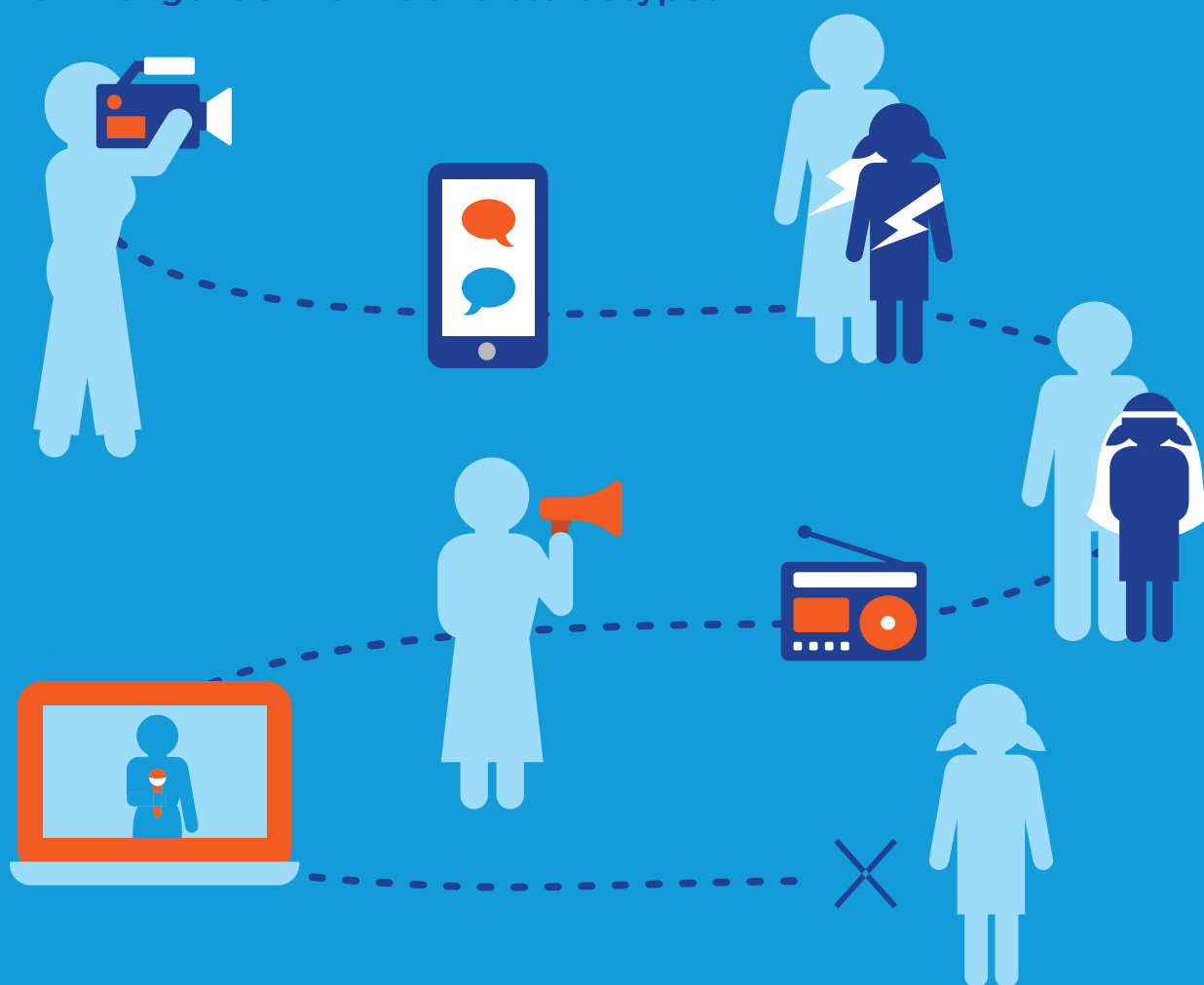


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# MAPPING THE NEXUS BETWEEN MEDIA REPORTING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS

The normalization of violence, and the perpetuation of harmful gender norms and stereotypes





EVIDENCE REVIEW  
MAPPING THE NEXUS  
BETWEEN MEDIA  
REPORTING OF  
VIOLENCE AGAINST  
GIRLS

The normalization of violence, and the perpetuation of harmful gender norms and stereotypes



# SETTING THE SCENE

Since the onset of the coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, perhaps more so than ever before, online news and social media have become crucial trajectories of information. As people tried to make sense of their rapidly changing realities from inside homes and behind screens, emerging studies show that, in some countries, media coverage of COVID-19-related deaths has also been accompanied by increased news coverage of the 'shadow pandemic' of domestic and gender-based violence, which has disproportionately had a negative impact on women and girls. Emerging studies even suggest that this news coverage is related to increased rates of reporting by some victims/survivors.

