



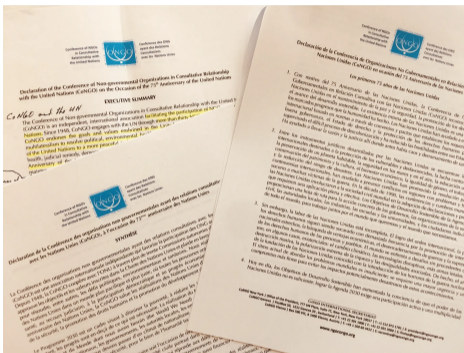
Smoothing transnational feminism:
a corpus-based analysis of the United Nations' discourse on
violence against women in English and in French

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Introduction



Declaration of the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CoNGO) on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations

Anya Victoria Delgado, Senior Programme Coordinator of the Feminist Alliance for Rights ; Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women ; and Silke Staab, Research Specialist at UN Women, discuss UN Women's report "Women's Rights in Review 25 years after Beijing"



Palace of Nations, Geneva



Smoothing processes enable a writer/speaker to make their discourse more neutral, less controversial by mitigating or not mentioning standpoints or elements that could be considered controversial, unacceptable or excessive

[aplatissement de la dimension argumentative contribuant à la neutralisation d'un discours dépourvu de toute dimension conflictuelle (Cussò et Gobin, 2008 : 8; Raus, 2017 : 95)

différents procédés de neutralisation et de dépolitisation [qui] [...] se doublent d'un lissage énonciatif qui atténue ou passe sous silence certaines positions jugées excessives (Née, Oger & Sitri, 2017 : 16)

Research questions :



How is feminist discourse altered and/or erased in UN discourse on violence against women ?



Why is it altered and/or erased ?

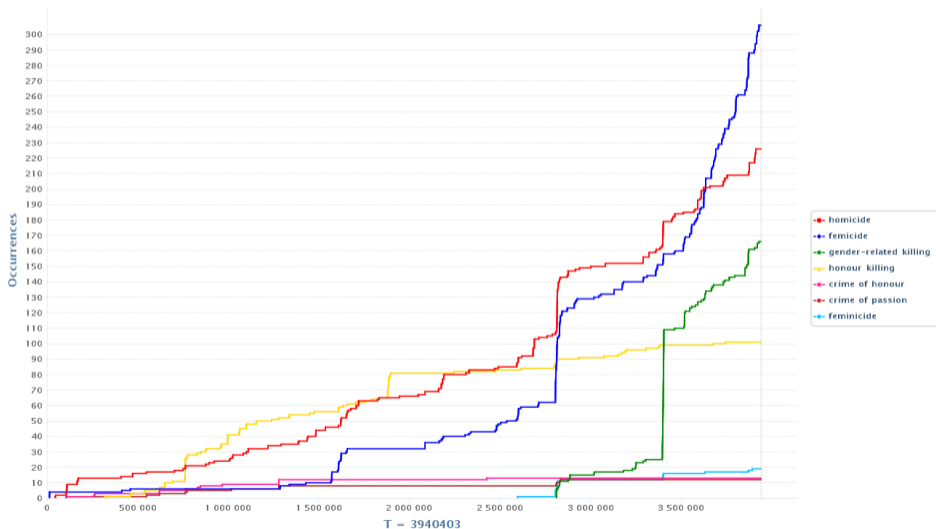


What role does translation play ?

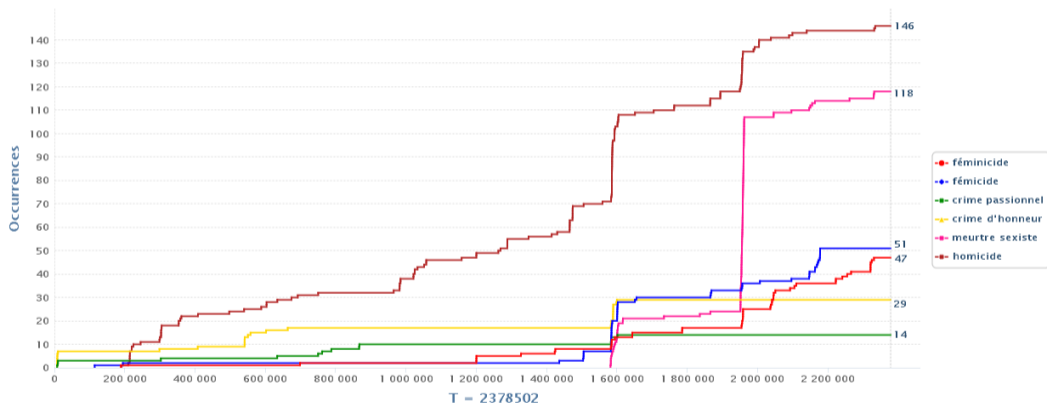
- ▶ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995 ; Wodak, 2001)
- ▶ Contextual analysis : in what context were these texts written and produced ? how did it influence the way they were written ? (*discourse-historical approach*, Wodak 2001)

