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Descriptive Finding

Feminicide as a determinant of Mexican female life expectancy in the 21st century

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Abstract

BACKGROUND
Violence in Latin America has intensified in recent decades, with Mexico facing rising homicide rates linked to drug-related conflict. While demographic studies have assessed its impact on mortality, the gender-specific effects are underexplored. In this context, women experience heightened vulnerability due to systemic gender inequality. Feminicide, the most extreme form of gender-based violence, is underreported and underanalyzed, despite its growing impact on female mortality.

OBJECTIVE
We develop an operational definition of feminicide to properly quantify the effect of gender-based violence on women's survivorship in Mexico. We also seek to estimate the potential gains in life expectancy if feminicides were eliminated, revealing how structural violence shapes female mortality associated with recent events related to the so-called War on Drugs.

METHODS
We use state-level mortality data from INEGI, demographic estimates from CONAPO, and violence records from CONAVIM to define and measure the impact of feminicides on female life expectancy in Mexico. Focusing on women aged 15–64, we include major homicides and home-based deaths where intentionality is assumed. We calculate cause-deleted life tables and multiple decrement life tables for the period 2000–2019 to verify the distribution of deaths and to estimate the potential gain in life expectancy if feminicides were eradicated.

RESULTS
Feminicide significantly impacts female survival, with deaths concentrated in women aged 20–39, contributing to stagnation in life expectancy. In a counterfactual scenario

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where gender-based violence is eliminated and all other causes of death remain, women's life expectancy at birth increases by up to 5 years.

CONCLUSIONS
Homicide violence affects both men and women, but gender-based killings have put Mexican women in everyday danger. Public policy can potentially reduce this type of violence and its impact on life expectancy.

CONTRIBUTIONS
The contributions of this paper are threefold: (1) It offers a novel operational definition of feminicide, applicable beyond Mexico, (2) It provides critical insight into how the eradication of gender-based violence could significantly improve female survivorship, and (3) It highlights the importance of integrating a gender perspective into demographic studies and policymaking.

1. Introduction

Violence is a significant global issue, with the widespread repercussions of armed conflict, criminal acts, extremism, and gender-based violence affecting millions of people (Muggah and Bailey 2019; WHO 2002). In the early 21st century, Latin America has attracted particular attention due to intensified violence driven by social and political change. New forms of armed conflict and internal war have emerged, with non-state actors assuming prominent roles (Blair et al. 2021; Briceño-León 2012; Salama 2013). Violence resulting from Mexico's War on Drugs' (a security strategy from 2006 to 2012) has intensified and become normalized, increasingly affecting civilians and communities as organized crime expands its reach. This context of structural and widespread violence has positioned women in situations of heightened vulnerability and systemic disadvantage due to entrenched developmental and sociocultural patterns. In recent years, various forms of violence against women have become intertwined with the ongoing crisis of governance, internal security, and human rights, culminating in the most extreme outcome, death (Olivera 2010; Lira et al. 2016).

The demographic impact of the surge in homicide violence in Mexico over the past two decades has been studied extensively (Aburto, Riffe, and Canudas-Romo 2018; Aburto and Beltrán-Sánchez 2019; Canudas-Romo et al. 2015; Canudas-Romo et al. 2017; Dávila-Cervantes, Agudelo-Botero, and Gómez-Dantés 2021; García and Aburto 2019). These studies have shown that violence has a greater impact on male survivorship than on female survivorship, but the gender perspective remains largely unexplored, even though it is an important and worthwhile investigation in the context of normalized violence and the militarized conflict between the state and organized crime, which is

deeply gendered. Moreover, survival measures are deeply influenced by variation in the risks associated with gender, which stem not only from individual choices but also from broader social and contextual factors (Sánchez Pérez and Román Sánchez 2023).

Research in other social sciences indicates that women experience death differently from men, often because violence is rooted in gender stereotypes and inequality (Atuesta and Vela Barba 2021; Data Cívica and CIDE 2019). According to Segato (2013, 2014), gender plays a central role in the "new forms of war" (like the war on drugs), as armed groups direct violence specifically toward women's bodies. These acts of violence aim not only to dominate women but also to destroy them simply because they are women (Segato and Vitenti 2023).

