

Visualizing femicide in the print media: A comparison of Italy and the UK

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Abstract

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action developed at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women acknowledged the media as a vital arena for the advancement of women's equality. Now, thirty years after the Beijing Declaration, it is clear that structural inequalities within journalism and the media continue to shape representations of women and thus the advancement of gender equality. From this starting point, this article examines how images are used in print media reporting on femicide within intimate relationships. It asks how newspapers have visualized incidents of femicide, how this shapes narratives and understandings of domestic violence, and what this means for women's equality. Drawing on two examples from the media in the United Kingdom and Italy, this article situates the cases within national regulatory frameworks and compares the visual representation of femicide in the printed press in the two countries as a means of understanding core principles of cultural and political narratives (visual and written) in the reporting on femicide in both countries.

Keywords

femicide, gender equality, Italy, journalism, media, UK

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There is now ample evidence that the mass media can advance gender equality and women's rights (UN, 1995). The media not only enables people to access information about gender-related issues, but in doing so can tangibly lead to change in gender relations. Indeed, the significance of the media for advancing women's equality was already acknowledged by the United Nations (UN) in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), which stated that "the media have a great potential to promote the advancement of women and the equality of women and men by portraying women and men in a non-stereotypical, diverse and balanced manner, and by respecting the dignity and worth of the human person" (UN, 1995: 13). The BPfA also issued a call to action for governments, media organizations, civil society groups, and researchers to promote gender equality in media structures by increasing women's participation and access to decision-making in traditional and new communication technologies.

Despite this relationship between the media and the advancement of gender equality, research across the humanities and social sciences has revealed on-going inequalities in and through the media and its portrayals of women (Byerly 2013; Gallagher, 2014; Ross et al., 2020; Padovani et al., 2019). Although increasing numbers of women have entered journalism, women remain under-represented in the upper echelons of the media and are featured less frequently as subjects and sources of expert knowledge (GMMP, 2020; UNESCO, 2019; UN Women, 2023). Media organizations have also largely failed to adopt internal codes to address gender inequalities, leaving gender imbalances in media content unquestioned (Padovani et al., 2022; Ross and Carter, 2011).

These inequalities prove particularly troubling for reporting on domestic and gender-based violence. Research has shown that media portrayals of violence against women typically misrepresent the violence and reiterate broader gendered attitudes towards violence against women. This includes: providing a lack of social context and acknowledgement of the systemic nature of male violence against women; terms like "domestic violence" not being used in reporting; violence being sensationalized; victim blaming; and the voices of the police and criminal justice system prioritized over the experiences of women (Cullen et al., 2019; GMMP, 2020; Sutherland et al., 2016).

This article builds on this body of critical media research by examining the visual representation of femicide within intimate relationships in two national contexts: Italy and the UK. Italy and the UK have been selected because while both experience similar reported rates of violence against women, femicide in Italy has significantly increased in recent years. At the same time, the commercial print media also varies in both countries. While the UK's printed press is highly partisan, the Italian counterpart is subject to political interference (Moore and Ramsay, 2021a: 456; Padovani et al., 2021: 317). The different models of the media in the two countries thus present a way of thinking about how different regulatory frameworks impact reporting on femicide. Images, moreover, provide a unique – albeit challenging – lens into reporting on violence against women. Images are polysemic and can be read in different ways. They are also subject to different (and often fewer) forms of regulation in comparison to textual reporting. And lastly, there is a long history of feminist critique of the ways in which images of women, and women's bodies, have been objectified and sexualized in the media (Gill, 2007).

We specifically analyze the images used in the reporting on the murders of Giulia Tramontano in Italy in 2023 and Alice Ruggles in the UK in 2016. These cases provide

an important perspective for thinking about the role of the media in advancing gender equality as the attention and pressure brought by the reporting on the cases led to reform efforts in the way the two countries respond to violence against women. However, through a visual and narrative compositional critique of this reporting, we show that the images used both challenge and affirm normative, patriarchal gender ideals and stereotypes of women and gender-based violence. This visual ambivalence largely accords with the broader research on the misrepresentation of domestic violence in the media.

We further situate these cases within the regulatory frameworks present in the Italian and UK media. In doing so, we argue that while there are guidance and regulations for sensitive reporting in cases of violence against women, the non-binding nature of many of these instruments in both the UK and Italy means that reporting practices vary, although the more highly regulated Italian system has led to some key improvements.

The article begins by scoping the media landscapes and regulatory frameworks of both countries, before outlining the extent of and responses to gender-based violence and femicide. It then moves to an analysis and discussion of the cases of Tramontano and Ruggles, whose murder by intimate partners preoccupied the Italian and British press.

