

# Intimate Partner Femicides in Eswatini: Victims, Assailants, Offense Characteristics, and Sociocultural Contexts

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## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Mensah Adinkrah (2024). Intimate Partner Femicides in Eswatini: Victims, Assailants, Offense Characteristics, and Sociocultural Contexts. *Journal of Crime and Criminal Behavior*, 4: 2, pp. 157-180. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JCCB.2024.v04i02.01>

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes 145 intimate partner femicides that occurred in Eswatini, Africa, during 2009-2022. Data were obtained through in-depth surveillance of two prominent national daily newspapers. Results show that assailants and victims generally shared a lower socioeconomic status. Stabbing, shooting, and beating were the dominant homicide methods and overkill was a significant feature of partner femicides. Perpetrator suicides occurred in 29% of cases. Ten cases had 11 collateral murder victims. Male sexual jealousy and rage over the victim's decision to terminate the relationship were the dominant motivational circumstances. Recommendations for the reduction of partner femicides are discussed.

## Introduction

Intimate partner femicide refers to the lethal victimization of females by their current or former intimate partners. Femicide represents the most extreme form of violence against women, and intimate partner femicide is oftentimes the apex of a long pattern of aggression against the victim. There is ample evidence that the crime of femicide occurs frequently across the globe (Abrahams *et al.*, 2013; Adinkrah, 2014; Cavlak *et al.*, 2023; Dayan, 2021; Mathews *et al.*, 2008; Sorrentino *et al.*, 2022; Solinas-Saunders, 2022; Violence Policy Center, 2020). A 2022 document jointly authored by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Women estimated that “approximately 45,000 women and girls were killed globally by their intimate partners or other family members” (UNODC, 2022 p.1). Data reported by law enforcement agencies

in the United States showed that of the nearly 4,970 female victims of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter in 2021, 34% were killed by their intimate partners (Smith, 2022). Indeed, a cursory inspection of various international digital media affirms the ubiquity of intimate partner femicides.

In tandem with the profusion of media coverage of the issue, there has been a plethora of scholarly treatment of the topic. The lethal violence literature shows that intimate partner femicide has been the focus of numerous studies and reviews (e.g., Campbell, 2012; Cavlak *et al.*, 2023; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Hannawa *et al.*, 2006; Serran & Firestone, 2004; Solinas-Saunders, 2022). The vast majority of this research, however, has focused on western industrial societies such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and select European countries. Particularly in the United States, there has been a profusion of research on the topic during the past four decades. The ubiquity of intimate partner femicide research in western societies has yielded vital information about the scope, nature, patterns, and social situations leading up to such violence. From this research, several robust preventive programs have been developed to control and prevent the incidence of these crimes (e.g., Center for Disease Control, 2017).

Criminological analyses of intimate partner femicides in African societies have received limited, albeit, increasing treatment in the scholarly literature (e.g. Abrahams *et al.*, 2009; Adinkrah, 2014; Mathews *et al.*, 2008; Ogunlana *et al.*, 2021; Rude, 1999). Research effort in this area requires urgent augmentation given that a large percentage of the world's population and femicide victims currently reside in Africa. Presently, the 54 countries in Africa have a combined population of 1.46 billion and comprise 18% of the world's population. Also, the aforementioned UNODC and UN Women report estimated that Africa ranked second to Asia as regions with the largest number of lethal victimizations perpetrated against females.

The limited amount of criminological scholarship on patterns of intimate partner femicide in Africa leaves several questions unanswered. For example, what is the scope, trends, nature and causes of intimate partner femicide in Africa? Do intimate partner femicides in Africa have some of the same patterned features associated with the offense in other regions of the world? To assist in answering these questions and contribute to the professional literature on intimate partner femicides in general, the current study examined 145 cases of intimate partner femicides that occurred in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Africa, a country in the southern region of the continent. To the best of the author's knowledge, no research has directly explored intimate partner femicide in Eswatini. Yet, local studies of intimate partner femicides are crucial to the development and formulation of culturally appropriate strategies for preventing and controlling this tragic and needless crime.

## Background of Research

During a review of international mass media reports on intimate partner femicides, the author came across an article titled “Eswatini’s Other Epidemic: Women’s Murder” (Shabangu, 2020). The article focalized two incidents of 2020 Eswatini femicides that involved extraordinary levels of brutality. The author decried “the spate of women killings in the society,” fulminating against the lack of official governmental action in controlling, reducing, and preventing the incidence of such tragedies. The author noted: “The year 2020 has seen tragic incidents of femicide. The killing of women persists unabated, and incredibly so, we are still overlooking the real issue” (Shabangu, 2020. p.1). The author poses the rhetorical question; “What gives men the audacity to take women’s lives?” Triggered by the most recent incident of intimate partner femicide at the time, in July 2022, a group of gender-violence activists in Eswatini, that included politicians, traditional authorities, and women’s rights activists, petitioned the office of the Deputy Prime Minister to declare gender-based violence a national crisis. This plea was renewed with each new incident of gender-based violence and as the government refused to declare the problem a national epidemic (“Declaring GBV National Crisis,” 2023; “Murder and Suicide,” 2022).

