germany, 0.70 in France, 0.60 in the United Kingdom, 0.40 in Australia, or 0.20 in Japan. Based on state-level homicide data collected from 2018 to 2020, the present analysis aims to identify the factors more likely to increase the women's risk of lethal victimization in the United States. As Fridel and Fox (2019, p. 27) noted, the research literature on homicide, devoted far less attention to gender than it did to other demographic characteristics of the victims and offenders, such as their race or age.

Given that social, political and economic inequalities are found to be among the strongest predictors when variations in homicide rates at the international and local levels have been examined (see Nivette, 2011), it is appropriate "to use inequality between the sexes to explain violence against women and girls" (Karstedt, 2022, p. 83). Focusing on the impact of gender equality, the current study intends to contribute to the limited literature that explored the correlates of femicide victimization (i.e., the killing of women by male offenders) using as units of analysis larger geographic areas.

II. Theoretical explanations of variations in gendered violence

Macro-level homicide research has been frequently informed by the social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942), which states that poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential instability would contribute to social disorganization at the area level, decreasing the community's capacity to informally control crime, lethal violence included. Meta-analyses demonstrate that social disorganization theory (SDT) and its recent developments received strong empirical support in the literature. Specifically, "indicators of 'concentrated disadvantage' (e.g., racial heterogeneity, poverty, and fam-

ily disruption) are among the strongest and most stable predictors" of delinquency and crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2005, p. 343).

Yet even though the literature consistently shows that poverty and homicide are significantly and positively related (Pridemore, 2002), most of the empirical tests of SDT were based on homicide rates or violent crime data that were not disaggregated by gender. When researchers attempted to explain variations in women's lethal and/or non-lethal violent victimization, inconsistent results were obtained. For example, a review of the literature indicates that neighborhood factors play a limited role in explaining intimate partner violence against women (see Fry et al., 2008 for a review). Moreover, using archival information on 59 neighborhoods in New York City and medical examiner data on female victims of homicide (N= 1861), Fry and her colleagues (2008) concluded that the neighborhood factors indicative of social disorganization (e.g., educational/occupational attainment, immigrant concentration, physical disorder, residential instability, social cohesion) did not significantly affect the risk of intimate partner femicide. Additionally, a recent state-level analysis of gender disaggregated homicide rates found that among the social disorganization predictors, only ethnic heterogeneity was significantly and positively associated with female homicide rates. Although bivariate analyses showed that women were more likely to be killed in states with higher levels of unemployment and residential instability, and higher divorce rates, the effects of these predictors were no longer significant in multivariate analyses (Moore et al., 2021).

In addition to social disorganization theory, an alternative explanation of variations in lethal victimization has been proposed by feminist theorists. In accordance with the feminist theory, a particular form of inequality (i.e., gender inequality) influences a special form of violence — gendered violence. According to the feminist theory (i.e., *ameliorative hypothesis*), increased gender equality should predict decreased violence against women. The hypothesis has been linked to the work of liberal feminists (Ellis & Beattie, 1983; Griffin, 1971), who acknowledged gender-based discrimination in the legal, social, economic, political, and familial spheres (Vieraitis et al., 2015, p. 431). For instance, liberal feminists contend that women's lethal victimization would decline when women would be legally protected against domestic violence, would have equal access to employment, and would receive equal pay for their work and equal protection from the courts (Vieraitis et al., 2008, p. 166). In summary, liberal feminists argued that gender inequality increases the structural disadvantage of women relative

to men, contributing to an increase in the lethal victimization of women (Vieraitis et al., 2015, p. 428).

Yet empirical tests of the ameliorative hypothesis produced mixed results as well. A review of the literature based on 19 studies that examined the impact of gender equality on female homicide victimization indicates that only seven studies found clear support for the ameliorative hypothesis. Conversely, more than half of the studies included in the review found a positive association between gender equality and lethal victimization (Vieraitis et al., 2015). As the radical feminist theory asserts, a positive relationship between gender equality and the victimization of women would support the *backlash hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, men would target and victimize women because they perceive the elevation of women's status relative to men as being threatening to the men's status in society (Russell, 1975). However, as Vieraitis et al. (2015) observed, research results "are difficult to compare because of the variety of measures that have been used to measure gender equality, the inconsistent use of control variables (…), variation in basic data analytic strategies, and varying units of analysis" (p. 433).

