

## PATHWAYS TO MATERNAL FILICIDE AMONG WOMEN INCARCERATED IN GAUTENG PROVINCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### Abstract

*South African research on women who commit crime gained momentum over the past decade, yet little is known about their routes to criminality. This article contributes to the understanding of maternal filicide (the phenomenon of mothers who murder their children) in the context of pathways theory by examining the lived experiences of women who killed their children. Eight women incarcerated in Gauteng, South Africa were identified using purposive sampling. Drawing on evidence from the in-depth personal interviews, the study uncovered four theoretical pathways to explain maternal filicide, namely adversities during childhood and youth; lack of support and suicide ideation; problematic and abusive intimate relationships; and strains associated with motherhood and economic deprivation. The aetiological tenets of these pathways appear interrelated and overlaying. An unwanted child and failure to provide medical care to a neglected or injured child were the most reported motives for filicide.*

**Keywords:** Maternal filicide; female criminality; pathway theory; child murder; family violence

### Introduction

While ancient myths passed down generationally may allude to the murder of biological children for the greater good of society, the murder of one's own child is not a universally shared value in modern society (Tyano & Cox, 2010). Child murder at the hands of a parent defies societal beliefs of parental roles and responsibilities. When a mother murdered her child, her acceptance of and commitment to gender norms and expectations are questioned. Despite South Africa's embodied legislation, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and the Children's Act 38 of 2005, which serve to preserve the best interests of children nationally, children remain vulnerable to violence. Headlines such as "Mom slits baby's throat as she tries to 'end her children's suffering'" (Nemakonde, 2021) and "Ballito mom tied up and drowned her 'difficult' child, 4, then tried to kill herself" (Wicks & Pijoo, 2022) illustrate the reality and brutal nature of the phenomenon in South Africa. This article examines the lived experiences of incarcerated women in South Africa who have murdered their children, ultimately to identify potential pathways that lead to maternal filicide.

Literature indicates that there is not a uniform definition of the term filicide, other than that it is the act of murdering a child by a parent (Holloway, 2016). Cases where children are killed by family members including their parents is referred to as intrafamilial child murder, although the term filicide is generally reserved to denote the killing of one's own child (UNODC, 2019). Filicide may include the death of a child of any age – from birth to 18 years old. Further, filicide can be subdivided into three categories, namely neonaticide (the murder of a child within the first 24 hours of his or her life), infanticide (the murder of a child within the first twelve months of his or her life), and filicide (the murder of a child older than twelve months. (Debowska et al., 2015). The definition of filicide is perpetrator-based, thus all child deaths caused by a parent are included and comprise unintentional death brought on by neglect or maltreatment (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018). Filicide includes fatal child abuse along with murder and culpable homicide. Furthermore, biological parents, *de facto* parents, legal guardians, and stepparents may all be considered perpetrators of filicide if the child is in their legal and ethical care when the murder took place.

Filicide is a phenomenon that surpasses national borders (Flynn et al., 2013). However, the dark figure of crime may apply as there are at least three obstacles that prevent accurately reporting the prevalence rates thus constraining international comparisons (Debowska et al., 2015; Flynn et al., 2019). Firstly, it is difficult to estimate the number of abandoned newborn babies whose remains are never found. Secondly, medico-legal procedures determining the cause of death may overlook intentional injuries. Lastly, a successful conviction in a court of law is required for the case to reflect as child murder in official crime statistics. For the financial year 2019/20, a total of 42 348 crimes against children were reported to the South African Police Services, of which 8 849 were contact crimes that include 1 137

cases of attempted murder and 943 cases of murder (South African Police Services, 2020). At least three children are murdered per day in South Africa (UNICEF, 2022).

