

HOW CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA FRAMED INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE DURING THE PANDEMIC AND WHY IT MATTERS

WHAT WE DID

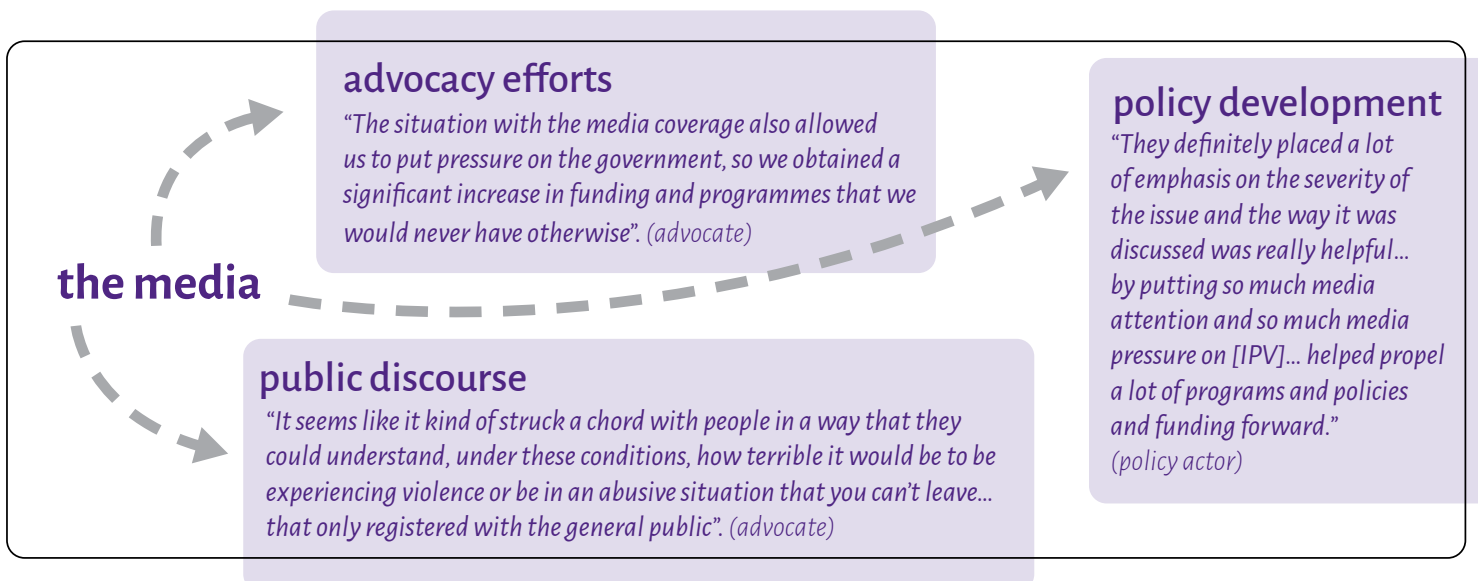
Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a costly and devastating health and social problem recently called an epidemic by several major Canadian cities. Media can play a significant role in how people think about complex issues, and can influence service and policy responses. We examined how the news media's portrayal of IPV, which increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, impacted advocacy and federal government responses. This was done by analyzing a representative sample of 366 articles from the main national and provincial news media sources, and then interviewing seven anti-violence advocates and nine federal government policy actors to explore whether changes in media portrayals of IPV influences advocacy efforts and/or policy development.

WHAT WE FOUND

Overall, and as was the case before the pandemic, the news media framed IPV as a private, isolated event and emphasized physical abuse and physical consequences of IPV. Other less visible forms of IPV such as emotional, sexual, and financial abuse, which can be equally harmful, were rarely reported or covered.

Although most of the articles (55%) continued to oversimplify IPV as above, and in some cases reinforce stigma and misunderstanding, there was a shift in how some journalists (25% of articles analysed) covered IPV, portraying it as a social problem, rooted in gender norms, and needing a systemic response. These more contextualized articles usually featured advocates as sources (rather than police or legal actors), who indicated the need to explain to the public (via the media) the types of IPV, its complexity, and why women can find it dangerous to leave abusive relationships. This more nuanced reporting created a sense of urgency about IPV as a "shadow pandemic" that had an important impact on those developing federal IPV policies and programs. The study's findings suggest that the media played a key, albeit inconsistent role in shaping public discourse, advocacy efforts, and policy development related to IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic.

55%
of articles
oversimplified
IPV



WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy:

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing inequities and structural challenges in the IPV service infrastructure. Services such as shelters and outreach counselling had to reduce capacity or, in some cases, fully shutdown, which impacted their ability to provide essential services for survivors of IPV during a time of increased need.
- The infusion of funds during the pandemic was significant, but as was noted by all advocates in this study, there is concern that this was temporary. Implementing the National Action Plan to End Gender Based Violence, and the related Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ People National Action Plan are key priorities.

For the violence against women sector, including organizational leaders:

- Continued media advocacy to dispel myths and enhance public understanding of IPV is required, including support for media training for IPV advocates.

For the media:

- Journalists, editors and other media writers are encouraged to take a trauma- and violence-informed (TVI) approach when reporting on IPV, and avoid victim-blaming, making excuses for perpetrators, and focusing on sensational details. Guides for how to report accurately and respectfully on gender-based and sexual violence are available, e.g., <https://www.couragetoact.ca/blog/use-the-right-words>
- The interconnectedness of oppression based on gender, race, and other characteristics is central to understanding gender-based violence. It is crucial to report on the experiences of equity deserving populations, including Indigenous women, women of colour, disabled women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

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For complete findings, see:

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