

# Pathways to maternal filicide among women incarcerated in Gauteng Province

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30 August 2022

Research report submitted in fulfilment for  
the degree MA (Criminology)

in the

Department of Social Work and Criminology

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that the research report titled PATHWAYS TO MATERNAL FILICIDE AMONG WOMEN INCARCERATED IN GAUTENG PROVINCE in fulfilment for the degree MA (Criminology) is my own independent work. I acknowledge that the data used in the report remains the intellectual property of the University of Pretoria.



30 August 2022

## Acknowledgements

The dissertation before you would not have been possible without the contributions of important role-players and an impeccable support system. I wish to extend sincere gratitude to the following people and organisations:

- The victims, whose little lives were cut short.
- The research participants who shared their experiences and thoughts with me. Without you, the study would not have been possible.
- The Department of Correctional Services as well as Johannesburg Correctional Centre and Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre for granting me permission to conduct the research and assisting me throughout the data collection phase.
- Ms Joann Pillay for being as committed to the inquiry as I was and never failing to deliver on promises.
- The University of Pretoria for partially funding my degree and seeing the value in my research.
- My supervisor, Professor Francois Steyn, for his guidance, support, advice and for always challenging and encouraging me. You have been the epitome of professionalism and I appreciate you.
- André Viljoen, my stone pillar, for unconditional support, embracing the trying times with me, and always reminding me of my coffee before it gets cold. I love you.
- My mom and dad, Gail and Douglas Castlemaine, for patience with me during the years of research and unwavering support even during the most difficult times.
- Mark Beckmann for being my biggest fan and number one supporter.
- Madeleen Rautenbach, Laura Cotton, Lorraine van der Merwe, and Marika Steyn for your endless flow of encouragement. I appreciate our friendship.
- The Viljoen family for reminding me of the positive things in life. You have been a blessing.
- Veronique Doubell, for your mentorship, guidance, and motivational speeches at times it was needed most.
- To my family, friends, and colleagues, who have supported me without fail since the beginning of my dissertation.
- Most of all, I would like to thank my Heavenly Father, for protecting me throughout, loving me unconditionally, and carrying me on the difficult days.

*Dedicated to Douglas George Castlemaine*

*1958 – 2021*

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## Abstract

The unfathomable crime of murdering one's own child, referred to as filicide, is increasingly reported on in media and evokes disbelief in society, especially when committed by the victim's mother. Mothers who murder their children, referred to as maternal filicide, defy societal expectations of both womanhood and motherhood. Despite the severe nature of filicide, the phenomenon has received little scholarly attention. The voices of filicide mothers have rarely been heard especially in the context of South African research. Filicide is a multifaceted phenomenon that is relatively unexplored. The aim of the present inquiry was to develop a theoretical pathway specifically related to maternal filicide.

The study adopted a qualitative approach and was exploratory in nature. In-depth information was collected from eight incarcerated women who murdered their children. The researcher made use of a semi-structured interview schedule administered through personal interviews. Instrumental case studies were used as the research design. A non-probability sampling method was used along with purposive and snowball sampling approaches. Data was analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which allowed greater understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and debriefing.

Methods of filicide included strangulation, prolonged child abuse, gunshots, poison, drowning, and burning. The median age of the victims was 3. An unwanted child and failure to provide medical care to a minor (neglect) were the most reported motives for filicide. Almost all participants had experienced intimate partner violence during their life-course as well as adversities in childhood. Half of the participants had been the victims of rape or sexual abuse. Nearly all participants reported hostile interactions in an interpersonal relationship preceding the filicidal incident and identified with feeling overwhelmed with their circumstances. A great deal of the participants indicated that they did not have a support system at their disposal.

Bearing in mind that there is no fixed list of factors that can be said to causally create criminal behaviour, four potential pathways were identified from the data: (1) adversities in youth, (2) recent conflict in relationship, (3) absence of support system, and (4) strain. The features of the pathways seem to be inter-related. The researcher proposes a theoretical pathway coined '*lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide*' which incorporates unresolved trauma, lack of knowledge or perceived support system, hostile relationships, severe burdens, and absence of coping mechanisms. Further research is required to understand the role men play in female criminality and the prevalence of unresolved trauma in maternal filicide cases.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction and purpose**

### **1.1 Introduction**

While ancient myths passed down generationally may allude to the murder of biological children for the greater good of society, the interdiction to murder one's own child is not a universally shared value in modern society (Tyano & Cox, 2010:207). Child homicide by a parent defies societal beliefs of parental roles and responsibilities, and when it stems from the mother, her adherence to gender norms becomes questionable. The phenomenon of filicide is filled with tragedy. It encompasses occurrences before the filicidal act, such as the destruction of the parent-child relationship, and ultimately evolves into the consequences experienced by families, friends, and society after the filicidal act. 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 & Pijoos, 2022) illustrate the reality and brutal nature of the phenomenon in South Africa. Despite the widespread and sensational media coverage garnered by maternal filicide, the phenomenon has received little scholarly attention (Malherbe & Häefele, 2017:117). The following chapter presents information regarding filicide, and more specifically maternal filicide, along with an outline of the research inquiry. The chapter concludes with a synopsis of the chapters included in the dissertation.

### **1.2 Origin and rationale**

Child murder is a multifaceted phenomenon that requires a high level of professional attention (Khoele, De Wet, Pretorius & Sommerville, 2016:6). Academics have undertaken modest ventures into the research field of filicide, leaving the phenomenon relatively unexplored (Klier, Fisher, Chandra & Spinelli, 2019:135). Filicide as a phenomenon remains an area to be researched, which is evident by the lack of literature pertaining to filicide (Malherbe & Häefele, 2017:117; Razali, Kirkman & Fisher, 2016:35). The lack of South African literature regarding the epidemiology and contextual factors of filicide means that the phenomenon cannot be effectively addressed (Davies, 2008:10-11). The dearth of knowledge on, especially, maternal filicide directly affects offender rehabilitation programmes within the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) as the programmes are not suited to specific offender traits, diminishing the rehabilitative potential of the programmes (Davies, 2008:10-11). In addition, there are currently no preventative measures in place to take a proactive stance against filicide.

In stark contrast to male-centred research, female criminality has received little interest from researchers (Agboola & Rabe, 2018:2; Steyn & Booyens, 2017:33). The minimal amount of female offenders, when compared to male offenders, leads to the perception of female offending as an anomaly and their experiences are assumed to be equivalent to their male counterparts (Parry, 2020:2). Although there has been a growing body of knowledge related to female offending, there is an absence of female voices within existing literature focusing on female criminality, resulting in generalisations which do not explain the genealogy of female offenders (Dastile, 2013:5298). Given the high rates of male offenders, as opposed to female offenders in South Africa, and low reported recidivism rates of female offenders, it is understandable why there is a concentration of research regarding male criminality. The DCS reported that during the annual 2020/2021 period female offenders made up only 2,4% of the national offender population in South Africa whilst male offenders constituted 97,5% (Department of Correctional Services, 2021:55). In the period, 3,453 female offenders were housed in South African correctional centres in stark contrast to 137,495 male offenders for the same period. While it may be argued that low levels of female violence, when compared to male violence, does not warrant scholarly attention, a failure to explore female criminality reinforces stereotypical gendered norms and perpetuates the sensationalisation of violent women in media and popular discourse (Africa, 2010:79-80). Further, the lack of research on women offenders directly influences rehabilitation programmes and intervention programmes, rendering most services inapt.

Research on filicide is constrained by the fact that the phenomenon is rare, which means that study samples are small, and that research conducted does not yield scientifically valuable results (Razali et al., 2016:35). Published articles tend to rely on aggregate data, such as police case files, court transcripts and newspaper articles (*cf.* Abrahams, Mathews, Martin, Lombard, Nannan & Jewkes, 2016; Malherbe & Häefele, 2017), leading to gaps in knowledge regarding the phenomenon and, ultimately, the views and experiences of the perpetrators going unheard. Most studies regarding filicide have been conducted in first world countries (Razali et al. 2016:35), whereas very few studies have been conducted in low- and middle-income countries, such as South Africa. Data is needed from women in developing countries who have been charged with or convicted of filicide. South African researchers from a psychological background ascertain that there are extensive gaps in knowledge pertaining to maternal filicide as published inquiries are limited to quantitative studies, which yields a lack of in-depth understanding regarding the women's lived experiences, obtained exclusively from the population concerned (Edge, Subramaney & Hoffman, 2017:1). Qualitative studies, such

as the current study, have the potential to produce comprehensive insight and understanding of the phenomenon.

As filicide has not been at the forefront of scholarly research, little is known about factors associated with the crime, which makes any sort of intervention or prevention difficult (Flynn, Shaw & Abel, 2013:1). A better understanding of the differences between the motives of women from different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds is needed as it will aid the development of prevention interventions and strategies (Abrahams et al., 2016:8-10). Malherbe and Häefele (2017:117) believe that research surrounding maternal filicide should seek to uncover how social support and medical services affect the prevalence of filicidal incidents in South Africa. In addition, most studies do not explore the role of men in women's motives to kill their children (Abrahams et al., 2016:8-10). As a joint effort by both the mother and father to murder their children is a rare occurrence, the phenomenon has not been at the forefront of scholarly efforts. An increasing number of studies demonstrate that intimate relationships may encourage criminal behaviour (Wyse, Harding & Morenoff, 2014:367-368); although filicidal studies have not addressed women's involvement in filicide due to pressures or expectations of their intimate partners. Qualitative research may result in nuanced data which would enable greater understanding of the context of filicide. With the above arguments in mind, the research question that guided the study was: What are the pathways that result in women committing filicide?

### **1.3 Aim and objectives**

The aim of the inquiry was to develop a theoretical pathway specifically related to maternal filicide. Certain objectives were pursued in order to successfully accomplish the aim. The objectives were to:

- Develop a profile of women who killed their children.
- Determine critical events during the life-course of each participant which may have influenced the act of murdering their children.
- Identify social, economic, environmental, personal as well as inter-personal circumstances at the time of the event which played a role in the participants' undertaking to kill their children.
- Ascertaining the women's understanding of the crime and their opinions regarding their motives to kill their children.

## **1.4 Value of the research**

As illustrated in the origin and rationale of the study and will be made evident in the literature review, a dearth of knowledge exists on the phenomenon of filicide, and especially maternal filicide both globally and nationally. The research has the potential to fill gaps in existing literature, as well as inform future research by identifying aspects of the phenomenon that remain uncovered. The concept of female criminality is strengthened as the study contributed to the limited knowledge of female offending. Ultimately, the research results were used to develop a theoretical pathway to explain the occurrence of maternal filicide. Developing new theories strengthens not only Criminology as a field but enriches South African theories in the process. Theory development within Criminology is an important process as it assists with explaining and understanding criminal behaviour (Akers & Sellers, 2013:3-4). Theories may be used to guide policymaking, and to inform preventative or rehabilitative interventions.

Further studies on filicide have the capability of providing concrete analyses of data which social agencies can make use of to develop policies, which may prevent the occurrence of filicidal incidents. Despite the basic nature of the research inquiry, the potential exists for the results to inspire future research aimed at improving rehabilitation and educational programmes offered by the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) to female offenders. In addition, the results may spark the implementation of prevention strategies in public or private health and mental health sectors. By understanding the trajectory of a mother's pathway to killing her children, it may be possible to identify burdened mothers and offer assistance before the act of filicide takes place.

## **1.5 Definition of concepts**

An understanding of the following concepts will maximise the reader's comprehension of the inquiry in its entirety:

### **1.5.1 Filicide**

Filicide is an infrequent but distinct form of murder (Edge et al., 2017:1). However, the criteria used to define filicide, especially with regards to the age of the victim and the biological relationship between parent and child, often goes unreported in publications, resulting in the lack of a universally adopted definition of filicide (Flynn, Windfuhr & Shaw, 2009:10-11). Filicide generally refers to a homicidal act in which one or more children are killed by a parent, stepparent, or guardian (Dodson & Cabage, 2015:1).

Filicide can be differentiated into paternal and maternal filicide (Abrahams et al., 2016:3). Paternal filicide refers to the killing of a child by the father, whereas maternal filicide refers to the killing of a child by the mother (Malope, 2014:1). The present inquiry will use the term filicide as an all-encompassing label for the murder of a child of any age under 18 years by their biological mother or female legal guardian or caregiver.

### **1.5.2 Child**

Parliament (2019:3) reiterated the adoption of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which defines a child as a human being below the age of 18 years. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 further defines the bounds of a child as any person between the age of birth to 18 years old. Taking into consideration that all subcategories of filicide were regarded, a child refers to offspring of any gender between the ages of birth and 18 years for the present study. Adult children will be excluded in the inquiry.

### **1.5.3 Pathways theory**

Stemming from Developmental Criminology, pathways theory is a paradigm, or way of thinking, that incorporates a 'whole-life' perspective when looking at the causes of criminality (Gehring, 2018:1-2). Pathways theory looks at the lived experience of individuals for critical life events to explain criminal acts in terms of the individual's specific circumstances (Sampson & Laub, 2004:8-9; Artz et al., 2012:2). The present study utilises pathways theory as the basis for theory development. In doing so, critical life events and the manner in which they combine in multiple ways are analysed to explain the occurrence of maternal filicide.

### **1.5.4 Parent/guardian**

According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a parent refers to either the biological or adoptive mother or father of a child. The Act excludes individuals whose parental rights and responsibilities have been terminated, a person who is related due to being a gamete donor, and a biological father whose child was conceived in the perpetration of rape. A guardian refers to a parent or another person who has legal guardianship of a child. Traditionally, a parent refers to an individual who has legal custody and guardianship over a child, and may include biological parents, stepparents, or adoptive parents (Mahoney, 2018:531). Progressively, the definition has been extended to include psychological parents (child's legal parent's romantic partner with whom they develop a strong bond), *de facto* parents (day-to-day caretaker of a child) and parent by *estoppel* (no biological relationship between parent and child) (Mahoney, 2018:532). Only biological mothers are included in the present study as other categories were not represented, however female legal guardians and females who have

designated care of a child were included in the sampling criteria. Importantly, the participants were over the age of 18 and fit the criteria necessary for the inquiry.

### **1.5.5 Mother**

A mother refers to the female biological parent of a child (Malope, 2014:3). Mothers tend to be responsible for primary parenting and assume emotional responsibility for the caretaking and safety of their children (Pedersen, 2012:230). While biological mothers do play a pivotal role, one needs to remain cognisant of the fact that modern family structures include cohabitation and remarriage units (Cutler, 2019:1). As such, the current study incorporated biological mothers, and did not exclude stepmothers and female guardians, aged 18 years and older.

### **1.5.6 Murder**

The Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 defines murder as the intentional and unlawful killing of a human being. To further delineate the concept, child murder refers to the death of a person aged between birth and under the age 18 years due to the actions of another human being (Mathews, Abrahams, Jewkes, Martin & Lombard, 2013:562). The present study focuses on child murder perpetrated by the child's biological mother, stepmother or female legal or *de facto* guardian, and includes intentional murder as well as death resulting from child abuse, child neglect or child abandonment.

## **1.6 Summary of the research methods**

The subjectivist paradigm was adopted in the current basic research inquiry, accompanied by a qualitative approach. The purpose of the study was to develop a theoretical pathway to explain the occurrence of maternal filicide as a phenomenon in South Africa. To fulfil the purpose, personal interviews were incorporated in the study in order to obtain in-depth and detail-rich information (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019:1002-1003). During the personal interviews, a semi-structured interview schedule was used as the data gathering tool. Instrumental case studies were used as the research design, which allowed unbiased focus on each participant, while retaining focus on the larger phenomenon of filicide (Ridder, 2017:282). Further, the case studies were exploratory in nature. A non-probability sampling method was used along with the snowball and purposive sampling approach which were applied to the study population.

Once the data was captured, interpretive phenomenological analysis was used for data analysis which enabled the researcher to explore meanings that certain events hold to

participants and how critical life events are internalised (Alase, 2017:9-10). The method of analysis ultimately allowed the identification of themes to make sense of the data which enabled theory building. From the research process, the researcher was able to develop a theoretical pathway coined “*lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide*”. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and debriefing (Webster, Lewis & Brown, 2013:78). The inquiry was not without limitations, which comprised restrictions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the proposed theoretical pathway, the researcher was able to provide a critical discussion of the findings in context of similar studies, as well as provide recommendations for future studies concerning policy, practice, and theory.

### **1.7 Structure and layout of the report**

Chapter one is an introductory chapter that presented the basis of the research inquiry and provided the reader with a broad overview of the researcher’s intentions. A summary of the phenomenon, existing literature regarding the field under scrutiny and research methods that informed the study was provided to contextualise the research.

Chapter two constitutes a literature review which demarcates the phenomenon in the context of international and local studies. It provides an overview of the field of inquiry and includes, but not limited to, victim, perpetrator and offence characteristics, pathology and suicide in the context of filicide, classification systems, and theoretical explanations.

Chapter three concerns research methods incorporated in the study. The chapter includes all relevant components such as the research paradigm and approach, methods employed, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. The reader will gain an understanding of the research methods employed as well as motivations for the methodological decisions taken.

Chapter four presents the empirical results of the study. The empirical results include demographic information of the participants as well as the themes derived from the data through interpretive phenomenological analysis. The results will be presented in paragraph format, accompanied by tables and extracts from the interview transcriptions.

Chapter five is the last chapter and will be used to synthesise the research study as a whole. Based on the findings, a theoretical pathway will be presented to explain the occurrence of maternal filicide. Further, the findings will be discussed in the context of similar studies and recommendations will be made regarding policy, practice, theory and future research.

## **1.8 Summary**

The preceding chapter introduced the document in its entirety, as well as to the research conducted, by providing the rationale for carrying out the research along with the aim and objectives that harmonised the inquiry. The value of the research, key concepts relevant to the subject matter and a summary of the research methods were provided. A synopsis of the chapters contained in the present dissertation was given. The following chapter is a literature review which provides a holistic synopsis of filicide within a global and local context.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Filicide is a vast and complex phenomenon (Putkonen, Amon, Weizmann-Henelius, Pankakoski, Eronen, Almiron & Klier, 2016:200). However, filicide has received little scholarly attention (Malherbe & Häefele, 2017:117; Razali et al., 2016:35). There is a need for a comprehensive literature review to understand filicide in all its multifaceted complexity. Extending oneself to related phenomena is required to gain a holistic understanding of a perpetually complex phenomenon such as filicide. The following chapter provides a broad outline of murder globally and specifically within South Africa, one of the most violent countries in the world (Ndlela, 2020:2-3). Further, the phenomenon of women who commit murder will be elaborated on, detailing aspects of their crimes. Emphasis of the chapter is extensively placed on filicide and the discussion will include the nature and extent of the phenomenon along with characteristics of the offence, perpetrators, and victims. Filicide in the context of mental illness and murder-suicide is visited. Systems of classification in addition to explanations of filicide and the respective theoretical underpinnings of filicidal behaviour will be provided.

### **2.2 Overview of murder**

Murder does not discriminate – the perpetration of murder is found in all socioeconomic categories and within each age bracket and ethnic grouping, affecting men, women, and children alike. The act of murder, or homicide, is a global crime; it is serious in nature and violates human’s most basic right – the right to life (Akbar, Bakti, Hildayanti & Arya, 2020:281-282). The crime of murder has ripple effects that go beyond the loss of primary human life as there are secondary victims found in the victim’s family and community (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019a:7). ‘Murder’ is globally defined as a criminal act that causes the loss of a person’s life; however, the elements of murder may differ from one jurisdiction to the next. The International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) defines homicide as the “unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury” (UNODC, 2015:33). In South African legislation, the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 defines murder as the unlawful and intentional killing of a person. In the event of murder without the intention to kill, the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 defines it as culpable homicide. Given there are various forms of violent death, the core element of murder is the complete liability of the perpetrator.

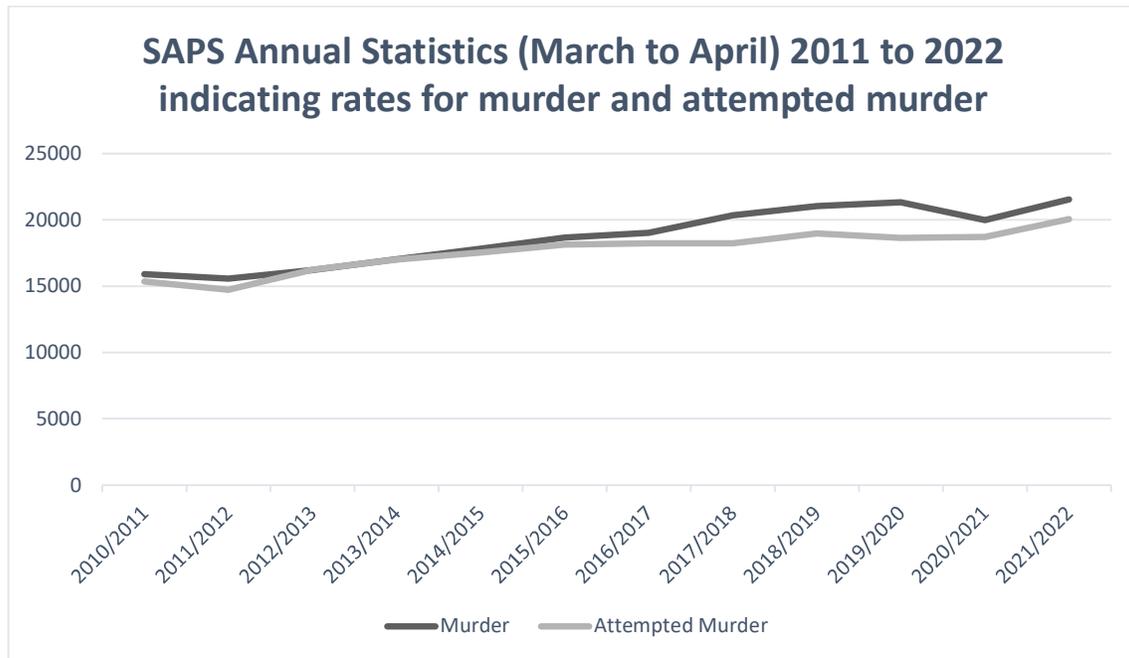
The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) released their Global Study on Homicide in 2019. UNODC (2019a:11) reported that in 2017 there were 6,1 homicide victims per 100 000 population worldwide. The overall number of people killed in homicides in 2017 was 464 400 and the Americas accounted for 37,4% of the total amount of homicides, while Africa accounted for 35,1%. The Americas continuously experience high homicide rates and young men are especially at risk with an estimated homicide rate of 46 per 100 000 for men aged 18 to 19 years old – which is much higher than what is reported in other regions. Firearms are involved in homicides more often in the Americas than in other parts of the world (UNODC, 2019a:19). Furthermore, Europe has experienced a decline in the homicide rate by 63% since 2002 and the rate in Asia has declined by 36% (UNODC, 2019a:1). Declines in the murder rate in Europe and Asia may be due to advances in security technology and the transition to cashless societies as well as the increasing rule of law, proliferation of schools and literacy, and the promotion of self-discipline in the regions (UNODC, 2019a:1).

