

REVIEW

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# Investigating causes of femicide in Egypt: review

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## Abstract

**Background** Femicide is a fundamental human rights violation that compromises one's life, liberty, and personal safety and impedes social and economic advancement. In recent years, Egypt has witnessed an alarming rise in the number of femicide cases. Unfortunately, there is limited data about the magnitude of this problem or factors contributing to the surge in femicide incidents. Consequently, this review aims to discuss the phenomenon of femicide in Egypt, provide an analysis of its causes, and propose possible solutions.

**Main body** Gender disparity, cultural and social norms, impunity, poverty, poor educational level, and insufficient aid services could be contributing factors to femicide in Egypt.

**Conclusion** Identifying the potential causes of femicide in Egypt is essential to prevent and reduce its incidence. So, comprehensive studies to understand the true scope of the problem and to monitor femicide trends in Egyptian society are highly recommended. Policymakers in Egypt should take actual steps to develop an effective action plan to combat femicide.

**Keywords** Femicide, Female deaths, Causes, Gender-based violence, Egypt

## Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global crisis that affects both developed and developing countries, conservative and liberal civilizations, and urban and rural regions (Kabylova 2021). According to the 2018 global prevalence estimates of violence against women by the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 30% (with an uncertainty interval of 26–34%) of women aged 15 years and older have encountered physical and/or sexual violence. This violence can be attributed to either a current or former husband, intimate male partner, or non-partner. These forms of violence, whether physical or sexual, occurred at least once during their

lifetimes (World Health Organization 2021). The fatal consequence of violence against women in many cases is the killing of a woman by a man, known as femicide (Sorrentino et al. 2020).

The term “femicide” was first presented by Diana Russell in 1976, during the first International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women to denote explicitly the killing of females by males solely based on their gender (Russell and Van de Ven 1976).

In the early 1990s, Marcela Lagarde, a Mexican anthropologist and feminist, used the Spanish word “feminicidio” to describe horrific crimes committed against the women of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Through her work, she attracted the attention of the world to femicide and made it a widely accepted term (Cecchi et al. 2022; Strevca 2022).

Frequently, only gender-related killings committed by an intimate partner or family member are classified as femicides. Nonetheless, gender-related-killings take place in a variety of contexts beyond the private sphere (UN Women 2023). The Vienna Declaration described different forms of femicide as follows: the killing of women as

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a result of violence by intimate partners; the misogynistic murder and torture of women; the murder of women and girls for “honor”; the deliberate killing of women and girls during armed conflict; dowry-related killings of women; murders of women and girls due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; the killing of aboriginal and indigenous women and girls because of their gender; female infanticide and gender-based sex selection foeticide; deaths related to genital mutilation; witchcraft allegations; and femicides related to gangs, organized crime, drug dealers, human trafficking, and the spread of small guns (United Nations 2013).

According to estimates by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 87,000 women were deliberately killed in 2017 worldwide. Fifty-eight percent of the killings were perpetrated by intimate partners or family members, with Asia representing the highest number (20,000), then Africa (19,000), the Americas (8000), and Europe (3000). However, Africa showed the highest rate of females killed by an intimate partner/family member (3.1 per 100,000 female population) and only an intimate partner (1.7 per 100,000 female population) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018).

This review aims to discuss the phenomenon of femicide in Egypt and provide an analysis of its causes, including gender disparity, cultural and social norms, the inadequacy of legal penalties, poverty, poor educational level, insufficient aid services, and the impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. It also proposes possible solutions for femicide prevention.

### **Femicide in Egypt**

Several incidents of women murdered by men have been reported over the past 2 years in Egypt. On 20<sup>th</sup> June 2022, a 21-year-old female student was stabbed to death in broad daylight in front of her university in Mansoura governorate (administrative division of the country), by her fellow male student because she had turned down his marriage proposal (Calhoun 2022). A few days later, the body of an Egyptian television presenter was discovered buried at a private residence outside of Cairo. She had suffered significant head trauma, and nitric acid had disfigured her face. Investigations showed that her husband, a State Council judge, had killed her due to marital troubles (Tabikha 2022a). On 10th August 2022, a 20-year-old female was killed by her male classmate after declining his marriage requests. He stabbed her 17 times with a knife in front of a building entrance in Al-Sharqia governorate (Hamad 2022). Moreover, due to rejecting a marriage proposal, a 19-year-old female was fatally shot in the back outside her family home in Menofia Governorate on 3rd September 2022 (Cheeseman 2022). Three incidences of femicide happened in

a single week of September 2023. Each case originated from a failed marriage or personal relationship in which males killed women after being rejected romantically (Mohnblatt 2023).

