MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR THE SENSITIVE & EFFECTIVE REPORTING OF DOMESTIC ABUSE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Women's Aid
FEDERATION
NORTHERN IRELAND

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic abuse and violence against women and girls.

We work to help women, children and young people to be safe, to break free from the cycle of abuse, and to rebuild their lives. We exist to challenge attitudes and beliefs which perpetuate domestic abuse. We work to promote healthy, non-abusive relationships.

Women's Aid has 8 local groups and one regional umbrella body (Women's Aid Federation) covering the whole of Northern Ireland, and our wraparound services are available across the region.

We work collectively to:

- Engage with women, children and young people, to give them a voice and ensure they inform all aspects of service development and delivery.
- Provide trauma informed support services to women, children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse.
- Deliver preventative education programmes in schools and community settings to promote healthy, non-abusive relationships.
- Monitor, influence and respond to Government policy and legislation as a Subject Matter Expert.
- Provide quality assured education and training to a wide audience, to increase capacity to respond to domestic abuse.
- Work in partnership, sharing our expertise with all relevant agencies to ensure a joined-up response to domestic abuse.

Funding for this Project was provided through the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Small Grant Scheme, a new initiative under the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy which is jointly led by the Departments of Justice and Health.

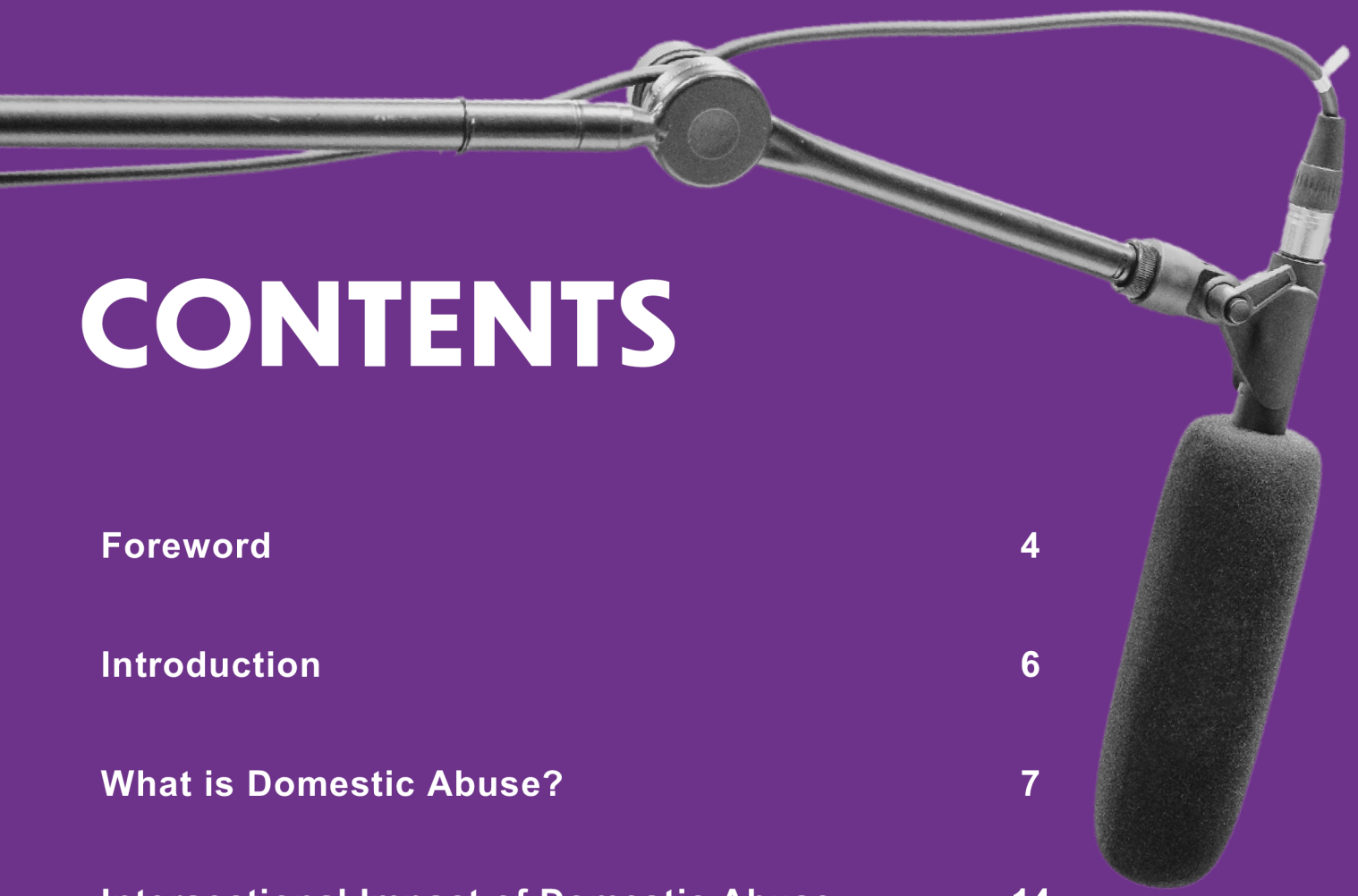
We wish to extend our sincerest thanks to journalists Tara Mills, Allison Morris and Kathryn Torney for their expert advice in drafting this guidance.

We also wish to thank the South Eastern Domestic & Sexual Abuse Partnership for this collaboration with the first edition of this guidance.

A special thanks to Professor Monica McWilliams for writing the foreword for this document.