Throughout the world, murder is perpetrated for a variety of reasons. The wide availability of firearms along with the proliferation of gangs and organised crime groups may explain why the Americas experience higher levels of homicide than one would expect when considering the development level of the region (UNDOC, 2019a:28-34). Armed conflicts in Africa are likely to have created environments conducive to lethal violence, coupled with political instability, erosion of the rule of law, poverty, and inequality. Deep-rooted reasons for killing include moral degeneration, economic pressure, and hatred (Akbar et al., 2020:281). Drugs and alcohol can drive certain types of violent crime including murder (UNODC, 2019a:29). Individual-level motives for murder may include impatience, revenge, financial gain, emotional outbursts, and psychological motivations (Kamaluddin, Shariff & Saat, 2018:2-3). Murder is found in a plethora of contexts including gang violence, mob justice, xenophobia, armed robberies, and other crime activities; and can be perpetrated solely or in a group.

South Africa experiences extreme levels of violent crime and has one of the highest crime rates in the world (Meel, 2018:76). At a news conference in June 2022, Bheki Cele, the South African police minister, said: “The first three months of [2022] were violent, brutal, and unsafe for many South Africans” (Charles, 2022) and in August 2022 he said: “The number of murders in the country remains worrisome” (*These crimes...*, 2022). The South African Police Service (SAPS) reported the highest murder rate since 2011 in the latest crime statistics – a total of 21 541 murders were recorded in the 2021/2022 period compared to 15 893 in 2010/2011 (SAPS, 2022a). A decline in murders occurred during the Covid-19 nationwide lockdown in 2020/2021 which is attributable to the restrictions imposed on the country’s citizens (SAPS, 2021). Attempted murder cases have been steadily increasing over the preceding years and

a total of 20 039 attempted murder cases were recorded in the 2021/2022 period (SAPS, 2022b).

**Diagram 1: SAPS Annual Statistics for murder and attempted murder**



Source: Compiled by researcher using SAPS Annual Crime Statistics 2020/2021 and Quarter Statistics 2021/2022, [www.saps.gov.za](http://www.saps.gov.za)

The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) annually reports the prosecution rates in South Africa and the DCS annually reports matters concerning sentenced offenders and remand detainees in the country. The NPA reported the finalisation of 3,600 murder cases with a verdict of which 2 787 convictions were obtained in the 2021/2022 financial year (NPA, 2022:28). Further, the NPA reported a conviction rate of 77,4% for murder prosecutions, a slight decrease from 79,3% in the previous year. The total amount of offenders has decreased over the past few years. The 2020/2021 financial year reported 140 948 offenders across the country which is a steady decrease from 154 449 in 2019/2020 and 162 875 in 2018/2019 (DCS, 2021:55-56). The reported figures include sentenced offenders, unsentenced offenders, and state patients. The comparison of the murder rate reported by the SAPS and case finalisation reported by the NPA indicates that there are much less cases making it to court than the amount of murder happening in the country annually. The investigation and criminal justice processes take longer than the momentum with which murder is committed which gives the illusion that perpetrators ‘get away with murder’ and perpetuates the culture of violence in South Africa.

### 2.3 Women who commit murder

While violence against women, coined gender-based violence, has been described as a pandemic both globally and in South Africa (Dlamini, 2021:583), females are seldom viewed as perpetrators of violence, especially murder (Prinsloo & Hesselink, 2015:67). As female murderers contradict societal expectations and gender norms of women, such cases evoke public outcry and are often sensationalised in media (Milliam, 2020:2). Women are considered nurturing, warm and motherly individuals, contributing to the perception that females are incapable of committing overtly heinous acts (Reed, 2020:4). Female-perpetrated murder is a challenging topic, as not only are ingrained perceptions of women questioned, but there is little available literature on the phenomenon, both globally and within the South African context (Milliam, 2020:2). The DCS reported that during the annual 2020/2021 period female offenders made up only 2,4% of the national offender population in South Africa whilst male offenders constituted 97,5% (DCS, 2021:55). In the period, 3,453 female offenders were housed in South African correctional centres in stark contrast to 137,495 male offenders for the same period. The same trend is apparent in the preceding years. DCS reported 3,982 female offenders in 2019/2020 and 4,316 in 2018/2019, while male offenders constituted 150,467 and 158,558 respectively. The DCS does not provide a breakdown of the criminal acts females are sentenced for. As such, it is not possible to comment on the number of women sentences for murder. Understandably, female offenders have received little scholarly attention.

Prinsloo and Hesselink (2015) set out to explore the profile and criminal involvement of incarcerated female offenders in Gauteng, South Africa. Data was obtained from 77 female offenders through a structured interview schedule (Prinsloo & Hesselink, 2015:68, 76). The study suggested that incarcerated female offenders in South Africa are significantly more aggressive and violent in their offending behaviour compared to their global counterparts and committed more serious crimes. To address the all-male focus on crime that characterised South African Criminology, the Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit at the University of Cape Town commenced with a study to explore the reasons why women end up incarcerated (Artz & Rotmann, 2015:1). Stemming from the project were 55 in-depth narratives of women incarcerated in Western Cape, South Africa correctional centres. The study aimed to generate new information around female criminality and incarceration. Most of the women interviewed were serving sentences for murder, followed by fraud/forgery and shoplifting/theft. Some of the women incarcerated for murder had murdered their husbands or contracted someone to do so for them as the abuse they were experiencing became too severe to endure. Although headlines like *'Wife kills husband in front of their minor child in Buffelsdale, KZN'* (Ncwane,

2022) are not too common in South Africa, the narratives are not isolated, and the concept of female murderers is a growing phenomenon.

The first name that comes to mind when considering South African female murderers, especially serial killers, is usually that of Daisy De Melker. De Melker allegedly poisoned two of her husbands and her son, for financial gain from their life insurance policies. Although De Melker is well-known for the three murders, it should be noted that she was convicted for her son's murder only as the two charges of murder of her two husbands were not proved in a court of law (Holland, 2015:13). As such, although she is colloquially thought of as a serial killer, she is not classified as a serial killer in peer-reviewed literature. Interestingly, female serial killers recorded in South Africa are serial killers by proxy, which means that the murders were not perpetrated themselves but rather that they ordered, paid, or manipulated others into murdering their desired victims (Bonn, 2014). One such case is that of Cecilia Steyn, who was believed to be the head of a cult that operated within Krugersdorp, South Africa. The cult, *Electus per Deus* (Chosen by God), murdered eleven individuals over a period of four years starting in 2016 through various means including gunshot, stabbing and arson (Seleka, 2019). Steyn was the mastermind behind the murders and is the only one who benefited financially (Jordaan, 2019). It is believed that Steyn was driven by personal gain, greed, and revenge, and received 13 life terms for the orchestration of the murders.

The most recent female serial killer case stemming from South Africa is that of Rosemary Ndlovu, a former policewoman, who arranged for six of her relatives to be murdered in order to benefit from the life insurance policies taken out on their lives (Mitchley, 2021). Ndlovu gained approximately R1.4 million in insurance pay-outs from hiring contract killers to murder her family members. She had plans of murdering a further seven family members when she was apprehended in 2018 which could thus not come to fruition (Shange, 2021). Ndlovu received a life sentence on each of the six counts of murder amongst other charges including fraud and defeating the ends of justice. Contract killing, or murder-for-hire, is an agreement between individuals for one person to murder another often in exchange for monetary compensation, however the exchange of money is not a requirement; nor is financial gain a necessary motive for wanting the victim to be murdered (Geldenhuys, 2018:14). Contract killing is usually masked as a suicide, and farm attack, robbery or hijacking gone wrong. Individuals opt for contract killers in order to stay impartial from the crime and mask their involvement to avoid apprehension and undoubtedly benefit from the victim's death.

As with many other types of crime, murder may result from various motives, not limited to greed or financial gain as outlined with the previous case study examples. A dominating model

within criminological academia is that murder stems from either instrumental or expressive violence, originating from Feshbach's (1964) work (Kamaluddin et al., 2018:2-3). On one hand, expressive murder results from a response to a threat and concerns emotions (Pecino-Latorre, Perez-Fuentes, Patro-Hernandez & Santos-Hermoso, 2019:2). Expressive murders are typically referred to as crimes of passion, and may stem from feelings of jealousy, rage, or frustration occurring mainly in instances where the perpetrator and victims are known to one another. In 2015, Nancy Majonhi confronted her husband about his misuse of family finances after which she became irate and attacked him with a hammer, killing him (Seleka, 2021). Majonhi proceeded to dismember his body using a shovel and discarded the remains in three pit toilets within the Rustenburg area where they lived. Once the crime scene had been thoroughly cleaned, Majonhi reported her husband missing and would have gotten away with the murder had she not confessed to the Sun City SAPS in 2021.

Instrumental murder, on the other hand, is perpetrated as a desire to obtain a future goal or some sort of gain, including financial, status or medicinal, or to satisfy one's own urges, as is usually seen with psychologically motivated murders (Pecino-Latorre et al., 2019:2). Contract killing, as mentioned earlier, may be considered a category of instrumental murder, although not all instrumental murders are committed by a third party. The murder perpetrated by Chane Van Heerden alongside her male partner may be considered an instrumental murder as it satisfied her occultic tendencies. Chane Van Heerden lured her victim to a graveyard in Welkom, South Africa where he was stabbed to death, dismembered, and his torso buried in a shallow grave (Simasiku, 2011:6). Van Heerden skinned the head of the victim after removing the eyes and ears, which were kept in their fridge, while other body parts were buried in the backyard of their residence (Labuschagne, 2021:125-126). Van Heerden was formally declared a dangerous criminal and will spend a minimum of 20 years in a correctional centre before returning to court for reevaluation of her sentence.

One of the few studies conducted on the African continent relating to murderous women is that of Milliam (2020) and was concentrated in Uganda, East Africa. The study aimed to investigate forms of victimisation and women's pathways to offending and imprisonment in Uganda. The study included 30 women convicted of murder who were interviewed using semi-structured interview guides during face-to-face sessions (Milliam, 2020:73-74, 131). In relation to the socio-demographic characteristics of the offenders, it can be said that women convicted of murder in Uganda are usually between the ages of 40 and 49 years old, are married with children, and practice subsistence agriculture. The women stem from low socio-economic backgrounds characterised by illiteracy, low income, underemployment, and lack of access to land (an important factor for production). In relation to the offences, the inquiry found that the

women are always first-time offenders who kill family members using garden tools or poison. The study identified the following six categories of female murderers (Milliam, 2020:131):

- Women who kill their intimate partners.
- Women who kill their stepchildren.
- Women who kill their husband's mistresses.
- Women who kill their brothers.
- Women who kill their fathers.
- Women who are in prison for being associated with intimate criminal partners.

Interestingly, the Ugandan study found that most women convicted of murder had murdered their intimate partners (Milliam, 2020:98). Domestic violence occurs all over the world and in most instances, men tend to be the perpetrators (Geldenhuys, 2020:20-21). It has been academically argued that most women who murder their intimate male partners are victims of domestic violence themselves (Lysova & Salas, 2020:257). A South African study that aimed to unravel offence-specific factors of females who murdered their intimate male partners found multiple and often overlapping causes and contributory motives and triggers associated with the murders (Hesselink & Dastille, 2015:335-337). Offence-specific factors included domestic abuse and substance abuse, whereas emotional factors included revenge and helplessness, and financial factors included greed. The study collected data from 15 South African women through in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews at two Gauteng correctional centres. Notably, almost half of the participants displayed a previous criminal record for crimes like assault, theft, and fraud, and ten participants had made use of outsiders to murder their victims.

## **2.4 Filicide**

Perusal of the available literature indicates that there is not a uniform definition of the term filicide, other than that it is the act of murdering a child and committed by a parent (Holloway, 2016:6-7). There is, quite frankly, a lack of consistency across research studies (Putkonen et al., 2016:198). Cases where children are killed by family members including their parents is referred to as intrafamilial child homicide and filicide is the term used to denote the killing of one's own child (UNODC, 2019b:8). Broadly speaking, filicide may include the death of a child of any age – from birth to 18 years old.

Filicide, an all-encompassing term used to refer to the phenomenon of child murder by a parent, can be subdivided into three categories (Debowska, Boduszek & Dhingra, 2015:3):

- 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.
- Filicide: The murder of a child over the age of twelve months.

The definition of filicide is perpetrator-based, thus all death caused by the parent of the child is included and does not exclude unintentional death brought on by neglect or maltreatment (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:1). 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 takes place.

#### **2.4.1 Nature and extent of filicide**

Violence against children is a multidimensional phenomenon that is often underreported (Moodley, Subramaney & Hoffman, 2019:2). As such, data on the killing of children, adolescents, and young adults is scarce. Lethal violence against children can occur in a continuum of violence, representing the culmination of various forms of violence that children may be subjected to in different settings (UNODC, 2019b:7). Approximately 1 billion children worldwide aged 2-17 years old experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in 2017 (UNODC, 2019b:9). Young children are especially vulnerable of being murdered by family members. The presence of stepchildren and separation of parents are known risk factors for lethal family violence especially in the context of filicide. At community level, poverty, discrimination, overpopulation, lack of education, and poor standards of housing may contribute to child homicide. The largest number of women and girls are killed by intimate partners or other family members in Asia (UNODC, 2019a:21). Women and girls run the greatest risk of falling victim to intimate partner or family-related homicide in Africa.

Filicide is a phenomenon that surpasses national borders (Flynn et al., 2013:1). However, the dark figure of crime may be applicable as there are at least three obstacles that prevent accurately reporting the prevalence rates and enabling international comparisons of the phenomenon (Debowska et al., 2015:114; Flynn et al., 2019:15):

- It is tricky estimating the number of abandoned babies whose remains are never found.
- Medico-legal procedures determining the cause of death may overlook intentional injuries.
- A successful conviction in a court of law is required for the case to reflect in official crime statistics.

Despite a longwinded history, there is a societal belief that filicide does not occur all too often. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently reported that in 2017 an estimated 40 150 homicides were recorded for the age group 0-17 years globally (Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children, 2020:26-27). The African continent placed second highest with an average of 2.1 child homicides per 100 000 population, noting that the concentration of the homicides occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. It must be noted that not all homicides are perpetrated by parents, and it can be accepted that the rates of filicide are less than the presented rates of homicide. The actual rates of filicide are not readily known (Flynn et al., 2009:15). As research has mainly been conducted in developed countries where the rates of filicide are low, little is known about the extent of filicide in developing countries where the rates of filicide are believed to be much higher (Razali, Kirkman & Fisher, 2016:74). Considering the high rates of child homicide in sub-Saharan Africa, one can deduce the rates of filicide would potentially be higher than developed countries in other parts of the world.

According to the crime statistics released by the SAPS, 943 children were murdered in the 2019/2020 annual period. Although the reported figure is a 7% decrease from the preceding year, the figure equates to almost three children murdered per day. The reporting of crimes against children is a new development released in the annual crime statistics. Previously, SAPS reported murder figures but did not differentiate victim age groups, which meant the rate of child homicide was not known (Davies, 2008:10). The current means of reporting child homicide does not indicate the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator; thus, the rate of filicide is not reported on. Inattention to in-depth information such as the gender of the murdered children, or the gender of the perpetrator results in an inability to further understand the concept of child homicide. One should be cognisant of different reporting categories and definitions utilised across the globe. For example, in South Africa children are legally defined as being aged between birth and 18 years old. The afore-mentioned Global Status Report by the WHO defined children as between birth and 17 years old. The discrepancy between definitions means that the reported rates of child homicide by SAPS and the WHO respectively cannot be directly compared.

One of the first and few attempts to capture the rates of child death in South Africa may be attributed to a multidisciplinary team based predominantly in Cape Town. The inquiry aimed to better understand the causes of child death and the associated factors. To achieve the aim, case files from mortuaries in two provinces were reviewed and information extracted for quantitative analysis. Homicide was the leading cause of injury-related deaths among children. The study revealed an estimated 1018 child homicides for 2009 which equates to 5.5 per 100

000 children younger than 18 years of age (Mathews et al., 2013:562). South Africa's uncovered child homicide rate was more than twice the global estimate at the time of data analysis and interpretation, which was 2.4 per 100 000 – yet truly little remains known about the phenomenon in South Africa. Not only does South Africa have a high homicide rate, but children fulfil a vulnerable position in society despite the country having embodied legislation to preserve the sanctity of children, including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Children's Act 35 of 2008. Violence against children is an underreported and multifaceted phenomenon.

Given the societal role of parents to be one of nurture and protection, the act of murdering your own child may be considered one of the worst forms of betrayal (Geldenhuys, 2019:35). While murder committed by a father is heinous, murder committed by a mother tends to spark public outcry. During sentencing in *S v Matjane* [2018] ZAGPPHC 956 Judge Hans Fabricius said, "it goes completely against nature for a mother to kill her children for almost any conceivable reason". Nurture, care, and protection are traits expected to be portrayed by mothers. Not only does the brutality of murder challenge the societal role of motherhood, but so too does it contradict gender norms enshrined in communities over time. One case of maternal filicide that has sparked international frenzy is that of Lauren Dickason who allegedly murdered three of her children, including a six-year-old and twin two-year-olds by strangling them with cable ties, in 2021 (Lawler, 2022). Dickason emigrated from South Africa to New Zealand with her family who was in the country for two weeks before the filicidal incident occurred (Chetty, 2022). The case has garnered international media attention as Dickason, who is a doctor, not only defied societal expectations of women and motherhood, but the role of being a doctor as well. Dickason is remanded in a psychiatric hospital until her trial in 2023 and further details regarding the incident are being kept out of the media.

#### **2.4.2 Perpetrator characteristics**

Reporting on prevalence rates of a crime type is considered academically the first step to understanding the phenomenon. Unfortunately, as the rates of filicide are not reported, it is tricky to divulge the rates of maternal filicide and paternal filicide. While one could include the samples of conducted studies it would not be a true reflection of the rate of either maternal or paternal filicide as the participants were those who were accessible at the time of the inquiries and are often geographically limited. Some studies have incorporated solely female participants (*cf.* Malope, 2014) or male participants (*cf.* Sedumedi & Winter, 2020); while others have reported more males than female (*cf.* Dawson, 2015), an equal amount of the two sexes (*cf.* Debowska et al., 2015) or more females than males (*cf.* Dekel, Abrahams &

Andipatin, 2018). While research has been conducted on maternal and paternal filicide as separate concepts, the author was not able to find local literature that compared maternal and paternal filicide, nor any literature that indicated a combined effort by both parents to murder their child/ren.

As the general definition of filicide is perpetrator-based, it is accepted that the majority of existing literature focuses on the perpetrators themselves. Early research on filicide focused merely on the motives for the crime and yielded simplistic results which undermined the complexity of the phenomenon (Brown, et al., 2019:2). Motives are hardly expressed, or distinctly expressed, by parents. Various risk factors pertinent to the perpetrators of filicide have been identified, noting that it is often a combination of multiple factors that propel an individual towards killing their own child (Tyano & Keren, 2012; Häfele & Malherbe, 2014:54; Malope, 2014:24-30). Factors may include unemployment or financial difficulties, social isolation, marital problems including jealousy or extra-marital affairs, family isolation or general familial dysfunction, single motherhood, work-related stress, housing problems, alcohol and substance abuse, physical illness, being a victim of childhood abuse or trauma as well as mental problems including depression, mood disorders or psychosis. Motives pertinent to South Africa include witchcraft, and to gain a level of acceptance (Malope, 2014:41-43). While not all factors may be present in each case of filicide, contributory studies indicate that the experience of multiple adversities tends to be present in all cases of filicide (Dawson, 2015:163). There are factors that precipitate filicidal acts, which means that committing filicide is not an isolated incident. Similarly, factors that are apparent within the context of filicide are not solely related to filicide. For example, in the same way that not all individuals who experience abuse will ultimately abuse their offspring, not all individuals who abuse their offspring will murder them.

Borrowing from Neuroscience and Clinical Psychology, motherhood is considered a major life event in the pathway of females and requires a strong activation of deep personality traits (Giacchetti, Roma, Pancheri, Williamsn, Meuti & Aceti, 2019:68-70). Controversially, while filicide mothers are expected by society to display abnormal behaviours stemming from adverse personality traits due to the undermining of gender norms and societal roles, scientific studies have revealed just the opposite. Filicide mothers tend to behave dutifully and with self-discipline, in ways that are sympathetic and kind with a socially acceptable self-image. Filicidal women come across as having the personality profiles of healthy individuals and have personality traits that are not correlated to any indicator of psychopathology (Giachetti et al., 2019:71-72). Interestingly, it should be noted that most studies conducted to determine the personality profiles of filicide perpetrators were carried out with psychiatric patients as the

participants. The researcher was not able to find personality research pertaining to filicide incorporating individuals considered mentally sane.

When it comes to serious and violent crime, such as murder, society generally expects the individuals to have a colourful criminal history or some sort of documented violent background (Geldenhuis, 2019:31). Studies have reported such findings in the respect of criminal histories of filicide perpetrators. For example, an Australian study incorporating 260 filicide offenders, reported that almost half had been previously convicted and the largest proportion were convicted for violent offences (Brown et al., 2019:8). The same study, however, indicated that fewer female filicide offenders had a criminal history. A similar finding was reported in the Chilean population during a study conducted to analyse the phenomenon of filicide (Benitez-Borrego, 2012:58-60). Of the 98 case studies analysed, only two female participants had indicated having a criminal record, whereas 18 men indicated a criminal record within the same study, which equates to less than a quarter of the total participants possessing a criminal history. However, filicide fathers were significantly more likely to have a criminal history than filicide mothers. Filicide offenders are less likely to have a criminal record than other homicide offenders (Putkonen et al., 2016:324-325). The lack of a criminal history, especially in the context of filicide mothers, may be directly related to the media attention and public outcry that follows a filicidal act. The disbelief of a filicide parent, especially a mother, without a criminal history or violent background is sensationalised in media and evokes an emotional response in the community.

As abuse is rife both globally and within a South African context, it is imperative we explore the concept within filicide. There are two facets to abuse, a) the perpetration of abuse directed towards their children, and b) the experience of abuse by the parent. As alluded to previously, filicide may be in the context of fatal child abuse, malnourishment, or neglect at the hands of the filicidal parent. Further, when looking at contributing factors, we consider abuse experienced by the parent before the filicidal act. Abuse may occur during their childhood or become apparent within intimate relationships in later life. The cycle of abuse is a phenomenon considered when the *abused becomes the abuser*. A study conducted in Malaysia found that all their female participants had experienced some sort of violence such as rape or intimate partner violence (Razali, Fisher & Kirkman, 2019:155). Malherbe and Häfele (2017:108) explain in their literature review article that a culture of violence within a family dynamic is a risk factor for filicide. Domestic violence perpetrated in adulthood is strongly preceded by the experience of domestic violence in childhood.

One of the worst cases of abuse stemming from South Africa is the case of Poppie Van Der Merwe. Poppie was three years old at the time of her murder and the court found that the severe abuse experienced went on for eight months. Poppie's biological mother and stepfather physically and emotionally abused their children (*Poppie's parents beat her...*, 2017). Poppie, along with her three-year-old brother, were shouted at, kicked, had their ears pulled or twisted, hit, doused with icy water in winter, and thrown against solid objects. Poppie's body was riddled with bruises and marks and the cause of death was attributed to head injuries as a result of assault with a blunt instrument. Both her biological mother and stepfather were sentenced to life terms for her murder and additional years were handed down for charges of abuse (*Poppie's mother and stepfather...*, 2018). Fatal child abuse and neglect go hand-in-hand as can be derived from the death of Jeremiah Speak, another case stemming from South Africa. Jeremiah's stepfather was found guilty of his murder, while his biological mother was found guilty of abuse and neglect which directly linked to his death (Nombembe, 2021). Had Jeremiah's mother intervened during the assault, the death of the three-year-old may have been prevented.

