

Narratives of Albanian female offenders who killed their intimate partners during 2010-2014. Case report series _____

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Abstract

Introduction: *Most homicide perpetrators in Albania (according to data from Tirana Central Prison Directory, 2015) were males (n=1170) and only 20 were females. Intimate partner homicides comprise the largest category of female-perpetrated homicide, 8 out of 20 female offenders were convicted because of intimate partner homicide.*

Aims: *The present study examined the life experiences of Albanian women, who are serving prison sentences for killing their male intimates between 2010 and 2014. “We are here due to a damned minute!” said one of the women blaming the triggering event. Several psychosocial factors which are hidden can interact in chain of events that may extend back from a triggering event to long-term processes that began in their childhood. These case studies shed light on those direct or indirect factors contributing to the murder.*

Method: *On July 2015 the convicted women responded to open-ended interview questions, providing narrative accounts of their personal experiences from childhood to the act of killing. Questions were related to childhood experiences, relations and*

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possible support from their biological family, possible traumatic events, relations to former partners, family dynamics with the murdered partner and children, attitudes toward their duties in the family and children's responsibilities, insight for the causes of murder, social systems they looked for help, their feelings, circumstances and motivational contexts of intimate homicide, as well as regret.

Results: *Our in- depth interviews revealed that there was a similar profile of female homicide offenders who killed their intimate partners: they were grown up in harsh psychosocial circumstances during their childhood, most of them having some type of trauma, economically disadvantaged families, victims of abuse, under-educated, with limited opportunities and unemployed in the long-term prior to being incarcerated. The findings suggest that those psychosocial factors have played a role in the commitment of the crime.*

Keywords: *female, homicide, partner, family, Albania, narratives*

Introduction

The term "homicide" refers to the killing of a person. According to statistics, the majority of victims, as well as subjects who commit homicide, are men (Jensen, 2001). In Albania, according to the 2015 statistics of the General Directorate of Prisons in Tirana, 1170 men and 20 women are serving the sentence for murder, of which 8 of them were convicted of murdering their partner. The majority of victims and subjects who committed crimes in the USA during the years 1976-2005 were male (Fox & Zawitz, 2007). Society is not ready to call the woman capable of committing a murder. The woman is perceived as the giver of life, her nature is to nurture, not to destroy. The gender role also reflects the social expectation for the women, little girls are taught from a young age that they will represent everything beautiful. It is difficult for the society to accept violence in women.

Stöckl et al. conducted in 2013 a summary of the overall prevalence of partner homicide in different states. They analyzed data collected from 66 countries. On average it turned out that 1 out of 7 homicides in the world (13.5%, IQR 9.2-18.2) is committed by a partner (Stöckl et al., 2013). This figure is close to the percentage given by Fox & Zawitz (2007) for the USA, where crime between partners accounted for about 11% of murders committed during the 30 years span 1976-2005.

Also, according to statistics, men who kill their partners are more numerous than women who kill their partners. According to Mouzos & Rushforth (2003), women constituted only 20% of those subjects who committed homicide against their partner (cited by Mouzos & Rushforth, 2003 in Johnson & Hotton, 2003). Based on the analysis of Stockl et al. (2013) in 66 countries, females kill their male partners 6 times less compared to males who kill their female partners (38.6%



versus 6.3%). When women commit homicide, they are more likely to commit it against their partner (Brookman, 2005). Homicide of the partner has a different portrayal when the killer is female compared to the male killer (De Lisi & Conis, 2012). Women are violent mainly only in conditions of extreme stress or repeated provocation (De Lisi & Conis, 2012).

Several perspectives are offered which attempt to explain the murder of intimate partners, including the feminist perspective: The theory of self-defense. The feminist framework relies on the characteristics of abusive relationships to explain homicides. Studies show that women who kill their abusers often do so in self-defense after years of severe abuse (Browne, 1987; Ewing, 1987). Feminists see the murder of an abusive partner as a woman's last effort to protect herself or her children from further physical and mental harm (Walker, 1979; O'Keefe, 1997; Leonard, 2002).

In general terms, criminal behavior includes three categories of factors: psychological, biological and social. In fact, human behavior is the product of a complex interaction between many factors. The vast majority of poor people do not commit crimes, raising the question of what distinguishes these individuals who commit homicide from other individuals who have similar life experiences and do not exhibit such behavior. Biological factors should also be considered, as they play a role in the individual's vulnerability to unfavorable life circumstances. However, while biological factors determine the aberrant personality structure, the environment can play a role in how the personality will be expressed as behavior.

