

# Firearms Control Briefing

## Femicide in South Africa over 18 years

### Introduction

Femicide – the murder of women and girls – is the most extreme form of violence, and shows the extent of violence against women. South Africa’s third national femicide study was published by the Gender and Health Research Unit of the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) on International Women’s Day.<sup>1</sup> The study examined women murdered in 2017, and compared findings with the 1999 and 2009 studies. This Briefing summarises the main findings of the 2017 femicide study, focusing particularly on how firearm-related femicide has changed over 18 years.

### Definitions

**Femicide:** Murder of women and girls 14 years and older

**Intimate-partner femicide:** Femicide by an intimate partner, including a current or ex-husband/boyfriend, same sex partner or rejected would be lover

**Non-intimate-partner femicide:** Femicide by someone other than an intimate partner, includes a family member, friend, acquaintance or stranger

### Methodology

The 2017 femicide study is based on data collected from:

1. Medico-legal mortuaries: Using a random sample of 81 medico-legal mortuaries, all females aged 14 years and older registered between 1 January and 31 December 2017 as injury deaths related to murder were identified and their mortuary file and autopsy reports examined.
2. South African Police Service: Follow up interviews were undertaken with police investigators to verify if the manner of death was a murder, and if so, to collect information on what was known or suspected

### Main findings of the 2017 femicide study<sup>2</sup>

- **SA’s overall femicide rate for women and girls 14 years and older has declined over 18 years:** From a high of 24.7 per 100,000 population in 1999, SA’s femicide rate almost halved to 12.9 in 2009, and dropped even further to 11,2 in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Despite this decline, SA’s femicide rate is more than six times the global average, highlighting the urgency of efforts to address violence against women.
- **SA’s Firearms Control Act (2000) continues to protect women and girls from being shot and killed with a gun owned by their intimate partner:** Firearm-related intimate-partner femicide almost halved between 1999 and 2009 (from 30.6% to 17.4%) and has remained stable since, showing a very slight increase to 18.2% in 2017.
- **Women and girls are at increased risk of being shot and killed by non-intimates:** After more than halving between 1999 and 2009 (from 33.6% to 17.1%), non-intimate firearm femicide increased 8% (to 25.3%) in 2017. This increase is likely linked to an increase in the availability of illegal guns as a result of legal guns leaking (through loss, theft, fraud and corruption) into the illegal pool.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all information in this Briefing is drawn from Abrahams, Naeemah. et al. 2022. Decrease in femicide in South Africa: three national studies across 18 years. Research Brief. Pretoria: South African Medical Research Council. (Online). Available at <https://www.samrc.ac.za/reports/research-brief-decrease-femicide-south-africa-three-national-studies-across-18-years> (accessed 29 March 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Points 2 and 3 include comments made by Naeemah Abrahams when presenting the 2017 femicide study at the 8 March 2022 launch seminar, and GFSA’s analysis.

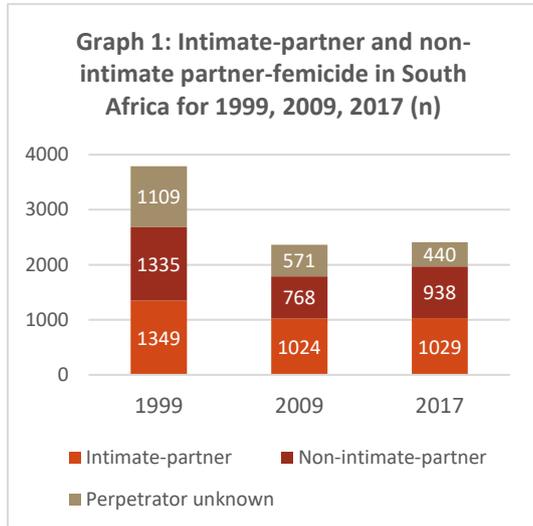
<sup>3</sup> To contextualise these figures, SA’s national murder rate declined from 38,4 per 100,000 population in 2009 to 34,5 in 2017. Source: Prinsloo, Megan. et al. 2021. The 2nd injury mortality survey: A national study of injury mortality levels and causes in South Africa in 2017. Cape Town: South African Medical Research Council.

