



# **Femicide and mana-wāhine: a kōrero to progress understanding and prevention of deaths of women and girls in Aotearoa**

## **Purpose**

In 2023, the Family Violence Death Review Committee (FVDRC) set out to develop an understanding of femicide (the gender-based killing of women and girls) within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa). In June 2024, members of the FVDRC became family violence death review subject matter experts (FVDR SMEs) for He Mutunga Kore, the National Mortality Review Committee. The current discussion document represents a component of the background work undertaken to develop the FVDR SME's Ninth Report.

This paper is an acknowledgement of the over-representation of wāhine (women) and kōtiro (girls) Māori in the family violence homicide statistics in Aotearoa and a desire to seek an appropriate response to that. Family violence homicides are one component of femicide. Therefore, the FVDR SMEs were interested in understanding if there was the potential to take a strengths-based approach to preventing future deaths similar to those described in this discussion document.

We sought input from wāhine Māori representatives with a variety of expertise to understand if there was the potential to understand femicide within a mana-wāhine framing in order to take a strengths-based approach to prevention. The content of this discussion paper is a representation of the views of those who explored this issue at a hui in September 2023 (hui participants listed in Appendix 1). This was an important starting point in understanding how we (the FVDR SMEs) might better acknowledge and respond to those impacted by gender-based violence, to prevent future harm and avoidable deaths relating to femicide.

We offer this background document as an opportunity to understand the thinking and collaborative processes that contributed to the development of our substantive report, as well as to acknowledge the contributions from participants at the mana-wāhine hui.

## **Overview**

This discussion paper is a preliminary outline of the impact of violence across the life-course for wāhine and kōtiro Māori in Aotearoa. In this paper, we describe the loss of unborn children, deaths from suicide and violence against older women in particular, and family violence homicides. This is

an extension of the United Nations' statistical guide<sup>1</sup> for measuring femicide in that we also consider other deaths that occur within the context of violence against women. The paper formed the basis of discussions that contributed to the FVDR SMEs' Ninth Report.<sup>2</sup>

Initiating a discussion about femicide for Aotearoa is an important starting point to help improve related monitoring, reporting and policy development. The paper starts with an introduction to the concept of mana-wāhine, drawn from a hui hosted by the FVDR SMEs in late 2023. Subsequently, it provides a brief overview of the global and Aotearoa-specific literature describing deaths associated with damage to women's bodies which includes perinatal deaths associated with violence exposure, and women and girls dying by suicide.

This discussion document provides a broader description of the deaths of women and girls than that previously presented by the FVDRC. It is a preliminary overview of those deaths, that we sought to explore with tangata whenua. This is more fully expanded upon and discussed in the Ninth Report.

We include some reflective questions throughout the paper (in text boxes below). These were primarily developed to facilitate discussion at our stakeholder hui. However, they have been included in this document to encourage readers from all sectors to consider how they might start to shift their understanding, thinking and responses to gender-based violence against women and girls.

## Background

In 2021, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published a statistical guide to support the consistent measurement of femicide<sup>3</sup> (defined below). The intent was to galvanise global responses to this most extreme form of gender-based violence. The guide was discussed by the FVDRC and the committee noted at the time that the data routinely collated for the purposes of family violence death review aligned with the data recommended by the UNODC.

The report also highlighted the broader context in which women and girls are the victims of homicide.

Although a core focus of the FVDR SMEs is to review family violence-related homicides, there are overlaps between family violence, femicide, violence against women, suicide and avoidable mortality in general.<sup>4</sup> In our life-course approach to family violence death review, the FVDR SMEs have frequently noted the overlap of these various forms of violence, which drove us to consider these commonalities more closely.

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<sup>1</sup> UNODC and UN Women. 2022. *Gender-related Killings of Women and Girls (Femicide/Feminicide)*: Global estimates of gender-related killings of women and girls in the private sphere in 2021 – Improving data to improve responses. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

<sup>2</sup> FVDR SMEs Ninth Report. In development. *Femicide: Deaths resulting from gender-based violence in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand*. Wellington: Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission.

<sup>3</sup> UNODC and UN Women. 2021. *Statistical Framework for Measuring the Gender-related Killing of Women and Girls* (also referred to as "femicide/feminicide"). Vienna.

<sup>4</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality. 2022. *Femicide: shedding light on the 'invisible' victims*. URL: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/femicide> (accessed 19 March 2025).

Understanding of the intentional killing of women and girls is limited across the globe.<sup>5</sup> Strengthening our understanding of gender-based violence and the systems required to prevent such violence has the potential to minimise harm to wāhine and kōtiro, and to reduce such deaths in the future.

Reflective question 1

If we encouraged a broader understanding of deaths related to violence experience, by including suicides and perinatal deaths (for example), how would this change our response approaches?

## **Centring on wāhine and kōtiro Māori**

The Waitangi Tribunal's Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry is framed around the '*denial of the inherent mana and iho of wāhine Māori and the systemic discrimination, deprivation, and inequities experienced as a result*'.<sup>6</sup> Much research and evidence-gathering has been done over the course of the inquiry, with a view to:

*... demonstrating the unrelenting, systemic and interrelated acts and omissions of the Crown since the Crown denied wāhine Māori signing te Tiriti o Waitangi, which have caused the negation of wāhine Māori mana motuhake and rangatiratanga over their whenua, taonga, mātauranga, hearts, bodies, minds, beliefs, and physical and metaphysical relationships resulting in the effects of today's inequities.*<sup>7</sup>

To align with local and international understandings of the disproportionate impact of femicide on Indigenous women and girls,<sup>8</sup> it is necessary to consider the significant and disproportionate impact colonisation has had on wāhine Māori.<sup>9,10</sup> Any discussion about the relevance of a femicide discourse within Aotearoa needs to therefore intentionally include the collective voices of wāhine Māori to ensure a balanced, informed and equitable approach to this kaupapa.

A commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi,<sup>11</sup> and guidance from Te Pou (the national mortality review's Māori responsive framework on understanding inequities in the experience of avoidable mortality),<sup>12</sup> influenced the second step we took in developing this discussion paper.

<sup>5</sup> UNODC and UN Women 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Waitangi Tribunal. nd. Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry. URL: [www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/en/inquiries/kaupapa-inquiries/mana-wahine](http://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/en/inquiries/kaupapa-inquiries/mana-wahine) (accessed 19 March 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Waitangi Tribunal. nd. Appendix B: Wai 2700 Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry. Tūāpapa Hearings Plan. URL: [https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/Documents/WT/wt\\_DOC\\_168195364/Wai%202700%2C%203.1.312\(b\).pdf](https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/Documents/WT/wt_DOC_168195364/Wai%202700%2C%203.1.312(b).pdf) (accessed 19 March 2025).

<sup>8</sup> García-Del Moral P. 2018. The murders of Indigenous women in Canada as feminicides: toward a decolonial intersectional reconceptualization of femicide. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43(4): 929–54.

<sup>9</sup> Mikaere A. 1999. Colonization and the destruction of gender balance in Aotearoa. *Native Studies Review* 12(1): 1–28.

<sup>10</sup> Pihama L. 2020. Mana wahine: decolonising gender in Aotearoa. *Australian Feminist Studies* 35(106): 351–65. DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2020.1902270.

<sup>11</sup> Te Tāhū Hauora. 2023. Tauākī Koronga Statement of Intent 2023–27. Wellington: Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission.

<sup>12</sup> Roguski M, Grennell D, Dash S, et al 2022. Te Pou: an Indigenous framework to evaluate the inclusion of family voice in family violence homicide reviews. *Journal of Family Violence* 39: 325–37. DOI: 10.1007/s10896-022-00459-6.

The FVDR SMEs invited wāhine Māori to a hui in late September 2023 to discuss femicide, and if and how femicide intersected with mana-wāhine. Participants were wāhine who had actively contributed to understanding the disproportionate impact of violence against wāhine Māori. In general, they were known by and had worked alongside the FVDR SMEs over time, with some contributing to previous FVDRC reports.

The hui is described below, including the advice that was received about how to position mana-wāhine – the life, energy and status of wāhine Māori – within a discussion of femicide. It presented an opportunity for robust debate, and participants challenged the FVDR SMEs to develop narratives about femicide from our in-depth family violence death reviews. These narratives describe failures that led to the deaths. We have also developed counter-narratives that describe opportunities for an improved response.<sup>13</sup>

## Femicide

### *Femicide defined, the global impact and an Aotearoa context*

Femicide can be broadly defined as ‘the killing of women and girls because of their gender’.<sup>14</sup> It is the most extreme manifestation of violence against women and girls and is a human rights violation. Generations of gender inequality, power imbalances and detrimental social norms continue to contribute to this pervasive issue,<sup>15</sup> which intersects with the ongoing impacts of colonisation here in Aotearoa.

Framing femicide as a human rights violation highlights the State’s responsibility to ensure action. Although the State currently contributes to action to reduce violence, these responses are largely framed on an individual basis – for example, prosecution of offenders and support services for victims. In contrast, Whānau Ora approaches and place-based responses have the potential establish trusting relationships, building the foundation to address safety concerns or re-establish support structures needed for safety.<sup>16</sup>

However, the social norms that create the context in which femicide can occur, such as gender inequity,<sup>17</sup> are largely ignored from State-based responses. When framed as a human rights violation, the occurrence of violence is a failure of the State rather than the sole responsibility of the individuals involved.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> We acknowledge the input of Dr Denise Wilson, Jackie Burrows, Kirimatao Paipa, Rolinda Karapu and Maira Pihema in reviewing the alternative case narrative and helping to highlight how the system continues to fail wāhine Māori.

<sup>14</sup> Vienna Declaration on Femicide. 2012. Vienna Symposium on Femicide, 26 November 2012, United Nations Office in Vienna.

<sup>15</sup> UNODC and UN Women 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> FVDRC. 2023. An ongoing duty to care He tauwhiro haere te mahi. February. Te Tāhū Hauora, Health Quality & Safety Commission. Wellington.

<sup>17</sup> UN Women. 2024. Five essential facts to know about femicide. URL: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/five-essential-facts-to-know-about-femicide> (accessed 8 April 2025)

<sup>18</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2023. States must eradicate femicide globally: UN expert. URL: [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/states-must-eradicate-femicide-globally-un-expert](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/states-must-eradicate-femicide-globally-un-expert) (accessed 20 March 2025).

It is estimated that around 45,000 girls and women worldwide were killed in 2021 by either an intimate partner or another member of their family.<sup>19</sup> If we were to classify surviving family or whānau members as additional victims of a femicide event (such as surviving children, parents and siblings), the number of people impacted by femicide, and indeed all family violence-related death victims, would be much higher.<sup>20</sup> The FVDRC 8<sup>th</sup> Report<sup>21</sup> provided evidence that the experiences of surviving children from family violence homicides remain largely unaccounted for, yet they have significant and ongoing unmet needs following their mother's death.

Femicide as a cause of death is under-reported and robust data surrounding it remains limited. The United Nations 2022 femicide report<sup>22</sup> stresses a need for better-quality data and reporting on femicide. Further, the discourse on femicide is not well informed by the perspectives of Indigenous women and girls, so there is an opportunity in Aotearoa to examine the implications of a femicide framework for kōtiro and wāhine Māori.

