

## **How media frames stories on gender-based violence matters**

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We have spent the last several months conducting a literature review of media reporting on gender-based violence and gendered issues. What we have learned will form the basis of a training program for journalists and students of journalism to report on these issues more responsibly.

No matter the issue being discussed, media plays an important role in forming public opinion. How the media cover events and stories has the potential to shape and reinforce not only opinion among the general public but also how governments address events and issues.

In the coverage of gender-based violence, the public is most frequently exposed to episodic framing, which is described as the tendency to report on events and issues as though they are unconnected, deviant, and solely about individual actors and circumstances. Thematic framing, on the other hand, makes clear the connections of how events and issues are impacted by and fit into societal trends and patterns. This thematic framing is preferred and advocated for by feminist researchers and activists.

Media framing impacts social awareness and understanding positively or negatively by either increasing understanding or by minimizing the issue and reinforcing commonly held – but incorrect – points of view.

Very often, when we undertake work to eliminate gender-based violence or to increase gender equality, we encounter questions about why the work is not being done for men.

It is true that men experience violence and that some men are not seen as equal to other men. In every instance – from sexual violence to intimate partner violence to online harassment to who is seen as ‘expert’ by the media – it is women; Indigenous, Black, and racially-marginalized people; disabled people; people living in poverty; and gender- and sexually-diverse people who experience more frequent and more severe forms of violence or inequality, particularly if one’s identity intersects in multiple ways.

In every single instance, cisgender, straight, white, non-disabled men may experience some of these issues; however, they never fare as badly as women and other equity-deserving people, and the margin between cisgender, straight, white, non-disabled men and everyone else is vast.

Though the overall rates of gender-based violence appear nearly equal, the obscured fact is that the frequency, severity, consequences, and context of intimate partner violence are gender-specific with distinct victimization experiences. Women suffer the most severe and injurious forms of intimate partner violence, including being more likely to be murdered by their intimate partner.

Statistics Canada tells us that, of solved cases, 47% of women who were homicide victims in 2019 were killed by their intimate partner, and 6% of men who were homicide victims were

killed by their intimate partner. We know that of the intimate partner violence homicides between 1998 to 2017 between same-sex partners, 86% included a male victim and male offender. None of this suggests that violence perpetrated by women is not a problem; instead that regardless of the sex of the victim/survivor, the perpetrators are overwhelmingly men.

All of this drives home the point that gender-based violence is rooted in historically unequal power relations and due to a patriarchal system that results in domination-based relationships with men as those who are dominant.

Even when we move from gender-based violence to realities of gender equality in media representation, researchers find that media feature men as experts and commentators four times more frequently than they feature women, and they feature men more frequently than women when discussing gender inequality.

When we can work with the media to discuss alternatives for how issues and events are framed or whom they rely on as experts, we can address meaningful change toward responsible reporting of gender-based violence and gendered issues.