<sup>4</sup> Gun Free South Africa. 2021. The illegal firearms trade in South Africa. Firearms Control Briefing 3, 15 November. (Online). Available at <https://gfsa.org.za/2021/11/14/briefing-3-of-2021-the-illegal-firearms-trade-in-south-africa/>

about the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (i.e. an intimate partner or not). Dockets were used to gather information on investigations and prosecutions.

The survey design allowed for the data to be weighted to provide national estimates

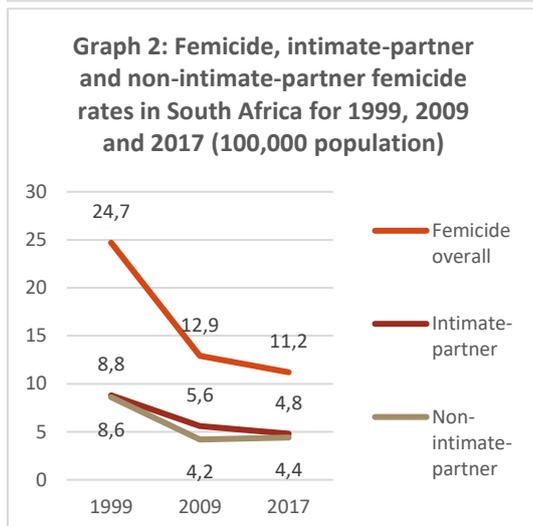
## Results



**Femicide:** 2,407 women and girls aged 14+ were murdered in South Africa in 2017, averaging almost 7 women a day. This is similar to 2009 (2,363), though the 2009 figure was significantly lower than the number of women killed in 1999 (3,793).

**Intimate-partner femicide:** The number of women and girls aged 14+ that were killed by an intimate partner in 2017 remained unchanged from 2009: In both years, 3 women were murdered per day by an intimate partner, down from 4 a day in 1999.

**Non-intimate-partner femicide:** Following a significant drop (from 1,335 in 1999 to 768 in 2009), the number of women and girls aged 14+ murdered by a non-intimate partner increased to 938 in 2017.

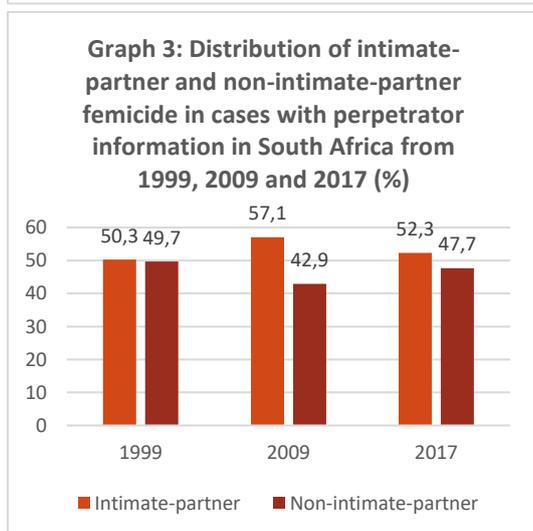


**Rate per 100,000 population:** Femicide rates are the best way to track changes as population growth is taken into account. As summarised in Graph 2, SA's overall femicide rate has more than halved since 1999, dropping from 24.7 per 100,000 that year to 12.9 in 2009 and 11.2 in 2017. This continual decline is mirrored in SA's intimate-partner femicide rate, which dropped from 8.8 per 100,000 (1999) to 5.6 (2009) to 4.8 (2017). In contrast, non-intimate-partner femicide increased from 4.2 per 100,000 in 2009 to 4.4 in 2017, after halving from 8.6 in 1999.

**More women killed by intimates than non-intimates:** As shown in Graph 3, while intimate-partner femicide dropped from 57.1% in 2009 to 52.3% in 2017, women and girls aged 14+ were still more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than a non-intimate family member, friend, acquaintance or stranger.