Method

Aim of the study

This study was focused on Albanian women who were convicted for killing their partners, in the period 2010-2014. "We are here due to a damned minute!" said one of the subjects blaming the inciting moment of the crime. But several psychosocial factors might underlie, which interact in chains of events that may extend back from the triggering event to long-term processes that begin in their childhood. These case studies would help to understand direct or indirect psychosocial factors contributing to the murder and the profile of the women who committed intimate partner homicide.

Sample and type of the study

This study is a case report series. The sample of the study is purposeful, consisting of six women, aged 21-59 years, who were currently convicted and were serving a sentence for intimate partner murder during 2010-2014. The interviews were

conducted in July 2015, in Women's Prison 325 in Tirana, Albania (Institution for the Execution of Criminal Decisions) by one of the authors of this article, a psychologist, in scheduled and consented meetings.

Instruments

The data was collected through a semi-structured interview with female offenders, based on open questions that were considered important to answer the research question. The narrative interviews covered extensively the lives of these women from their childhood to the act of murder. The interview contained open questions about their childhood, family relationships in their family of origin, traumatic life events, relationships with previous partners, life with the current partner and their children, the attitudes of these women to the responsibility and their family role, support from the family of origin and partner's family, systems they turned to for help, their reflection on the causes of committing the crime, the feelings and situations on the day of the murder, as well as their remorse.

The questions of the interview were divided into several categories:

1. Socio-demographic data: women's age at the time of the interview and at the time of committing the crime, place of birth, residence, education, employment, family income, religious belief, marital status at the time of the crime, age difference with partner, number of children.
2. Questions about childhood. By means of these questions an attempt was made to obtain information about important life events, which may possibly indirectly have an influence on the crime, although the latter belongs to a later period of life. This part of the questionnaire contained an open question about childhood, as well as more specific questions related to family relations in the family of origin, care received in childhood, possible physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
3. The third part of the interview contained two open questions through which we were able to get information on previous intimate relationships of these women. The course of these previous relationships/marriages may have an indirect impact on the perceptions and expectations of the latter relationship established with the partner to whom the woman committed the crime.
4. The fourth part of the interview was focused on life experiences with the partner to whom they committed the crime. The open question tried to explore the course of this relationship and the attitudes of these women towards family role and responsibility.
5. The fifth part of the interview focused on the causes of crime commitment. This part contained open questions which explored the meaning of the



murder according to the own subject's perception. The interviewee explains the circumstances and motives that led her to kill her partner.

6. The last part of the interview was based on questions which explored the subject's feelings and situations in the last period before the murder, possible suicidal ideation, life expectations and problem-solving options, relationships and possible help from their biological family or their partner's family, the social systems they turned to for help, as well as a question related to remorse for committing the crime.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis was applied for socio-demographic data. The analysis of the content of the open-ended interview questions was qualitative. The content of each question was analyzed by searching for possible topics in the subject's words, thus defining thematic categories. Further, we looked for common characteristics of the women who had killed their intimate partners, the common characteristics of their partners as referred, the influencing life events and the failure of support factors were grouped. We tried to create a model of interaction between identified psychosocial factors.

Results and discussion

1. Demographic data

TABLE 1: Demographic data of female offenders convicted for intimate partner homicide

GENERAL DATA	FREQUENCY
Age of women at the time of the interview	21-59 years old (mean 39 years old)
Age of women at the time of homicide	18-55 years old
Place of birth (urban vs. rural)	100 % rural
Residence (urban vs. rural)	100 % rural
The number of children in the biological family	5-10 children (mean 7 children)
Education	83 % 8 th grade 17 % college
Previous employment	33 % workers (lasting 6 months – 5 years) 67 % unemployed
Relationship with the partner	17 % husband 17 % ex-husband 66 % boyfriend

Relationship duration	50% long-term relationship (4 years - 35 years, mean 23 years) 50% short-term relationship
Religion	66 % muslim 17% orthodox 17% catholic
Economic situation	100% poor
Mothers vs. women without a child	67 % were mothers (1-6 children); two of them had a child with victim. 33% no children
Tool of the crime	67 % weapon 16.5% axe 16.5% hot oil in ear
Crime scene	100% at home

Table 1 shows general and demographic data of the study's sample. The sample consists of women 21 to 59 years of age. The youngest woman committed the murder at the age of 18 years old, while the oldest one at the age of 55 years old, after a long-term marriage. Table 1 shows some disadvantage characteristics of these convicted women related to education, their income and employment. Most of the female prisoners interviewed had completed the 8th grade and were unemployed or without a stable job. Their economic situation was very difficult. Subject 4 says: "After finishing the 8th grade, I couldn't continue the school, because we didn't have the opportunity".

