

# Responsible Reporting Matters

Media Guidelines for Reporting  
on Domestic Abuse  
2020



**Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic violence and abuse and providing services for women and children. Women's Aid exists to challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic violence and abuse. We work to promote healthy, non-abusive relationships.**

**Women's Aid supports all women and children affected by domestic violence and abuse. We work to help women and children be safe, to break free from the cycle of violence, and to rebuild their lives. Women's Aid has 9 local groups and one regional umbrella body covering the whole of Northern Ireland, and our wraparound services are available across Northern Ireland.**

**The South Eastern Area Domestic & Sexual Violence Partnership was established to ensure that all interested agencies, organisations and community groups in the SE Trust area work together on an inter-agency basis to address domestic and sexual violence. It strives to improve services and support for all victims of domestic & sexual violence and abuse.**

**With thanks to Tara Mills, BBC NI Presenter & Journalist, Allison Morris, Security Correspondent and Columnist with The Irish News and Kathryn Torney, former Editor and now working for the Executive Information Service for their advice in drafting this guidance. And special thanks to Professor Monica McWilliams for writing the foreword for this document.**

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## Introduction

**How the media reports on domestic violence and abuse informs how we as a society respond to it as a criminal act and to how we treat those who fall victim to it. Our response to victims of domestic violence and abuse determines how that person moves forward. A good, responsible response to domestic violence and abuse, where the survivor is believed and supported, can enable that person to move on from the abuse they have suffered. A bad response, where their suffering is minimised, or their abuser is defended can re-traumatise a survivor and obstruct their recovery.**

**Given how the media can influence and shape public opinion, it is important to ensure that they report on domestic abuse in a responsible manner. Victims and their family members can be traumatised by newspaper accounts of their experiences. It is crucial that the media do not oversimplify, sensationalise or ignore important details when reporting on domestic violence and abuse incidents. This can feed into victim blaming attitudes, exacerbate myths around domestic abuse, re-traumatise survivors and reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. This document will provide guidance for journalists about domestic abuse in Northern Ireland and support the media in accurate reporting to help the public to better understand the issues involved.**

**Individual media outlets may already have pre-existing guidance for reporting domestic**

**abuse, such as the BBC, Ofcom, IPSO and NUJ guidelines. This guidance is not meant to supersede the work of individual media organisations, but to enhance, supplement and provide a regional context for reporting on domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.**

## Foreword by Professor Monica McWilliams

**There is much needed information between the pages of this booklet. It is so appropriate and relevant to the times we are living in. It sets out the context in which domestic violence takes place in order to assist journalists to tell the full story. Since acts of domestic violence and abuse are rarely isolated incidents, a more complete picture of the nature of what has occurred needs to be presented. The examples provided here show what and what not to do if you have been given the task of reporting on domestic violence or sexual assault. Using the wrong language minimizes the seriousness of the suffering and has consequences that journalists are not always aware of. They should be after reading this booklet.**

**Presenting perpetrators as people who are driven to violence perpetuates victim blaming. Perpetrators don't suddenly snap or lose their temper and to suggest that this is 'typical' of how they behave is misleading and confusing. Such attitudes are harmful and need to stop. The causes of intimate partner violence need to be better understood and the examples given here**

**explain these in a straightforward and succinct manner. Reporting that the man was 'of good character' and 'well liked' in the community does not portray accurately his power and control. Where this happens, it highlights the media's lack of knowledge in cases of domestic violence assaults and murders. Suggesting that it was a 'one off' incident or 'out of character' fails to understand the context. It was a pattern of power and control that had gone on long before it came to be reported. Readers need to know the facts and not the fiction.**

