

Victorian print media coverage of violence against women

Summary report

Promoting respectful relationships and gender equality



Media coverage of violence against women offers an important contribution to public understanding of this social issue.

Newspapers are far-reaching and authoritative sources of information, and a key source of public information. The relationship between media, knowledge, public opinion and policy is complex, but there is little doubt that media coverage *matters*.

A literature review identified patterns of reporting on violence against women internationally (Politoff & Morgan 2010). The findings from the literature review guided the empirical research, which focuses on how violence against women has been represented by parts of the Victorian print media.

This report presents some of the major findings of the study. The aim is to describe, as accurately as possible, how violence against women is framed in the context of press reporting, where the strengths and weaknesses of media coverage lie, and how these might be addressed.

About this resource

This publication was commissioned by VicHealth and written by Professor Jenny Morgan and Violeta Politoff of Melbourne University. It identifies opportunities to strengthen reporting on violence against women to improve community understanding of the nature and causes of the issue.

It is intended to be a helpful resource for all media professionals, but particularly trainee journalists, their mentors and current newspaper editors.

This summary and the full technical report are available online: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/publications/freedom-from-violence

1. Violence against women: definitions and statistics

Violence against women is a human rights violation that affects women all over the world. It is prevalent, endemic and debilitating. The United Nations *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (1993) defines violence against women as:

any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

The consequences of gender-based violence are immense and long-lasting. While it is difficult to identify precisely how many women experience, or have experienced, gender-based violence, clearly this issue affects a significant number of women in Australia. Estimates drawn from the 2005 *Personal Safety Survey* conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggested that 'one in three women (33 per cent) have experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and around one in six adult women (16 per cent) have experienced actual or threatened physical violence or sexual violence by a partner since the age of 15' (VicHealth 2010: 11).

As described by VicHealth, 'intimate partner violence contributes to more ill health and premature death in Victorian women under the age of 45 than any of the other risk factors, including high blood pressure, obesity and smoking' (VicHealth 2004: 8).

Violence against women is a prevalent and ongoing problem for women and girls in Australia.

In relation to sexual assault, the *Crime and Safety, Australia* survey showed that 33,000 victims reported they had been sexually assaulted in the 12 months prior to 2002, including 28,300 female and 4800 male victims (ABS 2002). The proportion of women reporting sexual assault was somewhat higher in a dedicated survey undertaken in 1996 by face-to-face interviews (ABS 1996). As these shocking statistics reveal, violence against women is a prevalent and ongoing problem for women and girls in Australia.

2. Importance of media in primary prevention of violence against women

Attitudes, perceptions and knowledge all shape people's understandings of social problems. 'Attitudes inform the perpetration of this violence, shape victims' responses to victimisation, and influence community responses to violence against women' (VicHealth 2010: 15). Media play a key role in the communication of information about matters of public importance and therefore in the way people understand social issues such as violence against women. Understanding what causes violence against women is crucial to taking effective action to prevent it.

The underlying causes of violence against women are now well understood. These include a belief in rigid gender roles and weak support for gender equality. Research has shown that preventing violence against women is possible using strategies that address these underlying causes. Public health strategies, such as organisational development, community capacity building and cross-sector collaboration, have been effective in reducing other health problems and can be usefully applied to the prevention of violence against women (VicHealth 2007).

The causes of violence against women are embedded in the environments where people live, work and play. Strategies to prevent violence need to target these same places. Media is one of the areas for action identified in the VicHealth framework on preventing violence against women, due to the role that it plays in transmitting social norms and beliefs (VicHealth 2007: 58).

The media plays a key role in the way people understand social issues such as violence against women.

Prior research suggests that news coverage of public health issues (including violence) has an influence on public policy (Yanovitzky 2002) as well as public opinion (Palazzolo & Anthony 2011; Sotirovic 2003). For example, an empirical study in the United States found that exposure to news articles endorsing rape myths made participants far more likely to side with the defendant and dismiss the victim's claims of sexual assault (Franiuk et al. 2008: 299–300). Furthermore, problematic coverage has been found to affect levels of conviction (Marhia 2008) as well as policy-making (Yanovitzky 2002).

