

Media needs to address wider systemic, structural issues related to intimate partner violence

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While there are various forms of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, sexual violence, and femicide, the form of gender-based violence we hear about most frequently is intimate partner violence, which may be more commonly known as domestic violence.

Intimate partner violence includes physical violence (hitting, kicking, biting, choking, etc.); emotional or psychological violence (insults, monitoring a partner's behaviours and actions, making threats, gaslighting, etc.); economic abuse (controlling a partner's access to money or credit cards, preventing a partner from earning money, stealing, etc.); and sexual violence. It is most distinctly marked by coercive control, which keeps a partner in a near-constant state of fear for their safety and the safety of their children.

When we consider the experiences of women and gender- and sexually-diverse folks who are Indigenous, Black, or racially-marginalized or who have lived experience with physical or cognitive disabilities, we see much higher rates of intimate partner violence as well as higher likelihoods of having more than one partner in their lifetime who is abusive.

Some recent statistics indicate that more than half of women with a disability have experienced intimate partner violence, with rates increasing for Indigenous women with disabilities (74%) and gender- and sexually-diverse people with disabilities (71%). Arab (44%), Black (42%), and Latinx (47%) women experience higher rates of intimate partner violence than the total of visible minority women (29%), and 61% of Indigenous women have experienced intimate partner violence. Sixty percent of trans women experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 16, including that 56% of trans women had a partner who insulted, swore, shouted, or yelled at them; 29% had a partner push, shove, shake, or pin them down; 24% were threatened with harm by a partner; and 33% were sexually assaulted or raped. Young women (18-24) are five times more likely to report that their partner sexually assaulted them, and young women are three times more likely to be physically assaulted by their intimate partner.

A common theme throughout the literature is that, regardless of the target of gender-based violence or intimate partner violence, media reports incidents as though they are individual or one-off events, rather than connected to patriarchy, colonialism, racism, misogyny, class, ableness, etc. Systemic and structural issues are ignored, and responsibility is placed on the behaviour of individuals – sometimes the perpetrators, but often the victims or survivors, particularly if the victims or survivors are engaged in what is considered “high-risk” behaviours or are experiencing poverty.

When we talk about the importance of the media's role in shaping public policy and opinion, it is important to note that dealing with the aftermath of intimate partner violence was estimated in 2009 to cost more than \$7.4 billion annually. Adjusted for inflation, that number is \$9.8 billion today. Furthermore, more than half of women who have experienced intimate partner violence said that at least one abusive act happened at or close to their workplace. Of women who experienced intimate partner violence, nearly 40% said it made it challenging to get to

work, and 8.5% indicated they had lost employment because of it, meaning intimate partner violence threatens women's ability to maintain economic independence and threatens to drive them into poverty, or further into poverty, because of that loss.

When media does not address the wider systemic and structural issues related to intimate partner violence, these economic losses are also framed as the victim or survivor's fault and there is no larger policy discussion about the costs – in healthcare, policing, or for the justice system – of dealing with intimate partner violence after women have been harmed.