

A RETROSPECTIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON THE
CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILICIDES IN ESWATINISifiso Shabangu¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3335-1021>

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ABSTRACT

Familicide, a murder involving a current or former partner and at least one biological or stepchild, is a devastating global phenomenon that particularly impacts communities through its gendered nature. This study examined the characteristics of familicide cases in eSwatini to identify contributing factors and inform prevention strategies for this understudied form of gender-based violence in the African context. A descriptive retrospective design was employed, utilizing inductive content analysis of 24 familicide cases identified through national newspaper archives and court records from 2009 to June 2024. The 24 cases involved 59 victims (35 children and 24 adults). Male perpetrators accounted for 96% of cases, with 79% being biological fathers, averaging 29.5 years old. Most incidents occurred in domestic settings with documented histories of domestic violence. Among child victims (average age 4.1 years), 57% died, including the youngest aged two weeks. Of adult victims, 67% survived. Key contributing factors included a woman attempting to end the relationship (38% of cases), suspected infidelity (21%), refusal to reconcile (17%), and court-mandated child support (8%). Unlike global settings where firearms predominate, perpetrators primarily used readily available implements: hacking tools (9 cases), stabbing instruments (8 cases), arson (7 cases), and pesticides (6 cases). Only 21% involved familicide-suicide, all using pesticides. Familicide in eSwatini exhibits both universal patterns (male perpetration, domestic violence history) and culturally specific factors (threats to social dignity, gender-asymmetric infidelity norms). Prevention strategies require developing risk assessment tools merging universal and culturally specific risk factors, strengthening the capacity of law enforcement and traditional structures to address domestic violence, and regulating pesticide acquisition. A complex interplay of infrastructure and resource limitations significantly influences familicide outcomes, aspects potentially overlooked in research from developed regions.

Keywords: Africa, domestic violence, eSwatini, familicide, gender-related murder

Estudo descritivo retrospectivo sobre as características dos homicídios em eSwatini

RESUMO

O homicídio, um homicídio envolvendo um parceiro atual ou antigo e pelo menos um biológico ou enteado, é um fenómeno global devastador que afeta particularmente as comunidades através da sua natureza de género. Este estudo analisou as características dos casos de homicídio em eSwatini para identificar fatores contribuintes e orientar estratégias de prevenção para esta forma pouco estudada de violência de género no contexto africano. Foi utilizado um desenho retrospectivo descritivo, utilizando análise indutiva de conteúdo de 24 casos de homicídio identificados através de arquivos nacionais de jornais e registos judiciais entre 2009 e junho de 2024. Os 24 casos envolveram 59 vítimas (35 crianças e 24 adultos). Os agressores do sexo masculino representaram 96% dos casos, sendo 79% pais biológicos, com uma média de 29,5 anos. A maioria dos incidentes ocorreu em contextos domésticos com histórico documentado de violência doméstica. Entre as crianças vítimas (idade média 4,1 anos), 57% morreram, incluindo a mais nova com duas semanas. Das vítimas adultas, 67% sobreviveram. Os principais fatores que contribuíram incluíram uma mulher a tentar terminar a relação (38% dos casos), suspeita de infidelidade (21%), recusa em reconciliação (17%) e pensão de alimentos obrigatória pelo tribunal (8%). Ao contrário dos contextos globais, onde predominam as armas de fogo, os autores usaram principalmente instrumentos facilmente disponíveis: ferramentas de hacking (9 casos), instrumentos de esfaqueamento (8 casos), incêndio criminoso (7 casos) e pesticidas (6 casos). Apenas 21% envolveram suicídio-familiaricídio, todos usando pesticidas. O homicídio em eSwatini apresenta tanto

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padrões universais (perpetração masculina, histórico de violência doméstica) como fatores culturalmente específicos (ameaças à dignidade social, normas de infidelidade assimétricas de gênero). As estratégias de prevenção exigem o desenvolvimento de ferramentas de avaliação de risco que fundam fatores de risco universais e culturalmente específicos, o reforço da capacidade das forças policiais e das estruturas tradicionais para combater a violência doméstica, e a regulação da aquisição de pesticidas. Uma complexa interação entre infraestruturas e limitações de recursos influencia significativamente os resultados do homicídio, aspectos potencialmente negligenciados na investigação proveniente de regiões desenvolvidas.

Palavras-chave: África, violência doméstica, eSwatini, homicídio, homicídio relacionado com o gênero

Estudio descriptivo retrospectivo sobre las características de los homicidios en eSwatini

