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## Media and violence against women in the Basque Country: A self-regulation case study

Ainhoa Novo-Arbona <sup>a</sup>, Simón Peña-Fernández <sup>a</sup>, Lucía Martínez-Odrizola<sup>a</sup>,  
Eva Jiménez-Martín<sup>b</sup> and Leyre Eguskiza-Sesumaga <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Biscay, Spain; <sup>b</sup>Universidad Pública de Navarra (UPNA), Navarra, Spain

### ABSTRACT

In recent decades, given the crucial role played by the news media in fighting to eradicate violence against women, several organisations and legislative initiatives have begun self-regulating. This study analyses news coverage of gender-based murders in the Basque media over the course of three years, beginning with approval of rules for self-regulation. The results show that the media actively contribute to raising visibility of violence against women as a social problem, although reduced compliance with some of the recommendations indicates difficulty in practically applying them and disparate criteria from one journalist to another.

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## Introduction

All international initiatives since the end of the 20th century that have fought to raise visibility and combat violence against women have shared the priority objective, among others, of promoting social changes through the news media (UN Women 1995; Council of Europe 2011).

In Spain, legislative initiatives approved over the past 15 years state that the news media must carry out work to prevent and raise awareness in this regard, and guarantee that their information defends human rights, freedom and dignity for the women who are victims of violence and their sons and daughters. To this end, all legal texts propose adopting self-regulation measures and protocols, largely due to the difficulty and controversy that direct regulation over news media's work causes in democratic societies (Beatriz Martínez 2012).

In this effort to self-regulate, codes of conduct are the main tool (Aznar Gómez 2005). Thus, since 1999, over forty monographic codes of conduct have been published in Spain on how to address violence against women in the news (Edo Ibañez and Belén Zurbano Berenguer 2019). In most cases, collectives and agents from civil society who are not directly linked to journalism also participated in writing these codes (José Luis González-

**CONTACT** Simón Peña-Fernández  [simon.pena@ehu.eus](mailto:simon.pena@ehu.eus)  University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Biscay, Spain

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Esteban, et al. 2011). In other cases, for example, it is the journalists themselves who carry out the work of controlling their colleagues through social networks (María Iranzo-Cabrera and Vicent Gozávez Pérez 2021).

For the Basque Country, Law 4/2005 on Equality for Women and Men also stated the need to create codes of ethics for disseminating content by the public news media. This took shape through the signature of 51 Basque media outlets in February 2016 of a *Code of Conduct and Self-Regulation for Non-Sexist Advertising and Communication* (Begira 2016).

Within this context, the objective of this work is to analyse the impact of this self-regulation of the Basque news media through systematic observation of pieces on violence against women that results in death.

## Theoretical framework

In reflections regarding how to combat violence against women, the news media has always played a central role, since journalistic work has been identified as an indispensable tool to transform this reality when a need for change is detected (Ana Bernal-Triviño 2019; Nancy Berns 2004; Karen Boyle 2005; Margaret Gallagher 2001). Thus, it is understood that the media contribute toward defining which behaviours may be considered violent and, therefore, whether they are tolerable or may be socially condemned, and whether they require legislative action.

The news coverage of cases of violence against women, especially in the event of murder, has evolved over time from considering them as isolated events of a passionate nature to understanding them as a social problem (Dolors Comas-D'Argemir 2015a; Ana De-Miguel 2007; Rosa Rodríguez 2008).

In line with the classification by Inés Alberdi and Natalia Matas (2002), this evolution of gender-based violence resulting in death in the media can be organised into three stages. The first stage might be defined as invisibility of the phenomenon, or “non-news,” characterised by a spiral of silence in the news media, where women murdered by their partners or ex-partners were presented as isolated events, normally in the Current Events section. These were brief news pieces without context, where the events were narrated as crimes of passion (Alberdi and Matas 2002).

In the 70s, along with third-wave feminism and the “abused women” movement, birth was given to public recognition of this problem, as opposed to considering it a domestic or a personal issue (Lane Kirkland Gillespie, et al. 2013; Kate Millet 1970). This movement gave way to a second stage in the news' coverage of violence against women, where feminist associations and news media raised social visibility of the problem, while the academic field encouraged defining the events as a social ill, a spiral of violence based on the existence of structural inequality (Comas D'Argemir 2015b). The news media began to leave definitions such as “crime of passion” behind and moved from the Current Events section to the Society Section.

