

## A Gendered Analysis of Violent Deaths

Does the risk of violent death differ for men and women in conflict and non-conflict settings, and across regions and countries? Does it change over the course of a person's life? And are women targeted *because* they are women? In other words, is such violence gender-based?

Through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community has committed to reducing all forms of violence and related deaths (Target 16.1), and to eliminating violence against women and girls (Target 5.2). It has also undertaken to ensure the safety of public spaces (Target 11.7) (UNGA, 2015). Achieving these targets requires a detailed mapping of patterns and risk factors for lethal violence. The collection and analysis of data related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is still in its infancy, but some broad trends and patterns can be identified nevertheless.

This Research Note is the third in a series that presents the latest information from the Small Arms Survey's database on violent deaths (Small Arms Survey, n.d.; see Box 1). The first Note in the series examines broad trends in lethal violence, noting that while the global homicide rate has decreased slowly but steadily since 2004, conflict deaths have almost tripled in recent years, constituting 17 per cent of all the violent deaths in 2010–15 (Widmer and Pavesi, 2016a). The second report analyses the use of firearms as instruments of violence (Widmer and Pavesi, 2016b), while this third instalment in the series analyses available information on violent deaths, disaggregated by sex. It finds that:

- Globally, men and boys accounted for 84 per cent of the people who died violently in 2010–15; on average during that period, 64,000 women and girls—the remaining 16 per cent—were killed violently every year.
- The subregions with the highest violent death rates for women include Central America, the Caribbean, and South America.
- In subregions with low overall violent death rates, such as Western Europe, Eastern Asia, and Australia/New Zealand, the proportion of women who die violently is often above the global average.
- In the Afghan and Syrian conflicts, the proportion of women killed has been steadily

increasing at least since sex-disaggregated data became available.

- In industrialized countries, the general decrease in homicide rates entailed a decline in the killing of women, but rates of domestic and intimate partner violence have proven particularly difficult to reduce.
- In 2015 or the latest year for which data is available, as many or more women than men suffered violent deaths in eight countries characterized by high income and low violence levels: Austria, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

### Global and regional trends and patterns, 2010–15

Between 2010 and 2015, an estimated 16 per cent of the people who died violently were women and girls, representing an average of 64,000 victims per year (Small Arms Survey, n.d.). Men and boys thus continue to represent

#### Box 1 Methodology

'Violent deaths' is a composite indicator combining data on lethal violence in conflict and non-conflict settings. This Research Note does not consider suicide, unintentional violence, or killings resulting from legal interventions.

The Small Arms Survey collates data from a broad variety of sources into a unique database on violent death. Direct conflict deaths are tracked for 36 countries and territories that are experiencing or have experienced armed conflict since 2004. Sex-disaggregated data on conflict deaths is most comprehensive for Afghanistan (since 2009) and Syria (since 2011).

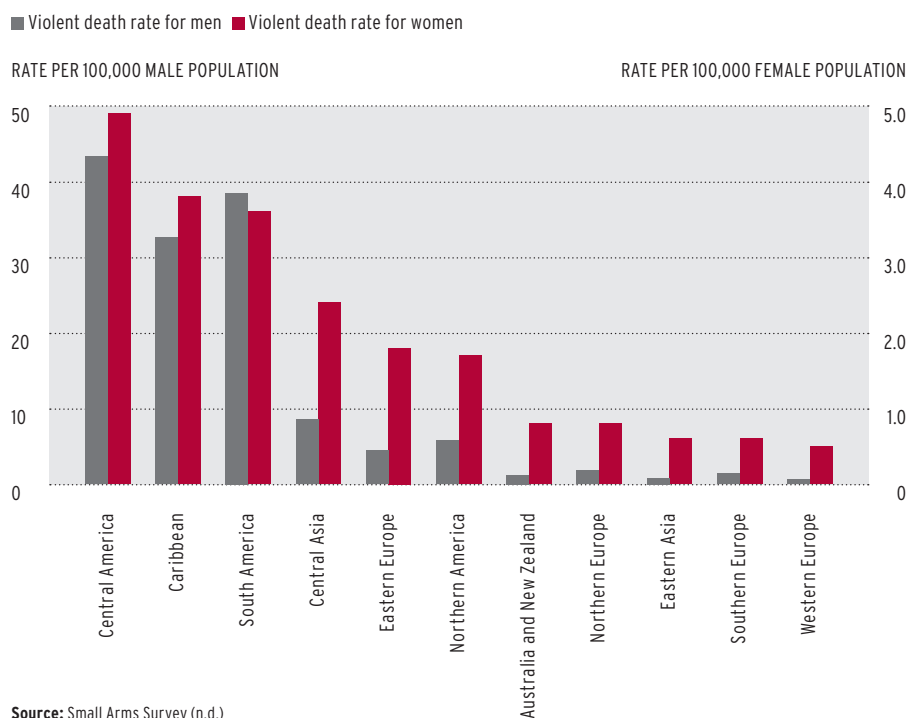
Non-conflict violent deaths are monitored in 221 countries and territories. For 64 of them, half of which are in Africa, only rough estimates are available. For each of the remaining 157 countries and territories, a single source of information on violent deaths was selected on the basis of the following criteria: length of the time series, clarity, consistency, and accessibility.<sup>1</sup> The database now includes sex-disaggregated data for 103 countries, up from 69 for the period 2007–12. Cross-country comparisons of data on violent deaths, including sex-disaggregated data, should be made with caution as the sources may apply differing methodologies.