It is important to remember that victims who find themselves the subject of news reporting have suffered real violence and subsequently witness mediated accounts of their trauma. Adverse publicity can deeply affect the victim, their friends and family, as well as those close (or who were at some time close) to the perpetrator of violence (Soothill & Walby 1991).

3. Scope of this study

The empirical study focused on the print media representation of violence against women in Victoria, specifically on reporting from 1986, 1993–1994 and 2007–2008 in *The Age*, a Victorian-based broadsheet published by Fairfax, and the *Herald Sun/Sun*, a Victorian tabloid published by News Limited. These dates were selected because they overlap with large-scale surveys of community attitudes towards violence against women. Once the data was collected, each article was coded using a coding scheme informed by prior research in the area.

A total of 2452 articles were included in the study. Broadly, the sample included articles describing both local and overseas incidents of either violence against women or violence by women which involved:

- sexual violence
- intimate partner homicide (or attempted)
- other murder (or attempted)
- 'violence against women' (when this term, or related phrase, is used).

For an article to have been included in the sample it must have mentioned at least one of these types of violence. Therefore, the sample ranged from articles solely about these topics to those which only briefly mentioned violence against/by women. Each article was coded in a way that identifies how central the violence was to the story's main topic.

In terms of the gender of the perpetrator and victim, the following categories were included:

- violence perpetrated by men against women
- violence perpetrated by a male against another male if explicitly committed to hurt a woman (intimate partner context)
- all violence perpetrated by women.

4. Summary of findings: strengths in current reporting

Overall, the reporting of violence against women by the print media studied here was much less problematic than that included in previous, largely international, studies. In particular:

- The proportion of male- and female-perpetrated intimate partner homicide covered by the media was broadly reflective of the actual patterns of such homicides.
- Very few articles showed men and women as equally violent.
- There was very little explicit victim-blaming (only 2 per cent) and the description of victims in a negative light was rare. In the study sample, only 3 per cent of articles about male-perpetrated violence described the victim negatively.
- Although many articles subtly shifted blame away from the perpetrator, very few did so explicitly and many included counter points that reinforced the perpetrator's responsibility.
- In contrast to much of the previous research, there were few examples of 'titillating' or 'salacious' coverage. Such coverage made up only 3 per cent of the sample.

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5. Summary of findings: areas for improvement

5.1 Coverage of violence against women tends to primarily report individual incidents of violence, with little information about the social context of the problem

It is not the intention of this report to blame journalists or the media for community attitudes towards violence against women. The media industry operates under numerous constraints, and audiences come to news from different perspectives and with varied interpretive frameworks. Nevertheless, knowledge of patterns in gender-based violence reporting remains important for identifying fruitful ways forward.

Events-based articles discuss violence against women in relation to incidents of violence (particularly criminal events) and are often framed in relation to law and order. Researchers have pointed out that the tendency towards events-based coverage means violence against women is commonly represented in individualised terms, rather than through contextualised accounts (Carlyle et al. 2008; McManus & Dorfman 2005; Taylor 2009). Maxwell et al. (2000) argue that this tendency to cover individual incidents of violence against women, rather than the social factors of the crime, is problematic because it shifts the responsibility for solving the problem from society to the individual victim and abuser.

The study found that 83 per cent of articles in the sample were events-based (Table 1). Also, articles in the sample tended to be either wholly events-based or wholly thematic¹ (although a small number of thematic articles used an event as a starting point for the thematic discussion). The study also found that articles rarely used terms like 'domestic violence', 'intimate partner homicide' or 'violence against women' when reporting cases of violence against women. The inclusion of such language would be a simple way to situate individual incidents of violence within the broader concept of violence against women.

These findings suggest that there is room for more contextualised and informative coverage in cases of violence against women. It should be noted that the limitations imposed by Australian laws on contempt of court may in some circumstances restrict the ability of journalists to fully report the social context of violence against women. However, this does not affect all stories.