RESUMEN

El homicidio, un asesinato que involucra a una pareja actual o anterior y al menos a un hijo biológico o hijastro, es un fenómeno global devastador que afecta especialmente a las comunidades por su naturaleza de género. Este estudio examinó las características de los casos de homicidio en eSwatini para identificar factores contribuyentes e informar estrategias de prevención para esta forma poco estudiada de violencia de género en el contexto africano. Se empleó un diseño retrospectivo descriptivo, utilizando análisis inductivo de contenido de 24 casos de homicidio identificados a través de archivos de periódicos nacionales y registros judiciales desde 2009 hasta junio de 2024. Los 24 casos involucraron a 59 víctimas (35 niños y 24 adultos). Los agresores masculinos representaron el 96% de los casos, con un 79% padres biológicos, con una media de 29,5 años. La mayoría de los incidentes ocurrieron en entornos domésticos con antecedentes documentados de violencia doméstica. Entre las víctimas infantiles (edad media 4,1 años), el 57% falleció, incluyendo la más joven de dos semanas. De las víctimas adultas, el 67% sobrevivió. Los factores clave que contribuyeron incluyeron una mujer que intentó terminar la relación (38% de los casos), sospecha de infidelidad (21%), negativa a reconciliarse (17%) y manutención infantil ordenada por el tribunal (8%). A diferencia de los entornos globales donde predominan las armas de fuego, los agresores usaron principalmente herramientas de hackeo (9 casos), instrumentos de apuñalamiento (8 casos), incendios provocados (7 casos) y pesticidas (6 casos). Solo el 21% implicó suicidio por homicidio, todos ellos usando pesticidas. El homicidio en eSwatini presenta tanto patrones universales (perpetración masculina, antecedentes de violencia doméstica) como factores culturalmente específicos (amenazas a la dignidad social, normas de infidelidad asimétricas de género). Las estrategias de prevención requieren desarrollar herramientas de evaluación de riesgos que combinen factores de riesgo universales y culturalmente específicos, fortalecer la capacidad de las fuerzas del orden y las estructuras tradicionales para abordar la violencia doméstica, y regular la adquisición de pesticidas. Una compleja interacción entre infraestructuras y limitaciones de recursos influye significativamente en los resultados del homicidio, aspectos que podrían pasar por alto en la investigación de regiones desarrolladas.

Palabras clave: África, violencia doméstica, eSwatini, homicidio, asesinato relacionado con el género

A Retrospective Descriptive Study on the Characteristics of Familicides in eSwatini.

Familicide, though rare, is a global phenomenon whose lethal outcome devastates and outrages communities. In this study, familicide is defined as the murder of two or more victims, including the perpetrator's current or former partner, and at least one biological or stepchild (Armeanu, 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021). Familicide often receives extensive media attention cross-culturally (Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Tosini, 2020), and eSwatini's media are no exception (Mazibuko, 2023; Sunday Reporter, 2023). Violence in eSwatini is a persistent problem, even against children (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2023), despite the legislative progress of passing the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 2018. This violence sometimes takes the form of familicides. Scholars have proposed that familicide is an extreme form of gender-based and domestic violence (Buiten, 2022; Johnson, 2023). Mailloux (2014, p. 921) states that "familicide perpetrators share many common characteristics with perpetrators of domestic violence", such as exerting control in the relationship. The gendered nature of familicide is evidenced by males perpetrating an estimated 95% of cases (Boyd et al., 2024; Liem, 2020). Gender-based and domestic violence increased by 22% in eSwatini between 2020 and 2022 (UNFPA, 2024). The increasing incidence of familicides and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) has precipitated calls from civil society organizations (Mazibuko, 2022), law enforcement (B. Dlamini, 2023), and political leadership (Thwala, 2024) for the declaration of GBV as a national disaster. Such a declaration would mandate the allocation of substantial government resources for mitigation efforts. However, as of the commencement of this study, the eSwatini government had not issued this declaration. The paucity of literature on familicide in the African continent (Adinkrah, 2023), and specifically in eSwatini, may be attributed to resource constraints, the relative infrequency of such events (as defined in this research), limited scholarly focus on this specific form of violence, and/or sociocultural norms governing discussions of death, intimate relationships, and family violence. This retrospective undertaking posits that these factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of African perspectives in global familicide research. By

addressing this gap, the current paper aims to contribute to the knowledge base on familicide, particularly within the African context, thereby supporting knowledge indigenization. Given the prevalence of familicides within domestic settings (Tosini, 2020), it is necessary to understand factors contributing to this phenomenon. Findings of this investigation have the potential to inform policy decisions and intervention strategies, ultimately contributing to the broader global discourse on GBV mitigation.

Familicide Incidence

Scholars in Western societies have explored familicide and emphasized the need to further the body of knowledge, especially cross-culturally (Truong et al., 2023). Others have indicated that familicide data often emerges as a by-product of research focused on another phenomenon (Armeanu, 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021). This is potentially due to the low incidence rate of familicide. For instance, familicides were estimated to occur annually at a rate of 23 in the United States (2000-2009) (Liem et al., 2013), 2.5 in Canada (2010-2019) (Boyd et al., 2024), and 2.15 in Switzerland (1972-2015) (Frei & Ilic, 2020). However, victim numbers remain high, earning familicide descriptors such as family annihilation (Matias & Soeiro, 2023). These incidents mostly occur in rural areas in domestic settings (Gallup-Black, 2005).

Characteristics of Offenders and Victims

A familicide is often a singular event in one domestic setting, with multiple victims, sometimes followed by the offender's suicide (Tosini, 2020; Walsh & Krienert, 2023). Familicidal individuals are often in their 30s and 40s (Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2020; Walsh & Krienert, 2023), married (Wilson et al., 1995), and often premeditate this family murder (Johnson, 2023; Mailloux, 2014). The offenders are habitually abusive and domineering during the relationship, they are often survivors of a childhood plagued with adverse experiences, and their physical violence increases in severity to the point of lethality (Buiten, 2022; Johnson, 2023; Johnson & Sachmann, 2018; Reece, 2022; Stith & Amanor-Boadu, 2010). Additionally, unemployment, mental illness, engagement in criminality, and substance and alcohol abuse are not uncommon among perpetrators (Aho et al., 2017; Armeanu, 2020; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008). For instance, a history of criminality among familicide offenders was found in Canada (Boyd et al., 2024) and most (59%) of the cases in the USA (Liem et al., 2013), but this history was very rare in Switzerland (Frei & Ilic, 2020). Regarding mental illness, for example, in England and Wales, 62% of offenders were reported to have mental health problems at the time of the familicide (Flynn et al., 2016). Put together, this implies that mental illness, criminal engagement, and substance abuse are risk factors for familicide.