### Research methods

The qualitative approach was used to develop pathways of maternal filicide as a phenomenon in South Africa. To fulfil the purpose, personal interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth and detail-rich information from eight women who killed their children and who were serving prison sentences for filicide. An instrumental case study design was used, and a semi-structured interview schedule guided the interviews. Non-probability sampling procedures had to be employed, in particular purposive sampling, because a list of women serving prison sentences for filicide could not be obtained (murder sentences do not differentiate between victims). Following verbatim transcription, content analysis was used to understand the meaning participants apply to certain events in their life and the manner in which the critical events that may have contributed to filicide were internalised. The method of analysis allowed the identification of themes to make sense of the data. From the research process, the researchers were able to identify four pathways leading to maternal filicide. The inquiry was not without challenges, which mainly comprised limited access to prisons due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Ethical considerations

Child homicide is a sensitive matter, and taking into consideration the stigma of murder, a high level of compassion and understanding was required during the interviews. Access to the participants was achieved through the appropriate channels, namely the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee, University of Pretoria, and the Department of Correctional Service's Research and Ethics Committee. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, informed consent, and debriefing of participants were considered to ensure ethical research practices were adhered to.

### Limitations

The study was qualitative in nature and, therefore, does not offer meaningful insights regarding trends or definitive characteristics associated with maternal filicide. It would be beneficial to include larger samples and cover a larger geographic area to increase the potential for generalisation of findings. Importantly, the role that men play in the motives for filicide should be investigated. The present study has shown that there is divergence between men and women filicide perpetrators, however, it has hardly ever been covered in literature. Further research into the experience of childhood adversities of filicide perpetrators is needed.

## Results and findings

### Background and context of participants

The participants' ages ranged between 26 and 38 years, although they were between 17 and 30 years of age when the offences took place. In addition to murder, the participants were charged with failure to provide medical care to a minor, concealment of a body, and child abuse and neglect. Their prison sentences varied between ten years and life in prison (i.e., a minimum of 25 years before being considered for parole). The victims included newborn babies and children up to the age of ten years, and their deaths were resulted from strangulation, poison, drowning, gunshots, burning and prolonged child abuse.

Five participants grew up in lower socioeconomic environments, while two participants stemmed from middle and one from high socioeconomic backgrounds. Three participants completed some schooling, another three finished Grade 12 and two attended post-school training. Most participants indicated having had a steady income before the filicidal incident and two were the breadwinners of their households. The socioeconomic status, education and employment profile of participants mimic that of the female offender profile found in other studies (*cf.* Steyn & Booyens, 2017).

Most filicide studies indicate that women are single at the time of the offence which directly influences the financial stress and childrearing responsibilities they endure which may well contribute to filicidal incidents (*cf.* Malope, 2014; Adinkrah, 2021; Muziki et al., 2022). In the present study, only one participant was single at the time of the offence, while all other participants were in long-term relationships or married. While nearly all participants were in long-term relationships, only three lived with their partners. The remainder of the participants lived alone with their children or with friends, and one participant, along with her children, had lived with her employer as she was a live-in domestic worker. The dynamic of having children with someone but not living with them may increase hostility in the relationship or complexities regarding living arrangements. Furthermore, the dynamic may be indicative of the role that men play in women's motives of filicide. An increasing number of studies demonstrate that intimate relationships may

encourage criminal behaviour (Wyse, et al., 2014; Barlow & Weare, 2019; Mostert et al., 2021) although filicidal studies have not addressed women's involvement in filicide due to pressures or expectations on the part of their intimate partners. The role of men in women's motives remains relatively unexplored in filicide research. Evidence suggests that most female offenders do not have a criminal history (Mostert et al., 2021) and, in the current study, none of the participants had a criminal history or an arrest record. Most participants shared the experience described by one participant, "*Because now, since growing up I never been police station. I never steal. I never did anything*" (P2/Johannesburg/2021). Some of the participants alluded to being involved with criminal activities, although they had not been arrested, including commercial sex work and illicit drug use.

Two of the participants had attempted to commit suicide immediately after murdering their children. One participant poisoned herself as well as her child, however, the poison did not have a fatal effect on her. Another participant who had fatally shot her two children, attempted to commit suicide by turning the gun on herself; however, when she realised there was not enough ammunition in the firearm, she attempted to run into oncoming traffic. In both instances, the women attempted suicide with the same means used to murder their children. Neither of the women had been diagnosed with mental illness, however, one participant maintained temporary substance-induced psychosis. While much of the literature focuses on altruistic killings, the present study found failure to provide medical care to a minor (neglect) and an unwanted child to be more prominent motives for maternal filicide.

