

Violence of Adult Sons Against Mothers in the Context of Matricide

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This article endeavours to analyse an important and concerning phenomenon: women killed by their adult sons. It focuses on parricide (killing of parents or close relatives), with special attention on killing of mothers (matricide), while the term ‘homicide’ is used as an overarching term for killing human beings. The article gives an overview of statistics on reported cases of matricide over a five-year period. Employing qualitative analysis, it refers to four court judgments in instances of matricide committed by adult offspring in Lithuania between 2021 and 2023. Based on the analysis of recent international studies, crime statistics and court decisions, the aim of this study is to highlight deeper social problems, which predispose mothers to susceptibility to matricide. Therefore, the article contributes new knowledge to the discourse within the field of gender-based violence against women. Moreover, this study provides professionals in the field of domestic abuse with enriched comprehension of the matricide phenomenon and enhances institutional cooperation seeking prevention of violent behaviour and adequate protection of victims.

Keywords: violence against mothers, femicide, matricide

INTRODUCTION

The findings of the Global Study on Homicide (2019) of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) show that even though men are the principal victims of homicide globally, women continue to bear the heaviest burden of lethal victimisation because of gender stereotypes and inequality. Although in the majority of cases victims of femicide or ‘the intentional killing of women in domestic violence or family contexts’ (EIGE 2023) are killed by their current and former partners, they are also killed by their fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters, and other family members because of their role and status as women (UNODC 2019: 11). As Condry and Miles point out (2022), although the killings of women are recognised as particularly committed by fathers, uncles, brothers, and cousins, the category of ‘sons’ as offenders is not clearly distinguished. Therefore, researchers reflecting on

the killing of mothers highlight the invisibility of mothers as victims of femicide (Condry, Miles 2022).

There are more studies of violence of offspring, children or adolescent, towards parents (Boxer et al. 2009; Loinaz, de Sousa 2020). Child to parent violence (CPV) patterns reflect tendencies of intimate partner violence, victimising women more often. A son-mother dyad is the most frequent of the CPV cases (Holt 2021). Violence of adult offspring towards parents receives limited scholarly attention. Nonetheless, although scarce, there exists some investigation into 'elder abuse', predominantly concentrating on elder abuse experiences in institutions rather than families. Victim surveys usually refer to a 'family member' without identifying a perpetrator more specifically (Holt 2021). Another problem encountered in gathering data is the very term 'elder abuse' as it is applicable to people over 60 years old, which means that younger parents are not identified as experiencing violence from adult offspring.

Elder abuse being recognised as a social problem, cultural understanding and acceptance of violence affect the perpetration and experience of violence. Holt (2021) argues that in culture, women's and men's rights, including mothers' and fathers' roles, their legal responsibility, and children's rights and position towards parents have an impact on the perpetration of violence within families. The reporting of violence depends on whether family relations are perceived by society as a 'private matter'. It has an impact on the disclosure of violence to researchers and authorities in the context of help-seeking (Holt 2021).

Parricides vary from 2% to 4% of all homicides across countries (Fegadel, Heide 2018); matricides, i.e., killing of mothers by their biological children, make up less than 2% (Heide, Frei 2010) when the type of relationship between a perpetrator and his/her victim is known (Holt 2017). Information on familial dynamics, motivational dynamics, and even mental health history are often not available even in large databases on victims and perpetrators (Fegadel, Heide 2018). In fatal cases of violence, mothers and fathers face a broadly similar risk. Still, the majority of perpetrators are men (Fegadel, Heide 2018; Holt 2021; Sahin et al. 2016). Matricide might be treated as a gendered crime as sons kill their mothers considerably more often than daughters do (Heide, Frei 2010; Adinkrah 2018). In analysing psychiatric diagnoses of the perpetrators, clinical literature covers parricide more comprehensively. In addition to mental illness, 'mutually dependent and hostile' relationship between mother and son may also lead to offence. Murder can be understood as a drastic strive to break away from the pathological symbiotic relationship with the mother (Catanesi et al. 2015). Adinkrah's (2018) analysis of matricide cases in Ghana between 1990 and 2016 proves that, in addition to psychiatric diagnosis or misuse of drugs, cultural beliefs in witchcraft contribute to matricidal killings. A few studies attempt to analyse non-clinical cases. One of the motives of parricide named in an analysis in Turkey was economic distress leading to child-parent conflicts (Sahin et al. 2016).