At the same time, this public attention also brings to light a key tension around gender-based violence and visibility, particularly in relation to news media coverage: given the media's recognized influence over how we interpret and respond to events, what matters is not only if violence is reported, but how it is reported.

For instance, in the case of media reporting on gender-based violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, have news outlets been portraying this violence as a consequence of the pandemic itself, and thus as 'exceptional', rather than as a long-standing dynamic exacerbated by the pandemic? Are stories about gender-based violence accompanied by relevant and accessible

information about services for women and children, many of whom are consuming news from inside homes where lockdown measures and service closures continue to restrict their access to spaces and people that might otherwise provide them with this information? Is coverage sensationalist or does it try to report the surge in gender-based violence in its broader context in order to generate deeper empathy and understanding?

The scholarship in response to the second and third questions is only starting to emerge, but these questions, and the concerns they foreground about the role of news media in relation to gender-based violence, have been important since long before the pandemic spread across the globe. Indeed, feminist scholars and women's and children's rights advocates have long understood the need for responsible reporting and, more specifically, for gender- and age-sensitive, victim-/survivor-centred and rights-based approaches to news media coverage of violence. This position is grounded in the recognition that reporting practices can have a direct bearing on victims/survivors, who may see insensitive and harmful coverage of gender-based violence and decide against reporting. Moreover, when news reports of gender-based violence fail to signpost survivors to relevant resources and services, this can put victims/survivors at further risk.



# OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE REVIEW

The media — which encompasses newspapers, television, radio and social media, through which we are presented with or consume information — constitutes a key institutional site of power and sphere of influence over the gender socialization process. Recent scholarly efforts to better understand the processes and dynamics that contribute to the normalization of gender-based violence have shed light on the particular role of news media reporting in perpetuating discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes, and bolstering the social permission structures that normalize this violence.

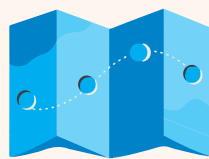
By the same token, evidence also suggests that media reporting has the potential to serve as a positive force, both by helping to illuminate, rather than obscure, the root causes of gender-based violence, by promoting positive social and gender norms, and, more practically, in risk mitigation through the provision of essential information to victims/survivors and those who may wish to support them. This positive potential is rooted in the understanding that the media plays a key role in shaping values and perspectives, including those related to gender, and that media reporting is not destined to always reflect dominant, harmful values and perspectives.

## BOX 1

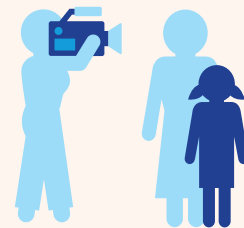
**Drawing primarily upon scholarly literature published over the past 20 years, and supplemented by key informant interviews and a cross-regional analysis of news media reports of violence against girls in the past five years, this evidence review:**



Provides an overview of the landscape of global trends in media reporting on gender-based violence, in terms of the practices and modalities that are most widely used.



Maps the existing evidence of the relationship between news media reporting of gender-based violence against girls and the normalization of violence, particularly through the perpetuation of discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes.



Spotlights key existing frameworks and approaches that may help catalyse more gender- and age-sensitive reporting.



It finds broad consensus across the literature that mainstream news media outlets tend to make use of harmful tropes and stereotypes when reporting on cases of gender-based violence, and that this contributes to the normalization of violence and perpetuation of discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes.

The key modalities considered in the scholarly literature relate to the visual and textual features of news stories, and the sourcing practices used by journalists. Studies highlight a tendency for mainstream news reporting to mirror and reinforce the dynamics that contribute to gender-based violence in the first place, such as victim blaming, decentering the responsibility of perpetrators, and deploying stigmatizing or sensationalizing language that draws upon harmful gender norms and stereotypes about women's and girls' 'appropriate roles'. Overall, the effect of these reporting modalities is to direct the public's attention towards the behaviour and actions of victims and to suggest that the transgression is in the violation of a gender norm, rather than in the exercise of violence.

Evidence from the scholarly literature also highlights that incidents of gender-based violence are largely reported as episodic events or independent incidents of crime, that such reports deploy language that blames the victim by suggesting that she violated established or expected gender norms and rules, and that the level of sensationalism or 'shock value' in the case determines its 'newsworthiness'.

Evidence also suggests that reporters still largely neglect to include inputs from gender-based violence, women's rights or child protection experts.

