



Dignity for dead women:

How families bereaved by fatal domestic abuse have experienced the press

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Thank you to all the families who shared their time and experiences

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INTRODUCTION

Losing a loved one to fatal domestic abuse is a harrowing experience for a family to endure. Unfortunately for some, the trauma and grief of their bereavement is severely compounded by the way the press reports on their loved one's death.

In partnership with AAFDA (Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse), a centre of excellence for reviews into fatal domestic abuse and for specialist peer support, Level Up conducted this research to understand families' experiences, and to seek recommendations on how the press can do better by them.

Methodology

An online survey was co-created with families who have endured fatal domestic abuse, and the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) had oversight of the final research questions before the survey was sent out.

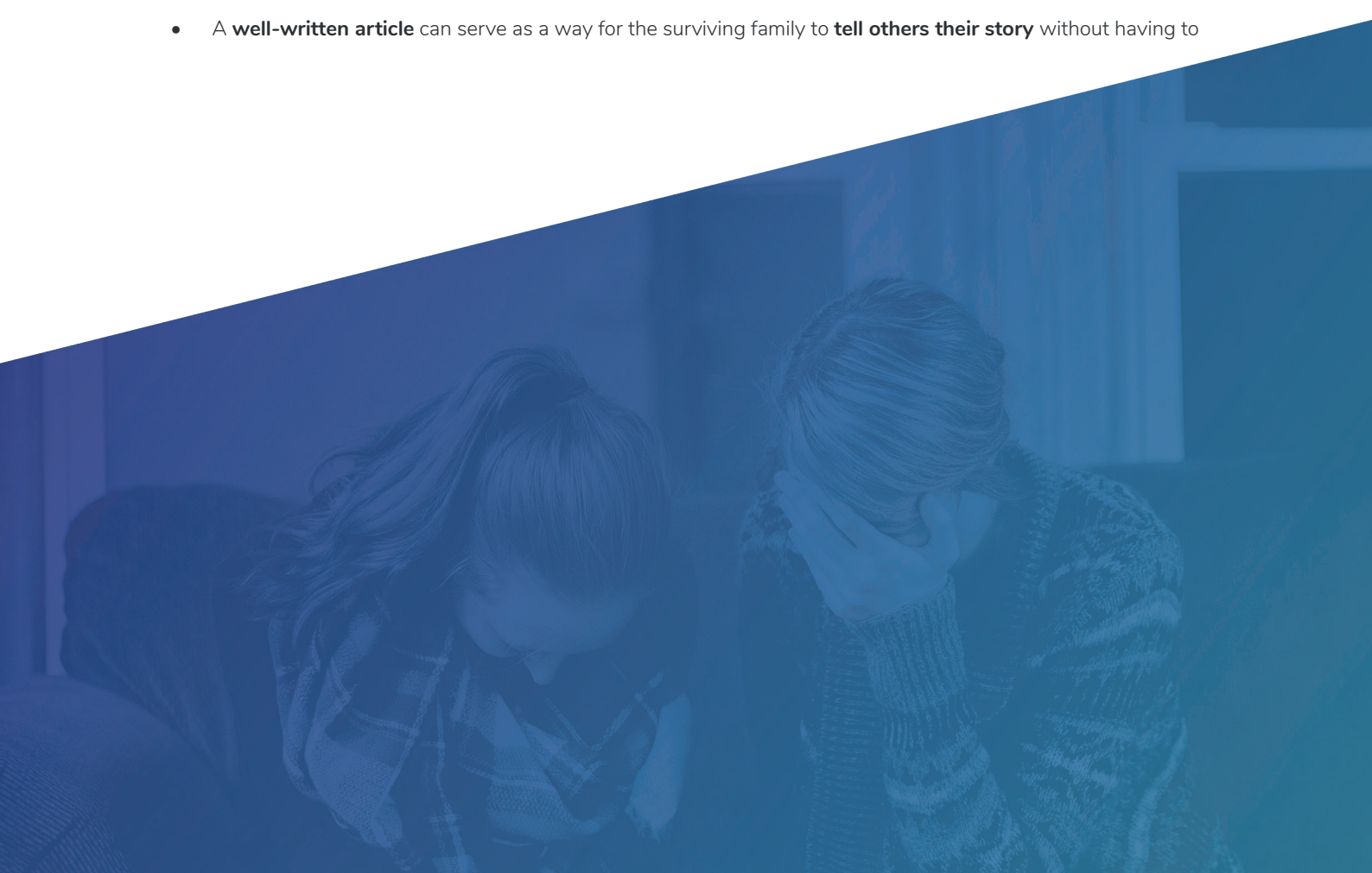
Questions ranged across families' intentions and experiences with the press, the impact of reporting on their family's case, and advice for journalists reporting on fatal domestic abuse.

