

Reporting Domestic Violence¹

Guidelines for Journalists and Media Content Producers²

communicate the message - don't dramatise it
domestic violence is not a family tragedy - it is a social problem

The media is the lens through which the general public views domestic violence and it often distort **domestic violence**. Australian studies found that “**media** reporting of the most salacious aspects of **violence** against women provides the public with a perspective that is provocative but not representative,” (**Media** Representations of **Violence** Against Women and Their Children) published by Our Watch.

In general, the media treats women and men differently. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2015 found that, in Malta, the overall presence of women in the news was 16%. However when women do appear in the news, everyday sexism prevails; women are identified around variables such as age and marital status and they are more likely to be described as victims (Murphy 2015).

Research shows that the media tends not to reflect the prevalence and severity of family violence and can unintentionally perpetuate commonly held but untrue beliefs about domestic violence. Yet statistics show that family violence is one of the most significant social issues in terms of number of people affected, long-term life effects and cost to the country.

¹ This resource has been developed to assist journalists, programme makers and citizen journalists to report this topic more realistically. It has been drafted by Prof Brenda Murphy and Dr Lara Dimitrijevic on behalf of the Media Policy Guidelines Working Group.

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² This document is informed by: *Reporting Domestic Family Violence - Guidelines for Journalists*

<http://www.areyouok.org.nz/assets/AreYouOK/Media/Guidelines-for-Reporters.pdf>

and on *Our Watch*

https://www.ourwatch.org.au/MediaLibraries/OurWatch/Images/ourwatch_reporting_on_sexual_violence_aa_v1.pdf

The media has a responsibility to report this issue accurately. News stories need to inform about the true nature of family violence, 1) how many people are affected and in what way, and 2) what we can do about it.

These guidelines are for *all* content producers for *all* formats – broadcast, print and digital media – and will be web-based with additional resources for easy use.

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(national, gender, ethnic etc.), in and through consumption and performances of consumption and spaces of consumption. She can be contacted at brenda.murphy@um.edu.mt

What IS Domestic Violence?

'Domestic violence' are all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim (Istanbul Convention).

Chapter 481 of the Laws of Malta, further define who are the members within a domestic unit. These are to include:

- (i) persons who are married or formerly married to each other;
- (ii) persons living in the same household as the offender or who had lived with the offender within a period of one year preceding the offence;
- (iii) persons whose marriage has been dissolved or declared null;
- (iv) parents and their children;
- (v) other adults sharing the same household;
- (vi) persons who are, or have been, formally or informally engaged with a view to get married;
- (vii) persons who are related to each other either by consanguinity or affinity up to the third degree inclusively;
- (viii) persons having or having had a child in common;
- (ix) the child conceived but yet unborn of any one of the persons mentioned in paragraphs (i) to (viii), both inclusive

Facts and Figures

According to the Crime Annual Review 2016³, reports on domestic violence continue to increase. The majority of the reports and include stalking, slight bodily harm, grievous bodily harm and psychological violence.

Malta has signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) that is currently being implemented into local legislation [This is subject to change since at present parliament has just gone through the first reading].

Malta is no different to the other countries when dealing with matters related to domestic violence and in fact research has indicated that the large part of the victims of domestic violence are women. The FRA 2014 report shows that:-

³ http://www.crimemalta.com/documents/CrimeMalta_Annual_Report_SF_2016.pdf as accessed on the 23rd October 2017

- 1 in 3 women in Europe experience physical and /or sexual violence by current or former partners.
- 15% of women in Malta over the age of 15 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their current or former partner

The most extreme form of violence against women and domestic violence is femicide and in the past 10 years, 15 women have been killed by their current or former partner or family member.

International Research

Poor reporting of domestic/family violence has been the subject of a number of international studies. Below find some useful points:

- more in depth reporting for non-domestic violence murders measured by number of articles, word count, column inches and front page status
- domestic violence murders were rarely called domestic murders
- experts were not used as sources
- violence was blamed on depression, substance abuse, stress, a troubled life or a failed marriage
- far less coverage of victims lives than victims of non-domestic murders.
- less than 22% of articles studied used the label domestic violence
- only 30% included mention of prior violence
- only 10% placed domestic violence murder in a larger context
- 48% suggested some sort of excuse (rejection, rage)
- 17% used victim-blaming language (such as quoting a relative who said the victim had a habit of getting involved with men who abused her)
- some focused on culture or class suggesting domestic violence is confined to some parts of the population
- many implied that it was surprising that the perpetrator seemed normal (well- rounded, upbeat person, clean cut very nice guy). However extensive literature shows that abusers usually function normally socially and at work and are not easily identifiable
- sources shaped the stories and domestic violence experts were seldom quoted.
- historically family violence tends to be minimized in news media - research found that stories about domestic violence incidents were:
 - shorter
 - buried in newspapers and bulletins
 - made excuses for the violence
 - treated violence as a one-off
 - reactive –stemming from Police and Courts
 - contained a myth
 - ignored the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim
 - the term 'family violence' was rarely used
 - used euphemisms such as
'Police are not seeking anyone else in connection with the incident'
OR *'there were relationship difficulties'*.
- The stories rarely included family violence experts as sources, and this impacted on the quality of report.

