



Can the media save children from harm & changing reporting of Family Violence? A Media Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Between February 2024 and May 2021, a comprehensive analysis of more than 150 media platforms was conducted to assess reporting patterns around domestic violence. The findings indicate that media coverage overwhelmingly frames women as victims and men as aggressors, with limited attention given to the impact such violence has on families, society, children and teenagers. Many reports focus on sensationalised tragic events, such as murder or disappearance, while largely neglecting the ongoing harm and trauma experienced by young people living in affected households.

The analysis revealed that media narratives prioritise adult perspectives, rarely acknowledging or reporting the silent suffering of children. This lack of focus can discourage children from seeking help, reinforcing cycles of silence and distress. The focus on the sensationalism of violence which has been studied in this paper often leading to murder and community distress appears to use family violence as clickbait. The study recommends a shift in reporting practices to include the voices of or advocates of children and young people and to emphasise early intervention. By doing so, media outlets can play a critical role in reducing stigma and offering support to children before crises escalate.

Keywords: Media, Discourse, Society, Family, Crimes, Children, Teenagers, Wellbeing, Development.

Introduction:

Media Reporting and the Neglect of Family Voices: A Critical Media Analysis and Commentary

This paper which highlights the many factors that make news in the horror that is domestic and family violence there have been many commentators. This study aims to show that a change in media reporting is well overdue¹. Media scholars note that the effects of domestic violence on children and families are often overlooked until a major incident occurs. Media coverage tends to highlight extreme cases like murder or disappearance, ignoring the ongoing trauma faced by young people in these environments. This lack of focus can discourage affected children from seeking help. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline in the UK, women aged 18-34 experience the highest rates of abuse—an age group likely to have children at home—yet media rarely address this connection.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report in November 2021 echoes these concerns. In their report, “Killings of women and girls by their intimate partner or other family members: such as parents stepparents and grandparents or even close neighbours.... Global estimates 2020,” they note the alarming number of women and children murdered by intimate partners. However, the media and society’s reporting of these tragedies often fail to address the ongoing impacts on children’s mental health, development, and sense of safety before such catastrophic outcomes occur.

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This omission perpetuates a crisis of confidence in authorities and the media's role in fostering early intervention and support for those most vulnerable (UNODC report 2021 p 1).

Further the *Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria* and it clearly identifies the issue within the first few pages:

“Domestic violence involves a complex range of human behaviours. It is an oversimplification to say that all stories of domestic violence are the same, but there is a reoccurring narrative that occurs within Australia. The story of domestic violence is one of physical, emotional, and financial abuse”. (O'Meara 2024)

In one of the Royal Commission's key findings it was stated that: “Women and girls account for only one tenth of all homicide victims perpetrated in the public sphere, yet they bear a disproportionate burden of lethal violence perpetrated in the home: in 58 percent of all killings perpetrated by intimate partners or other family members, the victim was a woman or girl.” Domestic violence not only devastates women and girls but also deeply affects children, causing emotional trauma, anxiety, and a loss of security. Children in these situations often remain silent out of fear, perpetuating ongoing cycles of distress within families. Further, the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria, Australia, highlights within its initial pages that the issues raised in the Commission shows a number of traumatic effects which will continue to impact on people's lives as they develop.

Children and adolescents who are exposed to violence frequently experience emotional neglect, financial instability, and long-term trauma, all of which can adversely impact their development and mental health. However, media coverage seldom addresses their specific needs, often focusing instead on sensational aspects that attract attention rather than promoting awareness of early intervention and recovery strategies.

This perspective is supported by multiple studies, including research commissioned by the *Australian Institute of Family Studies*. These studies have identified domestic and family violence as the primary cause of homelessness among children in Australia (Bland & Shallcross, 2015; Spinney, 2013). The findings indicate that both women and children affected by domestic and family violence face significant challenges in achieving recovery and security. Furthermore, efforts related to early intervention and longitudinal research typically receive limited media exposure unless a major incident occurs.

In July 2024, the Royal Commission into Domestic Violence in Australia began, presided over by Former Senator the Hon. Natasha Stott Despoja AM. Media reports frequently highlighted cases of women being killed or injured by their intimate partners, drawing attention to the ongoing issue of domestic violence in the community. Thus, it appears to be of significant interest in Domestic Violence and the need for changes in laws and responses to protect women and children from intimate partner violence.

The Scary horrors of families: death and distress in media

Media headlines call for change when women are found in shallow graves or families are killed, as these stories attract significant attention at all levels. Often however, the changes asked for are punishment for the offenders when convicted in a type of *revenge junkie* response (Schulz 2011). Recent Australian events have sparked public outrage, with families urging justice and police authorities to address the problem more effectively and promptly. What is striking in this instance is the lack of media stories calling for change in the early intervention and resources for the protection of children as they often do in criminal stories in what Schulz (2011:51) calls the *Discourse of Direction*.

For example, the story of Lyn Dawson a missing woman and mother which resulted in a 40 plus year search and eventually her husband was charged and found guilty of murder appears typical of this type of story Thomas (2024). Several other such cases have been considered for this study and discovered that the persistence of family members and media interest results in fresh eyes on the disappearance of the wife, woman or children. Yet no actual in-depth study of the family prior to the event of the missing woman and her eventual murder was left untouched by media. That is, not until after more than 45 years after the event when Channel 9 Australia's *Sixty Minutes* program did an in-depth study featuring one of the daughters named Shanelle. She described years of torture and despair having been told her mum did not want her or her sister and that is the reason she left.

In Australia, NSW Police Minister Yasmin Catley MP addressed parliament regarding a domestic murder, stating, “We have reached a crisis point.” Her remarks reflected community concern over delayed responses to domestic violence. Hedley Thomas (2024) notes that his podcasting has contributed to shifting attitudes on this issue. Thomas stated in his online story that: “It is more pressing now than ever to confront a systemic failure of the criminal justice system spanning decades until the late 1990s. Police would routinely file reports of missing women in the bottom drawer. They were not deemed important when, in truth, they were all vitally important”. The case of the missing women encourages a fresh way of thinking. It brings up important questions, like why the media didn't investigate the family's situation before the women disappeared or why children were allowed to stay with their father, who was later found to be the murderer.

While respecting family privacy can restrict media access, news coverage plays a vital role in highlighting these concerns. Therefore, media researchers may start to realize that leaving out information about family backgrounds and incidents of violence can result in incomplete stories.

