



DIGNITY FOR DEAD WOMEN

Media guidelines for reporting domestic abuse deaths



These guidelines were created by Janey Starling on behalf of Level Up, 2022.

Level Up is a feminist community campaigning for gender justice in the UK. Our mission is to interrupt gender injustice in the UK by strategically targeting cultural moments. Our vision is a world where people of all genders are loved and liberated from bodily and systemic violence.

The guidelines have been developed with the support of:

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“These guidelines are crucial. Reporting of these homicides should not only be fair, but should reflect reality because this could help prevent future deaths. Myths and inaccurate sensationalism protect killers, not victims.”

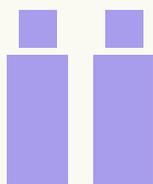
- Dr Jane Monckton-Smith

author of “Murder, Gender and The Media: Narratives of Dangerous Love”
and Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Gloucestershire

INTRODUCTION

Every week in the UK, two women are murdered by a partner or ex-partner.¹ Some of these deaths attract media attention, and journalists are faced with the challenge of covering a public health issue that is in the public interest, whilst managing an ethical duty towards victims' families.

These guidelines, backed by all UK press regulators (IPSO and IMPRESS) are a tool for newsrooms to ensure domestic abuse deaths are reported with sensitivity, dignity and accuracy – and that they reflect the broader public health issue of domestic abuse. They were created alongside domestic abuse survivors, experts, journalists and press regulators.



Two women a week are murdered by a partner or ex-partner

Before you write about a domestic abuse death, understand that:

1. When someone has been killed by their partner or ex-partner, this usually marks the endpoint to a sustained period of coercive control - not an isolated incident.² Nearly half (49%) of women murdered by their partner or ex-partner are killed less than a month after they have separated.

People who murder their partners are motivated by beliefs around ownership, possession and control. Including this broader context is a matter of accuracy – and is in the public interest.

- 2. Research shows that romantic narratives in domestic abuse deaths can lead to lighter sentencing in court,** even when there has been clear evidence of physical violence leading to murder.³ Studies have also shown that men who demonstrated “love” before, during or after they enacted fatal violence were given more lenient sentences and more sympathy than men who demonstrated an absence of love.⁴ This means that articles describing a “jilted lover”, “heartbroken” or “jealous rage” have a negative impact on justice for victims.
- 3. Insensitive reporting has lasting traumatic impacts on victims' families.** Victims' children will, and do, read all the coverage about their deceased mother - and can be retraumatized. 2 in 3 families say reporting intruded into their grief and shock.⁵
- 4. Cultural and religious insensitivity detracts focus from the woman's life that has been lost.** Domestic abuse deaths – including so-called honour killings – are a global issue and not specific to a religious viewpoint, unless stated otherwise by a victim's family. Inaccurate and insensitive reporting fuels discrimination against Muslim communities in the UK.
- 5. Every article on fatal domestic abuse is an opportunity to help prevent further deaths**

¹ Office for National Statistics, 2016.

² Stark, E (2007), Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life, UK: Oxford University Press.

³ Monckton-Smith, Jane (2012), Murder, Gender and the Media: Narratives of Dangerous Love, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

⁴ Burton, M. (2008), Legal Responses to Domestic Violence. Oxford: Routledge Cavendish.

⁵ Level Up (2020), How families bereaved by fatal domestic abuse have experienced the press.

BEST PRACTICE REPORTING TIPS (AIDA)

ACCOUNTABILITY

Place responsibility on the killer

Refrain from describing the murder as an uncharacteristic event, and look deeper into the context and character of the relationship. Men kill because they want to assert their control, not because they've "lost control". Fatal domestic abuse is underpinned by a longstanding sense of ownership, coercive control and possessive behaviours – and usually occurs when the victim has attempted to flee the abusive partner.

Avoid including speculative or spurious "reasons" or "triggers" for a killing, as these remove the fatal incident from the full context. Also avoid using sympathetic, romanticised clichés that invite pity for the killer, such as "jilted lover" or framing the killing in the context of an "affair"; these are proven to lead to lighter sentencing.

Consider the sources included in the piece. Try not to build a piece solely from a defendant's claims in court; the deceased partner is unable to verify these.

IMAGES

Centre the victim, and avoid insensitive or trivialising images.

Centre the image of the victim. Don't use composite images of the victim placed next to the perpetrator. Use the photo provided by the victim's family or police.

DIGNITY

Avoid sensationalising language, invasive or graphic details that compromise the dignity of the deceased woman or her surviving children and family members.

Be mindful of intrusion into grief and shock. Remember a victim's children are likely to read reports on their mother's death.

Centre the images and experiences of the victim (her job, her family's words about her). Make sure your article is a memorial for the victim, not propaganda for the perpetrator.

