

Analysis of the Maternal Filicide in Terms of Forensic Medicine in Turkey: A Clinical Research

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In the literature, 15% of the victims of homicide consists of children under 16 years of age; children under the age has been proved that they have the maximum risk. The vast majority of the victims were killed by their mothers. Thus, if mothers are the perpetrators of crime child murders are discussed in different ways, so it is conceptualized under the name of maternal filicide in the literature. This study has been performed for; in Turkey, women who killed their own children between 0-6 years old, victims of crimes, and to determine features of crime regarding on forensic medicine, eventually in order to provide a basis for taking necessary precautions and measures.

Methods: This research includes 74 reports of maternal filicide cases came to IV. Board of Specialization at the Council of Forensic Medicine in İstanbul, Ministry of Justice of Republic of Turkey between 1996-2006 years. In the light of data came from these reports, the socio-demographic characteristics of mothers who attempted filicide and children who were killed, and crime occurrence methods and mothers' criminal legal responsibility were examined.

Results: Mothers, suspected of the filicide crime, are often at a young age, and did not desire pregnancy, 73 of mother's do not have criminal history,

and 48 of mothers confessed the crime. Found that 71 of child victims are biological kids, 38 of them were killed around age, and 20 of them were girls, 35 of them were boys. The study group, seven of defendants killed or attempted to kill more than one child at the same time. The majority of mothers committed the crime during the daylight. When filicide methods were examined strangling or throwing up the child from higher were seen the most. The majority of mothers committed crime without weapon or other objects, just by their hands. Based on decisions of IV. Board of Specialization, no significant difference was observed between the mothers with criminal liability and mothers with non-criminal liability.

Conclusion: In this study, important data procured from the demographic characteristics of the mothers, findings on conditions during the crime and the method of the crime, and mothers' psychosocial stressors, but it has been discerned that this data is limited to define the crime of filicide. At the end of the study, besides studied the parameters that directed people to commit this crime, other factors, like mental status and/or motives should be probed.

Keywords: Homicide, crime, maternal filicide, forensic medicine, filicide

INTRODUCTION

In the literature, it is reported that 15% of homicide victims were children under 16 years, and the ones younger than 1 year had the highest risk (1,2). Murder of children by their parents has been explained with the concept of filicide. It is reported that, murder of children by their fathers is a very distinct concept from murder of children by their mothers. It is observed that fathers kill older, often multiple, male children with a gunshot, by stabbing, or a penetrating device as well as by leading head trauma. This situation has been termed as "paternal filicide" (3). However, mothers generally kill younger female siblings, and their psychosocial criminal motives and murder methods represent a broad range. Murder of children by their mothers has been accepted as a more complicated, unique, and sophisticated subject than other homicide crimes and paternal filicide, and this is conceptualized as maternal filicide (4).

In the literature it is determined that although most of the perpetrators of paternal filicide have personality disorders, alcohol/substance abuse perpetrators of maternal filicide are more prone to psychiatric disorders and less prone to alcohol/substance abuse. Most of these mothers experience domestic violence, spend whole day with their children, are poor, socially isolated, have disagreements with other family members, are psychotic, have a depressive or suicidal tendency, have a low level of education, are not married and are inefficient in child care, and have a history of abuse by their parents during childhood (5,6). In the light of this information, many investigators performed important analyses on causal, symptomatic, and psychosocial aspects of this crime, and some authors suggested that to determine differential diagnoses characteristic features and material details such as crime tools would also be important (7,8). On the other hand, some studies have investigated the effects of background of mothers on the crimes that have been conducted (9). Very few studies have presented detailed information about maternal filicide in Turkey (10).



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As summarized above, maternal filicide crime should be investigated in a more sophisticated and versatile manner. Thus, we considered investigating these mothers according to sociodemographic features, crime methods, attitudes and behaviors after the crime, and detectable psychosocial stressors. This study therefore planned to thoroughly investigate and interpret the occurrence and forensic medical aspects about mothers who killed their children between 0 and 6 years of age and to present alternative determining factors.

METHODS

Materials

This retrospective study consists of 74 maternal filicide reports of mothers who were accused of killing their children aged between 0 and 6 years. The files were scanned through all crime reports from 1996 to 2006 at the Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Justice, 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Istanbul.

This study was conducted with the permission of Institute of Forensic Medicine in Istanbul.

Methods

The interpretations of reports have been classified below and a study form has been generated.