As stated earlier, women and children dominate as victims in this gendered crime. Victim ages can range from months to over 90 years old, with the average adult victim in their late 30s (Frei & Ilic, 2020; Liem et al., 2013). In domestic settings, women have an eight-time likelihood of being murdered by their male partner (Stith & Amanor-Boadu, 2010). Child victims tend to be stepchildren with a mean age of 12 years, and no significant gender differences (Liem et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 1995). It suggests that, regardless of sex, a child is likely to be killed in a familicide.

Model of Motivations for Familicide

Partner-relational conflicts appear to dominate motives for familicides in heterosexual relationships (Karlsson et al., 2021; Mailloux, 2014). Mailloux (2014) proposes four motivations for familicides: suicide (suicide-by-proxy), revenge (murder-by-proxy), control, and immortality. In suicide-by-proxy the family is part of the offender's process of death by suicide (Liem, 2020). This is often motivated by the need to shield the family from perceived dire economic hardship in his absence, and suicide is observed in 50% to 70% of familicides (Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2020; Wilson et al., 1995). The perpetrator, as a patriarch, believes the family's continued existence is not possible in his absence, and he is therefore saving them from the stigma or shame of a household head who killed himself. Johnson (2023, p. 153) refers to this as the 'perpetrator's crisis of shame'. Murder-by-proxy is often motivated by anger and a sense of betrayal, which motivates a punitive approach in the face of, for example, divorce or relationship termination, and/or perceived or real infidelity (Levittan, 2022; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Liem et al., 2013; Tosini, 2020). Children are often seen as co-conspirators and therefore deserving of a similar fate (Mailloux, 2014).

In control as a motive, Mailloux posits that the murder of children is a final act of control driven by the offender's 'if I can't have them, no one can' reason and often in service of pacifying fears of abandonment. According to Johnson (2023, p. 153), this is the 'perpetrator's crisis of abandonment'. The familicidal individual translates this as loss of both control and decision-making power in the relationship (Liem, 2020). In immortality, children are murdered to keep the family unit intact in its current form (Mailloux, 2014).

Believing that death is better than living miserably, often because of drastic and sudden change, usually economically, and they can't sustain their quality of living (Packard, 2024). This creates a sense of desperation and a need to protect the children from such consequences (Mailloux, 2014; Packard, 2024).

Weapons Used in Familicides

The weapons used in family murders are varied and often context-informed. The use of weapons during partner-relational conflicts is an indicator of future familicide risk (Stith & Amanor-Boadu, 2010). The use of firearms was observed in Canada (Boyd et al., 2024), it was predominant in Switzerland and Italy (Frei & Ilic, 2020; Tosini, 2020), and in 20% of cases specific to Milan (Vignali et al., 2023). Bladed instruments, bare hands, blunt objects, strangulation, and suffocation were other common weapons (Aho et al., 2017; Armeanu, 2020; Behera et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2024; Liem et al., 2013). In the African context, there is a severe shortage of specific studies on familicide. However, studies on weapons used in family murder on the continent include firearms, machetes, and knives in Ghana (Adinkrah, 2014), and firearms, axes, poisoning, hanging, and stabbing in South Africa (Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023; Roberts et al., 2010).

Context of eSwatini

eSwatini is a landlocked, lower-middle-income country with 1.2 million people and an agriculture-based economy (Manana, 2019; UNICEF, 2023). The country faces high poverty (58%), unemployment (24%), and inequality (UNICEF, 2022, 2023). extreme poverty (20%), with rates doubling for women and youth (49%) who predominantly reside in rural areas (UNICEF, 2023). Economic hardship drives migration for employment, resulting in family separation and episodic infidelity.

eSwatini legally recognizes both Swazi Law and Custom (allows polygamy), and Civil Rites marriages (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). Traditional gender roles persist, with authentic womanhood tied to marriage, fidelity, and childbearing – expressed through “*sowungumuntfu kenyalo*” (you are now a real person) upon marriage and childbirth (Mthembu, 2018; Nyawo, 2014). Male children are preferred for lineage continuation, while men are perceived predominantly as providers and protectors, with their promiscuity, considered more acceptable for men than women (Daly, 2001; Nxumalo, 1999; Simelane, 2011). The saying ‘*umfati sibili uyabeketela*’ (‘a real wife/woman endures’) reflects tolerance for male infidelity and abuse (Chemhaka et al., 2023; Daly, 2001; Malangwane, 2006). These systemic practices are disempowering social agents for females (Brännmark, 2022). Domestic violence disproportionately affects women, with intimate partner femicide highly prevalent (Adinkrah, 2023, 2024; Fielding-Miller et al., 2021; Gule, 2024). Some women endorse wife beating based on age, education, and socioeconomic status, suggesting the need for education and economic empowerment (Chemhaka et al., 2023; Klomegah, 2019).

Suicidality is prevalent, with police reporting 147 murders and 133 suicides from January to November 2023 (Mazibuko, 2023; Motsa et al., 2021; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2020). Murder rates fluctuated from 494 attempted/completed murders (April 2022 - January 2023) to 403 (January 2023 - April 2024), often attributed to substance abuse, gender-based violence, and family conflicts (S. Dlamini, 2024). However, crime statistics often lack offender-victim relationship details, obscuring familicide identification despite multiple family murder incidents.