Media landscapes in Italy and the UK

Italy and the UK are representative of different media systems, though they both have heavily regulated broadcasting sectors. The regulatory agencies are, respectively, the *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* (Agcom, Communications Guarantee Authority) and the Office of Communications (Ofcom). While Agcom monitors and verifies media pluralism and the political parties and social movements' access to media, Ofcom is concerned with accuracy and impartiality in news content. In the UK media landscape, there is a hybrid system, with the publicly owned BBC holding a dominant role in domestic content production and reaching the largest audience through television, radio, and online news. In Italy, the publicly owned broadcast Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI, Italian radio television) together with the commercial broadcasting group Fininvest/Mediaset have the largest audiences.

With respect to gender inequalities, Moore and Ramsay (2021a) highlight the underrepresentation of women as expert sources, alongside biased portrayals of women by some media outlets in the UK. However, they also indicate that “several news organizations, particularly broadcasters, have engaged in policy reviews and have introduced new policies and procedures to address the problem” (Ibid: 470). Broadcasting news provisions are regulated by legislation, differently from those of print media, which might explain the discrepancies between broadcasters and print media in relation to gender equality in news content (Ibid: 488–489). Likewise for Italy, Padovani and Belluati (2021) argue that despite the developments made by the public service broadcaster RAI regarding the “the adoption of internal rules, recommendations, and guidelines regarding the promotion of gender equality in media content (i.e. Service Contract 2018–2022),” the same cannot be observed in commercial media broadcasters or print media. In Italy, men primarily make the news as subjects and actors, while women remain marginalized in the Italian news agenda.

Although media representations of women are lagging in both Italy and the UK, there are several codes of ethics and charters covering journalism in the two countries. In Italy, there are 12 different codes of ethics and charters approved by the Order of Journalists (ODG), covering various aspects of reporting, such as the protection and rights of minors (*Carta di Treviso/Charter of Treviso*), migrants (*Carta di Roma/Charter of Rome*), and guidelines for reporting on gender-based violence (*Manifesto di Venezia/Venice Manifesto*) launched in 2017 (Ruggiero, 2021). Approved in 2016, the *Testo Unico dei Doveri del Giornalista* (Consolidated Text of the Journalist's Duties), harmonized these principles and consolidated the duties and expectations of journalists into one document. Article 5-bis, added in 2021, specifically addresses gender inequalities, violence, and femicide, and states that journalists must "avoid gender stereotypes, expressions, and images that harm a person's dignity," as well as take care not to sensationalize the violence and be respectful to the families involved (ODG, 2021).

Importantly, the Consolidated Text is a binding agreement, and members of the ODG can face disciplinary action if they are found in breach. The Venice Manifesto, however, has a non-binding character, despite presenting more extensive guidelines on how to report gender-based violence. In cases where journalists disregard the law, norms, and principles enshrined in the Venice Manifesto, it is up to professional journalism bodies, such as the Commission of Equal Opportunities from the *Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana* (FNSI, National Federation of the Italian Press), UsigRAI (*Unione Sindacale Giornalisti Rai/RAI Union of Journalists*), and GiULia Giornaliste (*Giornaliste Unite Libere Autonome/United, Free and Autonomous Journalists*) to demand immediate action from news media organizations.

In the UK, five different codes of ethics cover journalism nationwide, while the broadcasting programming is regulated by legislation. According to Moore and Ramsay (2021b):

All operate at the national level among qualifying or member organizations and cover the vast majority of significant news organizations in broadcast, print and online (with some significant exceptions). An additional code of practice issued by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) covers the ethical conduct of journalists.

The exceptions mentioned by the authors are *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Financial Times*, which have developed their own norms, standards, codes of conduct, and internal disciplinary procedures. The NUJ (2011), meanwhile, has a 9-point code of conduct for its members, which includes a provision that journalists should produce "no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, color, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation." While it contains specialist guidance for reporting on race and on LGBTQ+ issues, it does not have similar guidance for addressing gender or gender-based violence. The Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO, 2023) also offers guidance for journalists and editors reporting on death and on sex offences, which broadly apply to reporting on gender-based violence and femicide.

The most detailed guidelines on gender violence in the media in the UK come from the charity and non-governmental organization sector. Groups like Women's Aid, Level

Up, and Zero Tolerance all provide information sheets offering best practice advice to journalists, editors, and publishers covering different forms of violence against women, and are linked through the IPSO website (Level Up, 2022; Women's Aid, 2020; Zero Tolerance, 2021). Level Up (which focuses explicitly on what it refers to as "fatal domestic abuse") and Zero Tolerance explicitly discuss the use of images in media reporting of violence against women and femicide. Both state that the media should use an image provided by the victim's family, who have consented to its use, and advise against the use of stock or composite images that juxtapose the victim and the perpetrator. Instead, Level Up underscores the need to center the image of the victim(s). In comparison, guidance in Italy, through the Venice Manifesto, recommends, among other things, that journalists should "use the specific term 'femicide' for crimes committed against women because they are women." Journalists should also not "make use of stereotypical images and symbols that reduce women to mere sexual appeal or 'objects of desire'" (Manifesto di Venezia, 2017).

