

Reframing media coverage of gender-based violence

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For the last eight months, readers of the Niagara Dailies have seen a regular column from Gillian's Place about various aspects of responsible media reporting of gender-based violence (GBV) and gendered issues, a project funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada.

We are grateful to the Niagara Dailies for providing us with the opportunity to write these columns to disseminate the findings of our report that resulted from a months-long literature review and what we learned through interviews with journalists and various community stakeholders. While we were concerned that the journalists with whom we spoke might misinterpret our intent and be defensive about how they do their jobs, our enquiries were welcomed, and we learned that journalists and professors of journalism also feel the work we are doing is valuable, necessary, and would assist them in their roles.

Our project will culminate in a training program for journalists and students of journalism that will also include a guide for journalists and a documentary.

Through the training program, we aim to promote gender equality and diversity in news media content; enhance news media capacity to appropriately and responsibly address GBV; and increase the representation of women and gender-diverse people as experts and leaders in news media.

Journalism is among the most powerful tools for social justice, particularly in the global fight against GBV. Journalists have the power to amplify the voices of women, girls, and gender-diverse people; to shed light on the forms of violence that target them; and to help communities worldwide address the harmful social norms that underpin gender inequality and GBV.

Several reports and studies have uncovered a substantial bias toward men's perspectives in newsgathering and coverage. This bias operates against a backdrop of women's political underrepresentation and the unique socio-economic, health, and psychological challenges women face globally.

The absence of women's perspectives in news coverage means that women have limited influence over the framing of issues in the news and, consequently, little influence over policy decisions. As a result, women are at an even greater risk of being further marginalized.

The work we have been doing for the last several months has furthered our knowledge of the existing issues around reporting women's issues in traditional and social media, particularly regarding GBV. Recent years have seen a notable surge in news media coverage of GBV, from high-profile cases involving public figures to frequent media releases from police regarding unsolved incidents of sexual assault and, all too often, femicide. While increased media attention has driven a growing public dialogue on this issue, the nature of media reporting on the subject has unfortunately often been problematic in several regards, including

sensationalism, inaccurate and inappropriate vocabulary, victim-blaming language, coverage that is not representative of diverse populations, and a failure to contextualize gender-based violence as a broader societal issue rather than a string of isolated incidents.

In response to this surge in coverage and the often problematic nature and focus of these articles, our program is focused on developing resources to promote more accurate and responsible reporting. Through education, it is hoped that the way the media covers these events can begin to be reframed.

Our program will address that women and gender-diverse people are currently underrepresented in news media and that GBV is often underreported or poorly reported in news media.

Media's role in our communities is crucial in forming public opinion and influencing public policy. Accurate and sensitive media coverage can help survivors, at-risk individuals, and their communities find available resources and services that can provide help. It can also help spotlight and address underlying harmful social and gender norms and practices that enable and cause GBV.