Trujillo and Ross (2008) found that the risk management of police choices in their timing and responses to reports of domestic violence suggests that this is a significant factor in surviving and recovering from such major traumas. In addition, several inquiries have found that until recent years when women “go missing” there were indifferent supports shown by police both in Australia and abroad. In other media reports on that same weekend of June 29-30th the *SA Weekend Advertiser* magazine had a major story which outlined clearly the problem of abuse to loved ones by people who are supposed to love them (Novak 2014). This comprehensive article describes in distressing details the horror of abuse and its aftermath and effects on Emma (named as such in article) and her daughter. She described one incident thus: “I don’t think there are words to describe just how terrifying it was... One minute we were watching a movie on the couch and the next he’s strangling me it still does not make sense”. She goes on to say that this is an important time to tell her story to the Royal Commission and to “highlight the gaps in the system she feels let her down”. In fact, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2023) Report showed in one of their key findings that 23% of the people surveyed thought that domestic violence was a natural occurrence resulting from frustration and stress in modern life.

It is a familiar story and resounds around the world especially where the cultural mores indicate it is acceptable to murder women who do not show the correct behaviours and there are nations in which it is acceptable to allow men to have custody of children of marriages just because they are men. According to Ali and Naylor (2015) the latter is part of a cultural norm in Pakistan. Surveys conducted in Australia have also clearly shown that a significant number of the population who are not considered to be of either migrant or indigenous cultures have similar views about women. This places women who do not appear to adhere to their husband’s views or cultural traditions at considerable risk.

Reading the Discourse of Cultures as a Defence of Domestic Coercion and abuse of children

In modern Australia the bride at a wedding ceremony is not expected to make the vow “to love honour and obey” the groom. In modern day Japan brides and grooms have adopted the white wedding dress and the traditional wedding vows. Often, they will travel to Western nations to be photographed by a wedding chapel and the concomitant traditional ceremony.

Some cultures that migrate west for safety and opportunity continue to uphold homeland traditions. In Australia (2026), the Australian Federal Police have reported concerns about arranged marriages and coercive control, highlighting potential harm and urging schools to help address these issues.

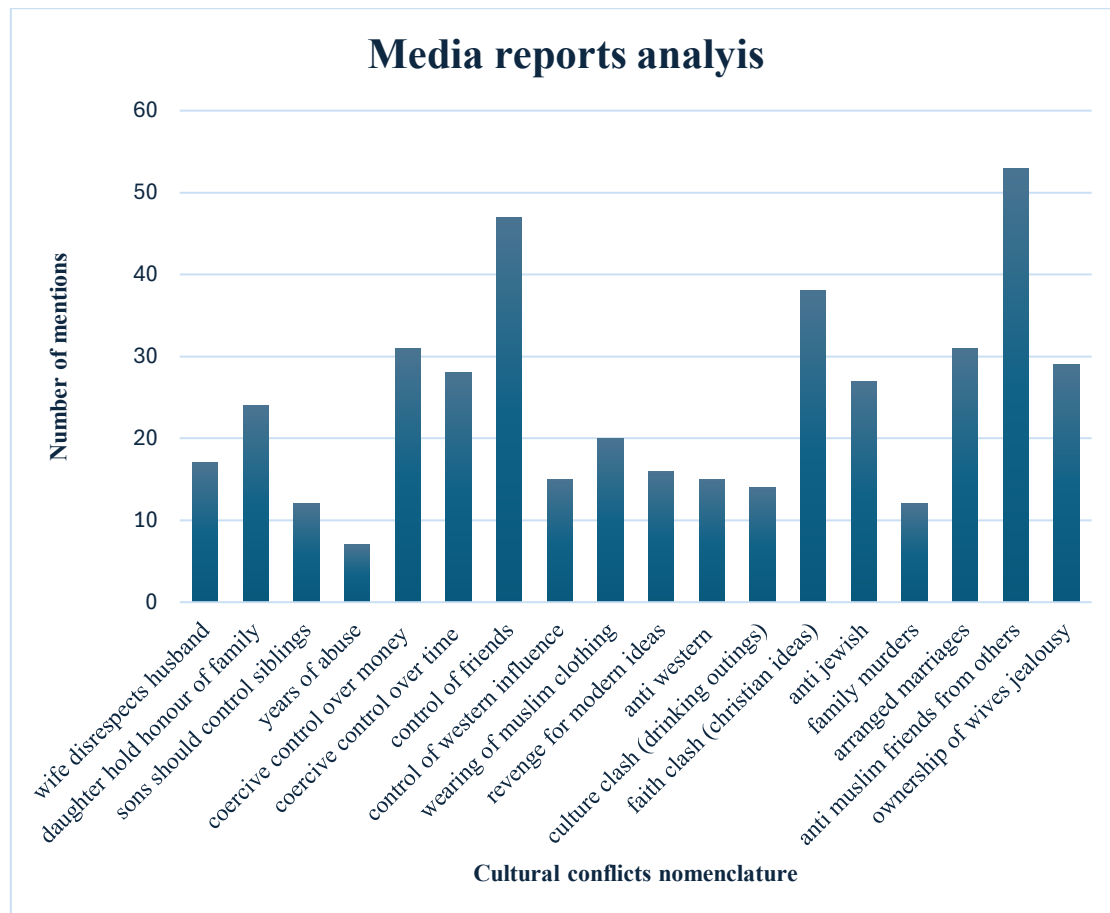
The *Musawah Brief* (2023) presents Islamic beliefs and traditions shaped by laws and expected Muslim behaviours. It notes that family policies often grant custody based on gender, though some countries are reconsidering this in favour of the child's best interests. In Australia, forced marriage is recognized as a serious abuse, often stemming from cultural or religious pressure. Some women have suffered tragic consequences, including suicide or violence, when resisting such marriages.

A recent investigation aired on Channel Nine's 60 Minutes (June 30th, 2024) and an earlier report from ABC Australia by Candice Marcus (2022) both highlighted a case of forced marriage. According to these accounts, an Afghan family compelled their teenage daughter, Ruqia—who had not yet completed her final years of high school—to marry an older man from their cultural community. The husband later killed her for failing in her duties. However, it is not always the intimate partner but the family *en masse* who are the perpetrators of culturally related domestic violence. In 2021, in a case which shocked Adelaide, South Australia, a Muslim family of five attempted to kill their daughter /sister in response to her falling in love with a Christian man.

The unnamed woman was stabbed several times and nearly lost her life after sustaining serious injuries in the attack which took place in broad daylight in a busy shopping centre in Sefton Park, an inner northern Adelaide suburb. What transpired as a family conflict over the faith of her new Christian partner (boyfriend) infuriated the strict Afghan family who took matters into their own hands. The stories online made for sombre reading. In another example, one coronial inquiry in Pakistan found that police had deliberately made decisions early on that the woman had run off with someone and that friends who showed distress at her disappearance as being not in character were told that there was no further evidence on what could be done to find her (Ali and Naylor 2015).

Cultural domestic violence has become an increasingly recognized issue. Authorities may sometimes be hesitant to intervene or consider appropriate measures when women report concerns for their safety. Media reports frequently highlight the impact of such violence in restricting women's participation in local communities and access to financial resources. This behaviour is often described as a method of asserting control, particularly where males maintain decision-making authority and financial oversight within households. Women in these environments are commonly perceived as

having diminished agency due to prevailing cultural norms. These instances tend to be prevalent in remote communities or Western countries where traditional gender roles persist plus slow progress toward gender equality has been limited.