III. Current study

This quantitative study examines the structural and cultural correlates of femicide victimization in the United States. The state-level analysis is based on pooled data from the 2018-2020 Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHR) and refers solely to cases of lethal violence that involved one female victim and one male perpetrator. The analysis will focus on the impact of gender equality on sex-disaggregated homicide victimization rates (i.e., femicides or women killed by men), when controlling for other structural factors. In summary, the study will test empirically the ameliorative hypothesis, while considering alternative theoretical explanations of femicide victimization.

IV. Data and methods

1. Data sources

The present analysis is conducted on a dataset created by the author. The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) - Supplementary Homicide Reports

2018-2020 have been used to extract cases of murder and non-negligent manslaughter that involved a single female victim and a single male offender (U. S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). UCR does not include data on femicides in Alabama and Florida. These two states have not been included in the multivariate analysis.

The online database of the Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) served as a data source for several state-level indicators, such as: fulltime employment for women in 2018; percent female workers in poverty in 2018; percent women with a college degree or more; percentage of seats held by women in both chambers of the state legislature in 2019; protective legislation for women enacted at the state level; General Social Survey (GSS) results on women's perceived community safety in 2018 (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2020). GIWPS reported a racial diversity index at the state level, which has been computed by Williams-Baron and Shaw (2016).

The World Population Review (2024b) was the source of the data on gun ownership in each state in 2020. The *HealthCare Insider* database was used to determine the women's access to healthcare in each state (McGuire, 2021). Data on unemployment for the years 2018, 2019, and 2020 were provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) survey data were used to form the indicator referring to the percentage of female victims of domestic violence in each state in 2019 (NCADV, 2019).

2. Measures

The dependent variable (*Femicide rate 2018-2020*) represents annual murder and non-negligent manslaughter cases involving one male offender and one female victim per 100,000 women in each state in 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Gender equality index (GEI) is the focal independent variable. It is a composite measure (factor) constructed via principal component analysis (PCA). It is an adaptation of the US Women Peace and Security Index (WPSI) calculated by researchers from GIWPS. The index has three formative indicators: *Inclusion*, *Justice*, and *Safety*. The measure has internal consistency (Alpha = .829) and construct validity. Only one factor with an Eigenvalue higher than one has been obtained (Eigenvalue: 2.242; variance explained: 74.74%; factor loadings vary from .801 to .922). GEI also shows convergent validity. It is negatively related (r = -.68; p< .01) to the gender

inequality index (GII) calculated for each state based on the United Nations Development Program's methodology and using state-level data from 2010 to 2015 (Andreescu, 2019). GEI is also highly correlated (r = .96; p< .01) with the *2020 Women Peace & Security index* (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2020). GEI takes values from -1.84 to 1.96. Higher index values indicate a higher level of gender equality. The indicators used to form the gender equality index (GEI) are described below:

– *Inclusion* – Subindex 1 is a factor constructed via PCA and includes four indicators (percent women in full-time employment; percent female employees who worked at least 27 months in the preceding year and are not poor; percent women with a college degree or more; percent seats held by women in both chambers of the state legislature). The subindex has acceptable reliability (Alpha = .620) and is unidimensional (Eigenvalue: 2.491; variance explained: 62.27%; factor loadings vary from .658 to .910). Higher index values indicate low structural disadvantage for women relative to men at the state level.