Further, an offender's level of education and socio-economic background is considered an important factor within correlations to criminal behaviour. Poverty, inadequate education or employment and poor access to state services leave individuals vulnerable to experiencing adversities (Razali, et al., 2019:156). A South African study reported that the majority of filicidal participants had dropped out of school and had below grade 12 level of education (Malope, 2014:23). A study conducted in Chile to analyse the phenomenon of filicide found that nearly half of their female participants were unemployed at the time of the offence, while most filicidal women were found to belong to a lower socio-economic class (Benitez-Borrego, Guardia-Olmas & Aliage-Moore, 2012:58). The perpetration of crime from individuals from a lower socio-economic grouping suggests a life-course process towards criminality.

#### **2.4.3 Victim characteristics**

Perusal of the existing literature indicates that victim characteristics have seldom been the focus of filicidal inquiries, but rather that the victim characteristics are reported on within the context of understanding the perpetrators themselves, or the offences they have committed. Little is known about the circumstances leading up to filicide. While researchers have found the opposite to be true, there seems to be consensus that younger children are murdered by their mothers, while older children are murdered by their fathers (Tyano & Kerem, 2012:8-9). Thus, mothers tend to be responsible for infanticide and neonaticide, whereas fathers are more likely to commit general filicide (Geldenhuys, 2019:32). Some studies have found

paternal filicide to occur more often than maternal filicide (*cf.* Myers, Lee, Montplaisir, Lazarou, Safarik, Chan & Beauregard, 2021). Although, the risk of filicide tends to decrease as children get older (Dawson, 2015:163). The incidence of adult filicide victimisation is less documented; however, filicide is not only a risk for minor children (Brown, Bricknell, Bryant, Lyneham, Tyson & Arias, 2019:1). Characteristics of the child including physical anomalies such as a handicap or disability increase the risk of filicide occurring (Tyano & Keren, 2012:8-9). The absence of official data concerning filicide makes it difficult to critically discuss the phenomenon as the very basic notion of occurrence is blurred.

Although most cases of filicide include healthy child victims, it has been argued that very young children and children in poor health are more likely to be murdered by their parents (Mariano, Chan & Myers, 2015:4-9). Children with physical anomalies such as being disabled are at risk for filicide, which is consistent with the documented link between child abuse and physical disability (Tyano & Keren, 2012:8-9). Explanations of which range from evolutionary effects to altruistic reasoning. Further, the gender of a child seems to play a role in filicide. Inquiries conducted indicate that male children are more susceptible to filicide (*cf.* Brown et al., 2019; Myers et al., 2021), whereas various other studies indicated that female children are more likely to fall victim to filicide (*cf.* Ozdemir & Evinc, 2021). From the above, we can deduce there is no single category of children who may fall victim to maternal filicide.

Existing literature indicates that most filicidal incidents embody single victims, however multiple victims per incident are not uncommon (Brown et al., 2019:9). Biological parents are more likely to murder multiple children, whereas stepparents or alternative parental figures are more likely to murder only one child. Stepparents, however, tend to use blatantly violent means to murder the children as opposed to the more inconspicuous means used by biological parents. It has previously been noted that some parents show compassion towards their children by sedating them first before murdering them, choosing methods that inflict the least amount of pain, or methods that are not overtly violent such as shooting the child in the back of the head (Myers et al., 2021:210). The role of empathy within the context of filicide, however, is a controversial topic, although it does tie into altruistic motives.

#### **2.4.4 Offence characteristics**

As with most types of crime, perpetrators demonstrate different *modus operandi* when committing filicidal acts. *Modus operandi* of filicide specifically tends to be difficult to predict as studies have collectively shown that culture as well as ease of access to the murder weapon plays a role in the methods used by the filicidal parents. Filicidal behaviour is not a unique

type of crime as incidences thereof are found globally, though the circumstances relevant to each case may be unique.

There is consensus in most studies that abuse plays a role towards the death of the child victims (cf. Malope, 2014). An Australian study reported that of the 42 victims incorporated in their study, a quarter had died due to injuries sustained from a beating or ongoing beatings (Brown et al., 2019:10). Many other methods of murder have been documented including the use of weapons such as a firearm or axe (cf. Malope, 2014; Sussman & Kotze, 2013); poisoning (cf. Myers et al., 2021); suffocation (cf. Dawson, 2015); and drowning and fire (cf. Giacchetti, Roma, Pancheri, Williams, Meuti & Aceti, 2019). Research shows that fathers are more likely than mothers to use violent methods such as stabbing or beating the child, whereas mothers are more likely to use passive means such as poisoning or drowning (Dawson, 2015:163). Methods used tend to depend on the age of the victim. Younger children are more likely to be beaten while older children are more likely to be stabbed or shot. Motivational factors for filicide directly influence the methods of perpetration (Debowska et al., 2015:2). Further, filicidal acts committed by genetic parents and stepparents differ significantly in terms of underlying motivational factors. Genetic parents generally display altruistic motives for filicide whereas stepparents generally commit filicide out of revenge.

One example of passive means of murder is the case of Zinhle Maditla who was found guilty of murdering her four children in eMalahleni, South Africa and sentenced to four life terms as a result (Mabona, 2019). Maditla intended to murder her children by poisoning them with bread laced with rat poison and the presiding judge found that she lacked remorse throughout the criminal justice proceedings. Maditla had turned herself over to authorities in 2021 after the decomposed bodies of her four children (aged four, eight, seven, and eleven years old) were found in her residence. Maditla had told her family about what she had done and handed herself over to SAPS. It is not rare for filicidal individuals to communicate their intentions to family or friends beforehand or seek help through services such as social workers (Klier et al., 2018:135-136), although, in many cases, offenders report not having access to community services and indicate having a lack of support structures (Razali et al., 2019:155). Similarly, it is not uncommon for perpetrators of filicide to have been in contact with child protection services previously, especially in the context of child abuse (Putkonen et al., 2016:325). The researcher found that published studies do not report on whether filicidal acts were premeditated or impulsive, although it can be deduced that some are planned beforehand especially with regards to poisoning, whereas some are impulsive especially in the context of angry outbursts and beatings. Although, it may also be said that some individuals do not realise their behaviour may lead to death, such as with prolonged child abuse or neglect.

#### **2.4.5 Pathological filicide and filicide-suicide**

Maternal filicide defies societal expectations of motherhood entirely (Shouse, 2013:8). As such, there is a societal belief that filicide mothers are “mad” and inhibit some sort of underlying mental illness. While psychological factors may be present in some cases, one needs to be cognisant of the fact that most women who commit filicide do not suffer from mental illness or disorders that could potentially propel them to commit the act (Edge et al., 2017:6; Holloway, 2016:1-2). As alluded to previously, filicidal women come across as having the personality profiles of healthy individuals and have personality traits that are not directly correlated to an indicator of psychopathology (Giacchetti et al., 2019:68-72). Men are not exempt from experiencing mental disorders; however, research has shown male perpetrators are less likely to be diagnosed with a disorder than their female counterparts (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:12). It is human nature to experience negative emotions periodically. While filicidal individuals may report feelings or symptoms that correlate to mental illness, it may not be to a great degree that is required for a specific diagnosis as laid out in the DSM-V (Giacchetti et al., 2019:71).

As commonly mentioned throughout filicide studies, the rates of filicide are not readily known. Further to that, the rates of filicide perpetrated with mental illness as a factor are not public knowledge. While studies have been conducted, both locally and abroad, concerning mental illness, they do not report on the rates of filicidal acts. Figures presented are merely from participants who were available at the time of the inquiry and willing to participate in the study (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:12; Holloway, 2016:23). Due to selection bias, studies conducted within the confines of psychiatric institutions would have higher rates of mental disorders, whereas studies conducted within a correctional centre or incorporating the general population would have significantly less figures of diagnoses. Existing literature has not drawn conclusive findings regarding the relationship between filicide and mental illness (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:4). Scholars debate the prevalence of mental disorders, the distribution of specific psychiatric diagnoses and their relative contribution to the offence.

Non-filicidal women tend to display higher rates of diagnosis for mental disorders than filicidal women, while filicidal women display significantly higher rates for diagnosis than filicidal men (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:10). Despite sporadic accounts of pathological filicide, mental illness is considered a substantial risk factor for filicide (Adinkrah, 2019:50-51). Mood disorders such as depression and bipolar appear to be the most reported in literature (Gowda, Kumar, Mishra, Malathesh, Komal, Math & Chandra, 2018:43). Although selected studies have found higher rates of psychotic and personality disorders (*cf.* Moodley et al., 2019). In

hindsight, there are commonalities in diagnosed mentally ill individuals who perpetrate filicide. They tend to display poor coping mechanisms or skills, such as a reluctance to reach out for professional help or turn to unhealthy methods like drug abuse (Tyano & Keren, 2012:9).

Interestingly, while suicide ideation and attempts tend to be more common amongst pathological filicide perpetrators (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:4), the actual rate of followed suicide is minimal (Adinkrah, 2019:46-47). The filicidal act may be enough to release tension which drains the individual of physical and emotional energy required to follow through with suicide (Flynn et al., 2009:33). Studies conducted regarding actual or attempted suicide show that in most cases, considering mental illness and in the absence such diagnosis, filicide is perpetrated in an attempt to avoid abandoning the child when the parent plans on committing suicide (Holloway, 2016:17). Homicide-suicide is usually classified as a subtype of familicide (family murder). Within the context of familicide, fathers tend to kill their wives and children before killing themselves; whereas mothers tend to kill only their children before themselves (Adinkrah, 2019:46). Suicide usually follows the murder of multiple children as opposed to the murder of one child. In addition, filicide-suicide generally involves premeditation and prior planning (Adinkrah, 2019:46).

#### **2.4.6 Classification systems of filicide**

Numerous attempts have been made to develop classification systems to better understand filicide using categorisation (Malherbe & Häefele, 2014:46). Hopwood (1927:99, 107) reviewed 166 cases of psychiatric filicide mothers. He divided the participants into two groups: A, those who murdered their children while lactating, and B, those who did so after the end of lactation. He noted that while most mothers were lactating at the time of the event, 70% of the filicidal acts were related to exhaustion, which he termed *lactation psychosis*. While the study focused on psychiatric mothers, it is important to understand early on that not all mothers, or individuals, who murder children have mental disorders or psychotic episodes.

Some 30 years on, Hirschman and Schmitz (1958) made strides in identifying neonaticide as a distinct subtype of filicide. The study focused on mothers who murdered their illegitimate infants in the first day of the infants' lives. Two groups were identified: The first being women who were considered young and immature primiparas (women giving birth the first time) who submit to sexual relations and have no criminal history; while the second group were women considered to have strong primitive drives and little ethical restraint (Hirschman & Schmitz, 1958:16-18). Most filicide mothers who formed part of the inquiry are categorised into the first group. While the study delineated a basic understanding of neonaticide (West, 2007:50),

future studies elaborated on the notion by focusing on, among other aspects, ages of mothers, education levels, class in society, and general attitudes towards their pregnancy.

Resnick (1969) proposed an influential classification system based on the motivational factors of the filicidal act committed by both men and women. His inquiry incorporated psychiatric literature dating from 1751 to 1967. The system was derived from research conducted with 131 cases of child homicide and comprised of five categories (Resnick, 1969:329):

- Altruistic: Relieve child of perceived suffering and is often followed by parental suicide.
- Acutely psychotic: Parent experiences severe mental illness at the time of the filicidal act.
- Unwanted child: Children who are illegitimate or of paternal uncertainty.
- Accidental: Death resulting from severe or prolonged child abuse or neglect.
- Spousal revenge: Committed to punish the child's other parent such as in cases of adultery.

Altruism was the most reported motive in the study, accounting for 38% of the cases reviewed, while spousal revenge was least commonly reported illustrated as 4% of the total reviewed cases (Resnick, 1969:329). In turn, Scott (1973) suggested a classification system focusing on the origin of the stimulus propelling one to kill (either the child directly; or being displaced onto the child) experienced solely by 46 filicidal fathers. The paternal filicide system is composed of five categories (Scott, 1973:124-125):

- Elimination of an unwanted child (either by assault or neglect).
- Mercy killing (real degree of suffering by the child and no secondary gain to the parent).
- Gross mental pathology (some form of psychosis exhibited by the parent).
- Stimulus outside of the victim (such as displaced anger, avoidance of status loss, or revenge motive).
- Victim constitutes the stimulus (battering parent, loss of temper).

While the classification is based on male perpetrators, Scott (1973:125-126) did examine case studies of maternal filicide and believed his classification would suit both male and female perpetrators of filicide. Similar in structure to Scott's paternal filicide classification is the classification of D'Orbán which incorporated 89 females who killed or attempted to kill their children during a six-year period (D'Orbán, 1979:560). D'Orbán (1979:562-563) presented six types of maternal filicide based on psychopathological elements: battering mothers, mentally ill mothers, neonaticides, retaliating mothers, women who killed unwanted children and mercy

killing. Interestingly, the most reported type was that of battering mothers, women who were considered abusive and impulsive, while the least reported type was mercy killing.

A noteworthy classification system stemming from contemporary research is that of a European multidisciplinary team released in 2016. Ten years' worth of data from two countries, Austria and Finland, were comprehensively combined and extensively analysed incorporating 124 offenders and 152 victims (Putkonen et al., 2016:201-204). The proposed classification system considered relevant variables over the social, environmental, criminal and gender spheres. The following five classes were revealed (Putkonen et al., 2016:201-204):

- Homicidal-suicidal fathers.
- Violent, impulsive parents.
- Single, sober parents.
- Prosocial, psychotic parents.
- Infanticidal mothers.

The researchers emphasised the fact that certain variables were apparent throughout all five classes and had to be excluded from analyses to allow differentiation between the classes (Putkonen, et al., 2016:206). Variables such as depression, economic problems and psychosocial factors were thus not included in the proposed classification but are associated with filicide.

Although classification systems are meant to categorise our current understanding of the phenomenon, the systems tend to focus on the motives which overlap in many instances and render case classification a difficult task (Debowska, et al., 2015:6). Classification systems are further limited by not alluding to a difference between maternal and paternal filicide, as well as filicide committed by stepparents and genetic parents. The complexity of the phenomenon is illustrated with the overlap between classification systems. Despite the overlaps, proposed systems spanning over the last several decades contribute to the growing body of knowledge relating to filicide (West, 2007:50). Notwithstanding the existing literature, filicide remains a multifaceted phenomenon with a lot left to explore and understand.

## **2.5 Theoretical framework**

The following section will outline the application of existing theoretical models to filicide, as well as the underpinnings of pathways theories, and filicide theories present in literature.

## **2.5.1 Existing theoretical models**

There have been attempts to apply a sundry of theories to maternal filicide, including attachment theory (Eriksson, Arnautovska, McPhedran, Mazrolle & Wortley, 2020:3-6, 22; Debowska et al., 2015:6); general strain theory (Malope, 2014:14-15; Dixon, Krienert & Walsh, 2014:352-353); social learning theory (Debowska et al., 2015:6; Malope, 2014:13; Sedumedi, 2017:21); social disorganisation theory (Malherbe & Häefele, 2017:109-111); psychodynamic theory (Davies, 2008:38-51); personal construct theory (Sedumedi & Winter, 2020:14-17); and relational theory of women's psychological development (Malope, 2014:14-15). The following section outlines the application of existing theories to filicide.

### **2.5.1.1 Attachment theory**

Bowlby (1973) proposed that 'attachment' is developed through repeated signal and response patterns of the infant-caregiver relationship. Further, the strength of the mother-child bond has an important developmental impact, and separation or deprivation may result in the disruption of the mother-child bond. Ainsworth (1978) identified three attachment styles namely, secure attachment, anxious-ambivalent, and anxious avoidant. The arguments of both Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth (1989) that early attachment patterns become internalised models that shape a person's close relationships with others later in life is the basis of attachment theory. Insecure attachment styles which tend to develop in the context of negative life circumstances, may profoundly impact a person's mannerisms with and behaviour towards other people including both children and adults (Eriksson et al., 2020:3-4). Individuals with insecure attachment styles may be unable to develop a bond with others including children or may develop an inharmonious bond.

As attachment theory speaks to the mother-child bond, various researchers have used attachment theory to explain the perpetration of filicide by females where the long-term antecedents associated with filicide perpetration are explained. Understanding the early attachment styles of filicide perpetrators offers deeper insight into childhood nurturing experiences and quality of the attachment bond in adulthood, which in turn may improve the understanding of vulnerabilities that place a person at risk for murdering their child or children (Eriksson et al., 2020:3-6, 22). Disrupted childhood attachment patterns may be transferred onto relations with significant others, including children and romantic partners, in adulthood (Debowska et al., 2015:6). Further, filicide appears to originate from frustration building up as a response to the inability to bond with a child. Maternal filicide perpetrators are arguably women who themselves experienced absent caregivers, abusive caregivers, or adversities

within the infant-caregiver bond and as a result experienced the same mother-child bond with their own children later in life.

### **2.5.1.2 General strain theory**

Malope (2014:14-15) applied Agnew's (1992) general strain theory to maternal filicide. The theory postulates that strains or stressors increase the likelihood of negative emotions which creates the need for corrective action of which crime is a possible response (Agnew, 2001:319-346). Agnew theorised that individuals engage in criminal behaviour as means to cope with their negative emotions. Negative affective states and strain render general strain theory an applicable theoretical framework to explain aspects of filicide (Dixon, Krienert & Walsh, 2014:352-353). Strain may include the loss of positive stimuli (e.g., the loss of a romantic partner), the presence of negative stimuli (e.g., verbal insults), and goal blockage (e.g., failure to achieve justice goals). Further, some strains are more strongly related to crime than others. Types of strains more strongly related to crime include failure to achieve goals conventionally that can be achieved through crime, parental rejection, excessive discipline, child abuse and neglect, negative school experiences, criminal victimisation, and experiences with prejudice and discrimination. Malope (2014:14-15) argued that child homicide is a result of the culmination of strain, negative emotionality, and coping resources.

### **2.5.1.3 Social learning theory**

Debowska et al. (2015:5-6) and Malope (2014:13) used Bandura's (1976) social learning theory to explain the concept of maternal filicide. Social learning theory argues that criminal behaviour is learned through observing and imitating the behaviour from others. Criminal behaviour is strengthened if it has a desirable outcome or if the individual perpetrating the behaviour is admired by the observer. Emotional and unhealthy family processes are often maintained and repeated across generations (Debowska et al., 2015:5-6). Malope (2014:13) believed mothers model aggressive behaviour through social learning and that it manifests in the form of child homicide. Social learning theory does not recognise how individuals contribute to their own development (Sedumedi, 2017:21). Not all individuals who experience violence at the hands of others perpetrate violence themselves later in life.

### **2.5.1.4 Relational theory of women's psychological development**

Malope (2014:16-17) applied the relational theory of women's psychological development to maternal filicide, guided by the Stone Centre Model. The theory assumes that 'connection' is a basic human need that is especially strong in women. Psychological problems in women can be traced to disconnections within their relationships and that the relationships can be

with family, personal acquaintances, or society at large. Based on Kaplan's (1984) work, there are three major concepts in relational theory: (1) Cultural context, (2) Relationships, and (3) Pathways to growth. Malope (2014:16-17) argued that child homicide is a result of acting out once there are disconnections or violations in relationships and believed that filicide mothers would be able to pinpoint the disconnections or violations that led to them perpetrating filicide.

### **2.5.2 Pathways theories**

Developmental Criminology is a strain of thought within the discipline that recognises the manifestation of offending as a function of one's experiences (Le Blanc & Loeber, 1998:115-116). Developmental Criminology 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 on in life may have lasting effects that influence behaviour later in life forms the foundation of Developmental Criminology (France & Homel, 2008:1). Developmental Criminology encourages longitudinal research to determine risk factors for offending (Schram, 2020:315-317). As such, researchers have focused on life-course patterns to determine pathways towards criminal behaviour.

One of the better-known developmental models to date is that of Sampson and Laub (Schram, 2020:320-321). Individual stability and change are the focal points of their theoretical perspective. Sampson and Laub (1993) emphasised the importance of certain events and life changes that can propel an individual towards criminal behaviour or desist from criminal actions. The theoretical framework focused around three major themes (Sampson & Laub, 2004:4-5). Firstly, social structures such as poverty or family structure leads to problems in social and educational development which then lead to crime. Secondly, early antisocial tendencies are linked to later criminal behaviour. Thirdly, the influence of delinquent peers increases the likelihood of one engaging in criminal behaviour. In essence, they believed that early adolescent delinquency is directly linked to adult criminal behaviour. Further, the onset of adult criminal behaviour can occur in the presence of weak social bonds despite a background of conforming behaviour, and desistance from criminal behaviour in adulthood can be explained by strong social bonds in adulthood, despite a history of criminal behaviour during adolescent years.

Many conventional Criminological theories, including the life-course perspective, have been critiqued for focusing on male perpetrators and neglecting the concept of female perpetrators (Moult, 2007:8; Gehring, 2016:1). Feminist researchers have argued that men and women

enter the criminal justice system on different pathways. Components of the pathway's paradigm include histories of abuse, substance abuse, and relationship problems, among others. Feminist pathways theory postulates that it is important to examine the lives of women prior to their engagement in crime to determine the factors that compelled them to engage in crime (Gehring, 2016:2). Given the similarities in the strains of thought, there is convergence between the life-course perspective and the feminist pathways paradigm, and it has been argued that the life-course perspective can be applied to female criminality (Moult, 2007:34). Various researchers have identified pathways to explain female participation in crime.

Pathways theory's foundation was laid by Daly's publications in the 1990s. Daly (1992:27-28) analysed pre-sentence reports of 40 women and identified five unique pathways:

- "Harmed and harming" women: Women who were abused or neglected as children and may have substance abuse and psychological problems.
- "Street" women: Women who ran away from abusive homes who engage in petty crime to survive, subsequently developing a drug problem and further engaging in crime to support their drug habit.
- "Battered" women: Women who engage in crime resulting from being involved with a violent partner.
- "Drug-addicted" women: Women whose engagement with the criminal justice system is a result of buying or selling narcotics with their partner or family members.
- "Other" women: Women who do not fit the above-mentioned profile and whose lawbreaking is a result of greed.

Daly's work inspired further research interest in the pathways that propel women towards criminality (Steyn & Booyens, 2017:36). For example, an inquiry conducted in California, United States applied quantitative taxonomic methods in disaggregating a large sample of female offenders from a prison population to identify diverse pathway prototypes (Brennan, Breitenbach, Dieterich, Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2012:1481-1499). A total of 718 cases were incorporated in the study, all of which were women being released on parole within 60 to 180 days. The study found diverse pathways existed amongst female offenders and identified four superordinate pathways (Brennan et al., 2012:1501-1502):

- "Normal functioning" drug/property offenders: Offenders with few childhood problems, below-average risk and need profiles, lighter and non-violent criminal histories, and later onset.

- Battered women/victimisation pathways: Offenders who have endured extreme and lifelong sexual and physical abuse.
- Poor marginalised socialised offenders in antisocial subcultures: Offenders with strong links to antisocial subculture, higher family crime, residence in higher crime areas, and frequent drug trafficking.
- Antisocial aggressive women offenders: Offenders who demonstrate inept abusive parenting, school and work failure, extreme antisocial personality, and continuation of crime into adulthood.