Journalists have an ethical responsibility to family members, especially children who survive their mother's death. In cases of black and minoritised women, focus on the perpetrator's gender-based abuse and control as the root cause of homicide. When religion or culture is used as a reason, it detracts from the misogynist beliefs the killer holds that underpin their violent actions.

ACCURACY

Name the crime as domestic abuse

Name the crime as domestic abuse or violence, as opposed to just 'tragedy' or 'horror'. Perpetrators are not 'monsters' or 'evil', they make choices that are motivated by control. Frame the death in the context of a pattern of controlling behaviour. Where possible, include examples of a history of coercive control and previous assaults. Find out whether police were aware of the abuse and if they responded.

Reach out to **experts** for comment, not just the police. Include a reference to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline at the end of the article, so readers know where to seek help:

For confidential support, call the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Freephone Helpline on 0808 2000 247 or visit womensaid.co.uk

If you or your family have lost a friend or family member through fatal domestic abuse, AAFDA (Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse) can offer specialist and expert support and advocacy. For more info visit www.aafda.org.uk

WHAT NOT TO DO

1

Avoid clichés like “jilted lover” that reinforce a romantic narrative. This is proven to lead to sympathy and lighter sentencing for killers.

2

Avoid speculative reasons or sensationalised “triggers” for a murder that are based on a woman’s behaviour. This is oversimplifying and misrepresenting the full context. A woman’s dignity is the highest priority.

3

Consider what resources or specialist voices you need to seek out in order to cover this piece sensitively. They are out there and will enhance the quality and accuracy of your writing. This especially relates to white journalists covering deaths in BAME communities.

5

Don’t perpetuate myths like “jealous rages” or “loss of control”. Almost all domestic violence deaths are planned by highly controlling partners or ex-partners. Dig deeper into the context and character of the relationship, the coercive control present in the relationship, and any prior engagement that the killer had with the police.

7

In the first stages of a case, quoting a neighbour who did not know the context of the relationship, is inappropriate and risks damaging the family’s bereavement as well as legal proceedings.

9

Don’t leave images of the woman at the bottom of the article: centre her and honour her death. If she is a Muslim woman, use the image provided by the police. Do not trawl her personal Facebook to try and find a photo of her without her headscarf.

10

Don’t use the passive voice in regard to fatal violence. This should read “Joe Bloggs slapped and choked Sara to death”.

4

Avoid building a piece solely from defence claims in court. This presents an unbalanced and biased version of events that the dead victim is unable to verify or respond to.

6

Be cautious of claims around “affairs”. Women are at highest risk of homicide after they have separated from an abusive partner - and abusive partners believe only they have the power to end the relationship. A killer’s claims of an “affair” may well be fictional - or his distorted perception of a woman’s new relationship and life without him. (See appendix 3 for more)

8

Don’t centre images of the killer, or grant too much space to his claims. Focus on the victim who has lost her life. If picturing the killer, include a behavioural description about his controlling nature.



CASE TIMELINE AND CHECKLIST

Immediate Aftermath

- Try not to let the urgency of reporting a breaking news story overshadow accuracy.
- If you want a quote from family members, go via the relevant FLO (police Family Liaison Officer).
- Be mindful of intruding into grief and shock through your reporting. Your article is a public record of someone's life. Their children and families will be reading this coverage and you may re-traumatise them with hasty or inaccurate reporting. For you it's an article, for them it has deep emotional impact.
- If you can't speak to a family member, don't use a quote from a neighbour who may be unfamiliar with the reality of the perpetrator's character or their relationship with the victim. This may negatively impact the justice process.
- Fatal domestic abuse is a national rather than personal problem. If few details are known, quote the "2 women a week are murdered by a partner or ex-partner" statistic to contextualise the death.

Perpatrator charged

- *Centre dignified* images of the victims instead of the perpetrator.
- Without making the perpetrator the focus, don't shy away from publishing his *photograph in the interest of public health and safety*.

Case opens in court

- Are you reporting a balance of prosecution and defence?
- Are you including context about the relationship's history, or only reporting on the fatal attack?
- Is your reporting sensitive? Are you mindful of its impact upon the victim's family?

Conviction

- Have you named it as fatal domestic abuse or fatal domestic violence
- Have you included the full context or are you oversimplifying to make it look like one trigger caused the fatal violence e.g. an "affair"?
- Have you put the national domestic violence helpline footer?
- Are you describing the perpetrator's actions in an active voice rather than passive? Hold them responsible.
- E.g. "A man killed a woman" instead of "A woman was killed"

Life after

- Have you added the national domestic violence helpline footer?
- Have you consulted expert opinion and national statistics on domestic abuse to best inform your piece?

