

SILENCING THE TRUTH: HOW NEWS MEDIA SHIELDS PERPETRATORS OF FEMICIDE

Why Failing to Name the Murderer and Mislabelling Violence Erodes Accountability and Fuels More Violence

It has been said and it is actually true that words hold a lot of power. The manner in which the media describes acts of violence, or more specifically, violence against women can shape public perception, influence legal outcomes and affect the lives of survivors in different ways. The media is meant to be an agent of change, charged with the responsibility of accurately and responsibly reporting cases of femicide, but sometimes, it fails to do so. Often, misleading language or ‘euphemisms’ are used, and perpetrators are not named.

When the perpetrators of femicide are not named, and their faces not shown, or rather there is no focus on them from the media, it unintentionally minimizes their responsibility. When a man kills his partner or wife, the lack of naming turns the story into a faceless crime, leaving the public with little to no awareness of the murder suspect or their alleged actions. This anonymity protects him and denies us the chance to understand the danger they pose. It also provides no closure and no accountability, allowing other men with similar behaviours to go unchecked, especially in cases where power dynamics in the form of patriarchy are at play. For the cases mentioned below (Rebecca Cheptegei and Gisele Pelicot), only the victims’ pictures are being circulated, with only a few and almost none of the perpetrators’ are being published. Black women, indigenous women, LGBTQ+ women and working class women often have their stories erased, their abusers left unaccountable. This creates a culture where violence against certain groups of women is not considered newsworthy, resulting to a systemic underreporting and a lack of public outcry when they are violated.

Rebecca Cheptegei, a Ugandan Olympic athlete whose boyfriend bought petrol, doused her in it and set her on fire, lost her life after fighting for it for 4 days following the attack. However, news outlets are mislabelling her murder as though she just died. Language matters. She was tortured with fire and burnt to death. This mislabelling ‘removes’ the violence that led to her death. It almost implies natural or accidental reasons, rather than intentional and calculated ones. This shift in language minimizes the crime and prevents society from confronting the reality of femicide. It results in little to no accountability by communicating that a man’s acts of violence are not serious enough to scrutinize publicly. This mislabelling is rooted in patriarchal values that prioritize male power. By framing violence against women in softer terms, the notion that men’s acts of violence should not be viewed as inherently criminal is perpetuated. It reinforces the idea that men are entitled to exert power over women every which way.

Gisele Pelicot, a woman whose husband drugged her so that 51 other men could rape her over a period of 10 years, went to seek justice in court, but *The Daily Telegraph* published an article with the headline ‘*Wife takes public revenge on the men who ‘raped her every night on her husband’s orders*’. When a woman seeks justice for the crimes committed against her by men, the use of the word “revenge” by the media trivializes the violent act. It is beyond imagination how unfortunate and irresponsible this is. “Revenge” implies justification, as if the woman did something to deserve

what happened to her, thus shifting the blame onto the victim, hardly reflecting the 21st century journalistic standards. That headline is reinforcing several pillars of rape culture. One being that sexual violence is a private act and coming forward about it publicly is a transgression, and another that any attempt to seek justice for sexual violence, is a form of violence in itself. It is as though the society is appalled by a woman daring to seek justice so much, it is portrayed as revenge. Additionally, saying the men were acting under her husband's orders, is saying these men who raped her while she was drugged, are not legally and morally responsible for their actions. Such wording blocks the root of the issue which is deep seated misogyny that drives men to hurt and kill women. This victim blaming is particularly damaging to women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are often hyper-sexualized and vilified in the public space.

Laws governing news coverage of crimes are designed to balance the public's right to information, the accused's right to fair trial and the privacy and dignity of victims. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights article 5 for example, upholds the right to dignity and protection from degrading treatment, which can limit how the media reports on violence crimes especially those involving vulnerable individuals. Article 4 of the Maputo Protocol additionally, protects women from any and all forms of violence, and this includes the way violence is reported in the media. States are required to adopt legislative measures that protect women from media practices that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, for example victim blaming. The Istanbul Convention also requires states to promote gender-sensitive policies in the media, including ethical reporting of violence against women.

As an organization, we acknowledge the importance of ethical journalism and we understand that nothing can be published by the media which implies guilt, in order to protect the presumption of innocence. However, we recommend training of journalists on gender sensitive reporting, to avoid victim blaming and to use accurate legal terminology. Governments and civil society organisations should also educate the public on how to engage with the media reports on the same, ensuring they do not encourage harmful stereotypes or overlook the root causes of femicide.

Femicide and gender based violence are global epidemics that require accurate, transparent reporting. By hiding the perpetrators and downplaying the violence, the media contributes to a culture that devalues women and their lives.