All the women in this sample came from rural areas of Albania and were raised in poor families with many children (5-10 children, on average 7 children). A. came from a family with 10 children. She confessed about the economic situation in her previous marriage: "My husband only knew how to drink all day and didn't care if we had food or not." We lived in a house made of reed; it wasn't even made of wood." Regarding her second marriage, with the husband she would kill years later, she confessed: "When the house collapsed and at this time my husband was in prison, I lived with the children in a military tent for 2 years. My 6-year-old daughter died while she was out grazing sheep with her 8-year-old sister." Their family subsisted on sheep, a cow and some farmland. Other women of this sample had a similar difficult economic situation. E. spoke about her marriage at the age of 17: "The economic situation was bad, there was no water. He married when I was young, left me there at home with his parents. He worked outside, came home rarely, and left".

Educated women may have an opportunity to leave a problematic relationship, while uneducated women have fewer options to support themselves and their children after separation their partner. They are limited in their ability to find other options and to cope with life after separation from their partner. When one of

the women separated from her partner, she found herself without the support of her biological family, social assistance, without a roof over her head, and being without a solution she returned to her abuser after a month of separation. "I was like a bird without a nest" - she said. In the USA, the prevalence of intimate partner homicide by women has dropped significantly by 75% during 1976-2005 (Fox & Zawitz, 2007) and this may be related to the increase in abused women's shelters during these decades. The stress of the women in this sample was even more, since nearly one third of the sample had children and felt the moral responsibility of the mothers. Stressful problems against the complexity and responsibility of motherhood can lead women to despair, hopelessness and favor potential crime (Roberts, 1993).

2. *Childhood and youth*

Almost all subjects grew up in patriarchal families, where the father was the one who decided about important things in the family, the wife and children were under his control. The women interviewed were emotionally neglected during childhood. As children they were devoted to the family by giving help and were taught not to cross the limits established by parents. "*We did our own things, so we didn't cross the borders*" - says one of the subjects. "*We knew our things as children and tried to fulfill our duties*" says another woman. All subjects have felt grown up prematurely, have suppressed their own feelings to devote themselves to the family and to respect the family duties. "*I didn't have a childhood at all. We were 6 children; we were adults before we were born. At the moment we learned to walk we were ready to work*" - said C. Another women of this sample confessed: "*Normally my mom was completely under dad's control. His word was not disputed. Mom, just like us as children, knew our things and followed them, we didn't cross the limits, so we didn't have problems with dad.*" In this case, the child internalizes the attachment model presented by the biological family and has the same expectations for the new relationships she will encounter later in life as women. This woman who says: "*I was more connected to my father than to my mother. He was really strict and his word was the law, but if you didn't break the rules we had in our family then everything was fine*" from the marriage she will expect that she can be controlled by her husband, but as far as she follows his rules it will go fine, just as it happened during her childhood and youth. She got the first wrong concept in the family, that is, that the rules must be followed so that things will go well. She could not reflect on whether the unfair rules can be followed also in the long-term, even when the difficulties encountered by her exceed her own threshold of mental health balance, that is, what she herself can handle. A folk expression says: "God only gives you as much as you can handle", but did this apply to those women?

Four of the women had experienced significant losses in life. Two of the women experienced the death of their father at the age of 18 years old, among them one also lost her partner of several year relationship, who died few years after her father. One of the subjects was sexually abused at teen age by the man she killed years later. Another woman, A. had a previous failed marriage that totally disappointed her expectations. The man she married was an alcoholic and they lived in extreme poverty. She was abandoned by her biological family of origin when she left the husband and their child to be with a new partner whom she killed many years later. Her parents and siblings did not meet her for 27 consecutive years of the second marriage, no one from biological family came to meet her, even on the day of her 6-year-old daughter's funeral. The impact of trauma can be invisible and cumulative. This is A. 's own explanation: "I think that the biggest consequence that I haven't overcome was the abandonment, rather than the husband. I tried to fill that void in the family I created with my husband, despite our strong disagreements. He used to remind me: *"Your family have not accepted you. Is there a harsher word than this for me? I have found support in my husband's family, but not in my biological family. They abandoned me"*.