Information drawn from the Small Arms Survey's database on violent deaths—including violent death rates for 2004–15 and disaggregated averages for 2010–15—is accessible online at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/tools/interactive-map-charts-on-armed-violence.html>.<sup>2</sup>

the vast majority of people who are killed worldwide: 84 per cent. This female–male ratio has been fairly stable over the last decade; overall, the 8 per

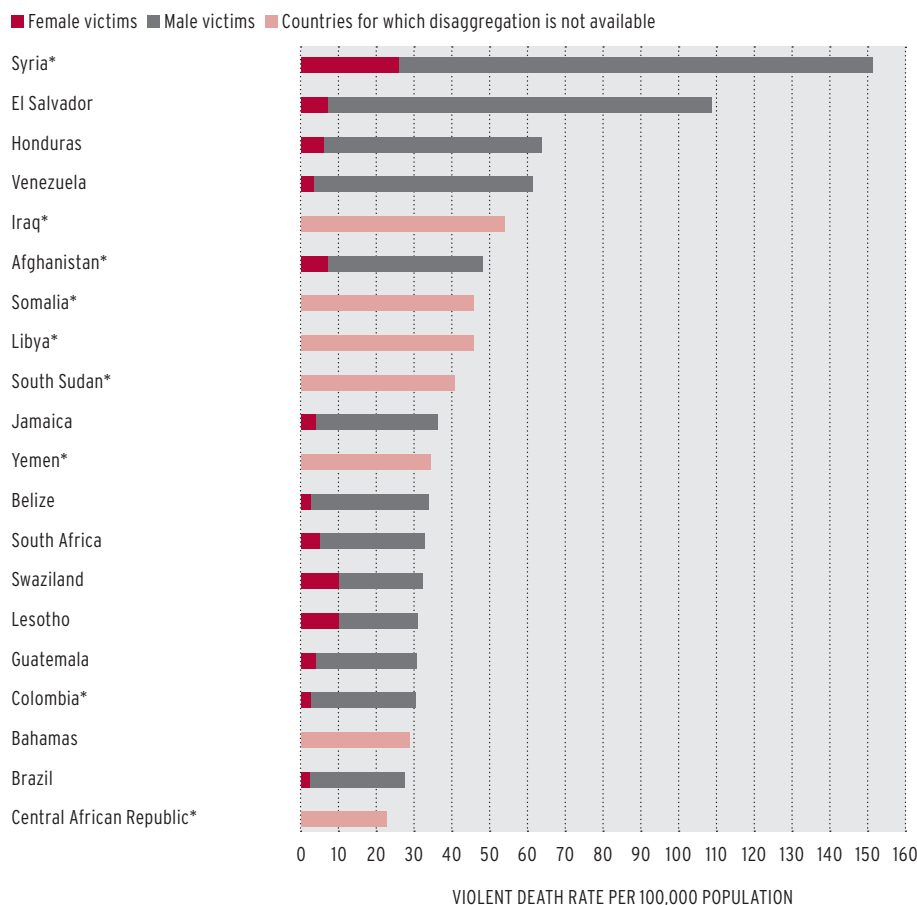
cent global decrease in intentional homicides since 2004 has corresponded with similar declines in the killing of women and men (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 Average violent death rates by sex, selected subregions, 2010–15



Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

Figure 2 Proportion of victims by sex in countries with violent death rates exceeding 20 per 100,000 population, 2015 or latest available year



Note: \* Countries with an active armed conflict during the period under review.

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

The ratio varies across subregions, however. Figure 1 presents violent death rates among men and women in selected subregions where sex-disaggregated data is available for more than one country.<sup>4</sup> As is the case for overall violent death rates, the disaggregated rates are highest for both men and women in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America, with some variation (Widmer and Pavesi, 2016a, p. 4).