This has led to the concept of feminicide, the ultimate form of violence against women in hostile social environments (Lagarde and de los Ríos 2005). The Spanish terms *femicidio* and *feminicidio* both derive from the English term 'femicide,' originally conceptualized by Russell and colleagues (Russell and Radford 2006) to expose the gendered motives behind the killing of women. This early definition aimed to recognize and name the systemic violence women face globally, simply for being women. However, Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos (2006) criticized *femicidio* as a direct analog to 'homicide,' focusing only on the victim's sex and overlooking the structural and political dimensions that enable this violence. She emphasized the need for a term that not only acknowledged the actions of the perpetrator but also pointed to the role of the state in fostering impunity and failing to protect women's rights (Cortes-Perez 2024).

This critique led to the development of *feminicidio* (feminicide), a concept that incorporates institutional complicity and systemic gender discrimination (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2005). According to Lagarde y de los Ríos, feminicide is not merely a private or interpersonal act but a manifestation of institutionalized gender oppression. As Martín-Beristain (2024) notes, recognizing the macro-social context is essential, as it shifts the focus from individual perpetrators to the institutional and societal frameworks that allow feminicides to persist.

Despite growing awareness of these gender-related killings, the lack of consistent records globally (D'Ignazio et al. 2022) has led researchers to examine female homicides or to focus on partner-related killings (UNODC 2023; Dawson and Carrigan 2021) using indirect data. Other studies have attempted to highlight gender differences through sex disparities in homicides recorded in vital statistics, which are the most reliable data source in Latin America (Agudelo Botero and Castro 2022; López Barajas and Guerra Favela 2020). Although those studies have revealed significant results, they overlook the fact that because of the political burden associated with feminicides in Mexico, many violent deaths are not clearly reported or remain unsolved (ONU Mujeres 2011; cited in Agudelo-Botero and Castro 2022). This challenge underscores the relevance of premature mortality as a framework, particularly when examining feminicides as a form of

avoidable mortality, preventable with adequate social, institutional, and policy interventions (López and Uribe 2015; Dávila-Cervantes and Agudelo-Botero 2018).

To address these gaps, after a conceptual and theoretical discussion we suggest an operational definition of feminicide in Mexico, using an approach developed for Argentina and other Latin American countries. It considers homicides and external causes where intentionality can be assumed if the victim died in the home. This definition acknowledges that feminicide stems from gender inequality, reflected in justice system failures. Our study examines the impact of lethal gender-based violence on female survival, guided by three questions: (1) How does lethal gender-based violence impact the survival of women in Mexico? (2) What is the age distribution of feminicide victims compared to overall female deaths, and has it changed over time? (3) How would removing feminicide as a cause of death affect life expectancy for women across states?

2. Data and methods

2.1 Data

We use vital statistic data of deaths from 2000–2019, classified under the 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (INEGI 2020a) and the 1970–2019 Demographic Conciliation of Mexico from the National Population Council (CONAPO). Vital statistics ensure consistent data quality across states, particularly for adult deaths (Echarri Cánovas et al. 2012). Meanwhile, the Demographic Conciliation results form a coherent estimation of the historical demographic dynamics at the national and subnational levels, considering all historical demographic data (census, vital statistics, surveys), making it the official source for national decision-making and the basis for population projections (Partida Bush 2023; García-Guerrero and Beltrán-Sánchez 2021; CONAPO 2023).

To further understand the dynamics of violence, we complement these data with administrative records from the National Data and Information Bank on Cases of Violence against Women (BANAVIM) for 2010–2019. BANAVIM collects detailed reports of violence against women, from either victims or third parties, through government institutions providing victim support. These records offer critical insights – missing from traditional mortality data – into patterns of recurrent violence and its escalation, providing a more granular perspective on feminicide.

BANAVIM data were obtained, through a 2023 request, from the Mexican Commission for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women (CONAVIM), which belongs to the Mexican Ministry of the Interior (CONAVIM 2023). These data extend beyond vital statistics to include the recurrence and intensity of prior

violence reported by victims as well as the settings and circumstances leading up to their deaths. This integration provides a more nuanced framework for understanding and measuring feminicides, bridging demographic trends and the realities of gender-based violence. However, its limitations include underreporting and its recent inception in 2010, restricting long-term analysis.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Selection of external causes of death to approximate feminicide

Building on Grushka and Kohan (2020) and Kohan (2018), we identify external causes where intentionality can be reasonably inferred, an essential criterion for the systematic analysis of feminicides. This is crucial in Mexico, where considerable variation exists between states when investigating violent female deaths from a gender perspective, despite the Federal Penal Code mandate (ONU Mujeres 2020). We examine specific causes within the broader category of external causes, considering the type of injury, mechanism, intent, and place of occurrence, and select those that are more reliably associated with feminicides. These include all cases of assault and some unintentional or undetermined causes that occur in domestic settings. Following Kohan's framework, but refining it for the Mexican context, we exclude categories unlikely to represent feminicidal violence (e.g., accidental explosions), to arrive at a more precise approximation.