Women's Aid
FEDERATION
NORTHERN IRELAND

THE ANNEX
30 ADELAIDE PARK
BELFAST
BT9 6FY
TEL: 028 9024 9041
EMAIL: PRESS@WOMENSAIDNI.ORG



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FOREWORD

There is much needed information between the pages of this booklet. It is so appropriate and relevant to the times we are living in. It sets out the context in which domestic violence takes place in order to assist journalists to tell the full story. Since acts of domestic abuse are rarely isolated incidents, a more complete picture of the nature of what has occurred needs to be presented.

The examples provided here show what and what not to do if you have been given the task of reporting on domestic violence or sexual assault. Using the wrong language minimises the seriousness of the suffering and has consequences that journalists are not always aware of. This booklet aims to clearly set out these consequences.

Presenting perpetrators as people who are driven to violence perpetuates victim blaming. Perpetrators don't suddenly 'snap' or 'lose their temper' and to suggest that this is 'typical' of how they behave is misleading and confusing. Such attitudes are harmful and need to stop. The causes of intimate partner violence need to be better understood and the examples given here explain these in a straightforward and succinct manner.

Reporting that the man was 'of good character' and 'well liked' in the community does not portray accurately his power and control. Where this happens, it highlights the media's lack of knowledge in cases of domestic violence assaults and murders. Suggesting that it was a 'one off' incident or 'out of character' fails to understand the context. It was a pattern of power and control that had gone on long before it came to be reported. Readers need to know the facts and not the fiction.

Abusive partners can be charming and can make people think they wouldn't harm a fly. That's how they often appear to the outside world. The media should know that it is doing the victim a disservice in asking acquaintances, neighbours or colleagues about the perpetrator's behaviour. They won't know. If they are unaware of the abuse, they are likely to give uninformed comments and these will only feed into perceptions rather than the reality of what it is like to live in an abusive relationship. Too often we hear that the couple were volatile, but it is the perpetrator who is at fault. Equating the offender's behaviour to the non-abusive partner adds to the victim's suffering. Honour the victim who is no longer around to speak the truth instead of making the perpetrator of the murder the centre of attention. Treat the crime with the seriousness it deserves.

Avoid saying “he looked vicious” as if what he looked like was a reflection of how he was expected to behave.

Domestic abuse perpetrators look like anyone else. Sensationalising offenders and putting them into ‘types’ is unhelpful. That also applies to stories that focus on minority status so as to add more drama. Vulnerable individuals face enough barriers without adding ‘spice’ based on someone’s minority background.

Asking someone to recount a life changing or traumatic episode has to be handled carefully. A service provider should not be put in the position of having to suddenly provide a victim as a case study for an interview. Where the perpetrator can easily identify the victim/survivor, safety issues have to be considered. Local domestic abuse services can be contacted in advance of a deadline if a reporter needs someone who is confident enough to share their experience.

Talking about domestic abuse takes time and the reporter and the interviewee may need assistance with the process of telling.

There are specialists in Women’s Aid who can help.

The gains we have made were hard fought and we have to make sure we hold to them. Salacious tag lines and sensational online outputs can divert public opinion from seeing the seriousness of the problem. ‘Doing no harm’ needs to become standard practice.

Tackling domestic abuse is a social responsibility and journalists can positively influence how we respond to it. Let’s build on the good reporting by many and use this booklet to call domestic abuse out.

Professor Monica McWilliams

INTRODUCTION

How the media reports on domestic abuse informs how we as a society respond to it as a criminal act, as well as how we treat those who fall victim to it. Our response to victims and survivors of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls determines how that person progresses.

A good, responsible response to domestic abuse, where the survivor is believed and supported, can enable that person to move on from the abuse they have suffered.

A negative response, where their suffering is minimised, or their abuser is defended can re-traumatise a survivor and obstruct their recovery. Given how the media can influence and shape public opinion, it is important to ensure they report on domestic abuse in a responsible manner. Victims and their family members can be traumatised by newspaper accounts of their experiences.

It is crucial the media do not oversimplify, sensationalise or ignore important details when reporting on domestic abuse incidents. This can feed into victim blaming attitudes, exacerbate myths around domestic abuse, re-traumatise survivors and reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.

This document will provide guidance for journalists about domestic abuse in Northern Ireland and support the media in accurate reporting to help the public better understand the issues involved.

Individual media outlets may already have pre-existing guidance for reporting domestic abuse, such as the BBC, Ofcom, IPSO and NUJ guidelines. This guidance is not meant to supersede the work of individual media organisations, but to enhance, supplement and provide a regional context for reporting on domestic abuse and violence comitted against women and girls in Northern Ireland.

WHAT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

In Northern Ireland, the Government's Domestic & Sexual Abuse Strategy[1] defines abuse as:

"threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member."

Domestic abuse involves the abuse of power and control by one person over another, within intimate relationships or family and typically escalates in frequency and severity over time. It occurs across our society, within all communities. It can be experienced by anyone regardless of socioeconomic background, race, sexuality or gender.

It remains a 'hidden' crime, often taking place behind closed doors, surrounded by stigma and significantly under reported. Abuse can take many forms. These examples are not exhaustive and should not be taken in isolation.

They are interchangeable across the different forms of domestic abuse as highlighted in the following sections:

PHYSICAL

Physically hurts the individual in any way or throws items in their direction to scare or threaten them.

EMOTIONAL

A form of manipulation and control that can harm a person's mental health and wellbeing.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Coercive control is an ongoing pattern of behaviour in which the perpetrator insults, humiliates, and instills fear in an individual in order to control them.

FINANCIAL

Constantly wants the individual to justify what they spend money on and tries to take control of all finances.

STALKING

Demands to know where the individual is at all times including constantly messaging, calling and tracking of their movements.

SEXUAL

A form of abuse which can include jealousy, demanding sex, or pressuring victims into unwanted sexual activities.

