

INTIMATE PARTNER FEMICIDE-SUICIDES IN ROMANIA. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF VICTIMS AND AGGRESSORS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of an analysis of how the Romanian online media reported on cases of intimate partner femicide-suicides (IPFS) committed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Content analysis of articles (N=96) presenting IPFS (N=13 cases) showed that, in the context of the constraints generated by the quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists continued to use unofficial sources of information to a large extent (79.1% – the victim's/aggressor's family, colleagues, neighbors, relatives). Only half of the articles analyzed mentioned public institutions investigating IPFS (police, prosecutors, and other institutions) as sources of information. We also note the tendency of journalists to use victim-blaming techniques to a small extent (22.8%). The share of direct victim-blaming techniques was lower than that of indirect techniques.

Keywords: intimate partner femicide-suicide, media representations, COVID-19 pandemic, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

Recent international studies have shown that “femicide frames affect readers’ reactions” (Schnepf and Christmann 2024, 2609). Describing femicides as “murder,” “domestic drama,” “love killing,” or “crime of passion” can generate different emotional reactions from the public. The authors point out that labeling a

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case of femicide as a “love killing” leads to the perpetrator being perceived as a “loving person” and distributes guilt between the victim and the perpetrator. In addition, describing femicide as a “love killing” or “crime of passion” is associated with victim blaming (Schnepf and Christmann 2024, 2611).

Victim blaming is constructed by describing the victim in negative terms, providing information about her relationships with other men, or stating that the victim did not report the crime to the police (Lloyd and Ramon 2017; Taylor 2009). Victim blaming also involves describing the victim as a drug/alcohol user, “being nagging or argumentative” (Aldrete 2023, 16). All of the above techniques are direct victim blaming techniques. However, the literature also mentions indirect victim blaming techniques that suggest that the victim provoked the murder, that jealousy motivated the crime, that the perpetrator was jealous and in love, and that it was a crime of passion (Correia and Neves 2024, 8). Other studies discuss the description of the aggressor as a person who lost control due to alcohol or drug use (Lee and Wong 2020, 224). “Female rejection of the love of a man” or the presentation of alcohol/drugs as causes of murder are other ways of diminishing the perpetrator’s responsibility (Smith 2012, 151).

Including more information about the victim in the body of the article reporting on femicide increases public empathy towards the victim and reduces victim blaming (Anastasio and Costa 2004). On the other hand, when journalists pay less attention to victims, we see “victim dehumanization” (Correia and Neves 2024, 9). Objectification of the victim is usually associated with presenting a lot of information about the perpetrator. In other words, the aggressor’s socio-professional profile is well defined (Correia and Neves 2024, 9).

MEDIA COVERAGE OF FEMICIDE IN ROMANIA BEFORE PANDEMIC COVID-19

In Romania, nine studies have been conducted to date on how journalists have reported cases of femicide. The studies analyzed online media articles published between 2003 and 2018 (see Table 1). The research methodology included content analysis of articles reporting on various types of femicide: femicide-suicides, intimate partner femicide-suicides, intimate partner femicide-suicides between immigrants and others. The analysis grid was similar, but the corpus analyzed differed in size and type of femicide. Information on the methodology used by studies analyzing how the Romanian media presented femicides was summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Methodology of studies conducted in Romania

