



Journalist Fellowship Paper

‘There’s no honour in honour killing’: the paradox of femicide in Palestinian media

By [Haya Abushkhaidem](#)

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Palestinians are no longer willing to ignore violence against women, *Haya Abushkhaidem* writes.



Demonstrators hold signs during a protest demanding legal protection for women, in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank September 4, 2019. REUTERS/Mohamad Torokman

When 19-year-old Palestinian makeup artist [Israa Ghrayeb](#) was beaten to death by members of her family under the pretext of lost “honour” in 2019, Palestinians responded with widespread condemnation.

Israa was a well-known figure who had shared her fears about the violence she faced on social media a few days before her murder. Her followers turned the story of her murder into viral news – a lightning rod for public opinion, not only nationally but internationally too. Palestinians protested across the West Bank for justice for Israa and advocated for a swift trial for her murderers.

Like many Palestinian journalists interested in her story, I went to court to cover the trial. While there, a young man – I think he was a lawyer – stepped up to me aggressively in the courtroom and demanded to know: “We witness violent crimes against women and killings all the time, why don’t you cover them [all] and assert yourselves among the public? You journalists are hypocrites!”

As shocking as his words were, I knew he was right. It was a wake-up call for me as a Palestinian journalist: yes, we navigate an endless stream of newsworthy stories. But what is more newsworthy than the story of a victim of violence and injustice, whether committed by a foreign occupying force or by a force within society and authorised by it?

The significance of our work became obvious to me in that courtroom. Stories of femicide do make headlines in Palestinian news, but rarely top the public agenda. If journalists made the same fuss every time a woman was attacked or murdered, would society look different? Why don't all women get the same public and media attention and outrage as Israa?

Gender-based violence is a global issue

Sarah Everard was raped and killed in London by a Met Police officer as she walked home, Sajida Tasneem was killed with an axe by her father-in-law in northern Pakistan, Luz Raquel Padilla was burned to death by a man in Zapopan, Mexico, Tshegofatso Pule was hanged from a tree and shot in the chest at the hands of her boyfriend in Johannesburg, South Africa. Lumy, a well-known Chinese social media personality, was doused in petrol and burned by her ex-husband. The list goes on.

Tens of thousands of women and girls are murdered around the world every year, and most of the murders are committed by a family member or acquaintance. A [report](#) by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes found that around 47,000 women were murdered by an intimate partner or family member in 2020 alone. These actions are normally preceded by physical, verbal, or emotional violence.

Despite the variety of cultures, religions, and laws each country in the world has, gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide are still a global tragedy and, according to the [United Nations Population Fund](#), “the most prevalent human rights violations in the world [that] knows no social, economic or national boundaries.”

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates one in three women (around 736 million across the world) experience physical or sexual violence based on their gender.

“Gender-based violence undermines the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. Victims of violence can suffer sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, traumatic fistula, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and even death.”

All that is to say: this is not exclusively a Palestinian problem. But Palestine's patriarchal culture, combined with decades of Israeli occupation, creates a very high level of gender inequality within the domestic sphere. Palestinian women experience violence on multiple levels.

There's no honour in "honour killing"

When Palestinians took to the streets to protest the killing of Israa and other women under the pretext of "honour", they chanted: "there's no honour in honour killing". But what is honour killing? And what legitimacy does this term give to the killing of women in Palestinian society?

Honour killing is a term used in different societies around the world (most frequently in Pakistan and India, but also in the Arab world) to describe the murder of a female relative under the premise that she brought shame or dishonour to her family, often through expressions of sexual autonomy.

The Honour-Based Violence Awareness Network has coined the term "honour-based violence", or HBV, for these crimes. HBV can include physical abusive practices, forced marriages, and disowning.

Not all femicide in Palestine is necessarily driven by attempts to wash away the shame brought on the family by women. In fact, a report by [Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling](#) found that most cases are framed in courts as honour killings because outdated Jordanian laws provide lenient sentencing for perpetrators of such crimes.

According to Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code and Article 18 of the 1936 Penal Code that is applied by the Palestinian Authority, "the perpetrators of murder in the name of 'honour' can obtain a reduced sentence based on a set of mitigating circumstances". These "reduced sentences" might equate to a month in prison or no punishment at all.

Lawyer and human rights activist Fareed Al-Atrash said it is not simply the letter of the law that encodes this impunity – social culture has historically been more tolerant of these crimes when associated with or justified by honour.

How are these crimes framed in Palestinian media?

Gender-based violence is spoken about on local radio and TV stations as a general topic, but rarely delves into specific cases. Instead, stories of femicide are either

briefly and/or superficially described. In worst-case scenarios, they are reported in biased language that glorifies patriarchal culture and condemns the victim.