The Myths

Media stories about domestic violence incidents can support commonly held beliefs (myths) about domestic violence.

These are listed below. Media reports often include one or more of these.

1. An unpredictable, private tragedy -

This is not true. Domestic violence is never a one off incident. It generally takes place in different forms and over a number of years. In fact within criminal law it is deemed to be a continuous offence. The victim will almost always have suffered violence for a long time. Media reports frequently use phrases which support this myth such as: *flew off the handle; moment of rage; lost control; he snapped; it came out of the blue; we may never know what happened that caused this violence.*

We know that domestic violence is almost never a one-off incident. It is a series of tactics used to gain and keep control, it is a pattern of behaviours which increase in frequency and severity over time. Murder is the extreme end of this continuum.

We know that the most dangerous time for a victim is following separation – most murders happen at this time.

Domestic deaths are planned. The killer has commonly obtained a weapon, made threats to kill previously, knows where the victim is and when to strike.

Most sexual violence is by a family member or a person known to the victim, not a stranger.

Domestic violence is a crime, like any other murder. Domestic violence includes both physical and/or sexual violence. The link below shows the different forms of power and control that take place within domestic violence [<https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/>].

2. Caused by substance abuse, stress, poverty, failed marriage

This is not true. Many people who experience these do not hit, stalk or murder their partners or children.

It is true that substance abuse can make the violence worse, but it's not the reason for it. People use violence in the domestic setting because they believe they are entitled to use violence to get what they want.

3. The victim is to blame

This is not true. Using phrases such as *why did she stay, they had relationship issues, she had a habit of getting involved with men like that*, imply the victim is to blame or "asked for it".

People choose to use violence to control and dominate other family members. They usually don't use the same tactics on their bosses, friends and members of their community.

Victims are not to blame because they stay. They are often unable to leave due to isolation, fear, lack of funds and housing. Leaving can make the violence worse.

4. Violence and love go together

This is not true. Headlines and phrases such as:

*He loved her so much he had to take her with him He couldn't face life without her
When she left him it tipped him over the edge*

It's not normal behaviour to bash or murder someone if you love them. Jealous, threatening, intimidating behaviour is not love.

5. It's not as serious as other assaults/murders

This is not true. Studies show that domestic assaults and murders still can receive less coverage than others, with little detail about the victim and her life.

In the past 10 years in Malta, there have been 15 women killed at the hands of a current or former partner or family member.

Many victims suffer serious and life-threatening injuries. A significant number of people are affected by family violence, and violence in the home underpins many other social problems such as bullying, youth crime and suicide.

6. He was a lovely guy

It is not unusual for reporters to hear that the murderer/abuser was a model employee, that neighbours thought he was a lovely person – abusers show a different face to the world. Outside the home they are “well rounded” “upbeat” “clean cut” “very nice guy”.

This does not mean he wasn't violent and controlling at home. Can he still be a nice guy if it is now known he murdered his partner or child?

People who use domestic violence are not connected to any racial, cultural, age or socio-economic group. Reporters can expect them to have conducted themselves appropriately in the community and be liked and respected outside of the home.

Guidelines for REPORTING

Media reports can better reflect domestic/family violence in Malta: by including facts about it, using recent statistics, and using experts as sources.

SOME FACTS:

What is domestic violence? A pattern of coercive tactics – emotional, physical, sexual and economic – used to gain and maintain power and control. Abusers do not use violence because they are out of control. Domestic violence is not a response to stress or an angry outburst and is not caused by outside circumstances. It is learned behaviour.

Who are victims? Victims of domestic violence cross all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation, educational, age and religious lines.

Who are abusers? They come from all backgrounds but share some characteristics. They tend to justify their behaviour, have a heightened sense of entitlement, fail to take responsibility and present a different personality outside the home. They control their behaviour in non-domestic situations.

Why do victims stay? There are many reasons including fear (victims are most at danger in the 18 months following separation); lack of affordable housing, childcare, employment or legal protection, religious or cultural beliefs, family pressures, immigration status and the desire to keep the family together.

Tips for reporting domestic violence incidents/murders/court cases

1. identify the murder/incident as domestic violence - Name it

Always use the term 'sexual violence' (or alleged 'sexual assault', or 'rape', depending on the legal language used in your jurisdiction) where it applies.

Using terms like 'affair' or 'sex' to describe an incident of sexual violence minimises and trivialises a violent, traumatic situation, and if you use the legal terminology of your jurisdiction it will highlight that the behaviours described can constitute a crime. Plus, readers who consistently come across these terms will get a better understanding of the extent of the problem. Referring to the parties involved as the 'accused' or 'alleged perpetrator', and 'victim-complainant' likewise highlights the potentially criminal nature of the incident.