Parenthetically, judicial pronouncements preceding the sentencing of convicted femicide offenders are replete with fulminations against increasing prevalence and trends in the incidence of intimate partner femicides, denunciations of intimate partner killers, as well as the importuning of stakeholders to raise efforts to bring about the curtailment of the phenomenon (see “Judge Blasts Women Beaters,” 2010; *R v Mtsetfwa*, 2010; *Rex v Aaron Khopho Msibi*, 2020; *Rex vs Thokozani Joseph Samson King Mngomezulu*, 2018). Eswatini thus presented an ideal location for conducting research illustrating intimate partner femicides in Africa. Among the issues examined in the present research were (1) sociodemographic characteristics of offenders and victims; (2) relationship between the victim and the offender at the time of the crime, such as married or nonmarried (3) presence of corollary murder victims; (4) method of offense perpetration; (5) spatial and temporal aspects; (6) motivational factors and precipitating circumstances; (7) post-offense behavior, including perpetrator suicide; and (8) criminal justice responses, including dispositional outcomes and judicial punishments. The study is based on the presumption that understanding the determinants of intimate partner femicide in Eswatini is imperative to establishing practical policies and programs for reducing its incidence.

## Past Research on Intimate Partner Femicide

The preceding section has noted the relative dearth of criminological studies of intimate partner femicide in African societies. The paucity of such research is partially due to lack

of reliable data. In many of these societies, criminological data are not systematically compiled or collated, are fraught with methodological limitations, and their release and dissemination are subject to political contingencies and entanglements (Riedel, 1999; LaFree, 1999).

In some African countries, the term “passion killing” is used instead of “intimate partner femicide” to describe the phenomenon (Exner & Thurston, 2009). The use of the term “passion killing” has been criticized for conveying the idea that a crime was committed in a heat of passion and is therefore excusable or justifiable. In recent years, an increasing number of research studies on intimate partner femicide in Africa have focused on the analyses of how femicide incidents are portrayed in some African newspapers and other media fora. Some of such studies have been conducted in Ghana (Owusu-Addo *et al.*, 2018), Botswana (Exner & Thurston, 2009; Kelebonye & Faimau, 2021) and South Africa (Boonzaier, 2023; Spies, 2020). These studies report that the local media, with their patriarchal and misogynistic leanings, often depict femicide victims as blameful for their victimization, while at the same time portraying the male assailants as justified in their actions. Besides, these media generally fail to portray femicide as part of a broader pattern of domestic violence against women in the society.

The intimate partner femicide literature has often identified a significant age difference between the partners in intimate partner homicide cases (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Breitman *et al.*, 2004). It is widely noted that couples in gerontogamous marriages—where one spouse is significantly older than the other—face an elevated risk of being involved in intimate partner femicides. To illustrate, Breitman *et al.*, (2004) conducted an empirical study of 2,577 intimate homicides in the United States. The results of their analysis revealed that “the risk of intimate partner homicide [was] considerably elevated for couples with a large discrepancy between their ages—where the man [was] at least 16 years older than the woman or the woman [was] at least 10 years older than the man. They concluded that “this risk pattern [occurred] regardless of whether the man or the woman was the homicide offender” (p.321).

A common finding across most studies of intimate partner femicide is an existing history of violence and abuse against the female victim. In one U.S. study, Campbell and associates (2003) reported that 79% of the femicide victims aged 18 to 50 years old and 70% of the total femicide cases involved physical abuse of the victim at the hands of the same intimate partner who murdered them. Though intimate partner violence against women is ubiquitous across many societies, few victims report the abusive actions to the authorities. Many stay in abusive relationships for myriad reasons, including economic powerlessness, fear of escalating violence, and the social stigma of separation and divorce (Counts *et al.*, 2019). In some societies, patriarchal structures and ideology socialize females to accept the violence as normal. Other notable risk

factors for intimate femicides are prior threats of violence or death, the presence of firearms, and pregnancy of the victim (Hough & McCorkle, 2020).

Prior research on intimate partner femicide has revealed that the modus operandi or methods of offense perpetration are myriad. However, for societies with liberal gun laws, where there is easy availability of firearms, guns feature prominently as murder weapons. According to a 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center, 40% of adults in the United States reported that “they lived in a household with a gun, including 30% who said they personally owned one” (Schaeffer, 2021, p.1). U.S. government records show that from 1993 to 2018, on average, 71% of homicides were committed with a firearm (Kena & Truman, 2022). In Harris County, Texas, USA, it was estimated that 76% of intimate partner homicides in 2021 were perpetrated with a firearm (Texas Gun Sense, n.d.). Contrastingly, in the South Pacific country of Fiji where stringent firearm legislation precludes immediate accessibility to firearms, none of the 30 male sexual jealousy homicides studied by Adinkrah (2021b) was committed with a firearm.

Most research on intimate partner femicides explore offender reasons for the commission of the offense. Several studies have reported that men react violently to real or imagined reports about their partners’ sexual unfaithfulness (Adinkrah, 2021b; Counts *et al.*, 2019; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Websdale, 2010). From this research we learn that hundreds of women across the globe are killed annually based on accusations of infidelity by their male partners. Daly *et al.*, (1982) concluded from their analysis that “male sexual jealousy [was] the leading substantive issue in social conflict homicides in Detroit.” Their cross-cultural review of homicide confirmed the ubiquity of male sexual jealousy as a motive. In a study of male sexual jealousy homicides in Fiji, Adinkrah, (2021b) reported that 30 women accused of infidelity during 2010-2020 were slain by their male partners. Several of the victims had adamantly denied infidelity charges but were killed by their unconvinced accusers.