Around 40 percent of female homicides worldwide in 2021 were accompanied by little or no contextual data to enable their classification as femicide or otherwise,<sup>23</sup> making it difficult to inform prevention policies for these types of killings. This is also the case in Aotearoa. The family violence homicide data reported below does not include women and girls who were killed outside of the family or whānau environment. Data drawn from the New Zealand Police shows that around 60 percent of homicides in Aotearoa are related to family violence. The nature and circumstances of the remaining 40 percent of homicides where women and girls are the victims remain largely unexplored.<sup>24</sup> We note the potential for hidden homicides to also exist – those that are staged as suicides or accidents and not subsequently recorded as homicide – further contributing to the undercount.<sup>25, 26</sup>

## ***Femicide as a product of colonisation***

Colonisation is a global phenomenon (see Box 1). While this discussion paper relates to the impact of colonisation on Māori specifically, colonisation has had a global impact, introducing foreign social norms and ideals to other countries also. As such, ethnic and migrant populations who increasingly call Aotearoa home might have their own stories of colonisation of which they may also be experiencing the consequences.

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<sup>19</sup> UNODC and UN Women 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> FVDRC. 2023. *An ongoing duty to care: Responding to survivors of family violence homicide*. Wellington: Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission. URL: [www.hqsc.govt.nz/resources/resource-library/an-ongoing-duty-to-care/](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz/resources/resource-library/an-ongoing-duty-to-care/) (accessed 20 March 2025).

<sup>22</sup> UNODC and UN Women 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> NZ Police. 2022. *Police Statistics on Homicide Victims in New Zealand 2007–2021: A summary of statistics about victims of murder, manslaughter, and infanticide*. URL: <https://library.nzfvc.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=7578> (accessed 20 March 2025).

<sup>25</sup> What We Learned In 2024: Updates from the Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention, <https://www.killedwomen.org/> (accessed 8 April 2025)

<sup>26</sup> Vintner, R. 2024. 'Hidden homicides': campaign calls for review of cases where women fell from height. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/04/hidden-homicides-campaign-calls-for-review-of-cases-where-women-fell-from-height> (accessed 8 April 2025).

**Box 1: Common global experiences of colonisation (as described by Amba Sepie, University of Canterbury)**

By imposing their own legal, political and social systems, colonial authorities effectively supplanted or assimilated local cultures into the coloniser's language, education and health systems, gender codes, religious beliefs, administrative structures, and legal frameworks ...

The nature of colonial rulership was hierarchical (a social and governance model we still have), highly mobile and acquisitional, and informed by a value system inherited from monotheistic religion, in which strict binaries (us and them, human and animal, good and evil, etc.) were enforced and used to structure the new societies. The violence, both subtle and overt, that colonial powers utilised to establish and maintain control over their colonies was directed by military force, socio-political manipulation, the imposition of religious, legal, and administrative systems, and the physical dismantling of the communities themselves ...

Child removal policies and residential school systems separate the children, directly impacting the ability of communities to pass on cultural traditions through child rearing and education, with profound intergenerational effects ... Education, oppressive laws, and assimilative practices undermine and eliminate language use, customary ceremonial practice, body sovereignty, and cultural identity. Forced sterilisation disproportionately targeted racialised and indigenous women ... Destructive and culturally interruptive strategies such as these have been shown to destroy the cultural foundations of a people within just two generations. (Page 656 and 658)

Source: Adapted from Sepie (2024).<sup>27</sup>

Substantial evidence highlights the impact of colonisation on the breakdown of Māori social structures and support systems.<sup>28</sup>

Background research for the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State Care collated much of this evidence to understand the compounding impact of colonisation and the over-representation of Māori in state care.<sup>29, 30</sup> As noted in Box 1, that experience is not unique to Aotearoa.

This work for the Royal Commission also highlighted the State care to custody pipeline,<sup>31</sup> intergenerational trauma and the uneven impact of State care on rangatahi (young) Māori.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Draw from Sepie, A.J., 2024. Colonisation and colonialism. In *Introducing Human Geographies* (pp. 651-665). Routledge. Page 656 and 658

<sup>28</sup> For a review of some of this research see, for example: Moewaka Barnes H, McCreanor T. 2019. Colonisation, hauora and whenua in Aotearoa. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* 49(sup 1): 19–33. DOI: 10.1080/03036758.2019.1668439.

<sup>29</sup> Rashbrooke R, Wilkinson A. 2019. Cracks in the Dam: The social and economic forces behind the placement of children into care. URL: [www.abuseincare.org.nz/assets/Uploads/Cracks-in-the-Dam.pdf](http://www.abuseincare.org.nz/assets/Uploads/Cracks-in-the-Dam.pdf) (accessed 21 March 2025).

<sup>30</sup> Savage C, Moyle P, Kus-Harbord L, et al. 2021. Hāhā-uri, Hāhā-tea – Māori Involvement in State Care 1950–1999. Report prepared for the Crown Secretariat. Ihi Research.

<sup>31</sup> McIntosh T. 2020. Imagining a world without prisons. URL: [www.auckland.ac.nz/en/alumni/whats-happening/alumni-video-and-audio/raising-the-bar--home-edition-2020/tracey-mcintosh---imagining-a-world-without-prisons.html](http://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/alumni/whats-happening/alumni-video-and-audio/raising-the-bar--home-edition-2020/tracey-mcintosh---imagining-a-world-without-prisons.html) (accessed 21 March 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry Abuse in Care. 2022. Care to Custody: Incarceration Rates. URL: [www.abuseincare.org.nz/assets/Uploads/Care-to-Custody-Incarceration-Rates-Research-Report.pdf](http://www.abuseincare.org.nz/assets/Uploads/Care-to-Custody-Incarceration-Rates-Research-Report.pdf) (accessed 21 March 2025).

...the ongoing impacts of colonisation ensured that Māori remained unable to live as Māori, the author Ranginui Walker argued in his book *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*. Walker also highlighted family breakdown and the loss of the traditional constraints imposed by tribal elders on younger people. This in turn produced low achievement at school, high rates of juvenile delinquency, and rising crime. Over 80% of young Māori left secondary school in the 1960s without any recognised qualifications, and their offending rates were many times those of their Pākehā contemporaries.<sup>33</sup>

We acknowledge the significant role of colonisation contributing to the inequitable experiences of wāhine Māori in femicide statistics. This draws attention to the different starting points for Māori and Pākehā in understanding gender-based violence and the oppression of women that leads to femicide.

