

Reporting domestic abuse in the media

Introduction

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of around 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country.

We are proud to work with the media to:

- Raise awareness of domestic abuse
- Campaign for better rights for survivors
- Amplify the voices of survivors
- To let those living with domestic abuse know that there is help and support available

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer. It is very common. In the majority of cases, it is experienced by women and is perpetrated by men, and we refer to women survivors in this document for this reason. However, all domestic abuse is unacceptable and all survivors need support.

(We work closely with charities that provide specialist services for male victims and LGBTQ+ survivors).

Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to:

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

Language

Domestic abuse or domestic violence?

Use domestic abuse where possible, as domestic violence can send a message that if you are not being hit, then it doesn't count as abuse. Coercive control has been against the law since 2015.

Survivor or victim?

Where possible, use survivor, when the domestic abuse is in the past – women tell us this makes a positive difference to how they feel about the reporting, and how they frame their own experience. We use victim when it is in relation to criminal justice – when reporting a crime or when a woman has been killed.

Using quotes to tell the story

Where possible, raise the voice of the survivor or victim – this makes a huge difference to both readers who have experienced abuse in the past, and those living with it now and deciding if anyone will believe them if they seek help.

- Use quotes from (or about) the survivor/victim, so she is the centre of the story.
- Don't give a platform to the perpetrator – quotes from perpetrators can be seen as normalising or minimising their behaviour. It can be traumatising for the woman and for other survivors of domestic abuse reading their words. It could make other perpetrators think that their actions or attitudes are acceptable.

- Remember that often perpetrators of domestic abuse are very manipulative and their friends, family and neighbours might not suspect a thing. When you quote a neighbour or friend saying “he was so lovely, he was a great father” after he has killed his wife and children, it can play into a harmful narrative where he is not held responsible for his actions. Most homicides are planned, but the narrative can be changed depending on how this is reported in the media.
- Many domestic abuse stories come from what is viewed as factual court reporting – but there is a choice on what quotes are used, and what weighting is given to these quotes in the story.
- In the headline, don’t pin the blame on the event that happened immediately before a domestic homicide. For example, a woman could be killed because of long-term domestic abuse, but if the murder followed an argument about their dog, she wasn’t killed because of the row about the dog. If you can, include “abused” or similar in the copy, to show the wider context.

Identification

If you want to include a photo or article of a woman who has been killed in a historic domestic homicide, please contact her family or next of kin before running it, if you can – we have been contacted by traumatised families, when they have not been aware that their relative would be pictured or written about in a newspaper or magazine.

If you can avoid doing so, do not run the perpetrator’s photo next to the victim’s – we get very strong feedback from families and friends about this.

Consent

Within a relationship, women can be raped or sexually assaulted by their partner. She can consent to a sexual act once, but it does not set a precedent that they have consented for future acts or for their partner to have sex with them while they are unable to consent, i.e. while they are asleep.

Someone under the age of 16 cannot be in a consensual sexual relationship with an adult, so do not describe sexual or intimate activity between an adult and person under-18 as a relationship (even if they would describe it themselves that way). So, a 28-year-old man would have abused a 14-year-old girl rather than being in a sexual relationship with her (he would be abusing her, because of her inability to legally consent, rather than being in an abusive relationship).

Statistics

Domestic abuse and domestic homicides are not one-off events, they happen frequently. Over the last three-year period, on average at least one woman a week was killed by a male partner/ex-partner. This has more than doubled during the Covid-19 lockdown. An estimated 1 in 4 women will experience domestic abuse at some point in their life.

Context and accurate statistics are important, and we have a research team constantly analysing new domestic abuse statistics – these are published on our website womensaid.org.uk or you can go to our press office press@womensaid.org.uk

Signposting

Where possible, signpost – if you cover a domestic abuse story, you will have readers who identify with what they are reading and some of them will want or need support.

Women's Aid runs the UK Domestic Abuse Directory for your local domestic abuse service at www.womensaid.org.uk

The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is 0808 2000 247 (run by Refuge)

The Men's Advice Line, for male domestic abuse survivors is 0808 801 0327 (run by Respect)

The National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline is 0800 999 5428 (run by Galop)

If you are in immediate danger always call 999