A woman’s desire to terminate the intimate relationship is another consistent motivational factor and circumstance in intimate partner femicides. Several studies have reported that women who leave or announce their intentions to leave their partners face an elevated risk of being killed by their partners (Belknap *et al.*, 2012; Browne *et al.*, 1999; Campbell, 2012; Hannawa *et al.*, 2006; Serran & Firestone, 2004; Taylor, 2012). Some of these men expend considerable time, energy, and resources to stalk the estranged partner, and upon locating them, threatening, harassing, beating, raping, and even ultimately murdering them (McFarlane *et al.*, 1999; McFarlane *et al.*, 2002). In fact, a recurrent feature of intimate partner femicide is a male abuser who threatened the victim with the proclamation, “If I can’t have you, no one will” or assertions of a similar nature (Hannawa *et al.*, 2006).

A wife's refusal of sexual intercourse with the husband is another major contributor to intimate partner femicides (Aboagye *et al.*, 2022; Adinkrah, 2021a). Studies reveal that some men feel that marriage entitles them to unrestricted sexual access to their female partners on demand, regardless of their wants, desires, or needs, and that any refusal warrants violence. In a study, of male-perpetrated partner homicides in Ghana, Adinkrah (2021a) observed that husbands who were denied sex used force and violence against the partner, in some cases, culminating in the infliction of serious physical injury or death to the victim.

The current literature indicates that pregnancy is a major risk factor for intimate partner violence, including homicide. Studies in the United States have revealed that homicide is the leading cause of death among pregnant women (Wallace *et al.*, 2021). In a recent publication, Wallace and colleagues (2021) reported a rate of 3.62 homicides per 100,000 live births among females who were pregnant or within one year postpartum—a rate “16% higher than homicide prevalence among nonpregnant and non-postpartum females of reproductive age” (2021, p.762). Findings from another study (Lawn & Koenen, 2022) presented similar results, with women who were pregnant or who had recently given birth more likely to be victims of lethal assault than to die from obstetric causes; such deaths, according to the authors, were associated with a lethal combination of “intimate partner violence and firearms.”

In studies of intimate partner femicide in Africa, Asia and Oceania, suspicions and accusations of malevolent witchcraft leveled by men against female partners have emerged as a contributory factor in the lethal victimization of women. In some parts of Africa, Asia, and Oceania where witchcraft beliefs are strong and endemic, some men blame their female partners for their economic hardships, health disorders or illness, and personal misfortunes. Consequently, they lethally assault the purported witch in the ostensible belief that this will lead them to personal, economic, and material advancement (Adinkrah, 2015; Forsyth & Eves, 2015).

A great deal of research on intimate partner femicides indicates that most incidents involve tremendous levels of violence that exceed what is necessary to complete a killing (Browne *et al.*, 1999; Crawford & Gartner, 1992). While homicide is unimpeachably a violent crime, lethal violence scholars distinguish between those involving moderate levels of violence from those involving overkill. Homicidal episodes involving overkill are those involving “two or more acts of stabbing, cutting, or shooting or a severe beating” (Browne *et al.*, 1999). Criminologists distinguish between instrumental and expressive crimes. Instrumentally oriented crimes have utilitarian or profit motivation while expressive crimes are motivated by jealousy, hate, frustration and rage (Alvarez & Bachman, 2003). As an expressive crime, intimate partner femicides often involve levels of violence, brutality, and bloodshed far outstripping what is necessary to accomplish

the act (Browne *et al.*, 1999). Additionally, a review of scholarship on intimate partner femicide further shows that a significant proportion of men who kill female intimate partners die by suicide at the scene of the crime, or elsewhere, immediately after the crime or sometime later, within days of the murder (Adinkrah, 2014; Cavlak, 2023; Dawson, 2005; Mathews *et al.*, 2008; Richards *et al.*, 2014; Solinas-Saunders, 2022).

In sum, intimate partner femicide research has uncovered valuable information about the crime. The vast body of work that exists on the topic has been conducted in western industrialized societies. Unfortunately, intimate partner femicides in African societies have not received adequate treatment in the criminological literature. What is needed is adequate information about the crime in other geographical and cultural areas hitherto unstudied. Research on male-perpetrated homicidal acts against female intimate partners in these hitherto neglected countries of Africa will illuminate and further our understanding of the crime and assist in the design and implementation of robust and culturally salient programs for the prevention and control of the crime. The current research, with its aim of providing an in-depth treatment of the subject in Eswatini, is one step towards the achievement of this objective.

### **Eswatini: The Research Setting**

Eswatini is a landlocked country located in the southern region of Africa. Until 2018 when an official name change occurred, it was known as Swaziland. Today, it has a population of about 1.2 million people. The population is predominantly rural, with just over 25% living in urban locales. Major public health problems are HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Current social and economic problems besetting the country include unemployment and widespread poverty. The suicide rate is one of the highest in Africa and the world, with female suicides approximating one-third of the country's suicide mortalities (Motsa *et al.*, 2021).

It is estimated that approximately 90% of the population is Christian, although most Eswatini Christians retain their traditional religious beliefs and practices alongside the new religion (Lawrence, 2017). A complex of religious beliefs and practices affects the incidence of intimate partner femicide in Eswatini. First, belief in malevolent witchcraft and the preternatural activities of diabolic witches is widespread. Witches are said to be capable of using supernatural means to maim and kill enemies, blight crops, kill farm animals, and cause other misfortunes. Women, particularly those of advanced age are commonly purported to be witches, accused of witchcraft, and subjected to witchcraft-related aggression. Violent retributive and deterrent actions deployed by solitary individuals or vigilante lynch mobs are used against women blamed for witchcraft. Victims are hacked with machetes, axes, or *set alight*. Some are incinerated while asleep in the middle of the night. Also, ritual homicides, whereby body parts of

living or deceased persons are harvested for use in sorcery and other rituals is believed to occur, albeit infrequently. Witchcraft accusations by husbands against wives have been reported; there are also reportedly cases of uxoricide with ritual murder as the primary motive (“Man Butchers Wife on Witchcraft Claim,” 2013). Eswatini is a death penalty retentionist society, although the death sentence has not been implemented since 1983 (Murphy, 1998).