Some of the participants indicated they were in an abusive relationship prior to the incident. Other participants explained situations where they felt degraded, but they would not go to the extent of saying they were being abused. Interestingly, almost all the participants had indicated being in a hostile relationship prior to the filicidal incident. The stigmas carried by 'abuse' are far-reaching and many individuals found it difficult to verbalise that they have been victims of abuse, especially in case of psychological or emotional abuse. The participants would rather use indistinct phrases to describe their relationship; for example, instead of the word 'abuse', they would use expressions such as "*there was no love anymore*" (P8/Johannesburg/2021) and "*it was just difficult*" (P1/Johannesburg/2021). Further, they did not allude to thinking of themselves as victims. Not surprisingly, some women do not understand their own trajectories to criminal behaviour, especially in contexts similar to South Africa where violence has become normalised (Graaff & Heineken, 2017). Although the police and civic organisations run campaigns annually targeting violence against women and children, the consequences of abuse are deeply entrenched into the psyche of victims. Not only does abuse make it difficult for victims to leave their violent relationships, but it also alters the manner in which they experience and internalise their world and surroundings (Dare et al., 2013).

The present study had two participants whose children's deaths were attributed to not only the physical abuse by the father figures, but further by the neglect of the mothers. In both instances, failure to provide medical care to the children resulted in their death as it was proved in court that timely medical care could have prevented the deaths. The case studies in the present study do not conform to the filicide classification system offered by Oberman (2003), and neither are the characteristics of the women in harmony with literature on fatal maternal neglect (*cf.* Davies, 2008). In South Africa, a country plagued with extremely high levels of gender-based violence, it appears the presence of an abusive partner plays a role in the interaction between mother and child and may result in the unintentional death of the child, however the dynamic has seldom been contemplated in literature.

Three participants had committed neonaticide (the victims were newborn babies) and one participant had committed infanticide (the victim was aged 12 months). All other participants had committed general filicide (the victims were aged four, seven, eight and ten years of age). An important filicide risk factor for older children could relate to economic stress as children get older which leads to increased costs related to growing children, such as progressing from breastmilk to formula, clothing, and enrolling at day-care centres and schools. Broadly speaking, and as was observed in the current study, females tend to receive support during pregnancy and once the baby is born; however, such support tends to decrease as time goes by and the child gets older.

### **Pathways to maternal filicide**

Developmental Criminology is a strand of thought that recognises the manifestation of offending as a function of one's experiences (Le Blanc & Loeber, 1998). This framework considers the course of offending in the context of developmental intervals such as life transitions and developmental covariates, which do not necessarily occur merely as a function of an individual's chronological age. The assumption that experiences early in life may have lasting effects

that influence behaviour later in life forms the foundation of Developmental Criminology (France & Homel, 2008). The theory encourages a longitudinal view to determine risk factors for offending (Schram, 2020). As such, researchers have focused on life-course patterns to determine pathways towards criminal behaviour. Another paradigm, Feminist Criminology, argues that reducing women's experiences to a series of risk factors that drive criminal behaviour is both essentialist and deterministic (Artz et al., 2012). At the same time, there is no fixed list of factors that can be said to causally create criminal behaviour (Steyn & Booyens, 2017). Filicide is a rare event that cannot be fully explained by a single construct (Milia & Noonan, 2022). Each maternal filicide incident involves the unique life circumstances of each woman who commits the act.

Feminist theories have argued that life events produce multiple and individual pathways to criminality; however, feminist pathway theorists have identified commonalities across female offenders' lives that place them at an increased risk of criminality (Artz et al., 2012). The present study mirrored similar commonalities in the lives of filicide mothers, although it is evident from the interviews that each participant's story is unique especially when considering the contrast between socio-economic groups. Participant 6 explained, *"I was well off, quite comfortable. Upper class across all my adult life, I guess. I have my master's degree and I am currently busy with my PhD proposal"* (P6/Pretoria/2022). Participant 3 did not have quite the same opportunities, *"when he walked out, everything stopped because I couldn't go to school. I used to travel by taxi, so I stayed at home since then. Ah, it came to a point where I had to go prostitute so that we can eat"* (P3/Johannesburg/2021). Analysis of the data revealed similarities in the life courses of the female participants, and the shared experiences and patterns in the lives of the filicide mothers led to the identification of four potential pathways to maternal filicide.