- Characteristics of mothers (age; number of children; intended/unintended pregnancy; raped/not raped; if raped, the relation with the rapist; place of delivery, and criminal background of the mother)
- Characteristics of the victims (age, sex, biological or stepchild, and presence of illness or handicap)
- Data about the crime (occurrence of the crime, acceptance or rejection of the crime, memory of the crime, time period of the crime, participants in the crime, murder attempt of another child in the same time period, simultaneous or following suicide attempt/thoughts/risk, the crime method, and the crime tool)
- Examination data of 4th Specialized Board of the Institute (psychiatric diagnosis, intelligence, and criminal responsibility status)

Statistical Analysis

Both categorical and continuous variables were assessed with descriptive statistics. Categorical variables (number of children, intention for pregnancy, sexual abuse status, criminal background, age and sex of the victim, being self or stepchild, illness or handicap status, timing of the crime, participants in the crime, multiple filicide, suicide-filicide relation, the mode of occurrence of the crime, acceptance of the crime, method of the crime, crime tools, and mental status data) were described with percentages of accessible data. Continuous variables were displayed as mean \pm standard deviation.

Statistical significance tests were not performed because of the small study sample.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Mothers

The reports retrieved from 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine stated that the age of the mothers varied between 14 and 47 years. Mothers were categorized into four age groups (14–21, 22–26, 27–32, and 33–47 years). Mean age was 26.42 \pm 7.11 years. The crime was more prevalent in mothers aged between 22 and 26 years. Twenty-eight mothers (46.6%) had a single child and 22 mothers (36.6%) had two or three children. Ten mothers (16.6%) had more than three children. Numbers of

children were not available in reports of 14 mothers (18.9%). Among accessible data of 27 mothers (36.5%), the pregnancies were unintended in 20 cases (74.0%). Eleven pregnancies (14.9%) were as a result of sexual abuse. Five of the abusers were close persons, three were relatives of the women, one was the partner, and other was the spouse of the woman. One woman was raped by a foreign person. Place of childbirth was the home in seven (50.0%), health facility in five (35.7%), and open land in two women (14.3%). Four of the deliveries at home and two of the deliveries at health facilities were actually in toilets. In reports of 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, information on the delivery place of 60 women (81.0%) was missing. Of the 70 mothers (94.6%), only one mother (1.4%) had a previous conviction; 69 mothers (98.6%) did not have a criminal background and data of 4 mothers were inaccessible (Table 1).

Characteristics of Victims

It was interpreted that 77 children were murdered by 74 mothers. According to the reports of 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, of the 77 children, 38 (51.3%) were younger than 12 months, 15 (20.3%) were between 2 and 3 years, and 21 (28.4%) were between 4 and 6 years of age. Data of three (3.9%) children were missing. Information about the sex of children was missing in 22 cases (28.6%). Of the 55 victims whose data were available, 35 (63.6%) were female and 20 (36.4%) were male. Seventy-one (92.2%) children were self-siblings. Data of the remaining six children (7.8%) were not available. Only four children (5.6%) were suffering from severe or chronic diseases (Table 2).

Characteristics of the Committed Crime

According to the reports of 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, crimes were detected after the corpses had been noticed in 19 cases (29.2%). Twenty-two cases (33.9%) were unraveled by denunciation. In 24 cases (36.9%), the mothers confessed their crime to her relatives, neighbors, or spouses and surrendered to gendarmerie or the police. Information on the detection of the crime was absent in nine cases (12.2%). Forty-eight mothers (71.6%) had pled themselves guilty. However, 15 mothers (22.4%) did not accept the criminal charge and four mothers did not remember the moment of the event. Data on the admission of guilt were missing in seven mothers (9.5%). The crimes occurred during the day in 44 cases (77.2%) and in the night in 13 cases (22.8%). In the reports, data were missing in 17 cases (23.0%). In five cases (6.8%), mothers were accompanied by their parents or relatives. In seven cases (11.7%), mothers attempted to kill more than one child. Multiple filicide attempts were observed only in mothers who had two or three children. None of the mothers with more than three children attempted multiple filicide. In 74 cases from 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine, there were 88 victims. Of these victims, 11 children (12.5%) survived after the filicide attempt. Suicidal thoughts or attempts were not observed in 52 mothers (74.3%). In 18 cases (25.7%), there were suicidal components following the filicide attempt. Fourteen mothers attempted suicide (78.0%) and four (22%) mothers had suicidal thoughts. Data on suicidal attempts or thoughts were missing in four cases (5.4%) (Table 3).