In an examination of the proportion of male to female victims across subregions, Western Europe, Eastern Asia, and Australia/New Zealand stand out. In these subregions, women and girls account for an unusually high proportion—45–48 per cent—of people who were killed in 2010–15. In fact, the subregions with the highest violent death rates among the overall population have below-average proportions of female victims, whereas subregions with low overall violent death rates sometimes have relatively high proportions of female victims.<sup>5</sup>

## Country-specific risks

Figure 2 illustrates available sex-disaggregated violent death rates in the countries that registered rates above 20 per 100,000 population in 2015, or in the latest year for which data is available. No disaggregated data is available for seven of these countries, six of which were affected by armed conflict during the period under review.

In all of these countries, men and boys were the primary victims of lethal violence—by a considerable margin. Yet the countries with the highest violent death rates for men and boys also tended to be the ones where the violent death rates for women and girls were highest. In 2015 (or the latest year available), the rates for women and girls were highest in Syria (25.7 female victims per 100,000 population), Lesotho (9.9), El Salvador (9.4), Afghanistan (6.9), and Honduras (6.0). In absolute terms, however, the greatest number of women and girls lost their lives in countries with large populations, such as India (9,200), Brazil (4,700), the United States (2,700), and South Africa (2,400) (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

## Conflict deaths

Sex-disaggregated data on civilian deaths directly related to conflict in Afghanistan and Syria shows that

in both countries, the proportion of female deaths has increased over time.

Statistics collated by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which have been

disaggregated by sex since 2009, reveal that the total number of civilian deaths increased by 47 per cent between 2009 and 2015, while the share of female victims rose by 70 per cent during that

period, reaching almost 10 per cent of overall civilian deaths in 2015 (see Figure 3). The primary cause of violent death for women in Afghanistan appears to be ground engagement, followed by improvised explosive devices as well as complex and suicide attacks;<sup>6</sup> it is important to note, however, that UNAMA does not provide sex-disaggregated data on targeted killings, the second most lethal method of warfare overall (UNAMA, 2016, pp. 14–15, 44).

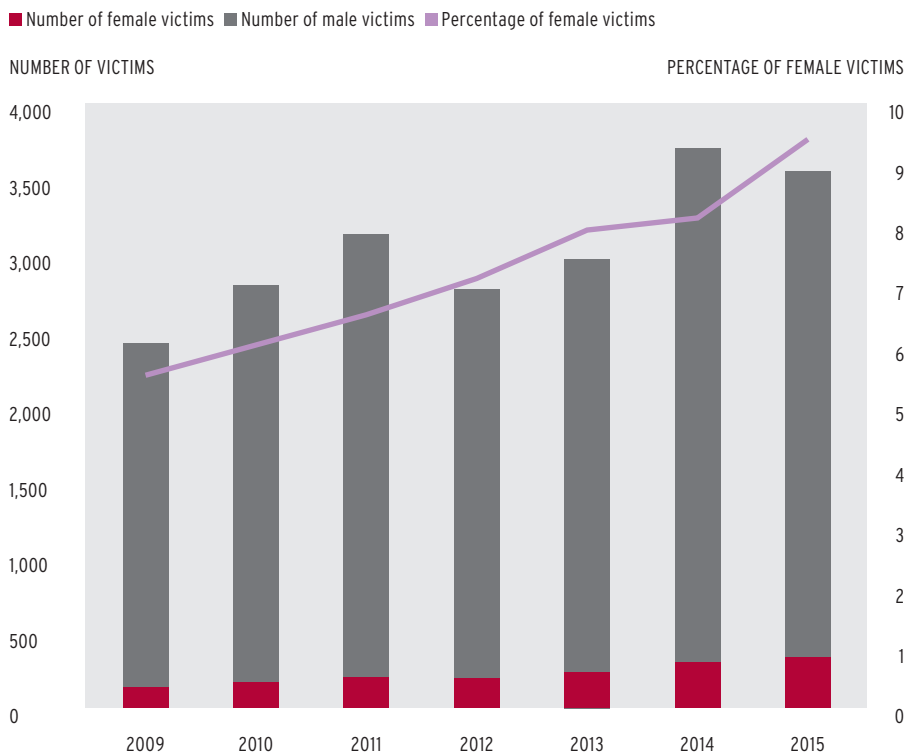
In Syria, data from the Humanitarian Tracker database indicates that the proportion of women killed tripled between 2011 and 2015, reaching almost 15 per cent of violent civilian deaths (see Figure 4). From 2012 to 2015, the killing of women and girls in Syria was mostly attributable to artillery fire; since then, aerial bombardments have become the leading cause of death. In contrast, most men and boys have consistently died due to gun shot wounds (Humanitarian Tracker, n.d.).