The 2021 annual report of the Edraak Foundation for Development and Equality’s observatory on GBV against women in Egypt revealed a significant increase in violent crimes (Edraak Foundation for Development and Equality 2020). In 2021, the observatory recorded 813 incidents, with a notable rise from the 415 incidents documented in 2020. Among these cases, 296 involved the murder of women and girls of various ages (El-Shai’s Contributors 2021).

A previous medicolegal study investigating female deaths in Egypt found that homicide was the most common manner of female death, which was usually committed by a husband or a family member after domestic disputes (Zaghloul and Megahed 2019). Similarly, Basyoni et al. 2024 reported that domestic disputes were the primary cause of female homicides, with spouses or other relatives being the primary perpetrators.

Femicide is the consequence of numerous, escalating, and ongoing acts of violence (Caicedo-Roa et al. 2020). Zaghloul and Megahed (2019) attributed the increase in female deaths in Egypt to the rise in domestic violence following weakness in family bonds caused by increased poverty and addiction. In addition, the growth of population size and the rapid inflation following the 2011 Egyptian revolution resulted in a sharp decline in socioeconomic conditions. Sara Kira, an Egyptian researcher and fighter for women’s rights, associated this rise in femicide cases with the absence of successful and adequate mechanisms to combat this increasing criminal behavior (Mohnblatt 2023).

### **Factors contributing to femicide**

Several factors could have contributed to the spike in femicide cases in Egypt in recent years, as presented in Table 1, including

- *Gender inequality and cultural and social norms*

Culture has a significant influence on individuals’ behaviors, including their tendency to violence. Several internal and external variables are believed to preserve cultural and social norms, such as the specific gender roles within a society. Cultures that promote the idea that men are socially and culturally superior to women are more likely to experience violence (Kouta et al. 2018). GBV is prevalent in many patriarchal cultures worldwide as a consequence of the power inequality that is skewed toward men (Millazo 2016).

**Table 1** Factors contributing to femicide in Egypt

Contributing factors	Apparent in
Gender inequality <sup>a</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labor force participation</li> <li>• Egyptian law</li> <li>• Educational attainment</li> <li>• Political participation</li> </ul>
Cultural and social norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The stigma of being unmarried or divorced</li> <li>• The stigma attached to reporting abusers to the police</li> <li>• The predominant support for male figures</li> <li>• The public's indifference to intervening in violent incidents</li> </ul>
Inadequacy of legal penalties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No specific definition for femicide in law, and it is not handled as a distinct crime category</li> <li>• The judicial system is severely lacking in legislation that punishes femicide and acts of gender-based violence</li> </ul>
Poverty and decrease in economic standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Femicide rates are higher in developing and underdeveloped countries</li> <li>• Poverty is a primary trigger of domestic abuse</li> </ul>
Low educational level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About 17.9% of Egyptians aged 10 and over were illiterate in 2021</li> </ul>
Limited assistance services and victims' awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of established emergency services</li> <li>• Lack of efficient reporting systems and referral networks to handle the situation</li> <li>• Unawareness of available services</li> </ul>
Impact of COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased incidence of violence against women during the pandemic in Egypt</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup> Egypt ranks 134<sup>th</sup> out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's (2023) Global Gender Gap Index

For a very long time, Egyptian society has been characterized by patriarchy. Egyptian men are raised believing that they hold the power and responsibility to protect and defend women and that women are accountable for preserving family honor. Subsequently, men's honor comes from controlling women's bodies, actions, and manners. This rigorous control is perpetuated through gender inequality, tied supervision, early marriage, and circumcision (Ahmed 2021).

Egypt possesses a varied and rich religious history; about 90% of Egyptians are Muslims, and around 10% are Coptic Christians. Additionally, there are smaller numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Mormons, and other recognized denominations (Gitnux 2023). Social science research generally indicates that religiosity or religious affiliation upholds patriarchal attitudes and gender inequality (Golriz and Miner 2021). Several studies indicated that Muslims are more likely to adhere to patriarchal attitudes compared to other religious groups (Fish 2002; Balamoune-Lutz 2007; Anyanwu 2016). Conversely, Schnabel (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of national gender equality measures among the four major religious groups in the world, namely Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and non-religious. He observed that the views of Muslims, Christians, and Hindus regarding gender equality are more similar than those of non-religion. Similarly, Seguino (2011) and Perales and Bouma (2019) found that religiosity, regardless of religion, predicts patriarchal and gender inequitable attitudes.