Subsequent sections dig deeper into the evidence of the nexus between news media reporting of violence against girls and the normalization of that violence. This involves analysing some of the more common tropes and stereotypes that circulate in relation to victims and perpetrators, and providing illustrative examples of how these shape interpretations of gender-based violence and its victims. These tropes and stereotypes are also shaped by vectors of intersectional discrimination across regional contexts, and evidence highlights that media reports play a crucial role in reinforcing hierarchies by differentiating between 'types' of victims (where some victims matter, or matter more than others).

Significantly, from the age analysis perspective, evidence from media reports also indicates that there is often an 'expiration date' after which girl victims may not 'count' as children. Specifically, sexualization in news media coverage of cases of gender-based violence can function as a mechanism to portray adolescent girls as adult women, and thus to obscure not only the gender dimension but also age-based rights violations at play.

Notably, while this review identifies a burgeoning literature analysing the dynamics of media reporting on gender-based violence against women and how these relate to the perpetuation of discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes, there is a concerning gap in similar scholarly literature analysing these dynamics in relation to girls. Specifically, while there is a rich body of literature that includes gender and intersectional analyses of media reporting of gender-based violence, research that centres the age-related lens and analysis alongside the gender lens is relatively thin or nascent.



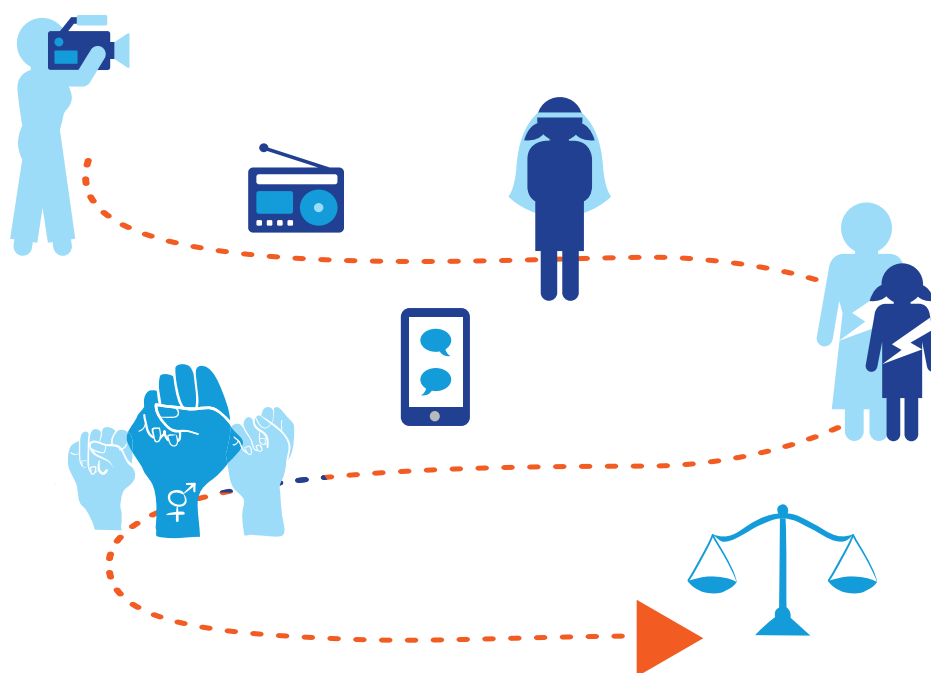
# THE WAY FORWARD

The final section spotlights the range of existing frameworks and guidelines for promoting more gender- and age-sensitive as well as victim-/survivor-centred reporting. It notes that, while there is a relatively clear path forward in terms of what needs to be done to drive positive change, a pressing gap remains in how to incentivize and ensure uptake and implementation of these frameworks and strategies for more responsible reporting of GBV within and across media organizations and among media practitioners.

This section leverages insights from stakeholders, as well as the literature, to flag additional ‘enablers’ that may be key to unlocking the potential within these existing frameworks. These include dynamics that may have more or less impact at scale, including the values and commitments of individual journalists, networks of feminist journalists and gender editors, the presence of strong feminist and women’s movements that

mobilize civil society in response to cases of violence and push for greater accountability from the state and media organizations, and advocacy and engagement with local news organizations and media practitioners by international organizations.

Reflecting on the evidence, the review concludes by suggesting that achieving the kinds of changes needed to enable more gender- and age-sensitive reporting will require a combination of formal and informal mechanisms, strategies, and long-term efforts and investments. These need to acknowledge that, even though gender norms and stereotypes are ‘sticky’ and take time to change, the vast sphere of influence of news reporting, and of the media more broadly, means that it presents a tremendous opportunity and entry point for catalysing positive changes in how gender-based violence against girls is represented, and thus how we as a society interpret and respond to it.



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