

Feminicidio and the Image of God

by Adriana Calzada Vázquez Vela

On September 15th, 2017, the body of Mara (19), who had been kidnapped a week earlier by a taxi driver, was found. This case of *feminicidio* deeply impacted Mexican society. Protests, conversations, and indignation were all apparent. However, for many the question was, “What was she doing hanging out with her friends at 5 a.m.?” “Why did she go out with only male friends?” or “She must have been drunk.” While the call to take care of oneself and to act cautiously, especially when the country is experiencing so much violence, is valid, it is clear that these kinds of comments blame her for her murder. We need to understand that women who are killed solely because they are women are victims of the system that makes them vulnerable. On November 15th, Archbishop Emeritus Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iñiguez commented that women are responsible because “they hop in a car with whoever and that is why they are killed.”¹ In 2003 he commented, “Women should not be provoking, that is why so many of them are raped.” Later on, social pressure made him take his words back.

Violence towards women is an everyday issue all around the world. For the past decades the statistics in Latin America have increased alarmingly. In Mexico, the case of Ciudad Juarez was widely known, but this is only a piece of the puzzle. After the city captured the attention of many, they discovered that Ciudad Juarez was only in sixth place in the incidence of gender-based killings in the country. As a result, academics and activists began a serious investigation of this issue.

In academic feminist literature, “male advantage exercised as power over women and disadvantaged males, is called *patriarchy*.”² When discussing patriarchy, it is very important to understand it from a systemic consideration. It is found in legal, economic, and political relations. Under patriarchy, women and children are considered inferior, and domination is legitimized. As women, we experience disadvantaged treatment from men. It is important to clarify that patriarchy is not exclusively exercised by men, as women can also act with this dominant mindset.

The concept of *femicide* was used by Diana Russell and Jill Radford to refer to the “killing of females by males because they are female.”³ Building on that concept, and after taking a deep look into the experience in Ciudad

1 Sandoval Iñiguez dice que hay más feminicidios en México por la ‘imprudencia de las mujeres.’ *Redacción/Sin Embargo*, November 17, 2017, <http://www.sinembargo.mx/17-11-2017/3353001>. He said this as he commented on an experiment done in Cd. Juarez where a man wearing fine clothes and driving a fancy car would invite women to approach, and they would do so.

2 Anne Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 18.

3 Diana Russell, “The Origin & Importance of the Term Femicide,” December 8, 2021, video, 22:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk9VNHYMOrE>.

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Juarez and other states in Mexico, Marcela Lagarde⁴ came to the concept *feminicidio*, suggesting that the translation *femicide* was insufficient because it did not point to the systemic factor prevailing in women killed by men.⁵

Feminicidio is rooted in political, economic, cultural, and social inequalities, including the equally significant power relations based on class, race, and sexual and racial hierarchies. Gender violence in its most extreme way is likely to be found when these inequalities are a reality.

As women, we experience authority from men in diverse areas. Feminists have enough evidence to affirm that men retaliate violently because women have violated traditional gender roles. Patriarchy and misogyny support this system of violence and death because the social structures tolerate impunity.

We find gender violence everywhere: on the street, in public transportation, in institutions, in the workplace, at home, in intimate relationships, in church, etc. I feel depressed and enraged every time I read in my Facebook feed how my female friends who use public transportation do not feel safe in their daily commute. Even though this violence is suffered in diverse places, it is important to keep in mind that in the majority of cases, the perpetrator of a *feminicidio* has a direct relationship with the woman, whether through employment, family, or in a romantic relationship.

When writing from a theological point of view, there is abundant literature that addresses domestic violence and *feminicidio* in terms of the suffering of women. A recurrent discourse found that, from a religious point of view, women are encouraged to accept whatever they are given because they are bound by the sacrament of marriage. Women are expected to accept all kinds of sacrifices in order to protect the best interests of their families, especially that of their children. Women must be able to ensure that their children will be provided with economic safety and the necessary conditions for a minimum standard of quality of life. Women are willing to resist the pain inflicted on them because they do whatever it takes to secure a future for their children. Furthermore, there is a strong belief that any kind of suffering ought to be welcomed based on the idea that Jesus welcomed suffering. In doing it, women are more like Jesus who carried his cross and went through what he did accompanied by his loving father God. The research then focuses on the problem of theodicy and on a better understanding of human suffering. However, I do not feel satisfied with this approach, and I am very interested in looking at the possibility of religion being one more factor that contributes to the problem. The question becomes more significant as I look at the problem in the Mexican context where, whether practicing or not, 82 percent of the population is considered Catholic and around 95 percent is Christian. What do we have to say about it from a theological perspective? I believe that it is important to examine the idea of God that leads to the problem. This is not to say that a particular image of God is the cause of the *feminicidios*, as that would reach a very misguided extreme. However, it be one more factor in society that serves to legitimize and perpetuate a system that allows this to happen.

Being able to name the divine is a human need. However, our human limits make it very difficult to express our understanding of the concept of God. Different expressions of God have been used through time, and the predominant image in the Christian tradition is an omnipotent male who dominates and controls. This concept of God promotes domination and subordination. Men are more easily identified with God because they can relate with *Him* in a more obvious way than many women who have not been nourished by a loving male and therefore lack a healthy image of masculinity. This association entails the risk of men feeling empowered by God *Himself*, to act in *His* likeness, as those who rule. After all, “if God is male, then male is God,” as Mary Daly affirms.⁶

4 Feminist anthropologist and politician who has been key in the research and visualization of this problem.

5 Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, ed., *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas* (Lexington, KY: Duke University Press, 2010), xv.

6 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

It is clear how this concept of a powerful God works in one non-relational direction, from a male God to humans and easily transferred from men to women. A radical exercise of a linear conception of power can be helpful to understand how in a society where women have consistently had access to more opportunities, either for economic or personal reasons, the perception is that they have been gaining more power. Some men can easily feel threatened by the empowerment of women and see their self-worth and power diminishing.

Under a patriarchal system, there is blindness to seeing that one large part of the society feels empowered to hurt, cause damage, possess, be aggressive, and kill “just because.” The way a particular image of God as a powerful and omnipotent male has influenced the understanding of power and how this symbol of God legitimizes and justifies the patriarchal system that supports gender violence demonstrates how using exclusive male imagery to name God can exclude and dehumanize women. The need to redefine the understanding of God’s power continues to be a priority for our theology. We should be mindful that feminists are not suggesting abandoning male images of God; rather, the goal is to provide us with a wider concept that can present God in a more complete way.

I feel hopeful as I read different authors who have explored the “power in relation” where God is conceived as a loving and generating one who, instead of being in control from a dominant sphere, empowers and liberates. When God’s power is relational and life-giving, it is difficult to keep responding from a subordination perspective. A new call to act in solidarity with God and with one another emerges.