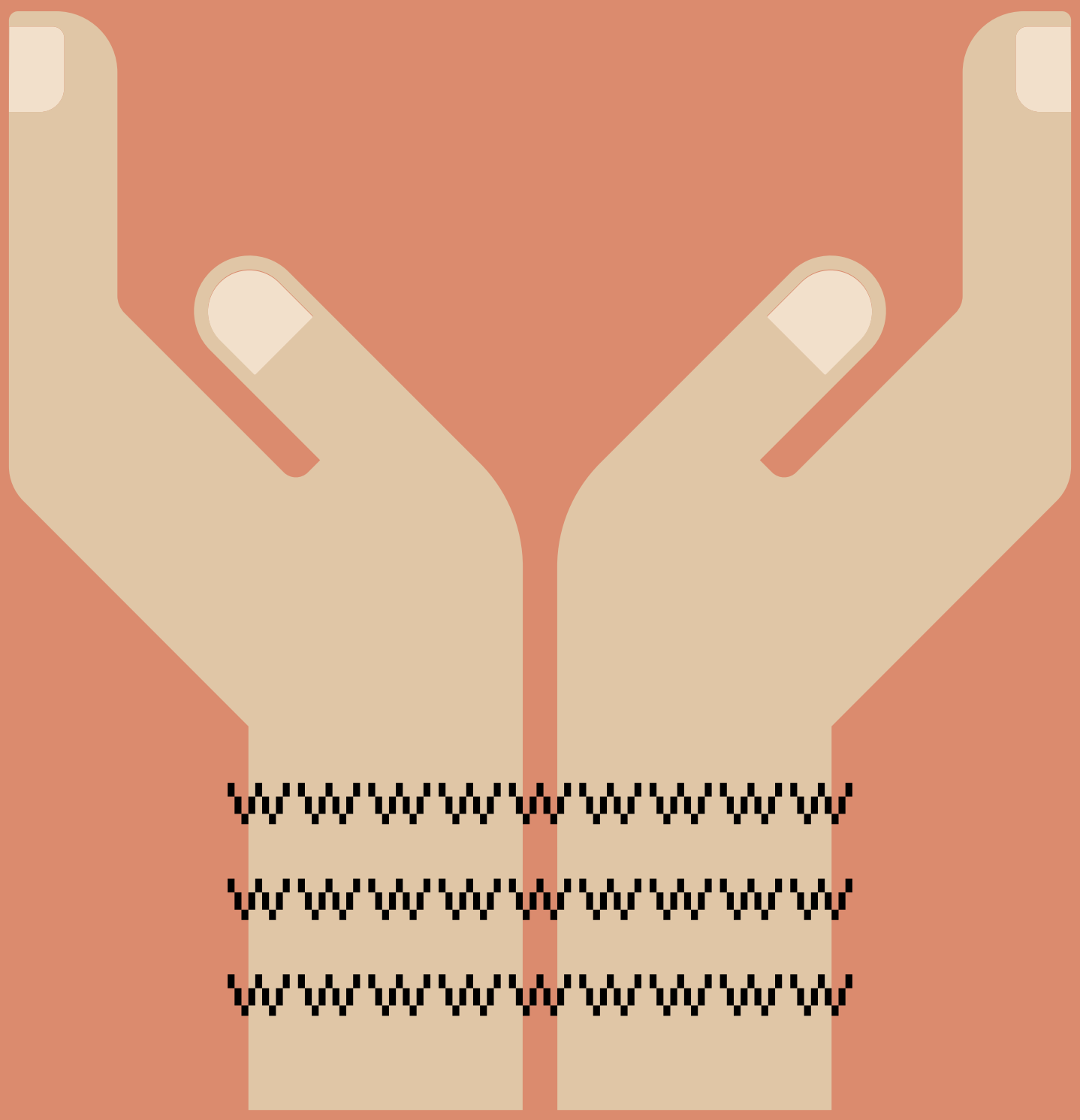
Gender-based content analysis:



How the media approach rape and consent

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Introduction

Gender-based violence is one of the most serious forms of human rights violation, with profound individual and societal consequences. In this context, the media play a key role as a platform for informing, educating and raising public awareness, while bearing a great responsibility in how they report on cases of gender-based violence. The media have the power to shape public opinion, to normalize or break gender stereotypes and to contribute to creating a society that recognizes and combats the various forms of gender-based violence.

Inadequate reporting on cases of gender-based violence, especially sexual violence, can result in serious consequences for victims, such as double victimization, a process in which media attention further and repeatedly traumatizes the victim. Sensationalist language, no respect for people's privacy, and disregard for ethical standards when reporting on sensitive cases can cause long-lasting psychological and social consequences. Instead of being allies in the fight against violence, the media often unwittingly become part of the problem, feeding stereotypes and a culture of tolerating and normalizing violence.

In this context, the role of the media in reporting on cases of sexual violence is essential, as their (in)ability to recognize, name and contextualize violence directly affects public perception and attitudes towards this phenomenon. Recognizing and clearly naming violence, especially sexual violence, is the first step towards creating social awareness and collective condemnation of such acts. If the media fail to adequately identify and name these phenomena, not only can that obscure the gravity of the problem, but it can also encourage a culture of tolerance and normalization, especially in the digital space.

Nowadays, the influence of the media extends beyond traditional platforms, with social media becoming one of the main sources of information for many citizens. The way the media report on cases of gender-based violence online, where content spreads quickly, also increases the risk of their misuse. Unethical and sensationalist

news reports can easily incite negative reactions, further stigmatize the victim, or create online discussions that will result in victimization or hatred.

On the other hand, the media, through appropriate and responsible reporting, can work on education and raising public awareness about all forms of gender-based violence, which is also their legal obligation. When the media clearly and appropriately name sexual violence, they not only embody their preventive role, but also encourage citizens, especially the online community, to recognize violence, take a stand against it and demand accountability from institutions. This is of particular importance in the context of the digital age, where content created by the media can encourage positive social change, but only if it is based on ethical and professional standards.

In order to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the impact of media reporting on rape cases on the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in society, the Institute of Communication Studies produced the analysis “How the media approach rape and consent”.

Methodology

By analysing the language and use of gender stereotypes in news reports, this analysis aims to identify harmful narratives shared online, targeting victims of sexual violence, with a particular emphasis on cases where the consent of victims is questioned, either through explicit denial of its meaning, through coercive or manipulative circumstances, or through narratives that shift responsibility to the victim.