You can find out more information, including local statistics, by visiting: *womensaidni.org/domesticabuse*

WHAT IS COERCIVE CONTROL?

Through our many years of providing specialised support, Women's Aid knows the vast majority of women experiencing domestic abuse are victims of coercive control. Our own definition of coercive control is:

"*An intentional pattern of behaviour (often used alongside other forms of abuse) which can include threats, excessive regulation, intimidation, humiliation and enforced isolation. It is designed to punish, dominate, exploit, exhaust, create fear, confusion and increase dependency in a woman (or a woman and her children).Over time it can lead to a complete loss of self."*[2]

Evan Stark, author of *'Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life' identifies*:

"*The primary outcome of coercive control is a condition of entrapment that can be hostage-like in the harms it inflicts on dignity, liberty, autonomy and personhood as well as to physical and psychological integrity."*[3]

Tactics associated with coercive control include forms of constraining, monitoring or regulating a partner's everyday behaviour, controlling access to money and transport, influencing how a partner can dress, social isolation, physical violence and threats of physical violence, coerced sex and stalking.

These tactics can be very subtle and therefore hard to identify; however, evidence suggests that the presence of coercive control in relationships can serve as an indicator of future physical or sexual violence within these relationships.

Northern Ireland criminalised coercively controlling behaviour through the *'Domestic Abuse & Civil Proceedings Act 2021'* which has been enforced since February 2022. A series of coercively controlling behaviour is now an offence in Northern Ireland.

This means the threshold of what counts as domestic abuse now includes non physical acts of domestic abuse including coercive control.

Examples of coercive control include:

- Constantly criticises your appearance, undermines your decisions, opinions and blames everything on you.
- Demands to know where you are at all times including constantly messaging, calling and tracking your movements.
- Constantly wants you to justify what you spend money on or take control of all finances.

- Tries to isolate you from your friends, family and colleagues and makes you justify any absences.

As with any law, it will take time to shift the public's misconception that 'only physical violence is domestic abuse'.

WHAT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS?

We recognise domestic abuse can happen to anyone regardless of sex or gender identity. However, the way in which men and women experience domestic abuse is different.

Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG) is defined in the Istanbul Convention as:

"*A violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.*" 4

Globally, women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse, with 1 in 4 women experiencing domestic abuse in their lifetime.

In September 2024, the Northern Ireland Executive published their first ever *'Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategic Framework'* to tackle this issue in the region. This Strategy will run from 2024 to 2031 and will help create a safer Northern Ireland for women and girls.

To bring this into context, on average in Northern Ireland, a woman is murdered every other month. The vast majority of these women were murdered in their own homes, with either a suspected or convicted perpetrator being a male known to them.

It is also important to understand violence against women is not a new phenomenon. It has unfortunately always existed in Northern Ireland, but as a society we are now calling out this behaviour more and finally acknowledging VAWG as a specific issue we need to address.

VAWG is rooted in historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have resulted in domination over and discrimination against women by men, and the prevention of the full advancement of women.

Although society has improved with regard to gender equality, sexist and stereotypical views of men as 'dominant' and women as 'subordinate' still exist.

Examples of VAWG include:

- Domestic abuse.
- Sexual offences including rape, sexual assault, sex trafficking and sexual harassment.
- Stalking & harassment.
- Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).
- Child or forced marriage.
- So called 'honour' killings.

It is important to stress whilst the above examples can apply to men and boys as victims and survivors, the majority of these behaviours are perpetrated against women and girls.

It is also important to highlight any mitigating measures, such as the *Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategic Framework*, to tackle these behaviours would create a safer environment for everyone, regardless of gender.

FEMICIDE

"Femicide is defined as an intentional killing with a gender-related motivation. It is different from homicide, where the motivation may not be gender related." [5]

UNITED NATIONS WOMEN

Femicide unfortunately is driven by remaining systematic discriminations against women and girls including unequal power relations, gender stereotyping or harmful social norms within a community. It is the most extreme form of violence against women and girls and is a global problem.

Statistically, globally the perpetrators of femicide are most likely to be a male known to the woman with the most common connection being current/ex intimate partners and male relatives including fathers and sons.[6]

Since 2020, the vast majority of femicides recorded in Northern Ireland the alleged or convicted perpetrator has been a male known to the woman.

It is important to use the word femicide as it highlights these killings are not random but are facilitated by discrimination and fueled by misogyny, drawing on specific vulnerabilities which women face and make them less safe.

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEWS

If someone aged 16 or older in Northern Ireland dies due to, or in circumstances suggesting, domestic abuse after 10 December 2020, a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) may be conducted.

The purpose of these reviews is to identify lessons which can help improve support services and prevent further deaths due to domestic abuse.

A DHR may only be considered, with a view to identifying lessons to be learned, within the following circumstances:

- if the deceased person is aged 16 or over
- if the death has or appears to have resulted from violence, abuse or neglect
- if the person requesting the DHR is a relative, in an intimate partner relationship or lived in the same household as the victim

Three Independent Chairs are responsible for leading each commissioned review and producing a report, with assistance from a multi-agency DHR Panel.

Each chair works with a panel composed of representatives from a range of organisations, including statutory bodies and community/voluntary sector. Together, they identify key lessons, which the chair then incorporates into the final report.

Since their introduction in Northern Ireland, there have been several published DHRs and these can be found on the Department for Justice NI's website.

VIOLENCE/ABUSE

While many people are familiar with the terms 'domestic abuse' and 'domestic violence' and often use them interchangeably, Women's Aid strongly recommends using the term *'domestic abuse'* instead of *'domestic violence'* for several reasons including:

- The widespread belief that 'violence' refers solely to physical acts perpetuates the misconception that domestic abuse only occurs when there is a physical attack.
- Using the phrase 'domestic abuse' is more encompassing of the different forms of abuse experienced including emotional, sexual, financial and physical.

