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STUDENT POLICY BRIEF

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BREAKING THE SILENCE: TOWARDS A PAN-EUROPEAN POLICY ON MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

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Who is this aimed at

- EU media policy makers
- Journalists
- Media organisations and institutions

Key messages

- Gender based violence (GBV) isn't publicly treated as the societal problem that it is.
- The media and the correct wording play a crucial important role in forming the public discussion about GBV.
- Pan-European policy that controls media outcomes is suggested.

Introduction

Gender based violence (GBV) is defined as „violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that effects women disproportionately“ (CEDAW Committee, 1992). GBV results from gender inequality and constitutes a human rights violation, which was only recognised as such in 1992 (World Bank, 2022), (Baluta, 2015). The forms of GBV can be physical, sexual, emotional and psychological. Two of the most common types of violence experienced by women are intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner sexual violence (NPSV) (World Bank, 2022).

As statistics show, one in three women have been physically or sexually violated at least once in their life (World Bank, 2022). Every 11 minutes, a woman or a girl dies in the act of domestic violence (United Nations, 2022). The portrayal of gender based violence in the media can have a major impact on whether stereotypes and social norms condoning violence against women continue to be tolerated or whether they are opposed (Media Affairs, 2019).

In the EU, there is no existing policy, which comprehensively takes action against gender-based violence. While a proposal submitted on 08.03.2022 is to be implemented, this includes no sufficient regulations and suggestions addressing the representation of the topic in the media, as the suggestions for improvement are only recommendations that are not legally binding. (European Commission, 2022).

Ethical reporting of GBV in the media: the problem context

An important variable in the public and political discussion of gender based violence and its inherent discussion is the way it is reported. The fundamental problem is that gender based violence is still regarded as an individual problem. It is not recognised as a structural and political issue. German media states that ninety percent of the articles studied, cited individual reasons as the cause of violence against the abused woman. Only ten percent pointed out the structural problem (Meltzer, 2022). It is made clear by researchers that the media plays an essential role when it comes to forming this discussion and reporting about acts of violence against women (Media Affairs, 2020). Particularly news media “spread news on gender-based violence in which the abusers have a secondary role [...] sometimes even removed from description” (Pachón & García Garlena, 2016, p. 6) and “give a male-centered view of the world” (European Parliament 2013). Generally violence against women is primarily reported in the form of tragic, shocking individual fates, but not as the structural social problem that it actually is (Media Affairs 2020).

The long-term outcome of unbalanced news reporting can be seen in the forms of different issues that altogether create a harmful environment for women in the public sphere:

- The sexualisation of women that leads to their objectification (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021)
- Advocating men’s violence and sexual harassment (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021)
- More lived out sexism in general (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021)
- The distribution and anchoring of obsolete stereotypes which contributes to “the normalisation of violence and perpetuation of discriminatory gender norms” (UNICEF, 2022)
- The victim blaming and creation of a hierarchy by differentiating victims into different types, based on the story told by journalists (UNICEF, 2022)

These issues will be explained in more detail with examples of current reports that show the problems of insufficient journalistic work.

To this day, the news coverage lacks a balanced and objective image of reality when it comes to GBV and its discussion is hidden “under the umbrellas of gender and feminist studies” (Santos, Cerquera, Rosa, 2022). The overall reporting on violence against women only increases due to public pressure; the role of politics as a participatory, determining body is hardly fulfilled (Santos, Cerquera, Cabecinhas, 2022). In Western European countries, the topic of gender based violence only became public in the 1970s; even later the Eastern European countries followed in 1995 and started to slowly put it on the political agenda. Romania makes a shocking example, as the first national law fighting violence was only adopted in 2003 (later changed in 2012) and wouldn’t have happened “without some civic mobilisation” by women’s movements (Baluta, 2015).

The wrong use of language and inadequate definitions by journalists plays an important role in the problem as well. The choice of words is not free (Gee, 1999) and the way we name facts has indeed a big influence on the perception of these events. Not naming cases of murder, rape and femicide will deform the story and downplay those crimes in the public eye. To make an example, a study of Austrian newspapers shows that in 2019, in 23% of the articles surveyed the act of violence was not directly identifiable as such. In this case, the journalists used euphemisms, and inoffensive wording like “family tragedy”, “relationship drama” or “Love-hate relationship ended in bloody tragedy” (Österreich, 13.02.2019; Media Affairs, 2019). Moreover, the use of the word “femicide” is still not the norm, even though not gendering it “overlooks the realities of inequality, oppression and systematic violence against women” (EIGE, 2021).