Gender-based violence and femicide in Italy and the UK

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2023) defines gender-based violence as "any type of violence based on someone's gender from physical to emotional to financial to reproductive violence." It notes that women are predominantly the victims of gender-based violence, due to ongoing inequalities between men and women (EIGE, 2023). Femicide is one of the most extreme forms of gender-based violence and is defined here as the killing of a woman or girl by a man that is "motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women" (Caputi & Russell 1990: 34; EIGE, 2021a). This can take different forms, including "the murder of women as a result of intimate partner violence; the torture and misogynist slaying of women; killing of women and girls in the name of 'honor'" (EIGE, 2023).

In both Italy and the UK, gender-based violence and femicide is widespread. In 2015, the National Institute for Statistics in Italy (ISTAT, 2015) reported that approximately one third of women aged 16–70 years in Italy have experienced gender-based violence. Of this, 20.2% reported physical violence, 21% sexual violence, and 5.4% rape. While this is slightly below the EU average of 33%, the statistics show that the most serious incidents of violence against women are perpetrated by current or former intimate partners (Ibid). This is also borne out in recent figures that reveal alarming increases in the number of femicides in Italy, despite a generally decreasing rate in homicides (Giuffrida, 2022). In 2022, of a total of 319 homicides in Italy, 125 (39%) were femicides, 103 of which took place in a domestic setting (Openpolis, 2023). By the end of February 2025, the group *Femminicidio Italia* reported that there had already been 31 femicides in Italy in the last 12 months (FemminicidioItalia.Info, 2025).

In 2021, data showed that 18% of all recorded crime in England and Wales was domestic abuse (ONS, 2021). Given the prevalence of underreporting gender-based violence, the actual figures are likely much higher. With respect to sexual violence, 3.3% of women aged 16 years and older in England and Wales were victims of sexual assault in the year ending March 2022 (Gov.UK, 2022). In comparison to Italy, the accounted rates of femicide in the UK are substantially lower. The *2020 Femicide Census* reported that

on average a woman is killed by a man every 3 days in the UK. More specifically, in 2020 there were 110 recorded femicides, of which 52% were perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner. This was the lowest number of fatalities since recording of femicide began in 2009 (Femicide Census, 2020).

Action has been taken to address violence against women, including domestic violence in both countries. To date in Italy, there are 486 women's shelters offering space for 1045 women, and women's rights and civil society groups have taken action to address gender-based violence and support victims (EIGE, 2017). In 2015, the "special plan against sexual violence and gender-based violence" was enacted by the Italian government to support the development of support services for women experiencing gender violence. Laws offering protection for women and victims of domestic abuse have increasingly been introduced following the enactment of the law *Misure contro la violenza nelle relazioni familiari* (Measures against violence in familiar relations) in 2001, which was the first law to specifically target domestic abuse in Italy. In addition, the 2011 Istanbul Convention was ratified by Italy in 2013 under Law 77/2013. This resulted in the approval of a crucial new piece of legislation, commonly referred to as the "Red Code" (Law 69/2019), which increased the penalties for existing gender-based felonies (Capecchi and Gius, 2023: 83). Further efforts to strengthen the prevention of domestic violence in Italy have recently been taken and are now before the Italian parliament. This includes the introduction of restraining orders, the surveillance of perpetrators of domestic abuse and the prioritization of legal cases involving gender violence.

The UK has played an important historic role in addressing violence against women. Chiswick Women's Aid, opened in 1971, was one of the first modern, domestic violence shelters, and there is currently a vast network of support services for women experiencing violence and abuse in the home (Pizzey, 1974). Most recently, in 2021, the UK government launched its Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy, which in part responded to the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving member of the Metropolitan Police Force (HM Government, 2021). This strategy coincided with the enactment of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which aimed at raising awareness of domestic abuse, improving the response of the justice system, and improving support for victims. For the first time in UK law, this Act created a statutory definition of domestic abuse (Part 1.1), which broadened the scope from physical violence to include emotional, coercive, and controlling abuse.

Action against femicide has been slower to materialize. Although the Italian criminal code does not explicitly define femicide, it is addressed through Article 575 (homicide) that prescribes a minimum imprisonment of 21 years for causing someone's death, and articles 576 and 577, which relate to aggravated homicide. Articles 576 and 577 impose life imprisonment for aggravated homicide cases involving elements like sexual violence, stalking, or when the victim is a relative, ancestor, descendant, spouse (even if separated or divorced), or a partner. These articles were modified in 2019 to enhance protection against domestic and gender-based violence (EIGE, 2021b). Likewise, UK criminal law lacks a definition of femicide, but it is prosecuted through other provisions, such as murder or manslaughter (EIGE, 2021c).

How then are these regulatory frameworks for the media and responses to femicide and gender-based violence reflected in the media in Italy and the UK? And to what extent do the visual representations of femicide affirm or challenge the very gender norms that enable violence against women?