15 families responded to the survey to share their experiences of press reporting on the death of a loved one. The limitation of this self-selecting sample is that it only includes families who felt most resourced and able to respond to the survey. The potential for this survey to trigger traumatic responses presented a barrier to participation.

A full list of questions is attached in Appendix A.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Most families **want the press to report on their case**, whether it be to raise awareness of domestic abuse or because they feel that their loved one deserves their story to be told. It is the manner, and timing, of how this is done that can generate either healing or harm.
- Several families experienced **intrusion into grief or shock** in the reporting of their case, **2 in 3 families** said reporting negatively impacted their grieving process.
- For families, news reports are a '**legacy for the victim**', and they wish journalists shared this perspective by remembering the victim and their family whilst writing articles. Specifically: "How might I want my loved one's death to be reported?"
- **Only 13% of respondents understood the press complaints process.**
- Families are starkly aware that what is reported in the press (including images) will remain online and be read by the victim's children and grandchildren. Knowing that there are images of the perpetrator and inaccurate articles that incorrectly blame the victim can repeatedly re-traumatise recovering families in the long-term.
- 93% of respondents do not think rules on reporting fatal domestic abuse are strong enough.
- A **well-written article** can serve as a way for the surviving family to **tell others their story** without having to



FINDINGS

Desire to speak to the press

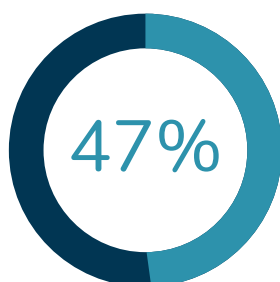
The majority of families (2 in 3) who responded wanted to speak to the press about their case. The driving force behind this was a desire to raise awareness of domestic abuse in order to help others. One bereaved mother said she wanted the press to help the public “realise the reality and ultimate impact of coercive control”, others wanted news reports to “make people aware of domestic abuse” and “help those suffering”.

Several families hoped the press could report the “truth” about their loved ones. One mother whose daughter had been killed, said “I had hoped they would report the horrendous, shocking death with the correct facts”. A bereaved son and brother had wanted to speak directly to the press about the murders of his mother and sister “to tell the truth about our story”.

1/3 of families did not want to speak to the press about their family’s case. One man described how, in the immediate aftermath of his sister’s death, “it was difficult navigating through everyday life. Giving consideration to much outside of immediate family was not on the menu”.

EXPERIENCES WITH THE PRESS

This subsection details encounters with the press, and overall impacts of reporting. The next section dissects press reporting in terms of its accuracy, headlines and images used.

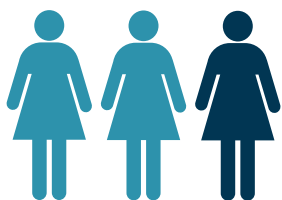


POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Just under half (47%) of respondents reported that their experiences with the press were either “somewhat positive” or “mostly positive”, albeit one of these families cited “we had zero direct contact with the press, so that was positive”.

Reasons for positive experiences included reporting being “accurate and factual, without speculation or sensationalism.” In these cases, families were glad that their story could serve as an insight into the reality of domestic abuse.

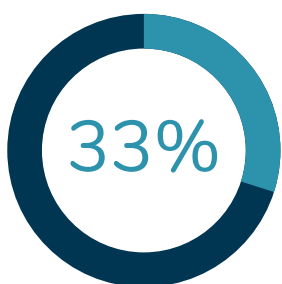
The most positive experiences came from encounters where families had regular contact and editorial input into reporting. One respondent described having “full editorial control” on an article for The Sun, which gave a sense of empowerment and trust. Another said he valued journalists “keeping us informed of the progress of the article and giving us time to read, review and make changes prior to publication”.



2 in 3 respondents felt that the reporting of their case was partially, mostly, or wholly respectful and dignified. Families commended articles that focused on the abuse the victim had suffered, rather than the victim's past. Families saw the press reports as a 'legacy' and 'memorial' for the victim; therefore, documenting the victim's side of the story, and the life they had within their local community, were valuable details.

Publications cited for positive experiences include the Daily Mail, Daily Record, Dundee Courier, Evening Gazette, The Guardian, The I, Shropshire Star, STV, The Sun, and The Telegraph.