By integrating BANAVIM data with vital statistics, we aim to better understand the conditions leading to feminicides. Recurring themes reflected in the location of bodies, the methods employed, and prior encounters with authorities illuminate the power dynamics at work in such crimes. This enriched perspective is essential for interpreting the demographic data surrounding deaths in violent contexts, where intentionality plays a central role.

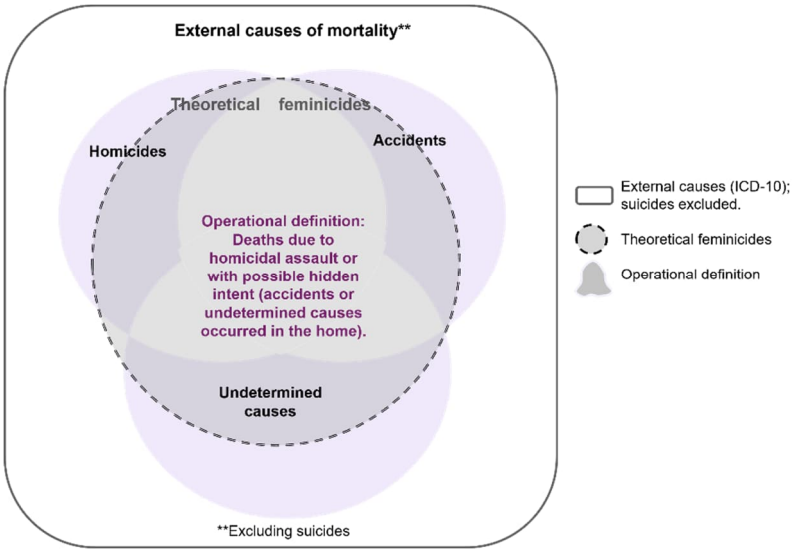
Figure 1 provides a conceptual visualization of the operational definition of feminicide based on external causes of mortality. The outer rectangle represents external causes of death as categorized by ICD-10, excluding suicides but including homicides, accidents, and undetermined causes. Within it, three categories intersect: homicides, accidents, and undetermined causes. The theoretical definition of feminicide lies in the overlap, representing all possible gender-related killings. This specific term is necessary because of the widespread misclassification and underreporting of gender-related killings, as well as the political influences that often distort their official recording.

Thus, we expand the scope of the operational definition to include not only homicidal assaults. The shaded area in the middle of the figure defines our operational approximation of feminicides, limited to women aged 15–64 years. It includes:

1. Selected homicidal assaults among women in this age group.
2. Accidents and deaths of undetermined intent occurring in the home, where the possibility of hidden gender-based motives is higher.

This approach recognizes that some gender-related killings are excluded (e.g., misclassified as ill-defined causes or occurring outside the home) while also acknowledging that some included deaths may not have been feminicides per se. Nonetheless, by balancing over- and under-inclusion, this strategy enables us to produce a more accurate estimation of feminicides.

Figure 1: Selection of external causes of mortality to approximate feminicide



Source: Based on Kohan (2018).

We restrict our analysis to women aged 15–64, as exploratory results show no meaningful gender differences in the selected external causes of death at younger or older ages. In these extremes, accidents and undetermined causes are more prevalent, obscuring potential gender-specific patterns of violence. Focusing on this age range therefore allows for a more accurate identification of deaths attributable to feminicide.

2.2.2 Estimating mortality attributable to feminicide

After selecting the specified external causes of death, the proportion of female deaths due to feminicide is calculated for each year, state, and quinquennial age group, using vital statistics. To obtain more accurate and coherent data, this proportion is multiplied by the estimated deaths in the Demographic Conciliation, which are not specified by cause.