### Status of Women in Eswatini

Eswatini is a highly male-dominated society. Although attitudes and practices are changing, women are subordinate to men in nearly all realms of life. There is a cultural preference for sons. Gender norms about familial responsibilities are fairly rigid. Patrilocality is normative in the rural areas of the country. In the domestic arena, husbands are expected to be the primary breadwinners. Indeed, men feel demasculinized when unable to provide for their families, although widespread unemployment and economic impoverishment often inhibit the ability of males to fulfil this expectation (Brear & Bessarab, 2012). Caregiving for children, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and performing general household chores are the dominant domestic activities of women.

Polygynous marriage is culturally permitted. Although the high cost of bridewealth and the prohibition of plural marriages by Christianity has contributed to a reduction in polygyny, men of wealth and status continue the practice. Gerontogamous marriages, early marriages, and child marriages are permitted by tradition and continue to be legion in the society (Mavundla *et al.*, 2015). Such marriages are often forced upon young brides, with media reports of such brides committing suicide to avert the arrangement (“Child Marriages Widespread,” 2022; “Teen Wife Survives Fifth Suicide Attempt,” 2013). Maintaining concurrent sexual relations with multiple partners is reportedly prevalent in Eswatini society (Ruark *et al.*, 2014; Timberg, 2006). Research by Ruark and colleagues (2014) suggests that the behavior is normative for both men and women. Ruark *et al.*, (2014) observed that “besides being motivated by love, concurrent sexual partnerships were described [by respondents] as motivated by a lack of sexual satisfaction, a desire for emotional support, and/or as a means to exact revenge against a cheating partner” (p.133). Despite the occurrence of the behavior among males and females, deeply rooted sexual double standards that exist in the society lead men to react violently when a female partner has additional sexual partners.

The use of nonlethal forms of aggression by men against women in dating and conjugal relationships is commonplace (Mavundla *et al.*, 2015). Physical abuse is used to dominate and control women across all social classes. Men assault and batter partners who do not exhibit obeisance to their dictates (“Judge Blasts Women Beaters,” 2010; “MP Henry Beats-Up Wife,” 2009). Incidents of sexual assault against women



abound (Fielding-Miller *et al.*, 2021; Reza *et al.*, 2009), and incidents and incestuous acts are regularly reported in the local mass media (“Civil Servant Arrested for Rape of Daughter (14),” 2022; “Father Accused of Raping Daughters,” 2023; “Man Accused of Rape of Child,” 2022; “Nurse Drugs, Rape Patient,” 2022). Relatedly, marital rape is not uncommon, and men are overwhelmingly the culprits (“Swazi Men Rape Their Wives,” 2010). Although Section 151 of the 2018 Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence (SODV) Act abolished the marital exemption rule, thereby criminalizing spousal rape, there is a perception in the society that victims of marital rape are reluctant to report errant partners for criminal prosecution (“First Arrest Puts Marital Rape in Spotlight,” 2020).

Given the high incidence of violence in dating and conjugal relationships in Eswatini, the probability of fatal outcomes is high. According to one Eswatini-based report, “31 women were murdered in 2016 under crimes of passion, with close to 3,000 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) reported during the same year” (“Two Women Brutally Murdered” 2017). Sublethal and lethal aggression within intimate partner relationships frequently occurs within the context of male sexual jealousy and the female partner’s attempt to assert autonomy, including a decision to terminate the relationship. Rather than sanctioning errant males for their aggressive actions, victimized women are often blamed for inviting the aggression upon themselves. Incidentally, male-on-female aggression in dating and connubial relationships is rationalized by significant proportions of Eswatini society. According to the UNICEF Swaziland Statistic Report (2013), justification of wife beating amongst adolescent males was at 34.3% and at 42.2% amongst adolescent females. Indeed, some of the young female respondents stated that they expected their partners to beat them to demonstrate to them that they were indeed loved, and that if they were not beaten, it signified that their partners’ love had dissipated (Mavundla *et al.*, 2015). Concurrently, many men believed that their failure to discipline an “errant” partner was perceived to be unmanly. Other practices perceived to be detrimental to the welfare of women include witchcraft accusations that disproportionately target elderly women (“Mob Assaults Gogo Over Witchcraft Claims,” 2022).

## Research Methods and Data Sources

The paucity of scholarly attention to intimate partner femicides in many African countries must be ascribed, in large part, to the dearth of reliable, dependable homicide data. In many African countries, criminological data are inconsistently collected, collated, and disseminated, and are, therefore, limited and not readily accessible for public dissemination or analysis by criminologists and other professionals. In Eswatini, for example, there is no publicly accessible database on homicide offenses. Therefore, for

this research, a media surveillance methodology was used to obtain the data upon which the current analysis is based. First, a search was conducted of the electronic database of the leading newspaper in the country, *Times of Swaziland*. The high reputation of the *Times of Swaziland* as a provider of independent, objective information on crime is established. News journalists of the paper go to crime scenes, interview secondary victims of the crime, neighbors, and investigating law enforcement officers. All these efforts culminate in the publication of extensive and reliable information about the crime. The following keywords and phrases were used in the search: “husband kills wife,” “man kills lover,” “man kills girlfriend,” “wife killed,” and “girlfriend killed.” The search covered the period 2009–2022. In all, the search yielded 6,137 results; 145 of these were about actual intimate partner femicides. All articles were printed and read by the author with relevant information culled.