- ▶ Corpus linguistics : built two computerised diachronic corpora
 1. UN corpus - 323 UN press releases and 401 reports, published 1996-2019
 2. Activist corpus - 1346 press releases by international and French feminist associations, published 1996-2023
- ▶ textometry (Salem, 1982 ; Heiden et al., 2010, Lebart & Salem, 1994 ; Anthony, 2005 ; Brunet, 2012 ; Kilgarrif, 2008 ; Heiden et al., 2010)
 - ▶ softwares enabling users to analyse large amounts of computerised textual data make it possible to identify phenomena that are invisible to the naked eye.
 - ▶ using TXM, French textometry software
 - ▶ some patterns of language use are not directly observable, because realized across thousands or millions of words of running text (Stubbs, 1994 :204)

Progression chart of *femicide* and its concurrents



Progression chart of “féminicide” and its concurrents

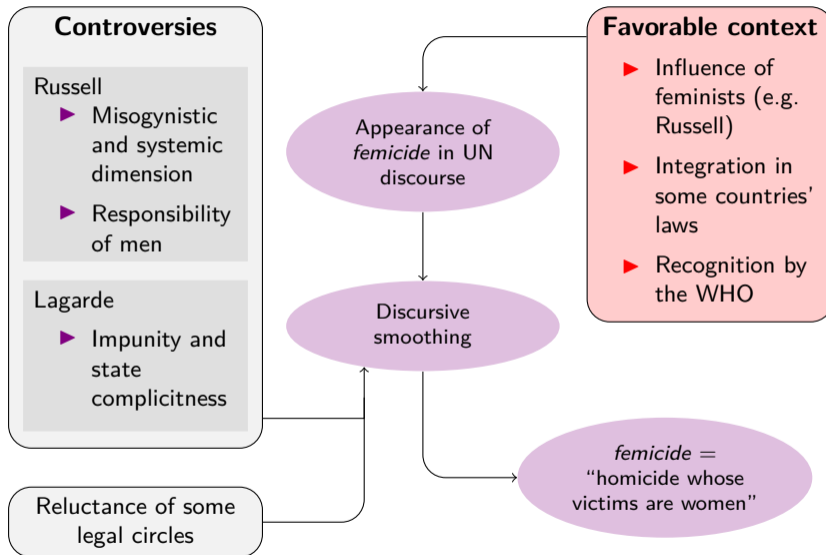


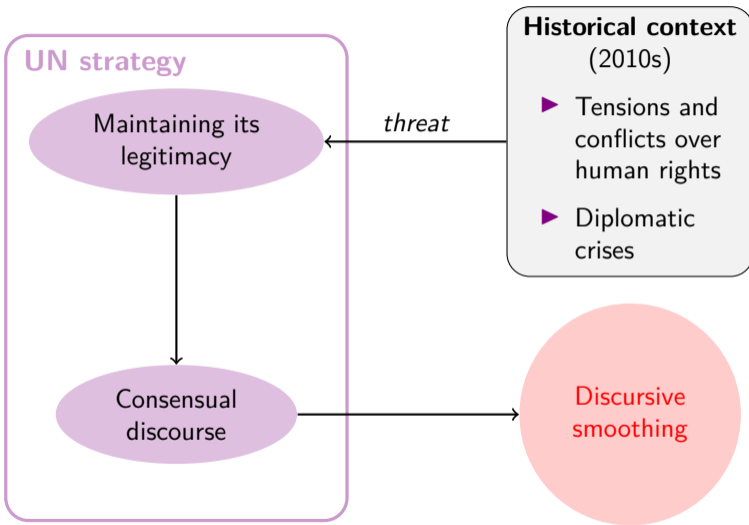
Smoothing the meaning of *femicide*

► *femicide* as a homicide whose victim is a woman

- (1) Studies have shown that in some countries between 40 and 70 per cent of female murder victims are killed by an intimate partner. South Africa is among those countries, making it one of the countries with **the highest femicide rate**. A 2009 national study showed that **homicide was declining, that there was a reduction in female homicide but that the reduction was lesser among intimate partner femicides while "rape homicides"** had proportionately increased. (UN, 2016b)
- (2) Further improve the collection of comparable data on **gender-related killings of women or femicides** by setting up at the federal level a system charged with collecting data from all jurisdictions; (b) Consider expanding the mandate of **homicide panels to homicide / femicide panels** or establishing or designating other bodies to perform such a role [...]. (UN, 2018)