The analysis included content that, instead of informing and educating, contributes to the discrediting of victims and their double victimization, especially through narratives that question consent or relativize the responsibility of the perpetrator. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to indicate how the media contribute to the formation and dissemination of harmful narratives about sexual violence, especially in the digital space, in order to propose ways for responsible and ethical reporting that will respect the dignity of victims and raise public awareness about this serious problem.

The main focus of the two case studies presented in this analysis was media reporting on rape, the most severe form of sexual violence. The research was conducted using qualitative analysis of news reports related to two rape cases, one in North Macedonia and one in France. A case of the rape of a minor girl in Veles, which included the initial media coverage of the news, as well as news reports related to the subsequent court proceedings, as well as a case of the multiple rape of an adult woman in France, Gisèle Pelicot, who came forward and publicly exposed the case, in order to break the culture of silence and emphasize the importance of consent in the legal and social discourse on gender-based violence. The analysed news reports related to both cases were published during 2023 and 2024.

The sample that was analysed consisted of 270 news reports published in online media that reported on the case in North Macedonia that is the subject of this analysis and 1,400 comments on the posts of news reports on social media, i.e. on the platforms Facebook, Instagram and X, as well as 250 news reports and 85 comments

related to the case in France. In doing so, gender-based content was analysed through several specific aspects:

- Recognizing the sexual violence
- Use of gender stereotypes
- Use of gender-sensitive language
- Use of sensationalist language
- Promoting a culture of gender-based violence
- Fulfilling the legal preventive role in raising awareness about gender-based violence
- The type of sources used in news reports
- Respect for journalistic and ethical standards in reporting
- Including critical reflection and broader context in news reports
- The spillover effect of views expressed in news reports on public awareness.

Context of the Analysis

Gender-based violence is one of the most serious human rights violations, with profound consequences for victims, their families and society as a whole. As a form of gender-based violence, rape is one of the most severe and traumatic forms of violation of the bodily integrity and dignity of the victim. This type of violence reflects the unequal distribution of power between the genders and the deeply rooted social norms that support a culture of tolerance to violence.

The way in which rape is defined, recognized and treated in the legal and social context plays a key role in society's response to this form of sexual violence. In contemporary discussions, the issue of consent is central to defining rape, as the absence of free, informed and clearly expressed consent is a direct indicator of gender-based violence. However, defining consent is a complex challenge.

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) recognises the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence, considering that violence against women is one of the main social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position in relation to men.[1] The Istanbul Convention sets a standard according to which any act of gender-based violence without voluntary consent is treated as a criminal offence, including coercing another person to engage in acts of a sexual nature with a third person without that person's consent. In doing so, consent must be given voluntarily as a result of the person's free will, assessed in the context of the surrounding circumstances.

Although the Istanbul Convention highlights the absence of consent as a key element in defining rape, in many European Union (EU) Member States, for example, harmonizing national laws with this definition remains a challenge. The traditional definition of rape in EU national law focuses mainly on violence, threats or the victim's inability to resist. However, this approach is considered inadequate due to

1 Council of Europe. (2011). Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Istanbul, 11.V.2011

new insights into victims' reactions, such as "paralyzing fear" or tonic immobility, which is a common reaction of rape victims and does not involve physical resistance.[2] Traditional definitions also fail to take into account situations such as surprise attacks, power relations or ongoing violence in abusive relationships. In addition, victim blaming, such as judging their clothing, behaviour or morals, has historically been part of this approach and is often supported by the courts.[3]

One of the positive examples is the legislation in Spain, where a law called 'only yes means yes' was adopted (*solo sí es sí*), which assumes the existence of explicit consent, while other countries continue to rely on traditional definitions that emphasize the presence of violence, i.e. physical resistance or coercion.

On the other hand, in France, Article 222-22 of the Criminal Code defines sexual aggression as any sexual act committed by violence, coercion, threat or surprise, where the coercion may be physical or moral.[4] The law does not explicitly mention the absence of consent, but was reformed in 2021 to categorize forced oral-genital acts and penetrative acts with minors under the age of 15 as rape. Despite public and expert support for further reform, France opposes an EU-wide definition of rape, arguing that "the definition of rape proposed by the European Commission and the European Parliament is not in line with that of the Istanbul Convention, which focuses more on the circumstances of such an act."[5]

In North Macedonia, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence defines sexual violence and rape as any act of a sexual nature, with any body part or object, on the body of another person without his/her consent.[6] The law states that it is considered sexual violence when another person is coerced or forced to engage in acts of a sexual nature with a third person without his/her consent, where the consent must be expressed voluntarily as a result of the person's free will, assessed in the context of the circumstances. However, amendments to the Criminal Code, aimed at harmonizing the definitions, were

2 European Parliament. (2024). Definitions of rape in the legislation of EU Member States. In-depth analysis. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/757618/EPRS_IDA(2024)757618_EN.pdf

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 24/2021.

adopted two years later, in 2023, when the definition of rape was aligned with the Istanbul Convention. Amendments to Article 186 of the Criminal Code criminalized rape and sexual assault, focusing on the "clearly expressed will" of the victim as a key element for defining consent. Additionally, the penalties for rape and sexual assault are more severe if they are committed by force or threat, against a child, if they result in serious bodily harm, death or other serious consequences, if they are committed by multiple persons or in a particularly cruel and degrading manner or out of hatred. These amendments contributed to strengthening the legal framework by recognizing consent as a key element, which improves the protection of victims and compliance with international standards.

In its evaluation report on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in North Macedonia, the GREVIO Committee[7] notes that the reporting rates of rape and sexual violence are extremely low, as well as the number of victims seeking medical assistance in referral centres, expressing serious concern about the almost non-existent criminal convictions for such acts.[8] GREVIO therefore considers that urgent measures are needed to encourage victims to report the acts and to bring perpetrators to justice. In this regard, the media can play a key role by raising awareness, reducing the social stigma associated with violence and promoting available resources and support for victims.

The problematic definition of consent is closely linked to societal attitudes and prejudice towards victims. The idea of a "perfect victim" who must physically resist, say a clear "no" or behave in a certain way to be credible is deeply ingrained in both legal and public discourse. Such attitudes further complicate the fight against gender-based violence and foster a culture of tolerance towards violence and its normalization.

Despite the importance of legal regulation of various forms of gender-based violence, of particular importance is the need to foster social change that will deconstruct gender stereotypes about victims and advance social awareness of gender-based

7 Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which is an independent body for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

8 GREVIO. (2023). Baseline Evaluation Report North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/-/grevio-publishes-its-baseline-evaluation-report-on-north-macedonia?fbclid=IwY2xjawIBtSZleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHVcp52cR1_KwInEaaUWySsz68JKxUqg-kyIzwpjgx9PicniBVDuXDLnE7A_aem_QiZXUvhGllYKuODa60WCzg

violence. Hence, the definition of rape and the concept of consent, although legally established, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the social attitudes that shape these issues. The legal system is often a reflection of the values and norms of a society, and therefore shortcomings in legal definitions of rape, but also in their implementation, are often related to deep-rooted social prejudice and stereotypes.