– *Justice* – Subindex 2 is a factor constructed via PCA and includes three indicators: *legal protection*, with scores from 0 to 100, was computed for each state based on seven laws related to women's protection from violence, economic autonomy, and access to reproductive healthcare; *access to healthcare* for women is an index with values from 0 to 100 and measures the women's access, cost, and the quality of healthcare; and, *low discriminatory attitudes*. The third index component reports the state-level percentage of men who did not have discriminatory attitudes toward women when surveyed nationally in 2018. The measure has acceptable internal consistency (Alpha = .618), is unidimensional, and has good construct validity (Eigenvalue: 1.935; variance explained: 64.49%; factor loadings vary from .718 to .892). Higher index values are indicative of higher legal protection from violence and weak discriminatory gender norms. Higher index scores show the males' support for women engaging equally in economic opportunities and also reflect the healthcare system's responsiveness to the women's needs.

– *Safety* – Subindex 3 is a factor constructed via PCA as well. It includes three indicators: percent residents who were not gun owners in 2020; percent women who in 2018 felt safe to walk alone at night within one mile of their home; percent women who were not victims of domestic violence when surveyed nationally in 2019. Although the measure appears to have relatively low internal consistency (Alpha = .523), reliability may

be underestimated when the number of index components is low and the sample is relatively small, as it is the case here (see Cho, 2016). Nonetheless, the measure is unidimensional and has good construct validity. Only one factor with an Eigenvalue higher than one has been obtained (Eigenvalue: 1.561; variance explained: 52.03%) and all three index components are highly related to the latent construct (i. e., factor loadings vary from .714 to .730).

The following indicators have been used as statistical control variables:

– *Unemployment rate* – Percent unemployed of the total work force in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The variable is used here as a proxy of poverty.
– *Racial diversity* – This is a measure of the proportional size of all population subgroups in each state and indicates how diverse each state is in terms of six racial/ethnic groups (White, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Hispanic, and other, such as two or more races). The diversity score takes value from 0 (complete ethnic/racial homogeneity to 1.8 (complete racial/ethnic diversity) (see Williams-Baron & Shaw, 2016, p. 5).
– *Democratic party control* – This continuous variable takes values from 0 to 21. It measures the number of years from 2000 to 2020, the state governor as well as most elected representatives in both chambers of the state legislature were members of the Democratic party.
– *Urban population* – Percent urban population is each state.

3. Analytic strategy

First, univariate and bivariate analyses have been conducted. Ordinary least square regression has been used to assess the impact of gender equality on femicide rates, using pooled data for three years. The reported estimates predict femicide rates across 144 state-years for 48 states that provided femicide data to FBI-UCR from 2018 to 2020. As previously noted, two states (Alabama and Florida) are not included in the analysis because they did not report homicide rates disaggregated by gender.

V. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables included in the analysis. During the period under observation the average femicide rate

for cases that involved one female victim, and one male offender was 1.40 per 100,000 women. Regarding the inclusion subindex, it can be noticed that in the United States, only four out of ten adult women (43%) have full-time jobs. However, less than 6% of the women who work are estimated to be poor. Approximately 32.5% of the women in the United States have a college degree. On average, only 29% of the state representatives are females. Only in one state (Nevada), women are not underrepresented among state legislators (i.e., 52% of the state representatives are females). In seven states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Wyoming) less than 17% of the state representatives are women.

Regarding the justice subindex, there are US states (i.e., Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Utah) that did not enact any of the selected laws meant to protect women from violence. On average, approximately two out of the seven laws have been enacted at the state level. Oregon had the highest number of enacted protective laws (6 out of 7). On the other hand, most men in the United States (72%) support non-discriminatory norms for women.