Representations of femicide in Italy and the UK

Research has highlighted the widespread misrepresentation of gender-based violence in the media globally. Specifically, studies of the USA, Australia, Republic of Ireland, and from the Global Media Monitoring Project have all shown that reporting on gender-based violence and femicide typically reflects gendered attitudes toward women in ways that perpetuate gender inequalities (Cullen et al., 2019; GMMP, 2020; Richards et al., 2011, 2014; Sutherland et al., 2016). This is also born out in the research on Italy and the UK.

Belluati and Tampone (2021) have investigated how the news has shaped mainstream public discourses on femicide in Italy by examining three years (2015–2017) of news coverage by two national newspapers (*La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale*) and three TV broadcasters of diverse editorial and political orientation (RAI, Mediaset, and La7). Employing a mixed-methods approach, they identified four macroframes that informed the representation of femicide in the Italian media. Namely, femicide as 1. a political and cultural problem related to human psychology; 2. a result of unequal power relations between men and women; 3. a normative and systemic problem that highlights the institutional inefficacy in addressing the phenomenon; and, 4. the least used frame, a societal problem. The authors concluded that despite the increased public attention to violence against women, femicide is not yet recognized as a societal problem, shaped by dynamics that create inequalities and perpetuate patriarchal structures. Instead, media reports “remain largely unchallenging with respect to stereotypes and are still heavily imbued with forms of patriarchal paternalism” (114). In a similar vein, Capecchi and Gius (2023: 94) contend that representations of femicide in the Italian news over the years have consistently shown a pattern of telling news stories from the perpetrators’ perspective. Unsurprisingly, “victim-blaming and perpetrator-justification narratives” have become the norm in this type of media coverage, a pattern also observed in countries such as Mexico, Turkey, and the US (Aldrete and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023: 5; Basdogan et al., 2021; Gillespie et al., 2013).

Like Italy, the news media in the UK plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of domestic violence and femicide (Lloyd, 2020). It is also clear that the news media in the UK have drawn upon and perpetuated problematic, gendered hierarchies, and conceptualizations of violence against women. In a study of reporting on domestic violence in 2001/2002 and 2011/2012 in two major UK newspapers *The Sun* and *The Guardian*, Lloyd and Ramon (2017) argued that much media content fails to contextualize domestic violence and also serves to blame the victim. Specifically, they highlight three (sometimes contradictory) tendencies in the media: 1. to downplay the prevalence of domestic violence; 2. to present it as commonplace; and 3. to blame the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, reporting on victims who are white, middle class women, who meet norms of attractiveness and respectability tends to be more supportive than reporting on women of color, unhoused, disabled, or working-class women, who are more

likely to be blamed for the violence they are subjected to. Although they do acknowledge examples where the UK news media has helpfully supported victims of domestic violence, alongside a noteworthy rise in media coverage acknowledging intimate partner violence against men, the study showed that there is still a persistent lack of change in the news content, particularly in the sexualization of violence against women and victim-blaming, especially by tabloid outlets like *The Sun* (Lloyd and Ramon, 2017).

Significantly, in the case of Italy, Capecchi and Gius (2023: 94) contend that thanks to the efforts and campaigns of feminist activists, women's movements and associations, as well as professional journalism bodies, such as *Giulia Giornaliste* and the Equal Opportunities Commission of the FNSI, changes in the news coverage on femicide and violence against women more broadly are visible, including:

the drop in the use of the term "raptus" and the idea of VAWG [violence against women and girls] as a sudden reaction to an underlying male impulse, the increased use of the term "femicide" to indicate the killing of a woman "as a woman," the new attention paid to the cycle of violence.

Case studies

For an event to be deemed "newsworthy," it must meet specific criteria, often referred to as "news values" (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). For press photographs, news values encompass visual aspects such as Composition, Personalization, Negativity, and Conflict/Dramatization (Craig, 1994: 190). "Aesthetics" is another crucial dimension, asserting that technical elements like lighting, color, contrast, and speed significantly "contribute to the aesthetic impression of an image" thus making it newsworthy (Caple, 2013: 50). However, as noted by Ross and Carter (2011) what makes something newsworthy is gendered, and stories pertaining to women are marginalized in the news. To what extent does this gendered framework also apply to the images used?

Below we examine two such newsworthy cases that captured the media in Italy and the UK respectively: the femicides of Giulia Tramontano in Milan in 2023 and Alice Ruggles in Gateshead in 2016. Both women were killed by current/former intimate partners, and both cases led to reform efforts in the way the two countries respond to violence against women. These reforms were, at least in part, due to the attention and pressure brought by the media reporting on the cases. As such, examining both Tramontano and Ruggles provides an important lens into the way the media can affect change.