Furthermore, Nuytiens and Christiaens (2016:195-197) explored the life histories and the pathways to crime and incarceration of female offenders in Belgium with the aim verifying the applicability of American-based gendered pathways to European contexts. Data was collected through autobiographical interviews with 41 female offenders whose crimes ranged from theft to drug offences, and homicide. The study found three specific vulnerabilities salient in the emergence of offending which are (1) financial need, (2) addictions, and (3) abusive intimate relationships (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016:207-210). The accumulation of vulnerabilities from childhood to adulthood has an impact on pathways to offending. Childhood victimisation sparks a negative cycle that leads to limited choice options and ultimately criminal behaviour. Child abuse and drug use were consistent with pathways emanating from the United States; however, the risks of living on the street, referred to as “street” women by Daly (1992), were absent in the sample.

Over the preceding decades there have been numerous developments in the field of pathways theory, and it seems South African researchers have adopted feminist views against the essentialist nature of pathways perspectives (Steyn & Booyens, 2017:36). Commonalities identified within the literature include childhood victimisation, the experience of trauma, substance abuse, intimate partner violence, and mental health issues, among others, that culminate as women’s involvement in the criminal justice system (Gehring, 2018:116). Differences in the research outcomes are usually attributed to differences in sample populations, as research efforts incorporate participants of different ages having committed a diverse range of crimes (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016:208-209). While multiple pathways have been identified to explain female criminality, it appears only one attempt has been made, quite recently, to identify pathways to filicide specifically.

Frederick, Devaney and Alisic (2022) set out to explore through a systematic review of literature the extent to which the antecedents of filicides can be traced back to adverse

childhood experiences of the perpetrators and achieved this by asking two questions – “What is the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in the lives of filicide perpetrators?” and “What potential pathways from the adverse childhood experiences may arise that could lead to filicide perpetration in later life?”. The study analysed 27 eligible articles for the prevalence of adversity and found pervasive adverse childhood experiences among filicide perpetrators (Frederick et al., 2022:3-14). Furthermore, six potential pathways to filicide perpetration were identified, which are: (1) high levels of stress, (2) mental illness, (3) problematic substance use, (4) intimate partner violence, (5) isolation and lack of support, and (6) multiple pathways. There are chains of risk linking adverse experiences in childhood to tragic outcomes in adult life.

### **2.5.3 Filicide theories**

As illuminated in the chapter, there are multiple theoretical frameworks and identified pathways to explain female criminality; however, there has only been one attempt to develop a theory specifically suited to maternal filicide. The maternal filicide theoretical framework (MFTF) is based on the premise that traumatic experiences during childhood can ultimately affect the relationship a woman develops with her children (Mugavin, 2008:68). Just as pathways theory looks to the life-course of women for reasons behind criminality, so too does MFTF. The MFTF suggests that filicide is the result of an interaction between several predisposing factors and triggers (Holloway, 2016:40):

- Predisposing factors (also referred to as phenotypic vulnerabilities): Predisposition to mental illness; history of or exposure to physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse; history of substance use; inadequate maternal role development; and social constructs.
- Triggers: Religiosity (excessive religiousness); revenge; inability to fulfil parental responsibilities; desperation; mercy killing; lack of interest in parenting or having an unwanted child; good mother stress; and substance abuse.

Mugavin (2008:76) noted that MFTF is restricted in its generalisability and external validity due to the limited evidence on which it is based. The theoretical framework only considers childhood trauma of an individual but does not make provision for trauma that occurs during adolescence or adulthood. Triggers are taken into consideration, but there seems to be a lack of everyday stressors that may cumulatively overwhelm a person. In addition, MFTF does not consider the role of paternal influence, or any other significant partners, on the filicidal behaviour.

While attempts have been made to understand and explain both female criminality and maternal filicide, there has been a scarcity of attempts from a South African perspective. South Africa inhibits a unique blend of individuals from different traditional backgrounds and ethnic groups, with distinctive cultural practices, including the utilisation of traditional healers or *sangomas* (Malope, 2014:40-47). Most of the existing literature on maternal filicide is pertinent to developed countries, which has left developing countries like South Africa out of the spotlight.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The information outlined in the present chapter provided a comprehensive and holistic view of filicide and related phenomenon. The nature and extent of murder, both in a global context as well as nationally were expanded on. Murderous women, especially within the South African context, was elaborated on. Considering existing literature on the phenomenon, a definition of filicide was outlined, and a delineation made between maternal and paternal filicide, which will echo throughout the dissertation. Topics relevant to the phenomenon were discussed, including perpetrator characteristics, victim characteristics and offence characteristics. To provide further understanding, the prevalence of pathological factors and suicide within the phenomenon were explored. Lastly, classification systems and theoretical foundations found in existing literature were reviewed. The researcher attempted to exhaust relevant sources to provide a thorough literature review in order to accurately present the phenomenon under scrutiny. The upcoming chapters will provide insight to the research methods employed in the study, the empirical findings along with a discussion of the research findings.

## **Chapter 3: Research methods**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The difficulty in trying to simplify a complex phenomenon such as maternal filicide lies in the various research methods and techniques used to study the phenomenon which often yield contradicting results (Davies, 2008:13). The following chapter focuses on systematic details of the inquiry and delineates the methods employed to complete the inquiry from beginning to end. Aspects that will be discussed include the foreground of the study, such as the paradigm, approach, and purpose of the study. The research design will be unpacked, including how participants were selected and recruited, and how data was gathered and subsequently analysed. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study will be presented. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the research methods.

### **3.2 Research paradigm**

After carefully considering the main research paradigms found within social sciences – namely subjectivist, positivist, and realist – in totality, the subjectivist paradigm was decided on and used as a framework to understand the reality of maternal filicide. The main assumption of the subjectivist paradigm is that people are the primary creators of their social reality and in order to understand a phenomenon present in their unique world one has to understand their experience within their context (Singh, 2019:9). Because the subjectivist paradigm emphasises the importance of individual experience in the creation of social reality, the researcher was able to come as close as possible to the participants to capture the meaning they apply to their lived experiences (Slawewski, 2018:17-18). Not only was the researcher intimately involved with the participants by means of the personal interviews, but the gathered data is in no way quantifiable, which ties in with the subjectivist nature (Bhattacharjee, 2012:103). Subjectivism incorporates flexible data gathering techniques and the researcher does not have to follow a rigid procedure, meaning that provision is made for adaptability (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:33). Subjectivism provides leeway for the researcher to adopt data gathering techniques that enable the participants to fully express their views and opinions. The afore-mentioned aspect informed further research methods.

### **3.3 Research approach**

A qualitative approach was opted for as, at the very least, the research inquiry was situated within the subjectivist paradigm (Antwi & Hamza, 2015:219-222). The aim of the inquiry was to develop a theoretical foundation pertaining to maternal filicide, which means an

understanding of personal perceptions of the perpetrators of the crime type and an interpretation of the meanings that the perpetrators give to their experiences is required (Mohajan, 2018:23-24). The qualitative approach focuses on the context of each individual participant which is an important aspect when wanting to understand personal life events and the consequences they carry towards perpetrating filicidal acts (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:2). The qualitative approach adopts a manner that is sensitive to human experience which is beneficial in terms of the topic on hand as it is of a sensitive nature. The qualitative approach ensures the social realities and experiences of individuals can be efficiently and effectively explored in a meaningful way (Jobin & Turale, 2019:314). By exploring the lived experiences of eight selected incarcerated female offenders, one can better understand the complexity of maternal filicide.

Qualitative research methodology relies mostly on personal contact between the researcher and the participants (Mohajan, 2018:23-24). As there is a high level of involvement by the researcher in qualitative research, steps were taken to ensure the research results reflected views and opinions of the participants as opposed to that of the researcher. The steps are further outlined in 'Data Quality' below, and include, among others, keeping memos of research decisions and procedures. With the researcher at the forefront of qualitative research, such studies are heavily dependent on the skills of the researcher. In the context of the current study, the researcher attended short courses prior to the commencement of data gathering which equipped her with the necessary skills to interview incarcerated individuals in a manner that is both sensitive and probing. The qualitative approach is inductive in nature, meaning one can gain a better understanding of influences individuals experience and how they interact with their social worlds, instead of setting out to prove a specific hypothesis or gain numerical representativity (Queiros, Faria & Almeida, 2017:370). The researcher was concerned with deeper understanding of the phenomenon of maternal filicide rather than the generalisability of the results.

Qualitative inquiries occur mostly in naturalistic settings (Mohajan, 2018:23-24) and, although a correctional centre is not a natural setting it tends to be an offender's natural setting for the duration of their sentence. A natural setting allowed participants the time and space to reflect on their views and experiences (Jobin & Turale, 2019:314). Information obtained from the participants may be described as emotionally loaded, rich or detailed (Barrett & Twycross, 2018:63). As qualitative research is generally open-ended, the participants have more control over the content of the data that is collected (Mohajan, 2018:41-42). To ensure relevant information was collected, the researcher approached the interview with a set of open-ended questions relevant to the study and used methods that enabled the researcher to retain control

over the interviews, while still allowing the participants to express themselves freely. Qualitative research methods are generally time-consuming, and fieldwork is an expensive exercise. To keep within a specific timeframe and budget, a smaller sample size, as opposed to the sample size needed for a quantitative inquiry, was incorporated consisting of a total of eight participants. In addition, the researcher interviewed two participants on most days which allowed her to progress through the interview schedule and lowered costs, without compromising the energy and attentiveness of the researcher.

### **3.4 Research purpose**

Upon selecting the purpose of the inquiry, both the aim of the study and the nature of the data was considered (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013:63). The aim of the research was to develop a theoretical pathway specifically relating to maternal filicide. As the objective was to explain the occurrence of the phenomenon rather than explain the phenomenon itself, 'why' and 'how' questions were focused on during data gathering instead of 'who' and 'what' questions. The purpose of the inquiry was explorative as limited research has been done on both general filicide and maternal filicide, thus there is a limited understanding of the phenomenon (Swaraj, 2019:666). Explorative studies have the potential to offer greater insight into phenomena. Exploratory research falls within the scope of qualitative research, as the current inquiry did. Flexible research methods that were needed during data gathering were accommodated by an explorative purpose.

One of the drawbacks of exploratory research is that it produces qualitative data which may be biased. Exploratory research is further limited using smaller sample sizes and inconclusive answers to the research questions posed (Swaraj, 2019:666-669). As alluded to previously, the researcher introduced measures to the research process to ensure the data collected was relevant and accurately represented the views and experiences of the participants, such as by developing memos of research decisions and asking participants for clarification throughout the interviews. The research was undertaken to satisfy the researcher's own curiosity, and to expand the existing literature pertaining to maternal filicide. Although the results cannot be generalised due to the sample size and geographical location of the study, the research questions, "What are the pathways that result in women committing filicide?", has been broadly answered and leads further research in the right direction when seeking a more definite answer, or when testing the theoretical pathway stemming from the current inquiry.

### **3.5 Type of research**

The study was basic in nature, also referred to as pure research, because the inquiry was based on expanding and advancing existing knowledge pertaining to filicide; it does not provide a particular application in policy or practice (Bentley, Gulbrandsen & Kyvik, 2015:690). Although the research fulfilled the researcher's own curiosity, knowledge was generated, and greater understanding of a poorly understood subject is imminent (Holloway, 2016:2). The inquiry was narrow in scope, meaning a specific topic was selected with a limited focal point which did not incorporate contradicting variables. Only one discipline, namely Criminology, was involved in the inquiry, as opposed to a multidisciplinary team, and the research was academic oriented which is considered the centrality of basic research (Bentley et al., 2015:690). Applied research includes a shift towards interdisciplinary collaboration. It should be kept in mind, however, that basic research paves the way towards applied research. Although the research was not undertaken to meet application, the results may be used to influence policy or practice and spark further research on the matter (Bachman & Schutt, 2013:315). In essence, the results of the inquiry may be used to influence current rehabilitation programmes within the DCS, or to develop intervention programmes within communities.

### **3.6 Research design**

Case studies were deemed the most suitable for the research as an in-depth inquiry was required of maternal filicide as a social phenomenon (Ridder, 2017:282). Case studies are particularly useful in expanding a phenomenon's knowledge base (Querio et al., 2017:377). The in-depth inquiry involved understanding the complexity of human behaviour through the individual's perspective, within their social context which included the stigma of, amongst others, illegitimacy, abortion, and gender inequality (Razali et al. 2017:37). The use of case studies allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the offender's life, circumstances surrounding the filicidal event as well as the offender's own attributions as to why the event took place. The case study research design enabled the researcher to assemble case studies relevant to the scope of the study, or which were believed able to offer insight into maternal filicide. Cross-case analysis is an element of case study research which compares case studies for similarities and differences, ultimately leading to theoretical conclusions (Ridder, 2017:282). Case study research has strength in developing and expanding theory.

Case study research has received criticism from social science researchers due to its lack of well-defined procedures (Krusenvik, 2016:1-2). The merits of using case studies lies in the aim of the research, which was to develop a theoretical pathway explaining the occurrence of

maternal filicide. Case studies were able to address the aim, as they allowed the researcher to gain a complete picture of the phenomenon from participants who had perpetrated maternal filicide themselves. Case studies incorporate subjective information which is considerably difficult and labour-intensive to interpret. A smaller sample size assisted the researcher with keeping to the academic timeline and well-defined interpretive phenomenological analysis procedures enabled the researcher to analyse the information without losing the essence of the participant's experiences. Further, transparency by the researcher throughout the research process addressed the concern of inherent biases as record was kept of research decisions ensuring that the resulting themes were those of the participants and not of the researcher. The inability to generalise findings stemming from case studies is one of the biggest concerns of researchers (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery & Sheikh, 2011:7-8). The research conducted did not aim to generalise findings, but rather to expand knowledge pertaining to maternal filicide as relatively little is known regarding the complex phenomenon.

Instrumental case studies were incorporated as it was recognised that the context for each of the respondents were different, while one phenomenon was under study. The case studies were secondary interest and supplemented the research issue, maternal filicide (Ridder, 2017:288-289). Instrumental case studies were better suited to the inquiry as the researcher was not attempting to solely understand maternal filicide, but rather to also gain insight into the salient causes of the phenomenon in order to develop a theoretical pathway (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:82-83). In essence, the participants' case studies played a secondary role as they acted as a mechanism to facilitate understanding of maternal filicide. Instrumental case studies allowed the researcher to analyse each case independently, while the case studies were also analysed wholly to detect trends and patterns. The ability to compare case studies enhance theory building as the focus is on how the phenomenon exists across cases (Ridder, 2017:289). The use of case studies enabled a theoretical pathway explaining the occurrence of maternal filicide to be developed. The case studies were exploratory in nature as the purpose was to provide new information and expand knowledge pertaining to maternal filicide (Rule & John, 2011:8). There remains a dearth of knowledge regarding maternal filicide, both nationally and globally.

### **3.7 Study population and sampling**

The study population was maternal filicide offenders incarcerated in Gauteng correctional facilities from which eight women were selected. Participants were serving a sentence for a crime that directly involved the murder of one or more children. The children were either their

biological offspring, stepchildren or children placed in their legal guardianship. Inclusion criteria for the purpose of the study was females over the age of 18 at the time of the interview who had been guilty of perpetrating the death of their own children or children placed in their legal care. Offenders below the age of 18 at the time of the interview were excluded, and offenders who had since been released from correctional centres were excluded as well. Offenders who were guilty of crimes involving violence towards children which did not lead to the death of the child, such as rape and attempted murder, were not included in the study. Although the participants were selected due to the specific characteristics outlined, participants were not excluded due to their ethnic grouping, socio-economic background, level of education, nationality, or language spoken. Non-probability sampling, which is based on judgement and does not include random sampling (Sharma, 2017:750), was incorporated in the study as only specific participants who could provide relevant data and a first-hand account of their experiences, having committed maternal filicide, were selected.

A combination of purposive/judgemental sampling and snowball sampling were utilised during the data gathering phase of the inquiry. Purposive or judgemental sampling is a way of selecting cases in a manner which uses limited research resources efficiently (Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, Bywaters & Walker, 2020:653-654). Participants who fit specific criteria believed to hold important information about maternal filicide were recruited. Beneficial participants were those who were over the age of 18 years at the time of the interview, had been found guilty of murder (or a related offence) of their child or children and were subsequently serving a sentence. The potential participants were then screened, and only those who were willing to share their experiences formed part of the study. The researcher perused court transcripts and newspaper articles to identify possible participants, to assist the case managers in procuring individuals. Case managers are DCS officials who work one-on-one with offenders ensuring their transition to incarceration is managed adequately and that they receive services they require, such as social work intervention or medical care. Due to the nature of the work, case managers form a working relationship with offenders and proved to be helpful in identifying suitable participants. Purposive sampling is prone to researcher bias as the sample is based on the judgement of the researcher (Sharma, 2017:751-752). In the current study, researcher bias was not a major component as the criteria of the participants was not poorly considered. The selection criteria developed by the researcher made theoretical and logical sense. While literature states that purposive sampling lacks the ability to generalise findings (Vehovar, Toepoel & Steinmetz, 2016:328), it needs to be reiterated that generalisation was not an objective of the study.

On the other hand, snowball sampling enabled the researcher to meet new potential participants through previously interacted-with individuals (Etikan & Bala, 2017:215-216). Snowball sampling is especially useful in the context of 'hidden populations' (Sharma, 2017:752). Maternal filicide offenders are considered a hidden population as 'maternal filicide' is not a delineated crime type, and the women would instead serve sentences for murder or related offences such as child abuse or failure to provide medical care to a minor. Thus, communicating with individuals who have access to potential participants enabled the researcher to grow the sample size. The requirements were presented to case managers within DCS who filtered through their cases and offered up potential participants. By using a combination of sampling methods, the researcher was able to address researcher bias presented by purposive sampling by using snowball sampling. DCS case managers were involved in recruiting participants and as a result thereof, the sample included offenders not requested by the researcher. The basis of representativeness of study populations gathered using the snowball sampling method has been questioned by researchers (Parker & Scott, 2019:4-5). Snowball sampling is of value to qualitative researchers in studies where generalisation, representativeness, and external validity are not sought after.

### **3.8 Data gathering method**

The data gathering method opted for was personal or face-to-face interviews, which is a technique that incorporates in-person data gathering during which the researcher plays an active participatory role alongside the participants (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017:3). Personal interviews seemed well-suited for the research as they are relatively inexpensive, practical, and versatile in that the interviewee can elaborate and steer the conversation in any direction while the researcher retains control over the content. Interactions were driven by question-answer sequences (Roulston & Choi, 2018:233). A total of eight interviews were conducted for the study, and each interview was conducted with each participant personally. DCS provided a translator that sat in on all interviews conducted at Johannesburg Correctional Centre and assisted if there was a language or cultural gap during the interview. Verbal consent was obtained from each of the participants prior to the interview in relation to the translator joining the interviews. Further, none of the participants indicated that they would not be comfortable with the translator being present. A translator was not required for the personal interview at Kgosi Mampuru II Female Correctional Centre as the participant was fluent in English and cultural gaps could easily be elaborated on and explained.

As in-depth information is gathered, data is of a subjective nature (McGrath et al., 2019:1002-1003). While personal interviews lend itself to exploring personal experiences of participants,

results are not generalisable to larger populations. The current research did not attempt to generalise the findings. While personal interviews allow the researcher to observe body language and emotional states of the participants, there is the potential for interviewer bias. The researcher attempted to avoid interviewer bias by actively listening to participants and continuing the converse using the same words as the participants and meeting them on their level (Roulston, 2018:326). Although the researcher attempted to build rapport with the participants, she remained objective in the interview and passed no judgement so as not to influence the answers offered by the participants.

As personal interviews are time-consuming, a small study sample was used and time limits were placed on interviews, which additionally suited the schedules of the incarcerated offenders. Incarcerated offenders participate in activities that fill up their schedules such as attending rehabilitative programmes or learning courses, receiving visits from family or friends, and fulfilling duties in the correctional centre such as cooking or cleaning. Interviews ranged between 40 minutes and an hour and a half. Personal interviews provide the opportunity for the voices of incarcerated perpetrators of maternal filicide to be heard, as most of the existing literature has been qualitative in nature, ignoring the subjectivity of the phenomenon. Further, by incorporating one-on-one interviews instead of group interviews, the researcher was able to highlight personal details and gain in-depth narratives from the participants (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017:4-5). Personal interviews rely heavily on the skills of the researcher (McGrath et al., 2019:1003). The researcher attended short courses prior to the commencement of the research to equip herself with the necessary skills for interviewing incarcerated offenders as well as interpersonal skills such as active listening. To be an active participant in the interviews, all interviews, except one, were voice recorded with the permission of the DCS and the research participants. Analysing the recorded interviews assisted the researcher with accurately accounting the information provided during the interviews.

### **3.9 Data gathering instrument**

Within the context of personal interviews, a semi-structured interview schedule was used which proved to be both flexible and versatile (See Annexure B) (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016:2954-2955). A semi-structured interview schedule is a set of questions that provides structure to an interview session, but still allows divulgence of in-depth information and spontaneity of responses through open-ended questions (Cypress, 2018:304-305). The researcher elaborated on the type of questions that would be asked in initial contact with the participant before the informed consent letter was signed, which allowed the participant to start thinking in that manner enabling depth of answers, but without jeopardising

spontaneity of answers (Opie & Brown, 2019:172). A semi-structured interview schedule was deemed the most suitable as complex social realities would be addressed (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2020:1360-1362). The participants were able to provide first-hand accounts of their experiences having perpetrated filicide.

A semi-structured interview schedule was advantageous in the inquiry as it enabled reciprocity between the researcher and participant and allowed the researcher to improvise follow-up questions based on the participant's answers (Opie & Brown, 2019:176). Interviews remained focused but gave the researcher an opportunity to explore pertinent ideas that arose during the interview, which ultimately enhanced further understanding of the participant's lived experiences (Roulston & Choi, 2018:233). Follow-up questions were asked in response to information offered by the participants to probe for more information and deepen understanding from the participant's context.

The downside of semi-structured interviews is that participants drive the interview in certain ways with their responses as the responses would not be uniform across participants. As such, all the interviews regarding the same subject matter differed, speaking to the subjective nature of the research. In the current study, the researcher retained control over the interview by allowing the participant to speak freely and express their way of thinking, but by probing in ways that would enable the participant to elaborate on information pertinent to the objectives of the study, rather than sharing information that would not be of value to the study. Further, the participants answered questions in the way they understood the questions, which is not always the way it is intended (Opie & Brown, 2019:176). For example, when the researcher asked about 'support', the intention was moral assistance from family, friends, or professionals. However, many of the participants understood the concept of 'support' as monetary aid and answered the question based on their understanding. To overcome the drawback, the researcher attempted to ask similar questions throughout the interview to ensure the participants' understanding of the question and to confirm the answers provided. The researcher felt that explaining the intention of the question would break momentum of the interview and that it was easier for the researcher to understand where the participant is coming from than *vice versa*. The combination of personal interviews as the data gathering method and semi-structured interviews as the instrument allowed the participants space for individual verbal expression.

### 3.10 Data analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected for data analysis as it has become a dominant qualitative research methodology and it carries with it many positive attributes (Tuffour, 2017:1). IPA afforded the researcher the opportunity for in-depth exploration of the lived realities of research participants (Alase, 2017:9-10). The focal point is on how individuals make sense of their experiences rather than on the experiences themselves. As such, multiple individuals sharing a similar event in their lifepath can tell their stories without distortion. IPA allows the researcher to extract important concepts and themes from each of the stories, without losing the essence of the individual stories. IPA has been criticised for its subjective interpretation of data, as there is no science or mathematics behind the data analysis to ensure accuracy of the findings (Larkin, Shaw & Flowers, 2019:190-193). In addition to following the academically accepted process outlined below, the researcher used existing national and global literature to critically discuss the findings of the study.