**Age:** The same age pattern is seen across all three studies: The mean age of all femicide cases is 37.7 years. Women murdered by intimate partners were younger (mean age 32.3) than those murdered by non-intimate partners (mean age 40.7).

**Province:** In 2017 the Eastern Cape reported higher intimate- and non-intimate-partner femicide rates (compared to national rates). The Western Cape, Northern Cape, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal had much higher rates of overall femicide and intimate-partner femicide rates compared to national and other provincial rates. The two provinces with the lowest



overall femicide rates were Limpopo and Mpumalanga which were significantly lower than the overall South African femicide rate.

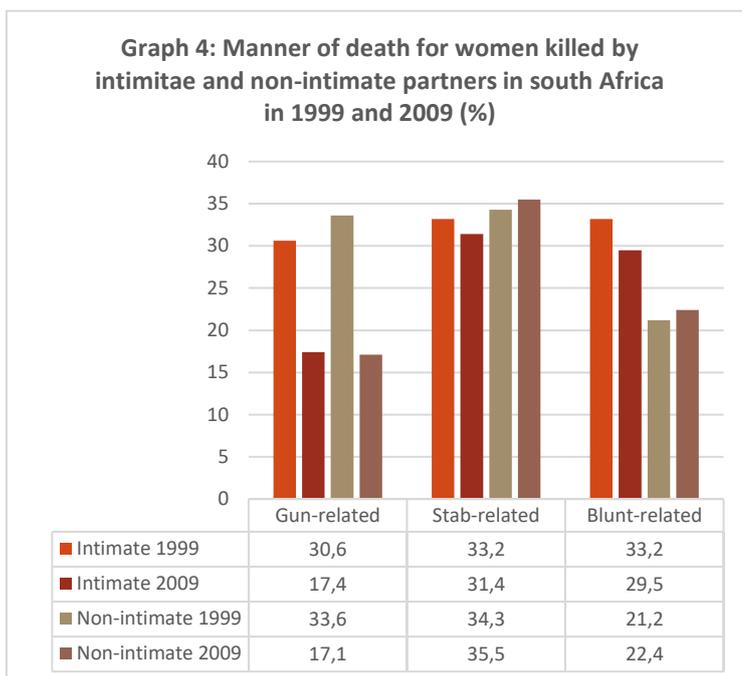
**Rape-murders:** There was an overall decline in the proportion of suspected rape-murders between the three studies. In 2009 there was a substantial increase from 1999 in suspected rape-murders among non-intimate-partner femicides, but in the 2017 study, the levels of suspected rape-murders decreased to the same level of 1999 i.e. 13.2% in 1999 and 13.6% in 2017.

### Firearms in femicide<sup>5</sup>

In analysing the prevalence of firearms in femicide, the 1999, 2009 and 2017 studies show that:

#### Gun control saves lives:

Between 1999 and 2009, the number of women killed by their intimate partner in SA dropped from four to three a day. The MRC attributed this drop to stricter gun controls associated with the Firearms Control Act (2000) which resulted in a substantial decline in the number of women that were shot and killed by an intimate partner compared to deaths resulting from stab and blunt injuries (see Graph 4). Of significance is that gunshot-related deaths were not replaced by deaths from other weapons, indicating that weapon substitution did not occur, and that the overall benefit of reducing gun deaths is lives saved. As shown in Graph 4, this same trend can be seen in non-intimate femicide.



The researchers note a decline in the number of perpetrators who committed suicide after murdering their partners in the 2017 study. This declined from 18.2% in 2009 to 12.9% in 2017. Such murder-suicides are typically committed with a licensed firearm.