Despite statistical information indicating that there are 1.2 guns per capita in the US (World Population Review, 2024b), at the state level, most residents (56%) do not own a gun. Additional analyses show that only in sixteen states out of fifty, most people own a gun. In Alaska, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, more than 60% of the residents have at least one firearm. Survey data also show that most women in the United States (63%) did not experience domestic violence recently. Approximately six out of ten women (57%) did not express fear of victimization when interviewed in 2018.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	S. D.	Min.	Max.
Femicide rate	1.40	.69	.25	5.40
Gender Equality Index	.00	1.00	-1.84	1.96
Inclusion Subindex	.00	1.00	-2.22	1.95
Female full-time workers (%)	43.00	2.90	36.40	49.70
Female workers who are not poor (%)	94.39	1.54	90.30	97.60
Females with a college degree or more (%)	32.45	5.31	21.70	44.50
Female state representatives (%)	29.12	8.51	13.40	52.40
Justice Subindex	.00	1.00	-1.90	1.82
Protective laws out of seven laws (%)	34.29	23.63	0	85.70
Males' support for non-discriminatory norms (%)	72.04	9.33	51.50	85.20
Healthcare affordability for women	48.68	10.86	25.48	69.49
Safety Subindex	.00	1.00	-2.28	2.17
Residents who do not possess firearms (%)	55.90	13.10	33.70	85.30
Female residents who feel safe (%)	57.05	9.68	40.70	67.70
Females who did not experience domestic violence	62.64	3.49	54.70	70.30
Unemployment rates 2018-2020	4.89	2.15	2.10	13.50
Racial diversity	.80	.27	.30	1.30
Democratic Party control 2000-2020 (years)	4.66	5.05	0	15
Urban population (%)	73.59	14.47	38.70	95.00

Table 2 presents the results of the bivariate analysis. The gender equality index has a negative and significant correlation with the dependent variable ($r = -.50$; $p<.001$), indicating that femicide rates are significantly lower in states characterized by higher levels of gender equality. The dependent variable has the highest correlation ($r = -.55$; $p< .001$) with the safety subindex. In summary, women are less likely to be killed in states characterized by low gun ownership, low incidence of domestic violence, and where women feel safe walking alone at night. Indicators of social justice also appear to influence femicide rates ($r = -.49$; $p< .001$) more than measures of social inclusion do ($r= -.24$; $p< .01$). Nonetheless, it can be noticed that all the components of the gender equality index are significantly and positively interrelated, with bivariate correlations that vary from .49 to .62, to .75.

Results also show that femicide rates tend to be lower in states with larger urban populations and in states where the Democratic party control lasted more years. The analysis controlled for two measures of social disorganization (ethnic heterogeneity and poverty). While unemployment rate used here as a proxy measure of poverty did not appear to be related to femicide

rates, the bivariate analysis suggests that females' risk of lethal victimization is higher in states that are racially and ethnically more diverse.

Table 2. Correlation matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Femicide rate	1.00							
2. Gender equality index	-.50***	1.00						
3. Inclusion subindex	-.24**	.87***	1.00					
4. Justice subindex	-.49***	.92***	.75***	1.00				
5. Safety subindex	-.55***	.80***	.49***	.62***	1.00			
6. Unemployment rate	.06	-.05	-.05	.02	-.09	1.00		
7. Racial diversity	.18*	.03	.14	-.07	.01	.26***	1.00	
8. Democratic Party	-.29***	.36***	.26***	.45***	.21**	.14	.22**	1.00
9. Urban population	-.24**	.38***	.37***	.27***	.35***	.18*	.71***	.21**

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001.

Table 3. Parameter estimates predicting femicide rates across 144 state-years for 48 states reporting to FBI-UCR from 2018 to 2020

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		
	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	VIF
Gender equality	-.346*** (.051)	-.495			-.164** (.056)	-.235	1.529
Unemployment rate			.013 (.022)	.040	.006 (.022)	.018	1.098
Racial diversity			1.858*** (.244)	.731	1.574*** (.257)	.619	2.442
Democratic party control			-.044*** (.009)	-.319	-.033*** (.010)	-.239	1.259
Urban population			-.033*** (.005)	-.684	-.026*** (.005)	-.533	2.641
Constant	1.414*** (.051)		2.503*** (.256)		2.181*** (.272)		
F	48.139***		22.019***		20.318***		
(Adj.) R square	.240		.370		.403		

*p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error of the estimates; Beta= standardized regression coefficient; VIF = variance inflation factor.