Following the systematic method of IPA, recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and read through multiple times while notes were made of the interviews. Notes of all the interviews were compared, and recurring themes were extracted. The process was repeated to identify additional themes. The themes were perused, and redundant themes removed, along with themes that did not occur across many case studies. In doing so, master themes were derived which will be presented and elaborated on in chapter four. Verbatim extracts will be quoted to support the master themes. To further delineate the process of IPA, the following steps were followed systematically (Malope, 2014:19-21; Jobin & Turale, 2019:316):

**Step 1:** Familiarisation and immersion (to gain a preliminary understanding of the interviews, transcripts were read through multiple times and notes were made accordingly).

**Step 2:** Compilation (the notes from the interviews were compared to categorise the participant's statements based on similarities and differences).

**Step 3:** Condensation (the notes from the interviews were compared to filter the categories and record the relevant recurring categories).

**Step 4:** Preliminary grouping (the recurring categories were compared, and similar categories were meaningfully grouped together into larger themes).

**Step 5:** Preliminary comparison of categories (compare the recurring themes to identify significant differences between the groupings and prevent overlapping of themes).

**Step 6:** Naming the categories (naming the categories to illustrate the recurring themes from the interviews and provide structure to the data).

**Step 7:** Final outcome space (arrange the categories according to their elements in order to provide a holistic experience of the participants towards the phenomenon).

From the above process, it is made evident that phenomenology does not end at description but allows for interpretation of the gathered data (Miller & Minton, 2016:49-50). The aim of IPA was to find and highlight the similarities and differences in the stories of the participants in a meaningful way that contributed to the development of a theoretical pathway explaining the occurrence of maternal filicide.

### **3.11 Data quality**

Trustworthiness of the data was obtained through confirmability and credibility as the study was of a qualitative nature (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020:597-598). Confirmability, as opposed to objectivity, involves portraying findings that are based on the participant's experiences and perceptions rather than that of the researcher (Nassaji, 2020:429). The researcher made use of a translator provided by DCS which allowed the participants to speak in their own language to prevent the loss of valuable data to a language barrier. Provision was made to ask participants for more information regarding cultural practices had it been mentioned during the interview to prevent the loss of detail-rich data to a cultural gap. Furthermore, interpretations and conclusions were drawn from the findings and are described within the final chapter of the dissertation (Nyathi, 2018:138). Direct quotes are used to strengthen arguments and illustrate meaning ascribed to themes derived from the data. Additionally, limitations and downfalls of the inquiry and methods employed are outlined to ensure transparency (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017:129-130). The researcher kept record of all research activities and related decisions, developed memos and documented the data collection and analysis throughout the inquiry.

Credibility, as opposed to internal validity, refers to the accurate recording of the phenomenon by ensuring the results are congruent with reality (Stenfors et al., 2020:597-598). The researcher ensured credibility through data triangulation and by incorporating tactics to promote honesty from the participants (Abdalla, Oliveira, Zevedo & Gonzales, 2018:70-71).

By having the respondents participate voluntarily, the researcher believed that they were genuinely interested in adding value to the study, and would therefore not fabricate stories, which would ultimately promote honesty. Participants who take part voluntarily are motivated by their potential to contribute to the study (Campbell et al., 2020:658). All participants signed an informed consent letter after being briefed on the contents of the study and their rights as participants (See Annexure A). The participants were periodically reminded that information divulged during the interview would not affect their treatment within the correctional facility. Participants were given the freedom to withdraw from the inquiry at any stage and provided with an opportunity to ask questions. In the process of data triangulation, information the participants provided was verified by perusing their court transcripts and media releases and confirming details with their case managers after the interviews (Nassaji, 2020:428). During the confirmation with case managers, they were asked to provide details and the researcher did not divulge details of the confidential interview to them. The researcher has taken steps to ensure confidentiality as anonymity is not possible due to the nature of the data gathering procedure. Confidentiality agreements were signed with relevant role-players in the research and interview transcripts were professionally redacted.

As the correctional centres did not allow follow-up interviews with participants due to restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not possible to proceed with member checking. Member checking is a process employed by the researcher to corroborate the intentions of the participants with the recorded interviews (Rose & Johnson, 2020:9-10). Instead, the researcher utilised data triangulation (Abdalla et al., 2017:70-71). To ensure credibility, the researcher asked the participants similar questions in multiple ways to gain a full understanding of the participants' lived experiences. As the participants could not be asked regarding patterns that emerged, the researcher instead opted to ask about the meaning the participants applied to certain events, or how they believe the events affected them and their internal processes. Further, additional sources were consulted to confirm the contents of the interview, such as court transcripts, media articles, and case managers. Qualitative research, and especially personal interviews, are not usually preceded by a pilot study. The first interview conducted was used as an opportunity to revisit and rephrase the questions of the semi-structured interview schedule to ensure relevant information was divulged. The researcher attended ongoing psychological counselling to counteract any negative effect the contents of the interview had. Although provision was made for Lifeline to provide counselling to the translator and participants, the correctional officials assured that psychological assistance will be provided internally by the DCS. To prevent bias brought about by the background and personal mindset of the researcher, a reflexive journal was kept recording the logistics of the study (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017:129-130). The researcher's reflexivity

included methodological decisions and a reflection upon what occurred within the study based on the researcher's own beliefs and interests.

The researcher approached the study with an open mind, however, had limited experience in conducting qualitative research. Although the findings of the study are beneficial in terms of advancing filicide literature, errors were a part of the journey. Reflectivity is an important tool in transparency (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017:129-130). Research methods tend to work out on paper, but the real-life application thereof was tricky. The personal interviews worked well as the researcher was able to see the reactions and body language of the participants which enabled the researcher to probe in certain areas where it seemed as if there was more information. Keeping to the semi-structured interview schedule was difficult, although the questions were pre-planned, it was not easy to ask them in the way they had been written down. The comprehension levels of the participants played a role in the way the researcher spoke to them, and the researcher needed to adapt to a tone and manner of conversation, thus the interview was more of a conversation than a question-and-answer session. As most of the women were opposed to admitting their guilt, they were approached in a way in which they did not feel judged or that their guilt had been presumed. For example, in one of the interviews with a participant who maintained her innocence, the researcher explained that the questions are suited to individuals who had intentionally murdered their child but that the questions would be asked, and the participant could answer in a way that suited her. Some of the participants had fabricated stories surrounding the death of the children, for example by saying they passed out and someone else had murdered their child, and one woman had said a car hit her child (although her case is one of strangulation).

The researcher realised during the first interview that wearing a blazer to the interviews, although professional, was intimidating to the women as some of them were from lower socio-economic groupings and had been through a bad experience with legal professionals during their criminal justice system journey. The researcher opted to wear dresses instead which was believed to help build rapport with the participants, however superficial it may seem. The researcher made regular appointments with a clinical psychologist to debrief from the interviews but also to discuss her own views and beliefs so that she would be conscious of them when drafting the dissertation. For example, the researcher had to ensure opinions of fabricated stories did not influence the way in which data was analysed. Further, the researcher needed to maintain absolute poise in the face of child murder, a topic that is of a sensitive nature and tugs on the heartstrings of someone who struggles with infertility herself. The researcher had limited time with each of the participants and only a brief period to collect data which impacted a vital part of the research. Not being able to fully win the trust of the

participants meant they were reluctant for the researcher to interview their family members as was initially proposed, and which would have been an excellent verification tool. Although the researcher ultimately had invaluable assistance by DCS staff, gaining access to the staff was a difficult exercise. It took many phone calls, emails, and visits to the correctional centres before the researcher was on the right track, which is perhaps due to the large human capital that DCS has, or the quick rotational schedules of their staff.

### **3.12 Ethical considerations**

Prior to the commencement of the inquiry, the wellbeing of the participants was carefully considered. Child homicide is a sensitive matter, and furthermore taking into consideration the stigma of murder, a method of compassion and understanding was required. Access to the participants was achieved through the appropriate channels, namely the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee from the University of Pretoria and the Department of Correctional Service's Research Board as the participants were housed in their correctional facilities. Ethical concerns that were considered include informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and debriefing of participants (Webster et al., 2013:78).

Participants were prompted to sign an informed consent form at the beginning of the interview. The informed consent form was used to obtain indemnity and ensure participation was based on a full understanding on the nature of the inquiry and the possible risks involved (Ferreira & Serpa, 2018:15). Keeping information regarding the study away from participants may lead to psychological harm, thus no deception was used by the researcher throughout the course of the study. The researcher was transparent in her methods and intentions. The process of informed consent involves three domains:

- Information: The research procedure, the objective thereof, the risks and expected benefits, and a statement making it clear that the participant had the opportunity to pose questions and withdraw from the research at any time was included in the informed consent form.
- Understanding: To ensure the information presented matched the participants' literacy ability, informed consent letters were read and explained to them, and each participant was given the opportunity to read through the form as well. In doing so, the researcher ensured that each participant was able to make an informed decision.
- Voluntary action: Each participant voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. None of the participants were threatened or coerced.

The informed consent letter enlightened potential participants about anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the nature of the research, total anonymity was not possible, however confidentiality was ensured. Regarding anonymity, the participants' identities are protected, and they are not identifiable in the research findings or publications. Names and locations are redacted in the interview transcriptions, and participants are named according to a number system (e.g., Participant 1) (Neuman, 2014:69-71). Steps taken to ensure confidentiality included not allowing any other person to sit in on the interview except the researcher, participant, and translator (Dekel et al., 2018:4). Confidentiality agreements were signed at the commencement of the research project by the professional transcriber (see Annexure E) and professional redactor (see Annexure F). The translator provided by DCS had internal non-disclosure agreements in place prior to the commencement of the interviews in accordance with employment conditions offered by DCS. It should be noted that strict logbooks are kept concerning the movement of the offenders. While it has been documented that each offender was interviewed by the researcher, the contents of the interviews remain confidential. Only the researcher and the translator who sat in on the interview is able to link data to a particular participant and only the researcher can access the data in its primary form (Miller & Brewer, 2007:97). Time was provided to the participants before, during, and after the interview for questions regarding the inquiry to diminish any doubts that they may have had.

Debriefing the participants was especially important in the inquiry due to the sensitivity and traumatic nature of the topic. The researcher allocated time at the end of each interview to make sure that the participants were not left with bad feelings or doubts about themselves (Maxfield & Babbie, 2014:71). The researcher felt competent to debrief the participants as practical training had been received from Lifeline and L&S Threat Management on numerous occasions which equipped the researcher with debriefing skills. Arrangements were in place with Lifeline prior to the commencement of the project to provide counselling to the research participants. Due to the restrictions imposed by the DCS during the Covid-19 pandemic, follow-up interviews with the participants were not allowed, thus sufficient time was spent debriefing the participants directly after each interview. The researcher received ongoing psychological assistance and guidance as a precautionary measure. The translator provided by DCS would receive internal assistance if required, although time was allocated at the end of each data gathering day for the researcher to debrief the translator. All participants were furnished with the contact details of the researcher, although none of the participants contacted the researcher after the personal interview.

### 3.13 Limitations and challenges

First and foremost, the Covid-19 global pandemic had a lasting impact on the course of the study. Data gathering was not able to be carried out for a period of eleven months, severely influencing the period of data gathering within the academic course. Only one session was spent with each of the eight participants, ranging roughly between 40 minutes, to an hour and a half. The interviews were conducted between November 2020 and April 2021. Given the time constraints, the researcher only conducted research in the Gauteng province, although permission was granted to conduct interviews in all nine provinces of South Africa. When interviews were conducted, the amount of safety precautions were excruciating and ranged from not being able to interview more than two participants on a given day, to maintaining social distancing, and not being able to schedule recurring interviews with participants already interviewed, which ultimately affected rapport built with the participants during the interview. Covid-19 regulations coupled with time constrictions meant that many correctional centres could not be visited. Data that informed the forthcoming theoretical pathway is not geographically rich nor can the pathway be generalised or applied to females living outside of the confines of Johannesburg and Pretoria.

As the researcher needed to rely on staff and offenders at the correctional centres, many individuals who would have contributed greatly to the study were opposed to participating. Not being able to personally recruit participants meant that the researcher was met with reluctance without being afforded the opportunity to explain the objectives of the research. The staff and offenders at the correctional centres were invaluable during the research, however, the researcher is of the opinion that personal contact with potential participants would have encouraged more women to participate. Offenders who did not want to participate had reasons that ranged from not being willing to talk about their crimes, to not being comfortable meeting with a professional, and ultimately not trusting the system they have been placed in. While a total of 15 interviews were conducted, only eight can be utilised in the inquiry as the others were not mothers who killed their children but rather mothers who displayed violence towards their children in the form of rape and attempted murder.

Gaining the trust of the participants proved to be difficult. None of the participants were willing to have the researcher speak to their family members. Interviewing a family member would have been an excellent verification tool. Additionally, some inconsistencies were noted in the stories presented by the women when compared to media reports, court transcripts and information provided by case managers although this was mainly concerned with the crime itself and not regarding the personal histories of the participants. For example, one mother

who had strangled her son attributed his death to a car accident during the interview. The Johannesburg Correctional Facility appointed a translator for all the interviews that were conducted in their centre which may have heavily impacted the rapport and trust between interviewer and participant as the translator was present throughout each interview and was a staff member at the centre working with the participants on a daily basis.

### **3.14 Summary**

The aim of the preceding chapter was to elaborate on methodology employed in the research study. The study was conducted in a subjectivist paradigm using a qualitative approach. The research was basic in nature and had an exploratory purpose. The research design was instrumental case studies and data was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule. Personal interviews were conducted with participants in a non-probability sample, who had been identified through purposive/judgemental sampling and snowball sampling. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before undergoing interpretive phenomenological analysis. Trustworthiness of the data was obtained through confirmability and credibility. Various ethical considerations were contemplated, including informed consent and voluntary participation. The Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted the study. The following chapter will discuss the empirical findings of the study.

## **Chapter 4: Empirical results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

As outlined in the previous chapter, information obtained from the study sample went through a process of IPA. The following chapter focuses on the analysis and presentation of the information gathered from the incarcerated participants during personal interviews. The chapter is divided into five parts: a) summary of case studies, b) bio-demographic characteristics of the participants, c) offence-related information, d) motives for filicide, and e) themes derived from the data. As IPA is concerned with the underlying meaning of events and thoughts held by individuals, the aim of the present chapter is to provide understanding of the content rather than looking at the frequency thereof. The researcher presents data in tabular format which is accompanied by paragraphs further explaining the content. Themes derived from the data are supplemented by verbatim extracts to support the themes presented.

### **4.2 Bio-demographic characteristics of the participants**

The study sample comprised eight women who were incarcerated in correctional facilities in Gauteng province in South Africa. Seven participants were housed in Johannesburg Correctional Centre (colloquially referred to as Sun City), while one participant was housed in Kgosi Mampuru II Correctional Centre in Pretoria. The participants' ages ranged between 26 and 38 at the time of the interview, and the study sample had a median age of 29. Only one participant indicated being in a relationship (marriage) at the time of the interview, whereas all other participants advised being single since their incarceration.

The majority of the women were South African, although three came from countries bordering South Africa including Lesotho and Zimbabwe. Five participants stemmed from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while two participants stemmed from middle socioeconomic groupings and one participant was from a high socioeconomic class. Concerning their level of education, one participant had completed grade 9, two participants had completed grade 10, while three participants had obtained their National Senior Certificate. Two participants had completed tertiary qualifications in Business and Accounting. One participant was in the process of completing an Electrical Engineering qualification.

**Table 1: Demographic information of participants**

Participant Number	Age of participant at time of interview	Relationship status at time of interview	Level of education at time of offence	Nationality	Socio-economic status
1	33	Single	Grade 12	Mosotho	Lower income
2	31	Single	Form 4 (Grade 10)	Zimbabwean	Middle Class
3	26	Single	Grade 10	South African	Lower Income
4	32	Single	Tertiary Qualification in Accounting	South African	Middle Class
5	26	Single	Grade 12 – Electrical Engineering Student	South African	Lower income
6	38	Married	Post Graduate Degree	South African	Higher Income
7	26	Single	Grade 9	Zimbabwean	Lower income
8	26	Single	Grade 12	South African	Lower income

### 4.3 Summary of case studies

As the inquiry was conducted with the intention of theory-building, the researcher utilised additional sources including case managers, news articles, court transcripts, media briefs, and case files, to verify the information obtained from the participants during the interviews. In some instances, the information shared by the participants could not be corroborated with information provided by the additional sources. Many of the details considered incorrect or untrue pertained mainly to the crime itself. The following is a short summary of each participant's case study highlighting both inconsistencies and critical details:

- Participant 1:** 33-year-old Black female who received an 18-year prison sentence for the murder of her infant son. The filicidal act was a combined effort between the participant and her long-term boyfriend at the time. During the interview, the participant indicated that they had obtained medication which would induce a miscarriage. Further, the participant indicated at the time of the offence, she fainted and could not remember the details of the events that took place. The case manager and media articles indicated that the medication used induced pregnancy and not a miscarriage. The infant child was subsequently strangled to death and the body of the baby was buried in a shallow grave within the living quarters.
- Participant 2:** 31-year-old Black female who received a 10-year prison sentence for the murder of her 10-year-old son. During the interview, the participant explained that she had taken her son to an orphanage to give him up for adoption. On the day of the child's death, he had jumped over a wall to return home, and a car subsequently hit him causing his death. The case manager indicated that the participant had strangled her son. During the interview the participant explained that the child was living with her mother and came to live with her when the mother passed away. The participant felt financial pressure due to looking after an additional child. The participant had three younger children that were living with her as well.
- Participant 3:** 26-year-old Black female who received a life sentence for the murder of her 2-year-old daughter. The participant had attempted a filicide-suicide by poisoning wherein she survived but her daughter did not. The participant was an adolescent at the time of the offence and had been incarcerated for nine years before the interview took place. The participant relayed severe financial stress as well as working as a prostitute to make ends meet.
- Participant 4:** 32-year-old White female who was initially charged with the murder of her son. The child died in the context of severe and prolonged child abuse. The court found the participant guilty of two counts of contravention of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 - 'failing to provide medical care to a minor'. During the interview, the participant elaborated

on the abusive marriage and household her, and her children, were exposed to. The participant explained that her fiancé had caused the death of her son and maintained that she was not involved. As the severe abuse was ongoing, the Court had found the participant to be guilty by reason of negligence as the child was not medically treated for the injuries which ranged from broken bones to burn wounds.

**Participant 5:** 26-year-old Black female who received a 10-year prison sentence for the murder of her infant child as well as concealment of birth. During the interview, the participant explained that she had experienced a miscarriage and “blacked out” so could not recall details of the incident itself. The case manager and news articles indicated that the participant obtained and consumed medication to induce a miscarriage, however the medication induced labour and the baby was born alive. The participant attempted to flush the baby down the toilet, and the baby subsequently died from drowning.

**Participant 6:** 38-year-old Black female who received two life sentences for the murders of her 7-year-old and 3-year-old sons. Both sons were fatally shot using the offender’s husband’s firearm. During the court trial, the participant’s defence was temporary substance-induced psychosis, and she was planning on appealing her sentence. The court transcripts revealed statements by eyewitnesses which indicated the participant attempted to commit suicide, however the participant was unable to recall details around the filicidal incident.

**Participant 7:** 26-year-old Black female who received a 10-year prison sentence for the murder of her 8-year-old son, attempted murder of her daughter, as well as child abuse and child neglect. During the interview, the participant explained that her boyfriend at the time was abusive towards her and that she was not aware of abusive acts towards the children. The case manager and case file indicated that the abuse was prolonged and severe. The participant’s son’s cause of death was attributed to prolonged child abuse.

**Participant 8:** 26-year-old Black female who received a 10-year sentence for the murder of her infant son. Participant 8 was the only participant that did

not consent to being recorded. During the interview, the participant explained how her sleeping baby was placed into a bag and taken to the dumpsite where the bag was set alight. The participant said that an acquaintance walked with her to the dumpsite and that it was the acquaintance who set the bag alight without knowing the baby was inside. The case manager and media articles indicated that the participant was solely responsible for the death of her son.

It was interesting to note that the participants who were not entirely forthcoming during the interview, or who had maintained an objective involvement or innocence throughout the relay of events had been in the correctional centre for a period of between one and four years. The participant who claimed temporary substance-induced psychosis and was planning on appealing her sentence had been in the correctional centre for one year. The only participant who did not have any discrepancies in the information relayed had been in the correctional centre for nine years at the time of the interview.

#### **4.4 Offence-related information**

All participants, except one, were considered young adults at the time of the offence with ages ranging from 17 to 30, and a median age of 26. One participant was 17 at the time of offence and considered a child according to South African legislation.

While strangulation and prolonged child abuse were the reported methods of murder for four of the participants, there was a diverse range of methods reported including gunshots, poison, drowning, and burning. All participants were sentenced with murder charges, except one participant who had received two counts of failure to provide medical care to a minor. Concealment of birth, child abuse, child neglect, unlawful possession of a firearm, and unlawful possession of ammunition were part of the charges handed down to at least three of the participants as well. The sentences handed down ranged between ten years imprisonment and a life sentence.

Only one participant indicated a joint effort with the father of the child to murder the child, although two more participants had indicated their male partner being responsible for the death of the child in the context of prolonged and severe child abuse. Only one participant had multiple victims. More male child victims were reported than female victims and the sex of the victim was unknown in one of the case studies. The age of the victims ranged between birth

and 10 years old, with a median age of 3 years. Three of the victims were infants, and their murder would be considered neonaticide and infanticide.

**Table 2: Offence-related information of participants**

Participant Number	Age of participant at time of offence	Relationship status at time of offence	Length of sentence	Criminal charge	Method of murder	Age & sex of victim/s
1	30	Boyfriend for 6 years	18 years	Murder	Induced labour and strangulation	Infant male
2	27	Engaged	10 years	Murder	Strangulation	10-year-old male
3	17	Single	Life	Murder	Poison	2-year-old female
4	28	Engaged	20 years	Two counts of failure to provide medical care to a minor	Prolonged child abuse	4-year-old male
5	24	Boyfriend for 1 year	10 years	Murder and concealment of birth	Induced labour and drowning	Infant
6	27	Married	Two Life Sentences	Two counts of murder	Gunshots	7-year-old male, 3-year-old male
7	24	Boyfriend for 2 years	10 years	Four counts: Murder, attempted murder, child abuse and neglect	Prolonged child abuse	8-year-old male

8	25	Boyfriend	10 years	Murder	Burning	Infant male
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#### 4.5 Motives for filicide

As some participants were not entirely forthcoming regarding their direct role in the filicidal incident, the researcher was not able to ask the “why” question. The following section will discuss the motives of the participants gathered by the researcher during personal interviews along with additional information sources including case managers, media articles, and court transcripts.

Both Participant 1 and Participant 5 used medication which would induce a miscarriage or terminate the pregnancy; however, the infants in both instances were born alive and the participants resorted to physical means to murder the infants. Participant 1 indicated that both her and the father did not want the child for various reasons including having other children and being HIV positive. The baby was subsequently strangled to death and both the participant and her boyfriend at the time were found guilty of murder. Participant 5 acted alone in the perpetration of filicide. She attempted to flush the baby down the toilet when it was born alive, and the baby subsequently died of drowning. Although Participant 5 indicated that she broke up with her boyfriend when he suggested she aborts the baby, alternative sources indicated that aborting the baby was solely her idea and her boyfriend had reported the incident to police officials. The filicide incident for both Participant 1 and Participant 5 can be attributed to an unwanted child.