2.2.3 Cause-deleted life tables

Following Chiang's (1968) approach, which assumes that the force of the decrement function from cause of death *i* is proportional to the force of the decrement function from all causes combined in the age interval *x* to *x*+*n*, and using the estimated deaths, we create cause-deleted life tables for each year in the study period. To exclude the effect of feminicide at extreme ages (under 15 and over 65 years), the survival probabilities p_x^{-i} are set equal to the overall female survival probabilities p_x. This means that only women aged 15–64 years are affected by the removal of feminicide as a cause of death.

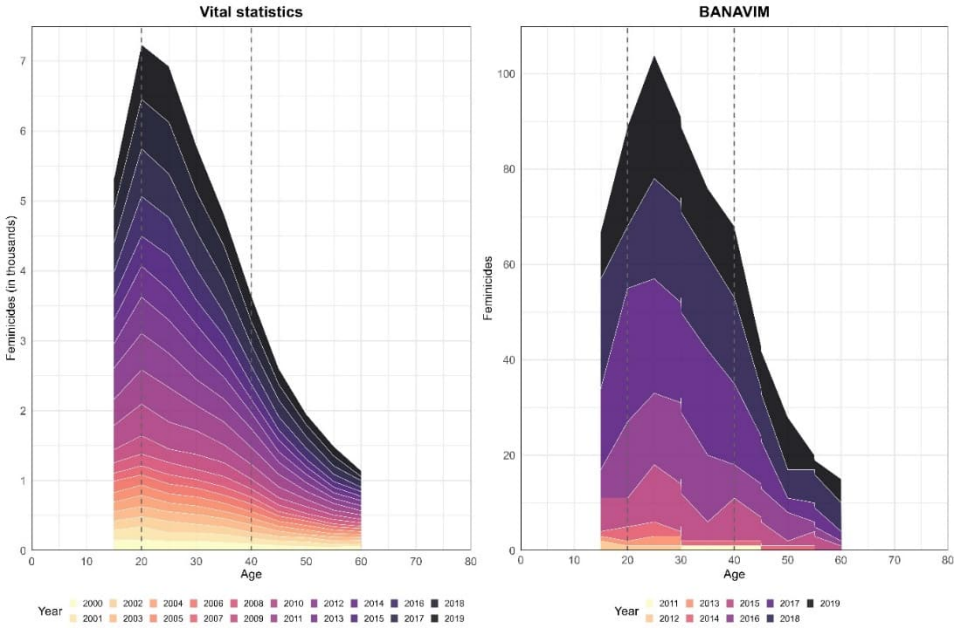
2.2.4 Multiple decrement life tables

To compare the age distribution of deaths from all causes with those from feminicides, we calculate multiple decrement life tables (Preston et al. 2001). In these tables, feminicide is the decrement of interest, and the number of deaths from feminicide ${}_nd_x^i$ is calculated using the formula: ${}_nd_x^i = {}_nq_x^i * l_x$, where l_x is derived from the all-cause life table.

3. Results

According to our definition, 49,274 feminicides occurred in Mexico between 2000 and 2019, of which 83% were victims aged 15–64 years. The age structure of deaths varies slightly over time but is always concentrated in these ages. The number of violent deaths among women has increased since the beginning of the 21st century (see Figure 2). However, in 2010 there was an alarming 43% increase in feminicides at the national level. A staggering 70% of the total feminicides from 2010 to 2019 were recorded in this period. However, this national trend conceals significant state-level heterogeneity, as evidenced by the high variability in the number of deaths.

Figure 2: Distribution of female deaths due to feminicide in Mexico from Vital Statistics and BANAVIM data, 2000–2019



Source: INEGI (2020b), CONAPO (2023), and CONAVIM (2023).

Table 1 shows the composition of the selected external causes by year. Homicides account for the overwhelming majority of feminicide-related deaths over the past two decades. However, a small but consistent share includes deaths recorded as accidents or with undetermined intent when the place of death was the home.

Table 1: Distribution of feminicide-related causes by year

Year	Cause	Proportion
2000	Homicide	93.5%
	Accident	5.7%
	Undetermined	0.8%
2001	Homicide	93.8%
	Accident	5.8%
	Undetermined	0.4%
2002	Homicide	94.3%
	Accident	5.2%
	Undetermined	0.5%
2003	Homicide	95.5%
	Accident	4.3%
	Undetermined	0.2%