Table 3 presents the results of the multivariate analysis. Model 1 shows the impact of gender equality on femicide rates, when no controls entered the equation. As anticipated by the correlation matrix, with each unit increase in gender equality, there is a .346 decrease in femicide rate. Gender equality explains 24% of the variation in femicides. Model 2 presents the effects of the other structural and cultural factors on femicide rates. As anticipated, unemployment is positively related to femicide rate. The effect is not statistically significant, however. As anticipated by the social disorganization theory, an increase in racial/ethnic diversity significantly predicts an increase in femicide rate. Women are less likely to be killed in states with higher levels of urbanization and also in states where Democrats held control for more years.

Model 3 shows the effect of gender equality on femicide, when controlling for additional ecological factors that could potentially impact the women's victimization. Collinearity diagnostics indicate that multicollinearity is not an issue. The highest value of the variance inflation factor (VIF = 2.641) is lower than 4.000 (see Allison, 1999).

Model 3 explains 40.3% of the variation in the dependent variable. While gender equality continues to have a significant relationship with the dependent variable, its effect is slightly lower. This suggests that the relationship gender equality has with femicide rates is partially mediated by other variables in the model (i.e., political party control and urbanization). An examination of the correlation matrix indicates that more urbanized states and states controlled by the Democratic party for longer periods have higher levels of gender equality as well. As shown in Model 3, *urbanization* and *Democratic party control* significantly predict variations in femicide rates. Women appear to face a lower risk of lethal victimization in states with a higher level of urbanization and where governors and state representatives that belonged to the Democratic party held positions for longer periods.

In sum, the ameliorative hypothesis is supported by empirical evidence. Women are less likely to be killed in states where they benefit from higher levels of social inclusion, social justice, and perceived safety.

VI. Discussion and conclusion

Macro-level violence research is generally informed by the social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) and less often by the feminist theory.

Although unemployment rate, used here as a proxy for economic deprivation did not affect variations in the dependent variable, femicide rates were higher in states with higher levels of racial/ethnic heterogeneity, as the social disorganization theory would predict and other state-level analyses of female lethal victimization rates also found (Moore et al., 2021).

In support of the ameliorative hypothesis, and consistent with prior research findings (Heirigs & Moore, 2018; Moore et al., 2021; Titterington, 2006; Vieraitis et al., 2015), results indicate that women are less likely to be killed by male perpetrators in US states characterized by higher levels of gender equality in the economic, social, and political spheres. Additionally, for women, the risk of lethal victimization appears to decrease with an increase in the number of years the Democratic party had legislative control at the state level. Conversely, femicide rates are significantly higher in states where women face justice and security constraints, such as higher levels of gun ownership, increased male support for discriminatory gender norms, and where there are fewer legal protections for women's rights. In summary, this analysis provides evidence that feminist theory can offer viable explanations when community-level correlates of femicides are examined.

However, as a macro-level analysis, the study could not assess the direct impact of gender equality on potential offenders. While it is reasonable to assume that restricted access to firearms would limit the lethality of violent crimes, it is not known *how* and *if* societal and legislative changes could produce attitudinal changes that would prevent or reduce violent behavior. As research shows that most homicides, especially those committed by males, have not been planned or premeditated (see Reynolds & McCrea, 2017, for a review), future studies based on micro-level analyses of femicide cases could provide additional useful information that might help us identify the individual-level factors that increase the females' risk of lethal victimization.

Yet Gartner and her colleagues (1990) noted that risk factors that are associated with homicide would not change based on the sex of the victim. Even though the current analysis focused only on the women's victimization, the literature (e. g., Andreescu, 2019; Karstedt, 2022; Moore et al., 2021) indicates that gender inequality increases the risk of lethal victimization not only for women but also for men. Thus, despite controversies regarding the measurement of the concept, gender inequality appears to be "a key indicator of overall violence in society" (Moore et al., 2021, p. 1884). This suggests that policy measures meant to change the social norms and structural inequities that foster gender-based violence would benefit

all members of the society (Carlson et al., 2015). Nonetheless, in addition to legislative changes that would restrict the citizens' access to firearms, would effectively protect women from violence, and would promote gender equality in all aspects of social life, the implementation at state level of rigorous violence-prevention programs (see Carlson et al., 2015; Casey et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2024) should continue.

VII. References

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