Egypt is ranked 134<sup>th</sup> out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's (2023) Global Gender Gap

Index, indicating high levels of gender inequality (World Economic Forum 2023).

Gender inequality is glaring for Egyptian women in the workplace; the labor force participation of females in 2022 was only 15.12% compared to 68.25% for males (Galal 2023a, b). Studies revealed that gender-based discrimination is predominant in the private than the public sector in terms of job opportunities, salaries, and career promotion, with increased incidence of workplace sexual harassment experiences in the private sector. Therefore, women are constrained to look only for particular types of jobs (Abhijit et al. 2019; Banerjee et al. 2015). We argue that male-female relationships may become less pliable and more brittle as a result of women's underemployment in male-dominated workplaces. Also, Women who struggle to obtain employment may be pressured to get married at a young age, which may pave the way to femicide.

Moreover, gender discrimination is apparent in Egyptian law. For example, the personal status law gave men the right to divorce without a reason or starting a lawsuit. Conversely, women who wish to file for divorce must demonstrate that they meet one of the legal requirements, including the husband's prolonged absence, polygamy, or the existence of harm. Demonstrating harm as one of the primary reasons to file for divorce places the interpretation of harm in the hands of judges, granting them complete discretion in this matter. In addition, it is the wife's responsibility to provide proof of such harm, and she needs the testimony of two persons who witnessed the husband's act. The fact that harm standards are not the same is another problem, and the court

could grant an exception to harm based on the wife's social standards (Ahmed 2021). Even when the legislature gave women the option to automatically terminate their marriage through a process known as khul' in 2000, this option came at the cost of relinquishing their financial rights (Bernard-Maugiron and Dupret 2008).

Regarding educational attainment, the latest data from the General Authority for Adult Education in 2022 indicated a notable difference in illiteracy rates between males and females. Illiteracy affects 19.9% of males across all governorates, while 29% of females are illiterate. Male education is traditionally more valued than female education, which contributes to the gender gap in illiteracy rates. Many impoverished families tend to marry off their daughters at a young age or enroll them into the labor force as domestic workers to get free of their financial responsibilities (Draya 2023).

Regarding political participation, women currently represent 27% of parliamentary seats, the highest ratio of women ever in Egypt's Parliament (So 2022). However, this does not match their representation in society.

The status of women in society is reflected also through their representation in the media. Media contributes to public desensitization to violence and even has the potential to reverse it. Women are stereotyped in the Egyptian film industry in various ways, primarily as the weaker, simple-minded, and "lesser" gender. Furthermore, the normalization of harassing women is another issue. In a culture that continuously acknowledges men as women's guardians in movies and other media, the inevitable outcome will be men controlling them up to the point of death (Shoaeib 2021).

Cultural and social norms play a significant role in fostering and perpetuating instances of violence against women in Egypt. The societal stigma associated with being unmarried or divorced, the stigma attached to reporting abusers to the police, the public's indifference towards intervening in violent incidents, the predominant support for male figures, and the lack of robust support from friends and family are a few examples (Wasef 2018). According to the EDHS conducted in 2005, most victims endure the abuse in silence, believing it is a normal part of life or feeling ashamed of being abused (El-Zanaty and Way 2006). Family loyalty, dignity, and reputation are highly valued in Arab culture. Additionally, it is inappropriate to disclose domestic violence; it is viewed as a type of family deception (El-Nimr et al. 2020).

The Vienna Declaration on Femicide (2013) highlights that culture and traditions cannot be used as an excuse for violating a woman's human rights, particularly her right to life and freedom from violence (United Nations 2013). In our point of view, femicide in Egypt is fueled by gender inequality and patriarchal

social norms. We believe that 'changing minds' is of utmost importance. Women must be actively involved in all spheres of society to achieve gender parity and truthful representation.

- *Inadequacy of legal penalties*

The United Nations defined impunity as "the impossibility, de jure or de facto, of bringing the perpetrators of violations to account—whether in criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceedings—since they are not subject to any inquiry that might lead to their being accused, arrested, tried and, if found guilty, sentenced to appropriate penalties, and to making reparations to their victims" (United Nations 2005).

In Egypt, femicide lacks a precise legal definition, and it is not delineated as a distinct category of crime within the legal framework. Law enforcement agencies, from the police to the courts, commonly dismiss instances of domestic violence, regarding them as private matters confined to the familial sphere, mainly when such incidents involve spouses. Preserving the "unity of the family" takes precedence for law enforcement authorities over the well-being of women. Furthermore, there is an absence of a systematic approach to addressing violent crimes against women with protective measures, as these cases are typically handled on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis (Ammar 2006; Tabikha 2022b).