**Abusive partners can be charming and can make people think they wouldn't harm a fly. That's how they often appear to the outside world. The media should know that it is doing a disservice in asking acquaintances, neighbours or colleagues about the perpetrator's behaviour. They won't know. If they are unaware of the abuse, they are likely to give uninformed comments and these will only feed into perceptions rather than the reality of what it is like to live in an abusive relationship. Too often we hear that the couple were volatile, but it is the perpetrator who is at fault. Equating the offender's behaviour to the non-abusive partner adds to the victim's suffering. What we write and how we write it makes a difference to people's lives. Honour the victim who is no longer around to speak the truth instead of making the perpetrator of the murder the centre of attention. Treat the crime with the seriousness it deserves. Avoid saying he looked vicious as if what he looked like was a reflection of how he was expected to behave.**

**Domestic violence perpetrators look like anyone else. Sensationalizing offenders and putting them into 'types' is unhelpful. That also applies to stories that focus on minority status so as to add more drama. Vulnerable individuals face enough barriers without adding 'spice' based on someone's minority background.**

**Asking someone to recount a life changing or traumatic episode has to be handled carefully. A service provider should not be put in the position of having to suddenly provide a victim as a case study for an interview. Where the perpetrator can easily identify the victim/survivor, safety issues have to be considered. Local domestic abuse services can be contacted in advance of a deadline if a reporter needs someone who is confident enough to share their experience. Talking about domestic abuse takes time and the reporter and the interviewee may need assistance with the process of 'telling.' There are specialists in Women's Aid who can help.**

**The gains we have made were hard fought and we have to make sure we hold to them. Salacious tag lines and sensational online outputs can divert public opinion from seeing the seriousness of the problem. 'Doing no harm' needs to become standard practice. Tackling domestic abuse is a social responsibility and journalists can positively influence how we respond to it. Let's use this booklet to call it out.**

*- Professor Monica McWilliams*

## What is Domestic Abuse?

In Northern Ireland, the government's seven-year strategy 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse' defines domestic abuse as:

**'threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member.'**<sup>1</sup>

The definition recognises that domestic abuse can encompass physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse. These types of abuse may present singularly or in combination from case to case, but they all impede a victim's quality of life and they should therefore all be viewed as equally abusive behaviours. The definition also identifies that domestic abuse can happen to anyone regardless of status. Men experience domestic abuse too and they need to be believed and supported through that journey. Stereotypical attitudes around men as victims should not feed into reporting on abuse against men as this can shame men into not

coming forward about the abuse that they suffer.

## Coercive Control

Coercive control is a term used to define a pattern of emotionally abusive, coercive, intimidating and controlling behaviour used to abuse an intimate partner<sup>2</sup>. Evan Stark identifies that 'The primary outcome of coercive control is a condition of entrapment that can be hostage-like in the harms it inflicts on dignity, liberty, autonomy and personhood as well as to physical and psychological integrity'<sup>3</sup>. Tactics associated with coercive control include forms of constraining, monitoring or regulating a partner's everyday behaviour, controlling access to money and transport, influencing how a partner can dress, social isolation, physical violence and threats of physical violence, coerced sex and stalking. These tactics can be very subtle and therefore hard to identify; however, evidence suggests that the presence of coercive control in relationships can serve as an indicator of future physical or sexual violence within these relationships<sup>4</sup>.

**The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (The Istanbul**

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<sup>1</sup> DoJ & DoH 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse: A Seven Year Strategy' [2016]

<sup>2</sup> J B Kelly and M P Johnson, 'Differentiation Among Types of Intimate Partner Violence: Research Update and Implications for Interventions' [2008] Family Court Review p476

<sup>3</sup> Stark E 'Re-Presenting Women Battering: From Battered Women Syndrome to Coercive Control' [1995] Albany Law Review p973

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p4

Convention), which the UK signed in 2012, states that parties to the Convention must protect against psychological violence through coercion in Article 33<sup>5</sup>. Thus, there is a legal obligation on the government to ensure that this behaviour is criminalised. Northern Ireland remains the only area of the UK and Ireland without legislative provisions to criminalise coercive control. In the year ending March 2018, the Crown Prosecution Service in England and Wales prosecuted 960 offences of coercive and controlling behaviour<sup>6</sup>, which serves as an indication of how these laws could help victims and survivors in NI.

