



**FEMINICIDES REPORTED BY THE BRAZILIAN MEDIA IN THE FIRST YEAR  
OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**FEMINICÍDIOS REPORTADOS PELA MÍDIA BRASILEIRA NO PRIMEIRO ANO  
DA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19**

**FEMINICIDIOS REPORTADOS POR LOS MEDIOS BRASILEÑOS EN EL PRIMER  
AÑO DE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19**

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To analyze the cases of femicide in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic reported by the Brazilian media. **Method:** descriptive documentary of qualitative approach. Data collection was carried out in two Brazilian reporting portals in the period between March 11, 2020 and March 11, 2021. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the support of Excel® tool and qualitative data were subjected to thematic content analysis with the support of webQDA software. **Results:** 346 reports were found revealing the characteristics of the crime, the victims, the relationship with aggressors and two empirical categories. **Conclusions:** The relevance of the journalistic media in giving visibility to the phenomenon was identified, revealing that these victims are women with a marital relationship with the aggressors and that the least safe place is their own home. The cases committed with women of white racial profile and with college degrees were privileged. **Descriptors:** Violence Against Women, Homicide, COVID-19.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Analisar os casos de feminicídio ocorridos durante o primeiro ano da pandemia de COVID-19 e reportados pela mídia brasileira. **Método:** documental descritivo de abordagem qualitativa. A coleta de dados foi realizada em dois portais de reportagens brasileiros no período entre 11 de março de 2020 e 11 de março de 2021. Os dados quantitativos foram analisados por meio de estatística descritiva com o apoio da ferramenta *Excel®* e os dados qualitativos foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo temática com apoio do *software* webQDA. **Resultados:** encontradas 346 reportagens revelando quanto as características do crime, das vítimas, vínculo com agressores e duas categorias empíricas. **Conclusões:** identificou-se a relevância da mídia jornalística em dar visibilidade ao fenômeno, revelar que estas vítimas são mulheres com relação conjugal com os agressores e que o local menos seguro é a própria casa. Privilegiou-se casos cometidos com mulheres de perfil racial branco e de curso superior.

**Descritores:** Violência contra Mulher, Homicídio, COVID-19.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Analizar los casos de femicidio en el primer año de la pandemia de COVID-19 reportados por los medios de comunicación brasileños. **Método:** documental descriptivo de enfoque cualitativo. La recolección de datos se realizó en dos portales de noticias brasileños en el período comprendido entre el 11 de marzo de 2020 y el 11 de marzo de 2021. Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron mediante estadísticas descriptivas con el apoyo de la herramienta Excel® y los datos cualitativos se sometieron a un análisis de contenido temático con el apoyo del software webQDA. **Resultados:** se encontraron 346 reportajes que revelan las características del crimen, las víctimas, el vínculo con los agresores y dos categorías empíricas. **Conclusiones:** se identificó la relevancia de los medios periodísticos en dar visibilidad al fenómeno, revelando que estas víctimas son mujeres con relación conyugal con los agresores y que el lugar menos seguro es el propio hogar. Se privilegiaron los casos cometidos con mujeres de perfil racial blanco y de curso superior.

**Descritores:** Violencia contra la Mujer, Homicidio, COVID-19.

## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a global phenomenon with a high incidence in Brazil, where one in three women of reproductive age has suffered physical or sexual violence from intimate partners.<sup>1</sup> It is a naturalized phenomenon, characteristic of a patriarchal society, marked by the exercise of male power over women, sustained by gender stereotypes that assign women roles associated with family, sensitivity, fragility and gentleness.<sup>2</sup> These stereotypes promote structural gender inequalities and often prevent women from being able to escape the violent processes to which they are subjected in their intimate relationships, which can culminate in its most serious form: femicide.