However, we cannot establish a radical border (geographic or in terms of time) regarding the evolution of the news' coverage of violence against women, since its scope still differs today between different countries and media. To name just a few examples, in the early 21st century, focus in the United States press on these events as a social problem was still minority (Cathy Ferrand Bullock and Jason Cubert 2002; Lane

**Table 1.** Models to classify news handling of violence against women resulting in death.

	Non-news	News	Social problem
Designation	Crime of passion	Domestic violence	Gender-based violence
Section	Current Events/Society	Society/Local	Front page, opinion, etc.
Size	Small	Medium	Large
Context	Isolated Event	With context	With context and without event
Narration	Romantic problem	Crime/mystery	Social problem
Sources	No sources/Neighbourhood	Police sources	Experts
Balance	+ Victim		+ Culpit
Victim	Adjectives/No action		No adjectives/Action
Motivation	Passion	Drugs, alcohol, stranger	No excuse

Source: The authors, based on Alberdi and Matas (2002)

Gillespie, Tara Richards, Eugena Givens and M Dwayne Smith 2013; Rae Taylor 2009; Tara N. Richards, Lane Gillespie and M. Dwayne Smith 2011), just like in Canada (Jordan Fairbairn and Myrna Dawson 2013; Guislaine Guérard and Anne Lavender 1999). In Australia, only 15% of articles address the social nature of the problem (Jenny Morgan and Violeta Politoff 2012), and in Italy, in 2012, the three main national newspapers *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa* continued to describe the events as “crimes of passion” (Chiara Gius and Pina Lalli 2014). In the United Kingdom, for its part, although the number of articles has increased, the way in which news coverage is carried out has not changed in the last ten years (Michele Lloyd and Shula Ramon 2017).

Despite the aforementioned, we can discern a third stage in coverage of violence against women in the news media, especially beginning in the 90s, characterised not only by a higher number of news pieces, but also by broad coverage of the events, with multiple news sources and contextualisation of the problem (Cynthia Carter 1998; Comas, 2015b; Concha Fagoaga 1999) (Table 1).

To transform this vision, a good portion of responsibility falls on processes of reflection and later application of codes of conduct and self-regulation in the news media. In analysing them together, Martínez (2012) concludes that they establish a basic doctrine with rules shared by all. Thus, they all define the appropriate terms to refer to the events (“gender-based violence”, “violence against women”, “male chauvinism”) and the need to describe them as a social problem and not as isolated events; news pieces must offer suitable contextualisation that does not give way to justifying behaviour, avoiding stereotypes such as social class and ethnic origin. Moreover, sensationalist elements must be avoided, and the entire news process must be followed, offering service information to victims, maintaining the victim’s anonymity and respecting the presumption of innocence, and using expert sources.

In this context, the Basque case has two elements that increase its interest: on the one hand, it is a case of self-regulation in which all the media and political authorities have participated jointly and, on the other hand, due to the distribution of political power in Spain, the autonomous community of the Basque Country has legislative and executive powers in this matter and, therefore, can constitute a differentiated unit of analysis. Previous studies in the Basque Country were carried out prior to the approval of the Code of Conduct (Gotzon Baraia-Etxaburu, et al. 2011, María Pilar Rodríguez 2008).

## Methodology

Based on the general objective of discovering the impact of this self-regulation in the Basque news media after approval of the *Code of Conduct and Self-Regulation for Non-Sexist Advertising and Communication* (Begira 2016), this research aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- O1. Analyze the characteristics of the news with which Basque Country's media have handled mortal victims due to gender-based violence in the news.
- O2. To know the opinion of professionals about the way in which they carry out their informative work on this subject and the difficulties in this task.
- O3. Assess the degree of compliance of signatory news media with the Code of Conduct and Self-Regulation and, if applicable, identify difficulties in its application.

The period selected to define the sample were the years 2015, 2016 and 2017. Given that the Code of Conduct was signed on February 26 2016, this timeframe provides for comparison of the period before signing it and after its application. During this period, six murders occurred in the Basque Country defined by law as "gender-based violence," three of them before and another three after approval of the Code of Conduct (Table 2).

To conduct the study, we carried out a content analysis (Rosalind Gill 2007). According to the categories set forth in the classification model for the news' coverage of male chauvinist murders, referenced in Table 1, and after observing the Code of Conduct, a series of codes was drawn up to analyse the content.

The indicators established in news published by a representative sample of seven Basque newspapers were indicated: *Berria*, *El Correo*, *Deia*, *Diario de Noticias de Álava*, *Diario de Noticias de Gipuzkoa*, *Diario Vasco* and *Gara*. According to data from the *Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión y el Estudio General de Medios* (Office of Justification for Dissemination and General Media Study), they account for 90% of dissemination of printed daily media in the Basque Country.