- (3) L'une de ses [l'ONU/DC] grandes réalisations, utile pour aborder la question du meurtre sexiste, est la classification internationale des infractions à des fins statistiques [...] **Le féminicide y figure comme une forme d'homicide volontaire**, mais il est possible de le rattacher à des sous-catégories plus précises pour apporter des informations supplémentaires sur certaines formes de meurtre sexiste. (2015)





Smoothing and translation

Rank	English corpus	French corpus
1	woman	femme
2	violence	violence
3	gender(s)	violence(s) sexuelle(s)
4	expert	sexe

Most frequent terms in UN corpus

English

gender mainstreaming in public institutions Term

Sources: [E/ESCWA/29/12/Report](#)

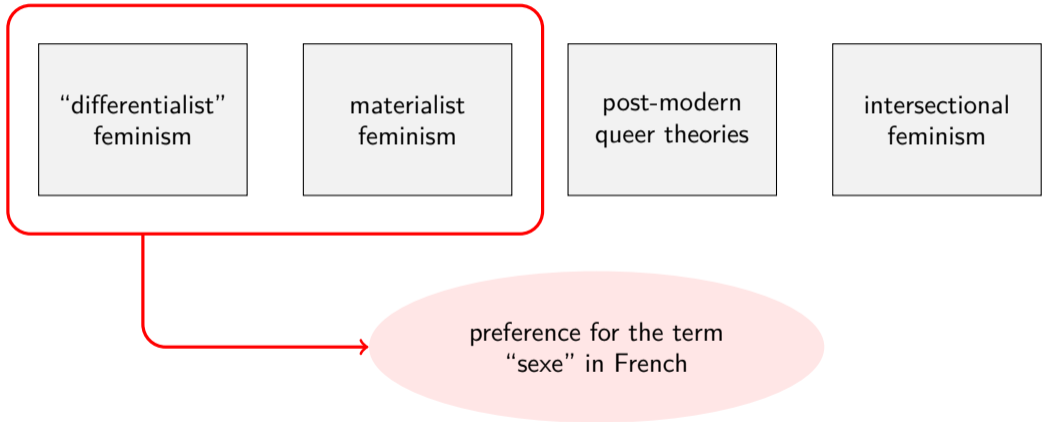
French

intégration d'une perspective sexospécifique dans les institutions publiques Term

Sources: [CEDAW/C/SR.705](#)

Screenshot from UNTERM, UN terminological database

historical predominance



Comparison with my corpus of texts by feminist associations

Compound adjective in *anti-* : depending on the head, may have a positive or negative polarity with regards to feminist values.

Polarity	Activist discourse EN	UN discourse EN
Positive	10.8%	52.9%
Negative	54.7%	4.2 %

*Distribution of polarity of the 10 most frequent anti- compound adjectives
(% on total number of such adjectives in each corpus)*

Activist

- (4) **Anti-rights** actors frame authoritative interpretations of UN treaty bodies and UN Special Procedure mandates on rights related to gender and sexuality as “creating new rights.” By propagating inaccurate readings of human rights standards, **anti-rights** actors and regressive states often aim to invalidate altogether the work of Special Procedures mandate holders (...).
- (5) Today’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* reflects the tightening grip of authoritarian forces in the United States. The attack on women’s and others’ bodily autonomy is something that global feminist movements know well from the alarming advances that **anti-gender, anti-rights** groups have made across the globe.

UN

- (6) In Asia-Pacific, public spaces in India will turn orange to promote awareness among local communities, and youth champions in Cambodia will take **anti-violence** messages online to galvanize action through social media.
- (7) Noting the links between violence and discrimination against women migrant workers and trafficking in women and girls, States also provided information on **anti-trafficking policies** and programmes.

Conclusion

Smoothing processes in UN discourse :

- ▶ "femicide" \simeq "homicide" which contrasts with its feminist origins
- ▶ changes in use of modal auxiliaries illustrate a strategy that consists in avoiding direct instructions to states
- ▶ the UN tends to avoid mentioning the actors and values opposed to feminism
- ▶ the influence of French feminism on language : "gender" \rightarrow "sex"

Smoothing processes. . .

- ▶ erase some radical, controversial aspects of feminist discourse, transforming it into a more consensual narrative.
- ▶ ... but also threaten the integrity of feminist principles on the international stage and thus may contribute to maintaining the status quo in terms of VAW and gender inequalities.

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