Method

This descriptive retrospective study utilized newspaper articles and court records as data sources. Use of these sources of data in family murder has precedents (Adinkrah, 2024; Moen & Shon, 2021; Tosini, 2020). The researcher acknowledges that newspaper articles are in no way comprehensive of the country's familicide incidents, though generally, familicides receive extensive media attention. However, these reports provide rich and valuable data that can help inform intervention efforts. The two major national newspapers, Times of eSwatini (www.times.co.sz) and eSwatini Observer (new.observer.org.sz), have a daily circulation and a combined readership of over 300,000. Online archives were available from 2009, which influenced the search period beginning in 2009. Data collection began in July 2024, this resulted in exploring familicides between 2009 – June 2024. Online archives of these newspapers were searched using the terms: ‘familicide’, ‘family murder/ed’, ‘family killed’, ‘gender-based violence murder’, ‘husband/father/boyfriend kills/murders’, ‘wife/mother/girlfriend kills/murders’, ‘murder/ed, child/partner’, and ‘family annihilated’. If both newspapers reported on the same familicide, they were both read but counted as one case. This proved useful when one newspaper had incomplete information, such as age, which another source then supplied. Offender names mentioned in newspaper reports were also searched in the court database to avoid repetition.

To ensure focus, the author excluded cases where the offender was a hired killer of a current or former partner. Similarly, if the murder or attempted murder solely involved the current/former spouse/partner or only the children, it was not included. The focus was on cases where an attempted murder or murder was committed against a current or former spouse/partner, and at least one biological or stepchild; offender suicidality was or was not present; the child victim was younger than 18 years; and both adult victims and offenders were included regardless of gender, age, or occupational status. In the newspaper databases from 2009 – June 2024, 19 familicide cases were found.

Court records have also been used as valid sources of data by researchers (Frei & Ilic, 2020; Tomas et al., 2021). The country's courts have a high backlog of cases (Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, 2023). This often means that even if reported by the newspapers, cases take years to be on the court roll. Additionally, newspapers may report earlier about sentencing before the case is uploaded on the court's open access database. Therefore, as a safety measure and to avoid repetition, the names of offenders as reported by newspapers were entered in the court cases database in case they had since been enrolled in court or uploaded onto the database. The court records were accessed from the open access database of eSwatini's legal information institute (www.swazilii.co.sz). Unlike the newspaper archives, the database of court cases allows for the use of Boolean operators, AND, OR, and NOT (Owan, 2022). The Boolean operators were used in some searches in the following manner: 'familicide', 'family AND murder', 'family killed OR murdered', 'gender-based violence AND murder', 'husband OR father OR boyfriend AND murders', 'wife OR mother OR girlfriend AND murders', 'murder AND child OR partner', and 'family AND annihilated'. Five court cases that fit the definition of familicide and the inclusion criteria were found. Put together (19 newspaper articles and five court cases), the 24 cases in this study are from 2009 – June 2024.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Inductive Content Analysis (ICA). This analysis often involves, but is not limited to, text-based documents such as newspapers, court records, academic articles, and/or policies (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The analysis is developed inductively from immersion in the text and its content, as opposed to having predetermined categories (Kynge, 2020). To ensure reliability and trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was achieved using multiple sources (newspaper articles and court records), which allowed for cross-verification of case details and helped ensure completeness and accuracy of information. Second, a systematic and transparent coding process was maintained throughout the analysis, with detailed documentation of coding decisions and category development. Third, consistency in coding was monitored by revisiting earlier coded cases after the development of the coding framework to ensure uniform application of categories across all 24 cases.

The ICA was guided by the following steps suggested by Vears and Gillam (2022): 1. Reading and familiarizing with data; 2. First-round coding – identifying big picture units. This step entailed identifying and labelling data in relation to the broad meaning; 3. Second-round coding – developing subcategories from the big picture units and fine-grained codes; 4. Refining the fine-grained subcategories. Subcategories were compared and refined; some were integrated due to similarity, and others were established as independent categories – this iterative process involved systematic comparison across all cases to ensure consistent application of categories and to verify that the emergent themes were adequately represented across the dataset; and 5. Synthesis and interpretation. Synthesis and interpretation (step 5) connected the categories, resulting in a developed narrative explaining familicides within the study context. The use of rich, descriptive case synopses (Table 1) provides transparency and allows readers to assess the credibility of interpretations drawn from the data. The ICA resulted in the following categories: offender and victim socio-demographics; spatial characteristics; motivations; methods and weapons; and court sentences.

Results

The results are presented as follows: offender and victim socio-demographics, contributing factors to the familicide, and the weapons used. The following table, Table 1, is a brief synopsis of the 24 cases.

Table 1. Synopsis of Familicide Cases in eSwatini, 2009 – June 2024.

| Case | Synopsis |
|------|--|
| 1 | The husband, 34, was abusive, and his wife wanted to end the relationship and take their two children. He hacked her with a bush knife, forced the children to drink a pesticide, which he also ingested. There were no survivors. |

