

Reporting Femicide: A Contextualising Document

<https://news.sky.com/story/man-charged-with-murders-of-wife-and-two-daughters-of-racing-commentator-john-hunt-13215943>

I have chosen to discuss this article because violence against women is a deeply personal and important issue to me. Having been affected by this issue myself, reports of gender-based abuse and violence resonate with me on a personal level. Their stories are also my own. Consequently, it is a matter of vital importance to me that such reports are presented in a respectful way that humanises and pays tribute to the victims. The article I have chosen was written by Clare Gilbody-Dickerson, and it serves as an update to the horrific murders of three women, Carol Hunt, Louise Hunt, and Hannah Hunt, which occurred on July 9th 2024. The way in which this story was reported, when the events in question initially unfolded, struck a chord with me. The three victims in question happen to be the wife and daughters respectively of John Hunt, a well-known racing commentator for the BBC. The story was documented through a lens of their association to a man of high status. Their individual identities were reduced simply to “wife and daughters of John Hunt”. The news received a significant amount of media attention which is unusual for cases of femicide (Ryan, 2024). I can recall reputable news sites such as the BBC offering live updates as the police searched for their prime suspect, a man named Kyle Clifford. I found myself wondering why such intensive coverage is not given to all the other women who are losing their lives approximately every 2.7 days at the hands of a man (Femicide Census, 2021). This discussion is concerned with two main points. Firstly, how the issue of femicide is reported in the media. Secondly, why this particular case received an unusually significant amount of media attention.

The issue of femicide is of grave significance as it is an ongoing issue in the UK which, due to its widespread prevalence, could be considered an epidemic. The term “femicide” was coined by American feminist scholar and activist Diana Russell, as a way of drawing attention to the sexual politics of murder, insisting that “we must realise that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide” (Russell, 2012). Application of the term confronts the

reality that most acts of femicide are gender motivated (Aldrete *et al.*, 2024, p.219), with men being the overwhelming majority of perpetrators. Femicide Census (2021) is an organisation founded by Karen Ingala Smith and Clarissa O'Callaghan, the aim of which is to raise awareness of fatal violence against women, and illustrate that acts of femicide are not isolated incidents. In their 2021 report, it is revealed that that year, at least 147 women were killed by 144 men. The report goes on to divulge that 53% of those women were killed by a current or former intimate partner, revealing the notable connection between femicide and domestic abuse. It is of further significance that of those women killed by a current or former partner, 52% were either taking steps towards leaving the relationship or had left the relationship. Societal attitudes towards domestic abuse often attribute blame to the victim for staying with a violent partner (Edwards *et al.*, 2024, p.106). However, this statistic highlights the reality that the period of leaving an abusive relationship is often the most dangerous and volatile. Another unsettling statistic shared in the report reveals that 74% of these victims were killed in their own home, indicating that, for women, home is not a safe place. These statistics are relevant to the case presented in Gilbody-Dickerson's article, as each of these points can be applied to one of the victims, Louise Hunt. The available statistics provide an indication of the grim reality that femicide is a widespread, current issue. However, as noted by Smith, founder of Femicide Census, "(e)ach of these women deserves to be remembered by name and as more than just another statistic" (Topping *et al.*, 2024). Thus demonstrating the importance of reporting on their deaths in a dignified manner.

News articles are a form of discourse, which share information and influence readers' perceptions of the issues at hand. The importance of discourse in relation to femicide is evident in research by forensic criminologist Jane Monckton-Smith (2020), in which she utilises Michel Foucault's theoretical framework concerning discourse to explore the risk factors associated with femicide in the context of intimate partner relationships. Monckton-Smith (2020, p.1271-1272) explains that, according to Foucault, discourse is a concept which extends beyond linguistics; it is a technology of power which constructs what we "know" to be true. In other words, discourse is powerful because it shapes and influences knowledge, ideas, and attitudes. Inasmuch as discourse influences what we

perceive to be true, Monckton-Smith argues that various discursive positions surrounding domestic abuse, in particular, intimate partner violence and femicide, affects perceptions and assessment of risk of femicide in abusive relationships (2020, p.1272). This suggests that discourse pertaining to femicide could play a role in perpetuating the epidemic.