## Violence Against Women and Girls

We recognise that domestic abuse can happen to anyone regardless of sex or gender identity. However, the way in which men and women experience domestic abuse is different. Women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse, with 1 in 4 women experiencing domestic abuse in her lifetime<sup>7</sup>. They experience sustained levels of domestic abuse over longer periods of time. Women

are also more likely to be killed because of domestic abuse. In 2017 Northern Ireland had the joint highest rate of femicide in Europe proportional to population<sup>8</sup>. Because of the disproportionate rate at which women experience these forms of abuse, domestic abuse is internationally recognised as a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG), also known as gender-based violence (GBV). A definition of VAWG is provided in the Istanbul Convention, which states that:

*“Violence against women” is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life<sup>9</sup>.*

VAWG is rooted in historically unequal power relations between men and women which have resulted in ‘domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is

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<sup>5</sup> Council of Europe, *The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, November 2014, ISBN 978-92-871-7990-6 art 33

<sup>6</sup> ‘What is Coercive Control?’ (Women’s Aid England) <<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/coercive-control/> accessed 1 November 2019

<sup>7</sup> ‘One in Four Girls Born Today Will Grow Up to Have an Abuse Partner’ (Women’s Aid England)

<<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/one-in-four-girls-born-today-will-grow-up-to-have-an-abusive-partner/>> accessed 1 November 2019

<sup>8</sup> Rose Blunt, ‘Femicide: The Murders Giving Europe a Wake-Up Call’ (BBC, 7 September 2019) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49586759>> accessed 1 November 2019

<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe, *The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, November 2014, ISBN 978-92-871-7990-6 art 3(a)



one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men<sup>10</sup>. Although society has improved with regard to gender equality, sexist and stereotypical views of men as dominant and women as subordinate still exist. It is important to recognise this when reporting on VAWG because these crimes do not just happen because a man has suddenly had a lapse of control. They are a culmination of sustained controlling patterns of behaviour, feelings of superiority and a belief that women are not equal to men.

**CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 identifies that VAWG is ‘a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on the basis of equality with men’<sup>11</sup>. VAWG discriminates against women, subjugates them and prohibits them from enjoying rights and freedoms in parity with men, therefore it amounts to a violation of their human rights. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that instances of domestic abuse are not minimised or trivialised.**

## Male Victims

**While police statistics show that most victims of domestic abuse are female, we know that anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse. In**

**2018/19, PSNI statistics identified men as making up 31% of victims of domestic abuse crimes. It is important to realise that, like female victims, male victims are not a homogenous group. Gay and bisexual men are more likely than heterosexual men to experience crime, including domestic and sexual violence<sup>12</sup>. It can be difficult for men to identify themselves as victims due to harmful gender stereotypes and societal perceptions of masculinity. Because of these cultural barriers to coming forward about abuse, men can find it difficult to access support services. Therefore, it is so important for media platforms to signpost to support services, as it can open avenues for male victims to access support and information about domestic abuse.**

## Marginalised Groups

**As we have previously noted, victims are not a homogenous group. It is important to remember that people with intersectional identities are impacted by domestic abuse in different ways and often face additional barriers to accessing support. For example, disabled women are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse than women without disabilities<sup>13</sup> and they are more likely to face barriers to accessing suitable refuge**

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<sup>10</sup> UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, 20 December 1993, A/RES/48/104, Preamble

<sup>11</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) *CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against women*, 1992

<sup>12</sup> Stonewall ‘*Gay and Bisexual Men’s Health Survey*’ (2013)

<sup>13</sup> Frances Ryan ‘*I am Tired and Desperate*’ – *A Disabled Victim of Domestic Violence on Her Struggle to Survive*’ *The Guardian* [19 September 2019]