Participant 2 had four children in total, however, only the firstborn child was murdered. Participant 2 explained that while three of the children lived with her, the oldest child lived in another province with the participant’s mother, the child’s grandmother. *“My mother grew him up. He was not even staying with me; he was staying in Limpopo [with my mother]. So, when he came to visit, he was coming, and he was gonna go back. But now, it... Everything was difficult because my mother wasn’t there anymore. Ja, died, 2014”*. The child’s father had died a “long time” ago and the participant did not receive any support from the family to look after the children after his death. The child’s death can be attributed to financial pressures with regards to looking after an additional child.

Participant 3 experienced similar financial pressures as Participant 2. Participant 3 was an adolescent at the time of the offence and did not receive any form of support from her own family, nor the child’s father or the family of the child’s father. After turning to prostitution to try

to generate an income, Participant 3 had poisoned her daughter and attempted to commit suicide in the same manner. The child's death may be considered altruistic.

Participant 4 had three children, and her partner at the time had two. Participant 4 alluded to all members of the family being victims of ongoing physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her partner. While the participant has been found by the court to not be directly involved in the perpetration of filicide, failure to provide medical care in the context of severe abuse constitutes neglect. While the child's death is attributed to severe abuse at the hands of the participant's partner, there is a possibility he would have survived the episode had he received medical treatment. The participant's failure to act may be attributed to a combination of fearing further abusive outbursts or underestimating the severity of the child's injuries.

Similarly to Participant 4, Participant 7 had found herself in a physically abusive relationship wherein abusive acts were directed towards her and her two children by her partner. The abuse was found to be ongoing and severe. While the child's death is attributed to severe physical abuse at the hands of the participant's partner, there is a possibility he would have survived the episode had he received proper medical treatment on time. The participant maintained that she was not aware her children were being abused as she was under the impression that only she was being abused. The court found that the abuse was too severe to go unnoticed as it included broken bones and lacerations. The participant's failure to act may be attributed to a combination of fearing further abusive outbursts, underestimating the severity of the child's injuries, or fearing for her own life.

Participant 6 maintained, as she did during her trial, that the filicidal incident was a result of temporary substance-induced psychosis. During the interview, the participant elaborated on stressful circumstances immediately prior to the filicide which included project managing the house development, suicidal thoughts, feelings of loneliness, and an argument with her husband on the day of perpetrating filicide. Court transcripts further indicated possibilities of infidelity, a prior protection order against her husband, additional children from the husband's previous marriage, and severe feelings of isolation and sadness. Eyewitnesses that testified in court explained that she attempted suicide on scene but that she was restrained by police to prevent hurting herself.

Participant 8 relayed accounts of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her partner during the interview. The filicidal incident followed an evening which the participant regarded as the ultimate betrayal – the participant and her new-born baby were made to sleep on the floor while her partner and another lady had sexual intercourse and slept on the bed in the

same room. The child's death may be regarded as revenge towards the participant's partner, the father of the child.

**Table 3: Motives for filicide**

Participant	Motive
Participant 1	Unwanted child
Participant 2	Financial stress
Participant 3	Altruistic
Participant 4	Failure to provide medical assistance in the event of severe child abuse (neglect)
Participant 5	Unwanted child
Participant 6	Temporary substance-induced psychosis
Participant 7	Failure to provide medical assistance in the event of severe child abuse (neglect)
Participant 8	Revenge

#### 4.6 Themes derived from data

Three theme categories or groups were identified from the data, which are experiences and circumstances prevalent during the lifetime of the participants, before the filicidal incident, and after the perpetration of filicide. The table below outlines the themes derived through IPA of the data. The themes are divided into three theme groupings: a) Life-course, b) Pre-filicidal, and c) Post-filicidal. There are a total of 18 themes.

**Table 4: IPA theme groupings and themes**

Theme grouping	Theme
<b>Life-course</b>	Victim of abuse
	Intimate partner violence
	Victim of rape or sexual abuse
	Victim of crime
	Unresolved trauma
	Suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts
	Criminal history or criminal behaviour
	Adversity in childhood
	Hostile interpersonal relationship
	Severe burden

<b>Pre-filicidal</b>	Lack of perceived support system
	Role of father figure in filicide
	Living arrangements
	Work circumstances
<b>Post-filicidal</b>	Suicidal attempt or ideation
	Regret
	Reach out to mother
	Intimate partner relationship

The following is a phenomenological explication of the themes:

#### 4.6.1 Life-course theme grouping

The themes within the *life-course* theme grouping are experiences that the participants encountered during their lifetime. Eight themes are presented.

##### 4.6.1.1 Victim of abuse

Although multiple participants indicated being a victim of abuse at some point in their life, only two participants indicated that this was within a familial relationship, whereas the other participants were victims of intimate partner violence.

**P4:** *She, she [my stepmother] didn't really treat us very well, so. Well, 'cos my father worked a lot. A lot of day shift, night shifts so we were with her all the time. I can't remember a lot of my childhood. Uh, like I dunno why. Can only start remembering here from 10, 11. Um, but from what I, from what my sister told me, like, she would lock us in the room where then she would eat like snacks and stuff by herself and ja 'cos when, when there's a stepmother involved there tends to be a bit of, I don't know, I don't know if you want to call it 'jealousy'. And my father, he hit me through my face a couple of times especially when I was rebellious.*

**P8:** *I grew up with my grandmother. My parents broke up. My mother abandoned me with strangers I don't know. Maybe they were friends. I don't know. They were abusing me. I had to wash plates and pots from the age of four. They would hit me on the head with the pot if it wasn't cleaned properly. The abuse was physical and verbal.*

#### 4.6.1.2 Intimate partner violence

Almost all participants indicated experiencing violence or acts of degradation within interpersonal relationships at some point in their life-course. The abusive acts experienced by the participants varied between sexual, physical, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse.

**P1:** *He only laid a hand on me by the time I told him it was over.*

**P2:** *My first relationship [was abusive]. [He was only violent towards me, not the children]. I didn't stay with him a lot, because he was saying "no this is not my child". And my mother said, "No, stay further or take care of the kids and stay far away from him". [My mom looked after the children so that I could get away] from him.*

**P3:** *And then I got pregnant, and that's where the things started to change. We fought a lot. It was, it was not nice. Ja. So, when I got the child, it got worse. He used to beat me in front of the child.*

**P4:** *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.*

**P5:** *He will, he will slap me. Ja, sort of things. It was just physical.*

**P7:** *So, he was always threatening me. I must um, how you mustn't tell me what must go on. Eish. [Long pause]. So, um... [Crying]. Um, so he was also abusing me, so I didn't think that he abused my kids.*

**P8:** *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.*

#### 4.6.1.3 Victim of rape or sexual abuse

Three of the participants indicated being a victim of rape. One participant explained that she had been raped by two different individuals on separate occasions, whereas one participant was the victim of a gang rape, and one participant was raped multiple times by the same

person. Only one of the participants indicated that the rape had been reported to the police. One victim of rape had stated she contracted HIV from the assault.

**P1:** *I once was raped. And... I never told my mom until I had a child. Because the person who raped me threatened to kill me if I ever talk. [at a later stage] I visited [my mom]. And then my mother's husband raped me. He raped me. I told his mother and his mother told me to never say anything about it to anyone. Because his child, her child will get arrested. Even this, my mom's cousin told me that: "if you ever say anything I am going to kill you". But I think that's when I got infected with HIV. And I was afraid because after my grandmother passed on, and my mom was all I had, I feel safe when I'm with her.*

**P3:** *My other... He was a cousin who was staying there with my grandmother. Then he would wait for my grandmother to go out and then he'd start coming into my grandmother's bedroom and stick his thing into me. I was eight. [it happened] like three times, I think. Ah, he used to promise to buy me things. Like, we had this bunny chow in the locations that I liked and then I used to get that. I didn't know that was wrong. Ah, I didn't realise, I realised it only later.*

**P8:** *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.*

One participant explained that she experienced sexual abuse but did not make use of the word "rape".

**P4:** *I think when I was younger [there was sexual abuse], I remember things but also don't remember anything. I've spoken to my mother; I've spoken to my father, but they won't give me any answers. But I do know that I was about ten at the time because the house was still in [redacted]. I just remember I was naked. He was in the cubicle with me, and I was naked just standing there. I think it was a cousin of mine. I can't remember. As I said I can't remember a lot about my childhood. [As an adult, my fiancé abused me] uh verbally, mentally, physically. Sometimes sexually.*

#### 4.6.1.4 Victim of crime

Two of the participants indicated they were previously a victim of crime other than rape or sexual assault.

**P1:** *I was robbed but it was, they took money but not a lot. [They used] a knife.*

**P6:** *Um, well, I've been mugged. That's why I moved from Johannesburg to Pretoria. It was with a gun in Johannesburg. When I got to Pretoria again, I was mugged, gunpoint in the rib. Maybe that was traumatic actually, now that I think about it. Um, also at a younger age, I think I was in primary school, came home and found the house having been burgled. Nobody there, but you know I tried to open the door and the door was already open and everything is ransacked.*

#### 4.6.1.5 Suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts

Suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts were not a common occurrence amongst the participants. Two participants explained that they had attempted suicide a few years prior to the filicidal incident.

**P4:** *It, it was a once-off thing. It was with my ex-boyfriend. Um, when my father found out that I'm dating a Coloured guy. So, I drank too much wine and then tried to commit suicide. 'Cos, he didn't want to speak to me after that. And when I was 14, I had a lot, or I still have a lot of issues, so I overdosed on my um, medication. I was angry at my mother. I can't remember what exactly and then I just decided to drink tablets.*

**P8:** *I had a death wish when I was growing up. I wanted to die.*

#### 4.6.1.6 Criminal history and criminal behaviour

While none of the participants indicated having a criminal history or arrest record, some participants alluded to engaging in some sort of criminal behaviour during their life-course, including corruption, commercial sex work, and illicit drug use.

**P1:** *He bribed an employee, I got everything [Lesotho citizenship]. And then he bribed the management of the mine and then I put in my tender [application] so that I could cook on the mine from 2020 to 2025.*

**P3:** *Ah, it came to a point where I had to go and prostitute.*

**P4:** *He was using [drugs], ja. Meth, Crystal Meth, ja. [I used it before] to experiment, ja.*

However, almost all participants indicated that the filicidal incident was their first offence and they had not participated in illegal behaviour before.

**P2:** *Because now, since growing up I never been police station. I never stealing. I never did anything.*

#### **4.6.1.7 Adversity in childhood**

The subtheme ‘adversity in childhood’ does overlap with other subthemes, such as being the victim of abuse or rape. However, the emphasis of ‘adversity in childhood’ is the age of the participant when the adversity (negative experience) occurred, rather than on the adversity itself – which is the focal point of the other subthemes within the ‘life-course’ theme grouping.

Participant 3 indicated that she had been raped three times by a cousin when she visited her grandmother (refer to subsection 4.6.1.3 for the verbatim extract). Participant 3 said, “*I was eight*”.

Participant 4 recalled an incident of possible sexual abuse in her childhood in addition to being treated abusively by her stepmother (refer to subsections 4.6.11 and 4.6.1.3 for the verbatim extracts). The participant struggled to vividly remember events from her childhood and said in relation to the possible sexual abuse incident, “*But I do know that I was about ten at the time*”.

**P6:** *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. Um, also at a younger age, I think I was in primary school, came home and found the house having been burgled. Nobody there, but you know I tried to open the door and the door was already open and everything is ransacked.*

**P7:** *Ai, I don’t know [where the father of my firstborn child is]. Um, we met in Zimbabwe. I was in school, so he just impregnated me. So, then he got another girlfriend, so there was misunderstanding, so he didn’t even support the child, so. We were dating, uh, it was maybe just one week.*

#### 4.6.1.8 Unresolved trauma

While almost all the participants had indicated traumatic experiences, either during childhood, later in life or throughout their lives, as illustrated throughout the themes presented; almost none of the participants had received psychological assistance of any kind.

**P1:** *He [my rapist] passed away. And I feel like he still owes me some answers.*

**P2:** *So, I don't know, I don't know what happened really, but somewhere, somehow there I couldn't find anyone to speak to. Or I didn't want to speak actually. It's not that I didn't find anyone, because everyone thought everything was fine and I was fine.*

**P4:** *But there was no psychologist, no.*

During her childhood, Participant 6 had found the body of her uncle who had committed suicide by hanging (refer to subsection 4.6.1.7 for the verbatim extract). She further stated, "*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. Now that you mention it, I've only realised that so, probably something that has never been dealt with. So, I've never, I've never really worked through it*".

#### 4.6.2 Pre-filicidal theme grouping

The subthemes within the *pre-filicidal* theme grouping are experiences that the participants encountered prior to the filicidal incident and may have directly contributed to the perpetration of filicide. Six subthemes are presented.

##### 4.6.2.1 Hostile interpersonal relationship

Only one participant indicated being single at the time of the offence, while one participant was married, two participants were engaged, and three participants were in long-term relationships. All participants indicated heterosexual tendencies. All participants had their children out of wedlock, while only one participant married after the birth of her first child. The subtheme 'hostile interpersonal relationship' is closely linked to 'intimate partner violence', but it highlights the experiences in the period leading up to the filicidal incidents, whereas 'intimate partner violence' looked at the life-course of the participants. Not all hostile interactions encompass violence. Hostile interactions are plagued with animosity or contempt with little

regard for the partner on the receiving end. Nearly all the participants indicated hostile relationships with their partners prior to the filicidal incidents.

Participant 3 explained that her relationship had turned abusive when she fell pregnant and that it became a regular occurrence for her partner to physically assault her in front of their child (refer to subsection 4.6.1.2 for the verbatim extract).

Participant 4 believed the abuse she was experiencing was on ‘*another level*’. She explained that her fiancé would threaten her for multiple hours at a time placing her in a vulnerable position where she had to beg for her life (refer to subsection 4.6.2 for the verbatim extract). On the day of the incident specifically, Participant 4 recalled the verbal and psychological abuse to be different than previous occasions and said, “*He even refused for me to sleep and said ja he’s going to show me what it is to be bitter*”.

Participant 6 had maintained that she had a pleasant marriage, however, she indicated that a disagreement with her husband occurred on the day of the incident.

*P6: We, on the day, specifically on the day [of the incident] we disagreed about the bathroom. That’s the last conversation I had with [my husband], telephonically, as I was going to pick up the boys. It was the size of the bathroom. But it wasn’t a fight, it was a disagreement, you know? I have disagreements with people everyday. I’m not going around killing people or you know, my family thereafter.*

*P7: ‘Cos, like um [Long pause]. That guy [Long pause]. Um, [sniffs]. He was all over me, it was like, he was guarding me. I couldn’t leave because um, [Sniffs], he was abusive, like, uh, when I, when you go you know he, he said, he used to say that um: “You know where I will find you”. So even though you open a case for me, there’s nothing gonna change, I will get out and I’m, I’m going to kill you.*

#### **4.6.2.2 Severe burden**

The theme is labelled ‘severe burden’ as opposed to ‘everyday stressors’ as the participants expressed feeling overwhelmed in their circumstances. It appeared to be a build-up of everyday stressors that led to the overwhelmed feelings, and not isolated stressors on their own. More than half of the participants communicated feeling overwhelmed, thus experiencing severe burden at the time of the incident.

**P2:** *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.*

**P5:** *No, I was not scared. I was just stressed. That's what he told me [That I am on my own]. I was worried [about having the baby].*

**P6:** *And the last discussion I had with my husband about it was on the Thursday night when I couldn't sleep, and I said 'listen, I think I need to consult because it's just becoming just too much now'.*

**P7:** *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.*

**P8:** *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 was crying. I didn't know what to do.*

#### **4.6.2.3 Lack of perceived support system**

A great deal of the participants indicated that they did not have a support system at their disposal, neither in the form of family or friends, nor in the form of social support such as social workers or psychologists. However, this was not elaborated on by most of the participants. Instead the participants answered with “no” when questioned about their support system.

**P4:** *To go to the authorities. I was honestly too scared. Um, I didn't know. I didn't know these places where the mother and children, where they can go to.*

The participant who did identify a support system indicated that they were not comfortable confiding in them regarding the circumstances they faced.

**P5:** *Because if I wanted to speak to someone I would have spoken to my friends.*

#### **4.6.2.4 Role of the child's father figure in filicide**

Only one participant indicated that the father of the child played a direct role in the filicidal incident, from the inception of the idea to the perpetration thereof.

**P1:** *I bought [a pregnancy test] and when I tested it, it showed me that I'm six months and three weeks pregnant. Then I told him I'm pregnant, and I told him that I, I don't want the baby and how must I myself raise another child. And he, he, he was feeling the same. But it's because we never used a condom. And then that's when we decided to go and buy the pills the insurance because when, when we are that stage, the government claims they don't do it, ug, they don't terminate anymore, it's illegal. It's already not a foetus anymore. And other, the other private clinics is much expensive. So, we decided to go to the people we know. We got the insurance on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, I decided to wait until the schools were closed so that my children could go and visit with their grandmother, my, the granny, the grandmother of this, the old one. And then on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, that's when I decided to use the pill. It was a rainy night, and when it started working; I got stomach cramps, I asked my boyfriend: "Please call your sister". We were at her granny's place not mine. "Please call your sister, I can't take this anymore". The he refused. He told me: "if I called, if I call my sister, she's going to call an ambulance and they will then figure out that you were tryin to terminate, you will get arrested". I felt then, I know that he is not doing this for me, he's doing it for himself and wants something that he could hold onto for the rest of my life, [to blackmail me].*

Two participants explained that the father figures were physically responsible for the death of the child.

**P4:** *Um, basically, my, my ex-boyfriend, he murdered my son. Um, I don't know what happened to him. Because I was at work during the day. Um. You know, I, I really... I don't know. Um, so according to the autopsy report, um it was like blunt force trauma to the head and chest. And then he had 60% burn wounds. Then bruises and stuff. I dunno how he sustained injuries but that is something only [my ex-boyfriend] can answer, because he says it was a mistake. He says it was an accident why he fell into the bath. But there's no way that that was a fall.*

**P7:** *Um, so he was, he was also abusing me, so I didn't think that he abused my kids. So, he kept on abusing them until they were traumatised. Then, the first day I caught them with bruises, like that big [gestures]. Then we fought, [my boyfriend and I]. After that he kept on abusing them. He knew exactly what was my knocking time at work so when I come from work, everything is fine. [My kids] claimed they are okay when I asked, like they are, they are fine. They like always threatening them, you know that uh, you are always here with me, once you tell your mother, you will see what I will do.*

*So, uh, on my trial, my daughter was my witness. So, my daughter said that um, she won't even have peace in her life because of what I did because her brother died in front of her. So, she said that uh, my boyfriend then strangled them, then kicking them. So eish, [Crying] this thing. Oh [Crying]. [Sign]. [Long Pause]. So, my daughter... My boyfriend broke her... My daughter's hand. It was swollen. Then I asked my daughter: "What's wrong with your hand?". She said that she fell on steps. Then I took... Me too, I took it easy, and things were tough for me. I was working, paying rent, I have to take them back home. Yoh, things were, were tight, uh they were tight for me. So, I think like I took her to hospital so... And then the doctor didn't tell me how emergence it was. So, I meant to... I, I thought uh, I will take the... I take her back to the hospital when she's... When I'm off. Um, then when I knocked off at work, I found my son not breathing, not talking. Then I asked [my boyfriend]: "What's wrong with my son?". Because I left him in the morning, he was fine. Because my son told me that I must bring him some oranges and some fruit, some biscuits. "What's wrong with my son?" Then he said: "No, leave him, he's fine, he's still sleeping". Then uh, I, I tried to, to wake him up. He didn't even respond. So, I then requested for a taxi to come. Then I took him to, to hospital. I told them: "The child, my child, my child", but unfortunately, he passed on. Uh, then my daughter left at home and then we saw her again, so I was like confused, I don't know what's wrong with my daughter. So, things like... I was [Sigh]. [Long Pause] uh.*

#### **4.6.2.5 Living arrangements**

Complex living arrangements, including separation and divorce, have been noted as a risk factor for filicide in literature. As filicide usually occurs in the larger context of an intimate relationship, the researcher explored the living arrangements of the participants within the scope of their partners. Two of the participants indicated living alone with their children. One participant who was working as a domestic worker, lived on the employer's premises with her own children. Two participants lived with friends. Two participants lived with their long-term partners and children, and one participant lived with her husband and children. To further encapsulate the living arrangements, five participants did not live with a partner, whereas three participants lived with a long-term partner.

**P1:** *I didn't live with him. He was visiting me and I... Whenever my kids are not there I would go and visit him. [My boyfriend and my kids] were very close. He loved them a lot because even fetched them from school when I was at work, he was the one who*

would fetch them and whenever we... He was the only one, he helped them with their homework.

**P2:** *I was living with [my boss] and my kids. They didn't have kids. I had four children. The two ones for one dad, the two ones for the other dad. In the start it will be okay but after I had the children, child, things change. I'm the one whose looking after the kids. They changed, [they went away, and they didn't help me].*

**P3:** *So, after my grandmother passed away, I moved to go and stay with my maternal great-grandmother. So, I stayed with her for about three years and then she got blind and then my other family took her. So, I stayed alone in the house. So, I got a boyfriend. I was 15 [years old]. So, I got a boyfriend and then I stayed with him in the house. And then I got pregnant, and that's where the things started to change. We fought a lot. ... And then he walked out. So, we had... Let me say I had debts. Because I used my, he has no property then, so I used my ID to go and buy furniture for the house. So, when he walked out, he stopped paying everything. When he walked out, everything stopped because I couldn't go to school. I used to travel so couldn't afford to anymore so stayed at home since then.*

**P4:** *I met someone via a friend of mine. And um, I started coming for interviews here in Johannesburg. And then I got retrenched at my... At my, at my workplace. So, I obviously by the time you find yourself with nowhere to go, so I thought to myself: "Okay, um, maybe pack up and go stay with him and then ill find work and I'd still have money to support myself and my children. I had two children at the time, and I had two children with him. We were staying on [his mother's] property [and she was also on the property].*

**P5:** *No, [I wasn't living with him], I was living with my friends. No, I, no, [I wasn't working at the time].*

**P6:** *I have a family that I am [Sigh]. [Long Pause]. [Sigh] um, building. That I'm, I'm living with, that I am working with... At that time my life was good. You know, I walked into the house. The enormity of the house got to me even on that day, I remember, it was like: "This whole space and I'm alone". And I just dropped off the kids from school, it's not like they'd gone anywhere. You know, and I'm going to fetch them after a few hours, and my husband's left, and he called to say he's going to, to um, actually, I called him to find out where he was. He's going to get supplier. Um, [Sigh], so it was...*

*And he was becoming back, and he was coming back. That was a, that was not the house we were building and that we are living in now, that's the house that he already had. So, it's a house I moved into. A house I love, a house I still love.*

**P7:** *He was staying with four of us. [It was me, him and two children]. So, eh, he was not working. I was the only one that was working. I... The boyfriend is the father of the, this boychild that passed away. Ai, I don't know [where the father is of the older child].*

**P8:** *I was living with friends that time.*

#### **4.6.2.6 Work circumstances**

Almost all the participants indicated that they had a steady income before the filicidal incident. Participant 3 indicated that she was involved in commercial sex work for an income (refer to subsection 4.6.1.6 for verbatim extract), while the other five participants indicated having lawful sources of income.