Table 1: Distribution of feminicide-related causes by year

Year	Cause	Proportion
2004	Homicide	94.4%
	Accident	5.3%
	Undetermined	0.3%
2005	Homicide	94.7%
	Accident	4.9%
	Undetermined	0.4%
2006	Homicide	95.8%
	Accident	3.9%
	Undetermined	0.4%
2007	Homicide	91.7%
	Accident	8.0%
	Undetermined	0.2%
2008	Homicide	94.7%
	Accident	4.9%
	Undetermined	0.4%
2009	Homicide	96.3%
	Accident	3.6%
	Undetermined	0.1%
2010	Homicide	96.4%
	Accident	3.3%
	Undetermined	0.3%
2011	Homicide	97.1%
	Accident	2.7%
	Undetermined	0.2%
2012	Homicide	98.2%
	Accident	1.7%
	Undetermined	0.1%
2013	Homicide	97.6%
	Accident	2.1%
	Undetermined	0.3%
2014	Homicide	97.1%
	Accident	2.6%
	Undetermined	0.3%
2015	Homicide	97.8%
	Accident	2.1%
	Undetermined	0.1%
2016	Homicide	98.5%
	Accident	1.4%
	Undetermined	0.1%
2017	Homicide	98.5%
	Accident	1.4%
	Undetermined	0.1%
2018	Homicide	98.3%
	Accident	1.4%
	Undetermined	0.3%
2019	Homicide	98.6%
	Accident	1.3%
	Undetermined	0.1%

Source: INEGI (2020) and CONAPO (2023).

Beyond age, BANAVIM reveals distinctive patterns of violence. Many women suffered extreme harm: 48% had facial injuries, 12% had injuries to the limbs, and 4% had experienced previous sexual violence. Weapons included firearms (28%) and sharp

objects or burns (17%). Also, a large proportion of victims aged 20–39 was found in public spaces (highways, fields, ravines, bodies of water), suggesting a performative dimension to the violence.

These forms of assault, marked by cruelty and intent to harm, reflect a performative and punitive logic: women's bodies are not only destroyed but also displayed. Moreover, these details, though limited in scope, validate the inclusion of misclassified causes in our approximation and highlight the structural nature of the phenomenon.

If only homicides had been included, the feminicide burden would have been significantly underestimated. Table 2 compares the official homicide counts with feminicide approximations. Early in this period our estimate exceeds official homicides by 5%–7%, narrowing to 1%–2% after 2012. This suggests that, while misclassification persists, it may have improved slightly over time.

Table 2: Comparison of homicides and feminicide approximation, 2000–2019

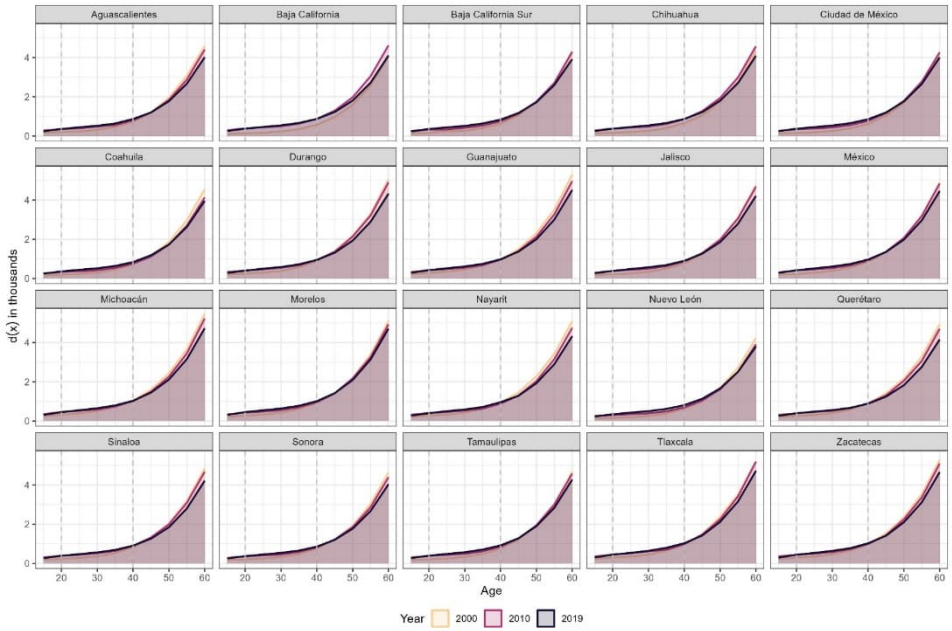
Year	Homicides (all causes)	Feminicides (approximation)	Variation
2000	954	1,019	6.8%
2001	912	973	6.7%
2002	926	986	6.5%
2003	957	1,004	4.9%
2004	910	963	5.8%
2005	932	984	5.6%
2006	991	1,031	4.0%
2007	821	897	9.3%
2008	1,111	1,168	5.1%
2009	1,448	1,502	3.7%
2010	2,305	2,386	3.5%
2011	2,654	2,736	3.1%
2012	2,815	2,864	1.7%
2013	2,643	2,712	2.6%
2014	2,412	2,485	3.0%
2015	2,479	2,535	2.3%
2016	2,965	3,010	1.5%
2017	3,587	3,639	1.4%
2018	3,849	3,915	1.7%
2019	4,056	4,114	1.4%