Methods of the murder were available only in 68 (88.3%) of the 77 children. Murder methods of these children were choking in 19 (27.9%), throwing the child from a height in 13 (19.1%), stabbing in seven (10.3%), corporal punishment or maltreatment in six (8.8%), burning in four (5.9%), and gunshot in three (4.4%) cases. Data on murder tools were insufficient in 12 cases (16.2%). Of the remaining 62 women (83.8%), 28 (45.1%) killed their children with no tools but just their hands (Table 4).

According to the psychiatric examination of mothers at 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine 41 (55.4%) of mothers 79

Table 1. Characteristics of mothers

Variable (I)	Variable (J)	n	%
Age group	14-21	16	21.6
	22-26	21	28.4
	27-32	18	24.3
	33-47	19	25.7
Number of children	1	28	46.6
	2-3	22	36.6
	>3	10	16.6
Volitional status of pregnancy	Voluntary	7	26
	Involuntary	20	74
Conditions during childbirth	Nearby hospital/maternity hospital/health care provider	2	14.3
	Hospital/maternity hospital/health care provider far away from home because of elopement or abduction	1	7.1
	Alone indoor/in a room at home	2	14.3
	Indoor hidden from others, with the help of a lay person	1	7.1
	Alone at indoor toilets	4	28.6
	At the toilet of a hospital/health care provider in secret	2	14.3
	At open field such as a garden, forest, or plantation	2	14.3
	Criminal record	Present	1
Absent	69	98.6	

Table 2. Characteristics of victims

Variable (I)	Variable (J)	n	%
Age of the child	24 h after birth	10	13.5
	1-5 days	5	6.8
	5 days to 12 months	23	31.1
	2-3 years	15	20.3
	4-6 years	21	28.4
Sex	Female	35	63.6
	Male	20	36.4
Adoptive status of the child	Self	71	96
	Adopted	3	4
Illness or handicap of the child	Present	4	5.6
	Absent	67	94.4

were found to attempt the crime under the influence of a psychiatric illness. In 14 women (18.9%), mental retardation was detected additionally. It was decided that 41 mothers (55.4%) were criminally irresponsible and 33 mothers (44.6%) were criminally responsible in the reports of 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine

Table 3. Manifestations of the crime of maternal filicide

Variable (I)	Variable (J)	n	%
Unravelling of the crime	Confession	24	36.9
	Discovery of the corpse	19	29.2
	Denunciation	22	33.9
Acceptance of criminal charge	Accepted	48	71.6
	Did not accept	15	22.4
	Did not remember the event	4	6
Time period of crime	Daytime (07:00-21:00)	44	77.2
	At night (21:00-07:00)	13	22.8
Crime associates	Present	5	6.8
	Absent	65	87.8
Attempt of multiple filicides	Present	7	11.7
	Absent	53	88.3
Suicide or suicide attempt/ thought/risk simultaneous with or after the crime	Present	18	25.7
	Absent	52	74.3

DISCUSSION

Studies on filicide cases revealed that variables such as mothers' age, social conditions, psychological and psychopathological status, age of the victims, and crime methods show different characteristics (1,7,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26). When assessed with respect to the mean age of mothers, this study consisted of a fairly young population, which was similar to that observed in a previous study (10). The mean age of the women of the present study was close to that of women from eastern communities but lower than that of women of northern communities such as Canada, Finland, and Switzerland (23,27,28,29,30).

Usually, victims were self-children, and this finding was similar with that of previous studies (1,12,15,16,17,22,23,24,25,26). On the other hand, we could not determine whether the sexual intercourse, which led to the pregnancy of women, especially married women, were in line with their wishes. In this study group, 20 women had given birth to unwanted children. In seven cases, there was sexual abuse. This threat usually originated from brothers, close relatives, and neighbors in concordance with other studies (15,16).

The absence of criminal background in mothers contrasts with previous studies (7,17,20,25,31,32,33,34,35). This information suggests that in our country, the aforementioned violence is independent on criminal structure and is specifically focused against children.

Many authors emphasized the most risky group was the infanticide group (1,15,16,36); this was also observed in our study. However, unlike with previous reports, reports on murdered children between 3 and 6 years of age were also prevalent. Very few victims had had a chronic illness or handicap.