Media reports on femicide in the *Times of Swaziland* typically contained the following information: (1) names of offenders and victims; (2) sociodemographic characteristics of victims and offenders, including age, marital status, employment status, number of children; (3) geographic location (town, village) of the crime; (4) physical location of the crime; (5) temporal aspects, including time of day, day of week, month and year; (6) method of offense perpetration, including weapons used; (7) circumstances and motives of the crime; (8) post-homicidal action taken by the perpetrator, including suicide; (9) hospitalizations or arrests. In addition, updates were given about the status of cases pending before the courts. For the current study, all available information on identified cases was extracted and put into an excel file. Then, 145 case summaries were prepared including information based on the nine variables above.

To ensure the completeness and accuracy of information on each of the identified cases in the study, case reports initially identified in the *Times of Swaziland*, were checked against information on the case found in an alternative competing daily newspaper, the *Eswatini Observer*. In the overwhelming majority of cases, case information ranged from similar to identical. In addition to reading case reports on intimate partner femicides and attempted femicides identified, I read letters to the editor, news editorials, readers' comments pertaining to femicide incidents, and special columns devoted to, or about intimate femicides in Eswatini.

Supplementary information on several of the femicide cases in the current study that proceeded to criminal trial was obtained from extensive review of trial judgements posted online. Such information was freely available at the Swazi Legal Information Institute (ESwatiniLII) at [www.eswatini.ii.org](http://www.eswatini.ii.org). Information in each case included evidence, exhibits, legal interpretations, summing up, and sentencing.

Information on Eswatini society was derived from various secondary sources, including extensive conversations conducted with two social scientists—a sociologist

and a psychologist, one female and one male, one of whom is an Eswatini national, both academicians with extensive teaching and research experience in Eswatini. These discussions provided insights about Eswatini society and information regarding traditional cultural beliefs and practices surrounding intimate partner violence. Country reports from various human rights and non-governmental organizations operating both within and outside Eswatini, as well as published research on a wide range of social phenomena (e.g., death penalty, corporal punishment, alcohol, and drug use) also provided background information on the society.

The last two decades, in particular, have seen a proliferation of studies using media surveillance methodology in the social sciences, including criminology (see for example, Adinkrah, 2014, 2021; Cavlak *et al.*, 2023; Richards *et al.*, 2014; Solinas-Saunders, 2022). The use of media surveillance methodology in criminological research is particularly essential and ideal in countries such as Eswatini where law enforcement data collection is inconsistent or limited.

## Results

The present study identified 145 cases of intimate partner femicides. Ten of the cases had 11 collateral murder victims. Perpetrator suicide occurred in 42 of the 145 cases. In all, there were 198 fatal casualties. It is highly improbable that the identified number of cases represents the total volume of cases that occurred during the period under study. In Eswatini, as elsewhere, some murders may have been staged to look like suicide, death from accidents, or death from illness or natural causes. It is also likely that not all cases of femicide were covered by the newspaper.

Intimate partner femicides create anguish for Eswatini citizens. People across the country, from ordinary citizens to government officials, remonstrated against the killings, asserting through letters to the press and representations made to government officials that they found the crimes deeply troubling and distressing. Public revulsion about the crimes and their dreadful impact on families, communities and society at large were frequently expressed in letters to the editor printed in local newspapers. In these letters, writers castigated offenders for their crimes and importuned their government to institute protective measures. In another set of letters, femicidal killers were described as morally repugnant individuals who needed to be incapacitated for the welfare of society.

## Victim-Offender Relationships

The study examined how assailants were related to their victims. While assailants killed wives, ex-wives, partners, girlfriends and ex-girlfriends, relationship status was not always clearly stated, and in some cases, were inconsistently reported in news stories.

For cases where the relationship status was clearly stated, 82 men killed wives and estranged wives while 61 offenders killed ex-wives, ex-girlfriends, and ex-partners.

### *Victim and Offender Social Characteristics*

The ages of 127 femicide victims were available in the case records. Victims ranged in age from 16 years to 66 years old, with a mean age of 32 years, a median age of 30 years old, with a standard deviation of 10 years. The ages of 103 out of the 145 offenders were available in media reports. According to these reports, offenders ranged in age from 18 years old to 75 years old with a mean age of 36 years and a standard deviation of 11.4 years. Femicide offenders were older than their victims in the overwhelming majority of cases. Age differentials ranged from 7 years to 32 years. In only 7 out of the 145 cases were the female victim older than her male assailant. In these cases, the mean age difference was 3.7 years.

Data on the characteristics of victims and offenders showed that homicidal assailants and victims shared similar socioeconomic characteristics. The majority of assailants and victims were of low socioeconomic status. The study looked at the types of employment held by victims and offenders at the time of the incident. Femicidal killers in case stories were identified as a senior police officer, business owner, army officer, senior police officer, taxi driver, university employee, correctional officer, warder, farmhand, football player, referee, pupil, farm supervisor, motor mechanic, pastor, herdsman, auto-rickshaw driver, petrol station attendant, traditional healer, security guard, sugarcane gatherer and laborer. Femicide victims included a vegetable seller, nurse, teacher, business owner, boxer, student, university graduate trainee, soldier, cleaner, employee of a photo studio, police officer, employee at a hair salon, and emergency medical technician trainee. Although victims and offenders were disproportionately of low income, in a few instances, the crime was committed by persons of higher socioeconomic background than the general population of offenders and victims.