In North Macedonia, as in many other countries, rape is treated through the lens of moral and cultural prejudice, where responsibility for the violence committed is often shifted to the victim herself. Instead of focusing on the (mis)deed and the perpetrator, society often deals with issues such as the physical appearance, clothing or behaviour of the victim. This approach supports a culture of victimization and reduces the likelihood of victims reporting cases of gender-based violence.

Societal stereotypes significantly complicate the understanding of consent, particularly through the idealization of the "perfect victim," who is expected to be passive, innocent, and helpless, physically resisting violence. Victims who do not fit this stereotype often face suspicion and accusations, leading to secondary victimization. The OSCE report on gender-based violence in North Macedonia states that many victims avoid reporting violence due to fear of stigmatization or distrust in the institutions.[9] These stereotypes create distorted perceptions of what constitutes rape and consent, fuelling public reactions that downplay the violence and further encourage the silence of victims.

In Macedonian society, there is a particularly visible tendency to tolerate traditional patriarchal values that support the idea that power and control are "normal" attributes of male behaviour. Such attitudes, deeply rooted in society, undermine any attempt to change the way gender-based violence and consent are perceived. Rape is often treated as a private problem, rather than as a social phenomenon that requires an institutional and societal response.

Despite these challenges, there are examples of social awareness and activism that suggest the possibility of change. Feminist movements and public discussions on gender-based violence in recent years have highlighted the issue of consent as

9 (2019) OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women: North Macedonia - Results Report. Available at https://www.osce.org/secretariat/419264

central to the fight against this negative phenomenon. In this context, the media can play an important role in educating the public and deconstructing stereotypes, as long as journalistic reporting is based on ethical and professional standards.

The cases analysed in this publication show that social perceptions can have a direct impact on legal practice and media reporting. In the first case of the rape of a 15-year-old girl in Veles, the fact that it was a minor who was the victim of blackmail and rape by 13 people did not cause sufficient public outrage to demand higher penalties and more serious accountability from institutions, which speaks of a kind of normalization of these acts, where institutions and society do not fully recognize the dimensions of violence against vulnerable groups.

In the context of consent, the way in which society defines or interprets its importance is particularly problematic. In the case of Gisèle Pelicot, the victim's unawareness and inability to consent were key factors, but public discussions have also tended to downplay this aspect, raising the question of whether the victim "put herself at risk", reflecting the perception that the responsibility for avoiding violence falls on the victim, rather than on the perpetrator to obtain explicit consent.

The media have the power to shape public perceptions of consent and rape, but their reporting often reflects the dominant discourse and societal prejudice about gender-based violence. Through sensationalist narratives and language that normalizes victim responsibility, the media reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and minimizes the severity of violence. In this way, the media contributes to perpetuating a culture of tolerance of gender-based violence, further perpetuating silence and stigmatization.

Case Study:

Rape and exploitation of a 15-year-old girl in North Macedonia

A twenty-five-year-old man from Veles, S. D., communicated with a 15-year-old underage girl via Instagram in December 2021, with whom he made pornographic material on the first meeting,[10] which he then used to force the girl to come to other meetings, threatening that if she did not come, he would publish and share the materials with intimate content on social media, thereby harming her honour and reputation. In this way, the man from Veles forced the girl on several occasions to go to apartments that were rented for this specific reason, in several locations in Veles, and through threats and blackmail, he enabled other people to commit both digital and gender-based violence. Since the end of December 2021 and throughout 2022, the girl has been a victim of human trafficking - specifically rape, sexual exploitation[11] and child pornography. The group was exposed by accident, when a person from Tetovo who was accused of drug distribution had his phone confiscated and a recording of the child from Veles was found.

The trial of the 13 people accused in the case began on September 19, 2023. Three of them were accused of “child trafficking”, some are charged with the crime of “sexual assault” or “rape”, and one of “production and distribution of child pornography”. All are between the ages of 20 and 32. One of the suspects in the case, in his defence, provided false evidence regarding his participation, for which a procedure has been

10 Nonconsensual pornography, often referred to as revenge porn, is any unauthorized recording (with a photo or video camera) and/or sharing of, as well as threats to share, nude or sexually explicit images or recordings of a person, all with the aim of humiliating, embarrassing or blackmailing them (Glossary of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, UNFPA)

11 When the goal is blackmail, we can also talk about sextortion, the purpose of which is to extort money from a person or force them to do something they do not want, such as a sexual act, under the threat that nude or sexually explicit photos or videos will be published. (Glossary of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, UNFPA)

initiated by the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office and during the investigation it was determined that the suspect was assisted by his lawyer, a hotel owner and a middleman.

In 2024, the verdict was delivered on World Children's Day and the Day dedicated to the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. The highest sentence for the perpetrators pronounced by the Criminal Court in Skopje is 5 years and 6 months in prison, and the lowest is a suspended sentence. The court found all 13 young people guilty of sexually abusing a minor, filming her and sharing the footage. "This is not a battle of men against women, but a battle of future generations," Judge Daniela Dimovska said after the guilty verdict.

Media narratives about the case of the girl from Veles are presented through two dominant positions - a legal and institutional narrative, as opposed to the social aspect and context of the case.

Some news reports provided in-depth analyses, focusing on statements from legal professionals, the judiciary and social workers in the context of the protection of the minor victim and ethical monitoring of the trial. This approach contributed to comprehensive reporting on the developments by contextualizing the entire case. [12] [13] [14]

In one of the reports on the case on TV Sitel[15], expert psychologists were consulted to emphasize the need for systemic preventive programs, reporting:

> A professional team from the Centre for Social Works from Veles spoke with the girl and she has already been provided with professional psychosocial support and assistance. Psychologists warn that the authorities must now be very careful with the victim. They say that the state needs to introduce a good systemic program to help such victims, but the most important thing is to explain to young people the dangers that lurk on social media."