Source: INEGI (2020) and CONAPO (2023).

In order to analyze the critical problem in mortality measures, we examine the theoretical deaths from the life table by state and age at three time points: 2000, 2010, and 2020. When we analyze the age distribution of these standardized female deaths, considering all causes, they follow a pattern: deaths increase with age (Figure 3). Although slight variations are observed over time, the overall trend remains consistent. However, such states show a significant increase in mortality among women aged 20–39

years in 2010 and 2019, indicating an excess mortality for these age groups compared to the beginning of the period.

Figure 3: Theoretical all-cause female deaths in Mexico, by age and state, 2000, 2010, 2019



Source: INEGI (2020) and CONAPO (2023).

The distribution of feminicide-related deaths from the life table (Figure 4) differs significantly from all-cause female theoretical deaths (Figure 3). In every state, feminicide-related theoretical deaths concentrate between ages 20 and 39 – an age window when mortality should be low, making them both premature and preventable. While national counts show a sharp rise in deaths after 2010, the standardized life table analysis reveals that most states had a higher concentration of feminicides in 2019 than in 2010. Exceptions include states in northern Mexico – Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Nayarit, Sinaloa – where feminicide rates peaked in 2010. These patterns likely reflect the escalation of drug-related violence following the 2007 security strategy and its subsequent geographic spread across Mexico, as highlighted in previous studies (Segato and Vitenti 2023). It is important to note that Figures 3 and 4 are only comparable in terms of distribution. The magnitude of deaths differs substantially: all-cause mortality

is measured in thousands, whereas feminicide-related deaths are counted in units. For this reason, the y-axis scale is adjusted accordingly in each figure.

Figure 4: Theoretical deaths due to feminicide in Mexico, by age and state, 2000, 2010, 2019

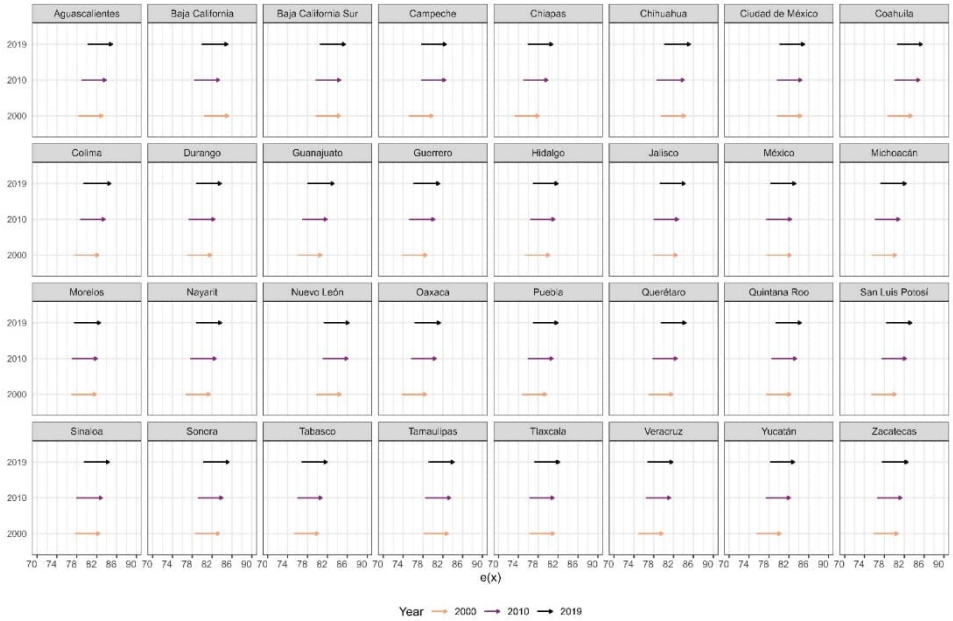
Source: INEGI (2020) and CONAPO (2023).