Egyptian law has provided an escape route for individuals to evade the initial specified penalties when the crime occurs within the family context. According to Article 17 of the Penal Code, which serves as the governing provision for those convicted of honor crimes specifically and family murders in general, judges are authorized to diminish the severity of the punishment by one or two degrees if they deem the circumstances surrounding the crime and its execution warrant such a reduction (Edraak Foundation for Development and Equality 2020).

Also, Article 237 states that a husband would only be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor if he witnessed his wife engaging in an adulterous relationship and immediately killed her and her mate. This provision appears to permit husbands to put their wives to death if they commit adultery because they will have lenience or be excused from punishment (Equality Now 2021).

From our perspective, impunity is one of the main contributing factors to femicide. The lack of the rule of law encourages a variety of violent crimes against women, including murder, domestic abuse, rape, and sexual harassment.

- *Poverty and decrease in economic standards*

Femicide rates exhibit higher prevalence in developing and underdeveloped countries, while countries characterized by higher income levels and increased female labor force participation have lower femicide rates than other nations (Anavatan and Kayacan 2023). In a study conducted by Whittington et al. (2023) describing femicide trends between 2003 and 2014, it was observed that femicide rates decreased by 32% worldwide but increased by 26% in low- and middle-income countries. An estimated 24,771 women were killed in India between 2012 and 2015 as dowry deaths, and about 15–20 honor killings are reported in Jordan every year. The National Citizen Femicide Observatory reported that 2318 women have been murdered in Mexico over 9 years. All of these countries are low- or middle-income countries (Global Americans 2024). Thus, it is imperative to look into how macroeconomic factors affect femicide.

Poverty is a primary trigger, allowing an attacker to maintain power and control over a victim of domestic abuse. Survivors who possess resources enabling them to exit a relationship safely, secure affordable housing, and be able to take care of their children and themselves are more likely to extricate themselves from further instances of abuse. Conversely, women with limited to no income, particularly those with dependent children, often lack the financial resources to escape situations of domestic violence (Niess-May 2019).

Moreover, studies revealed that economically disadvantaged men, unable to achieve traditional markers of “masculinity” and “respect” through financially supporting their women, may adopt alternative forms of masculinity that uphold their power and control over women, even if that means resorting to violence (Fulu et al. 2013; Gibbs et al. 2014; Fleming et al. 2015). According to the WHO multi-country study on women’s health and domestic violence against women, the increased women’s experiences of IPV were found to be associated with lower socioeconomic status in all studied countries (Abramsky et al. 2011).

According to Amel Fahmy, managing director of the Tadwein Centre for Gender Studies, which compiles data on crimes against women, the current state of Egypt’s economy could be a contributor to the rise in attacks against women. Given the recent spike in prices, families are under much stress, which may lead to men becoming more aggressive toward the women in their lives (Tabikha 2022b).

- *Low educational level*

Education, income, and employment positions promote economic independence and protect women from domestic violence. Education is vital for women because

it gives them social empowerment, self-confidence, and the ability to employ information and resources for their well-being. Women are more prone than men to rationalize IPV, which may be due to men’s greater access to education and literacy rate (Álvarez-Garavito and Acosta González 2021).

Multiple studies have supported the association between low education levels and the prevalence of violence. Orellana et al. (2019) observed that victims with 7 years or less of education had 37% fewer femicides than those with 8 years or more. This finding highlights the empowerment of more educated women, as they are more likely to respond to psychological abuse, verbal and physical assault, and male possessiveness within an environment characterized by persistently unequal gender power relations. According to Tenkorang et al. (2013), women with higher levels of education are less prone to experiencing physical abuse compared to women with no educational background. The national GBV costing study in Egypt revealed that women’s perspectives were influenced by two factors: type of residence and level of education of women. Women in rural Upper Egypt (the southern portion of Egypt) and illiterate women showed the highest level of acceptance of violent attitudes/situations, which could be because education enhances autonomy as well as social and economic empowerment (Rowan et al. 2018; The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics et al. 2015). Wang (2016) contends, based on the literature, that education is the most essential aspect influencing people’s attitudes toward IPV.

