



Femicide in the Balkans: An alarming situation

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Abstract: Balkan states must develop serious strategies to prevent violence against women and girls. Serbia and Albania witnessed 28 femicides by the end of August 2023. 24 in Serbia, the youngest victim just two years old, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina a man posted the killing of his ex-partner on Instagram. Most perpetrators were fathers, sons, partners or ex-partners and violence preceded most murders.

Gender-related killings (femicide) are the most brutal and extreme manifestation of a continuum of violence against women and girls which takes many interconnected and overlapping forms. In the [UN system](#) femicide is generally understood to involve intentional murder of women because they are women, but broader definitions include any killings of women or girls. Femicide is directed towards women based on their sex, gender and gender roles. It is primarily rooted in a culture dominated by gender discrimination, patriarchal structure and unequal power relations; a sense of ownership and superiority of men over women. Most femicides are committed by partners or ex-partners, the culmination of ongoing

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domestic abuse, threats, intimidation, sexual violence and/or situations where women have less power or fewer resources than their male partner, however, they also include killings by male family members.

A global issue: a regional crisis

A [study](#) by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Women published in 2022, shows that globally, an estimated 81,100 women and girls were killed intentionally in 2021, however, the overall annual rate of female homicides has remained largely unchanged over the past decade. Around 45,000 of those women and girls were killed by intimate partners or other family members. More than five women or girls are killed every hour by someone in their own family. Over half of the murdered women in the Western Balkans were killed by husbands or former husbands in their own home, while in the past ten years, more than [300 femicides](#) have occurred in Serbia. Many of the perpetrators also committed suicide.

Prevention through understanding

Due to lack of unified definition, legislative regulation and special registers it is believed that the actual number of victims is much higher. More research is required to better understand what is driving increased femicide in certain contexts, and what factors have influenced decreases in others in order to adopt adequate prevention [strategies](#).

Behind every femicide statistic is the story of an individual woman or girl who has been failed. We need the concerted action across society that will fulfil women's and girls' right to feel and to be safe, at home, on the streets, and everywhere. *Bahous*

[FemPlatz](#) and the Women's Research Center for Education and Communication from Serbia, started to develop a framework for understanding the characteristics, patterns and causes of femicide there, by analysing court decisions for gender based murders and attempted murders of women by men in the period 2015 - 2019, analysing perpetrator profiles, victim information, prior reports of violence, qualification of the criminal act and other aspects. The model, later replicated in Albania and Montenegro, provided deeper understanding of femicide and means to compare comprehensive and disaggregated data across the Western Balkans and produce national and regional advocacy actions to establish a femicide watch. Three women's organisations - the Center for Legal Civic Initiatives in Albania; Helpline for women and children victims of violence in Montenegro and FemPlatz in

Serbia - with the support of the [UN Women](#) regional programme, systematised the available data on femicide from all responsible courts, police departments, justice system and media monitoring, lobbying to put this issue on the political and public agenda. Their work was systematised into the [first regional report](#) on social and institutional response to femicide in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, published in March 2023, outlining a set of recommendations to prevent femicides in these countries, which included legislative changes, establishment of femicide watches and ongoing training of representatives of institutions responsible for addressing domestic violence and violence against women.

Some experts believe that recognising femicide as a separate criminal offence will highlight its misogynic nature, and provide access to more accurate data. This could contribute to timely identification of potential crimes and prevention, effective investigation and processing and enable adequate punishment of the perpetrators. According to the report, femicide is not a separate criminal offence in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia.

Femicide watch which represents a systematic collection of disaggregated data on femicide, enabling analysis of the collected data and proposal of preventive measures is one of the recommendations to prevent femicide. Systematic collection of data on the extent, structure and characteristics of femicide, as well as monitoring geographic trends over time is key for creation of successful public policies for prevention of femicide. Such a system should be centralised to [encompass](#) all responsible institutions for prevention of and protection from violence, including domestic violence; police, public prosecutors, courts, and social work centres.