While most of these women were not specifically killed because of their sex, some were individually targeted, suggesting possible gender-based violence. In Afghanistan, killings ‘target prominent women human rights defenders and women working in public life, including police and parliamentarians, as well as women with relatives serving in the security forces’ (UNAMA and OHCHR, 2016, p. 14). In Syria, some women have been killed by sniper fire, or beaten and stabbed to death (Humanitarian Tracker, n.d.). It must be remembered that available statistics on conflict deaths capture but a fraction of the many types of harm inflicted on people of all ages in conflict settings, including physical injury, sexual violence, psychological trauma, and displacement.

## Deaths in non-conflict settings

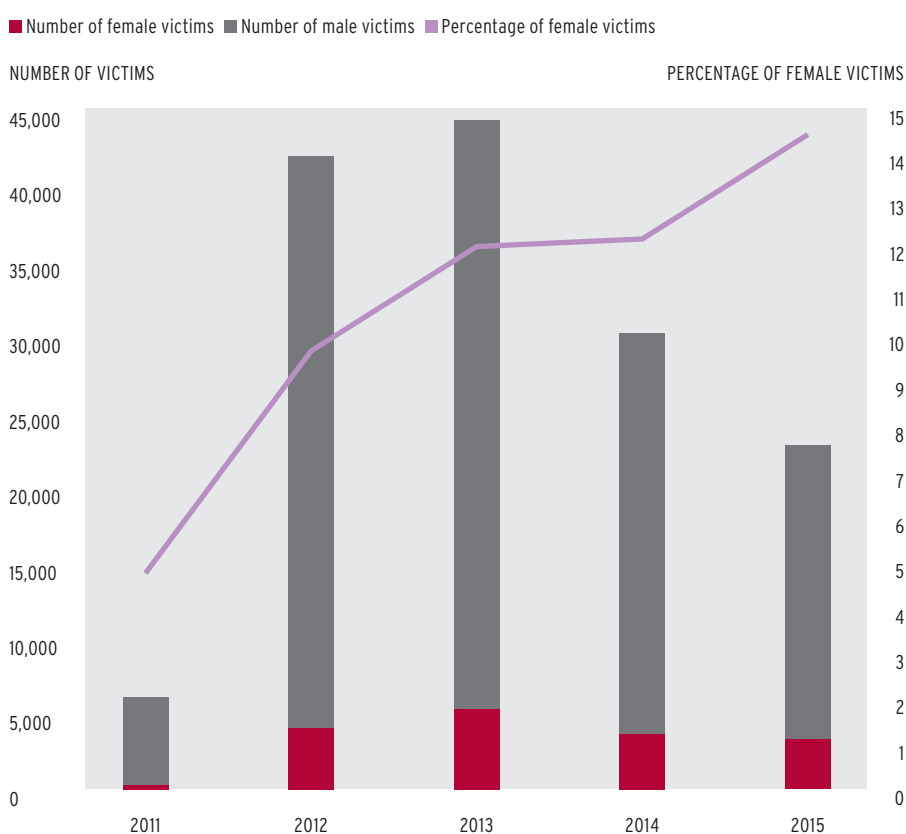
Men, women, girls, and boys also face different risks in countries that are not affected by armed conflict. Figure 5 shows the categories of violent death rates for such countries, as well as the average percentage of female victims for each category. It indicates that countries with high rates of lethal violence generally have proportions of female violence below the global average of 16 per cent, whereas the reverse is true of countries with low violent death rates.

Figure 3 Number of civilians killed in Afghanistan, by sex, and percentage of female victims, 2009–15



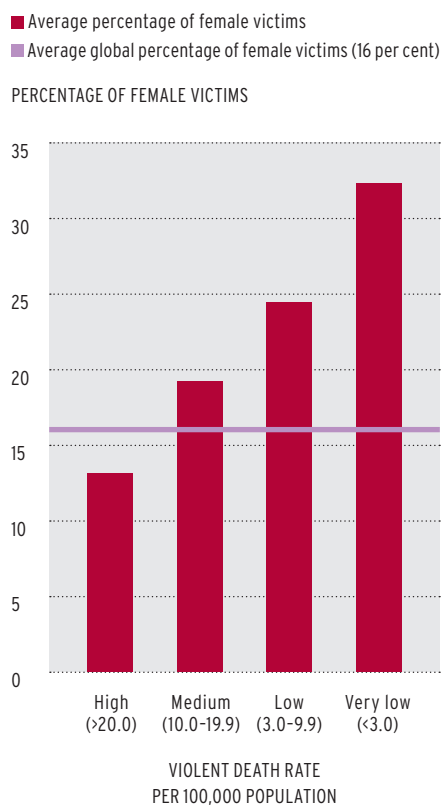
Source: UNAMA and OHCHR (2016)

Figure 4 Number of civilians killed in Syria, by sex, and percentage of female victims, 2011–15



Source: Humanitarian Tracker (n.d.)