Another issue is the victimisation of the perpetrator or even victim blaming. In some articles, journalists find excuses or extenuating circumstances to explain the acts of the criminal. Excuses like jealousy, alcohol or drug abuse are often used and thus remove the perpetrator's blame: "He left his family for her - then she left him: Blazing jealousy may have led to the bloodbath in Vienna-Meidling" (Heute, 14.02.2019).

In some cases, it goes even further: the victims are blamed. Their appearances or behavior are examined, as well as their clothes, their relationships, the time of the day, and as a result the victim herself is blamed for the crime. This takes away the perpetrator's responsibility and excuses the act of gender-based violence. Statements like these can discourage victims to report the violence that they suffer from. In general, evaluations of the annual study on Austrian media coverage of violence against women come to the conclusion that the topic of domestic violence is largely ignored in the media, especially by the tabloid press. Violence by partners is usually only mentioned when it involves murder or attempted murder, or when it concerns the most severe physical abuse. (Media Affairs, 2019).

Policy recommendations

European monitoring organisation

Unethical reportings, which violate against the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Personal Protection of Data, the Law on Prevention of Discrimination or other codes and laws must be reported and punished. These cases must be regarded as serious criminal charges against the violation of human rights and the responsible persons and media organisations must be held accountable. (Bajramovic, 2022).

To counter the inadequate media presentation and storytelling of the ongoing femicide that is covered up by journalists, we see the EU responsible for pan European improvements by a general policy for journalists and media organisations.

While there are several voluntary self-regulatory organisations of the press in almost every European country, their efforts are evidently falling short of making the necessary change. It only shows an image to the outside world that is characterised by control and freedom of the press - unfortunately, the reality still looks different (especially in Southern and Eastern Europe) (Bauer, 2006). These ethics committees handle incoming complaints about articles and work independently from their states. But this independence also results in no legal basis or rights to sanction media organisations. Their aims result in self-monitoring without actual consequences for reprimanded contents. We call for a European monitoring organisation or watch group - funded by the EU - that actively seeks out violations of the ethical principles of the press in the individual countries. These principles include the mentioned necessity of the use of correct wording, the objective and fact-based reporting and the allocation to the political agenda.

Raising Awareness

At the individual level, informative campaigns can be developed and disseminated through various channels to raise awareness about the issue. In fact, two experimental studies conducted by Guizzo and Cadinu (2021) provided evidence that men displayed reduced gender harassment after watching an informative video that increased their awareness of the problem. Therefore, informative campaigns, such as videos, can serve as a means to address this issue and utilise the media as a tool to mitigate gender-based violence.

Secondly, at the macro level, there is a need to gradually adjust the "paradigm" of journalistic practices to ensure that media content regarding violence reflects responsibility, a deep understanding of the phenomenon, and a genuine intention to inform the public. Media

organisations have the capacity to produce journalistic content that upholds social responsibility. Therefore, actions such as workshops can be a solution to raise awareness about this topic and train journalists to create such content. (Baluta, 2015)

There are already several guidelines and reports available that could assist in reporting on violence against women. For example, the 'CARE Gender Sensitisation Manual on Media Reporting on Gender-Based Violence' (2017) and the 'United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation Handbook for Journalists: Reporting on Violence against Women and Girls' (2019) provide valuable resources. Media organisations should pay attention to these guidelines and consider adopting them as norms (UNICEF, 2022).

Conclusions

Gender-based violence is a pervasive societal problem that demands immediate attention and action. The media and its responsible use of language play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and discussions about this issue. The current state of media portrayal fails to recognise gender-based violence as a structural and political problem, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and norms that enable violence against women. By implementing a pan-European policy that regulates media outcomes and promotes ethical reporting practices, the EU can take a crucial step towards combating gender-based violence and fostering a society that upholds the rights and dignity of all individuals. Emphasising the urgency and significance of this issue, this policy brief urges media organisations, journalists, and EU policymakers to work collaboratively in breaking the silence and initiating concrete measures towards a safer and more equitable future for all within the European Union.

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Jean Monnet Communication, Facts and Regulation for European Democracy (FREuDe) Centre of Excellence

- stimulates new forward thinking with regards the role of facts and place of regulation for securing a future democratic Europe
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- develops new agendas for research, policy and teaching across disciplines and across stakeholder communities
- provides an impetus for future oriented thinking, by researching the needs and perceptions of Europe's future autonomous citizens, young people and in particular children for factual information in and about Europe
- mobilises knowledges and competencies of a range of experts and especially aiming to "hear from" stakeholders which have historically been permitted least input to questions of right to accurate and comprehensive information as a civil and human right.