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH THE PRESS



A third (33%) of respondents described their experiences with the press as somewhat or mostly negative. Most of them attributed this to an invasion of their privacy during their immediate grief. As one respondent described: "the press approached us at the victim's home requesting a photo to use in their article. I felt it was an intrusion when we were in shock and trying to digest what had happened".

In another case, a bereaved daughter said "the press phoned my elderly grandmother out of the blue. Having found her number in a phone directory, they hassled her with phone calls and repeated letters wanting to use the story." She continued: "They did not put any consideration as to my mum as a person, or the fact she had served the community in Leeds in the NHS for over 20 years. [The press were] more interested in the sensationalist aspects of killing."



One respondent said:

"The Daily Mail door-stepped a teenage family member when no adults were at home. I feel dreadfully sorry for him because he did not know how to react and was left in fear. He was petrified that my sister's killer would come for him...He was also extremely anxious about saying something that could be used against him or allow her killer to be released."

For families who felt disrespected by journalists, victim-blaming was frequently cited as a reason. Some families had read news articles that described their loved ones as "murderable" and "a nightmare". Respondents wanted to see "victims front and centre of any news report". Some families felt aggrieved by the press which centred a perpetrator's experiences, which they felt allowed perpetrators to "play the victim", using the media to publish their narrative of events while the deceased victim was unable to respond.

News outlets specifically named for negative treatment of victims and families included: Daily Mail, BBC News, Blog Preston, The Daily Echo, ITV, The Sun, Metro, The Times, The Sentinel, LEP, Top News Today, Q News, PopBuzz, Loves School, Stoke Sentinel, Mirror, One News page, UK Wired News, Local UK News, OTS News Lancashire, Mail on Sunday, Wolverhampton News, Yorkshire Post, and Take A Break.



“

Remember the real person, the long lasting effects...That the story will never go away for the family and it will impact on their life for years to come.

”₅

IMPACT OF ARTICLES

Headlines

Notably, several respondents to the survey found it too distressing to answer the question ‘What were the headlines of the articles written about your family’s case?’

Families reported that sensationalist headlines contributed to their mistrust of journalists. These included terms such as “Butchered from behind”, “bludgeoned to death”, “House of horrors” and “axe killer”.

Images

In the majority of cases, families were happy with the images used by journalists. This arose where journalists had used the images provided to them by families. Where this did not happen, families reported severe distress.

One man whose sister had been killed said: *“When the press invaded our privacy, I was deeply shocked by the intrusion and salacious appetite for hype. They downloaded and published pictures from my late sister’s Facebook account, including pictures of both my sisters in bikinis on a beach on holiday”.*

One third of respondents were disappointed, angered, and in some cases retraumatised by the images used. These especially included images of the perpetrator, as well as images of the victim’s home.

Choice of interviewees

Several respondents left this column blank, and one third said that family members had spoken directly to the press.

One-fifth of respondents stated that members of the public were interviewed in their case, such as neighbours. One respondent said: “I don’t hold anything against the people who were interviewed, but the journalists should recognise that these people will not know the reality that the victims experienced.”

Accuracy

Only two respondents said that reporting was wholly inaccurate. However, only two respondents from our survey reported that the reporting of their case was wholly accurate. Inaccuracies of reporting included reporting solely from the perspective of the perpetrator. As one respondent said, “the dead can’t talk, and the press should be reminded of that.”

Speculations around a victim having an affair were cited as harmful, as were speculations around the perpetrator’s mental health.

It is as a consequence of these inaccuracies that two-thirds of respondents felt that reporting **negatively impacted their grieving process.**

FAMILIES TRUST IN THE PRESS

40% of respondents

stated that they were unable to trust journalists after their experiences.

60% stated

they were unsure whether they could trust journalists.

0% No respondent

could say that they could confidently trust journalists to report on fatal domestic abuse.

Despite this, when asked whether respondents would like to be introduced to journalists they could trust to tell their story, nearly half of respondents said yes.

The effects of misreporting on surviving families

When asked to describe the effects of news reports on their loved one's death, families describe their emotional response as "horrible", "anxious and afraid", "shocked and violated", "angry" and "fearful".

60% of families stated that the press reporting had intruded into their grief or shock, with one respondent explaining "it prolonged and hindered the grieving process, causing anguish and heartache."

Short term effects of press reporting

As one respondent described, families bereaved by fatal domestic abuse are already experiencing "earth-shattering grief and trauma". The short-term negative effects of press reporting included: receiving unwanted attention from the press and public during their grieving; feeling 'traumatised and numb'.