In both case studies, we focus on the media reporting from leading news outlets with different political orientations. For the Italian case this includes *La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, and the digital-born *FanPage*. We further examine the coverage of the Italian news agency ANSA and two local newspapers, *Il Giorno* and *Il Mattino*, because they all used the image of Tramontano that was shared by her sister when she disappeared and the last image of Tramontano that was used in the police investigation. For the UK study, we draw on the reporting on the Ruggles case produced both at the time and retrospectively as presented in leading UK dailies. This includes reporting from *The Guardian* and *The Independent* written in 2016/2017, and a reflection written in *The Sun* in 2023.

We specifically examine the photographs used by these outlets to understand the gendered concepts, values, and attitudes they convey in reporting on femicide. In doing so, we draw on the methods of multimodal analysis (Baroni and Mayr 2017, 2023; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin and Mayr, 2023) to conduct a visual and narrative compositional critique of the way newspapers have visually framed incidents of domestic femicide in Italy and the UK. A multimodal approach requires an examination of “what is fore- or backgrounded, concealed or abstracted in discourses and what semiotic resources are used to achieve this” (Mayr, 2015: 525). This means that we situate the images alongside their companion texts to reveal how they create multiple, and sometimes contradictory meanings about femicide (Machin and Mayr, 2023: 70). While Baroni and Mayr (2017) study photojournalism, the images we examine here were not produced by photojournalists. Rather, they were taken by the victims themselves, family members or provided to journalists by police investigators. Yet, once these images entered news making processes, they were subject to gendered journalistic frames that routinely “structure how events are represented” through journalistic narratives that include text as well as images (Baroni and Mayr, 2023: 273). As the two cases show, this has important ramifications for the representation of femicide.

Italy

An embrace with her partner’s other woman, then the return home. These are the last images of Giulia Tramontano, the 29-year-old seven-month pregnant woman, who, a few hours later on that same day, will be killed from 37 stab wounds perpetrated by her boyfriend and the father of her child, Alessandro Impagnatiello. It is 4:57 PM on May 27th. Giulia decides to meet at the Armani Bamboo bar, in the center of Milan, with her partner’s lover, the 23-year-old with whom the bartender had a parallel relationship.

The two embrace each other. The image is one of the photographs contained in the investigative dossier prepared by the carabinieri of the investigative unit and by the prosecutors Alessia Menegazzo and Letizia Mannella on the murder of Giulia Tramontano (La Stampa, 2023).

The last live image of Giulia Tramontano, extracted by investigators from security camera footage, was widely circulated in the media. The women’s movements were recorded from above. We can see the full bodies of Impagnatiello’s lover embracing Giulia Tramontano, but we cannot see their faces. Tramontano has her face turned to the opposite side of the camera and the lover’s face is blurred. This image can certainly be said to fulfil the “newsworthy” criteria, as it encompasses all news values mentioned above for news photographs: Composition, Personalization, Negativity, and Conflict/Dramatization. Moreover, the camera still tells a story about deception, betrayal, and murder that is in line with the old newsroom saying, “if it bleeds, it leads,” to say that news about crime and tragedy sells more newspapers (Robertson et al., 2023: 812). Reflecting this, the leading news narrative presented the image as a representation of solidarity between two women who were deceived by Alessandro Impagnatiello (ANSA, 2023a).

However, Chiara Tramontano, Giulia’s sister, challenged this mainstream discourse by posting a long message on social media in which she presents an alternative rendering of the image. She states: “My sister approached her interlocutor with her arms falling

along her body. . .she is enveloped in an embrace that she does not reciprocate. Giulia does not embrace the woman who snuck into her house taking on the role of lover. And each of us would have done the same thing.” After describing her reading of the frame, she writes: “The truth is that we are looking for a non-existent morality in the tragedy that has upset our lives. Solidarity is something else, it has different timing and is driven by good” (Italy 24 Press News, 2023).

Indeed, the image is not as simple as the mainstream media suggested. As we are reminded, “Distance in visual communication is expressed through shot types and tends to realize degrees of intimacy. A close-up can suggest intimacy and physical closeness, while a long shot suggests detachment from the depicted person” (Baroni and Mayr, 2023: 270). The image of the controversial hug is a long shot, however it demands our attention and invites us to look closer; maybe because of the drama of the context that precedes the murder of Tramontano, but also because of its composition. As Chiara Tramontano emphasizes, Giulia’s arms are “falling along her body” thus amplifying the drama and the conflict within the image. The image of Tramontano thus not only makes the story a personal one about her murder by her intimate partner, but it also presents a more generalized message about femicide. The victim could just as easily have been Impagnatiello’s lover or any other ordinary woman.

Alongside this still, the Italian media frequently used images of Tramontano drawn from social media. Close up photos of her youthful face, photos in front of picturesque backdrops or dining with friends, and one of a pregnant Tramontano at the beach, posed side-on to show her belly, the images give the impression of a beautiful, fashionable, young woman, whose life was unfairly cut short by her partner (Il Giorno, 2023).¹ Again, the images belie a tension, as the glamorous photographs fit within the broader trend of sexualized images of women in the mass media, problematically underscoring patriarchal gender norms.