Since the Law on Protection against Domestic Violence came into force in Lithuania (2011), more attention has been paid to violence against women. However, research data conclude that 'most of the victims of domestic violence are frustrated and too weak psychologically to seek help and inform the competent national authorities about their critical situation. For this reason, they require special treatment and should be recognised as vulnerable victims' (Michailovič et al. 2022: 264). In the context of adult violence against mothers as part of femicide, emphasis should be given to violation of human dignity and its protection by the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992): 'Human dignity shall be protected by law' (Article 21 of the Constitution). For example, Baer thus describes dignity

underlining discrimination and equality: 'discrimination cannot be seen as a group-based process because dignity is a fundamentally individual claim. Socially, however, dignity is a part of equality: you have dignity when you are equal. Dignity without equality does not exist' (Baer 1996: 56–57).

The available sources suggest that one of the most urgent issues – adult violence against mothers as part of femicide – remains under-researched. That is why the phenomenon of matricide is the key issue of this study. It applies qualitative analysis of the court judgments in four cases of matricide in Lithuania in 2021 to 2023. Besides, the study embraces the analysis of crime statistics. The article fills the gap in the unexplored area in Lithuania.

METHODS

This paper draws on official crime statistics in the field of intentional homicide gathered by the Information Technology and Communications Department under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania and the Official Statistics Portal administrated by Statistics Lithuania, State Data Agency, and analyses tendencies of intentional homicides and parricides committed in home environment between 2018 and 2022. Qualitative analysis is employed in examining court judgments regarding criminal cases of matricide, with adult sons as perpetrators of murders of their mothers. This study investigates four matricides that appeared before regional courts and one case that was also heard in the Court of Appeal of Lithuania. LITEKO, the information system of the Lithuanian courts, and the Infolex database, the primary source of legal information for professionals, serve as the sources for selecting the anonymised cases (i.e., with personal data unidentified). The judicial decisions were selected by the keyword 'matricide'. The anonymised court decisions are openly available in the aforementioned databases for the period 2021 to 2023. The content analysis method was used. The focus is on matricide cases: the social, demographical, and legal characteristics (information about systematic violence, alcohol/drug abuse, disability, marital status, employment, prior conviction, and/or administrative liability, aggravating/mitigating circumstances) that were present while committing this type of femicide, and the way the courts addressed these characteristics. It is noteworthy that court judgments in the field of matricide are rather formulaic and provide very few details of interaction between adult sons and their mothers.

It should be emphasised that our study includes only the cases of matricide recognised as such by the courts, which means that one case in which the courts of different instances interpreted the murder of an aunt differently, not recognising the case as matricide, is not analysed. On the other hand, the case of the murder of the aunt is worth mentioning because it sheds more light on both the legal interpretation and the gendered attitudes towards care and mother's social role. The court of first instance convicted a person of intentionally killing his aunt as a family member living together with the perpetrator under Article 129(2)(3) of the Criminal Code (CC) of the Republic of Lithuania (Panevėžys Regional Court 2022b). The court stated that although the family tie between the perpetrator and the victim was not in the list of family members in the meaning of CC Article 248(2), it was established, in the light of the circumstances of the case, that they had a long-term and strong emotional bond (among others, the perpetrator confirmed at the hearing that he considered his aunt as his second mother, took care of her, and their relationship was particularly close). However, the Court of Appeal did not recognise the murder of the aunt as matricide under CC Article 129(2)(3) and, referring to CC Article 129(1), reclassified it as a crime (Court of Appeal of

Lithuania 2023). In criminal law, the ontology of a crime is act-oriented. Theoretically, law is a social construction made in legislative processes and legal practices. Thus, courts reconstruct the facts of a given case, and criminal law guides crime investigation processes and interpretations (Jokila, Niemi 2020).

VIOLENCE TOWARDS PARENTS AND MATRICIDE: A STATISTICAL REVIEW

Cases of fatal abuse of mothers by their children constitute a significant proportion of domestic violence crimes. Although according to the available statistical data, the number of registered criminal acts related to domestic violence decreased in Lithuania (from 9529 criminal acts in 2018 to 5872 in 2022, Statistics Lithuania) in the period of five years, the number of reported intentional homicides (murders) increased (from 13 in 2018 to 22 in 2022). For example, in 2022, the registered intentional homicides committed by domestic perpetrators accounted for a third of all registered intentional homicides percentagewise (35.5%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Registered intentional homicides by domestic perpetrator in Lithuania, 2018–2022*

	Number of registered criminal acts related to domestic violence	Number of registered intentional homicides by domestic perpetrator/share of intentional homicides compared to all registered intentional homicides, %
2018	9529	13/13.4
2019	7691	21/25.0
2020	7132	28/28.3
2021	5801	21/30.0
2022	5872	22/35.5

Source: The Information Technology and Communications Department under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania and the Official Statistics Portal administrated by Statistics Lithuania, State Data Agency.