Femicide consists of situations in which a woman is murdered because she is a woman, and in most cases it affects women who are in relationships, or have left relationships, in which there have been previous episodes of domestic violence.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that globally, more than a third of homicides of women are committed by intimate partners.<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, the law that typifies cases of femicide was passed in 2015 and has given visibility to this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Social isolation as a containment measure for the spread of Covid-19 has been associated with an increase in cases of

domestic violence against women since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2022.<sup>5</sup> Countries such as Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States and France have reported an increase in cases of domestic violence during the first months of the coronavirus crisis.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way as in the international context, the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the occurrence of cases of domestic violence in Brazil has been noticed. In 2020, cases of femicide increased by 22% in 12 states of the federation compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>5</sup> This is possibly due to the increase in confinement time that women in situations of violence, especially domestic violence, spent with their aggressors, given that, at the beginning of the pandemic, one of the most effective measures to prevent the spread of the virus was social isolation.<sup>6</sup>

Home isolation led to an increase in the overload of gender roles imposed on women in terms of housework and childcare. During this period, Brazilian women reported higher levels of stress due to the pandemic, 50.9% more than men.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the economic impact of the pandemic on the lives of women in situations of violence must be considered. 61.8% of those who suffered violence in the last year had lost their family income.<sup>6</sup>

Financial instability and unemployment are

situations that reinforce women's economic dependence and the figure of the man as provider, serving as a source of aggressive behavior.<sup>5-2</sup>

In view of this, the media plays an important role in terms of visibility and collective construction on the subject of femicide. It can be seen that the media's approach to cases of femicide usually aims to inform about the crime, but also reinforces stereotypes that blame the victim of gender violence by treating the deaths in a disrespectful way, offering justifications for what happened, such as relationship crises or jealousy.<sup>8</sup>

The relevance of this research lies in showing the magnitude of the cases of femicide that have occurred since the pandemic was announced by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, through the portrayals of Brazilian media reports. This is justified since violence against women is a social and public health problem capable of causing physical, psychological and economic damage, and even death, which is the subject of this study. Thus, the research question of this study is: How were cases of femicide portrayed by the Brazilian media during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic?

## **OBJECTIVE**

To analyze the cases of femicide that occurred during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and were reported by the Brazilian media.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a documentary, descriptive study with a qualitative approach based on cases of femicide published by news portals since the COVID-19 pandemic was decreed.

The data was collected from Brazilian electronic news portals. Two portals were used for the research: P1 and P2. The portals were defined using data published by the Alexa ranking for 2021, a free service that lists the most accessed websites in the period. On the selected portals, the reports were searched using the search field of each portal with the keywords: femicide OR " violence against women" OR " gender violence" OR " domestic violence" AND " social isolation".

Reports on femicides that took place in Brazil from March 11, 2020, the day the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic, until March 13, 2021 were included, thus tracking data from the first year of the pandemic in the country, the period in which social isolation was most intense.<sup>1</sup> There was no need to define exclusion criteria. Duplicate reports were only counted once.

Data was collected using a semi-structured instrument built by the authors and adapted to Excel® to extract the following information: date of occurrence; city and state of occurrence; characterization of the woman

victim of violence, in terms of age, race/color and economic profile; existence of a protective measure; relationship with the aggressor; characteristics of the aggressor in terms of age; place of aggression; forms of aggression; motivation for the crime and outcome in relation to the aggressor.

The characterization of the reports included in the study was presented in tables and graphs, obtained in Excel®, with data distribution by frequency to order the numerical data with the arrangement in percentages.<sup>9</sup>

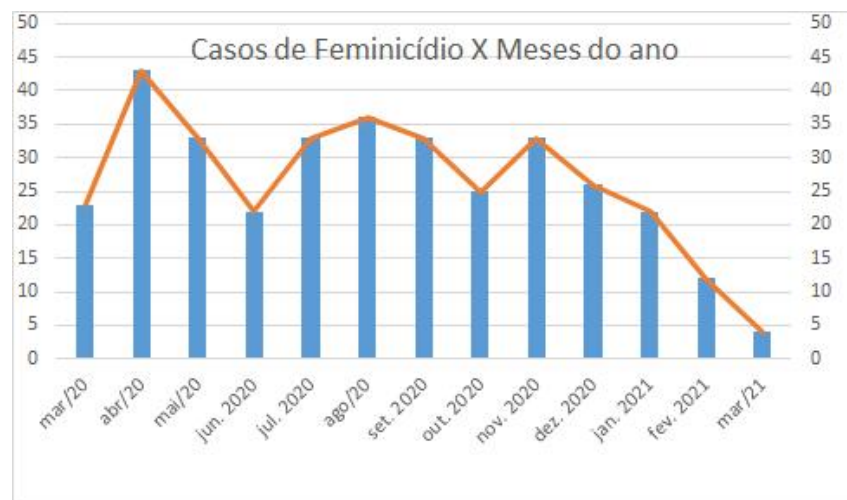
Qualitative data analysis was carried out using content analysis.<sup>10</sup> The webQDA software was used to support qualitative data analysis. Using the software, the empirical categories of this study emerged through the collection of internal sources of information from the reports.

