

Too Close to Home

GUNS AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Gender differences in gun ownership and violence are often ignored, but they become strikingly clear in non-conflict settings—such as in the context of family and domestic violence. Studies in a number of countries have shown that between 40 and 70 per cent of female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner; in countries where guns are easily available, they are often the weapon used. In stark contrast, most male victims of gun violence are killed outside the home by people who are not their intimate partners.

This chapter highlights the relationships between guns and intimate partner violence (IPV). It reviews the limited available data on the use of firearms to kill, injure, and intimidate and considers the gendered nature of firearm ownership and use as well as the cultural supports for gun possession by men. The main findings of the chapter are that:

- While the majority of the victims and perpetrators of firearms-related homicides are male, many more women than men are killed, injured, and intimidated by firearms in the context of IPV.
- In countries with high levels of firearm violence, the risk that IPV against women will involve firearms is higher than elsewhere.
- Intimate partner murder followed by suicide ('murder-suicide') is primarily perpetrated by men, and firearms are the predominant weapon.
- Most gun owners are men, as are the majority of individuals in professions using guns—such as the armed forces, police, or private security; the risk of lethal IPV and intimidation for women is increased by the presence of guns in the home, including work-related guns.
- Gender inequality, tolerance and cultural acceptance of the use of violence against women, and common notions of masculinity that embrace firearms possession (which may be supported by both men and women) all combine to create a climate that places women at risk of IPV involving firearms.
- Withdrawal of gun rights following IPV incidents and the use of risk assessments for intimate partner homicide may help prevent violence, but only in the small minority of reported cases.
- Promising strategies to reduce gun-related IPV include stricter civilian gun possession regulations, broader prevention policies that raise awareness of the dangers of firearms in the home, and interventions to change cultural attitudes to guns in relation to certain concepts of masculinity.
- Data that disaggregates victim-offender relationships and the type of weapon used in intimate partner violence and homicides is needed to track patterns and trends in firearm use, and to guide interventions and their evaluation.

Figure 2.1 **Femicides committed in the home vs. total homicide rates, selected countries (latest available data)**

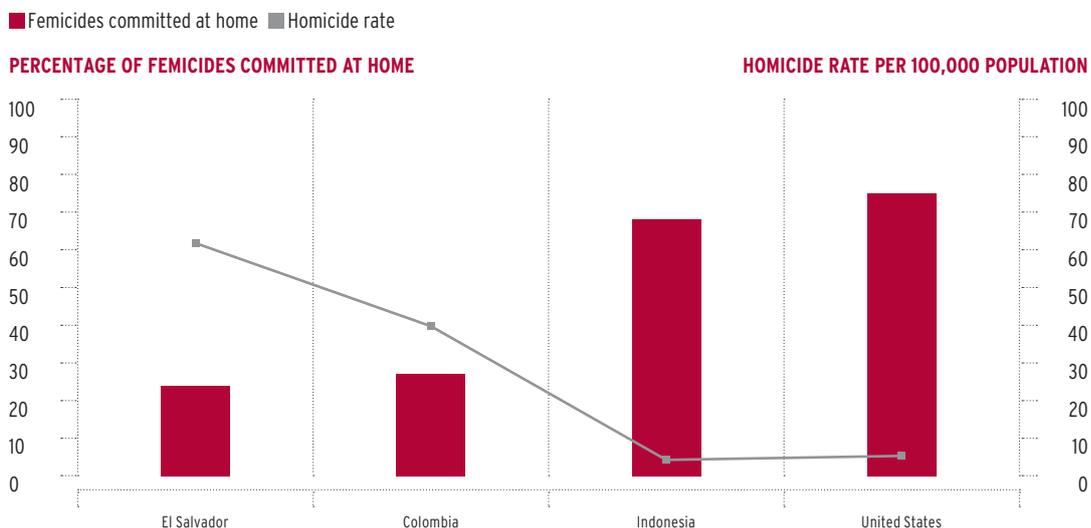
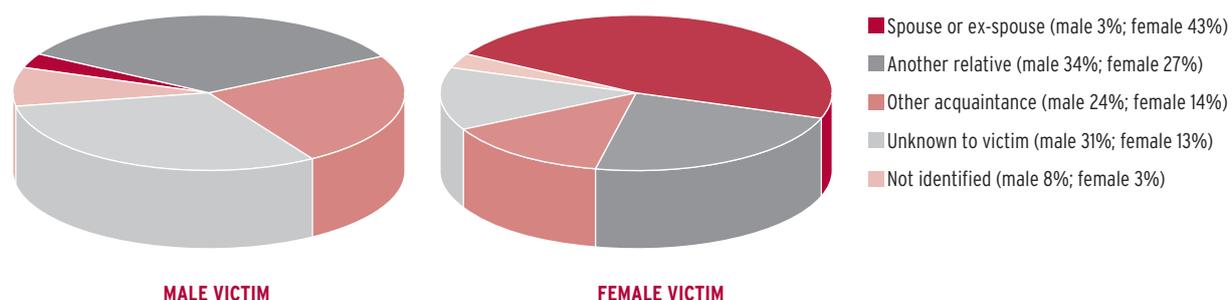


Figure 2.2 **Relationship of perpetrators to homicide victims in 16 European countries, by sex of victim (latest available data)**



Data for 111 countries and territories shows that around 66,000 women are killed violently each year, representing some 17 per cent of all intentional homicides. These deaths generally occur in the home, and the perpetrator is usually a current or former partner. About one in three of these femicides is committed with a firearm. Death and serious injuries are far more likely to occur with the use of firearms than with other violent methods.

Gun violence is highly gendered, but research has not sufficiently explored its differential impacts on men and women.

In regions where violence is widespread, such as Southern Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, women are at high risk of being killed by their partners, and by strangers. In regions with low homicide rates, such as Western Europe, IPV accounts for the great majority of intentional femicides. Figure 2.1 shows the percentage of women killed in private homes across a range of high- to low-homicide countries. Figure 2.2, based on data from selected European countries, shows that 43 per cent of female victims of IPV were killed by a current or former spouse, compared with 3 per cent of male IPV victims.

In all countries for which data is available, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of intimate partner murder–suicide, and guns the primary weapon used. Rates of murder–suicide with firearms are higher in countries with high rates of guns kept in the home.

The risks of keeping a gun in the home outweigh the benefits.

Firearms play a significant role in non-fatal injury, threats, and intimidation by male intimate partners. They are used to threaten and intimidate far more frequently than they are used to kill.

The majority of guns are owned and used by men, including those used by the armed services, police, and private security guards. Overall, there is little evidence that owning or having access to a gun protects a woman from attack by her partner; on the contrary, the risks of having a gun in the home outweigh the benefits.

Countries with high rates of violence and gun possession tend to have high rates of gender inequality and tolerance of violence against women. Some women think it acceptable for men to use violence against their wives, and they may support notions of masculinity that embrace gun possession.

Comprehensive gun law reform appears to have some impact on gun-related IPV. Laws restricting access to firearms in cases of IPV are helpful if properly enforced, as are risk assessment instruments to evaluate the risks of future firearm IPV. Yet the prevention of intimate partner gun violence requires much deeper changes in cultural norms that influence men and women’s attitudes to violence and firearms. More widespread education on the risks to women associated with guns in the home would help to raise awareness, as would public dialogue about men’s gun use, gender inequality, and tolerance of violence against women. At the same time, there is a pressing need for better data collection on gun-related intimate partner violence, not only to improve our understanding of the factors that influence IPV, but also to help in identifying effective interventions. ■