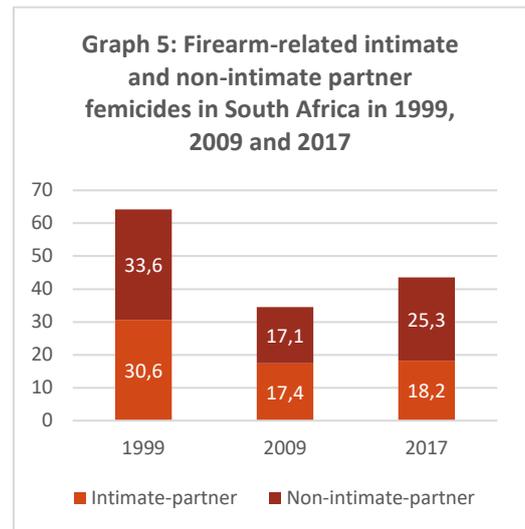
"There was a very substantial difference in the rate of homicide from gunshot between [1999 and 2009]. The decrease is most likely explained by gun control legislation (Firearms Control Act)"<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This section includes GFSA's analysis of the MRC's 1999, 2009 and 2017 femicide studies, though all data and information are drawn from these studies.

<sup>6</sup> Abrahams, Naeemah, Shanaaz Matthews, Lorna Martin, Carl Lombard, and Rachel Jewkes. 2013. Intimate Partner Femicide in South Africa in 1999 and 2009. PLOS Medicine, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 1-8, p. 3.

### Poor enforcement kills:

As shown in Graph 5, firearm-related femicide (both intimate and non-intimate) increased from an average of 17.3% in 2009 to 21.8% in 2017. This increase was due to a slight increase in intimate femicide (from 17.4% to 18.2%) and a notable increase in non-intimate femicide (from 17.1% to 25.3%). More research is needed to understand these different increases, but what is clear is that the ready availability of illegal guns in South Africa as a result of breakdowns in firearms control management since 2010/11 has meant that an increasing number of women and girls are being shot.<sup>7</sup>



### Criminal justice system response to femicide:

In addition to breakdowns in SA's firearms control management system contributing to murder by gunshot of women and girls, the 2017 femicide study highlights three failings by SA's criminal justice system (CJS) in response to femicide:

- 1. Lack of documented history of violence:** Only 29% of SAPS dockets in the 2017 study had information on past partner violence among intimate-partner femicide cases (compared to 30% in 1999 and 2009) and just 23 of the women killed by an intimate partner had a protection order at the time of her death. The researchers note this failure as a significant concern: With so many femicide cases remaining unsolved, a documented history of intimate-partner violence may help identify the suspect, as murder is seldom the first act of violence by an intimate.
- 2. Poor conviction rate:** While there was no improvement in the proportion of convictions among intimate-partner femicide cases over 18 years (37.4% in 1999 and 37.7% in 2017), there was an improvement in convictions among non-intimate-partner femicides since 2009 (from 23.1% in 2009 to 31.8% in 2017). However, conviction rates remain worryingly low.
- 3. Missing data:** While Covid-19 impacted on the 2017 research process, two factors associated with poor quality policing contributed to incomplete information: Missing dockets (increased from 1.6% in 2009 to 9.1% in 2017) and no suspect identified (increased from 22.9% in 2009 to 30.1% in 2017).

## Conclusion

In some respects SA's latest femicide study is good news, as it shows that femicide has halved over the past 18 years. But we must not become complacent: Despite this decline, SA's femicide rate is six times the global average, indicating the continued urgency of interventions to address widespread violence against women.

An effective intervention, confirmed by the MRC's three femicide studies, is a strong gun law that is well enforced with zero tolerance for corruption and fraud. This is one of the reasons GfSA supports proposed amendments to strengthen the Firearms Control Act (2000), particularly clauses which propose the temporary suspension of a firearm licence when the holder is issued with an interim protection order, and an automatic declaration of unfitness to own a firearm when an interim protection order is confirmed or a final protection order is issued. However, as with any law, effect relies on enforcement, and unless the CJS' response to femicide improves and stronger gun controls are implemented by the state and complied with by gun owners, the potential impact of these policies on saving lives will not be fully realised.

<sup>7</sup> Gun Free South Africa. 2019. Gun Control and Violence: South Africa's Story. Firearms Control Briefing 5, 24 October. (Online). Available at <https://gfsa.org.za/2019/10/24/briefing-5-gun-control-and-violence-south-africa-s-story-over-25-years/>