SUICIDE

The sensitive reporting of issues relating to suicide have been consciously adapted over recent years thanks to the work behind resources such as the Samaritans' *Media Guidelines on Reporting on Suicide*[7] which helps guide the reporting of the issue in a respectful and dignified manner.

Domestic abuse related suicide is a specific issue which is finally getting recognised for its interconnection and the devastating impact domestic abuse can have on victims and survivors. As a movement, Women's Aid is trying to foster a greater understanding of domestic abuse in relation to mental health through public policy and training.

The insidious nature of coercively controlling behaviour and the psychological damage to victims leaves them feeling hopeless, constantly in fear and worried there is no way to escape the abuse.

Women's Aid has seen this issue throughout the years, where women have taken their own lives due to the direct impact of the domestic abuse inflicted upon them by their perpetrator.

This is why as a movement we have long campaigned for the introduction of deaths caused by suicide to be included in the scope for Domestic Homicide Reviews to help prevent any future deaths by suicide as a result of domestic abuse.

In recent years, several domestic abuse perpetrators in England have been convicted in cases where their victims died by suicide as a result of the abuse. Notable cases include those of Justene Reece[8] who was being stalked by her ex-partner, and he was found guilty of her Manslaughter, and Kellie Sutton[9] who was found to be unlawfully killed following domestic abuse. Reporting on suicide in the aftermath of domestic abuse requires careful consideration and sensitivity.

Below are some key guidelines for responsible media coverage in such cases:

- When covering suicides, particularly those linked to domestic abuse, refrain from disclosing specific personal details unless explicitly provided by the victim's family or where it is necessary for public understanding.
- Use language which respects the victim's dignity and avoids stigmatisation or victim-blaming. Avoid terms which might minimise the seriousness of domestic abuse or imply the person could have "avoided" the situation.

- Where appropriate, provide context by highlighting the role domestic abuse played in the individual's experience. It is crucial to educate the public on the effects of abuse and how it contributes to suicide.
- Remember loved ones of the victim may be reading or hearing about the case. A balanced, respectful approach is crucial in reducing distress.
- Be cautious in the language used to describe both the victim and the abuser. Avoid any suggestion the person who died "could have left" or their actions were a result of personal weakness.
- Ensure reporting also provides pathways for hope. Mention the efforts of organisations, communities, and Governments who are working to prevent domestic abuse and suicide. Please also ensure the piece contains signposting information to support services.

By following these guidelines, media can help dispel harmful stereotypes and raise awareness of the need for (and availability of) support systems for those at risk of suicide as a result of domestic abuse.

INTERSECTIONAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

As we have previously noted, victims are not a homogenous group. It is important to remember people with intersectional identities are impacted by domestic abuse in different ways and often face additional barriers to accessing support.

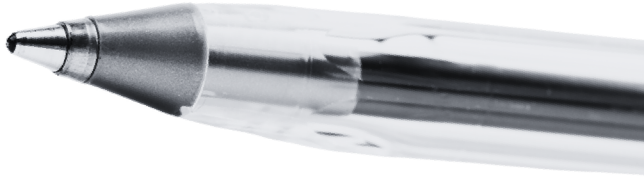
MALE VICTIMS

While police statistics show that most victims of domestic abuse are female, we know anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse. In 2023/24, PSNI statistics identified males making up 33% of victims of domestic abuse crimes.[10]

It is important to realise that, like female victims, male victims are not a homogenous group. Men in the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely than heterosexual men to experience crime, including domestic and sexual abuse.[11]

It can be difficult for men to identify themselves as victims due to harmful gender stereotypes and societal perceptions of masculinity. Due to these cultural barriers to coming forward about domestic abuse, men can find it difficult to access support services.

Therefore, it is vitally important for media platforms to signpost to support services when talking about this issue, as it can open avenues for male victims to access support and information about domestic abuse.



LGBTQIA+

Due to the historical mistreatment of members of the LGBTQIA+ community, many victims and survivors of abuse within this group face significant barriers when seeking support or reporting incidents to the police. Some examples include their fear of not being believed, being 'outed' if they come forward or facing stigma for remaining in an abusive situation with a same sex partner.

It is vital anyone who comes forward after an abusive relationship is treated with the utmost dignity and respect.

What has happened to them should not be sensationalised, especially when it comes to victims from the transgender community, where public discourse can often be even more incredibly toxic.

MINORITISED ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

Victims and survivors from minoritised Ethnic Communities often face additional barriers when coming forward after domestic abuse.

Examples include:

- Language barriers
- Concerns their case will not be taken seriously by authorities
- Fear of being ostracised by their community
- Anxiety that coming forward could jeopardise their insecure immigration status

Given the toxic public discourse surrounding immigration and the treatment of minoritised Ethnic communities, it is crucial any reporting of domestic abuse involving this group avoids inflammatory language.

This protects the dignity of the victim and helps prevent the perpetuation of unfounded myths about perpetrators.

In 2023/24, PSNI statistics confirmed 4 in 5 domestic abuse offenders were of white Ethnicity and held UK or Irish Nationality.[12]

Unfortunately, some recent headlines from Northern Irish media outlets have often focused on the perpetrator's or victim's Nationality when they were not of British, Irish, or Northern Irish origin.

For example, one headline read *'Polish man appears in court charged with stabbing.*' We would very rarely see a headline like *'Northern Irish man appears in court charged with stabbing'* for a crime which happened in Belfast. Labelling individuals by their Nationality in domestic abuse cases is unhelpful both to the criminal justice process and in our efforts to challenge myths about domestic abuse.