The chart supplies evidence where limited agency by the victims of abuse results in limited ability to care for children and keep them safe.

An overview of headlines and stories of cultural clashes and circumstances where multicultural families involvement was reported in family violence and criminal activity that resulted in the death, or deaths, of family members was charted. It clearly indicates the need for further studies on how police and community authorities ought to react in modern western nations in which justice and the rule of law prevails as a primary function of a safe society and maintain the focus on justice and the rule of law.

Schulz (2011) in *Courts and Judges on Trial* noted that the drama of courts and homicides makes for popular TV and clickbait. This work highlighted that crime TV dominates free-to-air television and news hours. True crime podcasts also thrive, with millions of listeners. For example, *The Teacher's Pet* podcast by Hedley Thomas, about the missing wife Lyn Dawson, has over 8 million subscribers and led to her husband's conviction years later, generating global news. This trend continues as more podcasts follow this model. In fact, a quick internet search finds thousands of podcasts in the True Crime genre and inevitably they contain horrific details of family abuse and missing women and, at times, significant mass murders.

Family disputes in Western countries occasionally attract significant media attention due to instances of severe violence, including cases involving arson, physical assault, stabbings, and, in Australia, the use of firearms or knives. Such incidents are particularly distressing when they occur in the presence of family, friends, or other witnesses, as bystanders may be rendered unable to intervene due to fear. Such was the case when Ziaollah Abrahimzadeh killed his wife, Zia, in front of his children, family and friends at a public function for Persian New Year's Eve at the Adelaide Convention Centre (Abrahimzadeh 2019). The story was a major feature on *Insight an SBS on Demand* Australia multicultural media platform.

The story of this murder was narrated by the son of the murder victim. The father (Ziaoholla) was at that time known as a pillar of his community, a religious leader and worker in the migrant sector of the not-for-profit services. The murder

took place when he walked in armed with a knife and stabbed his wife Zia many times in front of horrified attendees, leaving her in a pool of blood. The reports from several TV channels and local news outlets shocked the community to its foundations and there were calls to help migrant women who wished to transform their lives and be helped to get out of abusive domestic situations. Their son, Arman, shocked with what occurred, has since then been an advocate in explaining that such behaviours within the migrant community and wider host communities is not acceptable resulting in him becoming a Young Australian of the Year and in 2015, he and his sister started the *Zahra Foundation* to assist women and families fleeing violence.

Arman reflected that when he visited his friends upon arrival in Australia to western homes, he noticed a difference in the way fathers and husbands treated their families. And this was despite covert domestic abuse in other homes. However, in our modern western society he saw other examples of female agency, most families from school had mothers who could drive a car, have their own credit card and phone which he found strange at first. This reflection is moot when faced with the daily distress and drama of domestic violence in the news from all aspects of society. So thus, there is a place perhaps for cultural integration information so that some men from some cultures can understand that the roles women hold in Australia are different from the home country. In addition, the treatment of children and their discipline needs further examination which is beyond the scope of this paper.

In another gender-based violence example, Robyn Westgate (Pepper ABC News WA 2024) lived in a home under the menacing threat of domestic violence which escalated to the point where she was found guilty of her husband's murder and served 17 year sentence.

Her harrowing account has identified not just the physical aspect, but the menace of threat perpetrated by her husband over many years in which he claimed he would kill her and how he would destroy her body... while at the same time cleaning his guns in the house. In an ABC Australia interview she indicated that the tipping point came when she announced she was pregnant. After horrendous abuse that day she indicated to herself that she could not bring a child into this environment of domestic coercive control and abuse.

The law in Western Australia now allows self-defence or provocation to potentially change the verdict of her response to his violence to either acquittal or manslaughter. Since her release, she has supported domestic violence victims. Her story, along with regular murders of other women by men from various backgrounds, highlights that domestic violence is a gender-based abuse of power rather than a cultural norm.

Such stories via media highlight continuing themes. Around the world in both modern western democracies and still-developing nations, the issue of men as stewards of their families' life death and mental wellbeing is being reported in terms that show distress and disturbance as commonplace.

Discourse Analysis approaches

For this research more than 100 media sites were examined, and a discourse analysis was conducted using the following discourse items for consideration and findings. In addition, media stories which highlighted the work of courts in examining domestic violence and its aftermath were also considered.

- **Theme and topics** (main areas of interest) Lexical Choices for headlines (Semantic Macrostructures/Clickbait)
- **Cultural and socio-linguistic approaches (words related to cultural aspects)**
- **Anaphora** (repetitive retracing core information or ideology)
- **Collocation** (juxta positioning of descriptors either side of themes)
- **Topoi** (commonly held beliefs presented by communities or experts in identified groups)
- **Lacunae** (missing elements of discourse)

During the study phase, media platforms and government websites were accessed and subjected to various forms of analysis, including the examination of frequency lexis choices to identify themes. A comprehensive list of these sources is available upon request from the author. Significant stories identified in this paper are documented in the reference list.

Media Reporting Summary

When a child or children are within the report of a domestic crime, the story often takes on an emotional tone. Reporters usually interview local neighbours and include photos of the family or children. By examining the frequency and collocation of words used in these reports, patterns in descriptors can be identified.

Typical headings and word choices are highlighted and charted to see if any patterns emerge. McCombs and Kioussis (2004) identified in their media analysis that most media use the "if it bleeds, it leads" method for deciding the chronology of news or platform positioning. They also found the use of framing in the areas of emotion, sensation, division, conflict and celebrity. This study initially indicates that despite modern feminism and changes in Western cultures, journalism still tends to report on crimes such as sex and violence due to news value criteria.

According to Wykes (2010), this inevitably leads to the ongoing violence and collapse in relationships being widely reported, thus normalising to some extent the significant range of this type of behaviour and ongoing acceptance of its occurrence. The following table outlines a summary of what would normally constitute a significant story, but when children are involved in them a curious anomaly occurs... they become hidden.

Discourse analysis seeks to decode media language and uncover how power divisions are constructed in reporting and public narratives. Wykes (2010) highlights that factual news coverage frequently emphasises gender-based violence and portrays aggressive masculine reactions towards women and partners who do not conform or cannot be controlled. Despite the passage of time since her earlier work, these observations still resonate in contemporary reporting.

Alongside Schulz (2018), Wykes argues that all forms of violence satisfy news values and result in compelling stories, functioning effectively as clickbait for today's news platforms. Elements such as struggle, drama, danger, heroes, villains, and the classic battle of good versus evil maintain audience intrigue and perpetuate ongoing fear discourse. This study draws on the influential frameworks of discourse analysts including Fairclough (2004), Van Dijk (2003), Wodak and Meyer (2004), Teo (2000), and Taylor (2001), all of whom have made major contributions to media analysis. The focal areas for this media discourse analysis are detailed below. Schulz's (2010, 2012, 2017) work on public opinion and Child Protection issues has also shaped this research.

