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Blame the victim? Domestic violence as covered in The Sun and The Guardian

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[Michele Lloyd and Shulamit Ramon](#)

Authors



1. [Michele Lloyd](#)

Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University of Hertfordshire



2. [Shulamit Ramon](#)

Professor, Mental Health Research, University of Hertfordshire

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Blame the victim? Domestic violence as covered in The Sun and The Guardian

Domestic violence is an enduring problem in the UK: an average of two women a week continue to be killed by their current or former partner. It's a widespread and important story, and – like all news media – newspapers make a decision about how to report this issue.

But, unlike television and radio broadcasting, the print media in the UK is not required to be impartial. And although newspaper content is not necessarily absorbed uncritically by readers, the way editors and journalists frame news stories can influence the “take home” message communicated to readers.

We explored how The Sun and The Guardian reported domestic violence in 2001-2 and 2011-12 to evaluate evidence of change over a ten-year time span. The rationale for selecting these newspapers was based on their contrasting formats: The Sun is the biggest-selling newspaper in the UK, tabloid in style and traditionally right-of-centre politically, while The Guardian is a left-of-centre broadsheet with a far smaller circulation but a far larger online readership.

We studied both online and hard copy articles of the two papers: these included analyses of victims (predominantly women) and perpetrators (predominantly men). While The Guardian adopted a respectful position towards women victims, the textual and visual techniques adopted by The Sun reveal a tendency for victim blaming and, in some cases, giving character references for the perpetrators.

The stimulus for investigating newspaper reporting of domestic violence was a [European Union funded project](#) led by the University of Hertfordshire with partners in Greece, Italy, Poland and Slovenia, which researched the well-being of women experiencing both domestic violence and mental health issues.

The expressed guilt of the women participants made us consider what leads victims of this type of violence to accept guilt, blame and shame instead of holding perpetrators accountable. Given the influential role played by the media in both shaping and reflecting public opinion on issues such as domestic violence, this second project examining newspaper coverage of such violence was undertaken.

Laying the blame

The most commonly identified theme derived from our newspaper research was how The Sun appears to hold women responsible for their own abuse. Replete with descriptions of men who have killed their partners as “spurned lover”, “jilted lover” and “jealousy-crazed”, The

Sun seems to be insinuating that the woman is culpable, partially at least, for her victimisation.

BBQ dad 'killed 6 over wife's affair'

■ Court told of bloodbath

FROM TOM WELLS, IN ST HELIER, JERSEY | 13th August 2012, 11:00 pm

COMMENT NOW

A POLISH builder slaughtered six people at a family barbecue after he flipped over his wife's affair, a court heard yesterday.

Damian Rzeszowski, 31, stabbed wife Izabela to death in the street after chasing her through their flat.

When cops arrived they found the bodies of the couple's daughter Kinga, five, and son Kacper, two, inside.



How The Sun reported the story. The Sun

A key case in point was a story reported from the island of Jersey where a man called Damian Rzeszowski killed his wife, Izabela, two children and his father-in-law as well as a family friend and her daughter. [The Sun described](#) how he “slaughtered six people at a family barbecue after he flipped over his wife's affair”. This gave the impression that it was the woman's alleged infidelity that triggered the bloodshed. The Sun describes Rzeszowski as a “doting dad” and Izabela as “cheating on him”, again denoting her as a blameworthy victim.

Similarly, when a father, Jean-Francis Say, [fatally stabbed his two children](#), The Sun observed that his wife had left him for another man two years earlier, taking the children with her.



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Neighbours said Say was heartbroken when wife Antoinette left him for another man two years ago and took the children with her.

He told them he only realised something was wrong with his marriage when he got home and found Antoinette had gone. He went straight to the children's school to pick them up – and learned Antoinette had taken them with her.

Sylvia Murphy, 39, who lives in the same apartment block in Southwark, South London, said of Say: "He was very friendly and approachable, always dressed in a suit and looking smart and presentable I always thought he was a really nice man.

"When I found out what happened I was in complete shock, I couldn't sleep. I can't believe anyone could do that to children. The kids were both lovely. Rolls was an adorable little boy."

Sylvia said Say fought a custody battle for the children but was only allowed to see them on weekends.

She added: "The dad seemed like the busier parent. He always took them to school and picked them up.

"He always said he was the one who did everything for the kids and all his wife did was sleep and go to work."

'All his wife did was sleep and go to work'. The Sun

A neighbour was quoted saying that Say had told her he was always the one who did things for the children while "all his wife did was sleep and go to work". The use of this quote appears to disparage a woman whose children have been killed.

When women kill

This contrasts with the description of "evil" Tracie Andrews, convicted of killing her boyfriend and subsequently in preparation for release from prison. Entitled "Evil Andrews serves up cuppas in a church café", The Sun article juxtaposes her evilness with the sanctity of a church café and having a "cuppa". Compare "evil", redolent of internal, innate characteristics, with the descriptions of men who "snapped" or "flipped" and whose actions were "out of character", thus suggestive of external, qualifying triggers.

Evil Andrews serves up cuppas in a church café

BY ALASTAIR TAYLOR AND GARY O'SHEA | 15th January 2011, 12:00 am



KILLER Tracie Andrews is working in a church café – serving cuppas and teacakes to unsuspecting customers.

The 41-year-old, being prepared for release after serving 14 years in prison, smiles as she hands out tea, coffee and snacks at the Christian centre.

Other staff who know her identity have been sworn to secrecy. Andrews was jailed for life for killing fiancée Lee Harvey, 25. She stabbed him with a penknife in the back, face, neck and chest after they rowed while driving to their Worcester flat in 1996.

Female killers treated differently in The Sun. The Sun

The Guardian does not tend to engage in a victim-blaming narrative, which is a key issue when trying to understand the reporting of domestic violence which ends in the death of one of the partners. Sandra Horley, the chief executive of Refuge – who has been a prominent advocate on this issue – states that domestic violence cases are not about one partner “losing [their] temper” or “flipping out”, they are about systematic control and abuse.

Domestic violence

When it comes to covering domestic violence as an issue, we found that The Guardian had consistently outnumbered The Sun in relation to the amount of articles published over the whole of our survey period.

Time span	Guardian	Sun
2000-2012	3,975	695
2001	156	5
2002	203	20
2011	472	79
2012	544	111

How the two papers compare on domestic violence. Michele Lloyd and Shula Ramon, Author provided

A closer inspection also revealed that The Guardian's coverage had far more in-depth analysis of domestic violence overall, while The Sun tended to report on individual cases in a sensational manner.

Domestic violence in the news is seldom framed as a societal public health issue – but rather an individualised problem or somehow precipitated by victims. Our research, book-ended by the years 2001-2 and 2011-12, found that the ten-year passage of time has diminished neither the medium nor the message of The Sun in terms of blaming victims, and reinforcing society's normalisation of privatised violence as “just another domestic”.

To see a YouTube video about the article based on this research please [click here](#).

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