In 2017 a [femicide watch](#) was established in Croatia within the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality as a multidisciplinary body which collects and analyses cases of murder of women. The police informs the Ombudsperson on every case of murder of a woman, with a short description and analysis of each case, including determination of the murder causes and motives. The Ombudsperson publishes yearly report on, inter alia, the work of this body and the statistics of the femicides committed in that year.

Establishment of femicide watches in each country should be a priority, however, due to the societal similarities of Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, establishment of a regional femicide watch could significantly contribute to data-based prevention of femicide.

Ongoing training and education on topics related to violence against women, gender-based violence and domestic violence is another measure which was suggested to significantly contribute to prevention of femicide. Sufficient human,

technical and financial resources to enforce and implement laws, policies, and procedures to prevent and prosecute femicide and other acts of gender-based violence is considered crucial.

In 2022 an [interactive map](#) was launched which displays and describes femicides committed since 2020 in Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. The information is collected from the media and the map represents a model of public, systematic and easily available data presentation for future femicide watch initiatives.

Measures must be taken!

In the period of 2020 – 2023, 139 cases have been registered on the interactive map in the three countries. In Serbia, by the end of August of 2023, an alarming 24 cases have been registered. This is just the number of reported cases in the media, the real number is unknown. In just four cases the violence was reported and according to [activists](#) the institutions failed to take the adequate measures which could have prevented the murder. Further, according to family and friends, violence preceded the murder in almost every case. Yet the authorities are failing to take serious steps to prevent violence and protect victims.

Women's organisations [addressed](#) the relevant institutions in Serbia in 2020 asking them to take all measures in their jurisdiction to prevent femicides in the country. In 2022 they also called on [parliamentary deputies](#) to take action in establishing femicide watch, envisaged in the [National Strategy](#) for Combating Gender-based Violence 2021-2025.. Furthermore, in April 2023 they sent a [letter](#) to the Ministry of Justice group working on amendments of the Criminal Code, suggesting incrimination of femicide as a separate criminal offence.

On 25 February 2023, feminist groups FemPlatz and [Zenska solidarnost](#) organised a [protest](#) in Belgrade with the message 'No one else - stop femicide', triggered by media reporting of the eighth femicide in two months, the victim a two-year girl. They demanded definition of femicide as a separate criminal offence, provision of maximum protection and support for women in violent situations, effective emergency measures and punishment of the perpetrators. Protestors also called for better risk assessment in situations where the abuser is armed and tighter gun controls, since one third of the femicides in Serbia were committed with firearms.



Photo Source: Slobodna Evropa. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-protiv-femicida-u-beogradu-nijedna-zena-vise/32287071.html>

On 18 May 2023, on the National Remembrance Day of the Women Victims to Violence, a [performance](#) in Belgrade was held, to once again raise awareness of the seriousness of the situation. Girls and women, each with a sign pinned to their chest with the name of a femicide victim in Serbia in 2023 stood in a square formation to symbolise a 'women's cemetery'.



Photo Source: N1. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/performans-protiv-femicida-da-su-nas-nadlezni-slusali-u-januaru-ili-ranije/>

Unfortunately - the numbers continue to grow - but the authorities are not taking any concrete measures. The Government of Serbia has adopted the National Strategy for Combating Gender-based Violence that stipulates the establishment of a control mechanism for monitoring and analysing femicide cases, however, it has still not been established. After [two mass killings](#), the authorities called upon all citizens to surrender their arms to the authorities.

The Albanian government expressed its [commitment](#) to provide information about the implementation of the femicide watch initiative to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, while Montenegro's [commitment](#) was included in a statement by the Country's Prime Minister to define femicide as a criminal act.

All of these countries have ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence ([Istanbul Convention](#)) which obliges the states to adopt and consistently implement legal and other measures to eliminate and prevent violence against women and domestic violence, and to prevent, prosecute and punish these acts. The main aim of the Convention is zero tolerance towards violence. This international obligation should give the states a push to address the issue of violence against women and to prevent femicide.

The roots of femicide lie in the culture dominated by patriarchal structure, gender discrimination, unequal power relations based on male domination, thus measures focused on transforming harmful social norms and engaging whole communities and societies to create zero tolerance for violence against women are crucial in their prevention. Femicide can and must be prevented! The authorities must take serious steps to protect women and girls from violence.