As articulated by Kuni Jenkins and Leonie Pihama:

What the feminist discourse was dealing with was the oppression of women by men. So that's the gender struggle. What was wrong with the feminist struggle is that they were actually fighting Pākehā men and then they expected Māori women to join and fight Māori men ... If you leave out the gender bit and just look at the oppression, it gives you strategies for dealing with those power relations; for example, 'Why should that group be dominant while this one is subjugated?'... Just holding it at 'women's knowledge' keeps us from being locked into a gender struggle while we're still trying to deal with the whole Māori struggle.<sup>34</sup>

This has been further explored by Khylee Quince to understand why Māori women are over-criminalised in Aotearoa.

... the 'equal treatment' theory seemed to be appropriate for white middle class women, striving to be treated the same as white middle class men. The goal of equal treatment between genders does not transfer to indigenous or minority women. Given their shared history of colonisation, oppression and disadvantage, no aboriginal or minority woman would aspire to be in the place of an aboriginal man, who will have also suffered discrimination.<sup>35</sup>

Fiona Cram describes the need for understanding cultural roots to support an understanding of where women are in the world:

We all start from a common understanding of what it means to be Māori and ... this is a good space from which to explore what it means to be Māori women.<sup>36</sup>

Reflective question 2

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<sup>33</sup> Rashbrooke and Wilkinson 2019, *op. cit.* (drawing on the work of, page 17, citing Ranginui Walker. 2004), p 17 *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End*. Penguin, Auckland.

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins K, Pihama L. 2001. Matauranga Wahine: Teaching Maori women's knowledge alongside feminism. *Feminism and Psychology* 11(3): 293–303, pp 300–2.

<sup>35</sup> Quince K. 2010. The bottom of the heap? Why Maori women are over-criminalised in New Zealand. *Te Tai Haruru Journal of Maori Legal Writing* 3: 1–35.

<sup>36</sup> Cram F. 2001. Ma te wa e whakaatu mai: time will tell. *Feminism and Psychology* 11(3): 401–6.



The framework of femicide starts with a gendered lens, contextualising femicide as a human rights violation. If we were to consider femicide within colonisation, how would this shift our understanding of the underlying contributing factors?

## Preliminary data

To provide data on which to stimulate discussion, the FVDR SMEs drew on mortality data directly associated with femicide (family violence homicides in which women and girls were victims), as well as other forms of violence-related death.

There is a growing body of work that describes the strong relationship between intimate partner violence experience and adverse pregnancy outcomes. These deaths result from the direct exposure to physical violence directed at the stomach,<sup>37</sup> as well as indirect associations such as limited access to antenatal care as a result of coercive controlling behaviour by an intimate partner.<sup>38</sup> Further, a substantial literature base also describes the relationship between lifetime violence exposure and death by suicide.<sup>39</sup>

These additional deaths were recorded by the Perinatal and Maternal Mortality Review Committee (PMMRC) and Suicide Mortality Review Committee (SuMRC).<sup>40</sup>

The preliminary analysis, presented below, was conducted in 2023.

**It is important to note** that these are exploratory data, presented to allow hui participants to consider the approximate undercount of deaths of women and girls that are related to violence exposure.

### *Family violence homicides<sup>41</sup> (2009–2021)*

- A total of 143 women (aged 18 years and over) and 48 girls (under 18 years) died as a result of family violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), child abuse and neglect (CAN) and intrafamilial violence (IFV).
- Of this combined total of 191 deaths, there were 70 deaths of wāhine and kōtiro Māori, made up of:
  - 20 CAN deaths
  - 9 IFV deaths
  - 41 IPV deaths.

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<sup>37</sup> Burry, K., Thorburn, N. and Jury, A., 2020. 'I had no control over my body': Women's experiences of reproductive coercion in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 32(1), pp.17-31.

<sup>38</sup> Buchanan, F., Humphreys, C. Coercive Control During Pregnancy, Birthing and Postpartum: Women's Experiences and Perspectives on Health Practitioners' Responses. *J Fam Viol* 36, 325–335 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00161-5>

<sup>39</sup> Meyer, S., Atienzar-Prieto, M., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and Moore, S., 2023. Missing figures: The role of domestic and family violence in youth suicide-current state of knowledge report.

<sup>40</sup> The SuMRC was disestablished in June 2022. Information held by that committee was not updated beyond deaths recorded in 2020. Coronial Services of New Zealand and Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora continue to measure and report on data relating to suicide and suspected self-inflicted deaths in Aotearoa

<sup>41</sup> FVDRC Tier 1 data from 2009 to 2021.



- Among those who died as a result of an IPV homicide, 17 percent of wāhine Māori were aged over 50 years, compared with 33 percent of non-Māori women.

#### *Perinatal and maternal deaths<sup>42</sup> (2019)*

- Of the 604 total perinatal deaths in 2019, 30 (5 percent) occurred within the context of agency-recorded family violence<sup>43</sup> (for example, recorded by health or police).
- 53 percent of perinatal deaths that were associated with family violence were recorded for women whose ethnicity was recorded as Māori.