One way of including more contextual information is to consider incorporating thematic elements into events-based reports when possible. A study by Coleman & Thorson (2002) found that the inclusion of context, risk factors and prevention strategies in coverage of crime and violence helped 'readers learn more about the context in which crime and violence occurs, endorse prevention strategies in addition to punishment, and become more attuned to societal risk factors and causes of crime and violence' (2002: 401). These findings suggest that incorporating thematic elements, even if minor, within an events-based story could give the public a greater understanding of the realities of gender-based violence.

Table 1: Number of events-based and thematic newspaper articles in the study sample*

	Events-based			Thematic		
	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%
<i>The Age</i>	418	554	76%	129	554	23%
<i>Sun/Herald Sun</i>	1032	1185	87%	134	1185	11%
All	1450	1739	83%	263	1739	15%

* In 2 per cent of cases the article was too ambiguous to be coded as either events-based or thematic.

5.2 Few articles include information about victims' services

The media has been criticised for its tendency to fail to include information about victims' services (Carlyle et al. 2008). In this study, only 2 per cent of articles substantially or primarily about violence against women (37 out of 1739) included information about victims' services. Of these 37 articles, 23 (62 per cent) were thematic.

One recurring challenge for those working to help victims and their families is that many people do not know who to turn to when faced with gender-based violence. According to VicHealth, 'one-third of women and over one-third of men in the general community did not know where to go for outside help to support someone about domestic violence' (VicHealth 2010: 53). This issue means many women experiencing violence may not readily seek help and may feel they have nowhere to turn.

¹ Thematic articles were defined in this study as stories which describe more than 'who, what, when and where'. These articles are more in-depth, often explaining violence against women as a structural problem or offering statistics and analytical information.

There is room for more contextualised and informative coverage in cases of violence against women.

By offering telephone numbers, websites and other information when covering issues of violence against women, newsmakers could contribute greatly to raising public awareness of the services available to those experiencing violence. This would be an important step in bringing victims and support services closer. It would also help to link specific incidents of gendered violence to the broader societal issue of violence against women.

5.3 Stories about violence against women are predominantly either about stranger violence or the relationship is not specified

International studies have found that press reports often present a picture of violence against women which indicates that women's greatest risk comes from strangers rather than intimate partners (Marhia 2008; Sothill & Walby 1991). Some 75 per cent of sexual assault cases reported to the police (where the victim is female) are perpetrated by someone known to the victim (ABS 2010). However, in the current study, the analysis of the representation of relationships between victims and perpetrators in articles discussing sexual violence (perpetrated by men) found that only 41 per cent of articles cited a relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. These statistics suggest that sexual violence perpetrated against a known victim is proportionally underreported in Victorian print media when compared to actual incidents.

Fifty per cent of articles either discussed sexual violence perpetrated by a stranger (22 per cent) or did not mention any relationship (30 per cent) (Table 2). The overrepresentation of sexual violence perpetrated by strangers reinforces the belief that women are more likely to be raped by a stranger, and in doing so deters readers from understanding that sexual violence is usually perpetrated by someone known to the victim. This belief is likely to leave women feeling increased (and unwarranted) levels of fear around strange men, a false sense of security around familiar men, and a sense of doubt if reporting a rape that does not conform to the stereotype of 'real rape'². The concern is that this type of misrepresentation will limit the public's ability to understand the contexts in which violence against women actually occurs.

Sexual violence perpetrated against a known victim is proportionally underreported.

Again, there may be times when laws restrict journalists' ability to report the relationship context. In particular, a conflict occurs when the desire to name the perpetrator *and* identify the relationship means inadvertently revealing the victim's identity (which is often prohibited by legislation). However, in terms of the representation of violence against women, when faced with this choice it is preferable to identify the relationship context and leave the perpetrator unnamed.