This study did not need to be assessed by the Research Ethics Committee, as the data used was public and freely accessible. In this study, the names of the news portals surveyed were omitted and the coded nomenclature of the sources was used. The possible identification of the victims was preserved through anonymity.

## RESULTS

A total of 346 reports were selected, 298 in P1 and 48 in P2. April 2020 stood out for the largest number of publications (n=43). Graph 1 shows the number of publications in the 12 months analyzed and shows a downward trend in the number of cases reported by the Brazilian media from December 2020 onwards.

**GRAPH 1- FEMINICIDE CASES PER MONTHS**

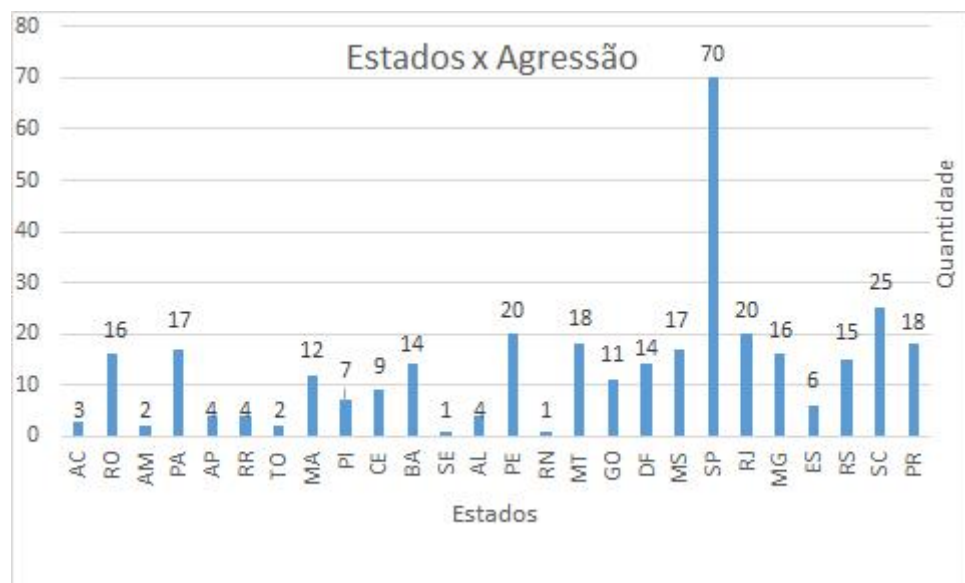


SOURCE: The author (2021).

Graph 2 highlights the prevalence of cases by state and shows that the Southeast region had the highest percentage of cases

analyzed (32%), followed by the Northeast region (20%). The lowest number of published cases was found in the North region (14%).