#### Pathway 1: Adversities in childhood and youth

The premise of lifecourse theory is that adversities and negative experiences in childhood correlate with adult criminal behaviour (Sampson & Laub, 2004). Pervasive adverse childhood experiences have been identified among filicide perpetrators including abuse, neglect, and familial problems, and such multiple adversities tend to be present in most cases of filicide (Dawson, 2015; Frederick, Devaney & Alisic, 2022). There are chains of risk linking adverse experiences in childhood to tragic outcomes in adult life. Almost all the female participants recalled negative experiences, or adversities, while growing up. The adversities included being the victim of child rape, gang rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and crime. As one participant narrated, *"It was the first time I had sex and there were many of them. They dragged me into the bushes behind the garage and then left me there afterwards. My grandmother took me to the police, but they never found them"* (P8/Johannesburg/2021). Another participant related her adverse experience as, *"You know I, when my uncle passed away, I saw him, he had hung himself in one of the rooms and I saw that, um [I found him]. Sho, I could have been six or seven"* (P6/Pretoria/2022). She received no counselling for the traumatic incident,

*"But I've never really given myself time to internalise it and see how I felt about it. What actually happened to me emotionally and, and psychologically at the time ... probably something that has never been dealt with. So, I've never, I've never really worked through it"* (P6/Pretoria/2022).

None of the participants sought counselling for the adversities they experienced, neither in youth nor in adulthood. A body of psychological and criminological work exists that shows the impact of unresolved childhood trauma on adult criminal behaviour (cf. Wright et al., 2019; Dalsklev et al., 2019; Halsey, 2018; Moloney et al., 2009). Female rage and violence may be rooted in childhood trauma consisting of abuse and victimisation (Flemke, 2009). Long-term reflections of unresolved childhood traumatisation manifest in committing especially violent crimes in adulthood among females (Altintas & Bilici, 2018). In the present study, the participants who explicitly stated not receiving any form of psychological intervention had murdered their children by means of strangulation and gunshots, which are overt methods of murder as they are direct means of violence as opposed to covert methods such as poisoning.

#### Pathway 2: Lack of support and suicide ideation

The social situation of filicide mothers is usually characterised by poverty, social isolation, and a lack of effective support (Davies, 2022; Frederick et al., 2022). In the present study, almost all the participants indicated that they did not have a well-functioning support system. The contextual effect of emotional isolation and weakened social bonds leaves women with limited perceptions of legitimate problem-solving opportunities (Artz et al., 2012). Without a capable support system, the participants were not able to share their experiences with others nor obtain an outsider perspective regarding their circumstances. In addition, participants did not know about organisations or social services available to them which could assist in their situations, *"Go to the authorities? ... Um, I didn't know. I didn't know"*

these places where the mother and children, where they can go to” (P4/Johannesburg/2021). However, this was not elaborated on by most of the participants. Instead, the participants answered “no” when asked if they knew about organisations and social services available to them before committing filicide. Furthermore, some participants expressed suicidal ideation by making statements such as, “I had a death wish. I wanted to die” (P8/Johannesburg/2021). Two participants attempted to take their own lives after the murders had occurred.

*“I wouldn’t be here; I don’t know why God saved me, but I was supposed to be dead. I’m supposed to be dead but um, I woke up very normally. I drank some pills that I got from [this person I knew]. Poison. They took me to hospital. [The poison worked on my baby but not on me]. See I, I did it. The child was dead, and I was not dead”* (P3/Johannesburg/2021).

*“I had a suicidal thought on the Thursday. The incident happened on the Friday. The day before I had um, suicidal thoughts that I couldn’t pin to anything, that I couldn’t explain myself. And before I could even um, [long pause], eh, resolve, or even make sense of them, then the incident had happened”* (P6/Pretoria/2022).