They are found significantly by research sites which are readily available online and many of which are in the reference list of this paper. A brief review of these sites significantly shows the same themes.

Some examples of headlines found in violence against children reflect strong horror and distress from community with media platforms "calling for change" but often the result is a review, a Royal Commission or yet a legal debate to change the laws relating to the care and development of children.

However, if the following headline from November 2025 is any guide there is more to be done. "Meth-addicted mum joked as six-year-old daughter died from neglect, court hears" (Excell 2025). At times an abusive mother is to blame one who appeared to be addicted to hard drugs and could not function as a normal parent. Calls for social workers to intervene more closely and to ensure the welfare of children is paramount in their consideration is debated endlessly as Government Services attempt to work with limited resources and time available. Sometimes dysfunctional mothers are the results of having lived in abusive and difficult environments. According to the Late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs given in a speech to remote communities where this author was present "abuse is pervasive and becomes the norm in some communities if the intervention is not swift and brutally honest".

Children the Silent Sufferers of Domestic Violence

Description/theme	Significant meaning	Analysis
Hidden from view	Silent victims	Lacking agency
Behind closed doors	Locked problem away	Unable to help themselves
Suffer	Hurt and shamed	Dysfunction of families not acknowledged
Wait for help that does not come	No intervention to protect them and remove them from harm	Children are not as important as adults?
Scared Powerless	At the mercy of those in power	Powerful people overshadow lives
Lagging behind in development	Domestic violence affects your wellbeing and learning	Teachers know but do not have the resources to help
Traumatised	Sometimes run away and likely to become homeless	Future in life is marred by these events
Mentally unstable Depressed and anxious	Problem children often overlooked until it's too late	Can end up in criminal behaviour or other substance abuse behaviours
Some Indigenous women are seven times more likely to become victims of domestic abuse	Why are authorities not intervening to save the children from trauma and other side effects?	Some cultural safety factors may prevent this. Matters of this kind are now being actively researched
Remote Communities violent	Women must be kept safe (sometimes in locked cages)	Women rely on government and police to protect them

Topoi and Themes in Domestic Violence

Effie Karageorgios and Amy Boyle (2021) have recognised this effect in media in their seminal work in which they examined media stories of domestic violence and clearly revealed that the Australian media was failing to cover domestic violence appropriately. However, there are clear *lacunae* that nearly always children are hidden from view in these stories.

Cultural significance in topic choices and their effects in reporting/ Victimology within culture examined in discourse

The study identified instances of contemporary Western culture, including the use of dating websites, chat rooms, and social media, and examined how cultural norms may influence domestic violence and other behaviours such as bullying, stalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate material. Additionally, the research observed shifts in certain cultural norms, including sexual behaviours.

For example, Nikki Gemmell (2024), a journalist from the *Weekend Australian Magazine* has written about the importance of young girls gaining knowledge to resist inappropriate behaviours. In the article she repeats a story of a young man asking a teacher; “Miss how do you choke girls during sex? And so, it has come to this. Choking Normalised.” The article relates the power of modern cultural norms which are being transmitted via social media pornography and because of aggressive porn. A further influencer of apparent misogynist male attitudes, Andrew Tate, who is mentioned in the article by Gemmell, has become a touch stone for angry young men and keeps heralding the aggression towards young beautiful women as commodities. He is often reported as violent brutal and misogynistic and has garnered millions of followers (Das 2022).

Media platforms like Australia's ABC report that stalking after rejection often leaves women in fear for their safety. Some of these cases end up in court. In some countries, wife killing remains a significant crime that authorities struggle to control.

In India, for example, many instances of crime against the intimate partner or family have occurred and been reported by media. One example is the case of Rajaram who killed his wife Sunita in March of 2024 as reported on the *India News Website* (Press Trust of India 2024). “Rajaram called his father-in-law before fleeing to evade the police”. Gruesome details describe a beating and his inebriated state, and a matter of fact report that the body of Sunita has been returned to her family. The Oklahoma USA family killings (Kubota 2024) are yet more of the same violence described by the local police as “beyond belief”. These killings were highlighted in US media over several months and the constant themes were the bullying and threatening behaviours were seemingly beyond the control of police and Sheriff’s officers in that State.

Family annihilation (Auchter 2022) by a single perpetrator is the ultimate *clickbait* story for media addressing domestic violence as such a story will have emotion sensation and division as its main brief and begins the conversation about what could have been done to prevent such an awful outcome. This is reflected in the work of research being conducted world-wide and in particular the National Institute of Justice in the USA.

It is often seen as the lack of resources as well as poor mental health intervention that underpins mass killing. While this mass killing of a family was in the headlines discussions were held to determine whether the teenage brothers who were the perpetrators, needed help. Neighbours were keen to say that the family kept very much to themselves, this being a recurring theme in masculine controlled households. Other news outlets were focussed on yet another mass murder by John Candy who murdered his wife and three sons before a surviving son was able to call for help from the police. In each of these mass murders the community is horrified and shocked and often cannot think of why it happened. This is followed by media calls begin for “something to be done”.

Some media outlets were exceptionally focussed on Police delays in attending to requests for assistance from men and women who later lost their lives because the police were reported as failing in their duty of protection of possible crime victims.

Some examples of this genre often showed the brutality of what had lain in store for women unable to flee and others murdered because police did not remove the husband or intimate partner from the home prior to the murder or injuries caused (Smee 2024).

Often women would alert friends by telling them that if they went “missing” or were found murdered that the husband would be the perpetrator. These facts often lead to distressed calls from family and lobby groups demanding a change in police procedures. For example, in an article posted on the ABC News Australia website, accusations are made by the victim’s family in which they claim that their mother’s pleas for help had been dismissed by Police.

Shayne Probert informed ABC’s Current Affairs program 7.30 that her mother, Doreen Langham, sought assistance from sixteen police officers prior to being killed by her former partner in February 2024. Here Atkins and McCutcheon (2022) describe in worrying detail the problem of women being either ignored about their reports of fear of their partners and the threats to the well-being of children, or the lack of Police effort in attempting to prevent this from happening. They also reported that the Queensland Police response was entirely inadequate.

The report identifies topic-specific lexical indicators, as detailed in the points below. This assessment aligns with comments describing a “disturbing theme” in the Queensland Police's response to domestic violence (Atkins and McCutcheon 2022). To some extent this appears to be a culture of not believing what may happen or is threatened to occur and it would appear once again that women have often been disbelieved.