#### *Deaths by suicide<sup>44</sup> (2009–2018)*

- Of those females who died by suicide, an average of 19 deaths of females per year occurred within 12 months of a family violence offence recorded by police.
- Wāhine and kōtiro were reported as both victims and offenders in these records.
- Among those who died by suicide and who had a previously reported family violence offence, 68 percent of wāhine Māori (n=83) compared with 50 percent of non-Māori females (n=106) had one or more police-reported offences against them in the 12 months prior to their death. Of these:
  - 52 percent of wāhine Māori were recorded as the victim in the offence in the year before suicide compared with 47 percent of non-Māori females.
  - 42 percent of wāhine Māori were recorded as the offender in the year before suicide compared with 35 percent of non-Māori females.
  - The remaining 6 percent of wāhine Māori and 18 percent of non-Māori females were recorded as witnesses or listed as subject to protection orders.
- In presenting this data, we note that ‘victim’ / ‘offender’ categories do not fully describe the role of people within a relationship. Previous FVDRC reports have highlighted the importance of understanding the full context of violence experience to more effectively respond. The ‘primary victim’, ‘predominant aggressor’ descriptors provide a more accurate description of the use of violence throughout the relationship, where primary victims may

<sup>42</sup> Perinatal and Maternal Mortality Review Committee. 2022. *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Perinatal and Maternal Mortality Review Committee | Te Pūrongo ā-Tau Tekau mā Rima o te Komiti Arotake Mate Pēpi, Mate Whaea Hoki*. Wellington: Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission. URL: [www.hqsc.govt.nz/assets/Our-work/Mortality-review-committee/PMMRC/Publications-resources/15thPMMRC-report-final.pdf](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz/assets/Our-work/Mortality-review-committee/PMMRC/Publications-resources/15thPMMRC-report-final.pdf) (accessed 21 March 2025).

<sup>43</sup> Of note, unless a child who dies in the perinatal period takes a breath, the police will not record a death. As such, none of these perinatal deaths will be included in the police homicide statistics. While the act of homicide, as defined in the Crimes Act 1961 (section 159), does not require the child to have taken a breath (instead, it requires a child to ‘proceed in a living state from the body of its mother’), the act of murder does (section 168(1)(c)). Therefore, an unborn baby who dies in the womb is not counted as a victim because (a) they have not proceeded in a living state from the body of their mother, and (b) the breath has not been wilfully stopped, because they have not taken a breath. Either way, the police practice of not recording these deaths is appropriate given the limitations of the Crimes Act.

<sup>44</sup> Suicide Mortality Review Committee data from 2009 to 2018.

use violence primarily as a mechanism resisting their partner's violence in order to keep themselves and their children safe.<sup>45</sup>

*The potential undercount of deaths resulting from violence against women*

- Family violence homicide data for the period 2009–2021 record an annual average of:
  - 4 deaths of girls aged under 18 years per year
  - 8 deaths of women aged 18–49 years per year
  - 3 deaths of women aged 50 years or over per year.
- These likely represent only a portion of deaths resulting from family violence. Including perinatal deaths and deaths by suicide where there was a police recorded history of family violence, we estimate the following distribution of deaths associated with family violence:<sup>46</sup>
  - 46 percent perinatal deaths
  - 30 percent suicide deaths
  - 24 percent homicide deaths.

We note the potential for the violence-related perinatal deaths to be an undercount. It is not possible to account for deaths where there was unreported family violence.<sup>47</sup> While wāhine Māori are known to be disproportionately impacted by family violence,<sup>48</sup> the over-representation of Māori in perinatal deaths may reflect bias in who is considered at risk of violence and therefore who is asked about their experience of violence in pregnancy.<sup>49</sup> Perinatal deaths for non-Māori women may be undercounted if they are less likely to be asked about their experience of family violence.

Reflective question 3

Family violence is generally understood by the health sector and other services as a 'social issue', while perinatal mortality is commonly understood as a medical issue, yet there are known associations between the experience of intimate partner violence and poor pregnancy outcomes. An appreciation of te whare tangata requires services and responses grounded in te ao Māori to support hapū māmā.

- a) How is this likely to shift our understanding of violence as a contributor to poor pregnancy outcomes?

<sup>45</sup> Family Violence Death Review Committee. 2016. Fifth Report: January 2014 to December 2015. Wellington: Family Violence Death Review Committee

<sup>46</sup> Note, these estimates are drawn from various time periods (perinatal deaths = 2019; suicide deaths, average of the period 2009-2018), and are presented with the intention of underscoring the under-estimate of deaths associated with violence when only counting homicides.

<sup>47</sup> The FVDR SMEs are in the early stages of a piece of work on better understanding femicide in the Aotearoa context, incorporating a mana-wāhine lens. This includes trying to better understand the death of unborn babies in the context of family violence, and female/maternal suicide that has been linked with police-reported violent events.

<sup>48</sup> FVDR. 2020. Sixth report | Te Pūrongo tuaono: Men who use violence | Ngā tāne ka whakamahi i te whakarekerekere. Wellington: Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission, p 27.

<sup>49</sup> This potential for bias needs to be considered across the wider health sector (and other sectors), including in women's health and antenatal settings, so that health professionals can better identify, respond to and support all women living with violence and their unborn babies.

- b) What does this shift mean for health service support for hapū māmā?
- c) What systems are required to respond effectively?

#### Reflective question 4

Compared with non-Māori women, there was a higher proportion of wāhine Māori who died by suicide in the 12 months following contact with police for a violent offence.

- a) Given this recent involvement with police following violence, what response is required to ensure the ongoing safety and wellbeing of wāhine Māori?
- b) What other response options are available for wāhine Māori in these situations that may enable them to feel safe and supported?

#### Reflective question 5

Seventeen percent of the Māori women who died as a result of an intimate partner or intrafamilial homicide from 2009 to 2021 were aged 50 years or over. In contrast, 33 percent of non-Māori women who died as a result of an intimate partner or intrafamilial violence homicide were aged 50 years or over.

- a) Given that wāhine Māori are disproportionately impacted by family violence, what contributes to a higher proportion of non-Māori dying from intimate partner or intrafamilial homicide aged over 50 years?
- b) Given that the figures displayed in this report are reflective of a global phenomenon,<sup>50</sup> are there protective factors that contribute to the lower proportion of older wāhine in the family violence homicide data?

