

Victorian print media coverage of violence against women

Fact sheet

Promoting respectful relationships and gender equality

Media coverage of violence against women plays an important role in shaping community attitudes and public understanding of this very serious health issue. Reporting on incidents is fraught with complexity for journalists, who are often faced with considerable legal and editorial barriers.

This VicHealth research project involved an international and national literature review into worldwide reporting of violence against women, as well as a detailed analysis of newspaper coverage in Victoria over a 20-year period.

The research describes how violence against women is framed in the context of press reporting, identifies the strengths and weaknesses in current reporting, and provides helpful recommendations for trainee journalists, their mentors and current editors and journalists who are writing stories on violence against women.

Strengths in current reporting

From a global perspective, the Victorian media coverage of violence against women rated well in terms of responsible and accurate reporting.

- The reporting of male vs female-perpetrated intimate partner homicide was broadly reflective of the actual patterns of such homicides.
- Very few articles showed men and women as equally violent.
- Very few articles explicitly shifted blame away from the perpetrator.
- Describing victims in a negative light was rare. Only 3 per cent of articles about male-perpetrated violence described the victim negatively.
- There were few examples of 'titillating' or 'salacious' coverage. This kind of coverage made up only 3 per cent of the sample.

Areas for improvement

- Coverage tended to focus on individual incidents of violence, without pointing to the broader social context or wider patterns of violence against women.
- Only 2 per cent of articles included information about victims' services, such as crisis and support phone numbers, whereas the inclusion of this information can be of assistance to readers.
- The articles were predominantly focused on stranger violence, or failed to mention the relationship between victim and perpetrator. In reality, the majority of violence against women is perpetrated by someone known to the victim.
- Sexual violence in intimate relationships appeared to receive particularly little coverage, despite this being a significant social issue, with up to 19 per cent of rapes in Victoria committed by partners or ex-partners.
- Reports of violence against women were often sensationalised, which can distort the seriousness of the issue; 40 per cent of reports included puns, rhymes, the inclusion of odd details, focus on humorous nicknames, and other elements that trivialised the facts.
- Articles about violence against women were unlikely to be prominent in newspaper layout. Many were published only as briefs and only 5 per cent of the sample were front-page stories.
- Police and other criminal justice personnel were over-relied upon as sources, while experts and advocates on the issue of violence against women – such as researchers and service providers – were rarely used as sources.

To read the full and summary reports of this research visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/publications/freedom-from-violence

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

PO Box 154
Carlton South, VIC 3053 Australia
T +61 3 9667 1333
F +61 3 9667 1375
vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
www.vichealth.vic.gov.au

July 2012
Publication number: P-096-V
ISBN: 978-1-921822-59-9

© Copyright Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2012

Recommendations

A wide-ranging approach needs to be undertaken at all levels to improve the quality and depth of reporting violence against women in Victorian media. The approach will involve multiple sectors and industries, from the health, emergency and crisis service sectors, to media education and training and, importantly, in newsrooms: from the journalist, to sub-editors to editors.

Pathways to improve reporting on violence against women may include the following:

- Media professionals could incorporate statistics on the prevalence of violence against women, or include comments from violence against women experts in all reports.
- Media outlets should communicate that violence against women is a serious and systemic social problem that is preventable.
- Reports should always include information on victims' services when reporting cases of domestic violence and sexual assault.
- Media professionals are encouraged to mention the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator when legally able to do so. Where the relationship is unknown, it would be useful to state this explicitly.

In addition, the following strategies could be progressed through cross-sector collaboration:

- 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 resources focusing on the prevention of violence against women.
- 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.
- Develop a collaborative strategy for improving the representation of violence against women, drawing on the specific recommendations outlined here, as well as those discussed in the *Family Violence in the News: Strategic Framework*.

This research has highlighted many opportunities to develop more responsible and accurate reporting of violence against women in the Victorian print media. The industry is well-placed to build on its current strengths and make an active contribution to the prevention and elimination of violence against women everywhere.