Abusers come from all backgrounds, regardless of race, gender, class, or religion.

Leading with Nationality or Ethnicity when it is irrelevant to the domestic abuse reinforces harmful stereotypes about minoritised Ethnic groups by suggesting perpetrators belong to an 'other' group, when in reality, abusers come from every part of society.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Victims and survivors of domestic abuse who have a disability can find it incredibly difficult to come forward to report the abuse they have faced for a number of reasons, such as:

- The fear of not being believed is particularly common if the perpetrator is also their caregiver
- Victims with documented mental health issues may face additional challenges, as perpetrators can manipulate authorities by casting doubt on the victim's reliability
- Victims may require alternative communication methods, such as a sign language interpreter, and authorities may not always accommodate these needs effectively
- Neurodivergent victims may be misread by untrained authorities, who might mistake distress responses for erratic or uncooperative behavior

When reporting on domestic abuse cases involving victims with disabilities, it is crucial to avoid narratives or headlines which dehumanise them or reduce their experiences to their disability.

Headlines like '*Wheelchair-Bound Woman's Dependence on Caregiver Leads to Tragic Abuse Incident*' perpetuate harmful stereotypes by framing the victim's disability as central to the abuse.

When reporting on a perpetrator who has a disability, it is important any media coverage should not exclusively focus on the disability as a reason 'why' they carried out their abuse.

To do so risks reinforcing harmful misconceptions around those with disabilities living in our communities, especially those who are neurodivergent or have mental health issues.

To summarise, when reporting on domestic abuse cases, ensure that you do not use a victim's identity to explain or excuse the abuse they have suffered.

If it is absolutely relevant to include this information within the story, always contact an organisation who works with the specific community for advice on how to report safely and sensitively.

You can find a list of relevant NI based organisations on page 32 of this booklet.

WHY SHOULD REPRESENTATION MATTER TO JOURNALISTS?

PRESS

Journalists have a unique opportunity to raise awareness around domestic abuse.

Media is massively influential in shaping social opinion. Research suggests mass media affects shifts in social and cultural contexts, this is evidenced by the influence media had in altering public opinion around driving under the influence of alcohol. This is also true of social attitudes to domestic abuse.

Research on media reporting in America identified that between 1994 and 1995, media coverage of domestic violence increased, and in the same period male respondents who identified domestic abuse as a pervasive social issue rose from 25 to 33 percent.[13]

Therefore, media reporting on domestic abuse can influence how society views domestic abuse and how it responds to victims and survivors.

Choosing to report this responsibly can have a positive impact on societal attitudes and legitimise it as a social issue worth caring about.

Gillespie et al[14] identifies the main risk factor in domestic homicide is a history of domestic abuse, but journalistic responses often do not adequately contextualise this.

DOMESTIC ABUSE TIMELINE

A strong piece of research that helps to explain the build up to a domestic abuse murder is Professor Jane Monckton Smith's Domestic Homicide Timeline. She reviewed 575 domestic abuse femicide killings in the UK which showed an 8-stage timeline[15] of events before a homicide takes place:

1. **The Start** - there was a pre-relationship history of abuse or stalking by the perpetrator.
2. The romantic relationship **quickly develops** into a serious relationship.
3. The relationship becomes **coercively controlling**.
4. A **triggering** event threatens the perpetrator's control - for example, the victim tries to leave the relationship.
5. **Escalation** - an increase in the intensity or frequency of the partner's control tactics, such as stalking or threatening suicide.
6. The perpetrator has a **change in thinking** - choosing to move on, either through revenge or by homicide.
7. **Planning** - the perpetrator might buy weapons or seek opportunities to get the victim alone.
8. **Homicide** - the perpetrator kills his or her partner and possibly hurts others such as the victim's children.

This research goes on to identify examples of articles which have successfully framed domestic homicide as domestic abuse. They found by using this frame, journalists and by extension, consumers, are forced to consider the role society plays in both perpetuating and preventing violence. By framing domestic abuse as a wider social problem, and a matter of social responsibility, journalists can raise awareness around the issue of domestic abuse and positively influence how we react to it.

This also allows journalists to tell the full story. Rarely are acts of domestic abuse isolated incidents.

We know at Women's Aid, a woman subjected to domestic abuse has most likely been assaulted several times before she contacted the police.

We also know there is a profound impact on children who experience domestic abuse. A study in North America found children who had experienced domestic abuse in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and or sexually assaulted than the national average.[16]

By failing to frame incidents of abuse in context, the article is only identifying part of the story, omitting the full picture of the abuse that victims and

survivors are dealing with. By framing these incidents as part of a wider social issue, journalists are giving a more complete picture of the nature of what has occurred.

Research indicates media has an impact on how society views gender, how gender roles are constructed and how gender stereotypes are reinforced. This is particularly true when reporting on abuse, as Naylor notes:

'News stories of violence also have a powerful role in the construction of gender – in everyday understandings of the roles and capabilities of men and women.' [17]

For example, the stereotypical view that men should be strong feeds into the incorrect assumption they cannot or should not be victims of domestic abuse. If the media makes a conscious effort to report on violence responsibly, without gender bias, it can have a profound and positive impact on how society relates to survivors of domestic abuse.

There is an international legal precedent to improve media reporting on gender stereotypes and VAWG. The UK has committed itself to several International Human Rights documents which have created legal obligations to eliminate gender stereotyping in the media, including print media.

The UN Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) note in General Recommendation 19, 'Effective measures should be taken to ensure that the media respect and promote respect for women'.