**P1:** *I was working with my mom. She sells food at the taxi rank, and we were working together.*

**P2:** *And after, I came here in Gauteng, then I was working as a domestic.*

**P4:** *[I was working with] accounts. It... I started off as a secretary and then just basically worked myself up to a senior bookkeeper.*

**P6:** *Yes, I still had businesses that I was running... Um, I ran a medico-legal clinic which was, you know, um, mainly spearheaded by [my husband], but I did all the operations in the background. We had a construction company, we had a, um sanitation company as well, which I ran from the front.*

**P7:** *I was the only one that was working. I was working in a restaurant in [redacted].*

Only two of the participants were not working and relied on others for an income.

#### **4.6.3 Post-filicidal theme grouping**

The themes within the *post-filicidal* theme grouping are experiences that the participants encountered after the filicidal incident. Four themes are presented.

#### 4.6.3.1 Suicidal attempt or ideation

Only two participants attempted suicide immediately after murdering their children.

**P3:** *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.*

**P6:** *And 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. [I got the gun] to commit suicide. The reports that I got from the state witnesses say I wanted to commit suicide, I wanted to jump over the wall and throw myself at the cars. I have no recollection of those things that happened on the scene of the event, and shortly after the, the scene. I had no recollection, and I still don't.*

#### 4.6.3.2 Regret

An overwhelming number of participants were regretful of their actions, although this was seen more in their body language and mannerisms during the interview and not necessarily in something they said. The body language and mannerisms included a quivering lip, holding their head in their hands, tracing words with their fingertips on the tabletop, maintaining and breaking eye contact, intermittent pauses when telling their story or before they begin a difficult part, and sobbing.

**P2:** *I'm still hurt because I failed, I think, to be a mother... Even now I feel I failed to be a mother for these kids. [Crying].*

**P4:** *Healing is the part that is difficult because it means I have to let go of him [my child]. He didn't have to die like that.*

**P2:** *No uh-uh, my conscience was eating me, so I couldn't have [carried on living without confessing].*

#### 4.6.3.3 Reach out to mother

In hindsight, two of the participants indicated that if they were able to turn back the clock, they would reach out to their own mothers for assistance in their circumstances or to share the burdens they felt in the period leading up to the filicidal incidents. As filicide mothers defy societal norms, the urge to reach out to their own mothers stood out to the researcher.

**P5:** *My mom.*

**P7:** *Um, my mother maybe.*

#### 4.6.3.4 Intimate partner relationship

Most of the participants who were in a relationship at the time of the offence had indicated that the filicidal incident marked the end of the relationship.

One participant indicated that her partner had become obsessed with her once she ended the relationship and attempted to use the filicidal incident as blackmail to keep her in the relationship.

**P1:** *We were together about six years, and we broke up a few months before I came to the centre. It was because he's the one who ended up and spilled the beans about what we did, and that's why I ended up here. ... I said to him, "As I did tell you when I got pregnant, I couldn't see myself having a family with you and I think now it's time to part ways. I think you should find someone who will bear you children. I don't see us having a relationship anymore". That's when he started to beat me. He beat me and then told me "You can't leave me" and that he won't live without me. Then he started, he started stalking me. Whenever I was at home, he would come around 12:00 at night to make noise. He would wait outside my window and stand the whole night watching me and the children sleeping. And I was always afraid. I felt like when I was somewhere someone is watching me, whenever I was going. And that's when he started to threaten me, and he told me that he will tell people about what we did if I didn't date him. He even told me that he even used Google and it's classified as murder and we are going to jail, even for life. Then I said to him: "If it was meant for me to go to jail, I'd rather go to a jail than be in a relationship with you".*

One participant had stated that her and her husband were still married and that they had conceived another child after the murder of her two sons.

*P6: Yes, [I am married]. It will be ten years, ten years now this year. Um, and [sniffs] he wanted a... So, we knew that we wanted kids, and here's this horrible heinous thing that happened. Um, what now? And then he just simply said we have another child. Um, I had a few doubts of my own. I think naturally. Um, but ja, with enough discussion and agreement we then decided to have another child.*

#### **4.7 Summary**

A total of eight participants were personally interviewed during data gathering using a semi-structured interview schedule as an aid. IPA was used to analyse and interpret the information-rich data. The participants had a median age of 26 years old at the time of the offence and their victims a median age of 3 years old. Various methods of murder were reported including prolonged child abuse, strangulation, poisoning, drowning and the use of a firearm. Three theme groupings were presented with a total of 18 themes including intimate partner violence, the experience of a severe burden, and suicidal attempts or ideation. The next chapter presents the 'Lifeways trajectory to maternal filicide' formulated using the findings of the study and existing literature. Further, the findings are discussed in terms of national and global literature, and recommendations are made for future studies.

## **Chapter 5: Presentation of lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide, discussion of findings and recommendations**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The current study focused on the lived experiences of filicide mothers incarcerated in correctional centres in Gauteng province. The terms 'filicide', 'child', 'pathways theory', 'parent/guardian', 'mother', and 'murder' were operationally defined in the first chapter of the dissertation. The remainder of Chapter 1 summarised the methodology that drove the research as well as outlined the aim, objectives, and rationale for the inquiry. Chapter 2 provided an in-depth review of literature pertaining to homicidal women and filicide. Theoretical frameworks relevant to maternal filicide were elaborated on. Chapter 3 focused on the methodological procedure of the study, explaining the methods employed and justifications thereof, along with drawbacks and how they were addressed. As means of transparency, ethical considerations and limitations of the study were discussed. In Chapter 4, the empirical results and findings from the study were presented, using verbatim extracts from the interviews. The last chapter is used to discuss the findings of the inquiry against the backdrop of national and global literature and present potential pathways to maternal filicide perpetration. The researcher proposes a *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model which will be presented.

The focus of the present chapter will be to answer the research question, which was: What are the pathways that result in women committing filicide? The objectives of the study revolved around developing a profile of filicide mothers, determining critical life events of the participants, identifying social, economic, environmental, personal, and inter-personal circumstances at the time of the incident, and ascertaining the women's understanding of the crime and their opinions regarding their motives for murdering their children. The chapter is structured broadly according to the objectives of the study. The chapter will conclude with recommendations regarding future research and ways to address maternal filicide.

### **5.2 Characteristics of filicide mothers**

Malope (2014:23) found that most of the filicide mothers in her study had not obtained their grade 12 level of education and that it was primarily due to falling pregnant and dropping out of school. Similarly, a study conducted in Rwanda regarding the prevalence of negative emotions experienced by filicide mothers reported that only about a third of the participants had attended secondary school (Muziki, Uwera, Niyonsenga, Nshimiyimana, Sebatukura & Mutabaruka, 2022:5). Interestingly, most participants in the present study had obtained their

national senior certificate or a tertiary qualification, which not only contradicts filicidal literature, but literature on incarcerated females as well which states that female offenders are generally poor, unemployed, and lacking in education (Artz & Rotmann, 2015:4). A Turkish study conducted on 74 filicidal women to evaluate motives, psychopathological aspects, and socio-demographic factors found the rate of low-income mothers to be much higher than other income groups (Eke, Basoglu, Bakar & Oral, 2015:147). The mothers were mostly unemployed or housewives at the time of the filicidal event.

The higher levels of education in the present study pairs with the higher levels of employment as most participants indicated having a steady income before the filicidal incident and at least two of the participants were breadwinners in their household. Despite higher levels of education and employment in the present study, most of the participants stemmed from lower socio-economic backgrounds which is in line with the profile that most female South African offenders present (Steyn & Booyens, 2017:35). Poverty is a consistent theme across filicide literature (Davies, 2022:8) and is globally associated with violent crime and victimisation (UNODC, 2019a:8). Individuals stemming from lower socio-economic groupings tend to have restricted access to resources, including basic needs and socio-economic services, which directly influences their quality of living and increases the probability of exploitation, marginalisation, and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness (UNODC, 2019a:8).

Most filicide studies indicate that women are single at the time of the offence which directly influences the financial stress and childrearing responsibility they endure which may lead to the 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 heterosexual relationships or married. Interestingly, while nearly all participants were in long-term relationships, only three of the participants lived with their partners. The dynamic of having children with someone but not living with them may increase the experience of hostility within the interpersonal relationship or perception of complex living arrangements. Further, 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., 2014:367-368) although filicidal studies have not addressed women's involvement in filicide due to pressures or expectations of their intimate partners. The role of men in women's motives is a relatively unexplored concept in literature.

Mothers who murder their children defy societal expectations, and it evokes public outcry when such instances occur (Shouse, 2013:8). Society tends to expect that mothers who murder their

children will have some sort of mental illness as it is difficult to comprehend a 'motherly' individual perpetrating such violence. In South Africa, offenders who are mentally ill are referred to as state patients and are housed in psychiatric institutions, which means that the participants in studies similar to the present one, will generally not have diagnoses of mental illness. In the present study, one participant had been diagnosed with depression and one participant had attributed the filicidal incident to a temporary substance-induced psychosis. The researcher appreciates that mental illness may play a role in some maternal filicide incidents, however, filicide does not necessarily stem from a mental health illness or a mental health incident.

An interesting aspect reported on the previously mentioned Australian inquiry is the delineation of a criminal record (Brown, et al., 2019:8-12). The study found about a third of female participants had a criminal history. Female filicide perpetrators were largely involved with drug offending as well as acts of violence. The researcher was unable to find relevant South African literature that reported on previous criminal convictions of perpetrators of maternal filicide. However, it has come to be accepted that most female offenders do not have a criminal history (Artz et al., 2012:4-7). In the current study, none of the participants had a criminal history or an arrest record. Some of the participants alluded to being involved with criminal activities although they had not been arrested or convicted previously. The criminal activities included corruption, commercial sex work, and illicit drug use.

Malope (2014:35) indicated most of the participants in her study were plagued with suicidal thoughts before the filicidal incident. Further, some of the participants attempted to commit suicide after they murdered their children and in most of the instances, a stressful family life triggered the suicidal behaviour. Further, the mothers were more likely to use the same methods in the suicide attempt as the methods used to murder their children. Adinkrah (2021:182) indicated that a third of the participants in the Ghanaian study committed or attempted suicide after the filicidal incident and that the same methods were used in the suicide attempt that were used to murder their children.

In the present study, only 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 in front of 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.

### 5.3 Critical life-course events of filicide mothers

Globally, most research conducted on filicide indicates that mothers who are perpetrators of the crime have a history of being involved in domestic violence, mostly as the victim but not excluded as the abuser. A study carried out in Australia examined the characteristics of custodial parents, non-custodial parents and stepparents charged with murder or manslaughter of their children (Brown et al., 2019:2). The study found that a small number of participants had a history of abuse. The modest figure of domestic abuse found in Australia is not in harmony with a study conducted in South Africa. The South African study aimed to explore the experience of adversities in the context of filicidal behaviour (Dekel, et al., 2018:1-14). The inquiry reported that more than half of the female participants were in an abusive relationship prior to the incident. Artz and Rotmann (2015:4) reported that incarcerated females in South Africa are often victims of abuse.

In the current study, some of the participants indicated they were in an abusive relationship prior to the incident. Other participants had 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 find it difficult to verbalise they have been a victim of abuse, especially in case of psychological or emotional abuse where the lines are not clear-cut. The participants of the current study would rather use indistinct phrases to describe their relationship, instead of the word 'abuse', such as "*there was no love anymore*" and "*it was just difficult*". Further, they did not allude to thinking of themselves as victims. As such, some women do not understand their own trajectories to criminal behaviour, especially in contexts like South Africa where violence has been normalised (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017:3). Although the SAPS and related organisations run campaigns annually targeting violence against women and children, the consequences of abuse are deeply entrenched into the psyche of the victims. Not only does abuse make it difficult for victims to leave the situation, but it also alters the manner in which they experience and internalise their world and surroundings (Dare, Guadagno & Muscanell, 2013:62-63).

#### **5.4. Environmental circumstances of filicide mothers**

In most literature, filicide is understood as a parent figure deliberately and directly causing the death of their child or children, although unintentional death brought on by neglect or maltreatment is not excluded (Poteyeva & Leigey, 2018:1). Death as a result of neglect is usually not an intentional form of murder and occurs when mothers are distracted from or inattentive to the needs of their children (Oberman, 2003:496). Despite the definition of filicide including neglect or maltreatment on the part of the parent, it seems few researchers have incorporated case studies where neglect played a pivotal role. Rather, most filicidal inquiries included fatal child abuse where the mothers played a more direct role in the death of their children. In the early 2000s, Oberman (2003:494-496) attempted to classify maternal filicide perpetrators. One of the categories identified was that of fatal child neglect and was described as 'mothers who live alone or whose partners are completely removed from the parenting process'. Further, the women are considered young with young children, have high levels of need and a limited support structure (Davies, 2008:59). Examples of neglect include forgetting the child in a bath or car where the children may die from drowning or exhaustion respectively.

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 classification system offered by Oberman (2003), 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. Little research has been conducted on maternal filicidal neglect (Davies, 2008:59). Further research is needed on the concept especially from a South African context.

#### **5.5 Motives for filicide**

A study conducted to examine the behavioural characteristics of mothers who have killed one or more of their children reported the most expressed motive in the study as altruism, followed by accidental, revenge, and acute psychosis (Shouse, 2016:13-57). Similarly, Malope (2014:41) reported that most of the participants in her study committed 'mercy killings' which are altruistic in nature. The mothers attempted to save their children from difficult circumstances by murdering them. Sussman and Kotze (2013:15-18) found altruistic reasons

in all maternal filicide cases reviewed in their study. As outlined in the literature review in Chapter 2, all classification systems that categorise the motives of filicide incorporate altruistic reasoning for filicidal incidents.

In the present study, an unwanted child and failure to provide medical care to a minor (neglect) were the most reported motives for maternal filicide. Additional motives were financial stress, altruism, temporary substance-induced psychosis, and revenge. The link between education and crime has been argued repeatedly in literature (Veselak, 2015:30; Hjalmarsson & Lochner, 2012:49). The researcher believes that there is a link between education levels and motives as well which appears to be evident in the present study. Most filicide studies incorporate female offenders with low levels of education and high rates of altruistic motives. Most participants in the present study had a higher level of education than profiles of women offenders divulged in literature (*cf.* Steyn & Booyens, 2017:35; Artz & Rotmann, 2015:4). Further, the present study indicates various motives and only one altruistic case study. Further, the only participant who indicated altruistic reasons for the filicide had not obtained Grade 12 level of education as she dropped out of school at a young age.

A Canadian study that examined maternal and paternal differences in the context of victim, accused and offence characteristics found that a large portion of women offenders murdered their children by means of strangulation or suffocation, while a small portion had fatally shot their children (Dawson, 2015:165-168). Incongruently, a study conducted in South Africa to explore and describe the biographical background and nature of women who have killed in a post-apartheid era, found that filicide mothers most commonly used a knife to murder their children (Pretorius & Morgan, 2013:393-396). In the current study, there was not a single case of a stabbing. However, two victims had been fatally shot by their mother and two victims had been strangled. Further, there were two cases of fatal child abuse. Although this is on par with the Canadian study, the researcher is of the opinion that it speaks more to the violence that occurs in South Africa. As such, the South African study uncovering stabbing to be the most common, is in line with the present study as the most common methods are contact crimes that are overtly violent. As illustrated in Chapter 2, South Africa is one of the most violent countries globally and children fulfil a vulnerable position in society.

A study conducted in Italy to detect a possible personality profile in infanticide/filicide women reported that about a third of the participants had committed infanticide, whereas none of the mothers were found to have committed neonaticide (Giacchetti, et al., 2019:68-69). In South Africa, Mathews et al. (2013:562) indicated that more than half of the child homicide that occurred in 2009 were categorised as neonaticide and the infanticide rate for the same year

was 28,3 per 100 000 live births. Previous studies have shown that mothers are more likely to commit neonaticide and infanticide as they are closer to their children at birth and many factors play a role such as not having a bond with the baby, or not having access to resources to care for the child.

The present research indicated that mothers are more likely to murder older children than they are a new-born or infant. Two participants had committed neonaticide while one participant had committed infanticide. All other participants had committed general filicide. While the researcher can appreciate that mothers are more likely than fathers to commit infanticide or neonaticide, the study shows that older children are at greater risk than younger children. The researcher is of the opinion that there is additional economic stress and social isolation as children get older which makes the burden experienced by the mother that much heavier. Economic stress may escalate due to increased costs related to growing children, such as progressing from breastmilk to formula, clothing, and enrolling at day-care centres. Broadly speaking, and as was observed in the current study, females tend to receive support during pregnancy and once the baby is born. However, that support tends to decrease as time goes by and the child gets older.

The afore-mentioned Italian study found that males are more likely to be murdered, however they did not report on the figure of male victims (Giacchetti, et al., 2019:69). The afore-mentioned South Africa study did not find significant differences between the rates of female and male child victims (Abrahams, et al., 2016:8-9). In the current study, male victims far outnumbered female victims and one victim's sex was unknown. The researcher was not able to find any arguments proposed for why males are more likely to be murdered by their mother than females. Considering the literature that does exist, the researcher is of the opinion that mothers are able to form a better bond with their daughters as they would with their sons as they have a same-sex connection with their daughters. The explanation here is, however, speculative and needs investigation.

### **5.6 Potential pathways to maternal filicide perpetration**

The literature review in Chapter 2 discussed notable progress within Developmental Criminology and pathways theory which confirms the significance of life trajectories and events correlated with offending and further suggests risk factors for offending such as victimisation and trauma (Belknap, 2016:296-297). Feminist criminologists have argued that reducing women's experiences to a series of risk factors that drive criminal behaviour is both essentialist and deterministic (Artz et al., 2012:217-219). The researcher believes, along with fellow South

African researchers with strong feminist views, that there is no fixed list of factors that can be said to causally create criminal behaviour (Steyn & Booyens, 2017:36). Filicide is a rare event that cannot be fully explained by a single construct (Milia & Noonan, 2022:1). 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, as identified in the literature review, feminist pathway theorists have identified commonalities across female offenders' lives that place them at an increased risk of criminality (Artz et al., 2012:217-219). The present research study mirrored similar commonalities in the lives of filicide mothers, although it is evident from the interviews that each participant's story is unique. 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 the researcher to the identification of potential pathways to maternal filicide. The following pathways were identified:

#### *Pathway 1: Adversities in youth*

The premise of life-course theory is that adversities in childhood correlate with adult criminal behaviour, where adversities are negative experiences (Sampson & Laub, 2004:4-5). Frederick et al. (2022:3-14) accounted for pervasive adverse childhood experiences among filicide perpetrators including abuse, neglect, and familial problems. The experience of multiple adversities tends to be present in all cases of filicide (Dawson, 2015:163). There are chains of risk linking adverse experiences in childhood to tragic outcomes in adult life. Almost all the female participants in the present study had recalled negative experiences, or adversities, while growing up. The adversities included being the victim of child rape, gang rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, crime, and one participant had discovered the body of an uncle who committed suicide by hanging.

Further, the researcher noted the absence of psychological intervention or counselling for the experience of adversities in the present study. Almost all the participants had experienced adversities in youth, whilst almost none of the participants sought counselling for the adversities they experienced, neither in youth nor in adulthood. A body of criminological work exists arguing the impact that unresolved childhood trauma has on adult criminal behaviour (Halsey, 2018:17). Female rage and violence may be rooted in childhood trauma consisting of abuse and victimisation (Flemke, 2009:136). Long-term reflections of unresolved childhood traumatisation manifest in committing especially violent crimes in adulthood among females (Altintas & Bilici, 2018:105-106). 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 considered overt methods of murder as they are direct means of violence as opposed to covert methods which may include poisoning.

*Pathway 2: Absence of and inadequate support system*

Isolation and lack of support is considered a recurring or consistent theme in filicidal pathways (Frederick et al., 2022:3-4) which was similarly found in the present study. The social situation of filicide mothers is usually characterised by poverty, social isolation, and a lack of effective support services (Davies, 2022:11). In the present study, almost all the participants indicated that they did not have a support system and the participants who did indicate having a support system were not comfortable confiding in the individuals that made up their 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., 2012:220). Without a capable support system, the participants were not able to share their experiences with others nor obtain an outsider perspective regarding their situation or circumstances. In addition to the absence of a support system, most participants did not indicate any coping strategies which means that the probability of fixating on their situations is increased while they are in the context of having limited perceptions of legitimate problem-solving opportunities. Furthermore, some of the participants expressed that they did not know about organisations or social services available to them which could assist in their situations. The absence of a support system is exacerbated by the absence of coping mechanisms and the lack of knowledge.

*Pathway 3: Recent conflict in relationship*

Intimate partner violence has been presented in literature since the inception of feminist pathways theorising. “Battered women” is how Daly (1992:27-28) chose to categorise women who engage in crime resulting from being involved with a violent partner. Intimate partner violence has been noted in filicidal studies as well, including that of Frederick et al. (2022:3-4) and Razali et al. (2019:155). 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. 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.

#### *Pathway 4: Strain*

Everyday stressors have been identified as motives for criminality and child homicide (Malope, 2014:24-25). Individuals may feel overwhelmed with their circumstances and opt to behave criminally to address the strain or stress they are feeling. The strain women experience influences the way they perceive themselves and the perceptions of strategies and solutions available to them (Artz et al., 2012:226-229). 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. Most of the strain the participants felt came from financial stress and the responsibility of looking after others, especially their children.

Importantly, the features of the pathways seem to be inter-related, which means that each participant experienced a unique blend of circumstances that converged to create conditions which were, for that particular woman and mother, criminogenic (Artz, et al., 2012:218-226). The present study shows how filicidal incidents are shaped by the particular social position mothers find themselves in, and their social position is an outcome of a life-course trajectory.

### **5.7 Lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide**

While the present study identified four potential pathways to maternal filicide perpetration, the aim of the study was to develop an all-encompassing theoretical pathway to explain the occurrence of maternal filicide. The four pathways identified relate specifically to the eight participants who were interviewed in the context of the study and proved to be an important steppingstone in the development of the *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model. In addition to the four pathways, extensive literature on the topics of filicide and female criminality were consulted to further inform the *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model. Developments within theoretical underpinnings on feminist pathway theory were considered as well. Bearing in mind that there is no fixed list of factors that can be said to causally create criminal behaviour, the researcher identified a relationship between a primary stressor and secondary stressors that may increase the likelihood of maternal filicide occurring.

Unresolved trauma, which stems from the experience of adversities that individuals do not seek counselling or therapy for, forms the basis of the *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model as the primary stressor for three reasons. Firstly, almost all the participants in the present study experienced childhood adversities that were left unresolved, which was identified as *Pathway 1*. The experience of adversities in the context of female criminality as well as filicide perpetration has been documented in literature (Frederick, et al., 2022:4) and

the experience of multiple adversities tends to be present in all cases of filicide (Dawson, 2015:163). Secondly, there is a body of Criminological work that proposes a causal relationship between unresolved trauma and adult criminality (Halsey, 2018:17). The violent actions of women in adulthood may be rooted in their own childhood victimisation. Thirdly, childhood adversities have been accounted for in pathways theory (Nurius, Green, Logan-Greene & Borja, 2015:144). Frederick et al. (2022:2) argue that childhood adversities are primary stressors which interact with further adversities and lead to later-life outcomes.

