

EU-CELAC dialogue on gender: Effects and challenges of the media coverage of violence against women on femicide¹

The establishment of the EU-CELAC gender dialogue and the organisation of the Workshop on Violence against Women and Femicide/Feminicide in Buenos Aires at the end of 2013 signalled the beginning of an official process oriented towards a better understanding of the phenomenon and the search for best practices to ensure women's right to a life free of violence.

It seems to be clear to everybody that educational programs promoting gender equality will certainly contribute to overcome discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes that foster violence against women. However, other channels such as television and the written press play a non negligible role in the justification and reproduction of violence against women. Academic research on the effects and consequences of the media coverage on femicide has highlighted this issue as a serious concern for journalists. Professionals such as the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) are aware of the media's impact and have elaborated recommendations on how to report on violence against women².



What are the effects and consequences of the media treatment of violence against women on femicide?

In 2013 the two academics Patsili Toledo and Claudia Lagos wrote an article on the relationship between media and femicide³, pointing out the influence that media coverage of violence against women has on the gender- based murder. One of these possible consequences of media coverage is the copy- cat effect⁴, where incidents of murder of or violence against women that were reported in the media get imitated, leading to an increase of violence under identical conditions. This effect is not limited to violence against women, but occurs with all forms of violence, however, in most other contexts ethical constraints of journalists seem to be more effective than when it comes to violence against women. Many women's rights organization

¹ Femicide/ Femicide or gender- related killings of women are 'the extreme manifestation of violence against women. Such killings are not isolated incidents that arise suddenly and unexpectedly, but represent the ultimate act of violence which is experienced in a continuum of violence' ([Rashida Manjoo](#), UN Special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences).

² The Lunch Debate took place on March 6th 2014 in the context of the 7th Conference on Femicide. Guest Speakers were **Patsili Toledo**, lawyer, PhD in Public law and member of Copolis Research Group at the University of Barcelona, **Jean-Jacques Jespers**, Vice-president of the Belgium Council for ethical journalism and **Pamela Moriniere**, Authors' Rights and Gender Officer, IFJ. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

³ The [article exists in English and in Spanish](#).

⁴ A [copycat murder](#) is a murder that mimed a previous murder which was reported in the media, or a fictional murder.

criticise that the detailed description of the murder is almost like an instruction on how to commit a murder. One of these cases is the one of Wanda Taddei from Argentina who died in February 2010 from her burns after she had been incinerated by her husband, Eduardo Vázquez. As he was member of a well-known rock band the case had an immense echo in the media and during the following year the number of women burned to death was four times as high as during the previous one. Another effect media coverage has, especially concerning the coverage of violence, is the increase of fear in women. Whereas the reporting of violence evokes fear in general, women are even more affected as female victims are overrepresented in the press. This leads to a reinforcement of the image of women as victims and the weaker sex. Furthermore, can the reporting of femicide lead to a normalization of violence against women within the society and enhance existing discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes. Often journalists interview neighbors or people with inside knowledge of the murderer's character, who more often than not state that such violence was atypical for the perpetrator and thereby, downplaying the cruelty of his action. By stating that he did it out of jealousy, love or etc, media regularly fails to depict the complex, societal roots of the problem and presents the murder as a private, single instance and a result of a problem between a couple and not for what it is. In cases of extreme violence against women, it is essential not to intensify the trauma experienced by the victims, but to give well researched background information to state the facts without being sensational. But, for reasons of the market, media exacerbate with sensational information, particularly in cases of sexual violence. The mainly male editors know that violence sells. This phenomenon of the commercialisation of violence is greater in countries where there is no system of regulation of the media- neither self nor state regulation.

What can we learn from the International Federation of Journalists and other recommendations?

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is a journalist union, representing national press councils⁵ and organisations worldwide, and which recognizes the importance of media's depiction of violence against women. Therefore, IFJ has released recommendation (or guidelines) to journalists on how to report on gender-based violence. Those recommendations are part of an ethical journalism initiative, which aims at bringing journalists back to core ethical issues of truth telling, independence and fairness as well as humanity and solidarity. It is the aim of the IFJ to portray this issue not only as a feminist issue, but as a professional issues one of how to report correctly, without clichés and stereotypes. The recommendations stress that journalists should be aware of the victims' and their family's privacy and therefore be confidential, not use too many graphical details, put the crime into the right context, use statistics correctly and do the same for interviews. Those recommendations also aim at improving the situation for female journalists and other female workers in the newsroom, as many of them are subject to harassment and violence themselves. The IFJ moreover supports

⁵ Press councils generally consist of representatives of journalists, editors and civil society that is to say, judges, representatives of universities, organisations defending human rights or other organisations and exist in order to raise and maintain professional standards amongst journalists.

the Global Media Monitoring Project, the largest international study of gender in the media and which releases reports every five years.