These women did not report any deviant behavior during their childhood and youth, but rather subservientness to family norms. Even though the mental health problems from their childhood were not reported we did not evaluate their mental state with a specific tool, because of this we did not exclude the possibility that they had internalizing problems in their childhood. C. revealed: *"I was an introvert and did not often reveal what I felt even to my closest friends. I was born with the feeling of distrust, and even today I still have it"*. Other studies suggest that women who commit homicide have shown less aggressive behavior during their childhoods because they show more problems on the introverted spectrum (Yourstone et al., 2008). In addition, they may have had difficult psychosocial circumstances during their childhood (Yourstone et al., 2008), as was reflected in the data of our sample.

3. Women's previous relations with men other than the intimate partner killed

One of the interviewed women had a previous marriage in conditions of extreme poverty. She left her first partner to marry the partner she killed many years later. Because of that her parents abandoned her. She found herself facing life with her second husband in the same conditions of poverty, moreover now she was abused and contempted by her husband. The man for whom she thought she had sacrificed by enduring abandonment by her biological family teased her knowing she had nobody from whom to seek support from. We think that in that case of abandonment by the biological family, as well as two disappointed marriages have



influenced to accumulate much stress in the long-term. She held hostage to her choices, her limited point of view, the impossibility of alternatives and she failed to separate from the second husband, what would have possibly avoided the murder. Another women in this sample had a previous long-term relationship with a partner who died accidentally a year before she committed the crime.

4. Family life with the intimate killed partner

Half of the women in this sample had a long-term relationship with the victim (4 years up to 35 years). The rest of the sample had a short time relationship. In childhood, some of the women revealed that they were attached to the men of the family (fathers or brothers), but at the time of committing the crime they were abandoned, which does not indicate strong ties to the biological family. Married women referred good relations with the husband's family, indirectly showing that they were respected by them. When they got married, they continued not to cross the boundaries as they were taught in childhood, showing themselves as devoted mothers and wives. 67% of the women in the sample are mothers, having 1 to 6 children (two of them had children with the victim), while nearly one third of the sample had no children. Despite the bad economic situation, some the women worked and took care of their children. A mother says: *"I was doing two jobs. I took care of the children despite the problems knowing how important the school is, especially for us women"*.

Almost all male victims had a similar profile. They were physically, psychologically and/or sexually abusers towards their partners. Two of them were sexual abusers. Almost all the victims were lawbreakers. Two of them had served sentences in prison. One of the victims on the day the woman killed him went to attack her with a gun and a knife. Married husbands, except in one case, did not take responsibility for the emotional and economic situation of their families. Some of the partners had gambling addictions, went into debt and were alcoholics.

Five of the women in the sample were exposed to physical, emotional and/or sexual violence, and two of these women suffered the abused wife syndrome, having been victims of physical and emotional violence throughout their lives with their husbands. Emotionally, some of these women who committed murder felt continuously mistreated, stressed, frustrated, undervalued, and disappointed from life. They felt physically and emotionally abused, some of them were afraid and were under pressure to avoid family conflicts and fulfill their partner's needs, but at the same time they constantly nurtured the hope that their partner would change. One of the subjects revealed: *"He was an alcoholic; he drank almost every day. Quarrels, insults, beatings were frequent. When he was drunk, which was almost daily, he insulted me, hit me on my head with the ashtray, etc. We were longing for*

home. He never helped us. I was making everything with my sacrifices. I had him for nothing. I had two jobs, taking care of the family. I bought him cigarettes and took them to him when I finished one of the jobs, otherwise he would have made so much trouble. The children supported me when they grew up, but I never wanted them to have conflicts with their father. I forgive him, in order not to create disputes. I loved him and kept hoping that he would change, he is changing now, he will be changing then. Hope kept me. He didn't let me to separate, I was very afraid”.

Abuse has been one of the substantial factors in aggravating the family situation and the crime committed. According to the USA National Institute of Justice (2003) the most common reason why a woman kills her partner is because she is being abused. Also, according to Leonard (2001) the abused women killed their abuser when they found themselves without any legal means to stop the violence against them. Leonard (2002) states that psychological abuse is more harmful than physical abuse.

5. Circumstances and motives of the crime

All crimes were committed at home, not in public spaces, and nearly 70% of the women used a weapon as a tool of committing murder (Table 1). According to some studies, firearms are the most common method, followed by knives (Mann, 1996). One of the women in this sample used an axe, while another used hot oil in the ear causing her husband's death.

The group of women who have had a long-term relationship with the victim (as shown in the findings of point 4 above) have been frustrated and abused by their partners in long-term and circumstances inciting the crime such as jealousy, loans taken by the partner and not consenting divorce have discharged the load that they have accumulated for a long time. The interviewed women had experienced intense dissatisfaction, as can be seen from their quotes below.