The *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model encapsulates the three above-mentioned components. Unresolved trauma, as the primary stressor, interacts with secondary stressors which could potentially lead to maternal filicide. The emphasis is not on childhood adversities, but rather on the unresolved nature of such adversities. Secondary stressors, in the context of the *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model, are considered potential precursors of maternal filicide which have been accounted for in literature, some of which materialised in the present study (Frederick, et al., 2022:12-13). The secondary stressors include lack of knowledge regarding social services available to them, absence of or inadequate support systems, hostile interpersonal relationships, strain or severe burdens, and the absence of coping mechanisms. Women experience a unique blend of circumstances that interact and create conditions that are criminogenic for the particular women experiencing them (Artz, et al., 2012:218-226). The secondary stressors are inter-related, and women may experience multiple stressors as they are not mutually exclusive. The researcher developed the following diagram to visually summarise the *lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide* model:

**Diagram 2: Lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide diagram**



*Source: Developed by researcher*

### Unresolved trauma

Trauma is defined in literature as emotionally painful, shocking, or distressful experiences which leads to lasting mental and/or physical effects (Dar & Hussain, 2014:1). The present inquiry found that almost all participants had experienced some sort of trauma from childhood or adolescence which they did not seek counselling or therapy for, thus rendering the trauma unresolved. The researcher was not able to find literature that intertwined the concept of unresolved trauma and filicide. On one end of the spectrum, existing literature focuses on events within the immediate period leading up to the filicide incident as opposed to delving into the perpetrator's early life (*cf.* Malope, 2014). On the other end, authors have reported a significant amount of childhood adversities in the lives of filicide perpetrators (*cf.* Frederick et al., 2022). Trauma includes a wide variety of experiences such as losing a loved one, abuse in all its forms, divorce, rape, being a victim of crime, and illness.

Traumatic events are broad in scope and vary in intensity (Maschi, Bear, Morrissey & Moreno, 2012:1). As such, trauma is an individualised and subjective experience. Unfortunately, there

is a global stigma associated with mental health matters. As such many individuals do not seek professional therapy or counselling for two main reasons. Firstly, they may feel unaffected by their experience and believe that they do not require professional help, or secondly, many people who know they have been affected by their experience feel they are capable of dealing with it on their own. Trauma comprises both psychological and physiological changes to the body occurring at different stages of a person's life span. Left unattended, trauma has the ability to be the root cause of major long-term consequences (Dye, 2018:1). Therefore, it is imperative for individuals affected by trauma to seek professional help and work together with clinicians to circumvent the symptoms of trauma.

Adults who experience adverse childhood experiences are seven times more likely to be involved in interpersonal violence, either as the perpetrator or victim (Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children, 2020:9, 17). Violence is passed down from one generation to another as children who are abused are more likely to abuse others as adults (Widom & Wilson, 2014:36). It is proposed here that the intergenerational violence is a result of a lack of psychological assistance. Adverse childhood experiences turn into unresolved trauma in adulthood as the experiences are not thoroughly addressed during childhood. While the unresolved trauma is not at the forefront of one's conscious thoughts in everyday decision-making, unresolved trauma plays a role in the development of one's personality, including coping mechanisms and ideologies (Dar & Hussain, 2014:3).

It should be made clear that while trauma is often related in literature to psychiatric disorders and mental illnesses (Dar & Hussain, 2014:3), the proposed pathways theory does not assume that women who commit maternal filicide are suffering from such disorder or illness. In turn, the researcher is of the belief, knowing that the experience of trauma is widespread in modern society, that *unresolved trauma* is one of the conditions that propel individuals towards filicidal behaviour.

#### Lack of knowledge and/or perceived support system

During the inquiry, the majority of participants communicated a feeling of isolation – not having someone they could speak to or confide in. Some of the participants had the feeling in the immediate time frame before the incident took place, while others had indicated the feeling as a recurring theme throughout their life-course. It is important to realise that the experience is subjective and personal. Although one may see that there is some sort of support system, such as friends or family or the family of a significant other, the individual feels that they cannot share too personally, or information that is too relevant to the current situation they find themselves in. Although at the time of the interview, some participants indicated they would

speak to their mothers if they could redo the past; at the time of the incident the participants felt that the relationship would take too much strain if they had to divulge their experiences, or the relationship was not at a healthy enough point to share.

Coupled with a lack of a perceived support system or the presence of an inadequate support system, is the lack of knowledge regarding social services available to them which speaks to the inability to make informed decisions regarding one's circumstances. An overwhelming number of individuals did not know they could access psychologists in the public sector and were under the impression there are high costs involved. There are also instances where the women were not aware of organisations that could assist in their circumstances. As much as there is a social stigma regarding mental health matters, there are false beliefs about how systems work and who may benefit from them. Lack of knowledge includes misinformation. The argument of having numerous individuals facing similar circumstances but not turning to the same 'solution' is often a critique faced by many Criminological theories and Hirshi, with his social bond theory, was one of the first authors to focus on why individuals do not engage in crime, as opposed to why people commit crime (Hirschi, 1969:57-58). To combat the argument, provision is made for a *lack of knowledge* pertaining to social support structures provided for by Government and which can also be found in the private sector. Social support structures include, but are not limited to, organisations that assist with domestic violence issues, social grants that assist with caring for children, counselling therapy for previous or current trauma along with emotional support (for example therapy and support provided by LifeLine or the South African Depression and Anxiety Group), and the availability of termination of pregnancy clinics.

It should be noted that either a lack of knowledge or a perceived support system is conducive to filicidal behaviour, but that most participants in the study presented with both factors. The experience of both a lack of knowledge and perceived support system has the potential to leave women feeling extremely despondent or completely lost.

#### Hostile interpersonal relationship

A hostile relationship is one where there is a heightened experience of stress and aggression while in the presence of the individual, or when there is contact with the individual for example telephonically. Individuals tend to argue over minor and major issues. Hostile relationships are not limited to life partners (such as a husband or boyfriend), and may include parents, children, siblings, or friends (Berkout, Tinsley & Flynn, 2019:35-36). The hostile relationship influences the individual's perception regarding a) The perceived relationship with their children, b) The value of their children's lives, and c) The diminished goodness of their children's lives without

the parent figure present. In essence, the hostile relationship enables the individual to view the relationship with their children as a negative one; or to view the children's lives as unnecessary in an attempt to better the hostile relationship; or in the event of taking their own lives they are unwilling for their children to continue life without them as that life would not be fulfilled.

### Severe burden

For the purpose of the lifeways trajectory theoretical framework, severe burden is defined as heavy stressors that individuals need to face almost every day, and that become a regular experience for the individuals. 'Severe burden' is similar to 'stress', though the term 'burden' emphasises that the individuals carry the weight with them, and that it is an overwhelming load. 'Stress' is a regular occurrence in modern society (Fawzy & Hamed, 2017:193), whereas 'burden' extends past that point. Much like stress, severe burdens exceed an individual's ability to cope, and it may affect their physical and emotional wellbeing. Examples of severe burdens may include, but are not limited to, financial difficulties, disease strains, unmet basic needs, a lack of resources, and suicidal or intrusive thoughts (Epel, Crosswell, Mayer, Prather, Slavich, Puterman & Mendes, 2018:147-148). A severe burden may also include the build-up of an experience of multiple less-significant burdens – such as the experience of a death of a parent coupled with unmet basic needs and a lack of resources.

The severe burden is described as an overwhelming desire to escape, which may be achieved by a) murdering the children who are perceived as a source of the burden, or whose absence may make the burden easier to carry, or b) committing suicide after murdering the children to escape the burden in totality. Filicidal behaviour may present after unsuccessful attempts to alleviate the severe burden, such as not meeting the requirements for a social grant or not being able to find an appropriate organisation for assistance.

It should be noted, in *Pathways trajectory to maternal filicide*, that while some individuals may experience both a *hostile relationship* and *severe burden*, only one factor is a necessary component to lead to filicidal behaviour.

### Absence of coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are defined as behavioural or cognitive efforts to reduce, tolerate, or overcome severe burdens or everyday stressors (Baquatayan, 2015:479-481). Coping mechanisms can be grouped into two categories: a) healthy coping mechanisms such as gardening, and b) unhealthy coping mechanisms such as the use of illicit substances. While either category of coping mechanisms may be present prior to the event, there appears to be

a lack of any kind of coping mechanism in the immediate period leading up to the criminal act. The understanding is that if there is a coping mechanism, either healthy or unhealthy, strain created by one's circumstances is lifted and the full weight of it is not felt. Once the coping mechanisms are withdrawn, individuals feel the full weight of their circumstances which then propels the individuals towards filicidal behaviour. Coping mechanisms act as a buffer from committing the act, the absence of which extenuates the circumstances within which the individuals find themselves.

The broad nature of the model is based on the belief that there is no fixed list of criteria that can be said to causally create criminal behaviour (Steyn & Booyens, 2017:36). Various pathways identified in the present study as well as in literature have been incorporated in the model. The model explains the occurrence of maternal filicide and provides leeway for the unique contexts that contribute to maternal filicide. Although there are similarities in the lived experiences of filicide women, each story is unique. Participants in the current study did not express factors that have been reported in literature to relate to criminal behaviour, such as substance or alcohol abuse. Furthermore, the study did not find specific elements that have been reported in South African studies, including witchcraft, muti murders, and the use of traditional healers or '*sangomas*' (cf. Malope, 2014). African based studies have revealed unique elements which require a unique approach to understanding both female criminality and filicide in the South African context.

## 5.8 Recommendations

The current inquiry provides invaluable information to an under-researched phenomenon. The development of a theoretical pathway furthers Criminological theories and expands South African literature. The study paves the way for future research to be conducted. As such, the following recommendations are put forward:

- More studies delving into the phenomenon of maternal filicide are needed. It would be beneficial to include larger samples and cover a larger geographical area to increase the potential for generalisability. However, one should not neglect the voices of maternal filicide perpetrators in future research endeavours.
- Importantly, the role that men play in the motives of women filicide perpetrators should be investigated. The present study has shown that there is divergence between men and women filicide perpetrators in some cases of filicide, however, it has hardly ever been covered in literature.

- Research into the experience of childhood adversities of filicide perpetrators is needed. The focal point of such research should include how childhood adversities are resolved if they are resolved at all.
- As filicide has received little scholarly attention, the phenomenon should be explored in its entirety including the occurrence of paternal filicide.
- The author is of the opinion that a cross-examination of maternal and paternal filicide is needed to uncover similarities and differences between the two phenomena, to build on the foundation already provided by existing literature.
- The theoretical framework that has been put forward in the present inquiry should be tested and further documented and expanded on.
- Role-players within the community should work together to prevent filicide. Community role-players are capable of early identification of risks related to maternal filicide and can refer such mothers to available organisations. The implementation of suitable and effective intervention programmes may assist filicidal mothers before filicidal incidents occur. The cyclical process of growing literature and informing intervention programmes can be initiated by accurately reporting on the occurrence of filicide which may spark the interest of academics and researchers.
- Distribution of knowledge is vital. Effort should be made by both public and private sectors to disseminate information regarding available services and the individuals who qualify for them. Emphasis should be on educating individuals outside of the systems, and not repurposing the previous audiences.
- Rehabilitation programmes within correctional centres should be informed by current literature as filicide is a unique crime, which requires a unique approach.
- Intervention programmes should be developed to identify women who are at-risk of filicidal behaviour, in order to address the adverse experiences that occur before leading to the death of a child in order to prevent that death.

## 5.9 Conclusion

The research conducted explored maternal filicide holistically in an attempt to develop a theoretical pathway to explain the occurrence 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 youth, (2) recent conflict in relationship, (3) absence of support system, and (4) strain. The features of the pathways seem to be inter-related. The researcher proposes a theoretical pathway coined '*lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide*' which incorporates unresolved trauma, lack of

knowledge or perceived support system, hostile relationships, severe burdens, and the absence of coping mechanisms.

Women who kill their children present a profound challenge to accepted norms of motherhood and societal expectations of the maternal role (Friedman, Cavney & Resnick, 2012:585). Filicide mothers are more likely to murder older children than they are younger children. Although the methods employed to murder their children are overtly violent, filicide mothers tend to be first-time offenders. Male children are more likely to be murdered than female children which may be attributed to the bond developed between mother and child, or societal gender norms.

Further studies are required to expand knowledge on filicide and maternal filicide. Testing of the lifeways trajectory of maternal filicide put forward in the current study should be tested and expanded on. Distribution of knowledge is vital, and sectors should work together to raise awareness of available resources and who would qualify for them. Intervention programmes should be developed that identify at-risk mothers in order to prevent filicidal incidents from occurring. Rehabilitation programmes should be informed by current literature as filicide is a unique crime type that requires a unique approach.

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## Appendix A: Informed consent form

### Pathways to maternal filicide in South Africa

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**Supervisor: Professor Steyn**

#### INFORMED CONSENT

The University of Pretoria's Research Ethics Committee requires that a researcher should ensure informed consent from a participant before commencing with the research inquiry. Informed consent entails providing potential participants with information about the following aspects of the research study:

##### 1. Purpose of the study

The study aims to develop a theoretical pathway specifically related to maternal filicide.

##### 2. Procedures

I, the participant, understand that I am requested to take part in the study about maternal filicide. I understand that I am being asked to take part in personal interviews at my correctional facility in a time slot that suits me. I understand that if I choose to participate, I will be interviewed by a Criminology postgraduate student from the University of Pretoria. Should I choose to participate, I will be asked to answer questions relating to the offence specifically, but also questions regarding my personal circumstances, family background, and intimate relationships. By choosing to participate, I am willing to spend sufficient time with the researcher in order for her to gather information from me. I allow the researcher to voice record the interviews. Furthermore, I understand that one family member may be interviewed regarding the same subject nature, with my permission.

##### 3. Possible risks

I understand that should I participate, I will not be physically harmed, and it is not the intention of the researcher to hurt my feelings or cause any harm whatsoever. I understand that there is a possibility of experiencing emotional distress as a result of the sensitive nature of the topic under discussion. However, I will tell the researcher about the emotions I experience during and after data collection. While the researcher is equipped with skills to debrief me after the interview, I understand that I can request to be referred to counsellors provided for by LifeLine for further counselling.

#### **4. Benefits of participation**

I understand that there is no compensation, whether financial or material, for participating in the research inquiry. I understand that by participating, or choosing not to participate, my circumstances within the correctional facility will remain unaltered.

#### **5. Rights as a participant**

I understand that my participation in the research inquiry is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the inquiry at any time without explanation or negative consequences. In the event of me withdrawing from the inquiry, all data collected from me will be destroyed. I understand that there will be no penalty or loss of benefit should I decide not to participate. I understand that I have the right to access the data I have contributed towards the inquiry.

#### **6. Anonymity and confidentiality**

I understand that if permission is given to record the interviews, the voice recordings will be used for research purposes only and all information will be kept confidential. In the event of a translator or counsellor being consulted, they will also keep all information confidential. Collected data will be accessed by the sole researcher only. My name and surname will not be made known.

#### **7. Contact details**

I can contact the researcher, Melissa Castlemaine, if I have any questions or concerns relating to the study. The researcher's email address is [u14182930@tuks.co.za](mailto:u14182930@tuks.co.za) and her phone number is 0815580650.

#### **8. Data storage**

I understand that the research data collected will be stored for a period of 15 years at the Department of Social Work and Criminology at the University of Pretoria, as stipulated in their policy, for archiving purposes. I understand that the collected data could be used for research outputs and future research.

#### **9. Permission for participation in the research study**

I understand what the study is about, and I am participating on a voluntary basis.

---

Research participant

---

Date

## Appendix B: Interview schedule

### Pathways to maternal filicide in South Africa

#### Interview schedule

1. To begin our conversation, I would like to find out who you are by asking you for some basic background information:

<b>Age</b>	
<b>Socio-economic status before prison</b>	
<b>Level of education</b>	
<b>Marital status</b>	
<b>Type of sentence</b>	

2. Tell me about yourself, where you grew up and what your family life was like.
3. Could you explain experiences you feel are critical when looking at your past that may have led up to the act?
4. Please share your views of how/why you ended up in the correctional facility?
5. Could you elaborate on influences that you experienced at the time of the event?
6. Tell me about familial relationships you had at the time leading up to the incident and how they supported you, or if there was a lack of support?
7. Can you elaborate on personal or intimate relationships you had during the time leading up to the offence and how these might have contributed to the event?
8. Please share details on your relationship with the child's father figure and his family?
9. Do you think you received any social support in the months leading up to the offence?
10. Could you share your thoughts, feelings and experiences when the event happened? What happened that day?
11. Do you believe you had external influences acting on you at the time of the offence, and if yes, what do you think was the main influence?
12. If you could turn back time, do you think that something external could prevent you from behaving in the same way, and if yes, what external factors would they be?

## Appendix C: Research Ethics Committee approval letter



1 November 2019

Dear Ms M Castlemaine

**Project Title:** Pathways to maternal filicide in South Africa  
**Researcher:** Ms M Castlemaine  
**Supervisor:** Prof F Steyn  
**Department:** Social Work and Criminology  
**Reference number:** 14182930 (HUM012/0619)  
**Degree:** Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 31 October 2019. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maxi Schoeman'.

**Prof Maxi Schoeman**  
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate and Research Ethics  
Faculty of Humanities  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
e-mail: PGHumanities@up.ac.za

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotheo

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof MME Schoeman (Deputy Dean); Prof KL Harris; Mr A Biss; Dr L Bickland; Dr K Booyers; Dr A-M de Beer; Ms A dos Santos; Dr R Fassett; Ms KT Govinder; Andrew; Dr E Johnson; Dr W Kelleher; Mr A Mohamed; Dr C Putterill; Dr D Reesburg; Dr M Soer; Prof E Tallard; Prof V Thebe; Ms B Tsebe; Ms D Mokalasa

## Appendix D: Department of Correctional Services approval letter



### correctional services

Department:  
Correctional Services  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Private Bag X136, PRETORIA, 0001 Poyntons Building, C/O WF Nkomo and Sophie De Bruyn Street, PRETORIA  
Tel (012) 307 2770

**Ms M Castlemaine**  
1202 Storey Street  
Queenswood  
0186

Dear Ms M Castlemaine

**RE: APPLICATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES ON: "PATHWAYS TO MATERNAL FILICIDE UNCOVERED IN SOUTH AFRICAN CORRECTIONAL CENTRES"**

It is with pleasure to inform you that your request to conduct research in the Department of Correctional Services on the above topic has been approved.

Your attention is drawn to the following:

- This ethical approval is valid from **15 October 2019 to 14 October 2021**.
- The relevant Regional and Area Commissioners where the research will be conducted will be informed of your proposed research project.
- Your internal guide will be **Ms S Moodley: Acting Director Risk Profile Management, Head Office**.
- You are requested to contact her at telephone number (012) 307 2416 before the commencement of your research.
- It is your responsibility to make arrangements for your interviewing times.
- Your identity document/passport and this approval letter should be in your possession when visiting the Correctional Centre.
- You are required to use the terminology used in the White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (February 2005) and the Correctional Services Act (No.111 of 1998) e.g. "Offenders" not "Prisoners" and "Correctional Centres" not "Prisons".
- You are not allowed to use photographic or video equipment during your visits, however the audio recorder is allowed.
- You are required to submit your final report to the Department for approval by the Commissioner of Correctional Services before publication (including presentation at workshops, conferences, seminars, etc) of the report.
- Should you have any enquiries regarding this process, please contact the REC Administration for assistance at telephone number (012) 307 2770.

Thank you for your application and interest to conduct research in the Department of Correctional Services.

Yours faithfully

  
N LEBOGO  
ACTING DC: POLICY COORDINATION & RESEARCH  
DATE: 15/10/2019

## Appendix E: Transcriber's confidentiality agreement

### CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Full name and surname : GISELA RALL  
Identity number : 580204 0139 085  
Professional capacity : TRANSCRIPTIONIST  
Physical address : 29 SARAH CRESCENT, RANDHART, ALBERTON

I, the undersigned, hereby declare, acknowledge and undertake as follows:

- A. I have been contracted by the researcher, Melissa Castlemaine, in a professional capacity to fulfil the role of translator.
- B. By virtue of my role in the study, I will have access to information, including but not limited to empirical data, as well as confidential information, disclosed or communicated before or after the date of the present undertaking.
- C. I hereby undertake to keep and treat as confidential any information concerning the research participants and not to disclose such confidential information to any unauthorised person/s.
- D. I shall not make available to unauthorised person/s, except with prior approval in writing, any information that is confidential in nature.
- E. If for any reason I have in my possession any document which belongs to the researcher or research participants and which contains confidential information, to return to the researcher such document and any other documents, copies, excerpts, notes or memoranda in my possession which are associated with the confidential information.
- F. I shall not make or use copies or excerpts from any document containing confidential information or make use of notes or memoranda pertaining to such confidential information.
- G. I shall not disclose any confidential information to a third party, parties or bodies without prior permission in writing from the researcher. Such permission may be granted in general or may pertain only to specific matters, cases or information. All such information will be submitted in written format to the researcher in order to obtain permission for disclosure. The decision of the researcher with regard to information, which may or may not be disclosed to third parties, will be final.
- H. I acknowledge that breach of any of the terms of the undertaking set out herein will lead to legal action taken against me, and if found guilty, could result in a monetary penalty. This is without prejudice to any rights which the researcher may have in this regard
- I. The undertaking shall remain in force for a period of five (5) years after the termination, for any reason whatsoever, of any relationship between the researcher and myself.

Thus, signed at ALBERTON on the 11TH day of AUGUST 2022.

## Appendix F: Redactor's confidentiality agreement

### CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Full name and surname : Minette Reukes  
Identity number : 9605101450085  
Professional capacity : Lecturer, Editor  
Physical address : Besselsen street, 82, Bloemfontein

I, the undersigned, hereby declare, acknowledge and undertake as follows:

- A. I have been contracted by the researcher, Melissa Castlemaine, in a professional capacity to fulfil the role of translator.
- B. By virtue of my role in the study, I will have access to information, including but not limited to empirical data, as well as confidential information, disclosed or communicated before or after the date of the present undertaking.
- C. I hereby undertake to keep and treat as confidential any information concerning the research participants and not to disclose such confidential information to any unauthorised person/s.
- D. I shall not make available to unauthorised person/s, except with prior approval in writing, any information that is confidential in nature.
- E. If for any reason I have in my possession any document which belongs to the researcher or research participants and which contains confidential information, to return to the researcher such document and any other documents, copies, excerpts, notes or memoranda in my possession which are associated with the confidential information.
- F. I shall not make or use copies or excerpts from any document containing confidential information or make use of notes or memoranda pertaining to such confidential information.
- G. I shall not disclose any confidential information to a third party, parties or bodies without prior permission in writing from the researcher. Such permission may be granted in general or may pertain only to specific matters, cases or information. All such information will be submitted in written format to the researcher in order to obtain permission for disclosure. The decision of the researcher with regard to information, which may or may not be disclosed to third parties, will be final.
- H. I acknowledge that breach of any of the terms of the undertaking set out herein will lead to legal action taken against me, and if found guilty, could result in a monetary penalty. This is without prejudice to any rights which the researcher may have in this regard.
- I. The undertaking shall remain in force for a period of five (5) years after the termination, for any reason whatsoever, of any relationship between the researcher and myself.

Thus, signed at UFS on the 26 day of June 2022 Minette Reukes