Figure 5 **Proportion of female victims per category of violent death rate, 2010-15**



A better understanding of the killing of men and women in different settings requires contextual information, such as details on the victim-perpetrator relationship, the location, and the motivation behind the violence. The data shows striking variations, not only across the categories of violent death rates, but also within them. In Honduras, which is among the countries with a violent death rate greater than 20 per 100,000 population, three out of four killings of women were categorized either as homicides or femicides by organized crime in 2014 (IUDPAS, 2015, p. 4). About 60 per cent occurred in public spaces; one in ten was classified as an intimate partner homicide (pp. 4-5).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, 57 per cent of the women who died violently in South Africa—which experiences comparable levels of violence—were killed by their intimate partners (Abrahams et al., 2013).<sup>8</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, in countries with very low rates of violent death, the proportion of female homicide victims lies well above the global average. In this group, nine countries experienced female homicide rates that equalled or exceeded male homicide rates in 2015 or the latest year

for which data was available. Eight of these are high-income countries, listed among the top 25 in the Human Development Index (World Bank, n.d.a; n.d.b; UNDP, 2015, p. 208); they register overall homicide rates of at most 1 per 100,000 inhabitants (see Figure 6).<sup>9</sup>

The inverted relationship between the rate of lethal violence and the proportion of female victims has been known since the 1930s as the ‘static law’ (Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2016, pp. 428-29, 457-58).<sup>10</sup> The question remains as to whether the factors that influence female homicide rates are gender-specific or gender-blind. Decreases in female homicide rates seen in industrialized countries since 2000 may reflect the general decrease in lethal violence, rather than gender-specific policies (Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2016, pp. 461, 467).<sup>11</sup> In fact, sex-disaggregated time series data available in the Small Arms Survey database covers several countries—such as Belarus, Guatemala, Kosovo, Lithuania, and South Africa—that witnessed decreases in male violent death rates of comparable or greater magnitudes than those seen for women and girls.<sup>12</sup> While overall homicide rates have been declining in Europe and some other regions, rates of domestic violence, which predominantly affect women and girls, have remained relatively static (Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2016, p. 429). This phenomenon is dis-

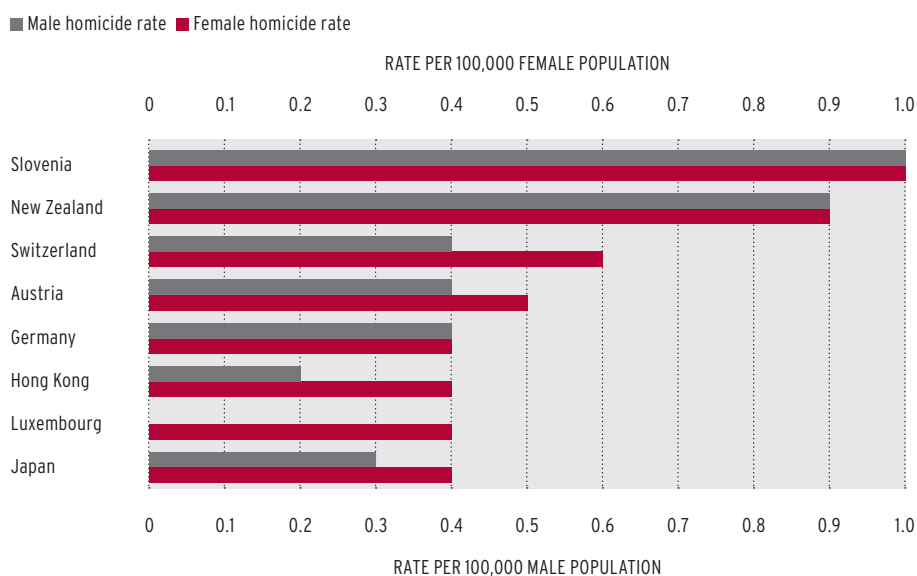
cussed below with respect to intimate partner homicide in Western Europe.

The risk of homicide varies not only based on sex, but also based on age. Figure 7 shows the proportion of homicide victims per age group in four countries with different levels of lethal violence. In general, female homicides were more evenly distributed across age groups than male homicides: the proportions of female homicide victims were higher in the 0-14 and 65+ age groups, even though a greater number of men and boys were typically killed in these (and other) age groups.<sup>13</sup>

In Colombia, the greatest proportion of male homicide victims was in the 15-24 age group, pointing to a problem of youth violence, while female homicide victims were more spread out between the ages of 25 and 34. In Ecuador, youth violence was less noticeable: both women and men in the 25-34 age bracket accounted for the largest proportion of victims. In the United States, young men aged 15 to 24 represented the greatest proportion of male victims, while women in the 35-49 and 25-34 age brackets were targeted most. Finally, in Australia, the greatest proportion of both male and female victims were 35-49 years old.