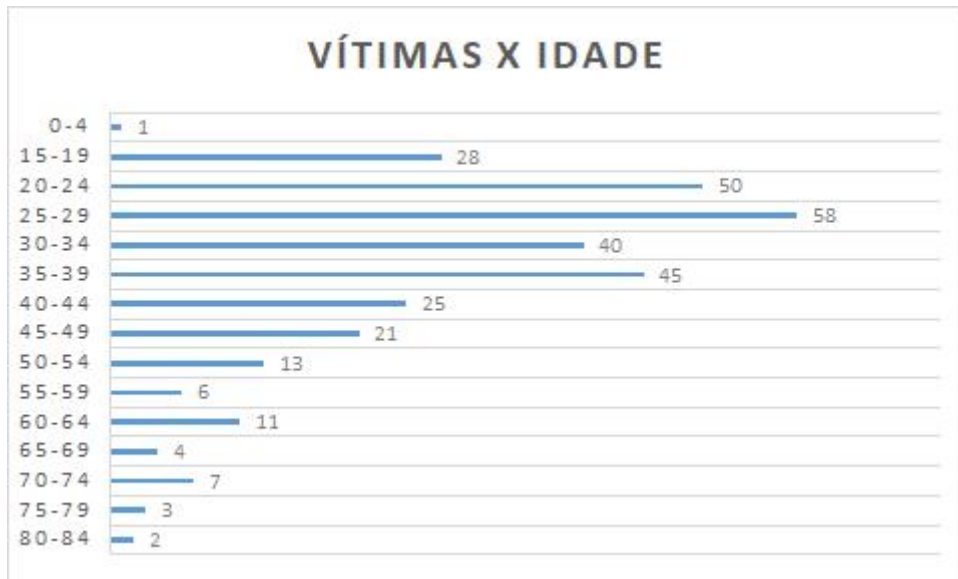
**GRAPH 2- AMOUNT OF AGGRESSION BY STATES**



SOURCE: The author (2021).

Regarding the location of the assault, 78.9% occurred in the victims' homes; in 8.3% of cases the crime occurred on public roads; in 4.3% it was in the aggressors' homes; 4% of femicides occurred inside a car and another 4.3% in other locations. The predominant means of committing the assaults was a sharp weapon (52.2%), followed by a firearm (22.2%) and strangulation/asphyxiation (7.2%).

The age group of working age was the most affected by crime, as shown in graph 3. Among the reports that brought the information, 43% of the victims were white and 10% were black. In 67 reports, the victims' professions were disclosed, 77.6% of whom had higher education degrees, such as doctors, judges, teachers, nurses, business professionals, dentists, political party candidates, among others.

**GRAPH 3 - AGE RANGE OF VICTIMS**

SOURCE: The author (2021).

About the bond between victims and aggressors, 30% of the reports identified the husband as the main perpetrator of the aggressions, followed by ex-husbands in 20.2% of cases; partners with 12.1%; boyfriends with 11.5% and ex-boyfriends with 9.8% of cases. In 2% of the reports analyzed, the children were the perpetrators of the violence.

Regarding the outcome of the aggressors, in 53.1% of the reports analyzed, the aggressor was arrested by the police and was awaiting trial, 27.7% of them were fugitives and in 10.1% of the situations the male aggressors committed suicide after committing the crime.

Among the 346 cases analyzed, in 10.9% the reader was informed that the

victims were under protective measures. Women who had filed a police report appeared in 6% of the cases.

The qualitative analysis of the data formed two empirical categories: 1- Expressions of male power over the victim of femicide; 2- The invisibility of the context of violence by society and the limits of protection networks for women in situations of violence.

In the first category, it was identified that female subordination, sustained by gender issues, such as non-acceptance of the end of the relationship, disrespect for sexual and reproductive rights and economic dependence, were determining factors in the occurrence of cases of femicide, as shown in the examples below:

He did not accept the end of the relationship. He stabbed his wife when she was going to announce the separation to her children and family (report no. 121).

"Jealousy and machismo. The victim's ex-boyfriend "felt like he owned her"; they talked about their relationship and argued after the young woman said she didn't want to get back together with him. The partner told the police that he strangled the young woman to "restrain her" and "ended up losing his sense of strength", the police chief reported " (report no. 297).

The following example demonstrates the feeling of loss of male power, as a justification for violent behavior and femicide.

"The victim was pregnant and the attacker wanted her to have an abortion and as she refused he committed the crime" (report no. 97).

Two news stories dealt with the appropriation of the female body by men through the belief that these women should not oppose having sexual relations, as identified in the following excerpt:

"Because the victim didn't want to have sex with him that day and because he was drunk. She didn't want to, she asked him to leave. He ended up slapping her in the face and then stabbing her twice. That's his version. He confessed, said the police officer report no. 204).

Furthermore, 10 reports highlighted financial issues as a motivation for cases of femicide, as highlighted in the following excerpts:

"Discussion because the victim did not want to share the emergency aid money offered by the government" (report no. 93).