But there is more to the image of a pregnant Tramontano at the beach. This image was shared by her sister on her Facebook page when Tramontano disappeared after a fight with her boyfriend on 27 May 2023. In her post, Chiara Tramontano wrote the following caption for the photo of her sister: “Hai visto Giulia?/Have you seen Giulia?”

We have received several reports about a blonde girl “possibly pregnant”. Giulia had this baby bump one month ago, and now it’s even bigger! If the girl you see doesn’t have a noticeable baby bump, IT’S NOT GIULIA. If Giulia has her arms uncovered, her tattoo is the most characteristic sign she has! (Il Mattino, 2023)

This is part of the reason this image was one of the most circulated and used. Again, it can be deemed “newsworthy” as it embraces the same news values mentioned above (Composition, Personalization, Negativity, and Conflict/Dramatization), in addition to aesthetics. The photo is a medium shot, and as such we can see her body, posed side-on, having the white-green sea merging with the blue of the sky. There is a harmonious symbiosis of colors of the back and foregrounds, mixing up with the blue of her swimsuit and her colorful tattoo that covered her left arm. She looks serene and at peace, which tragically contrasts with the context in which her image was shared. The “aesthetics” of the image contributes to the conflict and drama of the narrative, therefore strengthening its newsworthy character.

The textual reporting on the case similarly reflected an ambivalence towards challenging gender inequalities through the hesitancy to name the murder as a femicide. Although the Venice Manifesto recommends using the term “femicide,” there is an uneven usage across publications. *La Stampa* (2023; Rotella, 2023), a generalist newspaper with a high circulation, especially in the North-West of Italy, only sporadically called it a femicide. Other leading newspapers (Padovani, 2021: 16), such as *Corriere della Sera* (Giuzzi, 2023), *La Repubblica* (Liso, 2023), *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (Onofri, 2023), and the online-only *FanPage* (Guerra, 2023), use the term “femicide” in their articles when they included specific murder context details or when speculating about it being a “homicide” or “femicide” based on ongoing police investigations. They also use “femicide” when the news piece references the femicide phenomenon in Italy. This choice is made despite “homicide” being the more commonly used term in Tramontano’s case.

Examining the visual representation of Tramontano’s murder reveals ongoing challenges with respect to naming femicide and in the portrayal of victims. Indeed, it would seem that the very factors that make such cases newsworthy are what make the visual representation ambivalent; part of what made her case so compelling for the media was her beauty, youth, and the fact that she was pregnant. But these are also the same factors that feed into the visual languages that underpin women’s inequality.

UK

You went to her flat. She was alone that night and what you did will have terrified her. You knocked on the door on three separate occasions, each time slipping away—and then you climbed over the wall into the rear yard and knocked on a bedroom window as Miss Ruggles lay in her bed. She looked out of the window to see you backing off having left flowers and chocolates. As might be expected, she was shaken and scared by that incident. You then left a voicemail message telling her repeatedly that you did not intend to kill her. You were harassing her. You were stalking her. You were destroying her (Alice Ruggles Trust, 2023).

The above is an excerpt of the Judge’s sentencing of Alice Ruggles’ murderer, a man who exercised coercive behavior and stalking with threats to cause harm, which he finally acted on in October 2016. The extensive media coverage of the case highlights its broader significance in the UK’s discourse on domestic abuse and stalking-related femicide; it prompted significant legal and policy discussions, including calls for stronger anti-stalking legislation and greater institutional accountability in protecting victims from escalating coercive control. Furthermore, the *Alice Ruggles Trust*, founded in her memory, has since played a critical role in raising awareness about the dangers of stalking, advocating for improved victim support, and training professionals in recognizing risk factors.

Prominent national newspapers, such as *The Guardian* (Davies, 2017; Halliday, 2019) and *The Independent* (Wilford, 2017), reported extensively on the case, often including photographs of both Alice Ruggles and her ex-boyfriend/killer. These articles generally cover similar ground: they detail who the victim was, how she died, and the circumstances of control, harassment, and stalking surrounding the murder. They also describe the multiple attempts by the victim to seek support from authorities and support services, including two calls to emergency services in the days prior to her murder. While both point to the brutality of the murder, only *The Independent* (Wilford, 2017) included

details of the many stab wounds and slashing of her throat to the spinal cord that she sustained. This was also the approach of *The Sun* (Knight, 2018) at the time, whose title “STALKER TERROR. Murdered by jilted lover: Woman has neck slashed six times and is left dead on bathroom floor after soldier ex finds out she’s dating again” sensationalizes the tragedy. In contrast, *The Guardian* detailed the impact of the stalking on Ruggles, as well as the personal history of her relationship with her murderer.

