

## Representation of Domestic Violence in two British Newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, 2009-2011

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### Abstract

This article contains an analysis of the representation of domestic violence in two British newspapers between 2009-2011. This is a somewhat overlooked subject compared to research into media reports on rape and sexual assault. This study examines whether similar linguistic devices are used in domestic violence reports as in rape reports. The analysis uses a grounded theory approach to investigate common themes in reporting of domestic violence and the linguistic devices that are used in newspaper reports. This study draws on a corpus collected by the author to examine the similarities and differences between *The Guardian*, a broadsheet, and *The Sun*, a tabloid newspaper. It concludes that there are significant similarities between the reporting of domestic violence and that of rape and sexual violence.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, British newspapers, critical discourse analysis

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### 1. Introduction

Research (for example Bohner, 2001; Clark, 1992; Lamb & Keon, 1995) has shown how British media reports on rape and sexual assault cases can use language that shifts attention and blame from the perpetrator to the victim through the use of particular linguistic devices. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the representation of domestic violence in the UK media. This article aims to correct that omission by analysing the language used by newspaper reports about domestic violence in two newspapers, namely the broadsheet *The Guardian* and the tabloid *The Sun* in the years 2009-2011. It uses a grounded theory approach to explore how reports about domestic violence are worded, whether there are common themes within such reports and what linguistic devices are used. This study draws on a corpus collected by the author to examine qualitatively the similarities and differences between reports of domestic violence in the two newspapers under review.

Critical discourse analysts state that all social phenomena should be investigated critically and challenged as they cannot be taken for granted (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 2). Language is a very important object of analysis that enables us to examine “dominant structures of belief” (see Conboy, 2007: 24) and one of the ways this can be done is by examining media reports. Khosraviniq quotes Hartmann and Husband (1974) who point out that “mass media are capable of providing frames of references or perspectives within which people become able to make sense of events and their experience” (cited by Khosraviniq, 2009: 478). Newspapers play an important role in our society. Bell believes that people in the western world receive a huge proportion of their language from the media; that in fact society is pervaded by media language (Bell, 1991: 1). Berns considers that the

media are important as they can act as a “popular tour guide” (Berns, 2004: 35) teaching people about social problems and for many the media form their main source of information. They deliver not just fact, but also opinion, helping to shape ideology (Page, 2003: 559), therefore not necessarily providing neutral or objective representations of events (Semino, 2009: 443-4) which readers of newspapers may not consider when reading such stories.

The past thirty years have seen public discussion of domestic violence (Benedict, 1992: 44), which will be discussed more fully in the section 2. However, an examination of the manner in which the media have brought us accounts of domestic violence has not yet been undertaken in the UK and such an examination is badly needed to clarify the ideologies that seem to surround domestic violence in the media. Coates and Wade: “How we account for the actions of perpetrators and victims of violence has far reaching implications. Accounts are not objective or impartial reflections of events; rather, they must be treated as representations of events that vary in accuracy.” (Coates & Wade, 2004: 503). Berns writes that if people read certain accounts often enough, they can label it as “common knowledge” or “common sense” without further questioning the reports they are reading (Berns, 2004: 44). Furthermore, Carlyle et al. comment that the way the media portray such violence can have important implications not only for public policy but also the perceptions and beliefs surrounding norms of acceptable behaviour (Carlyle, Slater & Chakroff, 2008: 168).

This paper aims to address several questions, for example, which cases of domestic violence do the media choose to report? How are these cases reported? Do the media create or use particular stereotypes of the social actors in domestic violence reports? To answer such questions ideas from existing research can be utilised. Lafrance and Hahn think that stereotypes are “cognitive preconceptions” (Lafrance & Hahn, 1994: 352). With particular reference to domestic violence, particular gender stereotypes can supply readers with information about tendencies to act in particular ways, leading to inferences about who has caused such events. Soothill notes that newspapers are selective in the sex crimes they report (Soothill, 2004: 227). Furthermore, Dobash and Dobash comment that there is a tendency to report more sensational stories (Dobash & Dobash, 1992: 6), leading to a misrepresentation of domestic violence (Meyers, 1994: 48). As Bell notes stories tend to be covered in a particular way to make them more “newsworthy” (1991: 156-8) and this is likely to be the case for domestic violence stories. I will also cover the issue of tabloidization (see for example Maxwell, Huxford, Borum & Hornik, 2000; Wang, 2009), where newspapers shift their focus to sensational stories, with a particular interest in celebrity, scandal and crime.

Section 2 will examine the concept of domestic violence and how this has been represented in the public sphere. In section 3, the media representation of rape and sexual violence in newspapers will be examined to allow for later comparisons with domestic violence stories in UK newspapers. In section 4, the data and methodology are briefly explained and followed by results and discussion of the articles covering domestic violence in the two newspapers examined by this study, including the linguistic features such as the naming of those involved in the story, emotive language and language which diminishes the extent of the crimes. The final section will make some conclusions to the study.

## 2. Domestic violence

Unfortunately, domestic violence is a common occurrence within relationships. It is estimated that one in four women in the UK experience some form of domestic abuse at some point in their lives (this includes physical violence and threatening behaviour as well as mental, sexual and financial abuse by a current or ex-partner). An incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute, although it is unknown how many others go unreported (for more information see: <http://www.womensaid.org.uk>). Both males and females are victims of domestic violence, although male-to-female violence is the most common direction for the abuse (Lempert, 1996: 16; Saunders, 1990: 90; Yllö, 1990: 40). In the 1970s the first refuges were set up for women who wanted to leave their domestic situations. At the same time, words like ‘domestic violence’ and ‘battered women’ were coined, illustrating the fact that this was a social, not just a private, problem (Ashcraft, 2000: 3; Loseke & Cahill, 1984: 296; Yllö, 1990: 39). As a result, domestic violence entered the media and reports of incidents peaked in the 1980s (Benedict, 1992: 44). It has been well established that from early on domestic violence was frequently reported inaccurately or in an unrepresentative way (see for example Dobash & Dobash, 1992: 32/3; McManus & Dorfman, 2003: 8-14).