"The woman didn't want to give her partner money to buy drugs" (report no. 169).

In the category "invisibility of the context of violence by society and limits of protection networks for women in situations of violence", it was possible to observe that there is a naturalization of family members, friends and neighbors in the face of episodes of violence that the victims suffered prior to the femicide. In addition, the limitation of the scope of the actions of official protection networks was identified, as demonstrated below:

"Neighbors reported that there was an argument. At first, she [the neighbor] thought "it was just a common couple's fight"

"There was no protective order. According to family members, the victim was afraid to go to the police and he would go after her" (report n° 23)

Even with the issuance of protective measures, some victims continued to suffer violence. The insufficiency of this resource as the only source of protection was



realized. protection of women in situations of violence.

"After being reported, she tried to move on with her life, but her ex wouldn't let her. She quit her job because of him. He would set up ambushes on the routes she came from. When it wasn't at the bus stop, he would follow her in his car" (report no. 20).

"I had requested a protective measure against the aggressor, and only received a response a month late" (report no. 204).

"Three days before she was killed, the victim filed a police report and was informed that she needed to go to the women's police station to request a protective order, but there was no time" (report no. 180).

## DISCUSSION

With more than two years of the Covid-19 pandemic underway, it is possible to see that the Coronavirus has reinforced, in addition to the health crisis, the crisis related to domestic violence against women in Brazil. Since the first days of social isolation, practice recommended by health authorities to contain the spread of the virus, in March 2020, there was a decrease in police reports of domestic violence. On the other hand, femicide increased during the period of social isolation, demonstrating that violence continued to occur, it just could not

be reported, in many situations.<sup>1</sup> For victims of domestic violence, home became the most dangerous place and isolated them from support networks.<sup>11</sup>

The results of this research show that the month of April 2020 corresponded to the period in which most cases of femicide were reported by the Brazilian media. This data is in line with research that demonstrated a 60% increase in emergency calls in the first months of isolation in the European Union.<sup>12</sup> This data is consistent with research carried out in Brazil that showed an increase in cases of femicide in several Brazilian states at the beginning of the pandemic period.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of 2020, as social isolation measures were reduced and specialized services for victims of violence were adapted, there was a decrease in the number of cases of lethal violence reported by the media. This is a reflection of the behavior of the crime in society and is probably due to the reduction in the time spent in prison with aggressors and the expansion of access to means of reporting, considering that in March 2021, the average rate of social isolation was 33.8%, almost half of what was recorded in the same period in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The data from this study are in line with national research which identified the home as the most unsafe place for women, the scene of approximately 50% of domestic violence cases recorded between 2020 and

2021. This shows that the home, a space associated with protection, security and leisure, takes on different meanings when reflected on gender figures. The symbolic construction that the home is the man's territory gives him the right to exercise control over women.<sup>1-13</sup>

Regarding the means used to commit feminicide, the results of this study showed that the use of a bladed weapon predominated, which can be justified by the fact that feminicide is, in most cases, perpetrated at home and after a series of violence suffered in which the aggressor uses the object within his reach to commit the crime.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it represents a way for men to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, attributing to violence a disciplinary meaning or as a sign of virility at its maximum potential.<sup>14</sup>

It is known that feminicide occurs in all age groups, however, in the results of this study, young women of reproductive age, inserted in the labor market, predominated. This data sheds light on the difficulty in breaking the cycle of violence. It is assumed that feminicide occurs after successive cases of violence and that the idealization of romantic love contributes to women remaining in abusive relationships because they feel responsible for taking care of the relationship, in addition to illusion of a possible behavioral change of the

aggressor.<sup>13</sup> Other factors such as the lack of information and knowledge about their rights and about support networks, feelings of fear about the increase in already existing violent behavior, guilt and shame, economic dependence to raise children and the lack of access and/or trust in support services for women in situations of violence are reported in the literature as issues that reinforce the permanence of women in abusive relationships.<sup>15-16</sup>