Table 2: Number of articles discussing sexual violence in which relationship is 'Stranger'/'Not specified' (male perpetrator)*

	'Not specified'			'Stranger'			'Stranger' and/or 'Not specified'		
	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%
The Age	71	280	25%	41	280	15%	112	280	40%
Sun/Herald Sun	170	537	32%	138	537	26%	298	537	55%
All	241	817	30%	179	817	22%	410	817	50%

* There is some overlap between these statistics. Coders were able to record two types of relationships per article. Therefore some stories with multiple victims could have included both a 'not specified' and a 'stranger' relationship.

² The term 'real rape' was coined by Susan Estrich (1986, 1987) to encompass a stereotypical notion of rape – a rape perpetrated by a stranger, in which excessive violence is visibly evident, possibly involving a number of perpetrators, and where the victim and the perpetrator are socially distant.

5.4 Sexual violence in the context of intimate relationships appears to receive particularly low levels of print media coverage

Sexual violence between intimate partners does not receive significant levels of print media coverage. In Victoria, 13–19 per cent of recorded rapes are perpetrated by intimate partners or ex-intimate partners (ABS 2010). This is considerably higher than levels of press coverage would lead one to believe. Only 4 per cent of articles about sexual violence in the study sample discussed this crime in the context of an intimate relationship.

This lack of coverage reinforces the myth that strangers, not partners or loved ones, predominantly commit acts of sexual violence.

Therefore, while sexual violence in the context of intimate relationships is a relatively common problem, Table 3 shows that the reporting of sexual violence in this context is significantly underrepresented. This finding suggests that intimate partner sexual violence is a social problem that lacks visibility. This lack of coverage reinforces the myth that strangers, not partners or loved ones, predominantly commit acts of sexual violence. As previously discussed, one troubling element of this invisibility is that women in such contexts may not feel their experience constitutes 'real rape'. In the sample of 817 articles related to sexual assault, only three articles discussed the issue of sexual assault by intimate partners in any depth, thematically or otherwise.

5.5 Histories of prior violence are underrepresented in stories of intimate partner homicide

Women who kill their intimate partner, and women who are killed by their intimate partner, often share a similar history: a history of violence perpetrated against them. In NSW prior violence was noted in at least 40 per cent of cases where a man killed his female intimate partner (or former partner) (Wallace 1986). In cases where a woman killed her male intimate partner, 'as many as 70 per cent of the ... killings occurred in the context of violence by the husband on the wife' (Wallace 1986: 97; see also Easteal 1993; Hore, Gibson & Bordow 1996).

While prior violence is common in cases of intimate partner homicide, it was noted in less than 20 per cent of reports of men killing their intimate partners or former partners and in less than 40 per cent of cases where women did so. This substantially underrepresents the incidence of prior violence in cases of intimate partner homicide. For some cases, particularly those early on in legal processing, it is possible that this information had not yet been revealed or was unable to be reported for legal reasons. Nevertheless, the presentation of these homicides without the common context of prior violence is problematic.

Studies have found that violence presented as a first offence is perceived as less severe, less likely to be repeated, and affects levels of blame ascribed to the perpetrator (Harrison & Abrishami 2004; Hilton 1993; Palazzolo & Roberto 2011). For Ilsa Evans (2001) the omission of the history of violence means readers are unlikely to understand the crime as an incident of gendered violence, and will instead perceive it as a random act of violence which can further reinforce fear around stranger violence.

5.6 Sensationalism is regularly incorporated in the reporting of violence against women

Much of the research reviewed for this study showed that sensationalistic coverage of violence against women is commonplace in print media (Carter 1998; Evans 2001; Greer 2003; Kothari 2008; Soothill & Walby 1991; Sunindyo 2004; Wykes 2001). Often sensationalism incorporates elements of humour, frivolity or ridiculousness. This can come in the form of puns, rhymes, the inclusion of odd details, quotes, or 'humorous' nicknames for perpetrators. The inclusion of humorous or ridiculous elements in the reporting of violence against women is troubling, and only works against the idea that violence against women is a serious social issue.