In her work, Monckton-Smith (2020, p.1272) identifies two main discursive positions surrounding femicide. The first, which she argues is the dominant position, is the “crime of passion” discourse, which includes a key focus on traditional and stereotypical gendered roles expected in heterosexual relationships. This discourse typically positions women within a subservient role. Male dominance is considered normal and natural, meaning that violence against women is often legitimised if the natural order is disrupted. A “crime of passion” murder is regarded as impulsive, unpredictable, and unpremeditated, often in response to something the victim has done which is considered unacceptable to the perpetrator. It is categorised by a loss of control. What is generally considered to be unacceptable is also a point of discourse. Lees, as cited by Monckton-Smith (2020, p.1272), identifies three primary behaviours that tend to legitimise intimate partner murder. These three behaviours include nagging, infidelity, and rejection of traditional gender roles. The second discursive position, the “coercive control” discourse, provides an opposition to the “crime of passion” discourse, as it positions femicide within the wider context of ongoing, systematic domestic abuse. Within this discursive position, traditional gender roles are considered to be socially constructed and oppressive, rather than natural. The murder is seen as calculated, premeditated, and the final act of violence following a progressive pattern of abusive, oppressive, and violent behaviours.

Monckton-Smith uses a Foucauldian method of discourse analysis to interpret a breadth of data detailing incidents of femicide (2020, p.1272), and ultimately identifies eight stages of a common and consistent sequence leading to femicide which is present in cases of intimate partner abuse (2020, p.1273). The commonality of such a sequence adds validity to the “coercive control” discourse, highlighting that killing is seldom the

first act of violence. Ultimately, Monckton-Smith (2020, p.1282) argues that although the “crime of passion” discourse is the dominant one, the “coercive control” discourse provides a more logical interpretation of the motivation for femicide and the behaviours and characteristics that lead to such an event. She asserts that the motivation to abuse, which is rooted in the need for control, is directly linked to the motivation to kill, which is rooted in the loss of control (2020, p.1271). Understanding the motivation of acts of femicide is critical in terms of preventing it. Monckton-Smith’s work highlights the important fact that femicide is rarely an isolated incident, and is usually the fatal end result of a pattern of abusive and controlling behaviour.

Discourse pertaining to intimate partner murder is relevant to Gilbody-Dickerson’s article, due to the alleged intimate relationship between Louise Hunt and Kyle Clifford. This is an aspect of the case that the article entirely neglects to discuss. A formal motive has not yet been given by Clifford, though ongoing speculation attributes the murder to his former romantic relationship with Louise Hunt. Indeed, any discourse pertaining to the nature of the relationship between the two appears to be hearsay, however the intimate nature of their relationship was confirmed in an interview given by a friend of Hunt (5 News, 2024, 00:58). Furthermore, it has been reported that Hunt had posted to X, formerly Twitter, days before the murder, retweeting a message which stated “I admire women who leave” (Chantler-Hicks, 2024). The post went on to say “it takes ALOT of strength to break a tie. it takes ALOT of self love to choose yo self [sic]”. This can easily be interpreted as an expression of praise and admiration towards women who leave abusive relationships. It is surely not illogical to presume the timing of this post is of significance to the events which unfolded. This was the last post Hunt had made to her X account, which has since been deactivated. As previously discussed, the time of leaving an abusive relationship is often the most dangerous, as the abuse tends to escalate. The evidence exhibited strongly suggests that Hunt and Clifford did, in fact, share an intimate relationship which had recently ended. Withholding such relevant information in news reports contorts the narrative into one of an unusual and unlikely tragic accident. It obscures the reality of many women that to be killed by an intimate partner is a genuine, widespread concern. It is not uncommon for news articles to bend

the narrative in this way, as it has been found that articles reporting on femicide have a tendency to frame the violence as an isolated incident, rather than the final act following a pattern of abuse, and being a consequence of a larger societal problem (Aldrete *et al.*, 2024, p.228). When articles frame intimate partner murder as an isolated incident, they position the crime within the “crime of passion” discourse, which results in understating the prevalence and severity of femicide and the sequence of abuse that precedes it. The question remains why reporters and journalists would withhold this important context. Admittedly there is an apparent lack of evidence to support this point, but it is one that could easily be confirmed by interviewing friends and family. Thus, one can presume this context is being generally omitted intentionally. This is a question I shall endeavour to answer further along in this discussion.

It is relevant to explore the presentation of the victims in the article. A study by Aldrete *et al.* (2024, p.227) found that news articles tend to present two dichotomous archetypes of female victims: the “good, valuable woman”, and the “bad, disposable woman”. The former is described as young, white, middle or upper-class, physically attractive, and often possessing the stereotypical qualities of a wife or mother, and is often placed within a familial context. Such a victim is typically given more significant media attention, which garners sympathy and paints the murder as a sad tragedy. Women who fall outside this category tend to be presented less favourably, and may be the target of victim-blaming mentalities; the violence is more likely to be justified and legitimised. It can certainly be concluded that Louise, Hannah, and Carol Hunt fit the description of “good, valuable women”, and the way in which they are presented in the article supports the findings of the study conducted by Aldrete *et al.* As each of these women can be easily categorised as “good, valuable women”, it is logical that news articles reporting on the murders should place them in a familial context. When the familial context includes a known public figure, it provides insight as to why the murders would elicit even more media attention than what is already typically given to the “good, valuable” female archetype. Further to this, these findings give some indication as to why the relationship between Hunt and Clifford is seldom mentioned in reports of the murders. Reporting on the relationship could be interpreted by some as legitimising the

violence, as it provides a possible motif. In the interest of presenting the victims as wholly good and innocent, it is likely considered to be better, narratively speaking, to sever any known connection between the victims and the perpetrator.