For the information analysis, based on the literature on the matter and considering the contents of the *Code of Conduct for News Handling of Violence Against Women*, the seven categories for analysis below were established:

- Front page and section
- Length of the pieces
- Terminology used
- Information on the victim
- Information on the culprit

**Table 2.** Male chauvinist murders in the Basque Country (2015–2017).

Case	Year	Date	Location
1	2015	2 April	Vitoria-Gasteiz
2	2015	8 August	Bilbao
3	2015	4 October	Erandio
4	2016	23 July	Bilbao
5	2017	28 September	Sestao
6	2017	3 October	Miranda

Source: The authors

- Contextualisation and service information
- News sources

In total, 390 news pieces published over a three-year period were analysed, in both print and the online versions.

Likewise, to complement the quantitative data collected, ten semi-structured in-depth interviews have been carried out with people responsible for the coverage of these topics in the Basque media. The questions were directed to knowing the assessment of the degree of compliance with the recommendations of the Code of Conduct.

	Media	Type	Position
I1	COPE	Radio	News editor
I2	eitb.eus	Web	Editor
I3	El Correo	Press	Editor in chief
I4	ETB	TV	Editor
I5	Radio Euskadi	Radio	News editor
I6	Onda Cero	Radio	News editor
I7	Onda Cero	Radio	News writer
I8	SER	Radio	Responsible for content
I9	Deia	Press	News writer
I10	RTVE	TV	News editor

## Results

### *Front page and section*

Coverage given by Basque newspapers to male chauvinistic murders in the Basque Country can be considered broad. In total, the seven newspapers published a total of 390 news pieces on the six cases occurring between 2015 and 2017, which gives an average of a bit more than nine pieces per outlet and case.

As relevance indicators given to the news coverage, the newspapers published a total of 57 pieces on the Front Page, with an average of 1.4 pieces on the front page per outlet and case. In the Editorial section, where the outlet publishes its institutional position, 23 texts were published, all of them condemnatory, which encourages greater understanding and seriousness when working with this sort of news (Pilar López-Díez 2007).

Regarding total volume of information, the coverage was unequal, partially due to the very circumstances of the events themselves. Two of the cases were quickly resolved from a news perspective: case 5, due to the immediate suicide of the aggressor after the murder, and case 4, due to its ambiguous nature in terms of whether to consider it gender-based violence (the accused was finally acquitted in court) (Table 3).

When observing the media's long-term tracking of the news, 113 pieces were published during the 24 hours after the murder (29% of the total), 133 (34.1%) the following week (normally actions of condemnation, etc.) and 144 pieces distanced in time, with coverage of the police investigations or trials.

**Table 3.** Section where the events are published.

Term	2015						2016		2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Front page	12	18.2	16	15.4	11	13.6	4	11.4	5	13.5	9	13.4	57	14.6
Current Events	8	12.1	9	8.7	4	4.9	0	0.0	1	2.7	4	6.0	26	6.7
Local	15	22.7	28	26.9	21	25.9	15	42.9	15	40.5	27	40.3	121	31.0
Society	29	43.9	41	39.4	35	43.2	12	34.3	8	21.6	27	40.3	152	39.0
Editorial	2	3.0	3	2.9	7	8.6	4	11.4	7	18.9	0	0.0	23	5.9
Other	0	0.0	7	6.7	3	3.7	0	0.0	1	2.7	0	0.0	11	2.8

Source: The authors

In this regard, Case 2 is a good example of how the media help to raise visibility for violence against women. In the first instance, the case was considered a lethal hit-and-run. The seven newspapers only published a total of 11 pieces the following week, addressing the information as an event. Days later, when the police investigation took a turn and pointed the finger at the ex-husband, the case was classified as male chauvinistic murder and the newspapers published 93 pieces more.

The professionals interviewed do not doubt the relevance that their media gives to male chauvinistic murders. In all cases, these events are attributed a prominent place in the media. "The murder of a woman is the opening news, whatever happens that day. It would take priority over any political or economic news" (I7). "We have taken a step . . . At least, it is news. We have not managed to stop it from happening, but we have made it news. It seems little, but it is a lot" (I1). "But hey, our role is also to help that happen [social condemnation], in some way, right? And help institutions protect women victims of male chauvinistic violence" (I6).

By section, the pieces mainly appeared in the Society section (38.9%), Local (31%), and to a much lesser extent, Current Events (6.7%), which indicates alignment with thematic, and not episodic, handling of the pieces. Barring the aforementioned Case 2, in this regard, there are no differences between cases before or after approval of the Code of Conduct.

### Length

In general, the Basque Country's newspapers grant relevant visibility to news related to male chauvinistic murders. 46.5% of the pieces occupies more than half of the page's surface, as opposed to 16.5% of the pieces that occupy less than 20% (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Length of pieces (printed media).