The Committee recognised in its 2018 Concluding Observations[18] on the UK, the important strides have been made to improve representations of gender by the media, but stated the UK should *'continue to encourage the media to take further measures to eliminate negative gender stereotypes and to promote positive and diverse portrayals of gender.'*

The UK Government[19] ratified the Istanbul Convention into Law, of which Article 17 of the Convention states Parties should encourage:

'The media, with due respect for freedom of expression and their independence, to participate in the elaboration and implementation of policies and to set guidelines and self-regulatory standards to prevent violence against women and to enhance respect for their dignity.' [20]

INSENSITIVE LANGUAGE

Language plays a large part in how domestic abuse and VAWG is framed, presented and digested by the public. It shapes the societal conversation around these issues.

Using the wrong language can minimise the seriousness of abuse suffered by victims/survivors, excuse the behaviour of perpetrators as good people driven to violence by external factors, perpetuate victim blaming attitudes and reiterate unfounded misconceptions around domestic abuse.

Victims and survivors are often in vulnerable positions as they try to rebuild their lives following domestic abuse, and insensitive language can be incredibly re-traumatising, especially when they are seeing their criminal case play out in the media. Acknowledging their experiences with empathy and respect helps to validate their suffering and promotes their dignity.

Insensitive language can unintentionally shift blame onto the victim, especially if phrases like *"provoked"* or *"asking for it"* or referencing if the victim *“had been drinking the night of the incident”* are used. This can perpetuate harmful myths about abuse, such as the victim somehow caused or deserved the violence.

WORDS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Commonly Used	Why This is Not Helpful	Use Instead
The couple had a volatile relationship.	This phrase suggests both parties were complicit in abusive behaviour leading up to the incident.	**'They regularly abused their partner' or 'They had a history of abusive behaviour towards their partner.'**
They snapped. They lost control. Red-mist. Jealously-fueled.	Using terms like 'snapped' suggests that this behaviour was out of character. In reality they probably have a history of controlling and abusive behaviour.	**They had a history of controlling behaviour.**
[Name of perpetrator] lost control after she/he [the victim] did…	This frames the event as a reaction to something the victim had said or done. A victim is not complicit in their own victimisation. Using language like this suggests they might be and feeds into victim blaming narratives.	**'They perpetrated domestic abuse against...'**
They are a good colleague/father/friend of the community going through a difficult time.	This excuses abuse and shifts the responsibility away from the perpetrator. The perpetrator being well respected never excuses their abusive behaviour behind closed doors.	**'Their public persona was very different to the daily reality of violent, controlling behaviour at home...'**
Crime of passion	Salacious language distracts from the focus of the article and obscures the seriousness of the crime.	**'They murdered her/him.'**

WORDS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Commonly Used	Why This is Not Helpful	Use Instead
Their death was a tragedy.	The term "tragedy" often conveys a sense of an inevitable, uncontrollable event, suggesting a domestic abuse-related murder is just an unfortunate accident or act of fate, rather than the result of systemic failings that enabled the perpetrator to carry out the murder. This downplays the need for accountability and action.	**'Their death was a murder which could have been prevented.'**
This type of crime doesn't happen in this quiet community...	According to PSNI statistics, domestic abuse makes up approximately 20% of all crime in Northern Ireland. Domestic abuse is often under reported, so it already making up 1/5 of all crime in this jurisdiction reflects its prevalence in our society. Abuse in the home is happening behind closed doors, it is important to avoid saying 'this doesn't happen in this community' because statistically it does.	**'While this community is often seen as quiet, it is not immune to the violence and systemic issues which affect many others.'** **'This may seem like a peaceful community, but the reality is gender-based violence can happen anywhere, and we must confront it.'**
Non-consensual sex	Sex without consent is rape/sexual assault.	**'He raped her.'** **'She was sexually assaulted by him.'**

EXAMPLES OF WHAT NOT TO DO IN A HEADLINE

Jealousy motivated woman's ex-partner to stab her seven times

Woman's beating by partner left boy, **7**, on winter streets in pyjamas trying to get help

Man who choked girlfriend after she refused to eat dinner jailed

Jail for jealous drunk who torched ex–girlfriend's home

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Scottish rugby player convicted of domestic abuse

Man jailed for breaching protection order by contacting ex

[FIRSTNAME/SURNAME] JAILED FOR VIOLENT ATTACK ON EX-PARTNER IN BELFAST

‘MENTAL HEALTH’ MASKING DOMESTIC ABUSE

Domestic homicides, involving murder-suicides, are often incorrectly framed as a result of a mental health issue, rather than recognised as the result of domestic abuse.

The case of the murder of Clodagh Hawe[21] and her three sons Liam, Niall and Ryan by Alan Hawe was very much framed as a mental health issue. He was painted as a pillar of the community who “snapped”. The reality was Alan Hawe was coercively controlling towards his family.

By perpetuating the narrative that these murders are a result of a mental health crisis, the reality of coercive control inflicted on victims is denied, as the perpetrator’s actions are excused under the narrative that they ‘snapped.’ This framing ignores the fact that victims in such circumstances often endure years of fear and abuse at the hands of their perpetrator. The ‘they snapped’ story strips the victims of dignity by failing to acknowledge the terror they suffered.

On a fundamental human level, people want an explanation as to why something like this could happen, however, this narrative does not reflect reality. Domestic abuse is an uncomfortable topic for many because acknowledging it means confronting the terrifying truth; it can happen to anyone, regardless of background or circumstances.

As journalists, you have a vital role in our society to shed light on the stories others may find difficult to face. If we are serious about ending domestic abuse in our communities, we must move away from the oversimplified narrative that people ‘snap’ and kill someone they were supposed to love.

The prevalence of domestic abuse is undeniable. It is imperative journalists ensure their reporting captures the full context of these stories, including the patterns of coercive control and abuse that often precede such killings. This approach not only honours the victims but also helps raise awareness and fosters meaningful conversations about how to address domestic abuse effectively.