#### Reflective question 6

Identification of primary victims and predominant aggressors in a relationship requires an understanding of the history of both the victim(s) and offender(s), as well as of the immediate context they are faced with (for example, who has the most to gain from using violence, and who has most frequently sought help).<sup>51</sup> Without this detailed understanding, service responses can exacerbate social and structural entrapment and worsen the situation for the person experiencing violence.<sup>52</sup> For example:

- services may pass off a mother's efforts to protect her children from violence as controlling or violent behaviours and hold her responsible when the situation escalates

<sup>50</sup> Bridges, F.S. and Tankersley, W.B. (2010) Mean ages of homicide victims and victims of homicide–suicide. *Psychological Reports*, 106(1): 163–9. doi.org/10.2466/PRO.106.1.163-169

<sup>51</sup> Tolmie J, Smith R, Short J, et al. 2024. Social entrapment: a realistic understanding of the criminal offending of primary victims of intimate partner violence. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

<sup>52</sup> FVDRC. 2022. Seventh report: A duty to care / *Pūrongo tuawhitu: Me manaaki te tangata*. Wellington: Te Tāhū Hauora Health Quality & Safety Commission.

- when a woman doesn't receive the help she needs through formal support services (despite reaching out), she may start using violence as a defence mechanism.

The FVDRC Fifth Report showed that all offenders identified as being 'primary victim offenders' in the FVDRC dataset were female, and 75 percent were wāhine Māori.<sup>53</sup>

- a) How do our responses to IPV continue to leave women, particularly wāhine Māori, vulnerable to homicide and to the perpetration of homicide?
- b) What shifts are required to more effectively support wāhine Māori experiencing violence?

## Mana-wāhine

The FVDR SMEs invited wāhine Māori to a hui in late September 2023 to discuss femicide, and if and how femicide intersected with mana-wāhine. Participants were wāhine who had actively contributed to understanding the disproportionate impact of violence against wāhine Māori. In general, they were known by and had worked alongside the FVDR SMEs over time, with some contributing to previous FVDRC reports.

Participants were invited to:

kōrero about mana wāhine and femicide as we seek to explore if and how to use the term femicide in our next family violence death review report, and if and how we should navigate our way towards this kaupapa through a mana-wāhine lens. If this is deemed a good idea, what is the mana-wāhine lens we should use to inform our reporting of the deaths of Māori girls, women and kuia in Aotearoa New Zealand?<sup>54</sup>

The data presented above formed the basis of discussions for the hui. Participants were encouraged to "bring your personal position" on their perspective of the proposed FVDR SME approach. The hui was facilitated by Dr Fiona Cram and Kataraina Pipi.

The following section provides an overview of the discussion and views expressed during the hui.

### ***Suggested definitions and outcomes from a mana-wāhine hui***

Mana-wāhine may be interpreted as a form of Māori feminism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for example, has written:

*Mana wāhine Māori is the preferred Māori label for what counts as Māori feminism. It is a term which addresses both the issues of race and gender as well as locates the struggle for Māori women within two distinct societies.*<sup>55</sup>

Mana-wāhine focuses on bringing to light the unique experiences and narratives (diverse as they may be) of Māori women, delving into the complex and diverse intersectionality and meaning of being

<sup>53</sup> FVDRC. 2017. Fifth Report Data: January 2009 to December 2015. Wellington: Family Violence Death Review Committee.

<sup>54</sup> Invitation letter to participants.

<sup>55</sup> Smith LT. 1993. Getting out from down under: Māori women, education and the struggles for mana wāhine. In M. Arnot & K. Weiler (Eds.), *Feminism and social justice in education* (pp. 58-78). London, UK: The Falmer Press, p 60

Māori and being female.<sup>56</sup> Mana-wāhine provides a space where, in their own ways and under their own terms, Māori women can define and present their heterogenous experiences and knowledge of what it means to be a Māori woman – both historically and in more contemporary contexts.<sup>57</sup> Participants in our mana-wāhine hui highlighted that:

*Mana-wāhine is sitting in this room – it's the kuia who lives in a car with her moko because they have no where; our mama and our kuia; it's Whina Cooper marching this land and highlighting the importance of who we are to our people; it's wāhine who called for te reo revitalisation, the change agents for justice.*

Key messages from this hui were that femicide is a product of colonisation that continues through to the present day. While femicide occurs within the context of colonisation, mana-wāhine was described as strengths-based and belonging with Māori rather than within Crown reports.

Participants in this hui clearly described the concepts of femicide and mana-wāhine as being at odds with one another (Box 2).

## **Box 2: Definitions of mana-wāhine as provided by hui participants**

Mana-wāhine focuses on bringing to light the unique experiences and narratives (diverse as they may be) of Māori women. It expands on Kaupapa Māori theory by delving into the complex and diverse intersectionality and meaning of being Māori and female.<sup>58</sup>

Effectively, mana-wāhine should provide a space where, in their own ways and by their own terms, Māori women can define and present their heterogenous experiences and knowledge of what it means to be a Māori woman – both historically and in more contemporary contexts.<sup>59</sup>

To underscore how femicide is at odds with mana-wāhine, hui participants recommended the development of case examples to describe the whakapapa or the roots of the system that result in femicide.

The data presented also highlights the importance of ongoing investment in kaupapa Māori solutions.

The following are some quotes from participants at the hui.

Mana-wāhine and femicide: a strong collective voice that femicide occurs within the context of colonisation. Mana-wāhine is strengths-based and belongs with Māori rather than Crown reporting.

The roots of the tree – the mana-wāhine tree. As wāhine Māori everything we do is about strengthening the foundations for our whānau, our hapū and Iwi. We have those strong values that lead to toi ora, pae ora for our people ... we are the key

<sup>56</sup> Johnston P, Pihama L. 1995. What counts as difference and what differences count: gender, race and the politics of difference. In K Irwin, I Ramsden (eds), *Toi Wāhine: The worlds of Māori women* (pp 75–86). Auckland: Penguin.

<sup>57</sup> Simmonds N. 2011. Mana wahine: decolonising politics. *Women's Studies Journal* 25(2): 11–25.