Furthermore, analysing the dynamics of the registered victims of intentional homicides by domestic perpetrators, one cannot but notice that it increased from 14 persons in 2018 to 25 persons in 2022 (Table 2). When examining the figures for male and female victims of intentional homicides by domestic perpetrators, it is noticeable that a considerably higher number of women than men experienced fatal violence during 2021–2022, while the difference was minimal in the period of 2018–2020. According to the available data, the number of father-victims was several times lower than the number of mother-victims since 2020. It is noteworthy that crime statistics aggregate perpetrators under the general category of ‘child’ without differentiating by age. It is, therefore, not possible to determine whether the child was an adult or a minor (see Table 2).

* When examining the official statistical data, some data inaccuracies may occur. The data provided by Statistics Lithuania and the Information Technology and Communications Department under the Ministry of the Interior do not always match. This may be due to data processing issues.

Table 2. Registered victims of intentional homicides by domestic perpetrator in Lithuania, 2018–2022, number of persons

	Registered victims of intentional homicides by domestic perpetrator		Men victims of intentional homicides by domestic perpetrator			Women victims of intentional homicides by domestic perpetrator		of which victimised by:			
			intimated partner	child/adopted child	other	intimated partner	Child/adopted child	other			
2018	14	8	6	–	–	6	4	1	1		
2019	22	9	5	2	2	10	9	1	–		
2020	29	14	8	3	3	13	6	6	1		
2021	22	5	1	1	3	16	11	5	–		
2022	25	7	1	2	4	17	8	6	3		

Source: The Information Technology and Communications Department under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania and the Official Statistics Portal administrated by Statistics Lithuania, State Data Agency.

The available data suggests that the number of victims of matricide grew in Lithuania in 2020, and there was a slight increase in the number of femicides committed by intimate partners in 2021 (Table 2). One of the factors that may have had an impact on femicide was COVID-19. In this regard, the European Institute for Gender Equality points out that COVID-19 had a negative effect on gender equality, which is substantiated by deterioration in health indicators and increased domestic violence, part of which was instant yet should also have continuing outcomes. The pandemic situation aggravated stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, which, together with other fatal risk factors, could give rise to femicides in the coming years (EIGE 2023).

ANALYSIS OF COURT JUDGMENTS

As mentioned above, due to data protection, the judgments do not contain any personal information, e.g., information about persons' (victims' and perpetrators') age. Therefore, the age of the victims was identified only from witness statements or data from the crime scene inspection report: the mother was about 60 years old in one judgment case, and the victim was 80 years old in another case. The age of the perpetrator (44 years old) could be identified in one case only. The analysis of the judgments reveals that at the time of committing the crimes, the sons were coresident with their mothers, and the perpetrators were under the influence of alcohol or psychoactive substances (Table 3). In two cases, the court recognised abuse of alcohol or psychotropic or other psychoactive substances as aggravating circumstances (CC Article 60(1)(9)).

Table 3. The social, demographical, and legal characteristics of offenders in matricide cases

Case	Son and mother lived together	Systemic violence	Alcohol/drug abuse	Prior conviction	Prior administrative liability	Disability	Marital status	Employment
1	+	+	+	+	+	+	Single	Unemployed
2	+	+	+	-	+	-	Married	Employed
3	+	+	+	+	+	-	Divorced	Unemployed
4	+	+	+	+	-	-	Single	Unemployed

Source: case data; compiled by the authors.

According to recent studies, most of the acts of matricide are committed at victims' homes, the latter residing with their adult sons. The findings suggest that parent-adult children interdependence increases conflicts in families, and access to social services such as therapy, hospitalisation, or alternative living arrangements for the mentally ill adult children might decrease the cases of matricide and upgrade the life for parents and their children (Heide, Frei 2010; Holt 2017).

In two cases, the fact that the perpetrator had confessed and sincerely regretted was considered a mitigating circumstance (CC Article 59(2)(1)). Ultimately, in three cases, the persons who committed criminal acts were given the custodial sentence of 9 to 11 years of imprisonment. In one case analysed, the person was found legally incapacitated by the court and compulsory medical treatment was applied (Vilnius Regional Court 2022).

In all the cases examined, there is a discernible pattern of systemic violence against mothers, the murder representing the culmination of a violent relationship. Illustratively, it was established in one case that the perpetrator had previously been released from criminal liability for violence against his mother following reconciliation with her (Panevėžys Regional Court 2022a). As women tend to forgive their sons easily, some judgments reveal uncritical evaluation of the son by his mother. For example, the court indicated that, according to the witnesses, the murdered woman had repeatedly told them that her son was a good child, he used to help her, and the only problem was alcohol abuse, otherwise everything was fine (Kaunas Regional Court 2021). With just four cases in our dataset, we could not gain a profound insight into how cultural aspects strengthened the 'intersectional invisibility' of mothers-victims (Purdie-Vaughns, Eibach 2008: 377; Condry, Miles 2022: 43). The previous studies indicate that the victims experience 'intersecting structures of inequality: as women, as mothers of mentally ill sons, middle-aged or elderly, and with their own health conditions and disabilities' (Condry, Miles 2022: 52), which removed them 'to a position of acute social invisibility' (Purdie-Vaughns, Eibach 2008: 381). In that respect, 'legal invisibility' is defined as a 'special type of cultural invisibility' by arguing that 'a person with multiple subordinate-group identities becomes legally invisible when the court cannot provide the same legal protection as it provides for people with a single subordinate-group identity' (Purdie-Vaughns, Eibach 2008: 386–387).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study presents the situation in Lithuania by identifying deeper social problems that predispose mothers to susceptibility to violence. The statistical data for the five-year period indicate an increase by a third in the number of all recorded intentional homicides committed by