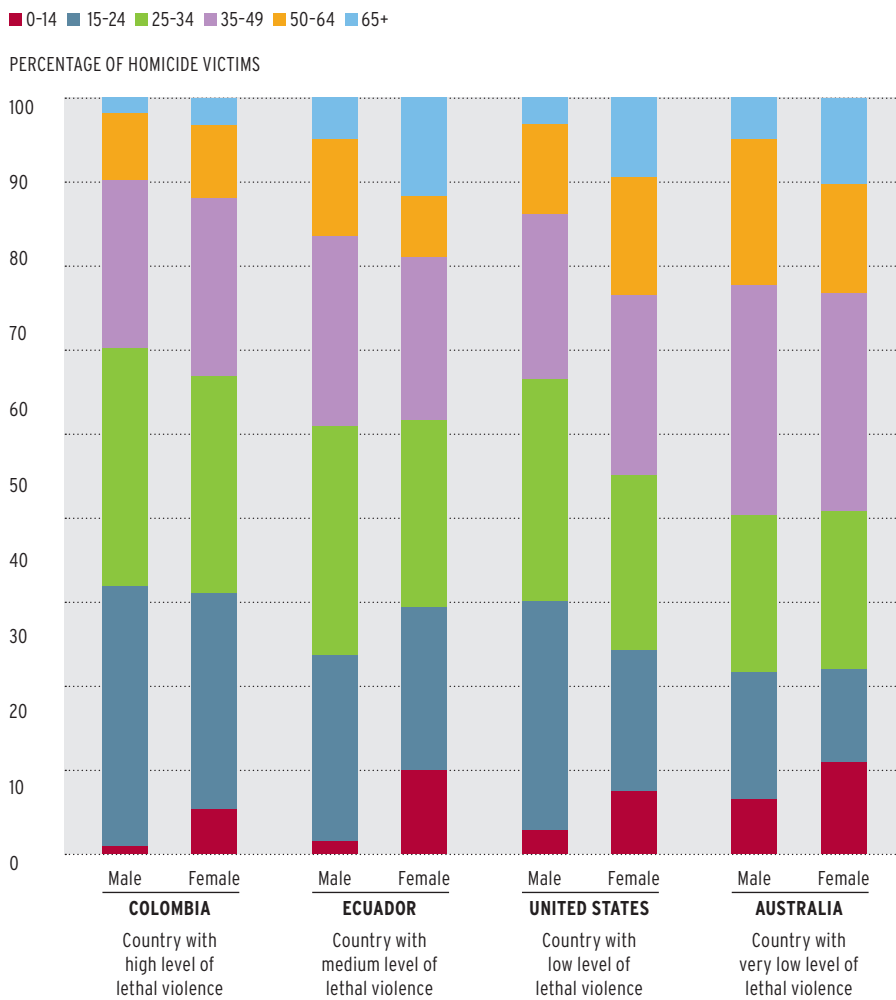
Overall, judging from this small sample, it appears that men are more at risk of dying violently before age

Figure 6 **High-income countries in which the female homicide rate is greater than or equal to the male homicide rate, 2015 or latest year available**



Note: Luxembourg registered a single (female) homicide.  
Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

Figure 7 Homicide victims by sex and age, selected countries, 2015 or latest year available



Sources: Bryant and Cussen (2015); Ecuador (n.d.); FBI (n.d.); INMLCF (2016)

35 than women, and that the age of homicide victims is higher, particularly among women, in countries with lower levels of violence. Such demo-

graphic information can help focus prevention efforts, as can details on the motivations for killing across particular age groups.



A memorial to a 16-year-old boy hangs where he was shot in a park in Chicago, 2012. © Scott Olson/Getty Images