Intimate partner femicide literature indicates that in the U.S., murder is a leading cause of death during pregnancy and the postpartum period, making pregnancy and the postpartum period times of elevated risk for homicide among all females of reproductive age. Dissimilarly, the current research on Eswatini found that there were only two reported instances where femicide victims were pregnant. Further, in a large number of the cases, the femicide was not the first violent assault on the victim. Rather, the lethal assault had been preceded by several incidents of nonlethal physical maltreatment and that the femicide climaxed a chronic pattern of abuse in the relationship.

### *Spatial Aspects of Femicides*

The current analysis identified the specific physical settings in which each homicidal incident occurred. The data showed that a large number of femicides took place in

the home where the couple shared a residence, followed in prevalence by the victim's home, including natal home. Other locations included, a public place (e.g. abandoned uncompleted building, along a path, a guest house or motel, and inside a car). Specifically, sixty-eight (46.9%) of the femicides occurred at or near the couple's shared dwelling; another 33 (22.8%) occurred at or in the vicinity of the victim's home; 12 (8.3%) occurred at the assailant's home or apartment; 17 (11.7%) incidents occurred at or near the victim's natal home where she was living following estrangement from the assailant; 9 (6.2%) incidents occurred at a public place; 2 (1.4%) occurred at a guest house or motel; information on the location of four cases was unavailable.

### Homicide Methods and Weapons Used

The study examined the homicide methods and weapons used for each incident. A wide variety of methods were used in completing the crimes. The data showed that the most common method of killing was stabbing with a knife (e.g., kitchen knife, table knife, "Rambo" knife, *okapi*), (54 or 37.2%), shooting with firearm (21 or 14.5%), beating with personal weapons (hands, fists, feet) (13 or 9%), hacking with machete (7 or 4.8%) hitting with blunt objects such as crowbar, knobkerrie, stick (4.1%); manual strangulation (7 or 4.8%). Other homicide methods included forcing the victim to ingest poison (e.g. weevil tablets or liquid poison), hitting with a brick, hacking with a spade, nailing a nail inside skull, banging head against wall, hitting head with iron rod, stabbing with a spear, knocking the victim down with a car, stabbing with a broken bottle or hacking with an axe. Some assailants used multiple methods to perpetrate the crime. To illustrate, in Case 45, the assailant stabbed the victim several times with a kitchen knife, then struck her multiple times on the head with a claw hammer. In Case 51, the assailant assaulted the victim with hands and fists before strangling her with her pantyhose.

### Post-Homicide Suicide Methods

The study also examined suicide methods for offenders who committed suicide following the femicide. Post-homicidal suicides were accomplished through a variety of means. The most common suicide method was hanging (13 of 42 or 31.0%). This was followed by shooting with a gun (9 of 42 or 21.4%), ingestion of weevil tablets (8 of 42 or 19.0%), self-stabbing (3 or 7.1%), ingestion of liquid herbicide (1 case), and self-immolation (1 case). Six (14.3%) suicide methods were unreported in the data.

### Collateral/Corollary Murder Victims

Ten (6.9%) of the 145 intimate partner femicide events involved the murder of collateral victims. In all, there were 11 collateral murder victims. In Case 6, the assailant ambushed his wife and her alleged paramour while the victims were allegedly sitting

in a car kissing. In Case 17, the assailant *set alight* the house in which his estranged wife and her 13-year-old daughter slept, killing both of them. Case 19 was a familicide with 2 collateral murder victims. The assailant killed his estranged wife and their two children aged 9 years and 7 years before killing himself. In Case 65, the assailant, who was estranged from his wife, poured petrol underneath her natal home where she and her mother were sleeping, killing the two. In Case 102, the assailant killed his 25-year-old girlfriend and her 26-year-old partner whom he allegedly caught in bed together.

### **Evidence of Overkill**

This study analyzed the amount of force used by perpetrators against victims. Looking at the methods of killing and the lethal violence inflicted on the bodies of the victims, it was easy to conclude that overkill was a regular feature in the overwhelming majority of the cases. Many cases revealed multiple shootings, stabbings, and slashings. In Case 1, the assailant stabbed the victim 23 times with a kitchen knife. In Case 4, the assailant used a machete to hack the victim to death. In Case 5, the assailant shot the victim 5 times with a firearm. In Case 8, the assailant “aggressively hit the woman repeatedly before reaching out for a bush knife which he used to hack her several times all over her body. The victim sustained serious injuries, mostly to the head and limbs. Some of her fingers are also said to have been chopped off during the vicious attack.” In Case 47, the assailant “used a pickaxe to gore the victim about 25 times, all over the body.” In Case 49, the assailant “brutally stabbed the victim over 20 times all over her body.” In Case 57, the 29-year-old man beat his 21-year-old wife to death with a knobkerrie all over her body. He then used a lit candle and burnt her body. In Case 83, a man stabbed his wife 15 times before cutting her throat. Case 103 was a witchcraft-related homicide. A 68-year-old polygynous man with three wives used a spade to lethally hack his 66-year-old second wife to death on allegation that she was a malevolent witch who had been bewitching him. The incident occurred in broad daylight and was witnessed by several of the victim’s children and grandchildren (“Man Butchers Wife on Witchcraft Claim,” 2013; *Rex v. Aaron Khopho Msibi* (347/20)).

### **Perpetrator Suicides**

The data show that 42 (29.0%) out of the 145 perpetrators of intimate partner femicide died by suicide at the scene of the crime, or shortly thereafter at another location. Suicides following femicides were committed by a wide variety of suicide means. The most common method was hanging, followed by ingestion of weevil tablets, shooting with a gun, self-immolation, and self-stabbing. All nine intimate partner femicide-suicide perpetrators who committed suicide via shooting had earlier committed femicide by shooting their victim.