<sup>58</sup> Johnston and Pihama 1995, *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> Simmonds 2011, *op. cit.*

knowledge holders of whānau, of whakapapa and narratives. Hopefully we can make a difference for our whānau including our tāne moving forward.

Western views of femicide were deemed by hui participants to downplay what happens to wāhine Māori, and the importance of continuing to tell the systemic story of what happens to wāhine Māori was acknowledged – that is, to focus on the whakapapa of the system that results in femicide through the imposition of colonisation, the patriarchy and the genocidal agenda of the coloniser.

Hui participants sought for the dignity of women and the sanctity of wāhine Māori to be upheld. They viewed the hui as part of an ongoing discussion about how the strengths of a mana-wāhine perspective can support the prevention of avoidable deaths of kōtiro and wāhine Māori.

Mana-wāhine was also viewed as part of a bigger kaupapa of Māori perseverance in their fight for survival and the realisation of their rights as tangata whenua.

*Ka ora te wāhine pupua, ka ora te whānau puawai, ka ora te hapū  
puoranga ... ka ora te iwi pūroto – if we nurture and protect women, then  
the whānau and iwi/hapū (all) are protected and they will blossom.*

To describe how alternate responses to wāhine and kōtiro experiencing violence may change the outcome, participants requested the development of a case study with a corresponding counter-narrative to be developed from the information held by the FVDR SMEs.

The alternate narrative was reviewed and edited by hui participants to ensure it reflected a more appropriate response. Both the case study and alternate narrative are presented below as an illustration of how changes in responses have the potential to change outcomes.

## Lived experience case study – Aroha

What did happen	What could have happened
<p><b>Aroha was exposed to intimate partner violence and sexual abuse within her whānau from a young age. One of her younger siblings died, which had a significant impact on Aroha. As she grew older, she was raised by an aunt, but she struggled to find her place in the world and she frequently absconded from school. She became suicidal and agencies that engaged with her also had some concerns about her mental health, but Aroha found it difficult to engage with them. No alternative options were made available to Aroha.</b></p> <p><b>In response to the trauma she had experienced through her childhood, Aroha began using drugs and alcohol in her early adolescence. She became a mother while she was still in her early teens and later became involved in an intimate relationship with Eddie.</b></p> <p><b>Eddie became Aroha’s main support person. He had isolated her from her family and friends and he preferred a party lifestyle, which caused additional challenges in raising their children. Neighbours complained of frequent drinking and partying at Aroha and Eddie’s house. Child protection services received notifications of neglect and emotional and physical abuse of the children during this time. Some of these notifications were substantiated and social workers were concerned about their family, regularly visiting and noting that the children were in the home when violence occurred.</b></p> <p><b>There were multiple police-reported episodes of violence before Aroha felt able to leave Eddie.</b></p>	<p>Aroha was exposed to intimate partner violence and sexual abuse within her whānau from a young age. One of her younger siblings died, which had a significant impact on Aroha. As she grew older, she was raised by an aunt, but struggled to find her place in the world and she frequently absconded from school.</p> <p>A social worker who identified ‘behavioural problems’ with Aroha when she was young initiated counselling support for Aroha, her mum and other family members. The community organisation assisted them in dealing with their grief from the loss of Aroha’s sibling. The trust that was built through these relationships enabled Aroha to feel safe with her support people and she could tell them about other things that were concerning her in her life.</p> <p>Appropriate support could then be put in place around the frequent exposure to alcohol abuse and violence. The family knew who to call if they felt things were getting worse or if they needed help.</p> <p>Aroha’s community support worker helped initiate a sensitive claim through the Accident Compensation Corporation to enable free specialised counselling for the sexual abuse she had experienced. Aroha and her family received specialist support from a local sexual violence support service, as well as ongoing support from the community organisation they were already engaged with. These services understood that the impacts of sexual violence and intergenerational trauma within a family unit are complex and far-reaching.</p> <p>A difficult time followed for Aroha and her whānau, and Aroha had some difficulties at school and with her mental health. Although initially Aroha didn’t want to engage, a social worker at school was allocated to work alongside Aroha, supporting her and advocating for additional help as needed. When Aroha experienced feeling suicidal, early intervention was possible through her social work and community advocates and additional help from a trusted mental health practitioner was put in place. She felt</p>



<p><b>Eddie threatened Aroha, so she often withdrew her complaints to police. She was also scared of losing her children. This meant that Aroha found it increasingly difficult to cooperate with police.</b></p> <p><b>On one occasion, Eddie punched Aroha in the face several times, causing her to fall onto the floor. While she was on the floor, he continued with the serious physical assault. Police arrested Eddie and charged him with injuring with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. He was sentenced to imprisonment.</b></p> <p><b>Eddie had threatened Aroha that she would lose the kids because she was a ‘terrible mother’. When child protection services investigated, Aroha minimised Eddie’s attack on her as she was scared they would remove her children from her care if they knew the truth.</b></p> <p><b>At the time of her death, Aroha was living with three of her children. Eddie had just been released from jail but was bailed close by. He had conditions not to contact Aroha.</b></p> <p><b>There were over 30 reports to the police and child protection services relating to Aroha and Eddie. Services knew that she was isolated from her family. Despite the reports of violence, Eddie’s recent imprisonment and Aroha’s isolation, a comprehensive plan was not put in place to support Aroha.</b></p> <p><b>Eddie killed Aroha during an argument while he was on bail.</b></p>	<p>supported to deal with her trauma in safe ways, so she didn’t feel the need to turn to drugs and alcohol to help her cope with what had happened. With time and ongoing specialist and whānau support, the family learned how best to support Aroha and look after each other. These open conversations also enabled some family members to acknowledge and start healing from the violence and alcohol misuse that impacted many of them.</p> <p>When she was older, Aroha was in a relationship with Eddie, who became violent towards her. When the violence started to escalate and Aroha felt unsafe, she was able to talk with some supportive family members and contacted the community organisation she had previously been involved with to ask for help, as she trusted them.</p> <p>Appropriate community support was initiated, and a report of concern was made to child protection services regarding the concerns around family violence and the safety of Aroha’s children. This report acknowledged Aroha’s protective actions to constantly try to maintain the safety and wellbeing of her children and identified her partner as needing additional supports to address his own personal issues and to stop using violence. Child protection services were able to facilitate Eddie’s engagement with a stopping violence programme.</p> <p>Aroha’s longstanding community support worker continued to be a strong advocate for her and for the safety and overall wellbeing of the whole family. The support worker supported them in their dealings with government agencies (child protection services and police) and helped to initiate wrap-around community-based support for Aroha, her children and Eddie. This included trauma-informed parenting support, which helped Aroha and her children feel supported and safe. Eddie was also supported to start addressing some of his own trauma and his use of violence. This brought the family closer together and they were able to start moving forwards with their aspirations as a couple, a family and a whānau.</p>
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## Discussion