## Male and female homicide victims in Western Europe

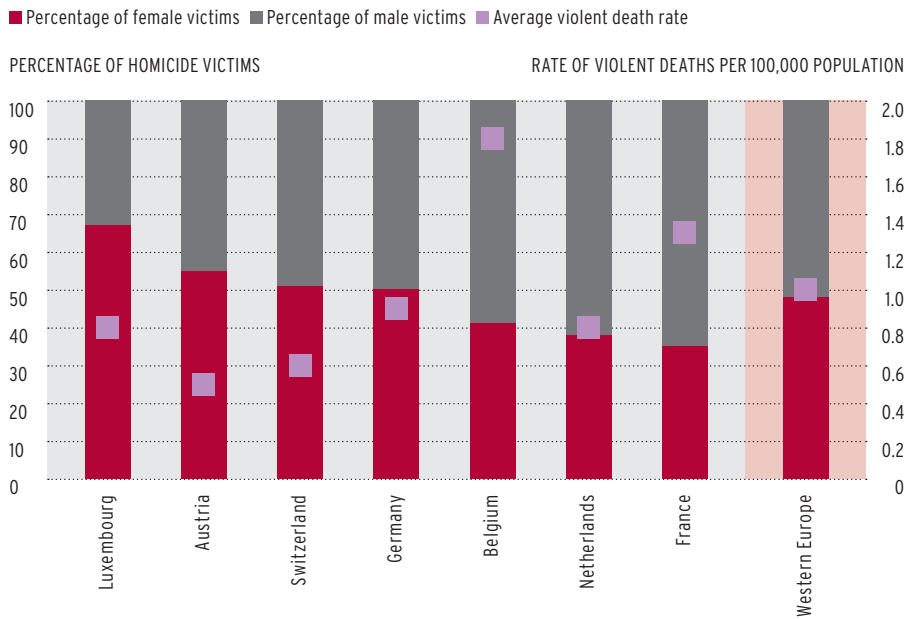
While Western European countries generally have relatively low violent death rates, as noted above, they tend to have high proportions of female homicide victims. Figure 8 presents the violent death rate and the proportion of male and female victims in the seven countries that have populations greater than 100,000 and that are categorized as Western Europe by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD, n.d.).

Germany and Switzerland are among just six countries in the world, all European, where more women than men were killed by firearms in 2015 or the latest year for which data is available.<sup>14</sup> The instrument of violence—in this instance, firearms—is important to the development and refinement of violence prevention policies (Widmer and Pavesi, 2016b).

As elsewhere, homicide rates vary for Western European men and women depending on their age. Figure 9 shows the distribution of homicide by sex and age for the seven Western European countries presented in Figure 8. This distribution reflects different national patterns: in France and the Netherlands, the highest homicide rates affected men in the 20–39 age groups; in Austria, men aged 40 to 49 were most affected; and in Germany, men in the 50–59 age group were targeted more than others. The highest female homicide rates were recorded among women between 40 and 59 years of age, with fewer national variations. The rate was significantly lower for women in their 60s and over 80, and even lower for women in their 70s.

The high proportion of female victims in Western Europe calls for a closer consideration of domestic and intimate partner violence. In Europe, some national statistical offices have recently made progress in recording not only the sex of the victim, but also factors such as the victim–offender relationship and the motivation for the crime, allowing for an improved understanding of lethal violence as it affects women.<sup>15</sup> Still, disaggregated information on intimate partner homicides is not readily available in all Western European countries.

Figure 8 **Percentage of male and female homicide victims and average rate of violent death, selected Western European countries, 2010-15**



Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

Austrian statistics disaggregate homicides by victim-offender relationship, but publicly available statistics do not distinguish between intimate partners and relatives, such as children or parents, uncles/aunts or nephews/nieces, or cousins (Austria, 2016). Switzerland provides annual counts of domestic homicides without details on the victim-offender relationship. The prevalence of intimate partners as perpetrators is presented separately for all types of domestic violence combined, including threats, assault, sexual violence, and homicide (Switzerland, 2016).<sup>16</sup> In Belgium, 2015 statistics dis-

tinguish parricide and infanticide, but not intimate partner homicide (Belgium, 2016). Germany, however, has identified crimes involving intimate partners since 2012. This data shows that in 2015, 26.7 per cent of homicides were committed by intimate partners, compared to 30 per cent in 2014 (Germany, 2016, p. 34). In the Netherlands, more than half of the women who were killed in 2011-15 died at the hands of their current or former partner, while about one-third of men were killed by an acquaintance (CBS, 2016).

France illustrates good practice in this regard. Since 2007, crime statistics

gathered by the police and *gendarmerie* are reviewed by the *Délégation aux victimes* (victims' delegation), an entity created in 2005 within the national police. The delegation identifies cases of intimate partner homicide and collects additional information based on police data and media reports. It verifies this information with regional police before compiling and publishing a detailed annual report that analyses the significance of the sex of the victim and the offender, their relationship, socioeconomic profiles, nationality and age, legal determinations, the instrument of death, the motivation, and further contextual information such as a history of violence, illness, or substance abuse (France, 2016).

In 2015, 136 out of 932 (15 per cent) of homicides, for both sexes, involved intimate partner violence in France. With 115 deaths, women represent 85 per cent of the victims of such crimes, meaning that in France a woman is killed every three days by her current or former intimate partner. Among the 21 men who succumbed to intimate partner violence in 2015, one was in a homosexual relationship. Of the 20 women who committed an intimate partner homicide, 4 (20 per cent) were themselves victims of intimate partner violence. The 41-45 age cohort is at greatest risk of such violence, followed by the 31-40 and 80+ cohorts. Firearms were used by women in 3 out of 20 cases (15 per cent), and by men in 40 out of 116 cases (35 per cent), underlining the importance of firearms in male-on-female violence.