Western European culture until recent memory insisted that women “obey” their husbands while reciting their wedding vows. In addition, the rise of the Andrew Tate website *Youtube* and media channel has resulted in some men feeling vindicated in establishing the norms of his treatment of women as sexual objects and as handmaidens to men. The Tate Website cited by Nikki Gemmel (2024) also highlights the notion that women are the property of men and to some extent women are to be in submission to men. It is common in such households for men to control the finances and expenditures. Until the late 1970s in Australia, it was difficult for women to take out a loan from a bank as she would have needed a male guarantor to oversee the loan. There was no legal framework to confront domestic violence, coercive control and stalking. The only protective order was a common law peace complaint which was toothless (Cannon 2025) if it was breached, and society was reluctant to intervene in abusive conduct and assaults behind the front door of people's homes.

This type of cultural norm has continued to persist and is often realised within the court room when men explained why they finally resorted to killing or maiming or threatening as they apparently felt emasculated by the modern woman Hollamby (2024). Many reports in the media give credence to the fact that so many women are too frightened to leave and stay covered by the threat of what may happen if they do... and whether they will be believed when they do try. In some cases, the fear of being found by the ex-partner is so great that they often appear to endure violence to be able to stay with their children. For some women who have married men whose traditions and cultures sometimes clash with their own, this may result in what Schulz (2012) called “tug of war” contested spaces in marriage dissolutions.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis often begins by examining word choices and key themes. This method reveals how media outlets report on crimes and the related issues. Media platforms frequently use specific terms in their news coverage, as listed below:

Lexical Choices identified in main media platforms

In media discourse the headlines are the main attractions for readers and viewers. These have been identified in various discourse analyses and are often referred to as semantic macrostructures. In the choices of words often by a senior sub editor working in media if they can actually make it stand out amongst the overwhelming information sources available then they will do so. Below are listed a significant example of this genre.

- Horrific
- Distress
- Death
- Family horror
- Outrage as husband/perpetrator/ murderer/ walks free on bail/is charged/ is remanded in custody
- Children killed by (loving dad, /stepfather/angry father/ upset father etc. etc./Dad who felt disrespected by family)
- Children cower in cupboards to escape their mother's killer
- Killer Dads
- Death stalks family
- Gender based violence
- Epidemic of violence
- Three women every week murdered by partners

Following a detailed scan of the main headlines for thematic choice of lexis (word descriptions) a chart was constructed to identify the numbers as they were often repeated. The Chart below reflects strongly the work of Altheide (2003) whose work in Criminal justice in the USA showed a clear preference for what he termed *fear discourse*. The *Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety* (ANROWS 2022-2023) has several reports on these and other related topics. Their website which is supported by the Australian Government clearly outlines some strong recommendations for ending gender-based violence. Cases of murder-suicides involving entire families often result in community reaction, with media coverage showing protests outside courts or parliament. An Australian Women's Weekly article by Genevieve Gannon in May 2024 shows a crowd carrying signs saying, “Enough is Enough” and “Stop Violence against Women.” She describes these women as determined and turning their frustration into action.

The issue too here is *Violence against Children* because if their mothers or grandmothers are killed then often this is overlooked in the protests that actively seek change. Early intervention for abuse and dysfunctional families is significantly needed along with resources. Former Child Protection Champion the late Professor Emeritus Freda Briggs AO often stated that this was a far greater investment in the future than virtually anything other than education in order to maintain a safe and secure society.

The chart following outlines major themes of distress affecting communities, emphasizing key terms identified by Altheide (2003) and Schulz (2010; 2012) on using fear in stories. Beck (2003) states that safer societies are drawn to terrifying information, while Gross and Aday (2003) refer to this as the "attraction of repulsion." The media phrase, "if it bleeds, it leads," often results in "cocooning"—feeling secure at home while watching distant events or frightening news headlines.

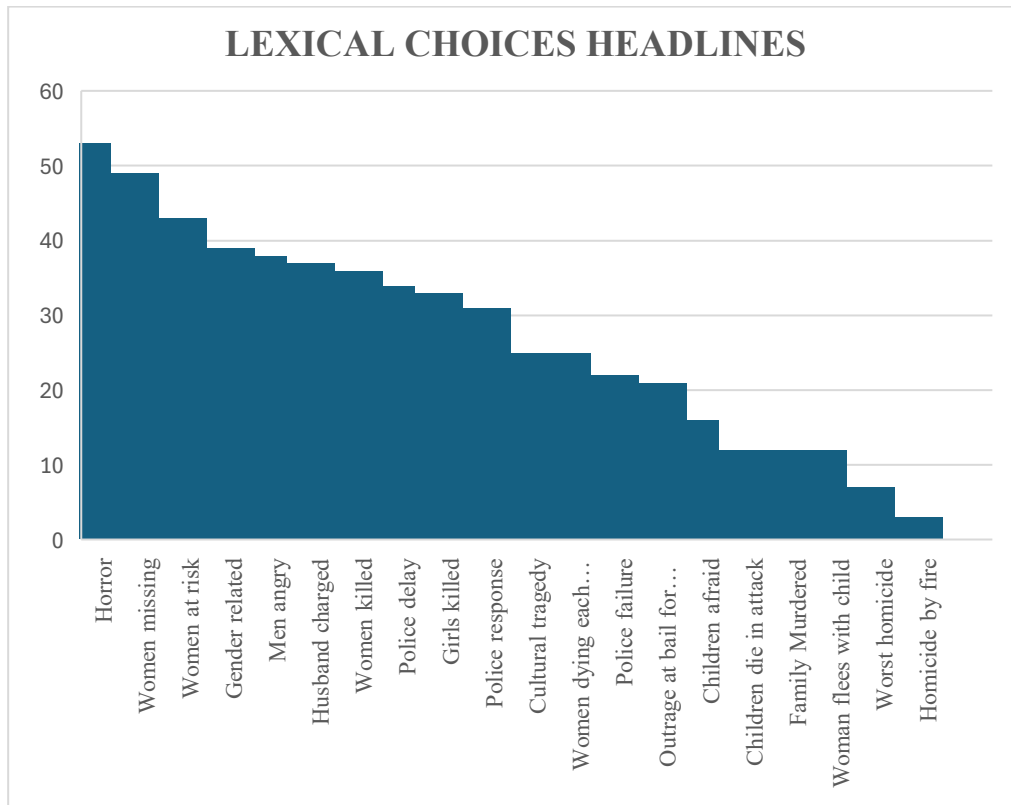


Chart of Lexical Choices in Headlines

The chart seen above is clearly replete with clear messages to viewers and readers that women are no longer safe in their own homes and when they attempt to escape, they are at even greater risk. Lexical Choices are described in discourse as attractants and recruit readers and viewers by either shocking them or influencing them via fear and concerns. Topics such as a weekly rate of family murders and the number of women being killed by intimate partners is a recurring theme in media platforms worldwide.