domestic perpetrators. Notably, the incidence of reported matricides rose from one to six cases within the period. The analysis of the court judgments unveiled that the mothers killed by their adult sons had suffered from systemic abuse prior to their murder. Holt (2021) argues that, in the fatal cases of violence, mothers are at a similar risk as fathers, and gender politics is not applicable. Our data suggest that the son-mother dyad dominates in the fatal cases of violence. It is therefore important to highlight femicide as 'the extreme end of a continuum of violence against women' and to conclude that a killing is often the peak of other configurations of violence encountered by victims (EIGE 2023: 9).

The study highlights deeper social problems, which predispose mothers to susceptibility to matricide, revealing the cultural reasons behind killings of mothers (matricide) by their adult sons. In addition, our study confirmed the finding of previous studies that the invisibility of women is one of the main social, cultural and legal factors causing matricide in the context of femicide. While exercising prudence against generalisations from only four cases, the analysis of the court judgments suggests a conclusion that supports the reasoning proposed by Condry and Miles, who assert that 'matricide needs to be understood as rooted in structures of inequality and particularly in the marginalisation of older women, mothers, and carers' (Condry, Miles 2022: 55).

Furthermore, acknowledging the influence of cultural disparities on familial relationship (Holt 2021), there emerges a compelling necessity to explore the demographical characteristics of offenders and victims as well as the broader picture of cultural norms of gender relationships in more detail. It is anticipated that despite methodological constraints, the insights garnered from this research may equip professionals in the domain of domestic abuse with a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon of matricide, which is pivotal in strengthening institutional cooperation in the fields of prevention of violent behaviour and adequate protection of victims. For this reason, it is critically important to collect and analyse broken-down statistical data not only on cases of all forms of gender-based violence but also on matricide as fatal abuse against mothers. The conclusion suggests that a gender perspective is needed to understand matricide as femicide.

LIMITATIONS

It is imperative to acknowledge the methodological limitations inherent in this research. Given the analysis of only four court cases, it is not an attempt to extrapolate its findings to a more expansive context. Moreover, complex factors such as the sons' mental illness, drug or alcohol addiction, among other pertinent factors, can also exert a considerable influence on the incidence of matricides. Other research proves that, besides a psychiatric diagnosis, multiple other factors lead to lethal offences. Therefore, inclusion of information on the dynamics of familial relationships can augment our knowledge on adult violence against mothers in the context of femicide. Despite the limitations of the current study, it nonetheless contributes valuable data to the highlighting of the challenges associated with femicide in Lithuania and its prevention.

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Suaugusių sūnų smurtas prieš motinas motinos nužudymo (*matricide*) kontekste

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamas svarbus reiškinys, kai suaugę vaikai (sūnūs) nužudo savo tėvus (motinas). Daugiausia dėmesio skiriama motinų nužudymui (angl. *matricide*). Pateikiama pastarųjų penkerių metų oficialios statistikos duomenų apie tėvų nužudymą analizė. Kokybinės analizės pagrindu aptariami keturi teismų sprendimai baudžiamosiose bylose dėl pilnamečių sūnų įvykdyto savo motinų nužudymo Lietuvoje. Naujausių užsienio tyrimų, nusikaltimų statistikos duomenų ir teismų praktikos analizė atskleidė gilesnes socialines problemas, susijusias ir su motinų didesne savo vaikų globa, todėl jos yra labiau pažeidžiamos smurto akivaizdoje. Straipsnyje atkreipiamas dėmesys į užsienio mokslininkų tyrimuose akcentuotą socialinį-kultūrinį ir teisinį motinų intersekcinių nematomumą moters nužudymo kontekste. Šio tyrimo metu gautos įžvalgos gali būti naudingos su smurto artimoje aplinkoje atvejais dirbantiems profesionalams siekiant geriau suprasti motinų nužudymo reiškinį, taip pat stiprinant institucinį bendradarbiavimą, smurtinio elgesio prevenciją bei tinkamą nukentėjusių žmonių apsaugą.

Raktažodžiai: smurtas prieš motinas, moters nužudymas, motinos nužudymas