Figure 9 **Distribution of Western European homicide victims by age cohort, 2015 or latest year available\***



Note: \* The graph reflects data for Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

## Conclusion

The overall decrease in violent death rates in non-conflict countries since 2004 is reflected among both men and women. Yet, in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria, the proportion of female deaths has increased over time, regardless of whether numbers of civilian casualties are increasing, as has generally been the case in Afghanistan in recent years, or decreasing, as in Syria since 2013. Moreover, in countries that register low levels of violent deaths, the proportion of women and girls killed is above the global average. It is thus doubtful that overall decreases in violent deaths in countries not affected by armed conflict



Demonstrators in Madrid wear masks representing women killed by their partners to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 2016. © Sergio Perez/Reuters

reflect progress in reducing (gender-based) violence against women. Among the types of violence affecting women globally, intimate partner homicide remains a concern, even in the most peaceful countries.

States have committed to reducing all forms of violence under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With respect to violence against women, these commitments echo earlier efforts, such as General Recommendation 19 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security of 2000 (CEDAW, 1992; UNSC, 2000). Better information alone will not address lethal violence against men and women, but it will better position states to implement the SDGs. Data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, victim–perpetrator relationship, and motivation for violence, along with contextual information, such as the location, time, and instrument of violence, will benefit efforts to diagnose, reduce, and prevent violence, including lethal violence. In monitoring the impact of policies and programmes—including progress made towards the SDGs—data collection systems will be indispensable. ■

## Notes

- 1 For a list of data sources, see Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2015, pp. 8–9).
- 2 For a discussion of the challenges related to the collection of data on violent deaths, see Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino (2015).

- 3 On the global decrease in homicide rates, see Widmer and Pavese (2016a, pp. 2–3).
- 4 Subregions in which more than three countries were affected by armed conflict were excluded.
- 5 See the section on violent deaths in non-conflict settings in this Research Note. See also Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti (2016).
- 6 UNAMA defines *ground engagements* as ‘kinetic ground operations, stand-off attacks, crossfire and armed clashes between parties to the conflict. Ground engagements include attacks or operations in which small arms, heavy weapons and/or area weapons systems, i.e. mortars and rockets, are fired’ (UNAMA and OHCHR, 2016, p. 78). A *complex attack* is defined as ‘a deliberate and coordinated attack which includes a suicide device (i.e., [body- and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs)]), more than one attacker and more than one type of device (i.e., [body-borne IEDs] and mortars). All three elements must be present for an attack to be considered complex’ (p. 34, n. 77).
- 7 Perpetrator data was missing in 46 per cent of cases, and location data was missing in 6 per cent (IUDPAS, 2015, pp. 4–5). The cited percentages are drawn from cases for which such information is known. It should be noted that homicide related to criminal activities can also be gender-based. Indeed, several Latin American countries have introduced the crime of ‘femicide’ in their criminal codes in order to distinguish gender-based violence, whether conducted by intimate partners or not, with variations in national definitions (CEPAL, 2015, pp. 48, 70–73).
- 8 The finding is based on statistics for 2009, the most recent year for which data is available. Perpetrator data was missing in 23 per cent of the cases (Abrahams et al., 2013, p. 6).
- 9 The remaining country is Fiji.
- 10 The term ‘law’ must not be taken literally; the proportion of male and female victims

also differs across regions, as illustrated in Figure 1.

- 11 See also Chon (2016).
- 12 The designation of Kosovo is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
- 13 The only exception among the countries shown in Figure 6 is Australia, where more women than men were killed in the 65+ age cohort. The rate of violent death among people aged 65 and over is also influenced by gender-based and national differences in life expectancy. According to the 2015 Human Development Index, life expectancy stands at 80.3 years for men and 84.5 years for women in Australia; 76.7 years for men and 81.4 years for women in the United States; 73.2 years for men and 78.7 years for women in Ecuador; and 70.5 years for men and 77.7 years for women in Colombia. See UNDP (2015, pp. 220–21).
- 14 The others are Denmark, Latvia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. An equal proportion of men and women were killed with a firearm in Estonia, Hungary, Romania, and Scotland (Small Arms Survey, n.d.). Regarding the link between the levels of civilian gun ownership and female homicide, see Killias and Markwalder (2012, p. 262).
- 15 See Stöckl et al. (2013) for a systematic review of intimate partner homicide based on data from 66 countries; Corradi and Stöckl (2014) for a study of intimate partner homicide and policy responses in Europe; Zeoli et al. (2016) for an epidemiologic review of studies on the use of firearms in intimate partner violence; and Shaw (2013) for further discussion of the use of firearms in intimate partner violence.
- 16 See, however, Switzerland (2014) for a study of domestic violence in Switzerland between 2009 and 2013.

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## About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

For more information, please visit:

[www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org).

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## Credits

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