One important aspect of Gilbody-Dickerson's article to focus on is the headline. The headline reads: "Kyle Clifford charged with murders of wife and two daughters of John Hunt in Bushey". The apparent purpose of this headline is to provide readers with a short summary of the story, to inform them that the suspect has officially been charged with the three counts of murder. It includes the name of the suspected perpetrator, a description of the three victims in relation to BBC commentator John Hunt, and the location of the murders. However, there is further contextual analysis to be deduced from this headline. Firstly, the headline includes the name of two males related to the case, the perpetrator and the husband/father of the victims. It does not include the names of the victims, but rather defines them in relation to their association with John Hunt. In doing so, this positions John Hunt as a more significant person in the story than the victims. Israeli linguist Daniel Dor (2003, p.696) defines headlines as "relevance optimizers", claiming that they are "designed to optimize [sic] the relevance of their stories for their readers". Based on the notion that human cognitive processes are designed to achieve the greatest cognitive result for the smallest processing effort, he argues that headlines aim to find a balance between providing the most relevant context whilst requiring the least amount of effort to understand (2003, p.704). In applying this theory to the headline of Gilbody-Dickerson's article, it reveals that the context of John Hunt having lost his wife and daughters is framed as the most relevant context, rather than three women having lost their lives at the hands of a man. The headline completely disregards the wider context of the epidemic of femicide. Moreover, Dor suggests that readers have a tendency to simply scan headlines without reading the story, using the headlines to decide which stories are worth the time investment of reading (2003, p.720). This would mean that anyone who simply scanned the headlines would be aware of the murders insofar as they have affected John Hunt, but would remain unaware of the individual identities of the three victims, nor would they be aware of the context of violence against women.

The language used in news articles is a significant component in influencing how readers interpret the content, and their attitudes towards the issues presented.

Gilbody-Dickerson's article, and indeed numerous articles reporting on femicide, utilise passive language. The subheading of the article asserts that the victims "died in a crossbow attack", and goes on to elaborate that Louise and Hannah "had been shot", whilst Carol "had been stabbed". This is a problematic way of phrasing the murders, as it frames the killing entirely as something that happened to them, rather than something that was done to them. Consequently, it is framed as a spontaneous and unfortunate tragedy, rather than a cold, intentional act of killing, thus shifting the blame away from the perpetrator. This framing also subscribes to the "crime of passion" discourse discussed earlier, as it paints the murders as random and unpredictable. However, the likelihood is that it was the final act of violence following a systematic pattern of abusive and controlling behaviour within the context of Clifford's relationship with Hunt.

Ultimately, the use of passive language obscures the true context of the murders. Whilst it is not rare for news articles to make use of passive language, it has been found that this can affect clarity, by concealing the identity of the performer of an action, which in turn affects how readers interpret the information (Almahameed, Bataineh and Ammari, 2022, p.1196). In the context of femicide and gender-based violence, it is especially problematic to use passive language, which fails to hold men responsible for their actions. In cases of femicide, it is not women who are killed, it is men who kill women. Confronting this reality is necessary in order to understand and fight against violence against women.

The choice of images included in news articles is also significant in shaping the narrative that the article presents. Gilbody-Dickerson's article features a photo of John and Carol Hunt in which they're smiling and laughing. To the side of this image are two smaller photos of Louise and Hannah Hunt. It is perhaps relevant that the chosen photos show them looking attractive, wearing make-up, and smiling. As established earlier in this discussion, physical beauty is one of the attributes of the "good, valuable woman" archetype, so it seems intentional that the photos chosen support this presentation of the victims. The photo of John and Carol Hunt appears to be the focal

image in the article, which again positions John Hunt as being of primary significance to the story. It also seems relevant that in the chosen picture, Carol is looking at John as opposed to at the camera, whilst John looks towards the camera. This creates a sense of detachment between Carol and the reader, which further positions John as a primary subject of the story. All photos show the victims looking happy, which could be with the intent of eliciting sympathy, but it is also possibly intended to further the narrative that the incident was spontaneous and random. It seemingly negates any notion that any of the victims were subject to ongoing systematic abuse prior to their deaths.