In most countries, such ethical guidelines as well as their monitoring are laid out and organised by the national press council as a system of self- regulation rather than state- regulation. It is a so called “soft law”. This is a questionable system as it is fragile with many legitimate criticisms and whose effectiveness depends largely on the political system in which it exists and on the commitment of civil society to enforce it, as there is no real possibility of self-regulation in a non-democratic system. The principle of soft law is to name and shame those members of the group that are doing wrong by saying "Do not repeat what they are doing", as they are not following the guidelines and standards, hoping that the good example of other members will be contagious and that more will follow it. The council acts upon complaints and the complainant does not have to be directly concerned by the message. The Press Council bases its decision on a series of existing documents on ethical journalism (about 400), the central of which is the [International Code: Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Journalists](#) stating that journalists



and media should not discriminate and must respect human dignity. The reports on violence against women are also based on these principles. However, many civil society organisations complain that self- regulation hardly works and it falls upon the civil society to point out when something is not going well and it is their obligation to name and shame on the journalists that are informing inadequately. Unfortunately though, limited resources do not allow it for civil society to fight femicide on all fronts and to be everywhere regarding the criminal offences, putting pressure on the judicial system to have a criminal prosecution, accompanying the victims or their families, changing legislations and the organisations. Many women’s rights organisation therefore call for state regulation. They argue that the freedom of expression, other than the freedom of a life free of violence, is not and should be an absolute right, journalists counter that this would be state censorship and therefore against fundamental human rights, international

convection and the constitutions of democratic countries. In their opinion

Recommendations by Civil Society

Journalists explain that is often due to bad working conditions and circumstances such as the immense time pressure they frequently have to work under that lead to insufficient research in order to put the stories into a bigger context. A further problem is that television by nature requires visuals and that consequentially cameramen and reporter more often than not intrude the victim’s privacy by filming them, their houses, their families, neighbors and friends. Moreover, there is not much training about gender equality in journalist schools and although there are many press councils, the issue of gender balance has not gained much attention so far. Therefore there is still a lot of work needed in this field.

Whereas in the context of racism the role of the media has been well included into the debate of opinion shaping, this has been lacking in the case of femicide. As experts fear that the issue of femicide will vanish completely from the media if regulated too strictly, a compromise is needed. The question is not whether to inform or not, but how one should inform. For example news about femicide should also include indications for women on how to seek help and protection from such occurrences. Furthermore women's rights organisations call for state regulation when it comes to media coverage on gender sensitive issues, as it can lead to the harm of women. On the Latin American side- in the context of the Conference Belem do Para, there has been no council of journalists or something likewise, which has guidelines on how to report on violence against women. The Spanish model, which often serves as an example for Latin American countries, however, does include guidelines for the media in its law for the protection of the security of citizens ("Ley Orgánica de Protección de la Seguridad Ciudadana"), in regard to gender and ethnicity issues. This law, however, has been heavily criticized by the media as "Ley mordaza" or "gag law" as functioning as cutting freedom of the press.

Conclusively, civil society and media representatives have different approaches on how to improve the media coverage of violence against women. Whereas some experts would solely rely on education and self- regulation, others additionally want to see state regulation. While all of them agree that the coverage of gender sensitive issues should be a required subject in journalist schools, some think this is not enough and that the state has the duty to regulate gender sensitive media coverage as well, as it can harm lives if it is currently done wrongly. Critics of this state- based censorship say that freedom of the press is essential to a democracy and should not be limited, but rather that governments need to involve media into this discussion and provide sufficient resources as well as trainings for journalists, editors and co. Opponents counter argue that the right to a life free of harm trumps the right to freedom of expression. Either way, change is needed as lives of women are at stake when it comes to the effect of the media coverage of femicide.