Further issues of concern are the beginnings of the *discourse of direction* first identified by Schulz (2007 pp51-59) after noting the then Australian and Western newspapers demanding that men not be allowed to *walk free* on bail and that *community outrage* was a predominant factor. This *discourse of direction* is usually preceded by dominant *discourses of disapproval and debate* which leads to the main currency of news platforms, i.e. *conflict*.

The media platforms studied reflect a sense of concern. The selected headlines indicate that police in many modern Western jurisdictions may need to improve their response to women reporting fear of their intimate partners or threats. Some women interviewed in media stories reported difficulties in avoiding ex-partners or violent husbands, citing stalking as a method used to continue the harassment.

This continued often to terrorise women into submission and return to their family home. Several platforms in media show stories of women reporting their fears of the partner only to be dismissed by police as "*Private Matter*". Some women are too afraid to report and this according to Gurm and Marchbank and Christopher Dowling (2024) is part of the global pandemic of violence and coercive control of women and children. In his report Dowling states that: "Police in

Australia are seeing increased reporting of family, domestic and sexual violence, while facing greater pressure to secure positive outcomes for victims. Improvements in the training police receive in responding to this violence have been identified as critical to broader efforts to reduce it" (Dowling 2024 p1).

Anaphora (repetition)

Several discourse analysts refer to the repeated tracing of themes and topics as *anaphora*, a key rhetorical device that highlights a speaker's or author's focus and attention. This technique engages audiences and suggests shared ideology by revisiting common ideas, clarifying how media emphasizes stories. The selected examples below show instances of *anaphora* in both Australian and international media.

- Murder of family Children at risk
- Missing women may be murder victims Women killed violently
- Epidemic of domestic violence
- Police delays in responding to women's fears dismiss women's fears
- Women often disbelieved Wife has run away
- Murdered by jealous husband in *crime passionel* [sic] Translation Crime of Passion
- Behind closed doors
- Failure to intervene due to cultural issues (UK Police blamed for inaction)

Headlines and repeated media coverage evoke high emotions and horror, leading the audience to believe that the threat to children and women is severe, even in their own homes.

Collocation Analysis

Collocation helps understand author mindsets and main arguments. This approach analyses the words juxtaposed either side of main thematic topics. Studies show we are flooded with messages from technology on the internet via social media and websites Gitlin (2001). He suggests in his research that people are often overwhelmed with huge amount of information issued out to media platforms. To stand out and make a political statement, it must be significant. The Glasgow Media Group (1976) first identified this trend where Gitlin calls this overwhelming phenomenon 'a torrent'. Thus, some media sites may resort to violence and fear and horror to get their perspectives noticed. For example, some stories are often overwhelmed with description of the horrific scenes following a murder. This can be readily seen on *Youtube True Crime Channels*.

De Beaugrande (1999), describes "collocation" as the "company words keep," indicating that even small word samples can reveal important patterns. Other analysts suggest it reflects a cultural conflict, similar to Justice Sackville's (2005) observation that courts, the justice system, and media often clash. This issue is highlighted by concerns that some police may be failing to protect communities. In stories filled with murder and violence, it now seems to be the police and politicians versus social order, a recurring conflict pattern. Fairclough (2003) encourages analysts to examine patterns in texts to identify relationships, including conflicts, between dominant discourses.

These are often described as *outrage* from family as a killer is given a light sentence or bailed while awaiting trial. Another conflict is often described as Police unwilling to follow up missing women despite pleas from the family. This can readily seen in the current joint calls by South Australia police (SA Police News website 2025) and the family for assistance in finding a missing woman Melissa Trussel (Brown) whose case has now gone cold after 25 years.

This story headlines a search for closure in this matter. However, there are several instances where police services have been seen as not proceeding with such matters when they were reported many years earlier (see for example Brennan 2024 on the Senate Inquiry into missing Indigenous Women).

The frequent recurrence of certain co-located selections in stories influences the subconscious selection of lexical items during composition of reports. Additionally, it is evident that attention-grabbing tactics are used in media to stand out amid the daily influx of news (Glasgow Media Group, 1976).

This is demonstrated by the frequent use of terms linking events to horror, distress, family fear, and community anxiety. They suggest that much media content involves emotion, sensation, division, conflict, and celebrity to attract headlines and readers. Below is a list of media terms and collocations that illustrate how news can instil fear even at home.

Theme	Collocation	Implication
Horror of killings	Dreadful scenes seen by first responders	Society is unsafe
Children often see what happens during violence	Children cannot help	Children are also victims
Family massacred	Father [usually] as mass murderer	Children innocently killed through the agency of powerful parent
Children killed	as mother tried to protect them	Vulnerability of children as hidden victims
Police	did not respond	Police failing
Police culture	Seen as a private matter	Lack of training or cultural insensitivity.
Police unable/delay in attending	To intervene	Laws strictly control how police can act
Women fearful in cultural context	Frightened to leave nowhere to turn scared of the future/children also vulnerable	Women need safe places to run to and there aren't enough of them. Often seen as social work problem
Children frightened of dad	Mothers cannot protect them	Why can't she leave him?
Judges too soft	Husband freed to stalk again	Courts need to be tougher
Court finds husband guilty	Years of threat	Why did this take so long?
Women not believed	Making it up	Women are liars
Women dismissed by prosecution as a potential witness in courts against violent men as too "difficult" to appear in court to give evidence against their abusive partners	No point in following up as women (through fear of reprisals) withdraw complaints	Women are a problem as they do not present as consistent or believable

Table of collocation selections seen in selected media reports

The collocations table above suggest that police frequently miss signs of genuine threats to women, sometimes overlooking cases or dismissing reports as attempts to influence divorce proceedings. Families reporting missing women may also be told their loved ones are simply "running away," often with a partner. The table also suggests this may be more than just clickbait, but an effort to hold authorities accountable for the high number of women killed by domestic violence. Finding the connections between horrors of killings and the words that accompany them identifies how collocation identifies what is implied. Below this table shows descriptions next to the headlined stories and their implications for readers and viewers.

There are also cases where police respond more actively when the victim is perceived as worthy (e.g., young, attractive, from a well-known family). Often, if bodies are later found, a murder investigation begins but it may be too late for some families. Disbelieving women and having nowhere to turn are appearing to be major issues, frustrating both police and authorities. Police often note that women face the greatest danger when leaving an abusive partner, complicating the advice they can give.

Cultural and ethnic considerations can sometimes influence authorities' actions, as they may become concerned about being perceived as discriminatory in societies where racism is considered unacceptable.

This has been discussed in media in relation to the Rotherham grooming gang cases, involving Pakistani men, where fears of accusations of racism reportedly influenced intervention efforts (Bindel 2024). Women are fearful if they have nowhere to turn to receive immediate help or are not believed.??

Topoi (or commonly repeated views in identified social or professional groups)

Topoi are described as *commonly held values and views within presented argument structures*.