**accommodation. These intersectionalities include, but are not limited to:**

- **LGBTQI+ communities**
- **BAME communities**
- **Migrant communities**
- **Persons with disabilities**
- **Rural communities**

**When reporting on domestic abuse cases, ensure that you do not use a victim's status to explain or excuse the abuse they have suffered. If it is absolutely relevant to include within the story always contact an organisation that works within the specific community for advice on how to report safely and sensitively.**



**A list of specialist services for victims of domestic abuse can be found on page 17 of this document. Organisations that support marginalised groups in NI also include:**

- **Transgender NI**
- **Rainbow, HereNI and Cara-Friend**
- **Migrant Centre NI**
- **Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network**
- **Disability ActionNI**

# DOMESTIC ABUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2019/20



The PSNI recorded 31,817 domestic abuse incidents in 2019/20. The highest since records began in 2004/05

The PSNI recorded 18,640 domestic abuse crimes. Domestic abuse crimes account for 17.5% of all recorded crimes



On average, the PSNI responded to a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes in 2018/19.

On 2018/19, 69% of domestic abuse crime victims were female, 31% were male. Of offenders, 86% were male and 12% female.



Between March and August 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown, 5 women were murdered in NI by a male partner/family member.

Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK without coercive control legislation or a violence against women strategy.



## Why Should Representation Matter to Journalists?

This is an opportunity to raise awareness around domestic violence and abuse.

**Media is massively influential in shaping social opinion. Research suggests that mass media affect shifts in social and cultural contexts, this is evidenced by the influence that media had in altering public opinion around driving under the influence of alcohol<sup>14</sup>. This is also true of social attitudes to domestic violence and abuse. Research on media reporting in America identified that between 1994 and 1995 media coverage of domestic violence increased, and in that same period male respondents who identified domestic violence and abuse as a pervasive social issue rose from 25 to 33 percent<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, media reporting on domestic violence and abuse can influence how society views domestic violence and abuse and responds to victims and survivors. Choosing to report domestic violence responsibly can have a positive impact on societal attitudes towards domestic violence and abuse because the media can legitimise it as a social issue worth caring about.**

**Gillespie et al identify that the main risk factor in domestic homicide is a history of domestic abuse, but journalistic responses often do not adequately contextualise domestic abuse<sup>16</sup>. Their research goes on to identify examples of articles that have successfully framed domestic homicide as domestic violence, they found that ‘by using this frame, journalists and, by extension, consumers, are forced to consider the role society plays in both perpetuating and preventing violence’<sup>17</sup>. By framing domestic violence and abuse as a wider social problem, and a matter of social responsibility, journalists can raise awareness around the issue of domestic abuse and positively influence how we react to it.**

**It also allows journalists to tell the full story. Rarely are acts of domestic violence and abuse isolated incidents. On average a woman living with domestic abuse will be assaulted 35 times before she contacts the police<sup>18</sup>. There is also a profound impact on children who witness domestic violence and abuse, a study in North America found that children who had witnessed violence in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and or sexually assaulted than the national average, this link is echoed across**

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<sup>14</sup> Yanovitzky and C Bennett ‘Media attention, institutional response, and health behaviour change: The case of drunk driving’ [1999] *Communication Research*

<sup>15</sup> M Flood and B Pease ‘Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women’ [2009] *Trauma Violence Abuse* p 125

<sup>16</sup> Gillespie et al ‘Framing Deadly Domestic Violence: Why the Media’s Spin Matters in Newspaper Coverage of Femicide’ [2013] *Violence Against Women*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* p17

<sup>18</sup> Howard L ‘Domestic violence: its relevance to psychiatry, *Advances in psychiatric treatment*’ [2012] *Int Rev Psychiatry*

the globe<sup>19</sup>. By failing to frame incidents of domestic violence and abuse in context, the article is only identifying part of the story, omitting the full picture of the abuse that victims and survivors are dealing with. By framing these incidents as part of a wider social issue, journalists are giving a more complete picture of the nature of what has occurred.