One bereaved daughter said: "we hardly left the house, as everyone knows who we were, and we had press knocking on our door and putting business cards through. All we wanted was privacy."

Other reported responses include a feeling of loneliness, and hearing the 'voice of the perpetrator' through the media reporting.

Short term effects of press reporting

Most of the families reported that the effects of press reporting on their case were ongoing, as the articles remain online. Concern about this was amplified where the victim had left children behind. As one respondent stated: "this is an account about their mum", and several respondents stated how articles had severely distressed the victim's children, and one respondent expressed anxiety about the children growing up to find the articles.

One respondent said: "we have been permanently scarred as a direct result of journalists printing what they presume are facts, but without context. The ramifications of misrepresentative reporting had profound and long-lasting effects on the whole family".

Another respondent said: "knowing there are photos all over the internet of our father still triggers me".

The complaints process

Over half of respondents had not heard of IPSO, and just 13% of respondents understand the process for complaining about articles in the press. Only one respondent was aware of the time limits on making complaints to the press regulator.

93% of respondents do not believe the rules on reporting fatal domestic abuse are strong enough.

WHAT FAMILIES WANT JOURNALISTS TO KNOW WHEN REPORTING FATAL DOMESTIC ABUSE

The survey ended with a space for families to share what they want journalists to be aware of when reporting fatal domestic abuse. Some responses shared are as follows:

"Journalists should be more respectful of victims' and families' feelings and not sensationalise cases just to make interesting headlines. They should also pay more attention to accuracy, being unbiased in their reporting and to correct details, all of which can be so important to grieving families."

"The earth shattering grief and trauma that the families are left to deal with. What they write will be somewhere, forever. There is always a wider picture to the story. Journalists should think about the consequences of when today's news becomes tomorrow's chip paper, it will still be all over Google!"

"Their responsibility for taking the attention away from the horrific situation we found ourselves in, to instead have to deal with their writing. I would say report in the way you would like the information to be handled if it were your family members"

"Journalists should be extremely sensitive to publishing personal details about victims and the damage that could result. They should be mindful that the families are victims as well. They should not be able to print any personal details, including names, until the case is closed. They should be professional enough to realise that facts can be misrepresented without context, resulting in misinformation and injustice. The potential offender is protected by law, but the victim and the surviving family is treated as 'fair game'. Where is the justice in that? Where is the fairness in that? Where are the protections for the victims?"

"Journalists should be aware that we are humans who have feelings and emotions which are flying all over the place as we have been traumatised to the core, and that we are not just another story to write. A life has gone which cannot be replaced and so as a direct result, lives have changed so traumatically...Protection is crucial for the victim so not to create damage to their name, their image and their reputation. This would also protect the mental health for those left behind to pick up the pieces and carry on with life, somehow. I'm sure the journalists would want the same, respect and dignity and space should they personally experience the same traumas as we have of losing a loved one through fatal domestic abuse. "

"Not to turn the blame onto the woman by saying one of her actions caused the man to kill her. Nobody asks for or deserves to be murdered no matter what they may do."

"Remember the real person, the long lasting effects for the family, and the build up and narrative before her death, that these deaths are preventable. That the story will never go away for the family and it will impact on their personal and working life for years to come."

"Journalists need to be aware of the myths and incorrect stereotypes that they may unconsciously be propagating. The effect of their reporting, not only on the surviving family members, but how their writing can hinder progress on tackling domestic abuse nationwide."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IPSO

The findings of this report give several examples of where press behavior has intruded into families' grief or shock (therefore breaching Clause 4 of the Editor's Code). However, the majority of families did not understand the IPSO complaints process, and these instances have gone undocumented.

IPSO is responsible for making the code and complaints process more accessible to families bereaved by fatal domestic abuse.

The four recommendations for improving families' experiences, and reducing harmful press conduct, are:

1. **Increase the accessibility of the press complaints process** by developing partnerships with domestic abuse advocacy organisations such as AAFDA.
2. **Include a sub-clause specific to fatal domestic abuse in clause 4 of the Editor's Code** (intrusion into grief or shock).
3. Use IPSO network to **publicise and run trainings for journalists on how to sensitively report fatal domestic abuse.**
4. Work with AAFDA and Level Up to form an advisory group made up of families bereaved by fatal domestic abuse to regularly meet and assess press reporting of fatal domestic abuse in order to continue to build on best practice and ensure victims have a voice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

Fatal domestic abuse is a specific crime that must be reported in a **sensitive and contextualised manner**. The adverse effects of inaccurate or insensitive reporting directly harm and re-traumatise families who are already undergoing bereavement.