To address the imbalance in professional responses, an analysis of the frequency of the most recurrent *topoi* in media comments is conducted. This process, referred to by Van der Valk (2003), establishes the existence of commonly shared "values and maxims" within a discourse community when they present their arguments. At times such argumentation appears to be somewhat hidden or implied. Further investigation reveals that the element of *Topoi* is used in discourse analysis to determine the commonly held viewpoints of authoritative cultural or significant groups, such as the media, which focus on domestic violence. These comments come from various sources and indicate that women often rely on groups not entirely supportive of them.

For instance, in some Christian societies where the emphasis is on women to "obey" their husbands as cited in wedding ceremonies, the occurrence of violence can prevent them from protecting themselves (Baird and Gleeson 2017). Some women seek help from church elders or charities, who sometimes fail to protect them. To address this professional response imbalance, an examination of the frequency of the most recurrent *topoi* in media comments was considered. This process, as identified by Van der Valk (2003), establishes the existence of commonly shared "values and maxims" within a discourse community when they offer their arguments.

This is echoed in work done by Wodak and Meyer (2004). Such elements are used in the assembly of any discourse describing and surrounding a reality, to reveal the characteristics of a community and its public perceptions.

Fairclough (2001) indicates that powerful participants can control discourse within communication formats. Dagistanli (2015) argues that cultural defences deny agency and responsibility to accused individuals identified as culturally different. *Topoi* influence interpretations based on cultural contexts, like media-driven assumptions that missing women are runaways due to violence. Police often use this belief to avoid lengthy investigations (Chenery 2024).

In previous years, certain police services have demonstrated reluctance to fully investigate cases of missing mothers. Typically, families with a missing mother attempt to demonstrate to law enforcement that their concerns are not related to voluntary disappearance, thereby emphasizing the need for thorough investigation. This pattern has been widely documented, and frequently it is only persistent assertions such as "*she loved her children*" that ultimately contribute to understanding what transpired.

Employing race, culture, or religion as a justification in cases of violence against women presents significant challenges within a Eurocentric and Anglo-based justice system.

Authorities often encounter difficulties in addressing norms that may compromise social cohesion and cultural wellbeing. The following brief table illustrates this issue as depicted in various media reports.

Topoi element	Implication	Argument/or judgment
Women should obey	They often disobey	She has run away
She loved her children	Therefore, she would not leave them	Police should investigate
Women often withdraw their complaints about husbands	Women are lying	Police should ignore whining women
Men are the head of the house	His word is law he should be obeyed	This is how it has always been
She is too modern and ignoring our culture	She should be punished for shaming our family	Culture is more important than the law
Why doesn't she leave him	She is not serious	Therefore, her husband is not to blame
Mushroom Murderer is evil	Some women are born with evil intent as shown by the horror of crime	She deserves a lifetime in gaol
Woman who killed children beyond belief	She is not feminine or caring	She should be heavily punished
Woman too outgoing for my liking	She does not act like she should as accommodating or acquiescent	She will be controlled until she does

Table selection of typical *Topoi* elements found in media discourse

Such significant arguments or judgments which are highlighting the problem of women afraid to go and afraid to stay and a culture that blames her for doing both are evident above in this table. While the inclusion of the *Mushroom Murder* recently, a sensational court case held in Australia may not be about domestic violence it significantly highlights the commonly held belief that women who kill are somehow not truly feminine but evil. Sensationally a doctor at a local hospital highlighted this *topoi* in a TV interview. He stated that: "She was evil and very smart to have planned it all and carried it out but didn't quite dot every I and cross every T." (ABC News Dr Chris Webster 8th July 2025).

Other stories draw attention to a similar *Topos* or commonly held views of a cultural group. What is missing here is the effect such stories and issues have on her children if at all. (Examples are pervasive of children being bullied at school and in the playground or when older elsewhere about the behaviour of their parents) This was the case of Princes Harry

and William during the behaviours reported in media of secret trysts and amorous adventures of their parents in the 1980's (Mac Kelden 2025) so that decades later the effects are still reported but perhaps too late.

In other cultural norms the notion of women turning the tables and attacking injuring or even killing their intimate partners while rare do occur. This area is fraught with significant issues of concern where the conflation of tension between the battered and scared wife who at the end of her tether finally succumbs to killing the abuser is still problematic.

This dilemma is summed up by the following quote from Bartal (1995 np) in a conference paper on the *Battered Wife Syndrome Evidence* presented in July 1995:

“Where there is sympathy for the abused women it leads to a subjective decision as to how much blame she should bear. This is manifested in the selection by the judge of either provocation or self-defence as the appropriate defence [often to help her children] to which the jury may apply the facts. The result is that the distinction between provocation and self-defence becomes obscured.”

Topoi incorporate cultural and familiar perspectives into debates. Specialist groups use *topoi* to present solutions as generally accepted views. Women are often referred to as mad rather than bad, influencing how syndromes are depicted in the media. In Australia, Domestic Violence Courts, established in the 1990s, handle both criminal cases and protection orders, ensuring clear presentation of information without media sensationalism. However, media reports sometimes deviate from the clarity provided by the courts.

A summary of the Problem: Lacunae or what society misses in discourse

Lacunae, or missing textual elements, is a significant issue in discourse as this clearly represents a lack of agency or developed legal or literal definition of what is domestic violence. For women or children, or others who live within domestic violence as a daily part of their lives, the media seems focussed on the victims the crimes the horror and distress when the abuse ends in murder serious injury or a later mystery of yet another missing woman; it is revealed sometimes years later as a domestic violence murder (Bartal 1995). In discourse analysis, lacunae refer to missing text or unrepresented voices.

Schulz and Cannon (2011) noted that sentencing remarks often lack terms like *punishment* or *penalty*. Journalists may also report on suspended sentences without addressing mitigating circumstances, often due to limited time and resources. The question is how this is affecting future generations of men and women as they grow into adulthood and carry with them the burden as victims of violence. It would appear significant enough for media to consider this as a future benchmark of investigative journalism... at times not just after the fact.

In domestic violence cases, media frequently omit detailed abuse histories, ignoring cultural differences. Some societies neglect women's pleas for help, while others punish them for defying traditions. Mainstream media's focus on sensationalism fails to capture the true horror when women and children are harmed by those close to them. The root cause lies in entrenched male beliefs of entitlement and control over women; some men, unable to accept challenges to their authority, resort to violence instead of facing defeat.

Violence is common in entertainment, such as movies and sports like boxing, football, and rugby. Further, conflict is often seen as a typical way to resolve disputes. The table below highlights gaps in media reporting on violence. These gaps are implied through page 3 stories and aggressive behaviour in Australian sports like the Australian Football League & NRL. Notably, the *Port Power* song includes the lyrics, “Come on Port Adelaide aggression”.

While there are no headlines advocating male aggression other than in sport, lacunae appear to show men in charge and women as unable to prevent it. In other cultures, masculinity or the macho male is lionised by virtue of celebrity and celebrity sports people are found to be wanting when they cannot control their women.