**If you are unsure of how to frame domestic violence as a social problem, contact someone who knows. Your local domestic abuse support services are a good place to start.**

The media plays a role in constructing gender stereotypes and therefore can play a part in their deconstruction.

**Research indicates that media has an impact on how society views gender, how gender roles are constructed and how gender stereotypes are reinforced. This is particularly true when reporting on violence and abuse, as Naylor notes ‘news stories of violence also have a powerful role in the construction of**

**gender—in everyday understandings of the roles and capabilities of men and women<sup>20</sup>. For example, the stereotypical view that men should be strong feeds into the incorrect assumption that they cannot or should not be victims of domestic abuse. But if the media makes a conscious effort to report on violence responsibly, without gender bias, it can have a profound and positive impact on how society relates to survivors of domestic abuse.**

There is an international legal precedent to improve media reporting on gender stereotypes and VAWG.

**The United Kingdom has committed itself to several international human rights documents which have created legal obligations to eliminate gender stereotyping in the media, including print media.**

**The UN Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) note in General Recommendation 19 that ‘Effective measures should be taken to ensure that the media respect and promote respect for women<sup>21</sup>. The Committee recognised in its 2018 Concluding Observations on the UK that important strides have been made to improve representations of gender by the media, but stated that the**

<sup>19</sup> *‘Behind Closed Doors: The impact of domestic violence on children’ UNICEF*  
<<https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf>>

<sup>20</sup> Naylor B *‘Reporting Violence in the British Print Media: Gendered Stories’* [2001] *Howard Journal*

<sup>21</sup> *UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against women, 1992, para 24(d)*

**UK should continue to encourage ‘the media and take further measures to eliminate negative gender stereotypes and to promote positive and diverse portrayals of gender’<sup>22</sup>.**

**The UK government signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) with the obligation to ratify the document**

**into domestic legislation. Article 17 of the Convention states that Parties should encourage ‘the media, with due respect for freedom of expression and their independence, to participate in the elaboration and implementation of policies and to set guidelines and self-regulatory standards to prevent violence against women and to enhance respect for their dignity’<sup>23</sup>**

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<sup>22</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 14 March 2019, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8

<sup>23</sup> Council of Europe, *The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, November 2014, ISBN 978-92-871-7990-6 art17

## Recurring Issues in Reporting Domestic Violence and Abuse

There are several common problems or issues that arise in reporting on domestic abuse.

### Insensitive language

Language plays a large part in how domestic abuse is framed, presented and digested by the public. Using the wrong language can minimise the seriousness of the abuse suffered by victims/survivors, present perpetrators as good people driven to violence by external factors and perpetuate victim blaming attitudes. [See table 1]

### Framed as a mental health issue rather than domestic abuse

Often a domestic homicide where there has been a murder/suicide can be framed as a mental health issue rather than a domestic abuse issue. The case of the murder of Clodagh Hawe and her three sons Liam, Niall and Ryan by Alan Hawe was framed very much as a mental health issue. He was painted as a pillar of the community who “snapped”. The reality was he was coercively controlling towards his family and thus the story should be framed within that context.

### Imagery

Use of insensitive images is a recurring issue. Always ask permission if using a family photograph. Avoid using generic images that infantilise victims such as a woman recoiling, or images that commoditise violence to sell papers or gain clicks.

### Asking the wrong people

Most abusive partners present as incredibly charming in their public lives; therefore, it is not always helpful to ask casual acquaintances, neighbours or colleague to give character assessments of abusers. They will not be aware of their abusive behaviour behind closed doors, their comments could feed into the notion that this was a one-off event rather than a pattern of abuse.

