

Thirty years ago in the United States, the crime of violence against women was not perceived to be a social issue. Women were certainly experiencing abuse at the hands of violent intimate partners, but that violence was not considered a crime by law enforcement, the courts, or society at large. As late as the 1970s, the abuse of women, particularly by male partners, was condoned socially (and even legitimized by the absence of spousal abuse and rape laws) as an acceptable way for husbands to discipline their wives. It was not until the 1970s that claims-making activities by members of the “battered women’s movement” convinced the public to recognize the condition of “wife abuse” as a social problem and women subjected to this condition as “battered women” (Loseke, 1992). Consequently, women’s experiences with relationship abuse were only labeled a public problem within the last several decades. Previously, the crime of violence had been conceptualized as something that only happened between strangers, not family members or intimates (Bergen, 1998). According to Best (1989), public issues grow up around private troubles when the experiences of individuals are understood as exemplifying a larger social problem, and the news media, in particular, are positioned to play a vital role in the construction of such problems. The news media provide a unique forum in which personal troubles are “selectively gathered up, invested with a broader meaning, and made available for public consumption” (Sacco, 1995, p. 142). At the individual level, constructing or naming a problem is important because it helps individuals define their personal experiences and choose a course of action (Kelly, 1988). At the social level, naming a problem may lead to the formulation of a solution (Mehrotra, 1999). Consequently, the ways in which the news media choose to frame domestic violence can have important ramifications, influencing how society perceives the dynamics of such violence as well as solutions and public responsibility. Despite the news media’s substantial role in shaping society’s perceptions of social issues, including domestic violence, minimal research has been conducted to examine whether the news media frame stories of femicide (the killing of a female intimate partner¹) within the context of violence against women. Responding to this relative void in the literature, the present study aims to expand our knowledge concerning the media’s representation of femicide and the media’s impact on the construction of violence against women as a social problem. First, previous studies that have explored news coverage of intimate partner homicides will be addressed. Second, existing media frames used by journalists to tell the story of violence will be examined. Finally, the present study will build on the past literature by exploring the media frames employed in stories that define the femicide as domestic violence compared to stories that fail to define the femicide as domestic violence.