THE IMAGES YOU USE MATTER

When reporting on domestic abuse, it is vital the images you use to accompany the news piece sensitively and respectfully cover the story.

Common themes we would advise avoiding when covering a domestic abuse story include:

- Avoid using generic images which infantilise victims such as a woman recoiling with a shadowy figure standing over them.
- Using violent imagery including showing injuries. A story leading with a bloody image for example, can be incredibly triggering for victims and survivors. It can also be seen as glorifying violence.
- Never use an image of the perpetrator and the victim together, even if the victim's face is censored. Posting an image of this nature is dehumanising to the victim, especially if they seem 'happy' or 'normal' in the photo. It takes the focus off the perpetrator and their actions. This is especially important to remember in cases where a murder has occurred and the victim can no longer speak for themselves.

A posed photo of a smiling couple can never convey the reality of life for victims and survivors behind closed doors, especially if in the photo they 'looked normal.'

- Always ask permission if using a family photograph. In this ever increasingly digital world, we are often one social media search away from finding a photo of anyone. Whilst this may be an 'easy' way to find a photo of someone, you must remember you are looking for an image of someone who has been abused and most likely remains incredibly vulnerable. Please respect their dignity and always explicitly ask for a photo and respect their decision if they decline your request.

ASKING THE WRONG PEOPLE

Most abusive partners present as incredibly charming in their public lives; therefore it is not always helpful to ask casual acquaintances, neighbours or colleagues to give character assessments of abusers.

They will not be aware of their abusive behaviour behind closed doors, their comments could feed into the notion this was a one-off event rather than a pattern of abuse.

AVOIDING SENSATIONALIST HEADLINES

Given so much of our news content is consumed online now, it is important to make sure domestic abuse is reported sensitively.

Often an article about domestic abuse can be sensitively written and presented, but the online headline intended to get the reader to click on the story can be insensitive or poorly worded.

This is more commonly known as clickbait, these types of headlines or taglines should be avoided.

'TOXIC' COMMENTS

More people now discover news stories through their social media feeds, and as a result of the nature of social media itself, will interact with the story through liking, sharing and commenting.

It is important to stress to news outlets sharing stories on domestic abuse that due to misconceptions and myths around this topic, the comments section can become a toxic environment.

Real life examples under Northern Irish domestic abuse criminal court stories include:

"He is actually a really nice man, no excuse for what happened, no one knows what happens to the mind."

"Why doesn't she just leave???"

"Businesses are folding everywhere, people are losing their jobs... but this is a story?"

Women's Aid knows we do not have to explain to journalists how toxic comments and messages can be on social media. We ask for your help for the wellbeing of victims and survivors to please ensure comments are disabled or at the bare minimum restricted on cases involving domestic and sexual abuse.

ENGAGING VICTIMS & SURVIVORS

If you are working with a victim or survivor for a story, it is essential to approach the situation with sensitivity and empathy.

Ensuring the safety of the victim or survivor must be your **top priority.** You cannot predict how a perpetrator will react to them speaking out. Always consider the long-term well-being of the victim or survivor throughout your reporting process.

Before encouraging survivors to share their experiences publicly, ensure they have thoroughly considered the safety implications.

If you are engaging victims/survivors to share their stories via a support organisation, they will want to work with you collaboratively to ensure the person sharing their story is supported and feels safe sharing their lived experience. It is important to understand this engagement cannot be 'on demand' within a tight timeframe, as the organisation will have engagement procedures to ensure the victim/survivor is fully supported during the process.

Reassure them they can share their story anonymously and avoid pressuring them to make 'on-the-spot' decisions. As a default, assume any victim or survivor sharing their story should remain anonymous to prioritise their long-term safety and wellbeing. If they choose to be identified, ensure all necessary measures including linking in with specialist support organisations are in place to help them feel safe and supported.

BEFORE AN INTERVIEW

- Have you ensured participation is safe for survivors by addressing any concerns they may have?
- Have you asked participants in advance about any support needs they may have to allow sufficient time to put measures in place?
- Have you chosen an accessible, safe, and welcoming venue? Consider ease of travel, etc to create a comfortable space for all participants.
- Have you asked whether the person prefers to be referred to as a victim or survivor of domestic abuse? This distinction is significant and personal to each individual. It is crucial to respect how they wish to be addressed, reflecting their unique experiences.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Check in with participants after the event to ensure they got home safely, thank them for participating, check any potential additional support they might need and ensure they are compensated for any out-of-pocket expenses including public transport fare, parking fee, etc.

- Have you updated participants on how their imput was used?
- What did you do with the information they shared, did anything change as a result?

Provide opportunities to gather reflections from participants on the process, (including giving the opportunity to do this anonymously). For example, what worked well? What could be improved? Create an opportunity for you and your colleagues to reflect and debrief on the piece for your own self-care and understanding. Consider how these reflections feed into learnings for future survivor engagement.

It is important to reflect, for you and your colleagues wellbeing, especially with recognition some of your colleagues may also be survivors.

Remember, support is here, not just for your audience, but for you and your colleagues too.

RESPONSIBLE REPORTING CHECKLIST

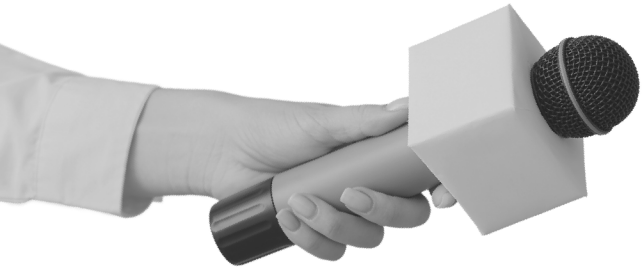
1 IT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE, CALL IT OUT

It is domestic abuse, it is not a one-off incident, avoid terms like “they snapped”, “they lost control” or “in a moment of madness”. Perpetrators of domestic abuse are always in control of their behaviour. Their behaviour is thoughtful and purposeful, and they are responsible for it.