### Different media platforms require equal care

Given that so much of our news content is consumed online now, it is important to make sure that this is reported sensitively. Often an article about domestic abuse can be sensitively written and presented, but the online headline intended to get the reader to click on the story can be insensitive or poorly worded. This is more commonly known as clickbait; these types of headlines or taglines should be avoided.

Table 1

Commonly Used	Why This is Not Helpful	Use Instead
The couple had a volatile relationship.	<b>This phrase suggests that both parties were complicit in abusive behaviour leading up to the incident</b>	<b>They regularly abused their partner/They had a history of abusive behaviour towards their partner.</b>
They snapped.They lost control. Red-mist	<b>Using terms like snapped suggests that this behaviour was out of character. In reality they probably have a history of controlling and abusive behaviour.</b>	<b>They had a history of controlling behaviour.</b>
They [the perpetrator] lost control after she/he [the victim] did...	<b>This frames the event as a reaction to something the victim had said or done. A victim is not complicit in their own victimisation. Using language like this suggests they might and be feeds into victim blaming narratives.</b>	<b>They perpetrated [the crime] against___.</b>
A good colleague/father/pillar of the community going through a difficult time	<b>This excuses abuse and shifts the responsibility away from the perpetrator</b>	<b>Their public persona was very different to the daily reality of violent, controlling behaviour at home.</b>
Non-consensual sex	<b>Sex without consent is rape/sexual assault.</b>	<b>He raped her. She sexually assaulted him.</b>
Crime of passion	<b>Salacious language distracts from the focus of the article and obscures the seriousness of the crime.</b>	<b>He or she murdered her or him</b>



# An Example of What Not to Do

1

Avoid clichés like “jilted lover” that reinforce a romantic narrative. This is proven to lead to sympathy and lighter sentencing for killers.

2

Avoid speculative reasons or sensationalised “triggers” for a murder that are based on a woman’s behaviour. This is oversimplifying and misrepresenting the full context. A woman’s dignity is the highest priority

3

Consider what resources or specialist voices you need to seek out in order to cover this piece sensitively. They are out there and will enhance the quality and accuracy of your writing. This especially relates to white journalists covering deaths in BAME communities.

4

Avoid building a piece solely from defence claims in court. This presents an unbalanced and biased version of events that the dead victim is unable to verify or respond to.

5

Don’t perpetuate myths like “jealous rages” or “loss of control”. Almost all domestic violence deaths are planned by highly controlling partners or ex-partners. Dig deeper into the context and character of the relationship, the coercive control present in the relationship, and any prior engagement that the killer had with the police.

6

Be cautious of claims around “affairs”. Women are at highest risk of homicide after they have separated from an abusive partner - and abusive partners believe only they have the power to end the relationship. A killer’s claims of an “affair” may well be fictional - or his distorted perception of a woman’s new relationship and life without him. (See appendix 3 for more)

7

In the first stages of a case, quoting a neighbour who did not know the context of the relationship, is inappropriate and risks damaging the family’s bereavement as well as legal proceedings.

8

Don’t centre images of the killer, or grant too much space to his claims. Focus on the victim who has lost her life. If picturing the killer, include a behavioural description about his controlling nature.



9

Don’t leave images of the woman at the bottom of the article: centre her and honour her death. If she is a Muslim woman, use the image provided by the police. Do not trawl her personal Facebook to try and find a photo of her without her headscarf.

10

Don’t use the passive voice in regard to fatal violence. This should read “Joe Bloggs slapped and choked Sara to death”

Courtesy of illustrator, Tamara-Jade Kaz, Dignity for Dead Women<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Level Up, ‘Dignity for Dead Women: Media guidelines for reporting domestic violence deaths’ [2018]

# Recommendations for Responsible Reporting of Domestic Violence & Abuse

1

## It's domestic abuse, call it out

**It is domestic abuse, it is not a one-off incident, so avoid terms like “they snapped”, “they lost control” or “in a moment of madness”. Perpetrators of domestic abuse are always in control of their behaviour. Their behaviour is thoughtful and purposeful, and they are responsible for it.**