Type of homicide	The time interval analyzed	Methodology/Analyzed corpus	Authors
(1) Intimate partners femicide-suicides & the media	2018 (March–April)	Case study Comparative analysis Romania–Republic of Moldova N=180 / N=88 articles Online media	Balica, Marinescu, Balica (2022)
(2) Intimate partner femicide-suicide	2011–2015	Femicide in Romania N=184 N=2282 articles	Balica 2021
(3) Femicide among migrants	2011–2015	N=26	Balica 2018
(4) Intimate partner femicide	2011–2015	N=10 cases N=490 articles Content analysis Online media	Balica 2017
(5) Femicide-suicide among migrants & the media	2002–2013	N=27 cases N=192 articles Content analysis Online media	Balica 2016a
(6) Media & homicide-suicide	2002–2013	N=96 cases N=793 articles Content analysis Online media	Balica 2016b
(7) Homicide-suicide committed by police officers & media representations	2002–2013	N=7 OS committed by police officers N=116 articles Content analysis Online media	Balica 2016c
(8) Femicide-suicide among intimate migrant partners	2003–2013	N=1 case N= 27 articles Content analysis Online media	Balica 2016
(9) Femicide-suicide & media	2010–2015	N=28 cases N=135 articles Content analysis Online media	Balica 2016e

*IPFS – intimate partner femicide-suicide; IPF–intimate partner femicide; HS – homicide-suicide.

Studies conducted in Romania have shown that Romanian journalists present cases of femicide as individual cases (they do not correlate them with other cases of the same type) and use both direct victim-blaming techniques and indirect techniques (Balica 2017, 2018, 2022). A particular feature noted in recent years

before the pandemic was that journalists used indirect techniques of blaming victims to a greater extent than direct techniques of blaming (Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022). A case study by Marinescu, Balica, Balica (2022) shows that sometimes photos of the victim or perpetrator can be used by journalists to capture and maintain public interest in the publication they work for. However, there is a risk, as recent scientific studies have shown even for Romania (Marinescu, Balica, Balica 2022), that photos of the victim may be turned into direct victim-blaming techniques (when the public is informed that the victim was a model for adult magazines and the article includes several photographs illustrating their status as an adult model).

The analysis showed that online media articles often include information about the victims' names and ages. Mentioning the age and gender of the victim is important in the context of journalists trying to capture the public's attention for so-called "ideal victims" (vulnerable people at high risk of victimization due to their vulnerability given their reduced ability to defend themselves): children, the elderly, and women.

The victims' level of education and health status were mentioned more often in cases of femicide-suicide, and studies in Romania have recorded this fact (Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022; and Balica 2016b) (see Table 5).

METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to some changes in the topics of interest to the public and journalists. Information about the new virus and its consequences at national and global level has occupied an important place in the structure of media programmes. In this context, we set out to identify changes in the way lethal violence, victims and perpetrators are represented. In order to obtain a comparative picture, but also out of a desire to identify the changes brought about by the pandemic, we decided to analyze how acts of lethal violence against women, known as femicides, were presented. To this end, we decided to use a methodology similar to that used in studies conducted prior to the pandemic, as presented in Table 1.

This article presents the results of a content analysis of articles reporting on cases of intimate partner femicide-suicide committed in Romania. All articles published in online media between 2020 and 2021 were analyzed. The aim of the research was to identify how the online media in Romania presented cases of intimate partner femicide-suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aimed to identify any changes in the representation of femicide followed by suicide compared to previous years for which studies have been conducted in Romania. In this regard, we set out to answer the following research questions: What are the particularities of media coverage of intimate partner femicide-suicides? Are there

differences between how intimate partner femicide-suicides were presented during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period? What media framing (episodic or thematic) was used for cases of intimate partner femicide-suicides? Did journalists use victim-blaming techniques? What sources were used to document cases committed during the pandemic? Did the constraints generated by the pandemic context (quarantine) influence the way cases were documented?

THE ANALYZED CORPUS

All online media articles referring to cases of intimate partner femicide-suicide were included in the analysis. The articles were extracted from the Femicide in Pandemic database, which contains all online media articles (2020–2021 – 736 articles) reporting on cases of femicide. This resulted in a corpus of 96 articles (43 articles in 2020 and 53 articles in 2021) reporting on 13 cases of intimate partner femicide-suicide (husband/ex-husband or cohabiting partner/ex-cohabiting partner). The cases of femicide-suicide took place between 2020 and 2021 (5 cases in 2020 and 8 cases in 2021).