Although the account of Participant 6 indicates suicidal ideation before the murders occurred, there were eyewitness accounts relayed in the court transcripts which indicated that she attempted to commit suicide on the scene by trying to shoot herself, however there was no ammunition left in the firearm, and by throwing herself in front of oncoming traffic. Participant 6 maintained temporary substance-induced psychosis and did not recall attempting suicide after the murder of her children.

### Pathway 3: Recent conflict in relationship

Intimate partner violence has been presented as a risk factor for female crime since the inception of feminist pathways theorising. “Battered women” is a term coined by Daly (1992) to categorise women who engage in crime resulting from being involved with a violent partner. Intimate partner violence has been considered a risk factor in the context of filicide (Frederick et al., 2022; Razali et al., 2019). Most of the participants in the present study experienced intimate partner violence, including in the form of emotional, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse at some point in their lives. One participant described a major turning point in her relationship as, *“I still had stitches and he wanted to sleep with me. I had to sleep on the floor with the baby while my boyfriend and the girl had sex in the bed”* (P8/Johannesburg/2021).

If the scope of intimate partner violence is expanded to include conflict, where conflict is hostility and contention, almost all the participants experienced conflict in an interpersonal relationship in the period leading up to the filicidal incident. In the context of the present study, conflict included an argument or disagreement, infidelity, abusive acts towards the participant or children, or the fear of further abusive acts, and financial isolation. One participant explained her relationship was tainted with hostility and abusive acts,

*“He was abusive. It started around six months into the relationship. Sho. Uh, verbally, mentally, physically. Sometimes sexually. I don’t wanna speak about [whether it happened towards the children as well]. [The abuse] was on a completely different level. Um, he was very good at manipulating me. Ja. And he would threaten me for like two, three hours non-stop where I had to basically beg for my life, and stuff like that”* (P4/Johannesburg/2021).

On the day of the incident specifically, the participant recalled the verbal and psychological abuse, *“He even refused for me to sleep and said ja he’s going to show me what it is to be bitter”* (P4/Johannesburg/2021). In this case, the child died due to a physical assault, reportedly at the hands of the mother’s partner, and the mother likely underestimated the severity of the child’s injuries or feared further abuse by her partner.

### Pathway 4: Strain

Everyday stressors have been identified as motives for criminality and child homicide (Malope, 2014). Individuals may feel overwhelmed with their circumstances and opt to behave criminally to address the strain or stress they experience. Participants recounted feelings of being overwhelmed with their circumstances, as summed up by one participant, *“Everything was just too much ... Because the child is crying and I’m crying. We are all crying. I was feeling like everything was heavy for me”* (P2/Johannesburg/2021). The strain women experience influences the way they perceive themselves and the perceptions of strategies and solutions available to them (Artz et al, 2012). In the present study, more than half of the participants communicated feeling overwhelmed at the time of the filicidal incident and it appeared to be a build-up of everyday stressors instead of isolated stressors on their own. As one participant recounted, *“My mother grew him [the child] up ... he was not staying with me. So, when he came to visit, he was [supposed to] go back. But everything was difficult because my mother wasn’t there anymore, she died”* (P2/Johannesburg/2021). Most of the strain the participants felt came from financial stress and the responsibility of taking care of others - especially their children - as described by one participant, *“My mind was not with me. I felt confused, stressed, everything, about*

my mom and the baby is crying. There were no clothes, no milk. The baby was crying. I didn't know what to do (P8/Johannesburg/2021)". Similarly, another participant stated, "Things were tough for me. I was working, paying rent. I have to take them [the children] back home. Yoh, things were tight, uh they were tight for me" (P7/Johannesburg/2021).

### Conclusion

Women who kill their children present a profound challenge to the accepted norms of motherhood and societal expectations of the maternal role. The research explored maternal filicide in an attempt to identify pathways to perpetration of the phenomenon. Bearing in mind that there is no fixed list of factors that can be said to causally create criminal behaviour, four potential pathways to maternal filicide were identified from the data: (1) adversities in childhood and youth, (2) lack of support and suicide ideation, (3) recent conflict in relationships, and (4) strain. Importantly, the features of the pathways seem to be inter-related, which means that each participant experienced a unique balance of circumstances that converged to create conditions which were, for that particular woman and mother, criminogenic and contributed to filicide.

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