Do not frame the perpetrator as a “pillar of the community” who has made a bad decision – their decision was to abuse someone and make them feel unsafe.

Likewise, perpetrators are people, so avoid language which makes him seem fantastical or otherworldly like “monster” or “vicious”. Abusive people look just like everybody else.

Domestic abuse is a prevalent problem, use this incident to comment on it. Approach relevant domestic abuse agencies for comments, frame it as part of a wider problem.



2 LEAD WITH EMPATHY, RESPECT & DIGNITY

If the person is still alive refer to them as a survivor if you do not know how they wish to be addressed. They have personhood, they are not defined by the abuse perpetrated against them.

Ensure no confidential information is released about a victim or survivor, particularly when they are part of an ongoing case.

Please do not use language which questions how the victim or survivor’s behaviour could have led to this.

Do not use graphic or offensive images. Centre the victim or survivor in images. Avoid using family photographs which include the perpetrator, this can be upsetting to survivors or to loved ones of victims. It can also frame the abuser as family orientated and add to the narrative this was a one-off incident.

Avoid looking for comments from neighbours or colleagues to build a profile of the perpetrator.

The likelihood is they will not have been aware of the abusive behaviour, abusers often present as extremely charming.

3 AVOID GENDER STEREOTYPES

Do not use language which frames female victims or survivors as passive to their own lives, or question why she did not leave. Women experiencing domestic abuse are the experts of their own situation. They have managed their situation, keeping themselves and their children safe for a long time, be respectful of this.

If the victim or survivor is male, do not use language which minimises the abuse he has suffered or calls into question his gender. Men can be victims of domestic abuse too, and very often feel they cannot come forward. Changing the narrative around male victims can create a culture of support and allow more victims to speak about the abuse they have suffered.

4 BE RESPECTFUL OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Examples of this:

- A man's Ethnicity does not indicate he is more likely to be abusive.
- A bisexual woman's sexual orientation is not a justification for jealousy and abuse.
- Do not use a person's status as transgender to explain abuse they have suffered.

Do not use a person's intersectionality against them in order to create a salacious or dramatic story. If their intersectionality is relevant, then ensure you include it in a responsible manner which does not read as an excuse for abuse. Be sure to use the correct language, for example use the term sex worker, not prostitute.

5 SIGNPOST

Include the information of local domestic abuse services at the end of the article. Contact local services to ensure the information is up to date and correct.

Many articles which report on domestic abuse namely after there has been an apparent murder/suicide will only signpost to a suicide intervention helpline. This again reinforces the narrative the perpetrator snapped and did something out of character, which ignores the experience of the victim/survivor.

If you want to include a suicide helpline then make sure you are also signposting to services for survivors.

Look after yourselves in these moments too. These stories can be very triggering, talk about anything which may have upset you, and practice self-care.

6 RESPECT VICTIMS & SURVIVORS

Before seeking out a case study, consider if it is necessary to the article or could the same outcome be achieved without one. Asking someone to recount their trauma should not be taken lightly.

Link in with local domestic abuse services well in advance of your deadline. Finding someone who is confident enough to share their experience of domestic abuse is a sensitive issue and takes time.

Think about how you can get the information you need while remaining sensitive to the survivor.

Ultimately, always ensure the safety of the interviewee, taking care to safeguard any identifying information, making sure their identity is always protected.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Women's Aid

Services throughout Northern Ireland offer specialist support for women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse. You can find your local Women's Aid group by visiting: womensaidni.org

mens advisory project

The Men's Advisory Project (MAP) exists to provide counselling services for men experiencing domestic abuse. Support and counselling services are also available to men who have previously left a violent or abusive relationship and who are still experiencing the effects.

mapni.co.uk
info@mapni.co.uk
Belfast: (028) 9024 1929
Foyle: (028) 7116 0001

domestic and sexual abuse
helpline 0808 802 1414

Available to anyone who has concerns about domestic or sexual abuse, now or in the past. It is open to all women and men affected by domestic and sexual violence.
dsahelpline.org

The Rainbow Project

The Rainbow Project provides Northern Ireland's only co-cultural gay affirmative counselling service.

info@rainbow-project.org
rainbow-project.org
Belfast: (028) 9031 9030
Foyle: (028) 7128 3030

here
a place for lesbian & bisexual women

HERe NI is a community organisation and registered charity supporting lesbian and bisexual women and their families to improve their lives across Northern Ireland.

hereni.org
028 9024 9452

USEFUL CONTACTS

Lifeline counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to listen. They provide support around suicide prevention, self-harm, abuse, trauma, depression and anxiety.
lifelinehelpline.info

ASSIST NI is a new advocacy service offering impartial and practical support for victims of sexual and domestic abuse. The service assesses individual need and risk, develops a safety support plan, helps encourage and maintain engagement of victims within the criminal justice system, and refers victims on to other agencies for specialist support as appropriate.

assistni.org.uk
info@assistni.org.uk

Samaritans provides emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope or at risk of suicide.

Call: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org
samaritans.org/ni/samaritans-ireland/about/northern-ireland

If someone is worried about a child, they can contact NSPCC professional counsellors for help, advice and support on 0808 800 5000
nspcc.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/northern-ireland/

The Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre offers a range of support and services for children, young people, women and men who have experienced sexual violence and abuse, recently and in the past.

Their 24-hour Freephone Helpline is: 0800 389 4424
therowan.hscni.net

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NOTES

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