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

The research methodology included content analysis of online media articles. Online media articles were analyzed using a structured analysis grid based on several dimensions: 1) information about the article (name of publication, type of publication, date of publication, photo, comments, article title, number of views); 2) sources of information (official and unofficial); 3) data on murder and suicide; 4) information about the victim and the aggressor; 5) victim-blaming techniques.

RESULTS

Analysis of data on media coverage of femicide-suicide cases committed during the period analyzed shows that journalists' interest in this type of violence varied from case to case. There are cases for which 30 articles were published (one case of femicide-suicide committed in 2020) and cases for which only one article was written (three cases in 2021). On average, seven articles were published per case. Two-thirds of the articles reporting on intimate partner femicide-suicide were published in online newspapers (63.5%) and one-third on TV websites (31.3%). Very few articles were published by news aggregator sites (3.1%) and press agencies (2.1%). Only seven articles had comments (1–2 comments). Eleven

articles showed the number of views. These ranged from 6 to 8562/average 2,477 views per article. Four articles had over 3000 views, seven had less than 850 views.

The development of online media has enabled journalists to easily include photographs, video recordings, and even excerpts from broadcasts/reports related to femicide cases in their articles. In addition, media articles can refer to other articles in other media or even provide repeated real-time updates to articles originally posted that did not provide much information about the case. Online media has the advantage of being able to use images taken from various sources and attach them to articles about IFPS without incurring additional costs. Taking into account the results of previous studies conducted in Romania, we tried to analyze how images were used to illustrate cases of femicide during the pandemic. However, it should not be overlooked that, during the period analyzed (2020–2021), the population (including journalists) went through several periods of general quarantine with extremely strict rules, as well as individual quarantine (if they were infected with COVID-19). These periods restricted journalists' direct access to the cases in question and reduced their ability to travel to the field.

Although the pandemic period involved travel restrictions, journalists managed to include real photos from the scene of the crime in about half of the articles analyzed (55.1%). Only one-third of the articles used images from the internet (images of cars, markings, weapons) (27%). A separate category of images associated with the articles consists of photographs and video recordings of the victim and the aggressor. One-third of the articles used photos in which the victim and the aggressor appeared together (31.2%). One-fifth of the articles included images of only the victim (19.7%). Only four articles published photos of the aggressor alone (Table 2).

Table 2
Types of photos/videos that were included in articles

Types of photos/videos that were included in articles	Frequency	%
A real photograph of the victim	11	11,4
A real photograph of the victim and the aggressor	24	25
Video of the victim and the aggressor	5	5,2
No video or photo	4	4,1
Multiple photos of the victim	8	8,3
Photo and video of the victim and the aggressor	1	1,04
Photo of the victim's funeral	1	1,04
Photo of the aggressor	4	4,1
Photos from the crime scene (police cars/ambulances, etc.)	30	31,2
Video showing the crime scene (apartment block, street, etc.)	23	23,9
Photos of police cars/markings and other images taken from the internet	26	27,1

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Analysis of data on the sources of information used by journalists to document articles on IPFS highlights the fact that unofficial sources of information were used to a large extent (79.1% – family of the victim/aggressor, colleagues, neighbors, relatives). The proportion of articles that mention public institutions investigating IPFS (police, prosecutors, and other institutions) as sources of information is lower (47.8%).

This situation confirms the results of analyses from the pre-pandemic period, which indicated journalists' interest in conducting journalistic investigations into IPFS cases, investigations that involved interaction with people close to the victims and aggressors (the victim's/aggressor's family, colleagues, neighbors, relatives) (Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022; Balica 2016). Interestingly, journalists' interest in unofficial sources was maintained only in the case of IPFS. Scientific studies in Romania have shown that, for example, before the pandemic, journalists used mainly official sources to document cases of intimate partner femicide (Balica 2021).