Women and children reported in media stories on violence	Implications of lacunae or what appear missing	Possible interventions
Threatened traumatised	Unable to retaliate	More police support and court ordered protection
Vulnerable	Weak needing rescuing but from whom?	Self-protection both mentally and physically is needed
Scared of their partners/scared of their parent Not believed when they report abuse	Unable to stand up to emotional or physical abuse Men in charge and aggressive	Women taught to be less submissive and more discerning in partner choice
Constantly on edge	Mentally fragile	Mental health support
Unable to function in violent household	“	Protection orders to be more carefully monitored
Children neglected	It is the role of women to support & protect their children	Child protection early intervention needed
Children at risk	“	“
Women expected to withdraw	Cultural norm	Cultural norms not always acceptable in the current society
Women expected to stay for the sake of the family and the children	Cultural norm but also too scared to leave and too scared to stay	“
Women ashamed of not being able to satisfy the man	“	Need to be told that is not always true
Women are to blame for not acceding to demands	“	Coercive control perceived“
Women and children seen as possessions by some societies	Cultural and other beliefs	Intercultural education needed for community groups and their families
Women obligated by culture to make the marriage work	Honour of family based on the woman's acceding and children behaving	Courts decide if cultural defences should be ignored in legal cases
Women are often lying to get custody of children	Women are too emotional	Perhaps there may be truth to be tested here

Selection of Lacunae noted in media discourse suggest interventions

The discourse analysis table above, featuring *lacunae* and its implications, highlights significant efforts that challenge the cultural norm of men being perceived as dominant figures who often manage their anger and families through intimidation. The concept of affectionate fatherhood is frequently not reflective of reality in private settings. The other challenge is to change elements of police training to respond more quickly to females reporting fear of partners committing abuse or reporting coercive control.

In some countries, statutes define coercive control, allowing immediate enforcement and support for victims of abuse. For instance, France has outlawed domestic violence since the 19th Century. In Germany the Government and Police and other authorities are using European Council frameworks such as the General Equal Treatment Act (Federal Law, written in German as *Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz* AGG, 2006): The Act protects people who are discriminated against on the grounds of race or ethnic background, gender, religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation and aims, among other things, to ensure access to services. They have also adopted the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence – Istanbul Convention was ratified in 2017 and has been law in Germany since 1.2.2018 (See for example *Improvada* 2025)

Conclusion: Media Sensation and Government Intervention

High-profile news coverage of families often reflects failures by governments to protect women, children, and society. Domestic violence is a longstanding issue rooted in culture, not just a recent media focus. In Australia, headlines highlight that a woman dies every four days due to domestic violence, and last year, half of female homicide victims were killed by current or former partners, with significant impacts on families and children.

Teo (2000) describes headlines as *semantic macrostructures*, indicating their role in shaping how audiences interpret content from news outlets. Stories focused on violence and crime have become so prevalent in nightly broadcasts and online news that few question this trend anymore. This reporting style influences cultural expectations, making outrage-driven stories a routine element.

Recently, communities have begun to respond critically, engaging through protests and podcasts addressing topics such as domestic violence. After protest marches in Australia where activists declared “Enough is Enough,” some police departments and officials issued statements and proposed reforms. Examples include Australia's national plan to end violence against women and a \$1 billion commitment to assist women escaping violent environments. The Australian Government also introduced budget initiatives supporting alternative housing for women fleeing abuse. Such public activism has helped raise domestic violence issues to governmental levels, encouraging policy responses. Furthermore, advocates like Kate Colvin (Karvelas 2024) have been vocal about the need to help women avoid homelessness for themselves or their children if marriages end due to domestic violence.

Other advocates, including Ms Rosie Batty AO, have raised concerns about this serious issue. In a recent address at the National Press Club, she called for support and suggested solutions for prevention. She emphasized:

“There’s one uncomfortable fact we all must face—almost everyone who has experienced violence in Australia, primarily women and children, suffered at the hands of a man. Over 94% of perpetrators are male. While we must hold these individuals accountable, we also need to give our boys a healthier definition of what it means to be a ‘real man.’ The current idea tells them to hide their fears or risk being excluded from society. Instead, we should teach that being stoic, tough, and controlled is meaningless without also being compassionate, thoughtful, and kind.” (Batty 2024 np)

Academic scholars and lawmakers could use online guidelines and advocates’ recommendations to prevent domestic abuse. Media often emphasizes violence for viewership, which fosters fear and undermines progress toward safety for women and children. Legal reforms should eliminate cultural excuses for abuse, and intercultural training—like Sweden’s workshops for migrants—can promote understanding of laws and rights. Hedley Thomas's research and lacunae studies highlight the need for police to improve responses to missing persons and fearful reports from women. The media can support the *UK Zero Tolerance* stance on domestic violence reporting, as Anna Burnside (2024) notes: “Violence against women is not caused by external factors, but by men and a culture of male dominance. That is the story we need to tell.”

In summary, although much of violence reporting focuses on male behaviour, this comprehensive media analysis indicates that abusive parenting by women is frequently linked to substance abuse and significant neglect. Such patterns often stem from generational cycles of abuse and normalization of violent conduct. These issues are commonly overlooked by police who are often the first responders of reports and social workers investigating these families. This may be that news coverage seldom draws attention to them explicitly.

The research concludes that violence perpetrated by women warrants increased focus in media reporting to adequately address all facets of domestic violence. This is particularly relevant for families, children, adolescents, and young preschoolers, ensuring that these matters are thoroughly considered. The following recommendations are provided based on a substantial number of papers and interviews conducted throughout this study, aimed at safeguarding children and culturally diverse families.

Recommendations

1. Each jurisdiction should have a core focus on regular review of cases that have been reported by mandated reporters to authorities in charge of child protection.
2. Difficult and challenging cases that have been unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion must be reviewed and decisions made on how to keep [women] and particularly children safe.
3. A significant review panel of experts to consider challenging and difficult cases monthly and selected by Government for their expertise in the following areas. *Early Childhood Health and Development; Education; Child Protection and the law; Psychology; Child mental health and well-being; Cultural sensitivity and safety.*
4. That the Committee of Child Protection Review of Cases should be Chaired by a significant member of the community who has at least several skills and qualifications in this area of interest.
5. That the Governments and Authorities appoint a *Chief Social Welfare Officer* to the portfolio² with powers to convene review panels and extra support, when necessary, in particularly challenging circumstances.
6. Regular reporting in the media of child protection statistics and how the Chief Welfare Officer of the State/Nation is responding to challenges faced in the areas of family function well-being and child well-being.

² It should be noted here that most jurisdictions in Australia have such appointments e.g. the Commissioners for Small Business practices, Chief Health Officer, Chief Nurse etc. are some examples of this approach.

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