**Don't frame the perpetrator as a “pillar of the community” who has made a bad decision – their decision was to abuse someone and make them feel unsafe.**

**Likewise, perpetrators are people, so avoid language that makes him seem fantastical or otherworldly like “monster” or “vicious”. Abusive people look just like everybody else.**

**Domestic abuse is a prevalent problem, use this incident to comment on that. Include local domestic abuse statistics, speak to relevant domestic abuse agencies for comments, frame it as part of a wider problem that needs to be tackled.**

2

## Lead with empathy

**If the victim is still alive refer to them as a survivor. They have personhood, they are not defined by the abuse that has been done to them.**

**Ensure that no confidential information is released about a victim or survivor, particularly when they are part of an ongoing case.**

**Take time to understand a situation beyond your first judgement. Do not use pejorative language that questions how the victim or survivor's behaviour could have led to this.**

**Do not use images that are graphic or offensive. Centre the victim or survivor in images. Avoid using family photographs which include the perpetrator, this can be upsetting to survivors or to loved ones of victims. It can also frame the abuser as family orientated and add to the narrative that this was a one-off incident.**

**Avoid looking for comments from neighbours or colleagues to build a profile of the perpetrator. The likelihood is that they won't be aware of the abusive behaviour, abusers often present as extremely charming. To include these comments detracts from the focus of the article which should centre the victim/survivor.**

### 3

#### Avoid gender stereotypes

**Don't use language that frames female victims or survivors as passive to their own lives, or question why she didn't leave. Women experiencing domestic abuse are the experts of their own situation. They have managed their situation, keeping themselves and their children safe for a long time. Be respectful of this.**

**If the victim or survivor is male, do not use language that minimises the abuse that he has suffered or calls into question his gender. Men can be victims of domestic abuse too, and very often feel that they cannot come forward. Changing the narrative around male victims can create a culture of support and allow more victims to speak about the abuse they have suffered.**

### 4

#### Be respectful of intersectionality

**Minority groups face even greater barriers to support, be mindful of this when telling their story. Examples of this:**

- **A man's ethnicity does not indicate that he is more likely to be abusive.**
- **A bisexual woman's sexual orientation is not a justification for jealousy and abuse.**

**Do not use a person's status as transgender to explain abuse that they have suffered.**

**Do not use a person's intersectionality against them in order to create a salacious or dramatic story. If their intersectionality is relevant, then ensure that you include it in a responsible manner that doesn't read as an excuse for abuse. Be sure to use the correct language, for example use the term sex worker, not prostitute.**

### 5

#### Signpost

**Include the information of local domestic abuse services at the end of the article. Contact local services to ensure the information is up to date and correct.**

**Many articles which report on domestic abuse, namely after there has been an apparent murder/suicide will only signpost to a suicide intervention helpline. This again reinforces the narrative that the perpetrator snapped and did something out of character, which ignores the experience of the victim/survivor. If you want to include a suicide helpline then make sure you are also signposting to services geared towards survivors. Look after yourselves in these moments too. These stories can be very triggering, talk about anything that may have upset you, and practice self-care.**

## Be Careful with Case Studies

**Before seeking out a case study ensure that it is necessary to the article or could the same outcome be achieved without one. Asking someone to recount their trauma should not be taken lightly.**

**Link in with local domestic abuse services well in advance of your deadline. Finding someone who is confident enough to share their experience of domestic abuse is a sensitive issue that takes time.**

**Think about how you can get the information you need while remaining sensitive to the survivor. Ultimately, always ensure the safety of the interviewee, taking care to safeguard any identifying information, making sure that their identity is always protected.**



**Have a back-up plan in case you can't get a case study. Are there any specialists in area of domestic abuse you could contact for comment?**