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| 2 | The husband, unemployed and supported by his wife, was heard arguing earlier in the day. Reasons for the argument are unknown. Later, he locked himself, his wife and children (5 & 3), in a room and set it alight. Their screams led to their rescue by neighbours who broke down the door. They all survived. |
| 3 | The boyfriend, who was historically abusive, had his marriage proposal rejected by the girlfriend. He stabbed her and their two-year-old child with a spear. He then ingested a pesticide and died. The mother and child were in hospital when the story was reported. |
| 4 | The wife was abdicating the relationship and had her bags packed. The husband, 29, poured petrol on himself, the wife, and their 18-month-old child as they tried to leave. Neighbours, alarmed by screams, intervened before he ignited his family. They all survived. |
| 5 | The former boyfriend randomly showed up at the victim's home demanding they reconcile. She refused, he kicked and punched her, but she managed to escape. He proceeded to attack their 10-year-old daughter with an axe and killed her. The perpetrator was on the run when the story was reported. |
| 6 | A conflict, whose source is unknown, is reported to have ensued between the husband and wife. He attacked her with a machete, and she managed to escape to her neighbours. The husband then kicked and stomped their 4-year-old son, who died, before giving chase to his wife. He hacked three neighbours' children before being subdued. All the children died. |
| 7 | The boyfriend, 39, hacked his girlfriend and child, 3, with a knife. He was reported to have been extremely angry at the time, although the source of the anger is unknown. The girlfriend escaped, and the child survived. He was arrested. |
| 8 | Using a bush knife, the boyfriend hacked his girlfriend, 28, (a wife to someone else and a neighbour) after she ended the relationship that day. She died. The girlfriend's 13-year-old son tried to intervene and was stabbed but survived. The boyfriend then swallowed the weevil tablet in a suicide attempt but survived. |
| 9 | The boyfriend, 21, came home drunk and quarrelled with the girlfriend. He punched and kicked her, then throttled their three-week-old child. |
| 10 | The boyfriend, 30, suspected his girlfriend of infidelity. He stabbed her with a knife, and she died. He then stabbed his 5-year-old stepson, who witnessed the murder of his mother and was crying for her. The child died. He was arrested. |
| 11 | The husband, 36, is reported to have randomly accused his wife of being unfaithful and began stabbing her. Believing she was deceased; he strangled their 4-month-old child and stabbed the child in the neck. The child died, the mother survived, he was arrested. |
| 12 | A former partner came across the former girlfriend and their child, 3. He immediately punched and kicked the former girlfriend, then kicked and trampled on the child. This was soon after he received a court order to pay child support. |
| 13 | The husband was abusive, and the wife had left their marital home. He realized reconciliation talks were failing, so he stabbed his wife, who died, then fed their 5-year-old child pesticide. He also ingested the pesticide and died. The child survived. |
| 14 | Husband was historically abusive; they had police reports and proceedings within traditional structures. Prior to the familicide, the wife had fled her marital home to stay with relatives, so he followed her. At the relative's residence, he hacked and killed her with a bush knife. He hacked their child, who managed to escape and survive. He was arrested. |
| 15 | The former boyfriend wanted to rekindle the relationship with the mother of their two children, 2 & 5. She refused. He then broke into their new residence, poured petrol as they slept, and set it alight. They all died. He was subsequently arrested. |
| 16 | A 19-year-old, historically abusive boyfriend suspected his girlfriend of infidelity with her first child's father and assaulted her. Following the assault, on her way to report to the police, he ambushed her, slitting her throat and concealing her body. He then suffocated their 8-month-old, claiming the child was "making noise". He was subsequently arrested. |
| 17 | A former boyfriend's history of domestic abuse led to the girlfriend leaving the relationship. They had two children, 2 & 7. On the day of the familicide, he had come to fetch the children as it was his weekend with them, he asked, and she refused to reconcile their relationship. That evening, he forced the children to ingest acid from a car battery, then returned to the former girlfriend's one-room residence where she was sleeping, poured petrol, and set it alight. The children died, the former girlfriend survived, and he was arrested. |
| 18 | The boyfriend, who was married to someone else, suspected the girlfriend of infidelity. He is reported to have seen her walking with another man who turned back as she was about to reach her home. Upon witnessing this, he stabbed her with a spear, and she died. He proceeded to her family home and attempted to stab her child, but she was protected by an uncle. He was arrested. |
| 19 | A former boyfriend, with whom she had one child, wanted to rekindle the relationship, and she refused. At the time, she had a two-week-old baby from her current relationship. Following the refusal, he stomped and stabbed the two-week-old, who died. He then struck the former girlfriend, 26, with an axe, bludgeoned |

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| | her with a hammer, and stabbed her with a knife, and she died. After his escape, he was later found to have died by suicide. |
| 20 | The boyfriend, 43, who was married to someone else, did not accept that the girlfriend wanted to end the relationship. He tied her up, assaulted her with a bush knife, and left her to die, but she survived. He then took her two children, 6 months and 5 years, and flung them over a cliff. They died. Following his arrest, it emerged he had murdered a former partner. |
| 21 | The girlfriend, 18, discovered that the boyfriend, with whom they had a 10-month-old, impregnated someone else. She wanted to end their relationship, but he refused and became less financially supportive, and the domestic abuse worsened. On the day of the familicide, she poured petrol where her boyfriend and child were sleeping and set it alight. The child died, and the boyfriend was in critical condition. She reported an intention to die as well but could not when she heard their screams. |
| 22 | The former boyfriend, 34, had received a child support order for their 21-month-old. He then went to the residence of the former girlfriend and stabbed the child first, then her. They both survived. He was arrested. |
| 23 | Her husband, who was historically abusive in this polygamous marriage, suspected her of infidelity with a church member following the church's offer to build them a home. The police and the church were aware of the ongoing domestic violence. On the day of the familicide, he hacked her with a spade, doused their shack in paraffin, and set it alight. She was rescued by their 13-year-old child, who was also attacked when he tried to intervene and suffered third-degree burns. They both survived. |
| 24 | The former boyfriend, who was emotionally and verbally abusive, wanted to reconcile and live together with their two children. She refused. He went to their residence and strangled the former girlfriend, who managed to escape and survive. He then moved to the children's bedroom and poured petrol on the floor, then set it alight. The children were rescued by neighbours. He was arrested. |

Offender Socio-demographics

Table 2 below presents the sociodemographic characteristics of perpetrators of familicide in eSwatini between 2009 and June 2024 as reported in the newspapers and according to electronic court records.