As we have seen, the issue of femicide is an epidemic in the UK. However, it is also an issue which affects women globally. Statistical findings from UNODC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023, p.3) found that globally in 2022, approximately 89,000 women and girls were intentionally killed. This figure shows an average of over 243 incidents of femicide per day. Furthermore, 48,800 of these murders were perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member (2023, p.3), further highlighting the link to domestic abuse and its prevalence around the world. The widespread epidemic of femicide and violence against women is likely linked to the wider issue of gender inequality. Women's oppression occurs in nearly every society in the world (Yaseen, 2017, p.177), which is a consequence of patriarchal social structures which reproduce a power imbalance between men and women (2017, p.181). McFeely et al. (2013, p.69) assert that domestic abuse is both a "cause and consequence of gender inequality." This highlights the cyclic nature of violence against women. Not only is it caused by gender inequality, but acts of violence against women perpetuate male dominance and normalise the subjugation of women, which legitimates further acts of violence. Positioning John Hunt as the main subject of the story, and the victims as secondary, could be regarded as perpetuating patriarchal ideology which positions men as more important than women. Further to this, neglecting to acknowledge the contextual relevance of violence against women reinforces the issue by perpetuating ignorance.

Gilbody-Dickerson's article frames the murders as random, spontaneous acts of violence which fit within the "crime of passion" discourse, rather than being a

consequence of a common, systematic pattern of abuse that precedes acts of femicide. Femicide is an epidemic, not only in the UK, but on a global scale. News articles are significant agents in constructing discourse relating to the issues of femicide and violence against women. They possess a technology of power to influence ideas and attitudes pertaining to this issue. However, this particular article neglects to provide the context of domestic abuse and intimate partner murders, by failing to mention the intimate relationship between Louise Hunt and Kyle Clifford. This is likely to preserve the presentation of the victims as “good, valuable women”. This particular presentation of victims is one which tends to garner more media attention, which is one reason this story received more coverage than other cases of femicide. The “good, valuable woman” presentation also positions them within a familial context. This familial context is likely another reason the case received such notable media attention, since John Hunt, the husband and father of the victims, is a known commentator for the BBC. The headline fails to name the three victims, and instead names the two men related to the case, including John Hunt. This serves to shape the context of what is deemed relevant information. This point is further compounded by the use of images, which frame John Hunt as a key figure in the case, above the three victims. The article uses passive language, which understates the intentional act of murder, further disregarding the relevance of how femicide is usually the end result following a pattern of violent and controlling behaviours. Femicide is rooted in gender inequality, which is both a result of and reproduces violence against women. News articles play a role in the institutionalisation of gender inequality, and Gilbody-Dickerson’s article unfortunately perpetuates patriarchal views by positioning John Hunt as the main subject of the story. The victims in this case were not simply the wife and daughters of John Hunt. They were individuals with their own stories which deserve to be told. Their names deserve to be known. Louise Hunt, Carol Hunt, and Hannah Hunt.

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Femicide: Educational Pamphlet

The below pamphlet is designed for educators teaching on the topic of femicide.

WHAT IS FEMICIDE?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

The term "femicide" refers to the gender-related murder of women and girls. The term illustrates how these murders are gender motivated, with the overwhelming majority of perpetrators being men. Femicide usually follows a pattern of gender-based violence.

WHY DOES GENDER MATTER?

Victims of femicide are killed due to gender-related factors which are rooted in gender inequality. These factors include the ideology of male privilege, societal norms regarding masculinity and femininity, and an imbalance of power between men and women.

HOW DOES IT HAPPEN?

Femicide can occur in a number of different contexts. It is most commonly committed by an intimate partner or family member. Other examples include honour killings, murder following rape, and killings connected to organised crime such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

89,000

Global number of women and girls intentionally killed in 2022

54.8%

48,800 of these women and girls were killed by an intimate partner or family member

Number of intimate partner/family murders

Continent	Population	Number of intimate partner/family murders
Africa	20,000	~19,000
Asia	18,400	~17,000
Americas	7,900	~7,000
Europe	2,300	~2,000
Oceania	200	~1,000

Although continental populations vary, this graph illustrates how femicide is a global issue

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence in the private sphere, meaning that home is not a safe place for them

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

- What are the causes of femicide?
- Why is femicide more prevalent in certain parts of the world?
- What other social issues factor into the issue of femicide?
- What can we do to prevent femicide?



The information in this pamphlet has been gathered from research published in partnership between UNODC and UN Women

UN WOMEN

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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime