

## Research Paper

Christina Fleischanderl

# Violence against women – A constructive approach

How constructive journalism can be used to achieve responsible reporting on violence against women

**Abstract:** The data published in Germany's annual police criminal statistics for 2022 leaves no room for doubt: In 80.3% of all cases of domestic violence, the victim was a woman. Intimate partner violence increased – it is clear who is the perpetrator and who the victim (cf. BKA 2022: 33). But how should this violence against women be reported? This paper uses an analysis of national German and Austrian newspapers to determine the status quo of reporting on violence against women. Expert interviews provide insight into deficits and opportunities for improvement. Starting from the concept of *constructive journalism* and a frame analysis of selected articles, the paper goes on to develop recommendations for holistic reporting on violence against women, both in breaking news and in background reporting.

**Keywords:** Constructive journalism, violence against women, frame analysis, expert interviews

**Translation:** *Sophie Costella*

The May 2011 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as »the Istanbul Convention,« calls on the media »to set guidelines and selfregulatory standards to prevent violence against women and to enhance respect for their dignity« (COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2011: 10). The Convention thus asks media in the EU member states to maintain a certain fundamental attitude towards the topic. Yet most

media are not fulfilling this duty in their reporting on violence against women, be it femicide or stalking. Neither the problem of violence against women nor the criticism of its presentation in the media are new. Numerous studies have looked at the issue and analyzed reporting on it. Key examples from the United States of America include publications by Lisa Cuklanz (1996) on the representation of rape in news media and by Shannon O’Hara (2012) on rape myths in British and American reporting. The German-speaking world, too, has seen multiple recommendations and guidelines on responsible and sensitive reporting on violence against women in recent years, with various studies and research projects published (MÜCK 2008: 12ff.; GEIGER/WOLF 2014; PERNEGGER 2020: 100f.; WOLF 2021: 44). The authors call for the following:

1. A more comprehensive and sophisticated picture of violence against women to be shown and thus the structural dimension of the violence to be communicated.
2. The spectrum of violent acts reported to be expanded instead of a focus on dramatic individual cases.
3. Wording that downplays, makes light of or sexualizes violence against women to be avoided at all costs (sex games, family tragedy, incredible drama, etc.).
4. Important emergency numbers and hotlines for those affected to be made available in reporting on violence against women.

Research on the journalistic representation of violence against women up to now thus offers detailed instructions for naming gender-based violence in the context of intimate partner violence and representing it in a holistic way. Yet there is still a need for studies that analyze the standards for and reality of media representation of sexualized violence. Most of the articles examined here report on current and acute cases of violence such as rapes and murders, but do not look at gender-based violence as a systemic problem in society as a whole. Terms like ›family drama‹ and ›domestic conflict‹ are commonly used to describe male violence against women in the journalistic articles analyzed. Media that use the term ›femicide‹ when writing about the murder of women are a minority.

The term ›femicide‹ is intended to highlight the fact that men kill women because they are women – the gender-based aspect of the violence. Feminist activist and sociologist Diana E. H. Russell adopted the term ›femicide‹ from the author Carol Orlock and contributed a great deal to its familiarity and use today (cf. Russell 2011). This study is based on the assumption that constructive journalism can be used as a way to pursue new avenues of forward-looking, solution-oriented reporting on violence against women. The following research questions are to be answered:

1. How do German-language national tabloid and broadsheet newspapers report on violence against women? Which dominant frames are used?

2. How can the constructive journalism approach help to deliver a more realistic picture that is appropriate to the situation and to provide solution-oriented reporting?

How can a media frame be recorded?

A frame definition that makes it possible to code observable elements and then to assign these frame elements to an inductive frame was selected for the investigation. The study is based on Robert Entman's frame definition, whose operationalizability makes it one of the most commonly used in framing research (cf. POTTHOFF 2012: 38). Entman describes a frame as follows: »To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described« (ENTMAN 1993: 52). Jörg Matthes (2007: 18) also refers to Entman, writing: »Frames are, according to the first working definition, understood as »horizons of meaning« of actors, which *highlight certain information and hide other information*. In doing so, they imply a certain problem definition, outline causes of problems, offer an evaluation of the problem and highlight possible solutions« [italics in original].

According to these definitions, a frame comprises four elements. The problem definition is the element that focuses the point of view on the topic to be considered. This frame element does not provide evaluation, but emphasizes a specific aspect of the topic area or certain actors in the public discussion of the topic. The problem definition acts as a lens through which a certain sub-section of the topic is examined in more detail. The »attribution of cause« element can describe situational and/or person-related causes of the problem. In the same way, possible solutions and measures to solve the problem can be situational or person-related. Specifically, the focus here is on calling for certain action to be taken or actions to cease, and determining the persons who are capable of generating solutions and recommended actions. The evaluation of a problem, according to Matthes, is usually not a categorical, but a gradual valuation. This gives rise to the question of how negatively or positively a topic area is evaluated within a frame (cf. MATTHES 2007: 134ff.). Matthes' definition also talks of actors without whom no frame can exist because the frame is defined as an actor's horizon of meaning (cf. MATTHES 2007: 18). However, the role of communicator does not necessarily need to be held by a single person – a group or organization can equally be an actor. Consequently, a frame element and subsequently a frame is based exclusively on statements from actors; only these can be coded as frame elements (cf. MATTHES 2007: 143). According to this, recording a media frame in the

analysis requires actors in the text who make statements in which they address at least two frame elements. It is important to differentiate between explicit (all frame elements are present) and implicit (at least two frame elements are present) frames in the analysis (cf. MATTHES 2007: 138f.).

## Methodological approach

The design of the study begins in the first section with a qualitative content analysis as described by Mayring (cf. MAYRING 2015: 69ff.), which analyzes the media frames in articles on the topic of violence against women in four German-language daily newspapers, including the online editions of the Austrian daily newspapers *Der Standard* and *Kronen Zeitung* and the German daily newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (sz) and *Bild*. These daily newspapers were chosen due to their large reach and position on the market, their political leaning, and their classification in media sciences as a broadsheet (*Der Standard* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) or tabloid (*Kronen Zeitung* and *Bild*). The sample comprises 80 articles published over a period of five months (January 1 to May 31, 2021). For each month, four articles on the topic of violence against women were selected from each newspaper and coded.

In order to be coded, each article needed to contain statements from one or more actors (male or female) on the topic of »violence against women.« The text also needed to contain at least two frame elements, one of which was an evaluative frame element. Any mention of the search term »violence against women« in the newspaper articles, however dominant or peripheral, was sufficient to be relevant to the analysis and thus part of the sample. The first four relevant articles in each month were used for the analysis. The analysis definition of »violence against women« was in line with the term definition in the Istanbul Convention, in which violence against women »is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life« (COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2011: 5).

The frame category system was created using the MAXQDA software for computer-aided qualitative data and text analysis. The actors' statements were coded and assigned to the four frame elements in order to form frame categories inductively. The tables below show examples of inductive frame category formation based on two articles from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* dated January 28 and April 29, 2021 (cf. DPA 2021a, 2021b).

Table 1  
Qualitative content analysis of an article

Location in document (MAXQDA project)	Paraphrase	Reduction	Inductive frame category	Actor	Occasion
	<i>Problem definition implied</i>	<i>Violence against woman was a tragic/isolated incident</i>			
<i>SZ, item 61</i>	<i>Cause 24: Arguments and violence occurred quickly, both had alcohol issues</i>	<i>Personal causes</i>	<i>Isolated incident frame (focus on perpetrator) Implicit frame</i>	Judge, defense attorney	Specific crime/trial
<i>SZ, item 62, SZ, item 59</i>	<i>Measure 24: Not criminally responsible, commitment or release, psychiatric care, custodial sentence of eight-and-a-half years for homicide</i>	<i>Psychiatric care and incarceration, individual measures</i>			
<i>SZ, item 58</i>	<i>Evaluation 24: Following the violent death of a 37-year-old woman, her partner was convicted of homicide</i>	<i>Very negative</i>			

Source: Author

It is clear that the frame elements ›personal cause‹ and ›individual measures,‹ for example, were coded and assigned to the frame category ›isolated incident frame‹ while, for other articles (see Table 2), frame elements such as ›socio-societal cause‹ and ›political measures‹ were coded and used as the basis for developing the inductive category ›gender-based structure frame.‹

The categories formed in the first run were summarized once again later. In addition, quantitative content analysis based on the study by Meltzer (2021) was used to gather data on the journalistic form of presentation, the occasion of reporting, whether the article focused on victims or perpetrators, and whether information on emergency helplines and points of contact for those in need of help.

