

50 Years *of* Ms.

The Best of the
Pathfinding Magazine
That Ignited a Revolution

Edited and with commentary by
Katherine Spillar and the editors of *Ms.*

Foreword by Gloria Steinem

She

BY **ADRIENNE RICH** • JULY/AUGUST 1990

goes through what must be gone through:
that catalogue she is pitching out
mildew spores velvet between the tiles
soft hairs, nests, webs
in corners, edges of basins, in the teeth
of her very comb. All that rots and rusts
in a night, a century.
Balances memory, training, sits in her chair
comb in hand, breathing the smell of her own hair
and thinks: *I have been the weir
where disintegration stopped.*
Lifts her brush once like a thrown thing
lays it down at her side like a stockpiled weapon,
crushes out the light. Elsewhere
dust chokes the filters, dead leaves rasp in the grate.
Clogged, the fine nets bulge
but she is not there.

“Femicide”: Speaking the **Unspeakable**

BY **JANE CAPUTI** AND
DIANA E. H. RUSSELL • SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1990

THE CANADIAN NOVELIST Margaret Atwood once asked a male friend why men feel threatened by women. He replied, “They are afraid women will laugh at them.” She then asked a group of women why they feel threatened by men. They answered, “We’re afraid of being killed.”

However disproportionate, these fears are profoundly linked, as was demonstrated on December 6, 1989, at the University of Montreal. That day, the twenty-five-year-old combat-video aficionado Marc Lépine suited up for war and rushed the school of engineering. In one classroom, he

separated the women from the men, ordered the men out, and, shouting, "You're all fucking feminists," opened fire on the women. During a half-hour rampage, he killed fourteen young women, wounded nine other women and four men, then turned the gun on himself. A three-page suicide note blamed all his failures on women, whom he felt had scorned him. Also found was a list of fifteen prominent Canadian women.

"Whether individual hate killers are demented is beside the point."

Unable to complete an application to the school of engineering, Lépine felt humiliated by women he defined as "feminists" because they had entered traditional male territory. His response to the erosion of white male exclusivity was a lethal one. It was also an eminently political one.

In the massacre's aftermath, media reports regularly denied the political nature of the crimes, citing such comments as the Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler's: "It was the act of an absolutely demented man [which does not] lend itself to any explanation." This despite Lépine's clear explanation of his actions. *Whether individual hate killers are demented is beside the point.* In a racist and sexist society, psychotics as well as the so-called normal frequently act out the ubiquitous racist and misogynist attitudes they repeatedly see legitimized.

Lépine's murders were hate crimes targeting victims by gender, not race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. When racist murders—lynchings and pogroms—occur, no one wonders whether individual perpetrators are crazy or have had bad personal experiences with African Americans and Jews. Most people understand that lynchings and pogroms are motivated by political objectives: preserving white and gentile supremacy. Similarly, the aim of violence against women—conscious or not—is to preserve male supremacy.

Early feminist analysis of rape exposed the myths that it is a crime of frustrated attraction, victim provocation, or uncontrollable biological urges, perpetrated only by an aberrant fringe. Rather, rape is a direct expression of sexual politics, an assertion of masculinist norms, and a form of terrorism that preserves the gender status quo.

Like rape, the murders of women by husbands, lovers, fathers, acquaintances, and strangers are not the products of some inexplicable deviance. Murder is simply the most extreme form of sexist terrorism. A new word is needed to reflect this political understanding. We think "femicide" best describes the murders of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women. Femicide includes mutilation murder, rape murder, battery that escalates into murder; historical immolation of witches in Europe; historical and contemporary immolation of brides and widows in India; and "honor crimes" in some Latin and Middle

Eastern countries, where women believed to have lost their virginity sometimes are killed by male relatives.

The misogyny motivating violence against women also distorts press coverage of such crimes. Rape, femicide, and battery are variously ignored or sensationalized in the media, depending on the victim's race, class, and "attractiveness." Police, media, and public response to crimes against women of color, poor women, lesbian women, women working as prostitutes, and drug users is particularly abysmal—usually apathy laced with pejorative stereotyping and victim blaming. Moreover, public interest is disproportionately focused on cases involving nonwhite assailants and white middle-class victims, such as the uproar over the 1989 Boston murder of Carol Stuart, a pregnant white woman who, her husband falsely claimed, was shot by a Black robber. (She had been murdered by her affluent white husband.)

Femicide is the ultimate end of a continuum of terror that includes rape, torture, mutilation, sexual slavery (particularly in prostitution), incestuous and extrafamilial child sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, sexual harassment, genital mutilations (clitoridectomies, infibulations), unnecessary gynecological operations (gratuitous hysterectomies), forced heterosexuality, forced sterilization, forced motherhood (criminalizing contraception and abortion), psychosurgery, abusive medical experimentation (for example, some efforts to create new reproductive technologies), denial of protein to women in some cultures, cosmetic surgery, and other mutilations in the name of beautification. Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides.

