

## **Properly framing femicide in news coverage will lead to prevention and better policy**

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For more than 30 years, the Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses (OAITH) has been working to ensure that the lives of those lost to femicide – the intentional murder of women and girls *because* they are women and girls – are remembered and to raise awareness about the violence experienced by women, girls, and gender- and sexually-diverse individuals at the hands of men.

In addition to monthly reporting on femicides in Ontario, OAITH conducts annual media analyses of the type of media coverage of each femicide. In developing their methodology for these analyses, they identified eight common media frames.

Media framing impacts social awareness and understanding in positive or negative ways by increasing understanding or minimizing the issue and reinforcing commonly held – but incorrect – points of view.

Four positive frames include humanizing the victim, which refers to describing and remembering the victim positively and acknowledging how she impacted people's lives; labelling the murder femicide so that communities better understand that there is a larger social issue; including a picture of the victim that does not lend itself to potential victim blaming; and contextualizing femicide as a social or political problem rooted in gender inequality and women's subordinate status.

Four negative frames include blaming the victim by suggesting her behaviour motivated the femicide or excusing or justifying the perpetrator's actions; relying on traditional voices of authority, such as law enforcement, for interviews over the voices of friends, family, or experts in/advocates against gender-based violence; portraying the incident as an isolated or seemingly random event; and failing to address any history of power and control, abuse, or violence by the perpetrator. This is particularly relevant as research suggests that a history of violence is one of the most significant risk factors for femicide.

Every year, OAITH finds that the negative frames are used at nearly twice the rate of the positive frames.

The most prevalent positive frames used by the media from 2015 through 2020 were humanizing the victim and providing a picture of the victim. This is good news; however, the negative frames are, overall, far more prevalent, including: making it seem like a random or one-off event tied to the behaviour of specific individuals, rather than in the context of a larger social problem; relying on the traditional voice of authority, rather than interviewing family, friends, and experts; and – overwhelmingly – not discussing a perpetrator's history of violence.

The least commonly used frames were labelling the murder a femicide, framing the murder as a gendered social problem, and victim blaming. Failure to label these murders as femicides or as a gendered social problem obscures the nature of these crimes. When we ignore that this is a

gendered issue, we limit the public's ability to fully understand the issue and advocate for better public policy. Victim blaming is never acceptable and demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of coercive control.

The annual media analyses from OAITH tells us that media are not currently reporting in a way that activists, experts, service providers, and victims/survivors feel is responsible in addressing the issue of femicide as the broader societal issue it is. Data from Statistics Canada make it abundantly clear that femicide is a gender issue. It is the result of patriarchy and misogyny, and the aftermath costs billions of dollars each year in healthcare, mental health services, emergency shelters, and justice system resources.

When the media begins to frame femicide in the appropriate and necessary context, it will provide the general public with a better understanding of the issues, and it will help to inform public opinion and lead to better public policy and prevention methods.