Table 2. Characteristics of Familicide Perpetrators

| Characteristics | No (%) |
|------------------------------|---------|
| Total cases | 24(100) |
| Gender | |
| Female | 1(4) |
| Male | 23(96) |
| Suicidality | |
| Survived Attempt | 1(4) |
| Died by Suicide | 4(17) |
| Employment status | |
| Employed | 13(54) |
| Unemployed | 3(13) |
| Undisclosed | 8(33) |
| Relationship to Adult Victim | |
| Wife | 9(38) |
| Former Partner | 7(29) |
| Girlfriend | 5(21) |
| Boyfriend | 1(4) |
| Mistress (Affair) | 2(8) |
| Relationship to Child Victim | |
| Father | 19(79) |
| Stepfather | 4(17) |
| Mother | 1(4) |

All the 24 offenders in this study were emaSwati (plural for Swati people), 23 (96%) males and one female. 79% (19) of offenders were biological fathers, and four were stepparents. The disclosed ages indicate that the youngest offender is 18 years old, the eldest is 43, and the average familicide offender appears to be 29.5 years old. Regarding relationship status, 38% (nine) of the offenders were married, seven in civil rites marriage and two in polygamous marriages. 29% (seven) were former partners, 25% (six) were in a relationship but not married, and two were reported to be engaged in an affair.

Regarding employment, there were 13 (54%) employed offenders, three unemployed and eight (33%) whose employment status was undisclosed. In this study, offenders who were reported to be engaged in cannabis farming, which is illegal in eSwatini, were considered self-employed due to the prevalence of this practice as a means for economic access and livelihood (Hlatshwayo, 2023). Disclosed occupations included being in the armed forces, a cannabis farmer, a woodcutter, a factory worker, and a groundsman. The criminal history of offenders was highlighted in two cases. In one case, the offender was out on bail for the murder of his previous girlfriend, while in the other case, the offender confessed to having killed a former partner. However, it is not clear if the offender was ever convicted for this murder. There were five (21%) familicide-suicide cases, and they all used poison (pesticides), Master 900, and the weevil tablet. Four (17%) of the five familicide-suicides resulted in death.

Victim Socio-demographics

Most familicides were committed in the domestic environment, such as the victim's apartment, marital home, victim's parental home, and a road near a home. Table 3 below shows some characteristics of child and adult victims in eSwatini between 2009 and June 2024

Table 3. Characteristics of Child and Adult Victims

| Characteristics | No. (%) |
|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Total cases | 59 (100) |
| Total Child Victims | 35 (59% of 59) |
| Female | 17 |
| Male | 18 |
| Age Groups of Child Victims | |
| 0 – 12 months | 6(17) |
| 1 – 5 yrs | 18(51) |
| 6 – 10 yrs | 5(14) |
| 11 – 15 yrs | 2(6) |
| Not Disclosed | 4(11) |
| Mortality of Child Victims | |
| Deceased | 20(57) |
| Survived | 15(43) |
| Total Adult Victims | 24(41% of 59) |
| Female | 23(39) |
| Male | 1(2) |
| Mortality of Adult Victims | |
| Deceased | 8(33) |
| Survived | 16(67) |

The 24 offenders had a total of 59 victims, which averages approximately 2.5 victims per offender. Additionally, these cases were over 15 years, which suggests 1.6 cases and 3.9 victims per year. There were 35 (59%) child victims, 23 (39%) female adult victims, and one male adult victim. Of the 35 child victims, 18 were males, and 17 were females. The youngest child victim was two weeks old, the eldest was 13 years old, and the average child victim age is 4.1 years old. 16 familicide cases involved one child, and eight involved more than one child. There were 20 (57%) deceased child victims, and 15 (43%) who survived the familicide attempt.

Among the 24 adult victims, the youngest was 18 years old, and the eldest disclosed age was 27 years. Due to the limited number of ages provided for adult victims, working out the average victim age proved challenging. The employment status of adult victims was often not disclosed. Disclosed employment included being a street vendor, a shop assistant, a factory worker, and a domestic worker. Regarding mortality, 16 (67%) adult victims survived the familicide attempt, while eight (33%) were deceased.

Contributing Factors to Familicide

Due to the complexity of establishing motivation without interviewing the perpetrators, the reported motivations will be considered as contributing factors. Partners perceived intention to end a relationship was a contributing factor in most (nine, 38%) cases. The second most common factor was *suspected* infidelity in five (21%) cases. This was followed by four (17%) cases where former partners refused to rekindle the

relationship. Court-ordered child maintenance was a contributing factor in two cases, and in one case, was the partner turning down a marriage proposal. In three cases, the contributing factors were not clear due to death by suicide. Further, most of the relationships were marked by a history of abuse by the perpetrator, especially physical and verbal.

Weapons Used

Familicides were committed using a combination of methods and weapons. Methods included hacking, body limbs (arms and legs), stabbing, arson, throat slitting, bludgeoning, throwing over a cliff, and poisoning. Hacking was involved in nine cases using a bush knife, axe, machete, and spade. These weapons are intended for farming or gardening. Stabbing, employed in eight cases, was the second most common method, using a knife (six cases) or spear (two cases). Body limbs and arson were equally utilized in seven cases each. Offenders weaponized their body limbs to kick, stomp, punch, throw, strangle, and suffocate victims. All seven arson cases included the use of petrol, clothes, and paraffin as accelerants. This was suggestive of an intention to cause damage in the quickest time. Poisoning was in six cases, five of which were familicide-suicide cases. The poisons included Master900 and Weevil tablets.