Across all states, eliminating feminicide as a cause of death leads to a significant increase in female life expectancy at birth (Figure 5), typically by 4.9 to 5.5 years. In 2019, Chihuahua and Colima saw the highest gains (5.5 years). Over time, there is an increase in the potential life-years gained in most states. In Baja California Sur the potential gain rises from 4.98 years in 2000 to 5.08 years in 2019 while in Jalisco the gain increases from 4.94 to 5.11 years. This figure reveals that the eradication of feminicides could yield significant improvements in life expectancy, especially as violence continues to shape mortality patterns.

Chihuahua – the state where feminicides were first officially recognized in the early 2000s – stands out as one of the most affected. In a counterfactual scenario without feminicides, women's life expectancy there would have risen from 79.4 years in 2000 to 85.3 years in 2019, a remarkable gain of 5.9 years. Guerrero – in southern Mexico – also

shows a significant improvement, from 73.7 years in 2000 to a potential 81.4 years, if feminicides were eliminated. This counterfactual scenario highlights the devastating impact feminicide has had, particularly in states ravaged by gender-based violence linked to drug trafficking, emphasizing the critical need for targeted intervention.

Figure 5: Potential gains in life expectancy at birth if feminicide was eliminated as cause of death, by state, 2000, 2010, 2019



Source: INEGI (2020) and CONAPO (2023).

4. Conclusions

We propose an operational definition of feminicide, focusing on Mexico, and analyze its impact on the survival of the female population. Our findings align with previous research, which shows an increase in violent deaths over time. The pattern of feminicide is distinct from that of overall female mortality, being concentrated disproportionately among women aged 20–39 years, a critical life stage often tied to reproduction and care roles.

From a demographic perspective, feminicides significantly influence survival measurement. The life expectancy stagnation among Mexican women observed in previous studies could be partly attributable to feminicide-related deaths. The potential gains in life expectancy when feminicides are excluded suggest that such deaths are not only premature but also largely preventable. While this study focuses on life expectancy as a summary indicator, to better capture the variability and inequities in female survival caused by gender-based violence, future research could incorporate additional measures such as lifespan inequality or modal age at death.

By incorporating gender as a new analytical dimension, we underscore the importance of examining feminicide as a significant cause of death. Our findings align with literature documenting the pervasive nature of gender-based killings across Mexico, particularly in regions marked by extreme insecurity and institutional failure. The case of Chihuahua highlights not only the human toll but also the urgency of targeted interventions in states where institutional failure and organized crime have entrenched this violence. While this approximation is specific to Mexico, it offers a framework that uses administrative records to enhance the understanding of gender-based violence, which could be adapted to other countries.

Vital statistics and administrative sources form a coherent narrative: Feminicide in Mexico must be understood as both a demographic crisis and a manifestation of structural and symbolic violence rooted in patriarchal power structures, normalized impunity, and a state apparatus that has failed to guarantee the right of women to live free from violence.

Our approach is supported by administrative data from BANAVIM, which confirms both the age concentration and the brutal nature of these deaths, as well as the spatial and symbolic patterns of violence, which closely mirror what Segato (2013, 2014) describes as the "new forms of war," where women's bodies become territories under siege. In these diffuse, informal conflicts, exacerbated by Mexico's militarized war on drugs, violent actors use gendered violence as a tool to assert territorial control, reinforce internal cohesion within criminal groups, and exercise symbolic power in the absence of the state. As Segato notes, these acts are not only misogynistic but also political, instrumentalizing women's bodies to convey authority and instill fear. BANAVIM data can be instrumental in designing public policies to prevent the escalation of violence and ensure that it does not culminate in feminicide.

This study has some limitations. Our operational definition, although more specific than prior typologies, still depends on assumptions about intentionality. Additionally, despite their value, the BANAVIM data present limitations due to underreporting and institutional bias, which are factors that can influence the scope and interpretation of our findings.

Despite the data limitations and assumptions embedded in our operationalization, this study contributes to two essential debates: (1) It demonstrates the value of

demographic tools in measuring gender-based violence, and (2) It advances mortality research by incorporating structural and political dimensions into survival analysis. Feminicide must be understood as both an avoidable public health crisis and a form of institutionalized gender inequality.

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