O’Keeffe and Breen comment

“The domestic abuse cases remain at arm’s length. ... Domestic abuse, when brought to the public sphere in news reports, is mediated for public consumption. It rarely receives evaluative comment and even more rarely, if ever, reaches the editorial pages. Family abuse seems to be beyond the bounds of close scrutiny in the print media” (O’Keeffe & Breen, 2007: 234).

This seems to suggest that domestic violence is a ‘private’ issue and one which should not be openly discussed in the media. We will see in section 5 that the media do discuss domestic violence even though there may be problems with the way it is reported. There has been some research on domestic violence reporting in the US (Berns, 1999, 2004; Carlyle et al., 2008; McManus & Dorfman, 2003). It found that the media focus is mostly on the victim, in the sense that the victim is either celebrated for leaving or blamed for staying, which raises the question why the media are not focusing on the abusers (McManus & Dorfman, 2003: 20). Berns demonstrates the importance of framing in such articles. By framing she means the way “the public, media, activists, politicians, and anyone else portray social problems” (Berns, 2004: 6). She states that the focus is mostly on the female victims – not on the male abusers, and not on the social or cultural factors surrounding domestic violence. She suggests that this changes the focus of the crime: instead of looking for the reasons for the violence, the victim is focused upon. McManus and Dorfman comment that such framing can create “tracks for trains of thought” (McManus & Dorfman, 2003: 6) and that this may frequently affect the reader subconsciously. The concept of framing also applies to rape and will be discussed in the following section on the representation of rape and sexual violence in the media (for example Berns, 2004; Carlyle et al., 2008; McManus & Dorfman, 2003).

Other researchers also argue that the focus on the female victim blames the woman for her own victimization and perpetuates the myth that she is responsible for the violence (Bograd, 1990: 21/22; Dobash & Dobash, 1990: 64/5; Lempert, 1996: 20; Meyers, 1997: 8). Rather than the man’s

behaviour, the female's behaviour is analysed – what did she do, why doesn't she leave? (McManus & Dorfman, 2003: 3).

The fact that female victims stay in a relationship despite domestic violence is mentioned in media reports, with an emphasis on what this suggests about the woman (see for example discussion of literature in Hydén, 1999: 449; Loseke & Cahill, 1984: 296-7). Berns theorises that many women's magazine articles focus on women who leave as this topic is more upbeat and shows a positive outcome, thereby empowering women (Berns, 2004: 84). Such magazines prefer to show survivors rather than victims. These magazines can also portray 'acceptable' victims (those who leave) and 'unacceptable' victims (those who stay). For the latter, women are seen as bringing about their own demise. Edwards states that these views can influence the legal process in such cases (Edwards, 1987: 152). There has already been some research examining heterosexual men's accounts of violence against women. The themes which arise from these studies include blaming the victim, minimizing the violence, claiming a lack of control and remorse (for full details see Stokoe, 2010; Ptacek, 1990). Lamb and Keon have also found that the usage of particular linguistic features can change views of blame by reducing male blame and sharing it with the woman (Lamb & Keon, 1995: 218). In their study, different stories of domestic violence were manipulated to contain different linguistic devices and results showed that altering the language used to describe the violence changed the blame apportioned to the women in these situations. This includes the use of passive voice, couple as agent (where joint violence is suggested by use of terms such as the couples' violence even though mutual violence is rare), and nominalizations which will be discussed in section 3 (see Lamb & Keon, 1995). This scenario is not restricted to domestic violence, but also occurs in other violence such as anti-gay attacks (Henley, Miller & Beazley, 1995; Henley, Miller, Beazley, Nguyen, Kaminsky & Sanders, 2002: 76).

### **3. Representation of rape and sexual violence in newspapers**

In the introduction it was stated that we can use media reports to examine 'structures of belief' (Conboy, 2007). Significant research has been carried out examining how language is used in rape and sexual violence stories (for example Benedict, 1992; Bohner, 2001; Clark, 1992; Coates, Beavin Bavelas & Gibson, 1994) and how this affects how women are represented. Do similar themes appear in the domestic violence cases? This section will examine how language is used in sexual violence stories to allow for comparison with cases of domestic violence reported in newspapers.

Studies of sexual violence reports in the media have shown that these stories contain inappropriate language (Bavelas & Coates, 2001; Benedict, 1992: 20/21; Clark, 1992; Coates & Wade, 2004) which result in sensationalist and titillating articles (Soothill & Walby, 1991: 3). The vocabulary used for reports of sexual crimes can carry the connotation of consensual sex rather than that of a crime (Ehrlich, 2001: 26). Words used to describe sexual violence can deflect from its true nature. The word 'intercourse' is sometimes used to denote the act of rape and violent sexual assault has been described as 'having intercourse with' or 'having sex with'. Other forms of sexual assault can be referred to as 'fondling' or 'touching', making them seem affectionate rather than unwanted. There are also other cases of erotic language which can be inappropriate: women are often described in a sexual manner, using words which describe their physical appearance in ways that are not used to describe men (Soothill & Walby, 1991: 70). The use of this type of language can reinforce the way

such crimes are viewed. Benedict (1992) writes that such language can give the impression that women provoke rape<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, reports that are too sanitized can suggest that such crimes are not as violent as they actually are.

The way in which the actors are named is important. Richardson comments "The way that people are named in news discourse can have significant impact on the way in which they are viewed. We all simultaneously possess a range of identities, roles and characteristics that could be used to describe us equally *accurately* but not with the same *meaning*." (Richardson, 2007: 49). Research has shown that certain ways of portraying perpetrators and victims can influence the reader's perception of blame and extent of violence (Henley et al., 1995; LaFrance & Hahn, 1994) and choosing what to call those involved can influence how readers view them. Clark (1992: 210) has shown that perpetrators of violence are named differently depending on their victims. She examined the way *The Sun* reports crimes of sexual violence and describes perpetrators and victims. Her study notes that men are described either as humans or sub-humans. If men are regarded as sub-human they are described as *fiend*, *beast*, *monster*, *maniac* or *ripper*. Furthermore, fiends attack 'unavailable' women (including wives, mothers and girls), whereas non-fiends (described using details emphasizing social normality) attack 'available' women (for example unmarried mothers, blondes, prostitutes, divorcees and sexually active girls). Clark comments that it is not construed as 'fiendish' for a man to attack a woman who he is married to, or to assault a woman who is seen as unrespectable (Clark, 1992: 223). Women are categorized in terms of their sexual availability rather than as individuals and may often only be described in limited roles in relations to others (Reah, 1998: 69). This 'virgin' or 'vamp' dichotomy in newspaper reports is discussed in considerable detail by Benedict (1992).