In the literature, information about the confession of the crime is scarce. Whereas this study revealed that 48 mothers (71.6%) admitted to the crime, which led to the conversion of suspects to perpetrators and increased the reliability of the data. As Gold emphasized, the admission of crime may be interpreted as a sign of the women's immediate awareness about the burden of the crime (37).

Table 4. Data on commitment of maternal filicide crime

Variable (I)	Variable (J)	n	%
Method of the crime	Choking	19	27.9
	Drowning	1	1.5
	Throwing into sewage	1	1.5
	Use of penetrating instrument	7	10.3
	Use of sharp crashing instrument	2	2.9
	Firearm	3	4.4
	Beating, battering, or shaking	6	8.8
	Throwing from a height	13	19.1
	Throwing on a hard surface	2	2.9
	Leaving in a closed place	1	1.5
	Poisoning	3	4.4
	Negligence and imprudence	3	4.4
	Burning	4	5.9
	Hitting with a hard object	2	2.9
Burying alive	1	1.5	
Crime instrument	Hands	28	45.1
	Cheesecloth, cloth, or socks	8	12.9
	Rope	2	3.2
	Gun or rifle at home	3	4.8
	Knife	7	11.3
	Stone	1	1.6
	Combustible material	5	8.1
	Cleaver	1	1.6
	Agricultural drugs or toxic agents	2	3.2
	Waistband	1	1.6
	Hayfork	1	1.6
	Drowning in sea, river, or creek	1	1.6
	Stove bar	1	1.6
	Natural gas or coal gas	1	1.6

Table 5. Criminal responsibility of mothers

Variable (I)	Variable (J)	n	%
Presence of criminal responsibility	Yes	33	44.6
	No	41	55.4

Findings reveal important clues about criminal characteristics of maternal filicide crime in Turkey. Children were generally killed during the daytime. This finding may be taken into account especially by the specialists of this field. The high prevalence of unaccompanied crime is in concordance with the characteristics of filicide crime and findings in the literature (11,38). Moreover, confession to the relatives, neighbors, or spouses as well as self-surrendering to security forces as the most common way of detection of crime is noteworthy.

In this study, while none of the mothers with more than three children attempted multiple filicide, all multiple filicide criminals had two

or three children. This event is termed as "infanticide obsession" by Chapman (39).

In this study, it is observed that choking was the predominant asphyxia method. However, drowning or poisoning was a relatively rare method (16,19,20,28,40,41). Instead, throwing the child from a height was the second most common method of filicide. The use of hands as a crime tool is a finding concordant with that in previous studies. Furthermore, it is detected that mothers used tools at hand such as cheesecloth, cloth, or socks. Infrequent use of firearms and the use of knives as the most common weapon, when used, are findings consistent with those in reported literature (7,10,19,20).

The women with criminal responsibility had a considerable rate of 44.6%, which should not be underestimated. Based on this result, the important issue that should be investigated and clarified is that there are driving factors in these mothers although they knew and were aware of the meaning and consequences of this crime.

Some aspects of this study were insufficient in revealing some aspects of the filicide crime. First, the data were not collected after intended conversations with the women who committed filicide and their relatives. Thus, thorough information about the personality characteristics, premarital life, and sociocultural features were not obtained. Second, the motivations during the crime were not included in this study. These data might likely get the study away from the purpose and the main idea albeit it might clarify the dynamics of maternal filicide crime. Third, this study was conducted by the evaluation of the data obtained from the investigation of the files of women with ongoing trials of maternal filicide at 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine. Thus, the justified decision of courts, psychopathological aspects of mothers, and measures against these aspects were not included in this study. Therefore, this study may provide a base for future studies to elucidate the impact of these data on the dynamics of maternal filicide crime.

In conclusion, the main purpose of this study was to reveal the profile of maternal filicide, which hosts multifaceted cultural factors in Turkey, to assess and develop causal explanations by examining similar and differing aspects with literature, and to attain data to prevent this offense. To address this, some important interpretations were made from the data about the situations of suspects during the crime and the method of crime. However, in contrary to expectations, these data were found to be inadequate alone. Besides, it is found that a standard protocol was not followed during the criminal investigation, and the reports of 4th Specialized Board of the Institute of Forensic Medicine were insufficient and inadequate. In conclusion, further sophisticated studies that investigate mental driving factors and motivations in addition to analyzed parameters are warranted.

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