Before you file

Accountability: Are you including context, or just the fatal attack? If no context, be cautious. Be mindful of template headlines that blame the victim.

Images: Centre dignified images of the victim, rather than perpetrator

Dignity: Avoid graphic, traumatising details. Think of the family, use sympathetic quotes about the victim

Accuracy: Have you named it as fatal domestic abuse? Have you put a helpline in the footer? Have you connected the incident to the systemic problem with national statistics?

RESOURCES AND KEY CONTACTS FOR JOURNALISTS

AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)

Research, policy, consultancy and training on violence against women in the UK.

www.avaproject.org.uk

AAFDA (Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse)

Specialist and expert support and advocacy for friends and family members of domestic homicide victims, assisting with Domestic Homicide Reviews and Inquests.

www.aafda.org.uk

Halo Project

A national organisation supporting victims of honour-based violence, forced marriages and FGM

www.haloproject.org.uk

Imkaan

UK-based, Black feminist organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and Minoritised women and girls.

www.imkaan.org.uk

Karma Nirvana

Supporting victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage. Helpline: 0800 5999 247

www.karmanirvana.org.uk

National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0800 2000 247

24-hour freephone providing information and support for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, their friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf

www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/

Refuge

Providing specialist support to women, children and some men escaping domestic violence and other forms of violence.

www.refuge.org.uk

London Black Women's Project

A women-only black feminist organisation to serve the needs of black minority ethnic and refugee women.

www.thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk/

SafeLives

National charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse through research, policy and training.

www.safelives.org.uk/

Standing Together

National organisation improving the way local services respond to domestic violence via Coordinated Community Response, and specialising in domestic homicide reviews.

www.standingtogether.org.uk/

Women's Aid

Providing life-saving support services and refuges across the UK

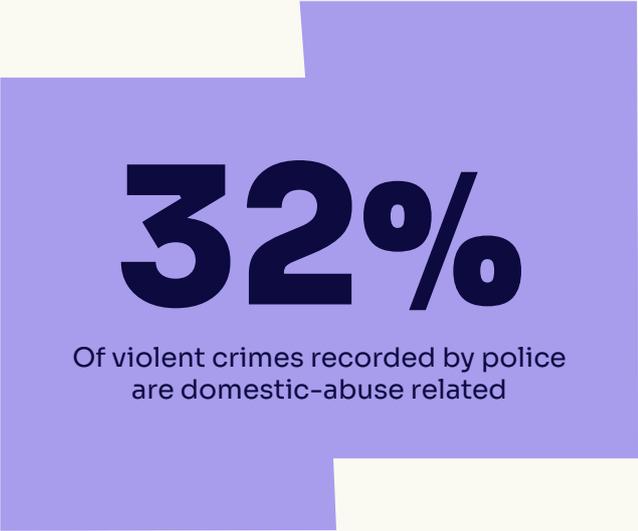
www.womensaid.org.uk

Royalty-free images to use in general domestic violence articles

Photographer Laura Dodsworth, commissioned by Scottish Women's Aid and Zero Tolerance, has produced a collection of royalty-free images for journalists to use for general articles on domestic violence [here](#).

APPENDIX 1: WHAT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Domestic abuse (also known as domestic violence) is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer. It is very common in the UK and in the vast majority of cases it is perpetrated by men against women.



32%

Of violent crimes recorded by police are domestic-abuse related

Facts about domestic abuse:

Domestic abuse-related crimes recorded by the police account for 32% of violent crimes (ONS, 2017)

Women experience higher rates of repeat victimisation and are much more likely to be seriously hurt (Walby & Towers, 2017) or killed than male victims of domestic abuse (ONS, 2017).

83% of high frequency victims (more than 10 crimes) are women. (From a study of data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, a nationally representative household survey by Walby & Towers, 2018)

Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to:

- Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence)
- Psychological and/or emotional abuse
- Physical or sexual abuse (including homicide)
- Financial abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse

APPENDIX 2: WHAT IS FATAL DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Fatal domestic abuse or domestic homicide includes any homicide where the relationship between an adult victim (aged 16 and over) and the perpetrator falls into one of the following categories:

- Spouse
- common-law spouse
- cohabiting partner
- boyfriend or girlfriend
- ex-spouse, ex-cohabiting partner or ex-boyfriend or girlfriend
- extramarital relationship
- lover's spouse
- emotional rival
- son or daughter (including step and adopted relationships)
- parent (including step and adopted relationships)
- brother or sister
- other relatives

Facts about fatal domestic abuse:

Every week, **two women** are murdered by a partner or ex-partner (ONS, 2017)

A history of **coercive control** is argued to be always present (Stark, 2007).

