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National 'Observatory' to Focus on Violence Against Women, Femicide

Why do men kill women? Tracking cases of femicide to understand its causes and consequences is the goal of a new University of Guelph project that will be the first of its kind in Canada.

Although local agencies and organizations have long monitored these crimes, Canada has lacked a system for monitoring femicide rates and responses across the country, says U of G sociology professor Myrna Dawson (right).



The new Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability is an initiative of U of G's Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence, headed by Dawson.

Dawson said the observatory's creation follows a call for action from the UN's Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

Prof. Myrna Dawson

The project was unveiled today to coincide with the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence beginning Nov. 25, which is the UN's International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women. The UN has named femicide as the most significant form of violence against women worldwide.

On average, one woman or girl is killed every other day in Canada, Dawson said, adding that entrenched attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes underpin violence against women and girls and its consequences.

"Worldwide, there are discussions about the impunity of those who perpetuate these crimes," Dawson said. "But, with the exception of a few countries, we have little to no information on exactly what happens and this is largely the case in Canada."

Besides tracking femicide cases, the observatory will mobilize and share research, and analyze media reports and court cases to gauge societal messages and norms about femicide.

"It is known that social and criminal justice responses vary for some victims or perpetrators, depending on who they are or where they live; and it's important to systemically document these variations," Dawson said.

Researchers will work with an expert advisory panel with representatives from across the country and drawn from various groups.

Ongoing networks and collaborations will help create a more comprehensive picture of these crimes in Canada, Dawson said.

"I'm thrilled to learn about the momentous achievement of the launch of a Canadian Femicide Observatory," said Diana Russell, an internationally-known activist and expert in the topic of violence against women.

She first used the term "femicide" at the International Tribunal of Crimes Against Women in Belgium in 1976.

U of G's new observatory will go live Dec. 6, Canada's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

Background

The Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence (CSSLRV), University of Guelph, announced today the establishment of a national femicide observatory with an emphasis on justice and accountability. The announcement coincides with the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence which begins tomorrow (November 25).

The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability will officially launch on December 6, 2017, Canada's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. The Observatory website will go live that day.

CSSLRV Director, Dr. Myrna Dawson, who is leading the initiative, says the Observatory's goals will be to count and track cases of femicide across the country, to mobilize and share research on femicide and current responses, and to examine the availability of prevention resources and initiatives targeting violence against women across Canada.

According to official statistics, on average, one woman or girl is killed every second day in Canada.

"Some agencies and organizations have been monitoring the killings of women for a long time such as Silent Witness projects, but not in all provinces and territories," Dawson says. "Currently, though, there is no central repository or mechanism for systematically pulling this information together to help better understand variations in femicide and our responses, or lack of responses, across the country."

The initiative is being launched in response to the call for action from the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences asking for countries to establish a femicide watch or observatory to collect, analyze and review data on femicide and to report annually on November 25. The call reflects increasing attention to femicide, its impacts on women's equality and human rights, and its differential impacts for specific groups of women.

Internationally, Dawson says, a key concern is the impunity of many perpetrators, often resulting from the lack of action or inadequate responses by state actors. "Worldwide, there are discussions about the impunity of those who perpetrate these crimes but, with the exception of a few countries, we have little to no information on exactly what happens and this is largely the case in Canada."

The Observatory will bring a national, systematic focus on femicide, and as suggested in the UN call, an expert advisory panel with representation from across the country and for various populations will help direct the activities of the observatory, explained Dawson, who is also a Canada Research Chair in Public Policy in Criminal Justice.

With the current and ongoing development of networks and collaborations, it is the hope that a more comprehensive picture of femicide in Canada will emerge, she says.

The term 'femicide' was made visible in 1976 by Diana Russell, a violence against women feminist pioneer, expert and activist. She used the term at the International Tribunal of Crimes Against Women in Belgium that year to bring attention to violence and discrimination against women.

Responding to the announcement of the Canadian Femicide Observatory, Russell said, "As the person who started disseminating the term 'femicide' way back in 1976 and who continued to do so during the following decades, culminating in the United Nations naming femicide as the most significant form of violence against women in the world, I'm thrilled to learn about the momentous achievement of the launch of a Canadian Femicide Observatory."

Some women more marginalized

A priority focus is the way in which some women, or groups of women, continue to be marginalized, increasing their vulnerability to femicide, Dawson says. "It is known that social and criminal justice responses vary for some victims or perpetrators, depending on who they are or where they live; it is important to systematically document these variations," she adds.

The Observatory will examine what Dawson describes as the 'geography of justice' which refers to variations in access to justice for victims depending on where they are killed. "We know that change has not been experienced equitably across all groups of women or across the country so understanding what groups have been impacted, where and why is integral to ensuring consistency in access to justice for all Canadian women and girls."

For example, Claudette Dumont-Smith, a member of the expert panel, says "In Canada, inadequate responses as well as historical and current impacts of colonization have been identified as contributors to the high femicide risk faced by Indigenous women and girls."

The role of the criminal justice system and the media in stereotyping and devaluing indigenous women's and girls' experiences of violence has been highlighted in the recently-released interim report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, adds Dumont-Smith, who is also a CSSLRV Research Associate.

A focus on media and courts

The media and the courts represent the most transparent sites for examination, Dawson says, and the most visible representation of dominant attitudes and beliefs held by society's members.

Because of this, the Observatory's initial research will focus on the media and the criminal justice system to better understand the presence of societal messages and norms about femicide. "It is recognized that entrenched attitudes, beliefs, and resulting stereotypes about violence against women perpetuate and maintain practices that are harmful to women and girls," Dawson says.

Dr. Yasmin Jiwani, also a member of the expert panel, says, "Media coverage is public by definition, and can raise the visibility of important issues, shape everyday understandings, facilitate dialogue, and serve as catalysts for change." Jiwani is a Concordia University Research Chair in Intersectionality, Violence and Resistance.

"Media coverage of femicides has helped increase public awareness," she adds. "But this new initiative will enable journalists to reduce the stereotypes that usually emerge in reporting the murders of women." Similarly, Dawson says, court decisions are also often public and symbolic, serving as a barometer of sorts about how serious certain acts are perceived in society and what should be done to address them, if anything.

In the past several decades, transformations have occurred in legal and policy arenas, including the 1996 sentencing amendments that stipulate intimacy – when the victim is a spouse or child – must be considered an aggravating factor at sentencing, Dawson says. These are positive steps, she adds, because those who impose the law must recognize the seriousness of violence before society can effectively respond, but the impact of this amendment remains largely unknown.

For example, women are most often in the greatest danger from male partners, but Dawson's Ontario-focused research spanning four decades demonstrates that women killed by male partners – referred to as intimate femicide – seem to have less access to justice than women killed by strangers. Similar to US findings, she describes this as the 'intimacy discount' that stems, in part, from unsubstantiated stereotypes which portray these acts as primarily 'crimes of passion.'

Expert panel member Tracy Porteous says, "Misinformation and negative stereotypes about women and girls are risk factors that contribute to increased violence and femicide." Porteous, who is the Executive Director of the Ending Violence Association of BC, adds that, "Only when we confront biases, and the societal silence that surrounds violence against women, will we begin to improve prevention efforts and increase access to support and safety for survivors."