The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics estimated that in 2021, 17.9% of Egyptians aged 10 and over were illiterate (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics 2022). The General Authority for Adult Education’s most recent data on illiteracy rates in the governorates of the Republic until 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022, in addition to dropout rates for individuals aged 15 years and above, indicates that the highest percentage of illiteracy is concentrated in the governorates of Upper Egypt. This trend is possibly attributed to higher poverty rates and a scarcity of educational institutions in these governorates (Draya 2023). Poor people cannot afford to send their children to private schools to receive a high-quality education. The public education system, on the other hand, widens the poverty disparity (Nassar and Biltagy 2017). Krueger and Malečková (2003) discussed the connection between education, poverty, and violence. They determined that poverty, low salaries, and a lack of education are the primary causes of crime.

A close association was observed between the rise in illiteracy and the prevalence of violence and crime in society. People’s education and culture boost their ability to deal with situations better and more consciously

while decreasing their criminal and aggressive tendencies (Draya 2023).

- *Limited assistance services and victims' awareness*

Despite the initiatives taken by the Egyptian government to combat violence against women, Egypt still lacks established emergency services, reporting systems, and referral networks to handle the situation. Hotlines and services within the current systems are ineffective outreach tools to reach women throughout Egypt and motivate them to get help. Shelter services are still limited. According to expert views, another crucial problem is that potential beneficiaries are not aware of these services enough, nor are they motivated to use them because of prevailing cultural norms that prevent most victims from reporting their crimes to the police and seeking much-needed assistance (Magdy and Zaki 2021; Rateb 2017).

- *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic was associated with a worldwide increase in violence against women (Magdy and Zaki 2021; Cantor et al. 2022). Several studies reported an increased incidence of violence against women during the pandemic in Egypt (Moawad et al. 2021; Tosson and Saudi 2021; Abu-Elenin et al. 2022; Elsaid et al. 2022).

The protective measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social isolation and curfew, rendered people more vulnerable to domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence (Magdy and Zaki 2021). The Egyptian Demographic Health Survey (EDHS) reports of 1995, 2005, and 2014 revealed that survivors or victims of domestic violence typically seek refuge in their families and social networks as the first support line. During the COVID-19 pandemic, family members avoided major social gatherings to protect one another, especially the elderly. Accordingly, the vulnerability of survivors and victims was complicated because they were imprisoned with their abusers and cut off from all sources of help (El-Zanaty et al. 1996, 2015; El-Zanaty and Way 2006). Furthermore, women often overburdened themselves by taking care of sick family members, caring for their children, and looking after the elderly, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflicts with the abuser (Marques et al. 2020; United Nations Population Found 2020). Additionally, the loss of jobs and income for both men and women, coupled with difficulties in accessing essential support services such as medical and mental health care, legal assistance, and socioeconomic support, have contributed to increased levels of domestic violence (Magdy and Zaki 2021).

## Recommendations

A crucial component of the WHO approach is encouraging governments to create National Action Plans (NAPs) to reduce particular forms of violence. The NAP adopted in Peru is cited as a best practice, which combines several agencies working toward femicide reduction and prosecuting the abusers, including emergency centers for women, a hotline for victims of violence, and the Specialized Police Squad for Prevention Against Domestic Violence. Besides, several countries have adopted NAPs intending to eliminate violence against women. Most of these NAPs were created in low- and middle-income countries, including Cambodia, Liberia, and Mozambique (United Nations 2012; Whittington et al. 2023). In addition, the WHO Global Status Report on Violence Prevention discussed the various anti-violence public health initiatives that member states have implemented as legislation, policy, interventions, and data collection. Some of these measures are targeting femicide and non-fatal violence against women (WHO 2014). These measures should be considered by Egyptian policymakers.

Regarding the Istanbul Convention (Action against violence against women and domestic violence, Istanbul Convention), recommendations could be made for Egypt to become a party to the Convention. The Convention emerged from the Council of Europe's work to monitor violence against women and girls, pinpoint gaps in legislation, and identify best practices, including a wide range of measures, ranging from awareness-raising and data collection to legal measures on criminalizing various forms of violence (European Parliament 2018).

## Conclusions

Femicide is a prominent violation of human rights that has attracted, up until now, very little attention and study in Egypt. It is essential to address the root causes of femicide in Egypt to prevent or reduce its incidence. Gender inequality, cultural and social norms, impunity, poverty and decrease in economic standards, low educational level, and limited assistance services and victims' awareness might serve as contributing factors to the surge of femicide cases in Egypt. Policymakers in Egypt should take the experiences of other countries into account to develop an effective action plan to combat femicide. Furthermore, comprehensive studies to understand the true scope of the problem and to track femicide trends in Egyptian society are essential to establish evidence-based interventions.

## Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EDHS	Egyptian Demographic Health Survey
GBV	Gender-based violence
NAPs	National Action Plans
IPV	Intimate partner violence
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WHO	World Health Organization

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