Within this discussion paper, we have provided some early thinking about whether ‘femicide’ is a useful framework for gaining insight into the deaths of kōtiro and wāhine in Aotearoa.

The preliminary data presented expanded understanding of how family violence can damage women’s bodies, leading to the avoidable deaths of unborn babies, girls and women. This data is likely to underestimate the true number of these deaths because no dedicated dataset is designed for this purpose, and it is difficult to capture unreported family violence experience.

As highlighted in previous FVDRC work, service delivery is often transactional in nature and lacking an ora or Whānau Ora approach. This can result in lack of trust, loss of hope and decreased safety for individuals and whānau experiencing violence. Furthermore, many services fail to understand the significant amount of distress people endure before they even attempt to seek help. In this way, services may fall short of their duty *of* and duty *to* care, reinforcing a lack of care for overall wellbeing and safety for those experiencing violence.<sup>60</sup> As the lived experience case study highlights, this failure to fulfil their duty does not address violence and negatively impacts pathways to safety and wellbeing. As participants at our hui noted:

*Family violence represents a pervasive social disease, creating a ripple of risks and consequent impacts that spread across children’s home, whānau, childhoods, and imagined futures.*<sup>61</sup>

Although settlers brought with them many patriarchal norms and social structures when Aotearoa was colonised, privileged patriarchal systems viewed women and children as chattels long before colonisation occurred.<sup>62</sup> As such, gender-based violence is entrenched with a long history of gender inequity and power imbalance, much of which continues today. Structural inequities and the ongoing effects of colonisation continue to negatively impact wāhine Māori, and Māori in general. This reinforces the need to view femicide as a human rights violation.

We note the collation of mātauranga that forms the basis of Waitangi Tribunal’s Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry.<sup>63</sup> In particular, how mātauranga and tikanga promote balance between wāhine and tāne. The knowledge presented is in direct contrast to patriarchal systems that were imported, and forms a basis for complementary relationships and may guide responses to the over-representation of wāhine Māori in femicide statistics:

“any differences in the roles men and women may have performed were a recognition of distinctive mutuality rather than oppositional worthiness”<sup>64</sup>

Reflective question 7

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<sup>60</sup> FVDRC. 2022, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Aroathoon C, Thorburn N, Burgess M, et al. 2023. *Evaluation of Kōkihi ngā Rito*. National Collective of Independent Women’s Refuges | Ngā Whare Whakaruahau o Aotearoa.

<sup>62</sup> FVDRC 2020, *op. cit.*

<sup>63</sup> Waitangi Tribunal. nd. Te ira wāhine and te ira tangata – the relationality and balance of wāhine and tāne for the good of all. URL: <https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/en/inquiries/kaupapa-inquiries/mana-wahine/te-kete-puputu/briefs-of-evidence-3> (accessed 8 April 2025)

<sup>64</sup> Moana Jackson. Witness Statement, page 6-7. URL: [https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/Documents/WT/WT\\_DOC\\_185718202/Wai%202700%2C%20A085.pdf](https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/Documents/WT/WT_DOC_185718202/Wai%202700%2C%20A085.pdf)

- a) What changes can we institute now to help prevent the deaths of girls and women?
- b) What is needed to address the underlying causes of violence (for example, the ongoing failure to address gender-based power imbalance and attitudes that allow some men to feel that violence is permissible)?
- c) What are the alternatives to police reporting when women and girls are experiencing violence?
- d) Given the limits in the data, how can we adequately capture the direct and indirect impacts of violence on unborn babies, girls and women?

## Summary

The FVDR SMEs work collectively towards reducing the occurrence and impact of violent deaths and avoidable deaths in general. This background paper is the start of a discussion about how to more comprehensively account for the deaths of women and girls in Aotearoa, as they relate to gender-based violence.

There was a strong view by participants at our hui that mana-wāhine is strengths-based and belongs with Māori rather than within Crown reports. The SMEs have taken on board this feedback as they developed their Ninth report.

Participants at our hui supported the application of a femicide framing to understand violence related deaths for wāhine and kōtiro Māori in Aotearoa, building in Kaupapa Māori approaches to violence prevention and response. Concurrent work needs to continue to address ongoing impacts of colonisation and inequities for Māori, and wāhine and kōtiro Māori in particular.

## Appendix 1: Participants at mana-wāhine hui September 2023

The FVDR SMEs wish to acknowledge the time and expertise of the wāhine Māori who attended this hui and shared their invaluable insights in this space. Those listed below consented to being named, but we also wish to acknowledge those who participated and whose consent was unable to be confirmed.

Fiona Cram	Denise Wilson	Dame Areta Koopu
Kataraina Pipi	Ria Earp	Jackie Burrows
Roni Albert	Prue Kapua	Kirimatao Piper
Denise Messiter	Maira Pihema	Mary-Kaye Wharakura
Ngaropi Cameron	Huhana Moselen	Dianne Cooze

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Enquiries to: [info@hqsc.govt.nz](mailto:info@hqsc.govt.nz)



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