In this study, sensationalism was regularly incorporated in the coverage of violence against women: 40 per cent of articles included an element of sensationalism. When sensationalistic elements appeared, they were most likely to occur in the headline of the story.

Table 3: Sexual violence (primary) articles in which relationship is intimate

	1986			1993–1994			2007–2008			All dates		
	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%
Male perpetrator(s)	3	90	3%	11	329	3%	9	230	4%	23	649	4%

Sensationalistic news coverage of violence against women is problematic for a number of reasons:

- It represents gender-based violence in a way that is unrepresentative of the realities of the social problem, particularly because it tends to highlight the most unusual examples of (and details around) such violence (Marhia 2008; Soothill & Walby 1991).
- Coverage that uses entertainment, humour or titillation ultimately trivialises this important human rights issue.
- Sensationalistic reporting raises the question of ethics (Kothari 2008; Soothill & Walby 1991). At what point does such coverage move from necessary information to the exploitation of the victim's experience?

5.7 Although incidences of sensationalism are high, violence against women also tends to be represented as mundane

Articles were identified as one of the following:

- substantially about violence against women
- short (primarily about violence against women but fewer than three lines in length)
- mentions (only briefly mention violence against women – less than 10 per cent of the central topic).

Articles categorised as 'short' or 'mentions' tended to treat the topic of violence against women in a way that could be understood as mundane – the topic was mentioned so briefly that the article included minimal context or information. In the sample of articles about male-perpetrated violence against women³, 59 per cent (1266) were articles in which violence against women was a relatively central topic (of which 38 per cent include elements of sensationalism), and 41 per cent contained either short or brief mentions. This means that more than 40 per cent of the articles which discussed violence against women perpetrated by men did so in a cursory manner.

Naylor (following Schlesinger et al. 1991) argues that while sensationalistic articles receive extensive coverage, 'mundane' stories are short and 'tucked away on the inside pages' (Schlesinger et al. 1991 cited in Naylor 2001: 183). This study found that violence against women was rarely on the front page. While sensationalistic elements might be commonplace, stories tend not to be placed predominantly in newspapers – in fact, only 5 per cent of articles in the sample were on page one.

These findings suggest validity in the argument that violence against women is often described in terms which could be seen as either sensationalistic or mundane. The concern is that by sensationalising stories of violence against women, particularly when focusing on the unusual or strange, the representation of gendered violence will be unrepresentative of women's lived experiences.

5.8 Police and other criminal justice personnel are over-relied upon as sources, while violence against women advocates/experts are rarely used as sources

Some individuals are considered more credible and thus more authoritative than others due to their occupation, expertise and social standing, for example. Researchers have found that this 'hierarchy of credibility' when reporting violence against women has meant that journalists rely heavily upon police and legal professionals (Bullock 2007; Chermak 1995; Meyers 1997; Mooney 2007; Naylor 2001; Ryan, Anastario & DaCunha 2006).

The present study also found that police and other criminal justice personnel tend to be the primary sources used by journalists when reporting violence against women (Table 4). Legal professionals and police were the sources most often quoted or paraphrased. Forty six per cent of articles cited legal professionals, while 34 per cent cited police. This finding suggests that the majority of stories in the sample were reports of trials or recently reported crimes.

News reports tend to echo courtroom discourse...journalists can end up reproducing injustices that occur within that context.

One outcome of this reliance upon criminal justice personnel is that news reports tend to echo courtroom discourse (Kitzinger 2004). Therefore, by using trials as an authoritative basis for reporting violence against women, journalists can end up reproducing the injustices that occur within that context (e.g. the use of prior sexual history as evidence and the victim-blaming arguments of the defence) (Kitzinger 2004; Soothill & Walby 1991; Taylor 2009; Wykes 2001).

³ Also included were articles where the gender of the perpetrator was not mentioned but where the crime discussed was one that is primarily perpetrated by men (i.e. sexual violence).