2. Safety comes first

Ensure that you report on the issue in a way that doesn't compromise the survivor's safety. This might involve leaving out details of what specifically occurred in the assault to maintain anonymity.

3. Sexual violence is never okay

The perpetrator is always the **only** person responsible for any incident of sexual violence. Never use language or contextualise the story in a way that suggests that the victim of sexual violence was to blame for what happened to her or him. Do not place undue emphasis on what the victim was wearing at the time, whether the victim used drugs or alcohol, or whether she or he was involved in prostitution - none of these factors explains the perpetrator's use of violence.

4. Sexual violence is serious, highly traumatic, and can be life-threatening

It is never appropriate to report on sexual violence in a way that sensationalises, trivialises, or makes light of it.

5. Place the story in the context of local and national statistics and recent events

- for example this was the *fifth/sixth/seventh* domestic murder this year / in the last 5 years ...
- the victim had a protection order

6. provide information about the nature of domestic violence

- domestic violence is a pattern of behaviour
- domestic violence is never an isolated incident
- domestic violence intensifies in frequency and severity over time
- the 18 months following separation is the most dangerous time for victims of domestic violence, most murders happen in this period
- physical violence is usually accompanied by psychological, emotional, financial abuse and sexual abuse of women and girls is common.

7. use experts as sources

- domestic violence experts say this is a common scenario

- perpetrators of domestic violence commonly present a charming and likeable face to the world
- if you are worried about your safety or someone else's go to the list of experts provided in this website

8. name domestic violence as a crime

- domestic violence is a crime
- it is against the law
- ask police if there was domestic violence
- ask police if the victim had a protection order
- ask police if there had been breaches of the protection order.

9. Acknowledge that this crime has both a victim and a perpetrator

Sexual violence is sometimes reported in ways that focus only on what happens to the victim (for instance, with headlines like 'Woman raped'). This can make it seem like violence is something that 'just happens' to women. Stress that someone perpetrated the violence, and that it was a crime.

10. Use sensitivity and good judgment when reporting on survivors' stories

The emotional impacts of sexual violence often include feelings of intense shame and vulnerability. Make sure you do all you can to report on sexual violence in a way that upholds the survivor's right to dignity, remembering that there might be trauma associated even with an incident that occurred many years ago.

11. Know the law

Be aware that there are certain legal parameters that outline what you can and can't report when some kind of protection order has been issued, or where there are children involved. See the end of this document for more information about this.

12. Take the emphasis away from 'stranger danger'

Most incidents of sexual violence are perpetrated by someone known to the victim. Where there is a relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, acknowledge it (if you are able to safely).

13. Sexual violence has a significant gendered dimension

Acknowledge that sexual violence is not just a one-off incident – **it occurs in a broader context in which power and resources are distributed unequally between genders, and in which women and children are far more likely to be victims of violence than men.**

14. Humanise the story with appropriate terminology

Where legally possible, and where consent has been sought, refer to the survivor of sexual violence by name. If that's not appropriate, be as specific as you can – for instance, 'woman who has been a victim of sexual violence'. The term 'survivor' is also used for people who have experienced sexual violence in the past.

15. Call on community experts for comment

Don't just rely on the police or judiciary for comment when reporting on sexual violence. Community experts on sexual violence will be able to put the issue in context.

16. SUPPORT

It is important to include information about available support options for people who have experienced sexual violence. **You should always include numbers for local support services where possible.**

17. TAGLINE

As well as the contacts for local support services, always list the following tagline at the end of the story:

If you or someone you know is impacted by sexual assault or family violence, call **insert contact list** or visit [www. insert a local website](#)
In an emergency, call 112.

RESOURCES / SOURCES

Useful contacts and resources for journalists

Kellimni	kellimni.com
Support Line	179
Police Emergency Line	112
Legal Aid	25674330
Victim Support Malta	21228333
Social work Unit Gozo	21556630
Mental Health Malta	23304313
Dar Merhba Bik (Shelter)	21440035
Dar Emmaus	21552390
SOAR Support Group (SJAF)	21808981
Women's Rights Foundation	79708615
Rainbow Support Service (LGBTIQ)	21430009
Fondazzjoni Dar il-Hena	27888211
Programm Sebh-Dar	
Qalb ta Gesu	21482504
Agenzija Appogg	
https://fsws.gov.mt/en/appogg/Pages/contact-us-appogg.aspx	
Telephone: +356 22959000 E-mail: appogg@gov.mt	

Academics

The Commission on Domestic Violence has a reference list of academics who are experts

FINAL NOTES:

Once the content in the document above is approved by the working committee, it is proposed that it exist as a downloadable pdf, AND that it be converted into web based information – on the Commission on Domestic Violence’s website. This would be a more developed space, and could include more resources etc.

See the dvonline.org site as an example of excellence.