Similar to the Italian case, the images used by *The Guardian* and *The Independent* encompass the news values of Composition, Personalization, Negativity, and Conflict/Dramatization, as well as aesthetics. In *The Guardian*, Ruggles is shown sitting in a country field, looking at the camera with a relaxed and smiling face, while making eye contact with news readers. Although the image is a middle-shot, it demands the reader’s attention and the eye contact with Ruggles implies intimacy. This connection with the reader makes the news story even more poignant by leveraging the Negativity, Conflict/Dramatization of the event. While building the killer’s profile, the news story reads, “Dhillon, described as obsessive and manipulative and who hoped to join the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. . .drove from his Edinburgh barracks to kill her [Ruggles] in a jealous rage” (Davies, 2017). This type of description frames the murder as an individual problem of human psychology, with the murder committed “in a jealous rage,” thus justifying the killing of an ex-intimate partner.

The Independent, meanwhile, uses a close-up photo of Ruggles posed side-on and shown, presumably on a tropical holiday, drinking out of a coconut. Although she is not looking at the camera and thus has no eye contact with the readers, the photo suggests intimacy due to the closeness of the shot, as well as her smile. The same news values are present in the image because we see a young and joyful woman whose life was cut short by an “absolute psychopath” (Wilford, 2017), as described in the story by Ruggles’ flat mate Maxine McGill. Again, the news article does not problematize the killing nor connects it to patterns of femicide in the UK. Much like *The Guardian*, *The Independent* individualizes the murder, emphasizing the “killer’s disturbing behavior” (Wilford, 2017). The retrospective article published in *The Sun* (Christodoulou and Grant, 2023) uses similar photos of Ruggles. It is likely that these photos were selected and approved for use in the media by family members. These images are the most common ones shared of victims and headshots and are increasingly likely to be pulled from existing social media profiles, where there is a higher likelihood of these photos having been taken, approved, and posted by the victim when she was alive.

Conversely, images of Trimaan Dhillon, her ex-boyfriend and convicted murderer, either showed him in his military uniform, or were the police mugshot of his emotionless face. This contrast in imagery both humanizes the victim while simultaneously eliciting sympathy toward the perpetrator, who was consistently referred to by his military title (Lance Corporal) throughout the reporting. This is supported by Lloyd and Ramon (2017), who examine the trope of the man-in-uniform as the perpetrator of violence against women. While they acknowledge that the images could underscore that any man – including soldiers – can potentially be perpetrators, they also argue that the images of the perpetrator in uniform may render the men in a more positive light. When placed alongside the textual reporting that emphasized Dhillon’s emotional state, a very unclear message about femicide, its prevalence and origins in the inequality of women is sent.

Much like Tramontano, the reporting on Ruggles draws on notions of “newsworthiness” that the images underscore. Ruggles’ youth and her joy for life (as evidenced by her tropical holiday and photos in various locations) emphasize the tragedy of her murder. This gives further weight to Lloyd and Ramon’s (2017) argument that the media treats women who reflect racial and social ideals of beauty and class in a more favorable light. The news reporting on Ruggles also does not name it as femicide, and instead we see both *The Guardian* and *The Independent* presenting the murder as the action of an individual, disturbed man, while *The Sun* sensationalized the case. All these examples would have been considered bad journalistic practice in the more structured regulatory framework of the Italian media.

Lastly, the range of images used in the reporting of the crime are particularly important for considering the nexus between violence against women, femicide, and cyberstalking. In the UK, 47.5% of women self-identified as being harassed via the internet based on images or accessibility to social media profiles (Burke Winkelman et al., 2015). The images used in the reporting of Ruggles’ murder thus embed the tragedy in the very kinds of images that would have been accessed by her stalker and murderer (who, it was reported, had hacked into her Facebook). This is not to suggest that these images caused Ruggles’ murder, but that by using these images the media is problematically perpetuating the tools of stalkers.

Conclusion

What then do these case studies tell us about how newspapers have visualized incidents of domestic femicide? In the cases of both Tramontano and Ruggles, the media sent mixed signals in its visual and textual reporting. Whether it is a hesitancy to name the murders as femicides, underscoring visual narratives of patriarchal gender norms, or even perpetuating the use of images used by stalkers to harass and target women, there is a clear ambivalence in naming the inequalities that enable violence against women and femicide. Certainly, images can be read in multiple ways as the statement by Chiara Tramontano reveals, and the images of the two young women may also send a general message about the ubiquity of gender violence. However, the lack of unambiguous visual (and textual) messaging in both countries is particularly worrying in the face of extensive guidance on reporting and government efforts to tackle violence against women.