Length	2015						2016		2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<20%	5	14.7	8	15.4	6	14.6	8	30.8	2	12.5	4	12.9	33	16.5
20–50%	14	41.2	16	30.8	17	41.5	11	42.3	5	31.3	11	35.5	74	37
>50%	15	44.1	28	53.8	18	43.9	7	26.9	9	56.3	16	51.6	93	46.5

Source: The authors

In this section, we can observe the higher media interest offered by certain cases, especially 2, with characteristics of a high media-impact event, with traits of sensationalism. There are no significant differences in the coverage given to the cases before or after approval of the Code of Conduct.

Journalists highlight the risks of having to write a lengthy article. To write a text of these characteristics, a large amount of information is required, which sometimes is asked if they should provide: “There are details that we do include about family circumstances or antecedents that may not be so necessary, but that we do use them (. . .). Later, when we attend the training courses [on gender violence], we do wonder if that information contributes something or not, if it is important or not” (I1). This occurs to a lesser extent on radio and television, where the time that can be devoted to each piece of information is less: “Fortunately, we do not have the conditionings that other media may have and we do not need to deepen and fill in the time” (I8).

### ***The designation***

There is no consensus in academic literature that analyses this phenomenon in the news media, largely due to different research traditions and the specific way that these crimes are categorised in each country’s legal system. In Anglo-Saxon literature, many works of research take on the designation of “domestic violence” (Nancy Berns 1999; Cathy Ferrand Bullock 2007; Cathy Ferrand Bullock 2008; Gillespie et al. 2013; Pamela Hill 2011), a term that has been discarded in Spanish-speaking research.

Greater consensus is granted to the term “violence against women” (Zeynep Alatz 2006; Patricia Easteal, Kate Holland and Keziah Judd 2015; Concha Fagoaga 1994; Marian Meyers 1997; Jenny Morgan and Margaret Simons 2018), which is used by the Code of Conduct and in this research. The concept of “gender-based violence”, which is used by Spanish law, is less-used internationally and is also a subject of debate (Claudia Vallejo 2005). Less frequent, but found in recent research, especially in English, is the designation “intimate partner feminicide/homicide” (Fairbairn and Dawson 2013; Gius and Lalli 2014).

The Code of Conduct for news handling of violence against women in the Basque Country explicitly sets forth which terms must be used: “violence against women,” “male chauvinistic violence” and “violence by men against women,” while it discourages concepts such as “domestic violence,” “family violence,” “intra-family violence” and “couple violence” (Begira 2016).

Of the 390 pieces analysed in this study, almost two of every three pieces (64.9%) follow the recommendations set forth in the Code of Conduct. Of those that do not, most use generic designations of the crimes (murder, homicide), without explicitly mentioning their gender-based violent nature.

When comparing data from the cases prior to and after the signature of the Code of Conduct, we can find noteworthy differences that may be attributed to implementation of the Code’s recommendations. Thus, the use of recommended terms significantly increases, from 57.4% to 78.5% (Table 5).

Some journalists explain the evolution in the use of these concepts. “When I started writing, it was always ‘family violence’ or ‘intimate partner violence’. Now, ‘male chauvinistic murder’ is spreading more” (I6). Among the difficulties, the professionals mention that in



**Table 5.** Term used to define the events.

Term	2015						2016				2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6					
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Gender-based violence	24	36.4	29	27.9	22	27.2	23	65.7	14	37.8	12	17.9	124	31.8		
Male chauvinistic violence	18	27.3	24	23.1	27	33.3	9	25.7	18	48.6	33	49.3	129	33.1		
Murder	8	12.1	29	27.9	19	23.5	3	8.6	2	5.4	16	23.9	77	19.7		
Crime	5	7.6	7	6.7	7	8.6	0	0	1	2.7	2	3.0	22	5.6		
Undefined	11	16.7	15	14.4	6	7.4	0	0	2	5.4	4	6.0	38	9.7		

Source: The authors

some media many different journalists may participate in the coverage of the same news, that it is not a specialized area, and that sometimes the reporter covering the news ignores the Code of Conduct, did not receive specific training, or isn't aware of the problem. As a result, an inappropriate use of concepts can creep into the news (E4). Controlling terminology is easier in print than on television or radio, where live programs can play tricks (E5). Nor does the same knowledge and awareness exist in all publishers (E8).

### **Information on the victim**

Providing information encourages empathy with the victim and reduces the tendency to blame her (Phyllis A. Anastasio and Diana M. Costa 2004; Berns 1999). However, Spanish law (Laws 1/2004 and 4/2015), as well as the Code of Conduct for Basque Media, are oriented toward attempting to guarantee dignified treatment of the victim, and at the same time her anonymity, because they highlight the need to only use data that serve the general interest, specifically, *“to contextualise the violence, explain the causes behind it, promote social condemnation and help other women who are suffering violence to confront the situation”* (Begira 2016).

Despite this, 56.7% of the news identify the victim with name and surnames, as opposed to 4.9% of the news that do not include information that identifies the victim. “They usually try to give the name because it helps to humanize, tell something about their life, it brings that veneer of a human being and brings you closer to her” (I5) The Code of Conduct has no effect on identification; there is scarcely two-tenths of variation between cases before and after approval (Table 8).

With this idea of serving the general interest, some information on the victim can encourage empathy and greater social condemnation. “I like to empathize, but never against the family, I don't want to do research on his life. I don't go on Facebook to see who he went on vacation with. But if she had children, if she was studying something . . . Everything that allows, without going into too much detail, that there has been a life that has been cut short” (I8).

Thus, although with lower presence, the analysed news pieces offer other data. Other data on the victim are fewer, although significant, such as her age (34.9%), town of residence (47.7%), her marital status (37.4%), whether she had daughters or sons (23.6%) and her profession (5.9%). In the two cases when the victim was of foreign origin, her nationality was quoted in 47.1% of the news pieces. On the other hand, the tendency to publish images of the victim has gone in the opposite direction, with low presence (6.4%) (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Identification and information on the victim.

Victim	2015						2016				2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		TOTAL			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
ID No	5	7.6	8	7.7	4	4.9	1	2.9	1	2.7	0	0.0	19	4.9		
ID Yes	7	10.6	79	76.0	56	69.1	24	68.6	2	5.4	53	79.1	221	56.7		
Initial ID	9	13.6	11	10.6	11	13.6	0	0.0	32	86.5	12	17.9	75	19.2		
Other ID	45	68.2	6	5.8	10	12.3	10	28.6	2	5.4	2	3.0	75	19.2		
Age	42	63.6	17	16.3	21	25.9	12	34.3	26	70.3	18	26.9	136	34.9		
Town	45	68.2	46	44.2	15	18.5	12	34.3	23	62.2	45	67.2	186	47.7		
Nation.	36	54.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	36.8	0	0	46	12.8		
Profession	0	0.0	1	1.0	11	13.6	0	0.0	5	13.5	6	9.0	23	5.9		
Minors	34	51.5	41	39.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	17	25.4	92	23.6		
Marital stat.	27	40.9	32	30.8	25	30.9	7	20.0	7	18.9	48	71.6	146	37.4		
Image	0	0	5	4.8	3	3.7	0	0	5	13.5	12	17.9	25	6.4		

Source: The authors

**Table 7.** Identification and information on the culprit.

Culprit	2015						2016				2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		TOTAL			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
ID No	9	13.6	31	29.8	10	12.3	4	11.4	1	2.7	11	16.4	66	16.9		
ID Yes	0	0.0	30	28.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	30	7.7		
Initial ID	8	12.1	10	9.6	45	55.6	0	0.0	19	51.4	35	52.2	117	30.0		
Other ID	49	74.2	33	31.7	26	32.1	31	88.6	17	45.9	21	31.3	177	45.4		
Age	34	51.5	12	11.5	33	40.7	15	42.9	16	43.2	8	11.9	118	30.3		
Town	34	51.5	1	1.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	35	9.0		
Nation.	32	48.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	32	8.2		
Profession	0	0.0	1	1.0	9	11.1	0	0.0	5	13.5	12	17.9	27	6.9		
Image	0	0.0	10	9.6	18	22.2	0	0	4	10.8	9	13.4	41	10.5		

Source: The authors

**Table 8.** Contextualisation and service elements (written media).

	2015						2016				2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		TOTAL			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Reporting	14	21.2	0	0.0	1	1.2	19	54.3	12	32.4	3	4.5	49	12.6		
Measures	6	9.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	9	25.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	15	3.8		
Information	3	4.5	2	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	1.3		
Telephone numbers	3	4.5	4	3.8	11	13.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	18	4.6		
No ref.	51	77.3	99	95.2	65	80.2	35	100	18	48.6	63	94.0	331	84.9		
Divorce	12	18.2	3	2.9	8	9.9	0	0	0	0.0	4	6.0	27	6.9		
Argument	2	3.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.5		
Mental	1	1.5	2	1.9	8	9.9	0	0	19	51.4	0	0.0	30	7.7		

Source: The authors

### **Information on the culprit**

Previous works of research tended to reference the absence or reduced presence of the culprit in narration of the news, and the need to balance the presence between the two of them (Elena Bandrés 2011).