The qualitative frame analysis was supplemented by four open, problem-centered expert interviews with persons from the fields of victim aid and work with perpetrators. The interviewees work in a violence prevention center, a women’s refuge, men’s counseling, and the »Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Täterarbeit Häusliche Gewalt e.V.« [Federal Working Group for Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence]. Of interest was their view of the current reporting, where they can see progress, and where they see a need for improvement. The results of the expert interviews and the content and framing analysis provide a starting point for discussion of whether and how the constructive journalism approach can contribute to more appropriate reporting on violence against women.

Table 2  
Qualitative content analysis of an article

Location in document (MAXQDA project)	Paraphrase	Reduction	Inductive frame category	Actor	Occasion
SZ, Item 231	<i>Problem definition 35:</i> Violence towards women increased massively during the pandemic, especially in the domestic environment; killing through intimate partner violence; we will not and must not accept this; not only in Turkey, but also in Germany, the state is failing to protect its female citizens against violence and femicide	<i>Violence against women in relationships is gender-based violence and a problem for society as a whole</i>	<i>Gender-based structure frame (focus on victim) Implicit frame</i>	Politicians	General reporting on the topic
	<i>Cause is not named, but implied by the term 'femicide'</i>	<i>Socio-societal causes</i>			
SZ, Item 231, SZ, Item 229	<i>Measure 35:</i> There is a need for more investment in women's refuges and counseling facilities; work with perpetrators to break through the cycle of violence must be possible even during the covid-19 pandemic; a call for solidarity with women affected by violence in Germany	<i>Funding for victim protection facilities, work with perpetrators, sensitization of society, unclear addressing in society as a whole, political measures</i>			
SZ, Item 231	<i>Evaluation 35:</i> The state is failing to protect its female citizens against domestic violence and femicide	<i>Very negative</i>			

Source: Author

What does it mean to report ›constructively?‹

There are various studies that set out what »constructive« and »solution-oriented« journalism means and how it can be applied practically in everyday journalism (GYLDENSTED 2011; HAAGERUP 2015; BEILER/KRÜGER 2018; EIGENMANN 2019; SAUER/GRÜNER 2019). In recent years, news media in the USA such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and German media like *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*, have dedicated some of their reporting to the concept of constructive reporting (cf. EIGENMANN 2019: 15). Beiler and Krüger (2018: 180) describe the added value of constructive journalism, arguing that it targets »[...] a solution to problems in society [...] in order to contribute to a better society. Reporting informs citizens about attempts to solve problems and thus, at the same time, empowers them to become active themselves in a targeted way« (BEILER/KRÜGER 2018: 180). They

emphasize that constructive journalism does not aim to abolish the conventional form of reporting, but instead to complement it (ibid.).

This study is guided by the terms introduced by the Norwegian peace and conflict researcher Johan Galtung. He speaks of *peace/conflict journalism*, which he describes as distorting reality less than day-to-day *war/violence journalism*. Peace/conflict journalism researches the deeper causes of conflicts, listens to all the parties involved and to peace initiatives, and tries to report in a solution-oriented way (cf. GALTUNG 2003: 178). Some skeptics, however, fear that solution-oriented or constructive journalism can quickly become campaign and actionist journalism. In fact, however, it is about making complex contexts easier to understand and highlighting solutions, as well as adopting new perspectives and thus challenging the audience (cf. SAUER/GRÜNER 2019: 12).

## Frame analysis and expert interviews

According to Matthes' definition, a frame is only a frame when it »can be identified across multiple articles« (MATTHES 2007: 153). Six frames were identified in the 80 newspaper articles analyzed. Three of these are viewed as dominant frames in the reporting, as each makes up almost a third of the total coded frames. The dominant frames in reporting on violence against women are as follows:

1. Problem frame
2. Gender-based structure frame
3. Isolated incident frame

When the ›problem frame‹ is activated in the reporting, violence against women is defined as a problem for the whole of society, but the cause of the violence is not usually clearly named. Instead, the focus is on help for women (and children, and in a few cases men) affected by violence, and the articles call for both individual and political measures to be taken.

The ›gender-based structure frame‹ includes both gender-based and structural violence against women. According to Article 3d of the Istanbul Convention, gender-based violence refers to »violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately« (COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2011: 5). This violence is closely linked to structural violence. Structural violence »does not always result in direct violence. But direct violence is always embedded in societal and structural power structures that disadvantage women« (bff undated).