Discussion

This study explored characteristics of familicide in eSwatini. There were universally aligned findings and culture-specific factors that contributed to familicide. Like other settings, familicides were rare but deadly and often lacked official statistics (Johnson, 2023). With an average of 1.6 familicides and 3.9 victims annually, eSwatini's rate is high relative to its 1.2 million population. Similar to other global contexts, most familicides occurred in domestic environments (Gallup-Black, 2005), reinforcing the duality of the family home as a source of lethal threat and a place of safety.

Consistent with international research, 96% of perpetrators were male (Boyd et al., 2024; Liem, 2020), supporting the assertion that familicide is a gendered form of violence. Most perpetrators were married to their adult victims, aligning with previous research that partner-relational problems are a risk factor (Karlsson et al., 2021; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008). The average offender age of 29.5 years is similar to other settings of offenders being in their 30s and 40s (Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2020; Walsh & Krienert, 2023). This finding implies that middle adulthood is the most likely period for committing familicide. Criminal histories were evident in two cases, contrary to studies that report familicidal offenders rarely had prior violent offending (Boyd et al., 2024; Liem et al., 2013; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008).

Unlike 50%-70% of cases in other settings (Aho et al., 2017; Karlsson et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 1995), only 21% of cases in eSwatini involved familicide-suicides. Given this, it is plausible to suggest that the majority of familicidal offenders in this study were not suicidal. All offenders of familicide-suicides used pesticide as poison, unlike other settings where firearms were utilized (Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2020; Wilson et al., 1995). This difference may be linked to eSwatini's farming practices, where pesticides are easily available and accessible. There is a need for suicide prevention as part of broader efforts in familicide mitigation.

Child victims in eSwatini were mostly (80%) biological children, unlike some settings, which indicated stepchildren as predominant victims (Brewer & Paulsen, 1999; Liem et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 1995). This appears to align with the motivation assertion that children are perceived as co-conspirators with the mother (Mailloux, 2014). The average age of child victims (4.1 years) was far lower than the average reported in other contexts (12 years) (Liem et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 1995), raising important considerations for localized interventions. Mortality of child victims is influenced by a complex interplay of infrastructural and resource challenges often observed in developing nations. These include the choice of weapon, which influences mortality rates; location, which is often a rural domestic setting far from health facilities; healthcare limitations – healthcare facilities are often limited in personnel and equipment; and emergency response constraints – a shortage of ambulances and poor road infrastructure hinders timely medical intervention. These findings highlight how socioeconomic factors and infrastructure development can play crucial roles in determining familicide-related mortality, aspects that may be overlooked in studies from more developed regions.

Abusive relationships, often involving physical and verbal violence committed by males, are a precursor to familicide, which echoes findings that characterize it as a form of gender-based and domestic violence (Buiten, 2022). Perpetrators are habitually abusive to the point of murder (Johnson, 2023; Stith & Amanor-Boadu, 2010). Adult victims in this study were often stabbed or hacked, with survival dependent on their ability to defend themselves, escape, or if the perpetrator believed them deceased. These findings suggests

a need to capacitate socio-legal and law enforcement institutions to intervene in domestic disputes to prevent escalation to familicides.

Prior to the familicide, victims sought assistance from perceived safe havens including police, churches, and traditional structures – yet these institutions often proved ineffective due to victims retracting complaints, inadequate police training and resources (see Eswatini News Reporter, 2024), and the cyclic nature of violence where offenders seek forgiveness only to resume the behaviour (Ezer et al., 2007). Traditional judicial processes often uphold gender inequalities due to their reliance on traditional laws and customs in marriage and minor criminal disputes (see Rex v Nkambule, 2013; Sanders, 1986). Similarly, religious institutions in this study often advocated forgiveness and preservation of the marital union, potentially compromising victim safety in domestic disputes. These institutions need to be capacitated to mitigate reported domestic violence, as it precedes familicide. It is noteworthy that recent progress has been made with the establishment of the country's first two shelters for survivors of GBV in 2021 (CDC, 2021), significantly contributing to the resources available in combating domestic violence, a known risk factor for familicide.

A primary contributing factor to familicide in eSwatini was a woman's attempt to end a relationship, which aligns with findings in other settings (Karlsson et al., 2021; Tosini, 2020). This suggests that relationship transitions are risky periods. This is consistent with the murder-by-proxy motivation where anger and a sense of betrayal are experienced and result in punitive measures (Levittan, 2022; Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Liem et al., 2013; Tosini, 2020). The exercise of agency by adult victims, like ending or refusing to rekindle a relationship, is particularly dangerous, amplified by the sociocultural perception of women as minors lacking decision-making power (Mthembu, 2018; Simelane, 2011). This underscores the need to implement programs that challenge harmful gender norms and promote equitable relationships. While the specific norms may vary by culture, the approach of addressing gender inequality as a root cause of familicide has universal applicability. Additionally, service providers such as nurses, pastors, social workers, psychologists, and community health motivators (referred to as *bacugcuteli* in eSwatini) (Brear et al., 2019), must standardize exploring partner-relational challenges when rendering services.