In their study, Sánchez Aranda, et al. (2003) stated that in over half of the news, the individual behind the aggression was unknown, and that while the victims appeared in 29% of the pieces, the aggressors were only present at 3% (Table 7).

Regarding the culprit, the news pieces generally follow the Code's recommendations, given that three out of every four cases make generic reference ("alleged aggressor," etc.) or use initials.

Regarding the other data, there is a certain balance between the information provided on the victim and on the culprit (age, profession, nationality if foreign, etc.). This is not the case with the town, but it is understandable that the purpose is to avoid redundancy.

The media agree to report on age or profession, but there is less consensus on the need to mention nationality or place of origin, some prefer not to mark the differences (I1, I2). "Names can [be published], because they appear in trials, nationality sometimes not, depending on whether we consider it relevant or not. Although you always give the nationality, right? If he is a foreigner, he is a foreigner and if he is a national, he is a national. It is a fact" (I3). The number of cases analyzed does not allow us to conclude whether there is a difference in the treatment of the news based on the origin of the perpetrator (Nadja Karlsson, et al. 2021). However, it could be interpreted that the fact that the aggressor is of another nationality ignites social guilt for this violence (Meyers 1997; Miriam Hernández 2018), especially in the case of men.

Regarding images, it is more frequent in news pieces to find that the image of the culprit has been published than that of the victim, 41 as opposed to 25. Therefore, barring identification, there is balance between the two. Placing greater focus on the abuser prevents victimisation of women, creating a collective image that culturally sanctions the men who commit these actions.

### **Contextualisation and service information**

The Code of Conduct devotes a section to news on the circumstances surrounding the case, so that they might help other women suffering from this violence. Mainly, filing reports (show women as active), the culprit's record, or the customary circumstance that this violence occurs when the victim has decided to leave, may alert women suffering from violence and those around her to obtain help and protect themselves (Begira 2016).

"We always highlight it in the news. It's very important. And if she had filed a complaint and if she had been abused before (. . .). And that there are resources for the women who have been attacked" (I7). However, some journalists showed concern when the non-existence of complaints was reported, as this can blame the woman (I9).

Generally, the degree of contextualisation in the analysed news pieces is low. Information on whether or not previous police reports exist, which is positive for understanding the cycle of violence, is included in 49 news pieces (12.6%), while the existence

of cautionary measures was only included in 3.8% of the cases. Moreover, 6.9% of the pieces reference the step previous to restraining orders, specifically divorce. When we compare handling before and after the Code of Conduct, we see noteworthy progress, given that mention of previous police reports went from 6% to 24.5% in news pieces, and mention of protective measures went from 2.4% to 6.5%.

On the contrary, the presence of other kinds of service information is residual (1.3%), just like the reminder of aid telephone numbers (4.6%). On the absence of this information, different explanations are offered: “The style book [of the media] says that you have to give the Basque Country phone number 900840111 and 016. I don’t know if it’s careless or because we don’t read the style book, but we’re eating it” (15). “Well, I would like that, but due to lack of time, because we have fifteen minutes for each newscast” (16).

In contextualisation, the Code of Conduct highlights the importance of not providing information that explains or justifies the actions, whether drugs, alcohol or unemployment (López-Díez 2007), given that these motivations or excuses can be considered as exoneration for the culprit (Bullock and Cubert 2002). The vast majority of Basque news media omit aspects that could be interpreted in this regard. In 84.9% of the cases, there is no reference to these situations, a percentage very similar to the one found in other recent research (Georgina Sutherland et al. 2016a).

There are two exceptions, referring to the alleged mental issues of the aggressors: In Case 3, in 8 news pieces, and in Case 5, on 19 occasions, related to an environment of drug consumption. Excepting these two cases, 91.2% of the news does not contain elements that could be considered as conditioning perception of the events.

### **News sources**

Regarding the use of information sources, on most occasions, there is an abundance of official sources and a scarcity of experts to offer a more social perspective of the event. Although official sources are viewed as a neutral and objective way to narrate the news, abusing this sort of source undermines comprehension of the issue as a social problem, since it highlights the police focus and the relationship between victim and culprit (Meyers 1997). Infection with legal language means these events are presented as isolated cases, private problems and exceptional cases to the news in a society that is critical of this perspective (Gillespie et al. 2013).