1. **Respect a family's privacy** in the immediate aftermath of a killing.
2. **Prioritise dignity and respect to victims** when reporting on fatal domestic abuse, remembering that any article published online will act as the victim's public memorial and legacy, and will be read by their children.
3. **Pay careful detail to accuracy and context in the relationship**, reporting in an unbiased manner.
Where you have direct contact with a family, **communicate clearly and regularly** with them in the drafting of the article, giving editorial oversight where possible.
4. **Avoid publishing images of the perpetrator.**
5. Do not include any narrative that positions the victim as potentially blame-worthy or responsible for triggering their own killing.

Journalists are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the [Level Up guidelines](#) on reporting fatal domestic abuse.

CONCLUSION

This report has, above all, set out to provide families bereaved by fatal domestic abuse with a platform to share their experiences of having their cases reported in the press. This is done with the intention that they will be honoured and heard.

Families want the public to understand the traumatic effects of domestic abuse, and see the press as playing a vital role in that. They want people to know about the life of their loved one – who they were and the build-up to their death – and they want everyone to know that these deaths are preventable so that other families do not have to go through what they have gone through.

The UK press should not only consider the effect of their reporting on surviving family members; but see their writing as an opportunity to become a part of a nationwide effort to reduce domestic abuse, and prevent further fatalities.

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If you are a journalist reading this, ask yourself: now that you are aware of the power you have, how will you use it?

Appendix 1

Survey questions

SECTION 1

General hopes and expectations of the press

1. Did you want to speak to the press about your family's case?

This can include at any point: from immediate aftermath to years later.

Yes

No

2. What were your hopes or intentions with the press? What did you hope to get?

3. How would you describe your experiences with the press?

Mostly positive

Somewhat positive

Neither positive or negative

Somewhat negative

4. If you did have positive experiences, which publications were they with?

5. If you did have positive experiences, what made them positive?

6. If you did have negative experiences, which publications were they with?

7. If you did have negative experiences, what made them negative?

8. After your experiences, do you feel able to trust journalists?

Not at all

In general, no

Not sure

In general, yes

Yes, completely

9. If you have not been able to tell your story, would you like to be introduced to journalists who you can trust to tell your story?

SECTION 2

Your family's experiences with the press, and the impact it has had

1. Did the press report on your family's case?

Yes

No

2. What role did your Family Liaison Officer (FLO) play with the press?

3. Which kind of publications reported on your family's case?

Local

National

International

4. What formats did the reporting on your case take?

Online

Print

Broadcast (TV/Radio)

5. What were the headlines of the articles written about your family's case?

6. What kind of photos were used in the articles about your family's case?

[Please describe the types of photos used; whether of people, objects or homes]

7. Were any personal pictures used?

Yes

No

8. If yes, did you give permission for these to be used?

Yes

No

9. How do you feel about the images that were used?

10. Did the use of any images cause you grief or shock?

Yes

No

11. Were any other family, friends or members of the public interviewed in any of the articles written?

Family members

Friends

Members of the Public

12. How did you feel about these people who were interviewed?

13. Was the reporting accurate?

Yes

No

Mostly

Partially

14. (If no), what reporting was inaccurate, and how?

15. Did the reporting impact your grieving process?

Yes

No

16. Was the reporting respectful and dignified?

Yes

No

Mostly

Partially

17. If yes: what was good about the articles that you felt to be respectful and dignified?

18. If no: what was disrespectful about the articles?

19. What did it feel like to see your case reported like that in the media?

20. What were the short-term and long-term effects of this reporting on you and your family?

SECTION 3

Press regulation and complaints

1. Do you know how to complain about an article that is upsetting or inaccurate?

Yes

No

2. In the immediate aftermath of your case, did you know how to complain about an article that was upsetting or inaccurate?

Yes

No

3. Have you heard of IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation)?

Yes

No

4. Do you understand the process for complaining about articles in the press?

Yes

No

Mostly

Partially

5. The timeframe for complaining about an article is 4 months (print) and 12 months (online). Were you aware of that?

Yes

No

6. Journalists are not meant to write articles that are 'inaccurate' or may 'intrude into grief or shock'. Were you aware of this?

Yes

No

7. Did the coverage of your case intrude into your grief or shock?

Yes

No

8. If yes, how?

9. Do you think the rules on reporting fatal domestic abuse are strong enough?

Yes

No

10. What do you think journalists should be aware of when reporting on fatal domestic abuse?