The second contributing factor to familicide in eSwatini was *suspected* infidelity, which was like findings in other contexts (Levittan, 2022; Liem, 2020; Mailloux, 2014). Suspected infidelity, as a risk factor for familicide, is often influenced by norms regarding masculinity and control (Wilson et al., 1995). There is a need to explore the mechanisms underlying the role of infidelity suspicion in familicide acts. This would inform contextual prevention and intervention initiatives regarding familicide. In eSwatini, culturally, husbands are considered unfaithful only if the woman is married, while infidelity for wives involves anyone who is not their husband (Ezer et al., 2007; Nxumalo, 1999). The inequality inherent in this socio-cultural practice demonstrates the need for culture-specific understanding of the role of suspected infidelity in familicide.

Familicides also resulted when a former partner refused to rekindle a relationship, often linked to the offender's abusive history and substance abuse – a global pattern (Aho et al., 2017; Buiten, 2022; de Ruiter, 2013). Familicide may present a final attempt to regain control (Liem, 2020). As indicated earlier, this further echoes a global need to intervene in domestic abuse and to establish affordable and accessible rehabilitation centres and support groups. Additionally, one can postulate that the attempt to rekindle a relationship is motivated by the offenders experiencing sociocultural shame attached to being deserted by a wife and child/ren (Simelane, 2011). In eSwatini, experiencing sociocultural shame and the perception that one has 'lost' respectability, and is so treated, is referred to as *'kulablekelwa sitfuntl'*. *Kulablekelwa* is losing something/someone. *Sitfuntl* has connotations of social influence, dignity, stature, and respectability (Golomski, 2018). It is not merely dignity. *Sitfuntl* can be earned with marriage or a stable relationship, and it can be lost by dissolution of the same (Murray, 2015). Given that human beings are inherently social (Attig, 2021), it is plausible that the attempt to rekindle a relationship is an attempt to regain *sitfuntl*. If *sitfuntl* is regained, so is the resumption of social worth. This demonstrates how culturally specific concepts of social worth and shame can influence familicidal behaviour, suggesting the need for culturally informed interventions.

Only one female was found to have been familicidal, which is aligned with findings from other settings (Liem, 2020). Like other settings, she was reportedly motivated by a history of being abused in the relationship and economic dependence (Adinkrah, 2000), demonstrating the economic challenges skewed towards women in eSwatini (UNICEF, 2023). Therefore, it is important to address economic inequalities and dependencies that can trap victims in abusive relationships. In eSwatini, it would also disarm the local perception that an authentic woman endures all things (Malangwane, 2006). While the specific economic

challenges may differ, economic empowerment of women as a protective factor against familicide is likely universal.

Multiple methods and weapons were employed in the commission of these familicides, which align with findings from other contexts (Adinkrah, 2014; Aho et al., 2017; Armeanu, 2020; Karlsson et al., 2021; Liem & Reichelmann, 2014; Moen & Bezuidenhout, 2023). Unlike in countries such as Canada, Italy, and Switzerland, where firearms were commonly used (Boyd et al., 2024; Frei & Ilic, 2020; Tosini, 2020), no firearms were used in the cases in eSwatini. Instead, readily available tools like bush knives, farming implements, and pesticides were common weapons. Owning a licensed firearm is a rigorous process in eSwatini, which might account for the lack of firearm-offended familicides. This highlights the need for culture-specific risk assessment and prevention strategies.

Implications for Intervention Programs and Risk Assessment in eSwatini

The findings of this study have direct implications for developing contextualized intervention strategies in eSwatini. First, risk assessment tools for familicide should integrate both universal risk factors (e.g., history of domestic violence, substance abuse, unemployment) and culturally specific elements identified in this study, such as threats to *sifjunti* (social dignity), refusal to reconcile relationships, and suspected infidelity within the context of gender-asymmetric cultural norms. Second, intervention programs must target multiple institutional levels: training law enforcement officers to recognize escalating patterns of domestic violence as precursors to familicide; equipping religious leaders and traditional authorities with protocols that prioritize victim safety over relationship preservation; and establishing standardized screening procedures for service providers (nurses, social workers, psychologists, and *bagcugcuteli*) to routinely assess partner-relational challenges and domestic violence history. Third, given the prevalence of pesticide use in familicide-suicides, regulatory measures controlling pesticide acquisition, storage, and access are essential prevention strategies. Finally, economic empowerment programs specifically targeting women can address the economic dependencies that trap victims in abusive relationships, thereby reducing vulnerability to familicide. These multilayered interventions must be implemented collectively to effectively reduce familicide incidence in eSwatini.

Limitations and Recommendations of the Study

There is the potential of inherent bias in news reports. Motivation for the familicides is difficult to determine because the perpetrators were not interviewed. The study only included familicide cases from electronic sources, and a specific period was investigated. Future studies should interview the familicide perpetrators to determine their motivations and perceptions of relationships. Additionally, other retrospective studies should use other sources that may not be electronically available, such as hard copies of newspapers and court records. Lastly, future studies should explore the rehabilitation processes that familicide offenders are exposed to within correctional services.

Conclusion

To enhance familicide prevention and intervention, we need to understand both universal patterns and cultural specificities. This involves developing familicide risk assessment tools that merge both universal risk factors and culturally specific elements. Such an approach could result in more accurate predictions and improved gender-based violence intervention across cultural contexts. Since people often seek help from various institutions before familicide occurs, it is crucial to capacitate law enforcement, religious institutions, and traditional community structures to effectively address reports of domestic and gender-based violence. Additionally, regulating the acquisition and storage of pesticides in eSwatini is necessary to reduce incidents of familicide.

Declarations

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