Another relevant source used by many media outlets to gather information about the event, and upon which many news pieces are based, are statements made by neighbours. Although this is perceived to be a reliable source of knowledge, due to proximity to the victim and the culprit, this is actually an uninformed source in most cases (Ainhoa Novo-Arbona, et al. 2021). Nevertheless, it favours testimonies that narrate the events as rare and exceptional (Pilar López-Díez 2002) and explains the event with surprise at the sporadic behaviour of the culprit, so unlike his past in the neighbourhood (Bullock and Cubert 2002).

Additionally, and generally, experts tend to be the least-used source, even though it is more likely that a social perspective of the events is ensured through this source (Bullock and Cubert 2002; Morgan and Simons 2018).

The use of one source or another can also encourage a greater presence of men or women. On most occasions, official sources are men, which according to Fairbairn and Dawson (2013) can contribute to upholding inequality (Table 9).

**Table 9.** News sources (written media).

Source	2015						2016		2017				TOTAL	
	Case 1		Case 2		Case 3		Case 4		Case 5		Case 6		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Police	7	10.4	7	6.7	1	1.2	0	0.0	2	5.4	15	19.7	32	8.2
Court	6	9.0	2	1.9	3	3.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.3	12	3.1
Pol. Inst.	6	9.0	11	10.6	9	11.1	2	5.7	6	16.2	4	5.3	38	9.7
Fem. Assoc.	8	11.9	2	1.9	2	2.5	5	14.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	17	4.4
Neighbours	5	7.5	6	5.8	10	12.3	0	0.0	2	5.4	9	11.8	32	8.2
Family	6	9.0	5	4.8	5	6.2	2	5.7	8	21.6	3	3.9	29	7.4
Other	8	11.9	3	2.9	34	42.0	6	17.1	0	0.0	8	10.5	59	15.1
None	21	31.3	68	65.4	17	21.0	20	57.1	19	51.4	36	47.4	181	46.4

Source: The authors

Although the analysis establishes eight categories, news sources can be grouped into three broad types: police sources (police, courts), providing information on the event and its criminal proceeding, institutional sources (political institutions, feminist associations, etc.), contributing social condemnation, and neighbours and relatives, who provide information and are allegedly more familiar with the event.

Although the Code of Conduct advises against doing so (Begira 2016), neighbours and relatives continue to be the majority source (15.6%), ahead of political institutions and feminist associations (14.1%) and police and court sources (11.3%). There have been no significant changes in the use of sources since application of the Code of Conduct.

## Conclusions and discussion

Over the last two decades, recommendations for international entities and laws and standards promoted by parliaments on violence against women have always considered acknowledgement of the role of the news media as a key element, and they have directly called on them to self-regulate. While laws have institutionalised, in this case, historic demands made by the feminist movement, they have also included the theoretical corpus drawn up in the academic sphere in the late 20th century.

Although in this sense this self-regulation may be considered an indirect and induced appropriation, it does not mean that the news media is not an active participant in fighting this scourge (Kellie E. Carlyle, et al. 2014).

In fact, to the contrary, this study proves that this focus is widely shared by the news media and its professionals. Feminist social capital inside and outside the media and the spread of a more egalitarian political culture have played a relevant role in the changes produced in the coverage of male chauvinistic murders. In fact, an important part of the recommendations included in the Code of Conduct for Basque media were already followed previously, as the research shows.

In this regard, the improvement in the informative treatment of violence against women cannot come solely from self-regulatory norms (Ibañez and Zurbarano Berenguer 2019). It is essential to reflect on how the recommendations are applied, to discuss the difficulties and disparities of criteria that occur in their application. The reflection and consensus that drive the creation of ethical codes must necessarily be accompanied by

measures that facilitate their compliance. Self-regulation works as a guideline for the media, which homogenizes the way in which these types of events are covered, but at the same time it can also be used to promote social control of their work.

Basque media have incorporated measures to raise visibility for male chauvinistic murder and violence against women as a social issue into their editorial policies and news planning. The in-depth interviews with the people who work on these issues show that they are quite satisfied with the way their media covers these news. The journalists of the Basque media acknowledge that not only the Code of Conduct has influenced the treatment of this type of news, but also the awareness of the newsrooms on this social problem and the specialized training courses that have been organized, among other factors.

The first indicator is the broad news coverage given to the six murders analysed, including front-page pieces and editorial texts. The length granted to these pieces also reveals the media's proactive attitude. However, the publication of extensive texts to make this social problem visible contradicts in a certain way the recommendations on the need to be cautious when detailing the facts. Journalists highlight the difficult balance between giving these events the importance they deserve and the need to contain details about the violence suffered by the victims or their personal lives.

News monitoring of the cases, providing news coverage of demonstrations and condemnatory demonstrations and legal proceedings, including statements from political and civil leaders, also contributes to highlighting social rejection. Thus, the Basque media contribute to show the social nature of the problem.