12 Money to freedom: The Veles man on trial for having sex parties with a blackmailed child has been released from custody - Skopje1.mk

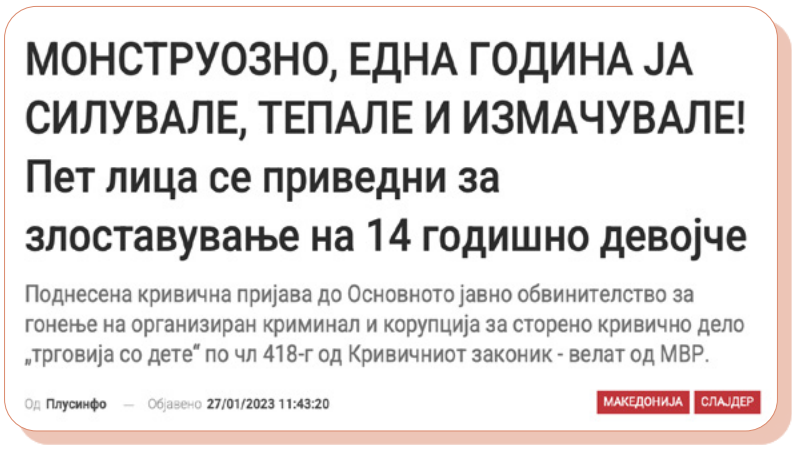
13 Prison for all 13 defendants from the "Veles group" for sexual abuse of a minor

14 The investigation into sexual abuse of a minor and pornographic material in Veles has been expanded to include 10 more people.

15 Five suspects in blackmailing a minor, seducing her on social media and sexually abusing her for years | Sitel Television

In this way, the media adds the social context in order to create concern for the victim.

However, this style of reporting was not observed in most news reports, which mainly focused on the "drama" in front of and in the courtroom, broadcasting footage of the suspects being welcomed outside the court by a crowd of angry supporters of the suspects[16] [17]. Other media outlets, however, reported on the case in a way that prioritized the shock effect over informative discourse[18] [19] [20]. In this way, the focus of reporting was sensationalist, rather than informative and analytical.


МОНСТРУОЗНО, ЕДНА ГОДИНА ЈА СИЛУВАЛЕ, ТЕПАЛЕ И ИЗМАЧУВАЛЕ! Пет лица се приведни за злоставување на 14 годишно девојче

Поднесена кривична пријава до Основното јавно обвинителство за гонење на организиран криминал и корупција за сторено кривично дело „трговија со дете" по чл 418-г од Кривичниот законик - велат од МВР.

Од Плусинфо — Објавено 27/01/2023 11:43:20

МАКЕДОНИЈА СЛАЈДЕР

Text in image:

MONSTROUS. THEY RAPED, BEAT AND TORTURED HER FOR A YEAR!
Five persons have been arrested for the abuse of a 14-year-old girl; Criminal charges have been filed to the Basic Public Prosecution for organized crime and corruption, for the act of "child trafficking", according to Art. 418-d of the Criminal Code, MoI

Furthermore, secondary victimization was present in news reports[21], which also existed in the narratives of the trials that were broadcast by the media[22], whereby

16 VIDEO: Ten more suspects in the case of sexual abuse of a 14-year-old girl – A1on.mk

17 Tears and anger at the beginning of the trial against 13 young people from Veles, accused of sexually abusing a minor – Radio Free Europe

18 THERE ARE MONSTERS AMONG US: Four people in Veles raped a 14-year-old girl - Lider

19 Horrific event in Veles – 14-year-old girl raped by five people

20 MONSTRUELY, THEY RAPEd, BEAT AND TORTURED HER FOR A YEAR! Five people have been arrested for abusing a 14-year-old girl – Plus Info.mk

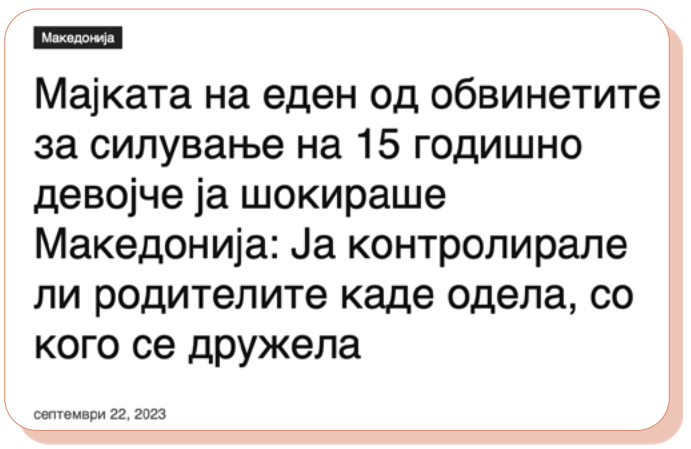
21 Platform for Gender Equality: It is unsafe to exist as a woman in a country that does not act - MakPress

22 The judiciary gives the green light to the perpetrators by imposing mild sentences - VidiVaka

the credibility of the child victim was questioned or the crime was shaped to appear less serious[23]. In some news reports, double standards were evident in terms of shielding the perpetrators from responsibility, instead of advocating for justice for the victim:

> What exactly happened between the convicted and the victim is unknown, given that the reasoning behind the verdicts was closed to the public due to the protection of the victim, but the lawyers of some of the defendants publicly stated in their defence that she showed problematic behaviour in the past and present, she consumed drugs and alcohol, and that their clients are scapegoats in this case."[24]

Similar narratives were shared in news reports that prioritized a statement from the mother of one of the defendants in the headline, while not offering a critical review of the overall event[25].



Text in image:

The mother of one of the accused for raping a 15-year-old girl shocked Macedonia: Did her parents know where she was going, who she hung out with.

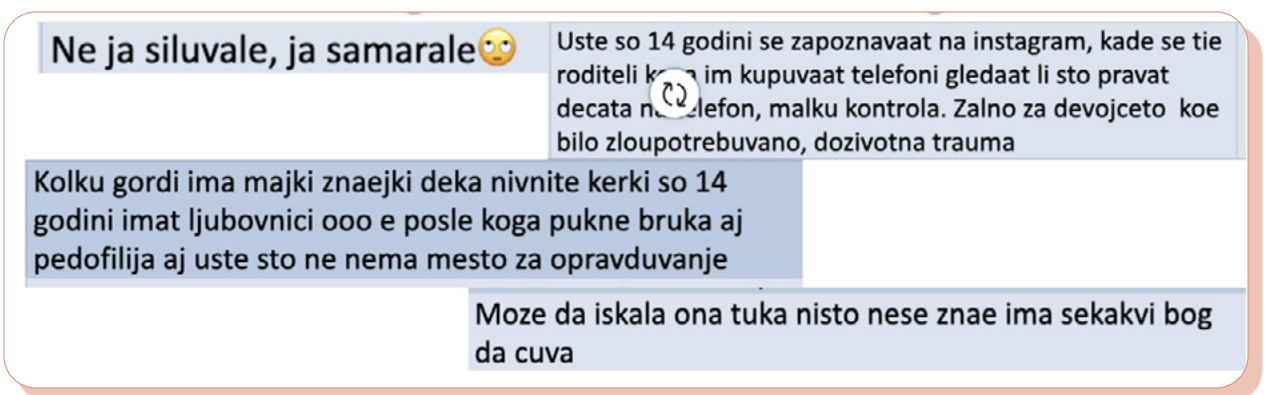
Such headlines do not place the act of violence as the central issue, rather the impact on the lives of the accused. In this way, the media shift the focus from gender-based violence as a crime to the personal tragedy of the perpetrators, subtly appealing to sympathy. A more direct relativization was observed in the comments on social

23 This aligns with Adrienne Rich's (1980) critique of institutionalized male entitlement, where systems—including the media—actively shield powerful men from accountability while failing to advocate for justice for survivors.

24 33 years in prison for 13 Veles residents for raping a minor - Magazine

25 The mother of one of the accused for raping a 15-year-old girl shocked Macedonia: Did her parents know where she was going, who she hung out with | Shilo Magazine

media, shifting the blame on the victim and ignoring the fact that she was groomed[26], without consent, to be sexually exploited for over a year.



Text in image:

They didn't rape her, they slapped her;

At age 14 they start meeting people on Instagram, where are their parents who buy them phones, are they aware of what their children are doing, do they control them? It's a shame for the girl who was abused, lifelong trauma;

There are so many proud mothers who don't know that their 14-year-old daughters have lovers. And when the cat gets out of the bag, they feel embarrassment and they claim paedophilia and what not. There's no excuse.

She may have wanted it, nobody knows. There are all kinds of people in this world, it's shocking.

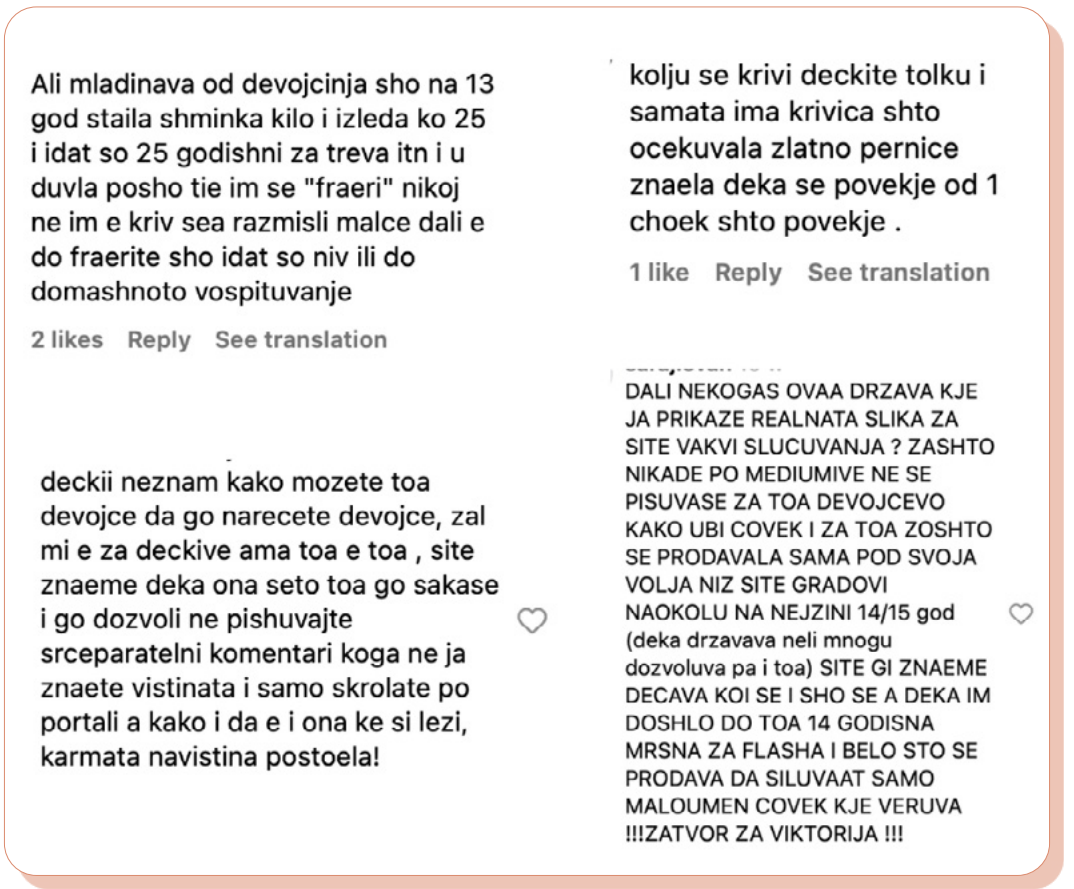
While only one media outlet reported the statement of the victim's counsel after the court decision was announced[27], the statement by the suspects' lawyer, which contained stigmatization and labelling, was shared by most media outlets:

26 Online grooming is a predatory form of behavior that involves contacting children and young people through social media or other digital platforms for the purpose of sexual violence. Grooming works by creating a false emotional connection with the target and luring them, with the purpose of committing sexual abuse, sexual exploitation (e.g., sexual exploitation through forced prostitution) or child trafficking. In cases of online grooming, predators often pose as children or young people themselves, and sometimes when they establish a relationship, they ask to meet in person, which opens up the possibility of sexual exploitation and sexual and physical violence offline. (Glossary of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (UNFPA)

27 Appeals after verdict for Veles men: Rapists of minor girl received prison sentences below the legal minimum - Free Press

> We will appeal the verdict. The decision was made without evidence and is based only on the victim's statements. Look up and take an interest in her past and you will see that not everything is as presented here in court referring to her personality[28]. "

The reported claim by the perpetrators' lawyer reinforced the victim-blaming narratives contained in the comments under news reports on social media.



Text in image:

Young people today… 13-year-old girls wearing make-up and looking like they're 25 and dating 25-year-olds for weed etc. and going to suspicious locations because they think they're cool. It's their own fault. We should think twice before we blame the dudes dating them or maybe it's just how they've been raised.

She is as much to blame as the boys. What did she expect, a golden pillow? She knew it was more than 1 person, so what more to say?

How can you even call her a girl? I'm sorry for those young men, but it is what it is. We all know that she wanted it and allowed it all to happen. Stop writing sob stories in the comments when you don't know the truth, you're just scrolling online. Either way, she's gonna end up in jail too, karma really does exist!

28 33 years in prison for 13 Veles residents for raping a minor, a verdict that is a fight for future generations – Radio Free Europe

Is this state ever gonna show the real story about such events? Why don't the media write about the fact that this girl killed a person and why she was selling her body willingly, in different cities in the region, at age 14/15? ('Cause this country is very permissive, so they allow that, too) We all know who these boys are and there's no way a sane person would believe that they would rape some 14-year-old lard-arse selling herself for a bottle and some coke.

Most news reports emphasized the 33-year prison sentence that the defendants received, but did not address the fact that there were 13 perpetrators[29], who were sentenced to minimum sentences without presenting mitigating circumstances, which shows ignorance of the crime and violence that the minor girl endured.



29 FOR THE RAPE OF A MINOR: Thirteen people from Veles go behind bars

Text in image:

Criminal court has ruled: Prison sentences for all 13 defendants from the "Veles group" for sexual abuse of a minor;

All 13 members of the Veles group are convicted of sexual abuse of a minor;

Prison for all 13 defendants from the "Veles group" for sexually abusing a 14-year-old girl

Over 30 years of prison time for 13 people from Veles who raped a minor

33 years of prison time for 13 people from Veles for raping a minor, the verdict is a fight for future generations;

33 years of prison time for 13 people from Veles for the rape of a minor.

However, there were also media outlets that highlighted procedural irregularities[30], leniency in sentencing[31]and systemic failures in protecting victims[32]. By reporting a statement from the victim's counsel, they questioned the decision to release the key defendant from detention, emphasizing that procedural precedents suggested a continuing risk to the victim[33]. Furthermore, they reported the reaction of the Platform for Gender Equality, which criticized the court decision, called for harsher sentences for crimes against girls and women,[34] and analysed how lenient sentences send a broader message of impunity for gender-based violence[35]. The reporting of some of the media outlets also covered deeper structural shortcomings in dealing with cases of sexual violence.

30 With a guarantee of 70,000 euros: The 26-year-old from Veles who was in custody and is on trial for "child trafficking" has been released. | Šilo Magazine

31 We need systemic reforms and harsher punishments for crimes against girls and women - Trn.mk

32 Fierce reaction to the below-minimum sentences for child trafficking and rape: A message has been sent that the crime is not serious! – Skopje1

33 Money for freedom: The Veles man on trial for having sex parties with a blackmailed child has been released from custody - Skopje1.mk

34 Platform for Gender Equality: Systemic reforms and stricter penalties for crimes against girls and women are necessary | Meta.mk

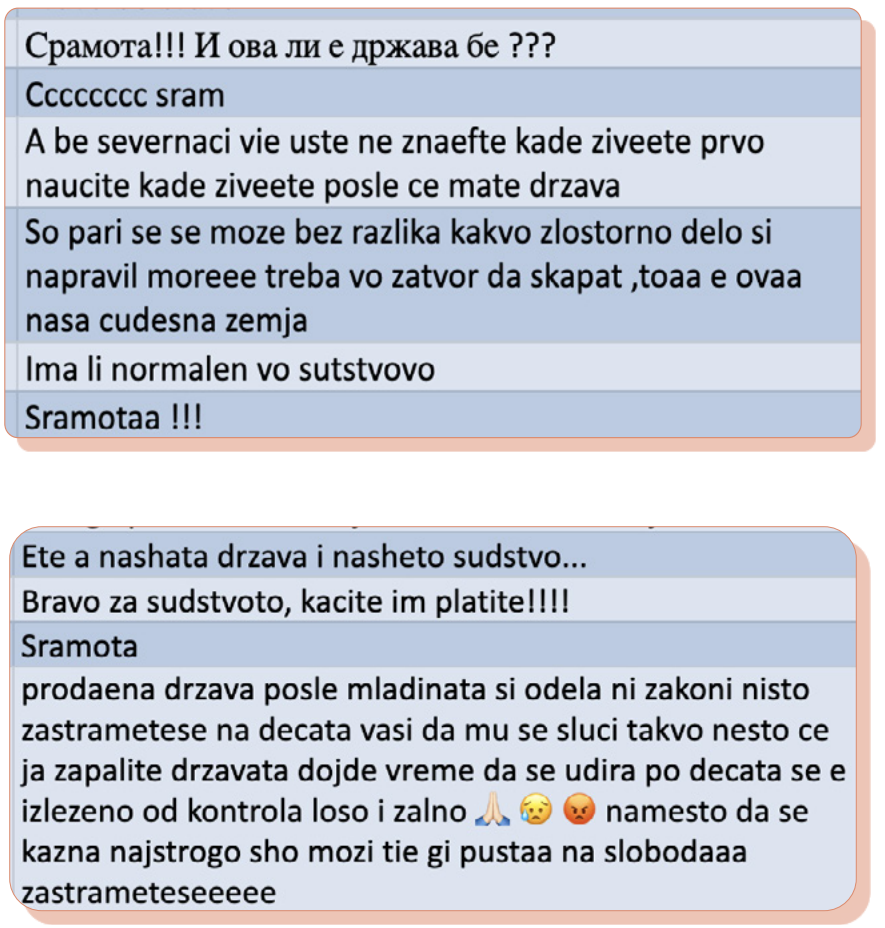
35 The judiciary gives the green light to the perpetrators by imposing mild sentences - VidiVaka



Text in image:

The law guarantees, but practice fails to provide support for the victim. Although the Law on Criminal Procedure states that in the court proceedings and the prosecutorial proceedings all involved professionals should ensure the health, wellbeing and support for the victim, reality is very different.

It is important to note that the analysis of social media also detected a large number of criticisms of the case, corruption in the judiciary, and lack of justice.



Text in image:

Our country and our judiciary system in action...

Well done, judiciary. You should give them all a raise!!!

Shameful

The country has been sold, that's why young people are leaving. There are no laws, no nothing. Shame on you, if this happened to your children, you'd have burnt down the country. What a time we live in, you are taking it out on our children. Everything is out of control, it's bad and pathetic. Instead of giving them maximum sentences, they let them walk. Shame on you!

Shameful! You call this a country?

Embarrassing

Northerners, haven't you realized where you live by now? You should realize that first, then you can have a country.

You can do anything if you've got money, regardless of the crime you've committed. They should rot in prison. What a country, I swear…

Is there anyone normal in this society?

Shameful!!