Nearly half (49%) of women murdered by their partner or ex-partner are killed less than a month after separation, 79% killed within six months of separation and 90% killed within a year of separation (ONS, 2017)

The most common means of killing are by knife or sharp instrument (38%), and by strangulation or asphyxiation (22%). (Femicide Census, 2020).

2 in 3 male victims of domestic homicide were killed by **another male** (ONS, 2017)

In 72% of intimate partner homicides, the perpetrator had a history of violence (Home Office, 2016)

Professor Jane Monckton Smith's 8-stage Homicide Timeline:

Criminology expert Dr Jane Monckton Smith has found that men who kill their partners follow an eight-stage "homicide timeline":

The eight steps she discovered in almost all of the 372 killings she studied were:

1. A pre-relationship history of stalking or abuse by the perpetrator
2. The romance developing quickly into a serious relationship
3. The relationship becoming dominated by coercive control
4. A trigger to threaten the perpetrator's control - for example, the relationship ends or the perpetrator gets into financial difficulty
5. Escalation - an increase in the intensity or frequency of the partner's control tactics, such as by 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

⁶ For more information on Jane Monckton Smith's research, read *In Control: Dangerous relationships and how they end in murder* (2021)

APPENDIX 3: WHY DO MEN MURDER THEIR PARTNERS AND EX-PARTNERS?

- 1. Jealousy, possessiveness, and a woman's attempts to leave a relationship** are significant features of domestic abuse deaths.
- 2. When separation occurs, the man's issues of possessiveness and jealousy are elevated.** This includes not just the act of separation itself, but also the process of terminating the relationship and threats to leave.
- 3.** When men could not force a woman partner to stay, they 'changed the project' from trying to 'keep her' to one of deciding to 'destroy her' for leaving. At this point, the men became more focused on killing her.
- 4.** Attempts to separate from such men are fraught with coercion, threats of physical violence, threats of sexual violence, and threats of murder.
- 5. 59% of the men had previously used physical violence against the woman partner that they eventually murdered.** This violence was often repeated and severe. In many cases, it had been reported to the police or social services prior to the murder.
- 6.** About one-third of the men had a **previous conviction for assault** of some type, not necessarily against the victim of the murder, but in over half of these convictions for assault the usual victim was a woman. These men specialized in using violence against women.
- 7.** For men with no history of previous convictions and whose lives were more "conventional" in terms of demographic factors such as education or employment, **the murder may initially seem to come from "nowhere," but a closer look may tell another story.** Despite appearances to the contrary, 46% of the men with no previous conviction had actually been violent to the woman at some time prior to killing her, although, for a variety of reasons, this had gone completely undetected or, if known, had never resulted in a conviction.
- 8.** Perpetrators of fatal domestic abuse hold a deeply patriarchal worldview, with a fixed belief in gender roles that reinforce women's subordination to men and the expectation that women provide domestic services.
- 9.** Jealous men imagined that their woman partner was seeing another man or being unfaithful every time she left the house, whether she was going shopping or visiting other women, including mothers, sisters, women neighbours or friends. They were suspicious even in circumstances where contact with another man was extremely unlikely. The reality of the woman's actions, movements, and contacts may have little effect on the man's imaginations about them.



59%

of men perpetrators had previously used physical violence against the woman partner that they eventually murdered.

⁷ Murder in Britain Study (Dobash & Dobash) Sept, ²⁰¹⁸. Rebecca & Russell Dobash, Emeritus professors, Criminology, School of Law, U.Manchester.

'Murder in Britain' is a ten-year study based on people serving life sentences for murder in British prisons. It is the biggest ever study of men who kill their partners and ex partners.

APPENDIX 4: GLOSSARY

Coercive control

A pattern of controlling behaviour which seeks to take away the victim's liberty or freedom in order to strip away their sense of self. This controlling behaviour is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Domestic abuse

Can be used interchangeably with domestic violence. Domestic abuse is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer.

Domestic violence

See above.

Domestic homicide

See page 12

Domestic Homicide Review (DHR)

A multi-agency review of the circumstances in which the death of a person aged 16 or over has, or appears to have, resulted from violence, abuse or neglect by a person to whom they were related or with whom they were, or had been, in an intimate personal relationship, or a member of the same household as themselves.

Police Family Liaison Officer (FLO)

A police officer who is assigned to a bereaved family as a point of contact between them and the police during an investigation. They will give statements to the media if the family does not wish to.

Honour killing

The homicide of a family member due to the perpetrator's belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonour to the family. This can be construed as shame brought from divorce, preferred sexualities, committing adultery, sex outside of marriage, renouncing faith, being a victim of rape or dressing inappropriately.