### *Homicide Occurring in Full View of Children*

Several of the killings occurred in full view of children or other minors. In Case 2, a 50-year-old woman was killed by her 44-year-old estranged husband “execution style” “in full view of their minor children.” According to a media report on Case 4, the assailant used a machete to “hack his wife several times all over the body, inflicting wounds from which she is believed to have died.” The report further noted that “the spine-chilling incident happened in full view of the couple’s young children who were roaming around the yard when the incident happened.” In Case 22, the 40-year-old assailant fatally stabbed his 27-year-old partner in front of their four children while the victim and the children were having dinner. In Case 103, a 68-year-old man used a spade to hack his 66-year-old wife to death in the presence of their children and grandchildren. Judicial records covering the case acknowledged the “trauma suffered by [a] grandchild who witnessed the assault of his grandmother by his grandfather” (*Rex v Aaron Khopho Msibi*, 2020).

### **Motivational Circumstances**

The study examined the motives and circumstances that precipitated femicidal killings. Three key motives were dominant: (1) male sexual jealousy over the victim’s alleged sexual infidelity; (2) decision of the victim to terminate the relationship; and (3) quarrels, arguments, and conflicts of variable origin.

### **Male Sexual Jealousy and Suspicion of Infidelity**

Forty-one (28.3%) assailants had accused their wives, girlfriends, or partners of having other love interests and engaging in sexual relations outside their established relationship. In the typical scenario, an accusation was followed by a denial, renewed accusations, denials, and counteraccusations, until matters escalated with the assailant unleashing lethal violence on the victim. In Case 6, a 47-year-old male police officer fatally shot his 48-year-old wife, also a police officer, as well as her 51-year-old alleged partner with his service pistol. He alleged that he found the pair kissing in a parked vehicle near her male partner’s residence. In Case 9, the assailant said his wife was involved in a sexual relationship with another man. He said he killed her because “I did not want any man to have her. If I could not have her, she had to die.” In Case 24, a 30-year-old man lethally stabbed his girlfriend “several times all over the body before dumping her body in bushes located close to the banks of a river.” He claimed he caught the victim “on her way to meet another man.” In Case 48, the assailant picked a quarrel with the wife-victim over her failure to answer “numerous” calls from him while he was at work, alleging that her failure to answer was due to her being in the company

of another man. He “used his waist belt, fists, and kicks to assault the woman before he dragged her by her hair, bashed her head against the wall several times until she fell unconscious, bleeding profusely from the nostrils. After realizing that she was no longer responsive, he left the house.”

In Case 55, a 37-year-old man murdered his wife with whom he had two children. The pair had worked in the same workplace until he took an early retirement. The assailant reportedly learned from a friend that his wife was having an adulterous relationship with another coworker. He then plotted to kill her. On the day of the incident he arrived at her job under the pretext of paying her a visit. As the pair took a walk for about 118 meters from the worksite, the assailant drew a short spear tucked under his clothes and reportedly ordered the victim to say her last prayer, then lethally stabbed her three times in the neck, two times in the stomach, and twice in her back. The victim died on the spot.

### **If I Can't Have You, No One Can**

Thirty-four (23.4%) cases were associated with the victim's decision to terminate the relationship with the assailant. In Case 22, a 27-year-old woman who was living in a cohabiting relationship with the assailant in a neighboring country planned to end their relationship of eleven years that had produced four children. She had recently confided in relatives that her husband cheated on her repeatedly and had been beating her, resulting in several hospitalizations. She returned to Eswatini for a funeral and was staying with her sister who described her as “needing a place to hide from her violent and dangerous partner.” Unbeknownst to her, the assailant had pursued her to Eswatini. The night of the homicide, he broke into her sister's home and lethally stabbed her “about 20 times all over her body” with a knife.

Case 40 involved both male sexual jealousy and male proprietary behavior. A 29-year-old man attempted to kill his entire family because his wife, whom he claimed he had caught cheating with several men, decided to leave him. He claimed that he was unable to bear the thought of the wife leaving with their only child and planned to eliminate the duo and then commit suicide. He drank petrol and forced some down the throat of his wife but as he was attempting to force the liquid down the throat of their 18-month-old, his wife prevented him from doing so. The victim in Case 50 met the assailant at age 15 and remained with him for 14 years, bearing four children with him. At the time of the murder, the relationship had become estranged. She wanted an end to the relationship; the assailant objected. On the day of the killing, she was carrying their 3-year-old as she ran errands in the village community and was on her way home. The assailant ambushed her along the path and “stabbed her all over the body including her back and face.” He “inflicted over 10 wounds using a machete. The 3-year-old ran home to inform relatives about the attack on her mother.



### *Victim's Refusal of Sexual Intimacy*

Two femicides were triggered by a wife's refusal to have sexual intercourse with her husband. In case 67, the assailant attacked his 30-year-old conjugal partner for refusing to have sex with him due to tiredness. The assailant was enraged and in response, used a machete to inflict several deep injuries on the victim, all over her body, including her head. Convinced that the victim was deceased, he turned to her parents who had come out of their room to see the source of the commotion. The assailant used the same weapon to hack the hand of the victim's father, nearly severing it, then he used the same weapon to hit her mother's head, nearly killing her. The assailant immediately fled but returned the next day to set the victim's homestead alight before taking refuge in a neighboring country.