Articles assigned to this framing present violence against women as a problem for society as a whole that cannot be located solely at an individual level. The reporting focuses on the gender-based element of the violent acts – for example, the murder of women is often referred to as femicide. The violence is viewed as

the result of patriarchal role models and of societal and structural, institutionally rooted power structures. The topic of structural violence against women is addressed in the journalistic representation on multiple levels, from economic to cultural, in a wide range of ways. This framing places the responsibility with policymakers and society, rather than the individual, and calls on these to act.

Articles coded as ›isolated incident frame‹ also describe violence against women as tragic and very negative, yet exclusively as a tragic isolated incident. The topic of violence as a problem for the whole of society is not addressed. Personal problems on the part of the perpetrator are seen as the main cause of the violence against women. The articles mention individual measures such as a change in behavior, prosecution, incarceration, commitment to a mental hospital etc. in order to combat these isolated violent incidents at the level of the individual.

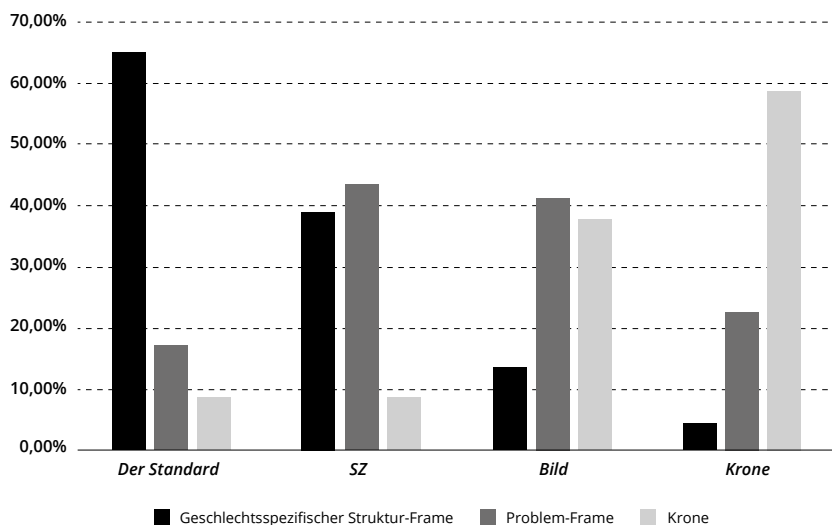
When it comes to the frequency with which the frames occur in the online media analyzed, it is noticeable that the ›gender-based structure frame‹ makes up a clear majority in the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard*, followed by the ›problem frame‹ and the ›isolated incident frame.‹ In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, both the ›gender-based structure frame‹ and the ›problem frame‹ are represented relatively equally, while the ›isolated incident frame‹ was coded for two articles. In *Bild*, the dominant frame codings are the ›problem frame‹ and the ›isolated incident frame,‹ followed by articles in which the ›gender-based structure frame‹ is present. In the *Kronen Zeitung*, the ›isolated incident frame‹ is far ahead, followed by the ›problem frame.‹ The ›problem frame‹ was the most frequently coded in total across all four daily newspapers, closely followed by the ›gender-based structure frame‹ and then the ›isolated incident frame.‹

The content-analytical frame analysis was complemented by expert interviews, in which the experts talked about the societal causes of gender-based violence, prevention, legal processes, and media reporting. All the interviewees defined violence perpetrated against women as male relationship violence. The perpetrators are almost always men and in a relationship with their victims. Structures of dependency and thus unequal power dynamics also frequently play a role, said the experts.

Asked about the reporting on gender-based acts of violence, the interviewees criticized both the way that such acts are blown up into scandals on the one hand, and the way they are trivialized on the other. Martin Christandl, head of the men's counselling service *Mannsbilder Tirol*, finds that media interest is particularly high in cases of extreme violence, while there is insufficient reporting on the ›normality‹ and ›everyday nature‹ of this violence against women (cf. FLEISCHANDERL 2022: 110f.).