What was missing from the press reports was to highlight the digital dimension of sexual exploitation. At a time when digital gender-based violence is widespread and targets young people in particular, it would have been particularly important to analyse that aspect of the case.[36] [37]

36 Gender-based violence spills over into the digital space: The silent struggle of queer women in Macedonia - Meduza

37 "Beyond the Screen: Exposing Digital Gender-Based Violence Through Critical Reflection" Stella Network 2024

Case Study:

Multiple rape of Gisèle Pelicot in France

The case of Gisèle Pelicot, the woman who was secretly drugged and raped by her husband and multiple men in France from 2011 to 2020[38], has received extensive and multifaceted global media coverage, in terms of the significance of her decision to have her trial held in public[39], her courage[40], and the impact on society[41].

There were 250 news reports in Macedonian media covering this, most of which had the same headlines, such as "Macron: Thank you Gisèle Pelicot" (over 15 posts). Although this can be interpreted just as a restatement of the statement of French President Emmanuel Macron, this type of reporting also demonstrates the importance of expressing solidarity with the victims by the state leadership and thus sending a clear message of support to the public.

Most Macedonian media outlets shared headlines and reports from international media outlets, which focused on the rapists' admissions of guilt: "*I am a rapist like the others in this room: French man admits to drugging his wife and inviting other men to rape her.*" More significantly, the news reports emphasized that the rapists come from diverse backgrounds, which helps to dispel the myth that they are easily recognizable and cannot be part of women's everyday surroundings:

38 Pelicot rape trial: 'I never regretted my decision to go public,' says Gisèle Pelicot as husband and 50 others found guilty – as it happened | Gisèle Pelicot rape trial | The Guardian

39 Gisèle Pelicot has rewritten her story – and electrified women all over the world. But what about men? | Rebecca Solnit | The Guardian

40 Gisele Pelicot is a hero Women's Rights | Al Jazeera

41 Married to a monster: How Gisele Pelicot went from victim to feminist hero | World News

> Police have only been able to identify 50 suspects out of 83 men who appear in Dominic Pelicot's videos." Their ages range from 26 to 68, and amongst them are firefighters, pharmacists, workers, and journalists. Many of them have wives and children. Only 15 of them admitted to rape, while the others claim to have participated in sexual acts. Some of the perpetrators said they thought the woman was pretending to be asleep.[42]

The press reports focused on the solidarity and courage, but also on Gisèle Pelicot's search for justice, reporting: "*Her report saved a woman's life: The heroine who got a conviction against her husband, who drugged his wife and brought unknown men to rape her*"[43], "*The brave fight of Gisèle Pelicot: Victim of a horrific crime, a symbol of resistance*"[44], "*The harshest sentences for Gisèle Pelicot's rapists, justice for all women in France*"[45] and "*Rallies in France in Support of Gisèle Pelicot and Rape Victims*"[46]. Headlines such as *"Gisèle Pelicot: I Never Regretted my Decision to go Public"*[47] contribute to breaking down frames based on victim shame and encourage an end to the culture of silence and relativization that enables systemic sexual violence. Additionally, press reports included statements of solidarity from various feminist groups and organizations.

The headlines show partial sensationalism, such as: *"Horror in France: Man who drugged wife to be raped by 50 men rushed to hospital. He was to testify in front of children today. "*

On Macedonian social media, a large number of reactions focused on actively expressing dissatisfaction or disinterest in these topics, not connecting this case to the daily media reports of sexual violence in the country.

42 Rallies in France in support of Gisèle Pelicot and rape victims - Free Press

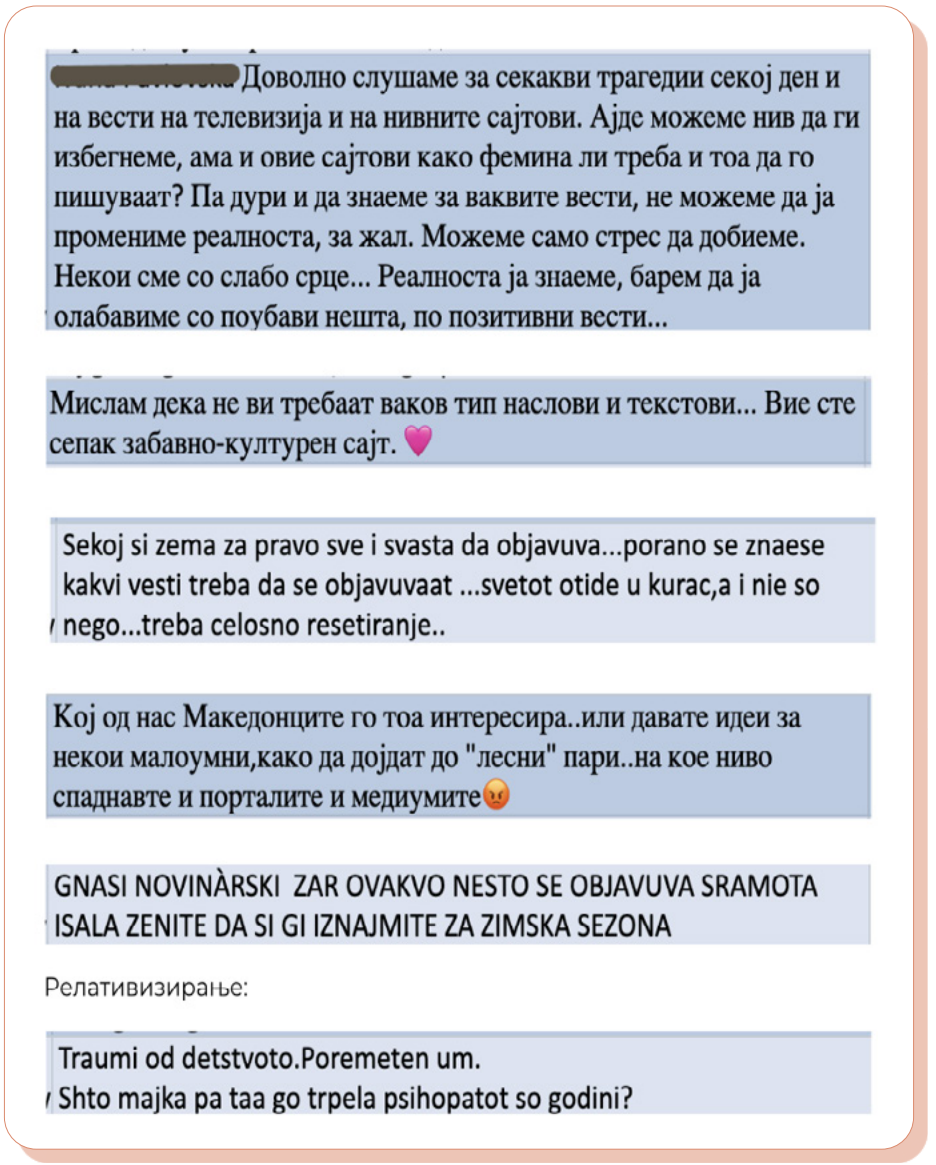
43 Her report saved a woman's life: The heroine who got a conviction against her husband who drugged his wife and brought unknown men to rape her – Press 24