Half of the articles analyzed mentioned other media outlets (53%). The proportion of articles using information taken from other online media outlets is higher this time than that identified for the same types of murders reported in the media before the pandemic (22.4% – Balica 2016; 31.3% – Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022).

We note a lower interest, compared to the pre-pandemic period, in taking information from social media (14.5% compared to 23.8% Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022). Experts remain a source of information very rarely used by journalists reporting on IPFS (Table 3).

Table 3
Sources of information

Source of information	Number of articles	%
News agencies from Romania	9	9,3
Media from Romania	42	43,7
Police	32	33,3
Prosecutor's Office	8	8,3
Other public institution	6	6,2
Aggressor's family	12	12,5
Aggressor	2	2,1
Victim's family	17	17,7
Neighbor, relative, colleague	45	46,8
Social media	14	14,5
Doctor	8	8,3
Expert – university professor	3	3,3
Social worker	1	1
Representative of the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations	1	1

FRAMING THE VICTIM AND PERPETRATORS

When reporting on IPFS cases, journalists in Romania attempted to outline the profile of victims and perpetrators using data they found during their research. An analysis of articles published during the two years of the pandemic showed that the vast majority of articles included information about the family status of victims and perpetrators (married, separated, cohabiting, relatives, etc.). This type of information was mentioned equally about both victims (90.6%) and perpetrators (89.6%). The age of victims and perpetrators was also mentioned in more than two-thirds of the articles: the age of victims in 75% of the articles and that of perpetrators in 64.6%. The names of the victims (44.8%) and perpetrators (39.6%) were mentioned to a lesser extent. The occupation of the victims (10.4%) and perpetrators (17.7%) was mentioned in few articles. The same applies to the ethnicity of the victims (10.4%) and perpetrators (12.5%). The health status of the victims was mentioned in only two articles, while that of the perpetrators was mentioned in seven articles. No data on education level or religion was mentioned.

During the pandemic, we observed a decrease in the number of articles mentioning the names of victims, compared to the pre-pandemic period when the vast majority of articles mentioned the names of victims (Balica 2016b – 74%; Balica 2021–83.7%).

The number of articles specifying the age of the victims decreased during the pandemic years analyzed (75%), but continued to represent a significant proportion compared to the previous period, when 87.6% were recorded (Balica 2021). The downward trend in the number of articles that specified information about the victims was evident during the pandemic, especially in the case of information regarding education, health, and occupation (Balica 2021).

Table 4

Information on victims and perpetrators published in online media during the pandemic

Information presented in the media	Victims		Aggressors	
		%		%
1. Name	43	44.8	38	39.6
2. Education	–	–	–	–
3. Occupation	10	10.4	17	17.7
4. Marital/family status	87	90.6	86	89.6
5. Religion	–	–	–	–
6. Health/mental state	2	2.1	7	7.3
7. Ethnicity	10	10.4	12	12.5
8. Age	72	75	62	64.6

Table 5
Data on victims included in online media before the pandemic

Study	Time interval	Number of cases/articles	Number of victims	Victims				
				Name	Age	Education	Profession	Health
(1) Balica, Marinescu, Balica (2022) IPFS & media	2018 (march-april)	Case study RO-MD N=88 cases	N=1	83.7	87.6	4.9	18.4	60
(2) Balica 2021 IPF	2011–2015	N=184 N=2282	N=184					
(3) Balica 2018	2011–2015	N=26	N=29	–	Da	–	–	–
(4) Balica 2017 IPF	2011–2015	N=10 cases	N=13	–	Da(13v)	4v	3v	3v
(5) Balica 2016a FSPImigrants &media	2002–2013	N=27 cases	N=27	Da	Da	Da	Da	–
(6) Balica (2016b) Media&HS	2002–2013	N=96 cases N=793 articles		74	21.6	80.8	54.2	–
(7) Balica (2016c) HS police officers & media	2005–2013	N=7	N=13	–	Yes	–	Yes	Yes
(8) Balica 2016d IPFS migrants	2003–2013	N=1 case	N=1	Yes	Yes			
(9) Balica 2016e IPFS & media	2010–2015	N=28 articles	N=28	–	63.7	34.6	14.0	–

*IPFS – intimate partner femicide-suicide; IPF – intimate partner femicide; HS –homicide-suicide.