It was identified that cases of femicide against white women who occupy important positions in the job market receive more media coverage. White women are naturally portrayed as having a safe home and a solid relationship, but the opposite is shocking. Black women who are victims of femicide account for more than 60% of all registered cases.<sup>1</sup> This data differs from that found in this research. The marginalization and naturalization of crimes committed against black women reinforces the historical intersection between racism and sexism and contributes to the subordination, invisibility, objectification and dehumanization of black women, a culturally constructed scenario.<sup>17</sup>

It is known that the majority of feminicides in Brazil are intimate feminicides, that is, perpetrated by the victim's intimate partner, partner or ex-partner. The historical and cultural construction carries remnants of patriarchy

and the institution of men as responsible for the family order, in a natural way, in which men are attributed the punishment of women. The existing structure of inequality inferiorizes and subordinates women, encouraging men to feel possessive over women's bodies. Even though, currently, "the patriarch" does not hold the power of life and death over his wife and her family in an explicit way, it is possible to perceive men's attempts to dominate their partners, reaching the most extreme expression of violence, femicide.<sup>18</sup>

Protective measures are part of the progress in the fight against gender-based violence and contribute to a closer look at the problem. This document that orders the arrest of the aggressor who fails to comply with the law has proven insufficient because it has not, by itself, been capable of curbing the incidence and recurrence of domestic violence.<sup>17</sup> Even under protective measures, in some cases, the aggressor was not intimidated and continued with the aggressions that culminated in the femicide. Due to these circumstances, it is crucial consider that change is possible if women have access to the necessary tools to exercise their rights. Therefore, in addition to deconstructing sexist patterns that shape society, it is necessary to have public policies that make women's right to protection effective.<sup>18</sup>

Women who experience violence often report feelings of fear and insecurity when it comes to reporting the crime. The insecurity offered by the responsible bodies to women who experience violence is the result of a lack of monitoring of the case, of information to the victim or of educational public policies that aim to reeducate the aggressor by work on issues involving the reduction of beliefs that legitimize and perpetuate the use of violence against women.<sup>19</sup>

The subjugation of women before men and the naturalization of violence leads to the invisibility of the phenomenon. Fighting against the popular saying "don't interfere in a fight between a husband and wife" is an urgent challenge. This thinking is justified by the paradigm of not intervening in conflicts inherent to the private sphere because they are something intimate between the couple.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the analysis of the data in this study points to the importance of an informal support network to intervene in cases of violence against women and femicide.

Another point observed was the neglect of women's sexual and reproductive rights, based on the male logic that authorizes the appropriation of the female body for its own benefit, and often uses femicide violence to dominate and domesticate it.<sup>17</sup> This comes from patriarchal

constructions that affirm that the female body has meanings – such as motherhood and sexual practice – that make it alien to the woman herself. This misogynistic and violent culture persists to this day, sustaining and legitimizing high rates of rape, femicide and the criminalization of abortion.<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted that female financial independence can also be associated with the practice of violence against women. Women who have better levels of education, socioeconomic and employment status are also exposed to risks, especially when the aggressor is in a disadvantageous socioeconomic or social situation in relation to the woman.<sup>19-20</sup>

This study has limitations, such as the fact that it only analyzed the first year of the pandemic and, due to the use of public media data, it does not have accurate information on the demographic profile of all victims reported in the reports. However, these limitations do not compromise its relevance in shedding light on a phenomenon of great magnitude in the national territory that, even so, is invisible.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows the relevance of the news media in giving visibility to femicide, characterizing the crime and giving voice to the many victims who have been silenced as

a result of violence. It was identified that the victims of femicide are women in a marital relationship with the aggressors and that the main place of occurrence is the residence, indicating that enjoying a safe home is still a gender privilege. However, it is important to highlight the ambiguity of social isolation does not allow the pandemic to be held responsible for the increase in femicide as a direct cause, since the phenomenon has relationships connected to gender relations present in society. It was observed that the news media favored cases against women of a white racial profile and with higher education, marginalizing black women and corroborating the common sense of naturalizing these crimes committed against the black population. As a contribution to health, it is indicated that the results of this study demonstrate the importance of professionals being attentive to reporting and acting in the face of domestic violence, since femicide is often preceded by other forms of violence. In addition, addressing the issue allows for new studies to be proposed and to support the creation of public policies to guarantee women's rights.

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