There are also other linguistic features involved with blame shifting in rape reporting. The uses of passives and nominalizations have been shown to remove blame from the attacker and either direct it elsewhere or remove it altogether in studies which ask participants to judge responsibility on a scale for stories in which different linguistic features are used to describe such crimes (see Bohner, 2001 and Lamb & Keon, 1995). Passives are grammatical constructions in which the subject can be deleted and the object becomes the focus, e.g. *the man was killed*. Here the subject of the active sentence (who killed the man?) has been removed<sup>2</sup>. Bohner discusses the fact that sentences such as *the woman was raped* result in foregrounding of the victim. He also comments on 'get-passives', for example *the woman got raped* (Bohner, 2001: 517), which can imply *the woman got herself raped*, making the woman an active participant. Studies carried out by Henley et al. (1995) also suggest that using passive forms in crime stories can affect the way both assailant and victim are perceived and this study showed furthermore that the word 'rape' is used more frequently in the passive voice than other verbs. In nominalizations, verbs, adjectives or adverbs can be used as the

<sup>1</sup> A study commissioned by Amnesty International UK (for more information see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/review-stop-violence-against-women-campaign>) suggested that the people questioned in their survey thought that women were partly responsible for rape if they had behaved in a flirtatious manner; had been drinking; wore 'sexy' clothing; had many sexual partners or were in a dangerous area. This was reported on the radio and in many newspapers, for example by Alexandra Frean in *The Times*, November 21 2005, page 11.

<sup>2</sup> Although such a construction might be used for discourse reasons (for example if the killed man was the topic of the previous sentence), such constructions can be used to obfuscate the person responsible for the action and make the reader focus on another person instead, in such cases, the victim of the crime.

head of a noun phrase, e.g. *the process of abuse, the violence or the discovery of a crime* (See Bohner, 2001: 518; Lamb & Keon, 1995: 212). Such uses prevent the agent of the act from being named and can conceal the action within a noun (for a verb, for example). Within such constructions, information may be missing or implied and actions are presented as abstract facts that can be difficult to question. Coates et al. studied such language use in the courtroom (Coates, Beavin Bavelas & Gibson 1994: 196) and found phrases like *there was an abuse of trust* and *there was advantage taken of a situation which presented itself*. In such cases, the situation has become the agent and such acts can be seen as occurring without the involvement of a particular individual.

Another important feature to consider is the fact that newspaper reports also relate myths surrounding rape and sexual violence (for example Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Soothill, 2004; Soothill & Walby, 1991) and tend to concentrate on a few sensational cases, rather than the 'usual' cases of rape, which are deemed to be 'not newsworthy' (Benedict, 1992: 8; Mooney, 2007: 199; Semino, 2009: 449). Soothill and Walby comment that the result of this is that "people are given a highly distorted overall picture of the nature and incidence of sexual violence" (Soothill & Walby, 1991: 1). Ehrlich comments that myths (such as the idea that most women are raped forcefully by strangers, more likely by black men, more likely by lower-class men) result in a dichotomy between 'real' rape and 'acquaintance' rape where the danger of rape is misunderstood. In fact, contrary to this myth, most women are raped by men they know in familiar surroundings (Ehrlich, 2004: 224) which also links to the myth of the safe home (Stanko, 1990: 76). This 'framing' of events which changes the focus of such violence onto the women affected rather than the perpetrators or society is common in such stories (Benedict, 1992; Berns, 2004: 8; Clark, 1992, Meyers, 1997). Meyers believes that such reporting "serves as a warning and a form of social control for all women, providing them with a guide to appropriate female behavior and detailing the repercussions for violating the rules" (Meyers, 1997: 24). Furthermore, such reporting suggests that women can take action to stay safe from rape, making it seem women are partly to blame if they contravene that advice and are raped. Newspaper reports may also suggest that there may be 'more legitimate' victims in particular cases (Ehrlich, 2004: 225), suggesting a just and fair world (Abrams, Viki, Masser & Bohner 2003: 111; Benedict, 1992: 18; Bohner, 2001: 516). The placing of responsibility on the victims draws attention away from other individuals and makes the victim accountable for any action, rather than the perpetrator, the police or laws surrounding rape and sexual violence (Berns, 2004: 150).

Such actions can lead to a diversion of blame, which can occur in different ways: by blaming the victim, by giving attackers excuses for their violence or by avoiding the concept of blame entirely (see for examples Coates & Wade, 2004: 502/505). Some acts of sexual violence are blamed on men's nature (for example a study examined by Carll, 2003: 1602, where 'testosterone' was blamed for a sexual attack), or conversely on women's behaviour, where they are seen to provoke an attack by flirtatious behaviour or making their partner jealous (Benedict, 1992: 15-6; Soothill & Walby, 1991: 50). Women are blamed for their clothing; drinking; knowing their assailant (Anderson, 1999: 378) and their previous sexual behaviour (Soothill & Walby, 1991: 47). This can lead to the classification of 'good' and 'bad' women, who are more or less deserving of rape (see Abrams et al., 2003: 112 and links to the 'virgin' vs. 'vamp' ideas discussed above) while victims of acquaintance rape have more blame attributed to them than stranger rape victims (Abrams et al., 2003: 112). Meyers also comments "[q]uestions are often asked why a woman was beaten or raped, but it is unlikely to be

asked why someone was robbed” (Meyers, 1997: 63). Coates and Wade believe that such framing is absolutely crucial as “[i]n our view, language that mutualizes violent behavior implies that the victim is at least partly to blame and inevitably conceals the fact that violent behavior is unilateral and solely the responsibility of the offender” (Coates & Wade, 2004: 501).

Berns comments that the representation of violent men in this way makes people feel safer. This means that “ideal criminals” (Berns, 2004: 158) are strangers. Abusers, murderers and rapists are portrayed as evil strangers, rather than next-door neighbours. Such stories allow readers to focus on the evil criminal, or the woman who got away, rather than think about the society and culture in which they live and where such crimes occur. Clark supports this argument in her study. She states that “Fiend naming suggests that the attacker is so evil and so alien that he is utterly outside human kind and society” (Clark, 1992: 224). This raises an interesting question. In domestic violence, the men who commit these crimes are husbands and partners and, as such, form integral parts of our society. The rest of this paper will discuss how such men are represented in the media alongside the victims of their crimes.

#### 4. Data and methodology

This study is based on a corpus of data collected by the author from two UK newspapers: *The Guardian* and *The Sun*. These newspapers have been selected for this study because of their wide readership, their very different editorial styles and content, and their dissimilar readerships. This allows analysis to be carried out across two different styles of newspapers to examine differences between them. Although these two newspapers are not supposed to be representative of all UK broadsheets and tabloids, they will be examples of case studies which could be applied to other newspapers in future research. *The Guardian* is a broadsheet founded in 1821 and in 2011 had an average daily distribution of 280,000. It tends to identify with centre-left readership of the political mainstream. *The Sun* is a national tabloid with an average daily circulation of around 3,000,000 in 2011<sup>3</sup>. It was re-launched in its current format in 1964 and has changed political allegiance over the years. It recently switched its support from Labour and Tony Blair (Labour is a centre-left political party in power in the UK from 1997-2010) to the Conservative Party and its leader David Cameron (the Conservatives are a centre-right political party in coalition with the Liberal Democrats and have been in power since 2010). These newspapers were searched using Lexis Nexis to find articles covering issues of domestic violence and form the corpus used for this article. The terms searched for include ‘domestic violence’, ‘domestic abuse’, ‘domestic battering’, ‘domestic dispute’, ‘spousal abuse’, ‘wife abuse’, and ‘violence against women’.

The period examined runs from July 2009 to July 2011. This period of time included a nation-wide anti-domestic violence campaign run by the government to try and make people more aware of the issues. Using these papers and these dates allows a qualitative examination of recent coverage of domestic violence issues in two widely-read British newspapers. The searches used meant that most cases of domestic violence had been found and allowed for different aspects of coverage to be

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/media/table/2011/feb/11/abcs-national-newspapers1>. A more recent figure shows that *The Sun* and *The Guardian* have the highest reading figures for tabloid and broadsheet respectively. These figures include online readership and state that *The Sun* has 13.5 million readers and *The Guardian* 5.3 million readers, <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-newspapers-ranked-total-readership-print-and-online>

analysed (for example, in *The Sun* problem page letters were also analysed which do not appear in *The Guardian*). Focusing on just two newspapers meant that the corpus can be reviewed in total to allow an in-depth analysis of relevant articles. Once the corpus had been checked through to ensure all articles were focused on domestic violence (and did not just contain one mention of domestic violence in an article on another topic) the total word count amounted to 84,065 (30,136 from *The Guardian* and 53,929 from *The Sun*). Every article and story relating to domestic violence was read and annotated. It was decided to investigate the articles reported in these two papers using a grounded theory approach (for more details see Charmaz, 1995; Hendry, Mayer & Kloep 2007). Using this approach meant starting with examining individual articles within the papers and seeing which common themes and patterns emerge across the time period of the corpus. This occurs by examining the transcripts, coding responses and grouping these into similar concepts. From this, categories can be formed which can form the basis of a working theory. By examining the common themes and language used within the articles it was hoped that further light could be shed on the aspects of domestic violence which are reported to the public.

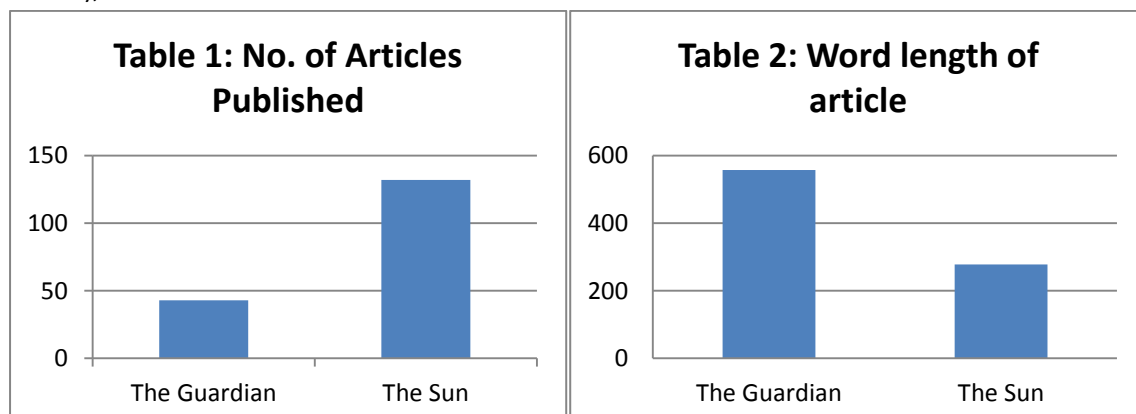
I have used the data to ask the following questions: Do the newspapers cover particular domestic violence stories? Are there themes recurrent in domestic violence reporting? How are the persons involved and their actions named and referred to linguistically? Are there differences and similarities between the two newspapers? Within the results and discussion, I will focus on the themes which have been raised by the grounded theory approach and quotes from the newspaper stories are underlined for ease of viewing.

**5. Results and discussion**

This section will initially examine the focus of the domestic violence articles in the two newspapers and which names are given to this type of crime. Then themes found in the articles are discussed and these include the fact that ‘normal’ cases of domestic violence are less likely to be reported than ‘unusual’ or celebrity cases. The normalization in many articles of the perpetrators is analysed as well as the trivialisation of such cases.

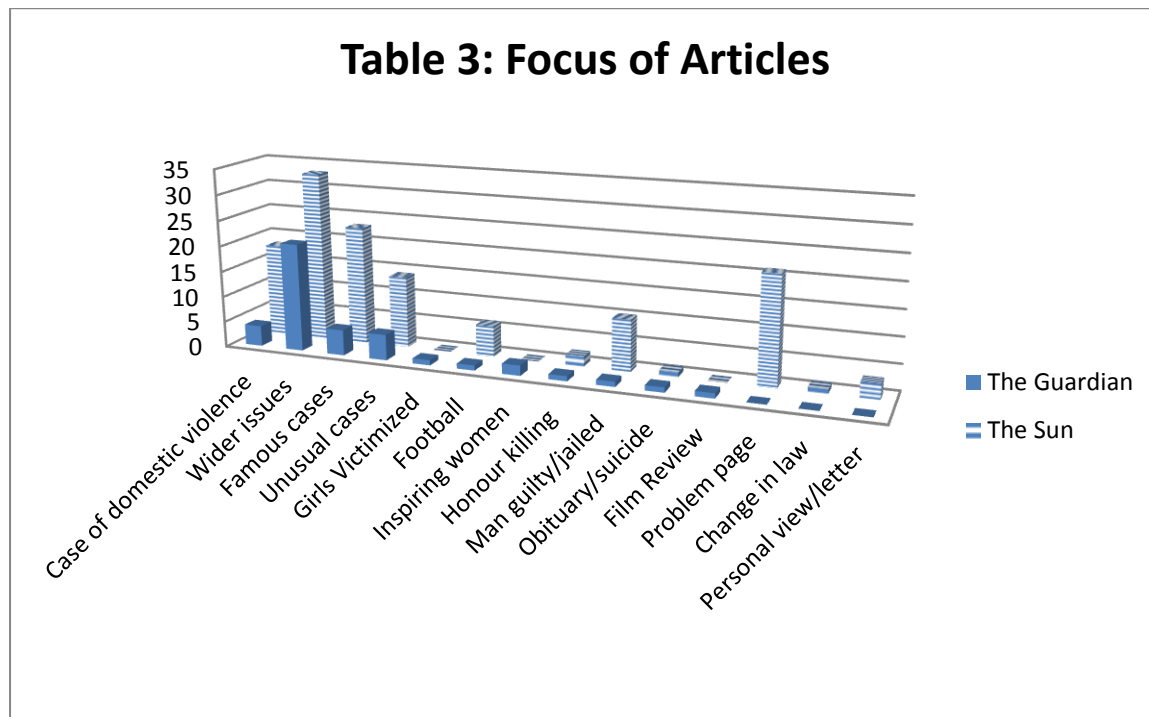
**5.1 Topics covered**

During the period under review, *The Sun* published more than three times as many articles concerned with domestic violence as is shown in Table 1 (132 cases compared to 43), but on average these articles are almost half the length of *The Guardian’s* articles (278 words compared with 558 words), see Table 2.





A wide range of issues are reported: from actual domestic violence cases to court cases; honour killings; foreign affairs; the role of football as a factor in increasing domestic violence; funding for refuges; legislation; and female-to-male violence (this is classed in the research as ‘unusual’ cases as it is not treated as the ‘normal’ domestic violence), the focus of the articles can be seen in Table 3.



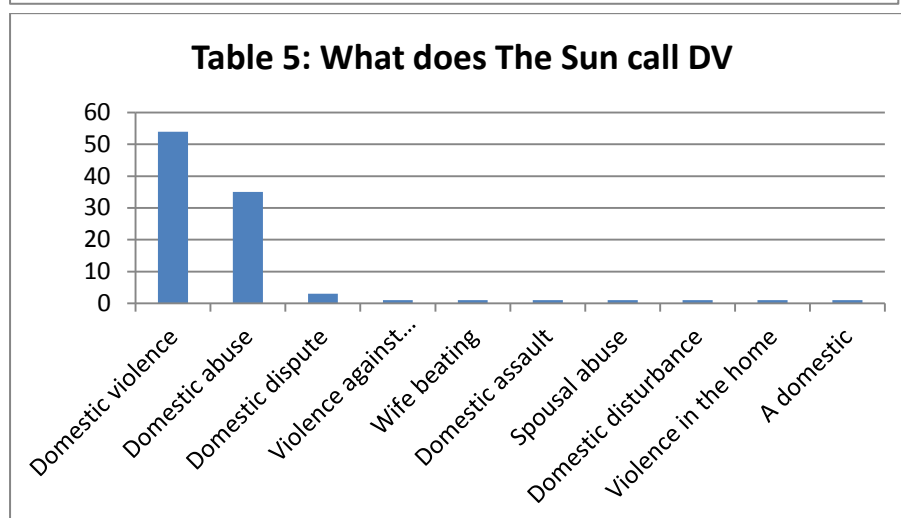
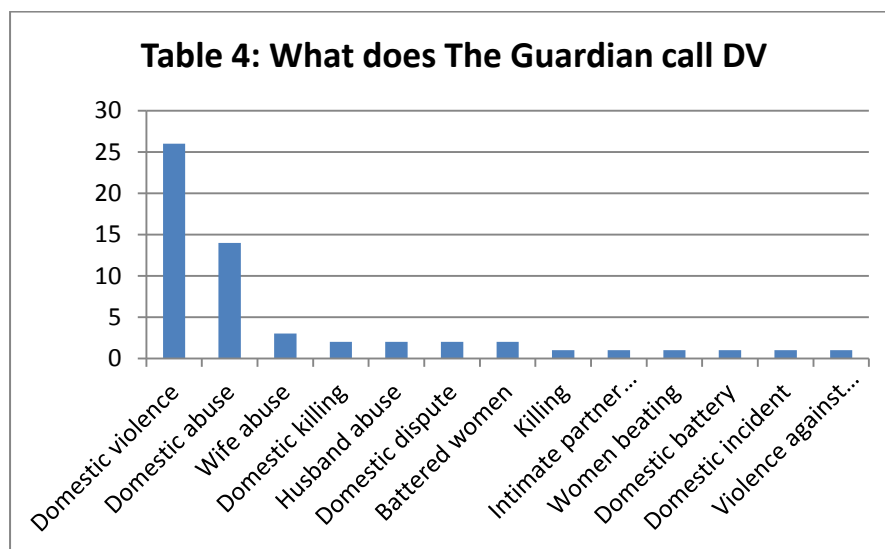
Both papers cover celebrity cases and out-groups – such as gypsies, travellers and foreign cases. *The Sun* also contains problem pages dealing with domestic violence cases. When breaking down these cases, similarities can be seen between the two newspapers. For both, what I have classed as ‘wider issues’ of domestic violence are the most commonly covered topic for both newspapers, although these articles make up a significantly larger proportion of overall articles in *The Guardian* (49% in *The Guardian* and 25% in *The Sun* as a proportion of all articles in the corpus). These articles do not actually cover specific domestic violence cases but look at overall development such as funding cuts, refuges, police failures and statistics. Both papers cover celebrity cases (12% for *The Guardian* and 18% for *The Sun*) and what I have classed as domestic violence cases which cover ‘ordinary’ cases of domestic violence, where non-famous women are victims of abuse by their partner (9% in *The Guardian* and 14% in *The Sun* of all articles in the corpus).

Notably *The Sun* is more likely to report ‘unusual’ cases where men are victims of domestic abuse (14 reported cases compared to 5 in *The Guardian*) and one of its headlines runs Battered blokes: Shock 400% rise in women found guilty of beating up their husbands during family rows. However, a report on the following day states that although more women are being convicted of domestic violence, these figures are misleading as far more women suffer domestic violence and particularly repeat incidents of domestic violence. In such cases, the story reports, women are violent when trying to defend themselves or their children and the last line of this article states that While there

are undoubtedly male victims of domestic violence, it is important the gulf in the number of cases involved is appreciated.

### 5.2 Naming domestic violence

In both newspapers, *domestic violence* is still the most common term, occurring in 60% of articles in *The Guardian*, and 40% in *The Sun*. The next most common term is *domestic abuse*, used in 33% of the reports in *The Guardian* and 24% in *The Sun*. Other terms, such as *domestic battery*, *wife abuse*, *domestic dispute*, *spousal abuse* and *violence against women*, are very rare, occurring only once or twice during the entire two-year period. These figures can be seen in Tables 4 and 5. Some of the articles have multiple mentions of domestic violence and abuse, but there are also articles which do not use any of these terms. Other than the two most common terms, the only other overlapping terms are *domestic dispute* and *violence against women*. It seems that in some cases the issue remains nameless (particularly the problem pages in *The Sun*). As such cases tend to be found in problem pages, it seems that for the women writing these letters they are avoiding the terms above, perhaps they feel they have to excuse their partner or their own behaviour (of staying in the relationship, rather than leaving).



### 5.3 Celebrity cases are given more coverage

The coverage of actual cases of domestic violence (non-celebrity domestic situations where a woman has been subject to violence or abuse by her partner or ex-partner, which is the most usual kind of domestic violence) is relatively low (9% for *The Guardian* and 14% in *The Sun*) considering these make up the majority of real-life domestic violence situations. In the section on representation of rape and sexual violence in the media one of the 'myths' of rape was discussed, namely that there are particular situations where rape is more likely to occur, which does not tally with real life. It seems that this myth also occurs in reports on domestic violence. Both newspapers report more on celebrities (12% in *The Guardian* and 17% in *The Sun*) even though these cases form a minority of overall domestic violence numbers. Such celebrity cases include Rihanna and Chris Brown (solo music artists), Mel Gibson (American-Australian actor and film producer) and Neil Mitchell of *Wet Wet Wet* (Scottish pop band with many chart hits in the 1980s and 1990s as well as some UK television actors). This phenomenon has been referred to as tabloidization, where more famous and sensational cases are foregrounded.

The sensational reports also apply to the cases which I have classified as 'unusual'. These cases either deal with female-to-male abuse, which is a common theme in *The Sun* covered in 11 different stories in the paper or cases that fall outside 'normal' society. The men that are subject to such abuse are frequently referred to as blokes and hubbies in *The Sun* whereas similar terms are not used for women who are abused. This theme is covered on a much smaller scale in *The Guardian*, with just one occurrence, which states Less often discussed is the problem of husband abuse. Groups that fall outside of 'normal' society are also covered by both papers, e.g. gypsies and travellers and foreign cases, for example, domestic violence in Spain which features in four articles in *The Guardian* and one in *The Sun*. The article in *The Sun* which deals with travellers discusses how new caravan sites are being built for gypsy women who want to escape domestic violence without going to a traditional refuge. Although this article states that this is welcomed by traveller groups, it also claims police worry about the additional cost to the tax payer. This allows the readers of the papers to distance themselves from such cases, as they do not deal with the men and women in our society. As discussed in previous sections, this reporting allows readers to think that the men involved are very different from 'normal' men (for example Clark, 1992; Meyers, 1997: 10) even though this misses out most men involved in domestic violence cases.

Very few articles give information about current figures on the occurrence of domestic violence, less than 1% of domestic violence related articles in *The Guardian* and only 5% in *The Sun* discuss such figures. One article in *The Sun* describes that ONE woman dies every THREE days at the hands of an ex or current partner, whereas another article focuses on its increase around Christmas time. In *The Guardian*, one article states that one in four women will experience domestic violence and another that numbers of women killed by their partners has increased dramatically. These kinds of articles which illustrate how common domestic violence is are rare in these newspapers. The celebrity cases, as well as the 'unusual' cases serve to distance the reader from domestic violence, as if it does not apply to us, in a similar manner as the media representation of rape. When domestic violence is reported, it tends to be the most extreme cases that receive attention, where women are killed by their partners or ex-partners. The majority of domestic violence cases are therefore completely overlooked.

#### 5.4 The framing of domestic violence stories

Unless the man is framed as a ‘monster’, the focus is on the woman (either leaving or staying) rather than the perpetrator. There are some interesting exceptions to this, for example, where the woman is the perpetrator of the violence, she is the main focus of the article (one headline in *The Sun* reads A loofah’s tiff; woman throttles lover with bath sponge in TV row). Another exception is when the domestic violence perpetrator is a well-known person, as in much of the articles on celebrities – in these articles there is relatively little attention for their victim (Mel’s facing 4 years for ‘belting ex’ in *The Sun*).

An interesting example can be found in *The Guardian* where a famous footballer is reported as having assaulted his girlfriend. There are facts mentioned in the article that seem irrelevant, for instance when the footballer (who is named) is described as an attacking, two-footed player and a skilful, two-footed player in two reports and that the player is reported on the team’s website as being a supremely gifted talent. *The Guardian* also carried an article about a domestic violence incident involving Chris Brown and Rihanna and the fact that some of his fans had suggested that she may have provoked him or done something to deserve the attack. The writer then states In Brown’s defence, he’s never blamed Rihanna for his actions. This could suggest that domestic violence is seen as an acceptable course of action in certain cases or that the woman could carry some aspect of blame. Berns has suggested that there is less desire to erode the credibility of a famous sportsman or star (Berns, 2004: 152). This is not necessarily the case in these two newspapers, and there is certainly a virulent attitude against non-famous men who abuse famous female partners (for example *The Sun* contains an article reporting on Enders Nat’s brute fiancé who assaulted her where ‘Nat’ is Natalie Cassidy, an actress appearing in the long-running soap ‘Eastenders’ which is set in the East End of London).

One of the ‘unusual’ cases concerns the conviction of a woman for perverting the course of justice after she retracts claims made against her husband. This occurrence forms the focus of seven separate articles in *The Guardian* but is not covered at all by *The Sun*. Although rape and domestic violence lie at the heart of this case, the articles rarely focus on these issues and rarely mention the husband.

Many articles mention issues that can be seen to reduce the blame of the male perpetrator – for example, alcohol, football results, depression, lack of employment or the women’s behaviour. There is an article in *The Guardian* which suggests that jury prejudice is one reason why so few men are convicted for rape and domestic violence, due to some belief that there may be some aspect of female blame. In another article in *The Guardian*, the director of public prosecution asks whether violent male attitudes in music and film were part of the problem. In both *The Guardian* and *The Sun* it is stated that many abusers have been maltreated in their childhood. Raising these issues suggest that such issues can be used to ‘explain’ the reasons that men are violent towards their partner, thereby requiring no further searching for the reasons behind violence or what can be done to overcome this.

Football and domestic violence feature in both newspapers and there are suggestions that the two are somehow linked. It is stated once in *The Guardian* that historically domestic violence was

somehow acceptable, that men came home drunk from the football and assaulted their wives and sometimes the wives deserved it while a headline from *The Sun* states that England's defeat by Germany was Cup hell for wives. One cop states that some people were drowning their sorrows – and then taking it out on their partners; this does not state the specific gender which the headline does.

The sexual behaviour of the men and women involved in the violence is also mentioned. Clark has commented on the examples in media reports where offenders have raped to fulfil their basic sexual needs, thereby naturalizing the assault (Clark 1992: 218) and it seems that this issue is also raised during domestic violence reporting. However, in the two British newspapers male and female sexual behaviour are treated very differently. Some of the offenders have other partners, but are not treated as brutes, whereas a woman's sexual behaviour is reported as having triggered her attack. One story in *The Sun* describes a case where a woman's sexual behaviour is reported as having triggered her murder. Much of the article focuses on her sexual behaviour (she had a string of flings; Mrs Garbutt had been unfaithful and had several intimate relationships with men; the attractive postmistress also had sex chats on Facebook; Mrs Garbutt had sex with a man; she was also said to have romped with a cousin's husband). It then suggests that this behaviour erupted and caused this man to kill his wife. The man who carried out this murder and then phoned police to state that an armed robber had killed his wife is referred to in the headline as hubby which undermines the severity of the crime. Another story informs about a woman who is murdered as she had asked for a divorce and in the headline her husband is also referred to as hubby.

It seems that there are cases where the violence is more normalized than others and this is often linked to the victims. As stated in the section on rape and sexual violence, *The Sun* can normalize perpetrators or not (see Clark, 1992). In cases where the victims are not 'acceptable' they are seen as less deserving of violence (see also Berns, 2004: 93) and the perpetrator is portrayed as a fiend. *The Sun* deals with the jailing of a man who was violent to five partners. He is referred to as one evil monster; brute; cowardly monster; sadistic; fiend; an evil paranoid psycho; snivelling and causing an orgy of violence. The woman who finally reported him is called brave Suzanne and other women are mentioned as his missus. This man is treated as being outside of normal society, which means there is no need to look for the root of this violence (other than drink and drugs). There are similar cases where men are referred to as sex-crazed, a depraved monster and vile in *The Sun*. However, in many cases, men are treated differently. The man referred to in the previous paragraph due to this wife's sexual behaviour who bludgeoned his sleeping wife to death is referred to in the headline as post hubby and a village postmaster, Robin Garbutt, 45 and Garbutt in *The Sun*. This way of referring to the man do seem at odds with the term bludgeoned which is used to describe his crime. A similar report in *The Sun* describes the murder of a woman by her violent ex-husband after she has sex with the policeman who is protecting her from him. The man is referred to as ex and dumped bus driver Piotr Zasada, 33. He claims diminished responsibility because his ex-wife had romped with the policeman. These normalized terms are used to describe men who murder their partners where it is suggested there is some aspect of blame to be assigned to the victim.

There are few reports on why the man is violent and what can be done about it. There is one case in *The Sun* where a famous jockey accused of domestic violence states that this is a private matter. Another article in *The Sun* shows an example of nominalization by stating that the thinking goes that

domestic violence is private (unlike crimes driven by racial hatred and homophobia), but it does not explain whose thinking this is. The author of this article also states that people lie to themselves ... you can be a womanbeater and yet a decent person. This shows that the author suggests that people think that such crimes are acceptable to a certain extent. In many of the cases described in these newspapers, the perpetrators have something to blame for their actions, whether it is drink or drugs, emotional problems or jealousy. It seems essential to give reasons for such crimes, as 'normal' men could not commit such crimes.

One example of an article in *The Sun* shows inappropriate sexualization about a woman who is murdered by her partner and then burned in a bin until her body is unrecognisable, so that it has to be identified through her dental records. The focus of the article is on the victim, who is described in the headline as playboy girl and throughout the article as Playboy model, brunette and the stripper. The suspected killer is named as labourer Klym, 34; her fella and lover. They are described as having a volatile relationship (the victim had recently had suffered a broken nose as a result of an argument). She is said to have had too much to drink on the night she died. It seems as if the victim more or less deserved her fate. The woman is described in a physical way in which men are never described and make her seem a victim who brought on her problems herself. The language used also suggests that the violence was mutual, although there are no statements to any violence inflicted upon the man.

Other examples in *The Sun* where naming seems to be at odds with the crime are headlines such killer wheeled girl in barrow, where it is not immediately clear that the 'girl' is the man's partner, and body-in-bath hubby to face life sentence and in both these cases the men murder their partners. A further headline DIY SOS Dad describes the situation where a man holds his wife hostage before finally killing himself. In many reports on well-known men the perpetrator is referred to in a friendly or familiarized way, for example as Telly Billy, Corrie Bruce (both British TV actors), alcoholic football legend Gazza (ex-English football player Paul Gascoigne) or Mad Max Mel for Mel Gibson (these are all in *The Sun* although one article in *The Guardian* mentions Gazza). There is also a report on domestic violence in *The Sun* with the headline Dog fight charges where the emphasis is on pet abuse when a man is charged with assaulting his partner and their pet. These articles deflect from the crimes committed by these men by focusing on other aspects.

### 5.5 Language usage

The men in these articles are 'normalized' by these newspapers. For example, an article in *The Guardian* contains the headline Chef who hid wife's body in wheelie bin guilty of murder. In other instances, men are described in terms of employment, which happens far less to the women involved who are frequently referred to as 'wife'. There is a report in *The Sun* under the headline Judge 'hit wife over hold-up in dinner', where her employment is not given until much later in the article. Such language can also suggest that women are regarded as possessions, as women are more likely to be described as 'wives' regardless of being perpetrator or victim, while men will be described as 'man', for example man who killed girlfriend in *The Guardian*. This has been seen to be the case with representation of women and men more generally (see for example Page, 2003: 563; Reah, 1998: 63).

Certain linguistic features (such as passives and nominalization) occur in some articles and can hide or reduce the blame of the attacker and it was discussed in section 3 that passives are more likely to be used with the verb 'rape' than with other verbs. For example, an article in *The Guardian* describes the killing and the murder of a woman and her daughter, without mentioning the man who killed them. Only towards the end of the article is he named, unlike the victims, who are named throughout. Another article in *The Guardian* describes the fact that women get beaten up more after football matches, without mentioning the perpetrators, keeping the focus on the victims rather than the men who beat them up. One of a football organisation's Chief Executives in the article says that domestic abuse does take a hike around specific football matches, which seems like odd wording for a serious social problem. Another article in *The Guardian* mentions violence against women and girls without naming an agent.

Most instances of emotive language are found in *The Sun*. However, *The Guardian* mentions Gazza smashing Sheryl's head and Ulrika's battered face. There is only one example of a headline containing the phrase *battered women* in *The Guardian*, it appears above an article about Spain urging for EU-wide protection systems for battered women.

There is an example in *The Guardian* where linguistic terms seem to diminish the sense of violence. The article mentions a domestic dispute which resulted in the murder of a four-year old girl and her mother being critically wounded by the husband who then killed himself. Using a term like this seems to diminish the atrocity. Another article in *The Guardian* describes an incident where a man kills his wife and then himself, which is described as a terrible tragedy, therefore almost equating their deaths. Furthermore, people who knew the couple state that there had never been a suggestion of domestic abuse in the past and the husband may have been suffering from depression, as if to explain why he acted in such a way. There are also examples in *The Sun* which feature wordplay that minimizes the extent and seriousness of domestic violence. They include headlines such as a loofah's tiff; yule be sorry (on a report that rates of domestic violence increase over the festive period); wets he been getting up to? and wet and wild (where the perpetrator is a member of the pop band *Wet Wet Wet*). The headlines play down the fact that these articles all deal with examples of violent behaviour that form part of long-term domestic abuse. There is also a headline in *The Sun* which obscures the fact that a woman is murdered by her husband. It states Lost 'son' frenzy, where a couple is trying to adopt a child, the adoption is stopped by social workers after the woman reports her husband for domestic violence and finally, the man first kills his wife and then himself. The police state that there is no doubt Morrison blamed Wendy for the failure to adopt. Furthermore, the couple are described as volatile, with Morrison suffering bouts of jealousy. Again, the man's jealousy is equated with a volatile relationship.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has examined how domestic violence is represented in *The Guardian* and *The Sun* over a two-year time span. The aim of this analysis is to examine how domestic violence is reported, whether this is representative of 'real life' and whether there are similarities between the representation of domestic violence and rape.

It seems that there are differences and similarities between the two newspapers. *The Sun* more often reports on domestic violence, but the articles are typically much shorter than those featured in *The Guardian*. Although articles in *The Sun* are generally shorter than those in *The Guardian*, there are some exceptions to this where *The Sun* publishes a longer article on a case which is very suitable to tabloidization. There seems to be a similar coverage of the most frequent types of stories, with the majority focusing on the 'wider issues' of domestic violence, as well as famous and 'unusual' cases. However, there are differences between the newspapers as *The Sun* also features a large number of problem page letters from readers about domestic violence (without ever naming it as such).

The framing of domestic violence bears similarities to that of rape and sexual violence. There is more focus on the victim, for example on why they stay or how they leave, but the reports pay far less attention to the perpetrators and their reasons for committing these crimes, let alone how these crimes could be prevented. Similarly to the general reports on rape, articles from the two newspapers refer to different types of 'victims'. The language used to describe them and their perpetrators sometimes suggests that some of the blame may lie with the victim, which results in the 'normalization' of the perpetrator. However, even in cases where the sympathy lies with the victim, there is frequently a reason given for the violence, thereby removing these perpetrators from 'normal' society.

Using language such as particular descriptions of men and women, linguistic devices such as erotic language or passives and nominalizations can also serve to blame the victim and emphasize the causal role of the woman (see also Frazer & Miller, 2009: 70).

It seems that *The Sun* frequently trivializes domestic violence and does not fully illustrate the extent of the problem. Although *The Guardian* takes it more seriously, it still does not portray the full extent of such crimes. These two newspapers very rarely ask why the men in these reports are violent or what could have been done to prevent and stamp out domestic violence. Furthermore, there is rarely a focus on the actual number of cases of domestic violence, which would show its prevalence in our society.

*The Sun* reports on the most extreme and sensational cases as they are regarded as more newsworthy, while the language used in its headlines and reports is more exaggerated than that of *The Guardian*. However, for both these newspapers the 'real', everyday domestic violence is rarely reported on and extreme cases are focused on (serial abusers, murders, celebrity cases) which misrepresents domestic violence. Taken as a whole, the stories in *The Guardian* and *The Sun* during the period July 2009 to July 2011 give an inaccurate picture of domestic violence and its prevalence in our society.



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