As for the aggressors, during the pandemic, we note a decrease in the proportion of information regarding the age of the aggressors, from 81.6% (Balica 2021) to 64.6%. The proportion of information on health status decreased from 34.1% before the pandemic (Balica 2021) to 7.3% during the pandemic. Data on the profession of perpetrators was also specified for a smaller number of perpetrators (17.7%) compared to the years before the pandemic (Balica 2021 – 27%).

TECHNIQUES FOR BLAMING VICTIMS

Victim blaming techniques were used to a lesser extent than in other time periods (22.8%), with direct victim blaming techniques being less prevalent than

indirect ones. In fact, other studies analyzing the representation of IPFS cases in the Romanian media also highlighted the tendency of Romanian journalists to use indirect victim blaming techniques to a greater extent. This trend had become visible in the online media as early as 2018 (Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022).

Table 6
Victim blaming techniques

Victim-blaming techniques	Frequency	%
Direct techniques	1	1
Indirect techniques	13	13,5
Direct and indirect techniques	8	8,3
No victim-blaming techniques	78	77,2

Table 7
Direct and indirect victim blaming techniques

Direct victim-blaming techniques			Indirect victim-blaming techniques		
	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
The victim had multiple relationships with different men	1	1	Crime of passion	4	4,2
The victim did not report to the police	4	4,2	Jealousy-motivated murder	9	9,4
The victim was unfaithful	4	4,2	Aggressor driven mad by the victim	7	7,3
			The aggressor was mentally ill	3	3,1

Romanian journalists used victim-blaming techniques that are frequently mentioned in international and national studies. Describing the victim as unfaithful or as a woman with multiple relationships are the most easily identifiable direct victim-blaming techniques. Describing femicide as a “crime of passion” (4 articles) or “a crime motivated by jealousy” (9 articles) assigns a significant part of the responsibility for the act of violence to the victim. Other ways of diminishing the perpetrator’s responsibility used during the pandemic, but not only, were describing the perpetrator as mentally ill or “driven mad by the victim.”

CONCLUSIONS

Although the pandemic period involved travel restrictions, journalists managed to overcome the constraints imposed by quarantine periods and gathered

much of their information from unofficial sources close to the victims and perpetrators (family members of the murdered women or perpetrators, friends, neighbors, acquaintances). The interest of journalists in conducting journalistic investigations and gathering information primarily from unofficial sources is specific to cases of intimate partner femicide-suicides and has been noted before and during the pandemic (Balica, Marinescu, Balica 2022; Balica 2016).

Information about victims and perpetrators, although still occupying an important place in the structure of articles, has decreased significantly. Thus, there has been a decline in the number of articles specifying the name, age, level of education, health status, and occupation of victims. This situation may become worrying if the trend continues in the post-pandemic period, with international studies drawing attention to the risk of “victim dehumanization” (Correia & Neves, 2024: 9). Our analysis indicated that the lack of information about the victim’s profile was not associated with a greater interest on the part of journalists in profiling the perpetrator. The articles analyzed showed that, in the case of perpetrators, data on age, health status, and occupation were also less frequently mentioned.

The low interest in the profile of the aggressors can also be highlighted by the lack of images associated with the articles. One in three articles included images of the victim and the aggressor, one in five articles had only images (photo/video) of the victim, and only four articles had only photos of the aggressor. During the pandemic, the tendency to use indirect victim-blaming techniques to a greater extent than direct victim-blaming techniques continued. This trend can be attributed to journalists’ interest in using unofficial sources of information (people close to the victims and perpetrators), but also to journalists’ interest in providing as much information as possible about the victims and perpetrators.

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