Self-regulation is also effective to terminologically define the nature of the events, as legislative changes also influence terminological changes (Belén Zurbano and García-Gordillo Mar 2017). Moreover, the recommendation to not include elements in pieces that exempt or mitigate violent behaviour is generally followed.

On the contrary, other recommendations handed down by the Code of Conduct are not obeyed as frequently, which on some occasions can be attributed to the hurried nature of journalistic work and the inertia of professional routines, but on others to an open debate on their suitability or applicability. The lack of presentation of male chauvinistic murders in the context of intimate violence is addressed by providing information on the existence of previous complaints. However, the positioning of the media is not so clear when they come across a case in which there are no prior complaints. In these cases, some media choose not to include this information, which is necessary to provide context but which, from their point of view, challenges the victim.

Only a small portion of the pieces provide service information (self-help measures, telephone number against abuse) and there is no consensus amongst professionals as to whether it is advisable to mention previous police reports filed.

Despite the recommendation to not provide data that would directly or indirectly identify the victims, Basque news media identify the victims with name and surnames, initials or other significant elements that provide for identification. This failure to comply may be due to the fact that the events analysed in this study are murders, so more relevancy is granted to the information than the victim's rights. To complete the focus on this section, it would be illustrative to analyse cases of violence not resulting in death. Therefore, there is less consensus on the information to be provided about the victim and

most of the media question the Code of Conduct in this regard. The benefits of developing empathy with the victim call into question reservations about what information to provide about the her, especially in the case of murders.

We also observe room for improvement in the use of sources, specifically the low presence of experts. The immediacy of news can, on occasion, prevent the use of this resource. However, the increased presence of experts on social media may provide access and facilitate the work of the media, enriching social interpretation of the violence with their opinions, as set forth in the Code of Conduct.

In summary, the editorial commitment of Basque communication media in self-regulation regarding violence against women is unquestionable. The general principles are clear and widely shared and help to understand these murders as a social problem. On the contrary, the challenge lies in the still-remaining need to improve use of sources, identification of victims and contextualisation of the events.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Ainhoa Novo-Arbona** Associate Professor at the University of the Basque Country. Degree in Political Science and Sociology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Master in Public Administration and Ph.D. in Social Sciences (specialty Political Science) from the UPV/EHU. In 2012, she was Advisor to the Management of EMAKUNDE - Basque Institute for Women. Among her publications in the area of equality and gender are "Women in political science: indicators in Spanish universities", "The social status of Men and Women in Basque Country" or "Feminist challenges in the Social Sciences Gender Studies in the Basque Country", among others. E-mail: [simon.pena@ehu.eus](mailto:simon.pena@ehu.eus)

**Simón Peña Fernández** Full Professor at the University of the Basque Country. Ph.D. in Information Sciences from the UPV/EHU and Degree in Journalism and Audiovisual Communication from the University of Navarra. As a researcher, he has participated in around thirty research projects financed in competitive public calls at regional, state and European level. He is also the Principal Investigator (together with Ainara Larrondo) of the Consolidated Research Group of the Basque Government Gureiker. E-mail: [simon.pena@ehu.eus](mailto:simon.pena@ehu.eus)

**Lucía Martínez Odrizola** Professor of the University of the University of the Basque Country. Degree in Journalism from the UPV/EHU and Master's Degree in Journalism from El Correo. She is currently a member of the Begira Commission and co-founder and member of the editorial collective of Pikara Magazine. She has been coordinator of the international network of journalists with a gender perspective, member of the commission of media professionals for the fight against gender violence of the Ministry of Equality (2008-2010), member of the commission of professionals of the communication media created by the Directorate of Attention to Victims of Gender Violence of the Basque Government. E-mail: [simon.pena@ehu.eus](mailto:simon.pena@ehu.eus)

**Eva Jiménez-Martín** Associate Professor of the Public University of Navarra in the degree of Sociology, a task that she makes compatible with her work as an Accompaniment Technician for the Department of Social Services of the Pasaia City Council since 2011. She has a degree in Sociology and in Political and Administrative Sciences from UPV/EHU, and Master in Decentralized International Cooperation. E-mail: simon.pena@ehu.eus

**Leyre Eguskiza-Sesumaga** Predoctoral researcher. Degree in Journalism and Master in Social Communication from the UPV/EHU. Journalist for the newspaper Deia between 2014 and 2017 in the areas of Society and Culture. E-mail: simon.pena@ehu.eus

## ORCID

Ainhoa Novo-Arbona  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6184-7916>

Simón Peña-Fernández  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2080-3241>

Leyre Eguskiza-Sesumaga  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0308-2545>

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