### *Marital Conflicts and Disputes*

Marital quarrels stemming from conflicts of varied origins served as precipitants for altercations that culminated in femicide. For example, women who arrived home late from appointments or events, such as visits to hair salons, funerals, or parties, raised the ire of husbands and boyfriends. In other cases, women who attended parties and funerals without the man's "permission" or attended over the husband's objections were at risk of lethal violence. Wives who were allegedly verbally abusive towards male partners were also at risk of battery and lethal violence. In Case 34, a marital quarrel evolved into a fatal assault when the husband claimed his wife called him *silima*, meaning "idiot." While husbands regularly accused wives and other female partners of infidelity, women who accused husbands of infidelity were at risk of being beaten and even killed. Wives who complained about husbands bringing new female partners into their home were also at risk of being physically abused and killed. Relatedly, women who complained about a husband's mistresses or children that the mistresses conceived with the husband were also killed. In Case 20, the assailant hired someone else to kill his wife. He had a child out of wedlock while married to the victim and claimed his wife was resentful of there being a child, repeatedly bringing up the existence of the child in family conversations. Then she allegedly started having extramarital affairs in revenge. He plotted the murder to eliminate her from his life.

In Case 25, a man went to his estranged wife's home and lethally shot her and nonlethally wounded her brother. He claimed his mother-in-law had earlier told him to leave her daughter alone because he was indigent and useless; she added that the family had found a wealthy man to marry the victim. In Case 41, the assailant spent the morning of Christmas Day with his wife and family. He left home in the afternoon where he engaged in a bout of heavy drinking with friends. When he returned home late that night, his infuriated wife delayed opening the door when he knocked to be let

in. After forcing his way in, he beat her to death. According to witnesses, “he assaulted her with fists and kicks in the head and several times on her body, resulting in her suffering severe injuries. Her nose was broken, and her skull appeared to have cracked.” In Case 66, the husband claimed he killed his wife because of her marital infidelity. Relatives of the victim repudiated his claims, insisting the killing was done for ritual purposes. They claimed the decomposing corpse of the victim, which the husband had hidden from the public, showed signs of body parts having been removed.

### **Criminal Justice Responses and Dispositional Outcomes**

The study examined the outcome or legal disposition of the cases. Femicide perpetrators who did not commit suicide were typically apprehended within hours of the reporting of the crime to the police, and criminal justice processing began immediately following arrest. However, a long delay occurred from arrest to trial. It was not unusual for a case to take longer than five years before court adjudication. In the interim, the defendant was released on bail pending trial. Some cases that were initially charged as murder were reduced in court to a lesser charge of culpable homicide. Of the cases that were adjudicated in court, no homicide assailant escaped legal punishment. Some cases were resolved by members of the public who took it upon themselves to visit instant justice on the perpetrator. To illustrate, in Case 98, the victim broke off a relationship with the assailant who refused to accept the end of the relationship and became a stalking scorned partner. One day he accosted her and stabbed her over 40 times, killing her. Witnesses horrified by the victim’s death fatally attacked him with all manner of lethal implements before the arrival of law enforcement personnel.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The preceding has presented a systematic analysis of intimate partner femicide in Eswatini. It adds to the body of literature on the subject of femicide in Africa. The data show that the central features of intimate partner femicides in Eswatini are consistent with the characteristics of intimate partner femicides in the extant literature: (1) lethal attacks on female partners were precipitated by the offenders’ suspicion that their female partners had been sexually unfaithful, or the victim unilaterally left or expressed an intent to leave the relationship; (2) a large proportion of the crimes, particularly femicide-suicides, evinced features of premeditation and prior planning; (3) a significant percentage of the assailants committed suicide at or near the scene of the crime; (4) elements of overkill, wherein the offender utilized extreme violence in the commission of the homicide, were routinely present in most cases.

The findings of the study have several public policy implications in efforts to reduce women’s lethal victimization at the hands of their male partners in Eswatini.

First, judicial officers must impose sufficiently deterrent sanctions to discourage intimate partner abuse. Second, there is the need for more resources for women who are victims of domestic violence. Eswatini recently established two shelters for battered women fleeing abusive relationships. While this is commendable, victims facing violent or threatening partners will need additional legal, social, and financial resources. For example, the provision of legal aid and stipends should be considered. The findings also revealed the prominent role of guns in femicide, suggesting that the appropriate authorities should take measures to control the proliferation of firearms as a significant number of perpetrators of femicide used unlicensed firearms to perpetrate the crime. A large body of research suggests that when gun availability is high in a society, gun violence also tends to be high (Cook & Moore, 1999). Apprehension, conviction, and incarceration of malefactors is warranted to stem the proliferation and unlawful use of such weapons. Finally, a cultural shift advocating for equitable treatment of men and women in the society will lead to a reduction of assaultive violence by men against women.

Data for this analysis were primarily taken from media sources. There is currently a shortage of law enforcement data on lethal violence in the society. Future research should use carefully collated law enforcement data, if available. This means that law enforcement authorities must be assiduous in the compilation of crime data as well as in publicly disseminating the data or, at a minimum, granting access to potential researchers investigating the topic. One limitation of this research was some missing data on the age of offenders and victims. Crime journalists may have placed high premium in covering the crime story and may have given secondary emphasis to certain sociodemographic characteristics of offenders and victims. Despite this limitation, the article has helped illuminate the nature, patterns, and contexts of intimate femicides in the society and suggested pathways for the reduction of this tragic but preventable crime. Future researchers should expand current understanding of the dynamics and etiology of intimate partner femicide in the society. Similarly, researchers should embark on similar studies in other low- and middle-income countries to illuminate understanding of intimate femicide in societies currently underrepresented in the literature on intimate partner femicide.

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