Table 4: Articles which quote or paraphrase, by source (highest to lowest)

	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%
Legal professional	617	1349	46%
Police	455	1349	34%
Perpetrator(s)	269	1349	20%
Family of victim(s) or perpetrator(s)	246	1349	18%
Victim(s)	226	1349	17%
Neighbours of victim(s) or perpetrator(s)	127	1349	9%
Political figure	91	1349	7%
Violence against women advocate/expert/social worker	82	1349	6%
Friends of victim(s) or perpetrator(s)	73	1349	5%
Psychologist/psychiatrist	69	1349	5%
Other non-government organisation spokesperson	43	1349	3%

Research also shows that reporters rarely turn to victim advocates as sources (Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997; Los & Chamard 1997; Taylor 2009). In this study only 6 per cent of articles which used sources quoted or paraphrased a violence against women advocate/expert/social worker. This low percentage is problematic, particularly when one considers the level of expertise which these workers could offer when commenting upon issues in this area. The tendency to avoid such groups as authoritative sources means that the connection to a broader social problem that could be made by advocates rarely appears.

5.9 While explicit victim-blaming is rare, it is relatively common to describe the victim as enabling or provoking the violence

Among the most recurrent findings to emerge from the literature review was that press coverage of violence against women tends to blame the victim and absolve the perpetrator (see Alat 2006; Benedict 1992; Berns 2004; Bullock & Cubert 2002; Consalvo 1998; Cuklanz 1996; Meyers 1997, 2004; Soothill & Walby 1991; Taylor 2009). Encouragingly, this study found very little evidence of victim-blaming [2 per cent].

While there was little explicit blaming, the study also looked at more subtle forms of victim-blaming, that is cases where the victim is described as provoking or enabling the violence. Some researchers have argued that while explicit victim-blaming is less prevalent than it was in the past, the sense that victims can be guilty of *enabling* the violence remains commonplace (Berns 2004). This form of victim-blaming is reinforced by the belief that it is a woman's responsibility to protect herself; therefore, if she behaves in ways that are seen as dangerous or risky, she may be perceived as being at least partially responsible for her own victimhood.

The inclusion of details such as the victim being drunk or having an affair increases readers' attributions of responsibility to the victim.

In researching these more subtle forms of victim-blaming, such as provoking/enabling, 17–24 per cent of articles included victim-blaming elements (Table 5). While the proportion of such articles is significantly lower than previous research suggests, this is an area which nevertheless requires improvement. Research by Palazzolo & Roberto (2011) found that the inclusion of details such as the victim being drunk or having an affair increases readers' attributions of responsibility to the victim.

Table 5: 'All blaming': Articles in which victim is explicitly blamed or described as 'provoking' or 'enabling' the violence (male-perpetrated)

1986			1993–1994			2007–2008			All dates		
<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	<i>N</i>	%
43	193	22%	184	763	24%	76	443	17%	303	1399	22%

6. Conclusions

This study has found Victorian press coverage to be substantially less problematic than in other countries and in comparison to international trends. In particular, the issues of blaming the victim and absolving the perpetrator appear to be far less prevalent than previous research suggests. While there are certainly areas where the coverage could be strengthened, the findings are nevertheless encouraging. Press reporting of violence against women could engage more often with informed perspectives on the issue of gendered violence, particularly when reporting individual incidents of violence against women.

Strategies need to be developed to encourage journalists to incorporate more context and analysis when reporting violence against women.

While this research found a number of strengths, when considering an issue as serious and systemic as violence against women we should always seek improvement. Many people are working towards improved coverage, among them some exceptional journalists. One need only look at the entries reviewed by the Eliminating Violence Against Women Media Awards (EVAs) to see examples of journalists working to provide insightful perspectives on this very serious social problem.