Another point of criticism is the reversal of perpetrator and victim, which occurs time and again in reporting on violence against women and serves to

Figure 1  
Percentage share of the most common frames per daily newspaper



Source: Author

justify the act of violence by apportioning some or all of the blame for the suffering to the victim. Michaela Egger, Managing Director of Gewaltschutzzentrum Niederösterreich [Lower Austria Center for Violence Prevention]: »By including that she was having an affair, this also suggests to the reader, right, obviously he's going to lose it. [...] But you have to put things straight. Responsibility for this act lies solely in the hands of the person who committed the act, regardless of how much he was provoked, regardless of the terrible situation he was in, that must not be conveyed« (Egger, quoted in FLEISCHANDERL 2022: 145f.).

The experts also criticize the lack of background reporting. The head of Frauenhaus Tirol [Tyrol Women's Refuge], Gabriele Plattner, explains how important it is for reporting to place events in the context of society as a whole: »We can only talk about femicide if, at the same time, we also [...] talk about all the situations of disadvantage that continue to exist for women in our society« (Plattner, quoted in FLEISCHANDERL 2022: 125). It comes as little surprise that the experts took a very negative view of free tabloid newspapers like *Österreich* and *Heute*, but were more positive about the reporting in broadsheet newspapers.

All in all, said the experts, the media representation of violence against women has improved in recent years. The topic is receiving more attention, and many articles that cover violence against women now list contact details for

charities who can help. This is a form of violence prevention that does not require expensive government campaigns, says Martin Christandl (cf. FLEISCHANDERL 2022: 116).

The interviewees were also asked about potential ways to improve reporting and how the media representation of violence against women can be designed in a holistic, solution-oriented way. Some described a form of journalism that represents feminist positions and is critical of society (cf. FLEISCHANDERL 2022: 112). This includes challenging gender roles, highlighting dependencies and injustices, and, above all, depicting violence against women as an everyday problem that can affect anyone. What matters, said the interviewees, is that media creators themselves know enough about the topic or gain information from experts to enable them to cover the highly complex dynamics of violence. Reporting should focus not on the perpetrator's potential motives, but on the framework conditions surrounding acts of violence. Interviewees also stressed the importance of presenting role models, both perpetrators and victims, who have undergone a positive change and successfully broken out of the cycle of violence. Furthermore, they argue, journalism should focus more on the victim when reporting on violence against women. Andreas Schmiedel, head of department at the Münchner Informationszentrum für Männer (MIM) [Munich Information Center for Men], states that reporting is very rarely about the victims at its heart, »because we do not tend to identify with the side of the victim. That means that looking at the victim side is much more uncomfortable than looking at the perpetrator side. [...] In my view, this is reflected in reporting time and again« (Schmiedel, quoted in FLEISCHANDERL 2022: 132). The term ›femicide‹ came in for criticism in some interviews, as it could cause confusion if its definition is not sufficiently known. According to the experts, simple language and clear facts should be preferred in reporting on violence against women.

### How can constructive journalism help?

This investigation has clearly shown the problems and deficits in reporting on violence against women. But what value can the constructive journalism approach add for the media and thus for society and the way it deals with the issue of violence against women? Questions compiled by Sauer and Grüner (2019: 12) on constructive reporting in practice could help to correlate the experts' responses with the demands of constructive journalism. The three questions cover the topics of facts, prospects, and discourse.

1. The facts: Are we checking the relevance criteria? Are we really showing the world as it is? Are we helping people to understand the realities? Are we providing information that supports discourse in society?

2. The future prospects: What do solutions look like? Who and what is needed for them? Who benefits; who loses? What are the next steps? Who has experience; who has expertise? And how can we tell?
3. The discourse: Get out of the filter bubbles. Who is talking? Where? To whom? Where is there a lack of dialog? What makes communication successful? (SAUER/GRÜNER 2019: 12)

These questions may be more or less easy to integrate into the everyday work of an editorial office, depending on the form of journalistic presentation. A daily news update, for example, requires a different level of research and production than a reportage or feature. At first glance, it would appear difficult to take Sauer and Grüner's questions into account in breaking news. The idea of holistic reporting on violence against women is not consistent with the typical process of breaking news. Breaking news is up-to-the-minute, arrives unexpectedly, and initially provides little information. Editorial offices do not have the time to provide context and additional background reporting in this case, especially in an age of electronic media with its fast-moving news.