44 The brave fight of Gisèle Pelicot: Victim of a terrible crime, symbol of resistance - Trn.mk

45 The harshest sentences for Gisèle Pelicot's rapists, justice for all women in France - Free Press

46 Rallies in France in support of Gisèle Pelicot and rape victims - MIA

47 Gisèle Pelicot: I never regretted my decision to go public | Kajgana



Text in image:

We've heard enough about tragedies, everyday on the news on TV and their websites. We can avoid those, but should websites like Femina also write about this? Even if we know about this news, there's nothing we can do to change reality, unfortunately. We can only get stress. Some of us have heart conditions... We know the reality, at least let us relax with nicer things, positive news...

I think that you don't need this type of headlines and stories... You are an entertainment website, after all.

Everyone can publish anything now... Back in the day, it was clear what kind of news deserve to be published... The world has gone to hell, and we've gone along for the ride... We need a full reset...

Which one of us Macedonians is interested in this... or are you just feeding ideas to some dim-witted people, how to get to "easy" money... Oh, how low you've come, both websites and media outlets.

Journalistic dirtbags, is this something you publish? Hope you rent out your wives for the winter season.

Relativization

Childhood trauma. A deranged mind. What kind of a mother put up with that psychopath for years?

And in the case of Frenchwoman Gisèle Pelicot, the false claim that the perpetrators did not know she was unconscious[48], which was repeated by the media, demonstrates the failure to clearly define consent in cases of sexual violence[49]. In other words, the media should emphasize that consent only exists when it is explicitly and unambiguously given.

48 One of Gisele's rapists admitted: If I had known she was unconscious, I wouldn't have done it - Utrinski Vesnik

49 Frenchman brought 50 men to rape his wife, one of them confessed: He didn't consent, I'm sorry - Tocka

Final discussion

The two cases of rape of women show that society has difficulty accepting that sexual violence is a systemic problem, and not just an individual tragedy or an isolated incident. The media should have presented these cases through a broader discussion about relativizing rape, the (non)consent of the victims and legal responsibility, ensuring that the victims of rape will not only be “heard” (in the case of the girl from Veles), but also that such events will lead to real changes.

In the cases of the 15-year-old girl from Veles, who was exploited, groomed and raped by several men, and the Frenchwoman Gisèle Pelicot, who was drugged by her husband and also raped by multiple perpetrators, a different approach in media reporting is observed. While in the case of Pelicot, where most of the reports were taken from foreign media, more appropriate and gender-sensitive reporting is observed, in the case of the girl from Veles, there is great room for improvement in the way gender-based violence is reported, especially against minors. On social media, in both cases, negative and condemnatory comments towards both women prevailed, accompanied by relativization of the rape and the non-consent of the victims. Although the two victims differ in age, location and circumstances, the stigmatization of both women through comments on news reports on social media not only reflects, but also actively shapes social reactions to sexual violence.

In the case of the raped girl from Veles, through sensationalist reporting, selective emphasis on the behaviour of the victims and preference given to the voice of the perpetrators, media reports contributed to the normalization of sexual violence in the public, undermining the credibility of the victims and systemic impunity. This perpetuates the culture of rape and encourages gendered hierarchies of credibility in which some are considered “more trustworthy/credible” or “more worthy of justice” than others. Furthermore, sensationalist reporting is also contrary to the ethical responsibility of the media, as stipulated in Article 8 of the Code of Journalists, which prohibits sensationalism in reporting on court proceedings and family tragedies. Some news reports contributed to the victim being shown in a negative light or accused of committing abuse. The language of suspicion used in reporting

the case contributed to the strengthening of established beliefs that the victim is usually guilty and what's even worse, they legitimized rape. Hence, social media comments also contained accusations, speculations, and moral judgments about the rape victim's actions, rather than focusing on the crimes committed against her. And when comments that reinforce harmful prejudice, such as "Where were her parents?" or "Why do girls today look like they do?", are not controlled by the media, a dangerous precedent is set that justifies sexual violence. Therefore, it can be said that media narratives directly influence how sexual violence is discussed, legitimized, or dismissed.

The analysis of both cases points to the urgent need to shift from reactive reporting based on spectacularity to victim-cantered journalism and to more in-depth reporting that highlights systemic failures rather than isolated "shocking" cases. Without such a shift, the media will continue to be complicit in reinforcing social norms that contribute to suspecting victims rather than demanding punishment for perpetrators. However, by focusing on accountability for gender-based violence, as well as sensitizing victims of different ages and social categories, the media can serve as mechanisms of justice and awareness, rather than as a site for relativization and repeat-traumatization.

Concluding observations

The analysis of media reporting on the two cases of sexual violence indicates the need for a more ethical and comprehensive journalistic approach. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the following recommendations for improving journalistic reporting on cases of sexual violence:

- Media reporting must avoid framing cases of sexual violence around the actions of victims, their emotions, or their credibility. Instead, reporting should emphasize the responsibility of the perpetrator, the legal definitions of (non) consent by victims, and the systemic failures that allow such crimes to occur. Such a shift will help prevent or reduce victim-blaming narratives and the relativization of sexual violence in public discourse.
- Media reporting should take a victim-cantered approach that prioritizes factual accuracy, systemic analysis, and advocacy for protection from gender-based violence.
- The media should emphasize clear legal interpretations of the victim's consent in cases of rape when reporting, to remove ambiguity around sexual violence, but also to influence legal systems to adopt stronger definitions of such consent.
- Sensationalist headlines contribute to public spectacle rather than informed discussion. To prevent misinterpretations and misinformation, the media should adhere to ethical criteria for journalistic reporting and use gender-sensitive language. This would be facilitated by continuous education of journalists on reporting on cases involving gender-based violence and by creating new and consulting existing resources.
- The media should not portray victims in an offensive manner and should take into account their dignity and right to access justice.
- Social media platforms contribute to legitimizing the narratives of perpetrators. Therefore, the media must proactively monitor and regulate comments under news reports to prevent the spread of hatred towards women and denial of rape.

In addition, institutions should hold the media accountable for enabling the spread of misogynistic narratives in the digital space.

- The media, through journalistic reporting, should raise public awareness and educate the audience about the consequences of the relativization of sexual violence.

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