As a cornerstone of information, journalism plays a fundamental role in the public understanding of social problems. While the question of media effects is complex and multifaceted, it is clear that journalism plays a part in shaping people's knowledge of the world. News can, and often does, offer in-depth and informative coverage of issues. It is for this reason that strategies need to be developed to encourage journalists to incorporate more context and analysis when reporting violence against women. Given the importance of working together to find ways of preventing violence against women, the recommendations made in this report should be considered by media, government and those working to prevent gender-based violence.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations provide a framework for a 'violence against women in the media' strategy. They have been grouped into four key areas:

- reporting context
- multi-stakeholder collaboration
- building capacity
- research, development and innovation.

These four areas are mutually reinforcing and should be considered to function together.

The focus of the research was the content of news, so the first key area focuses specifically on reporting, and those aspects which could be strengthened. The three subsequent areas focus on strategies for achieving the recommended changes in coverage and, ultimately, improving the representation of gender-based violence.

7.1 Reporting context

Media reporting on violence against women could be enhanced in the following ways:

- Incorporate more contextual information such as statistics on the prevalence of violence against women, or comments from violence against women experts/advocates, to communicate that violence against women is a serious and systemic social problem that is preventable.
- Include information on victims' services when reporting cases of domestic violence and sexual assault.
- Mention the relationship between the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) when legally able to do so. Where the relationship is unknown, it would be useful to state this explicitly.

7.2 Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Awareness and education campaigns must be complemented by actions that address the structural conditions that perpetuate violence. Hence collective, multi-level action is likely to be the most effective way of stopping violence against women (VicHealth 2010: 19).

Violence against women is not a problem that can be effectively addressed by one group. Rather, this issue needs to be actively addressed by many sectors working together. Collaborative activity can coordinate effort, maximise reach and allow resources to be more effectively utilised.

A collaborative strategy for improving the representation of violence against women should be developed, drawing on the specific recommendations outlined here, as well as those discussed in the *Family Violence in the News: Strategic Framework*.

The strategy should include the perspectives of a broad range of stakeholders, specifically organisations in the violence against women sector, journalists, media outlets, media training providers, state government, VicHealth and others who have expertise on violence against women and the media.

In addition, stakeholders, in consultation with public relations experts, should work together to devise a number of clear and concise public messages about preventing violence against women.

7.3 Building capacity

Among the most troubling, but also solvable, issues found in the research was the lack of violence against women advocates and experts used as sources. Development in this area holds much potential. It is evident from the research that building the capacity of experts and leaders to undertake media activity will increase the likelihood that reporting will include useful information about violence against women as a significant and preventable community problem. Specific recommendations include:

- Build capacity by training, resourcing and supporting experts and leaders in the violence against women sector who are most likely to speak to the media.
- Develop a group of dedicated violence against women media spokespeople to drive the conversation rather than only responding to violence against women related issues. This group of individuals should help to develop insightful pieces about the prevention of violence against women for publication.

- Support the inclusion of victims'/survivors' voices in media reporting on violence against women by continuing to fund, for example, the Multimedia Stop Violence Against Women project run by the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service.
- Initiate consultations with the journalism industry to generate more effective strategies to improve media reporting on violence against women and encourage a collaborative approach.
- Explore education and training strategies for journalists. These include targeting university curriculums, developing short courses, and on-the-job training.
- Consolidate or develop existing resources for journalists, including specific tools and guidelines focusing on the prevention of violence against women.
- Continue to fund initiatives such as the Eliminating Violence Against Women in the Media Awards (EVAs), an event to acknowledge responsible reporting of violence against women in the media.
- Explore strategies for encouraging law enforcement officers to incorporate messages about the nature of violence against women in their conversations with media.

7.4 Research, development and innovation

Research into the strengths and weakness of media coverage should be conducted every five years to evaluate current strategies and identify further areas of work.

Alternative media strategies (non-news based) should be explored:

- Explore and develop innovative uses of new media to effect change in public knowledge of violence against women.
- Undertake a scoping study to explore the utility of a one-stop social media site for violence against women information.
- Organise high-profile media events to attract media attention, keeping in mind the needs of the media. These events should present information on the realities of violence against women and strategies to prevent it.
- Consider developing a national, state and local level social marketing campaign focused on the prevention of violence against women.

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