This also points to the uneven impact of policy and best practice guidelines within the respective medias. The term “femicide” is not used uniformly in the reporting on either Ruggles or Tramontano. Although the Italian media uses it more frequently, reflecting the proposals of the Venice Manifesto, the failure to label the murders as “femicide” suggests a reluctance (especially within the UK) to explicitly point to the gendered nature of domestic homicide. In terms of the visual representation of femicide, images provided by the family are used throughout the reporting in both countries and the victim is centered. However, this also underlines a contradiction in the requirement to use certain images while also avoiding gender stereotypes and the perpetuation of harmful norms. What happens when the images of the victim feed into the sexualization and objectification of women? While the framing of the two examples and differential use of terms like “femicide” indicates that the more elaborate regulatory framework of the Italian media has resulted in some success, compared to the UK framework where best practice predominantly comes from the charitable and NGO

sector, there is still more work to be done. As recent research has shown, most professional journalists are unaware of the existence of various codes of ethics and charters adopted by the Order of Journalists (Padovani et al., 2021).

Much like the images then, the role of the media in challenging gender inequality is also unclear. On the one hand, the narratives of Ruggles and Tramontano show plainly that any woman can become a victim of domestic violence, and their stories reveal the issues of coercive control and the limited ability – even failure – of the police and criminal justice system to effectively respond to women’s calls for help. On the other, they often seamlessly feed into contested patriarchal narratives of female victimhood and the objectification of women that have been identified in the research on textual reporting on femicide and gender-based violence.

What is the way forward for journalists and researchers? Of comparative interest in both cases is the selection of images used and permitted by family members – is there guidance for family members to consider which images are most appropriate for sharing, and should there be guidance in relation to the nature of the crime of femicide? Another line of research would be to consider how and the extent to which guidelines on reporting on gender-based violence, as well as policy provisions at national levels, are being translated into journalistic practices. Furthermore, with the fast development and deployment of generative AI systems, it is pressing to investigate how generative AIs are re-signifying power dynamics pertaining to visual/textual representations of femicide and gender-based violence. Baroni and Padovani (forthcoming), while critically interrogating European regulation of AI through the lenses of gender equality and mainstreaming, shed light on how a global reach of efforts to disempower feminist voices and achievements, while affirming “new (and aggressive) masculinities” (Lundius, 2025), is also highly visible in the media in Europe. Although non-European countries fare worse, democracies in Europe are also struggling to address increasing inequalities, social and political polarization, and unrest, including the rise of far-right political parties (EIU, 2024; Duina and Mérand, 2020; Horowitz and Nieminen, 2024), all of which feed into gender-based violence (Kováts, 2017; Verloo and Paternity, 2018).

Recent developments in Italy may also offer a solution. There, several observatories on femicide led by civil society groups, the research community, and leading media outlets, critically examine reporting on femicide. This includes the observatories created by *La Repubblica* (*Osservatorio femminicidi*) and the broadcaster SkyTg24 (*Femminicidi*). RAI (2018) was also part of a research project from University of Turin, entitled, *Rappresentazioni sociali della violenza sulle donne: il caso del femminicidio in Italia* (Social representations of violence against women: The case of femicide in Italy; 2015–2017), whose findings demonstrate that “[t]he coverage of femicide and gender violence still appears as highly stereotyped and not capable of, nor interested in, making public narratives more gender-sensitive” (Padovani and Belluati, 2021). One of the developments of this research project is the *Osservatorio di Ricerca sul Femminicidio* (Research Observatory on Femicide; 2023) that involves five different research units covering the national territory.

Another good practice comes from *Corriere della Sera*’s feminist blog *La ventisettesima ora* (The twenty-seventh hour, La27Ore), and its database entitled, “Dal 2012 ad Oggi” (From 2012 to Today) that catalogues all the women who have been killed since 2012. At the time of writing in February 2025, 1372 women have been killed since 2012.

According to the database, “We have built this Spoon River with a search engine that helps us rediscover the years, places, and stories and assists us in identifying women killed due to femicide or other crimes” (Zangarini, 2025). The images of women displayed in the database are all headshots, close-ups, that imply a sense of closeness and physical intimacy with the victim, much like the images of Tramontano and Ruggles examined above. In 2024, UK newspaper *The Guardian* initiated a similar project, the “Killed Women Count,” where they reported on every woman killed by a man throughout the year. The summary article featured personal photographs of many of the women, and stories from their families (Topping et al., 2024).

A further independent initiative that employs an alternative way of visualizing femicide is the photo exhibition (ANSA, 2023b) and book, *Le conseguenze. I femminicidi e lo sguardo di chi resta* (The Consequences. Femicides and the gaze of those who remain), by freelance journalist, writer and photographer Stefania Prandi. Rather than portray the victims of femicide, *Le conseguenze* centers the images of the those left behind – mothers, brothers, fathers – who must live with their grief and the extreme consequences of gender equality. According to Prandi (2020),

The reaction to infinite individual pain, which turns from personal to political, struggles to be recognised at the institutional and media levels. Yet, many continue to fight against invisibility and silence, even decades after the death of their daughters, mothers, sisters. This is true love, not the love of the men who killed them.

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Note

1. These images also circulated in the UK reporting on the case (Mirror, 2023).

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