## Helpful Contacts

### Women's Aid Federation NI

**Web:** [www.womensaidni.org](http://www.womensaidni.org)

**Tel:** 02890 249041

**Email:** [info@womensaidni.org](mailto:info@womensaidni.org)



For local Women's Aid Support  
Services visit:

[www.womensaidni.org/get-help/local-groups/](http://www.womensaidni.org/get-help/local-groups/)

### Men's Advisory Project

**Web:** [www.mapni.co.uk](http://www.mapni.co.uk)

**Tel:** 02890 241929 (Belfast), 02871 160001 (Foyle)

**Email:** [info@mapni.co.uk](mailto:info@mapni.co.uk)

### The 24hr Domestic & Sexual Abuse Helpline (managed by Nexus NI)

Freephone 0808 8021414

### Victim Support

**Web:** [www.victimsupportni.com](http://www.victimsupportni.com)

### NEXUS NI

[www.nexusni.org](http://www.nexusni.org)

**Tel:** 02890 326803

### The Rowan – Sexual Assault Referral Centre

**Web:** [www.therowan.net](http://www.therowan.net)

**Tel:** 0800 389 4424

### Lifeline

**Tel:** 0808 808 8000

### Samaritans

**Tel:** 116 123

## References

### Legislation

**Council of Europe, The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, November 2014, ISBN 978-92-871-7990-6**

**UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 20 December 1993, A/RES/48/104**

**UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against women, 1992**

**UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 14 March 2019, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8**

### Journals/Books/Other Resources

**Kelly J B and Johnson M P 'Differentiation Among Types of Intimate Partner Violence: Research Update and Implications for Interventions' [2008] Family Court Review p476**

**Stark E 'Re-Presenting Women Battering: From Battered Women Syndrome to Coercive Control' [1995] Albany Law Review p973**

**Yanovitzky I and Bennett C 'Media attention, institutional response, and health behaviour change: The case of drunk driving' [1999] Communication Research p1978**

**Flood M and Pease B 'Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women' [2009] Trauma Violence Abuse p125**

**Gillespie L K, Richards T N, Givens E M, Smith M D 'Framing Deadly Domestic Violence: Why the Media's Spin Matters in Newspaper Coverage of Femicide' [2013] Violence Against Women p222**

**Howard L 'Domestic violence: its relevance to psychiatry, Advances in psychiatric treatment' [2012] Int Rev Psychiatry p129**

**Naylor B 'Reporting Violence in the British Print Media: Gendered Stories' [2001] Howard Journal p180**

**Department of Justice and Department of Health, 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse: A Seven Year Strategy' [2016]**

**Level Up, 'Dignity For Dead Women: Media guidelines for reporting domestic violence deaths' [2018]**

**Stonewall 'Gay and Bisexual Men's Health Survey' [2013]**

**<[https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/Gay\\_and\\_Bisexual\\_Men\\_s\\_Health\\_Survey\\_\\_2013\\_.pdf](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/Gay_and_Bisexual_Men_s_Health_Survey__2013_.pdf)>**

**Frances Ryan "'I am Tired and Desperate'" – A Disabled Victim of Domestic Violence on Her Struggle to Survive' The Guardian [19 September 2019]**

**<<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/sep/19/disabled-victim-of-domestic-violence-on-her-struggle-to-survive>>**

#### Websites

**'What is Coercive Control?' (Women's Aid) <<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/coercive-control/> accessed> accessed 1 November 2019**

**'Behind Closed Doors: The impact of domestic violence on children' UNICEF  
<https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf>**

**'One in Four Girls Born Today Will Grow Up to Have an Abuse Partner' (Women's Aid England) <  
<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/one-in-four-girls-born-today-will-grow-up-to-have-an-abusive-partner/>> accessed 1 November 2019**

**Rose Blunt, 'Femicide: The Murders Giving Europe a Wake-Up Call' (BBC, 7 September 2019) <  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-49586759>> accessed 1 November 2019**