The Sauer and Grüner study shows that, in order to meet the standards of constructive journalism, editorial offices would need to incorporate certain routines and guidelines into their everyday journalistic work as a matter of course. There should be guidelines for depicting and reporting on violence against women in a breaking news situation. These guidelines would need to be discussed with the reporters and deskmen in training courses and become part of the curriculum at journalism schools and universities. As a general rule, even in a breaking news situation, the following considerations need to be made: Which information is necessary? Which distorts reality? Which aids understanding? Which terms and wording can be used; which are better avoided?

When writing a standardized short text for news, the final sentence »The motive remains unclear« is often simply copied from the police report. One recommendation is to replace this, or at least add to it, at the end of the story with a mention of the scope of violence against women in society as a whole. An example: »This is the ninth case in which a women has been murdered in Germany this year. So far, an average of more than two women per month have been killed, most of them by their (ex-)partner. Violence against women is a problem for all of society.« The act should also be described in clear language and the perpetrator, if his identity is known, clearly named: »The woman was raped by her (ex-) husband.« Mentioning the relationship status can also help to contextualize the dynamic of violence and to counteract any distortions of reality. Speculating on the motive behind the act, however, is considered counter-productive.

Although designed for breaking news, the recommendations also apply to longer reports, reportages and interviews. However, with less time pressure, these forms of journalism offer much better conditions for extensive research

and holistic reporting in the style of constructive journalism. In general, it would also be beneficial to address the issue of violence regularly even without a specific current incident. This would help people to comprehend sexism as a structural problem. The causes of violence against women should be covered critically and with a sound scientific base, avoiding passive representations of victims and self-justifying quotes from perpetrators. Experts with direct contact to the acts and their consequences are therefore ideal interviewees. In order for the reporting to be solution-oriented, it should incorporate recommendations for action and potential solutions and solution approaches (question: What are the next steps?). Questions might include: Which countries are successfully combatting violence against women? Where is there already more gender democracy? Reporting can be future-oriented for victims when it uses role models, looks at those who have escaped from violence, and uses interviews with former perpetrators and victims to demonstrate that violence conditions can be changed. Editorial offices should support violence prevention and give information on assistance that is available.

## Discussion of results

To finish, it is important to note that, in the view of the author, the most frequently coded frame in this analysis, the ›problem frame,‹ is particularly problematic, perhaps even more problematic than the ›isolated incident‹ frame. In contrast to the ›problem frame,‹ articles coded under the ›isolated incident frame‹ usually specifically name the frame elements ›cause‹ and ›measure.‹ Articles with the ›isolated incident frame‹ tend to speak of ›monsters‹ and the need to ›lock them away.‹ In this framing, personal causes are addressed as the explanation for the violence, and individual measures as the solution. Although this framing completely fails to contextualize the gender-based violence against women, it does provide a solution approach for the reader. It poses the question: Is it worse to address the wrong causes of a problem than not to name any causes at all?

The ›problem frame‹ was coded for articles that define violence against women as a problem, often indeed as a problem for society as a whole, yet very often ignore the reasons and motives, or the responsibility of institutions and their representatives. Yet without naming the causes of the problem, it is difficult to develop solution approaches and to put together recommendations for action – despite this being one of the specific demands of constructive journalism. In both the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild*, the ›problem frame‹ accounts for more than 40 % of the frames coded. The frame analysis showed that the fewer frame elements are specifically named in the reporting, the more space remains for a wide range of different interpretations of the actual cause of the problem. This is particularly true of the ›problem frame.‹

Media play a crucial role in collecting and analyzing data on the killing of women. With no statistics on femicides available at a national level in Germany, a group of volunteers has formed in recent years to collect this data. The employees of the database project ›Feminizidmap‹ base much of their work on media reports – despite the fact that, according to the project staff, this reporting often does not take place or, when it does, sometimes reflects gender stereotypes and prejudice on the part of the journalists (cf. FEMINIZIDMAP 2023: 151ff.). The results of the frame analysis and the expert interviews show that societal structures and backgrounds that promote violence against women are often not addressed in the media. The fact that, in the context of society as a whole, violence against women is based on gender injustice and sexism, does not receive sufficient coverage. That makes constructive, conflict-sensitive reporting on violence against women all the more important, be it in breaking news or in background reporting.

## About the author

**Christina Fleischanderl**, M. A. (\*1991) studied German Studies and Media Sciences in Innsbruck and Koblenz and works as a multimedia reporter. Her master's thesis, on which this paper is based, looks at the topics of constructive journalism and violence against women. Contact: christinafleischanderl@gmail.com

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