TABLE 2: Citations of women who committed intimate partner homicide

Subject	Citations of the women
A.	“My life is a drama. There was 29 years of suffering gathered in that cursed minute. I cried all day long from stress, my heart was hurt from my life, but still I was experiencing the same over and over”.
B.	“For 5 minuta can happen the worst. I was a victim of spousal abuse which led me to this point. I was blown from an entire life. If I had a good husband, I wouldn't be where I am today and I would be treated like a lady”.

Although weak motives such as jealousy appeared in certain cases, other reasons that have left a mark on the woman who commits the murder may take more weight than the apparent motive. A. reveals about her husband's 17-year-old



girlfriend: *“He wanted to bring her home and I absolutely did not want him to bring her there, because for that flat I had poured my sweat. I didn’t want him to bring her home, he could have gone somewhere else with her, but not there. I didn’t want him to bring her to that flat which I had thought was for the children.”* In this case, in addition to the jealousy feeling, we think that the main reason was being left without a home again for herself and her children after many years of sacrifices.

The women of this sample who had short-term relations with the victim had committed the crime in other circumstances, such as the victim’s physical attack on her, the discovery by her husband of her infidelity with a boyfriend.

6. Women feelings

In the last period before the murder, the women who were in a long-term relationship with the victim referred that they felt stressed, very tense and some of them had insomnia. The difficult economic situation aggravated women’s state in some cases. One of the women says: *“he said to me go where you want. I felt like I didn’t exist, like I was the most undervalued person in the world, that’s how I was, I really was. He was provoking me in the last two weeks, I was stressed, I was down, morally hurt and insulted”*.

The social systems that could have provided solutions to the problems of these women failed in some cases: A. had gone to the police office more than 50 times, many times she herself had withdrawn the complaint papers against her husband, but she warned the police office that she would kill him, not far off the act. She was divorced and later reunited and lived together with her ex-husband, because after the separation the children remained with their father as she was unable to financially support them. Subject B. stated that she had thought of separating but was too afraid. She talked about separation with her husband once when he was calm and sober and there was no discussion. He had reacted very badly. He threatened her and she was afraid of leaving him.

The interviewer noticed that in addition to remorse for the crime committed, these women had a desire to return to life again.

Conclusions

There is no single factor that is responsible for intimate partner killing. It turned out that there was an inciting circumstance of the crime which provoked the discharge in a final act of murder, but several hidden psychosocial factors, which interacted in a chain of events extending back from a triggering event to the women’s child and youth development contributed to the murder. The diagram below shows

some common characteristics of the woman offender, her male partner and risk factors during their relationship.

DIAGRAM 1: Risk factors in intimate partner homicide



The women who killed their intimate partners shared some common characteristics. These women with unfulfilled childhood, raised in poverty, in patriarchal families, with low education, limited opportunities, unemployed in long term encountered partners who were abusive, law breakers, irresponsibility for the family and moved into an abusive relationship, in difficult economic situation, without a future and repeated extinction of hopes and positive future expectations. Caught in disputes, violence from their partner, the difficult economic situation, these women failed to find a solution. The systems they used to seek help failed. They did not have any emotional and economic support from the biological family of origin, social assistance, accommodation for them and the children, so even attempts of divorce failed. They remained chained to their unfortunate lives. Each of the above-

mentioned factors contributed to an aggravated psychological state, and one incident was enough to provoke the discharge and explosion of all life's complaints in the final extreme act, that of murder.

Our results agree with the findings of Jensen (2001) stating that women are more likely to commit murder when they are victimized, trapped by traditional expectations, and denied the resources to escape difficult family situations, which lead to despair and unavoidable and unbearable life situations. These are clear indicators that women are experiencing a low quality of life and murder represents its most serious extreme (Jensen, 2001). Jensen states that the woman's attack against human life can be seen as the result of the extreme of a spectrum which reflects the quality of the woman's life and her psychological well-being. At the other end of the spectrum, women would be free from domestic abuse, valued in private and public life, and free to fully express their human being.

Limitations of the study

This study did not aim to study the personality of women who committed the murder of their intimate partner, looking for personality disorders that may also come from innate temperament factors. We would encourage further studies in this direction. This study was focused on psychosocial factors, since while biological factors determine the aberrant personality structure, the environment can play a role in how the personality will be expressed as behavior. The number of the sample was small, representing case report series.

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