



INFOCUS

by Katy Carroll



WHAT ROLE DOES LANGUAGE PLAY WHEN REPORTING ON MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

The tragic murder of Sarah Everard – a 33-year-old marketing executive – in South London on the evening of 3rd March 2021 brought the issue of male violence against women to the forefront of the British national consciousness. As reported in Issue [16 of Freedom From Fear Magazine](#), the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rise in violence against women, especially in a domestic setting. This has been seen in countries across the world,

including the UK: when looking specifically at the period affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the Office for National Statistics reported that “the police recorded 259,324 offences (excluding fraud) flagged as domestic abuse-related in the period March to June 2020. This represents a 7% increase from 242,413 in the same period in 2019 and an 18% increase from 218,968 in 2018.”¹

1 ONS. (2020, November 25). Domestic abuse during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabuseduringthecoronaviruscovid19pandemicenglandandwales/november2020>

Sarah Everard's murder also sparked a conversation on the language used to report on violence against women in the British media. Although it might not initially seem like the two issues are directly connected, the language that the media uses to report on crime can in fact subtly influence society's cultural mindset and behaviours.

In a blog post for Gender Equal Media Scotland entitled "*How to report sexual assault trials responsibly*" (28th February 2020), Karen Boyle (University of Strathclyde) and Brenna Jessie (Rape Crisis Scotland) explain this link in relation to acts of male sexual violence towards women. They point out that "[t]he audience for sexual assault trial reporting includes potential and actual perpetrators and victim/survivors," and suggest that, "[h]ow these cases are reported can make it more – and less – likely that potential perpetrators reflect on their actions, that incidents are reported to the police, and that victim/survivors seek support."²

Boyle and Jessie draw attention to research that has shown the media reporting of court testimony in sexual

assault cases rarely accords equal value to the defence and prosecution, saying instead that "it often betrays an implicit bias towards the accuser, his legal team and witnesses by describing their statements in neutral or assertive terms whilst subtly casting doubt on the prosecution."³



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An example of this can be seen in discussions of the evidence and statements given by the defence – that is to say, the legal team and witnesses representing the alleged perpetrator of the crime. When reporting these discussions, the British media tends to use terms such as *said*, *stated*, *asserted*, *denied* – terms that imply fact. In comparison, when reporting on the prosecution

and their witnesses – those representing the alleged victim – it is more common for the media to employ vocabulary like *alleged*, *accused* or *claimed* – terms that could cast doubt on what is being said.

Instead of using terms which could betray bias towards one side of the case, Boyle and Jessie suggest that fair and balanced reporting should use "equivalently weighted terms: she said/ he said; she testified/ he denied."⁴

The blog post is not the first time Boyle has touched on the language used by the media to report on sexual violence against women. In her 2018 article "*Hiding in Plain Sight: Gender, Sexism & Press Coverage of the Jimmy Savile Case*", she discusses the British media's relationship with TV personality Jimmy Savile, who in 2012 was posthumously investigated for his sexually predatory behaviour. Over the span of his 50-year career, the household name used his position of power to target and sexually abuse large numbers of women and children. However, it was only after his death in 2012 that many of the criminal allegations against him were recognised and investigated.

2 Boyle, K., & Jessie, B. (2020, Feb 28). *How to report sexual assault trials responsibly*. <https://www.genderequalmedia.scot/news/blog/how-to-report-sexual-assault-trials-responsibly/>

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

Boyle analyses the media coverage surrounding Savile's death and concludes that in the early posthumous reports, "his sexual harassment of women is not hidden, but yet cannot be seen as problematic. He is simply a flirt, a womaniser, a ladies' man – all terms which are widely used in the reports following his death."⁵ Savile's public persona during his lifetime and immediately after his death was that of a harmless flirt. This persona was created by Savile and made popular by the media.

Boyle's article argues that "one of the reasons Savile's behaviour wasn't recognised and named as abuse in his lifetime – even after the first reports of the allegations which brought about his downfall – is that it was part of a wider cultural acceptance (contemporary as well as historic) of men's sexual entitlement to, and abuse of, women."⁶ In other words, Savile's public persona as a harmless flirt meant that those who came forward with allegations of abuse were likely to be dismissed by the establishment. What is more, it is likely that it dissuaded many of his victims from coming forward at all.

It is evident, then, that the language the media employs – and that we also use in our

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5 Boyle, K. (2018). *Hiding in plain sight: gender, sexism and press coverage of the Jimmy Savile case*. *Journalism Studies*, 19(11), 1562-1578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1282832>

6 Ibid.



We must be equally mindful of how we talk about the intersections between areas such as race, class and mental health when reporting on crime

real-life interactions – can have far-reaching implications. It does not only enable and embolden the perpetrators of violent crimes against women, but also silences the victim-survivors. And, while this article has looked at this question through a gender lens, it is also important to highlight that we must be equally mindful of how we talk about the intersections between areas such as race, class and mental health when reporting on crime.



Working to change the public narrative surrounding violence against women and ensure that the stories of victims and survivors are heard

It should also be noted that there are many journalists and media outlets which are setting the benchmark with regard to responsible and informative reporting. For example, Zero Tolerance, a Scottish charity which work to end violence against women through tackling the root cause of this violence – gender inequality, hold an annual “Write to End Violence Against Women Awards”⁷ which champions writers working to change the public narrative

7 For more information on the awards: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/work-awards/>



surrounding violence against women and ensure that the stories of victims and survivors are heard. Zero Tolerance also publish their own best-practice guidelines on

the language to be used when reporting on male violence against women.⁸

And, finally, thanks to the democratising influence of

social media, we all now have the power to write our own narratives when discussing crime and publicly call out news outlets that use biased or prejudiced language.

THE AUTHOR

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8 Language guide available from: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/language-guide-for-reporting/>