Federal statistics do not reveal the scope of violence against women. Surveys by independent researchers show rates of female victimization that should shatter us all. For example, in Diana Russell's random sample survey of 930 San Francisco women, 44 percent reported being victimized by rape or attempted rape, 38 percent by child sexual abuse, 16 percent by incestuous abuse, 14 percent by wife rape, and 21 percent by marital violence.

As with rape and child sexual abuse, femicide is most likely to be perpetrated by a male family member, friend, or acquaintance. Ironically, the patriarchy's ideal domestic arrangement (heterosexual coupling) is the most potentially femicidal situation. Husbands (including common-law) account for 33 percent of all women murdered between 1976 and 1987 in the United States.

Violent crimes against women have escalated in recent decades. Some believe this increase is due to women reporting them more. But Russell's research on (largely unreported) rape, for example, establishes a dramatic escalation during the last fifty years.

We see this escalation of violence against females as part of a male back-

lash against feminism. This doesn't mean it's the *fault* of feminism: patriarchal culture terrorizes women whether we fight back or not. Still, when male supremacy is challenged, that terror is intensified.

A sense of entitlement is a major cause of sexist terrorism. Many males believe they have a right to get what they want from females. Consider the hatred exhibited in response to a trivial challenge to male dominance: female students at the University of Iowa complained about the loud stereos of male students on the floor above. A response in graffiti titled "The Top 10 Things to Do to the Bitches Below" was found in the men's bathroom and then published in the university newspaper, including exhortations to beat the women "into a bloody pulp with a sledgehammer and laugh" and instructions on "how to mutilate female genitalia with an electric trimmer, pliers, and a 'red-hot soldering iron.'" Similarly, the suggestion was made in the University of Toronto engineering students' newspaper that women "cut off their breasts if they were sick of sexual harassment."

To see where these students get such gruesome ideas, we need only look to pornography and mass-media "gorenography." An FBI study of thirty-six sex serial killers found that pornography was ranked highest of many sexual interests by an astonishing 81 percent. Such notorious killers as Edmund Kemper (the "Coed Killer"), Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam"), and Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono (the "Hillside Stranglers") were all heavy pornography consumers. Bundy maintained that pornography "had an impact on me that was just so central to the development of the behavior that I engaged in." His assessment is consistent with testimony from many other sex offenders, as well as research on the effects of pornography.

Femicidal atrocity is everywhere normalized, explained as "joking," and rendered into standard fantasy fare, from comic books through Nobel Prize-winning literature, box-office smashes through snuff films. Meanwhile, the FBI terms sex killings "recreational murder."

Just as many people denied the reality of the Nazi Holocaust, most people refuse to recognize the gynocidal period in which women are living—and dying—today. If all femicides were recognized as such and accurately counted, if the massive incidence of nonlethal sexual assaults against women and girls was taken into account, if incest and battery were recognized as torture (frequently prolonged over years), if the patriarchal home were seen as the inescapable prison it so frequently becomes, if pornography and gorenography were recognized as hate literature, then this culture might have to acknowledge that we live in the midst of a reign of sexist terror comparable in magnitude, intensity, and intent to the persecution, torture, and annihilation of women as witches from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century in Europe.

It is unspeakably painful for most women to think about men's violence against us, as individuals and collectively, because the violence we encounter, as well as the disbelief and contempt with which we are met when we do speak out, is often so traumatic and life threatening that many of us engage in denial or repression of our experiences.

The recollection and acknowledgment of history/experience that has been so profoundly repressed is what Toni Morrison in her masterpiece *Beloved* calls "rememory." In an interview, Morrison noted that there is virtually no remembrance—no lore, songs, or dances—of the African people who died in the Middle Passage: "I suspect . . . it was not possible to survive on certain levels and dwell on it. . . . There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but . . . in a manner in which the memory is not destructive." Morrison's concept of rememory is crucial as well for all women grappling with the torment of living in a femicidal world. We too must be able to face horror in ways that do not destroy but save us.

Progressive people rightly favor an international boycott of South Africa so long as apartheid reigns; why do they/we so rarely consider the potential efficacy of boycotting violent and abusive men and *their* culture? In 1590, Iroquois women gathered in Seneca to demand the cessation of war among the nations. We must now demand an end to the global patriarchal war on women. The femicidal culture is one in which the male is worshipped. This worship is obtained through tyranny, subtle and overt, over our bruised minds, our battered and dead bodies, our co-optation into supporting even batterers, rapists, and killers.

DIANA RUSSELL, who popularized the term "femicide," died on July 28, 2020, at the age of eighty-one. According to her obituary, Dr. Russell first used the word "femicide" publicly in 1976 at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels, attended by two thousand women from forty countries. Her early definition—the killing of females by males because they are female—evolved over time to cover a range of calculated acts of violence, including setting a wife on fire for having too small a dowry, death as a result of genital mutilation, and the murder of prostitutes, as well as indirect forms of killing, such as deaths that result from barring women from using contraception or obtaining an abortion.