Dr Kifah Manasra, professor of Criminal Law at Al Istiqlal University and women's rights activist, told me the Palestinian media was guilty of reacting instead of acting first. "We as journalists, activists, and feminists need to take action to prevent these crimes, rather than just reporting on them when they are committed," she said.

But Maysoun Qawasmi, director general of the public news agency Wafa, told me, "Journalists always cover these stories." She added a caveat: "But these attempts are very modest and superficial."

Qawasmi, who has worked in the Palestinian media for over 26 years, said femicide reports were usually devoid of detail about the crime. And, if the story was not big enough to attract public opinion, journalists did not attach importance to following up these cases.

GBV or HBV crimes are considered sensitive topics, she explained, and journalists risk getting in trouble with the law or face career-damaging prospects if they are not careful when reporting.

Journalists working for Wafa must wait for official police reports before proceeding to write anything about a criminal case. And, when official reports are released, it must compete for space with stories about the occupation or politics that understandably take precedence.

As a result, most femicide news pieces are short and detail-deprived – unlikely to draw public attention. Consider this January 2022 article about a 28-year-old woman killed by her husband in [Al-Watan Voice](#) (*Nazareth: Man stabs wife to death*): it is roughly 60-words long and only 50 of those words are about the crime.

An important tenet of GBV reporting is avoiding jigsaw identification, but this scarcity of reporting detail takes that to another level – no context, analysis, or expert voices. No indication of the gap left in the lives of her friends and family. And, of course, no follow up. Nothing that would hold public attention.

Palestinian media in the Arab ecosystem

When we talk about the influence of the media in Palestine, we cannot consider it in isolation from the media of the Arab world. With Arabic as a common language, Palestinian audiences consume news from all over the region.

And, while my criticism of Palestinian media is that not enough reporting is done, my criticism of wider Arab media is that it tends towards too much dramatisation, using language and framing that advances a patriarchal mentality.

Consider this article published by Egyptian news website [Al-Masri Al-Youm](#): the headline reads *The last moments of the dancer of Al-Tajammu: she met a man from Al-Ismailiya who killed her at the elevator door*. The subhead reads, “Investigations: illegitimate affairs, parties, financial discrepancies are behind the accident”.

By identifying the 27-year-old as a “dancer” in the headline, a stigmatised profession, the narrative is already set. The reader is then encouraged to pass judgement before even reading the article with a subhead that outlines the crime as an “accident” caused by the implied moral failings of the victim. (The reference to an “illegitimate affair” implies adultery.)

Imagine an alternate reality, in which the 27-year-old woman had successfully defended herself from her attacker in that elevator. Would the headline ever read: “The last moments of Facebook creep – Investigation: His refusal to pay, parties and adultery are behind the accident”. Of course not.

These, and many other examples, underscore a culture of justifying femicide in society, rather than helping to change it.

“The goal is to silence the victims,” said Dr Manasra, “and raise the voice of society and the clan.” She said journalists are either unprofessional or uneducated enough to care about raising the voice of the victims. It is, after all, safer to side with the powerful than question the status quo.

Working for change

There are many human rights organisations and feminist activist groups working to raise awareness, advocate for women’s rights, and give voice to silenced victims in Palestine.

[TAM](#) (Women Media and Development) was created to train journalists to report on gender-sensitive issues and produce content that challenges societal norms. Suhair Farraj, director of TAM, told me Palestinian journalists are often not adequately trained to report on such sensitive issues. TAM is one of dozens of non-governmental organisations in Palestine working to protect women from gender-based violence.

But, according to Farraj, mainstream media outlets rarely get involved in these campaigns unless they are paid by the NGOs to do so. “The fact that these outlets can publish anything as long as it is paid for [means these platforms could be used by] misogynistic groups to spread hate speech,” she said.

A lack of training, coupled with a lack of vision for social advancement, paints a dire picture for the media's ability to promote the wellbeing of Palestinian society.

How to better cover gender- and honour-based violence

Dr Manasra believes the solution begins in a gender-equal home: when women are raised to be strong and respectful, they will raise strong children who are also more resilient in difficult political situations.

But for gender-equal homes to become a possibility, there are many laws and social norms that must change. As part of society that helps set the public agenda, the media can either help maintain the existing reality or promote change.

Stories covering GBV should be handled with more care than simply repeating the details of a police report. How were her loved ones affected? What do the experts say? What pattern does this fit into?

Follow up stories: what happened next? And be careful when choosing language. Word choice can influence the way readers perceive the news. It was murder, not an honour killing. It was a crime, not an accident.

We need to increase the publishing of gender-sensitive content, too: writing in-depth thought pieces on the concept of “honour killing”, producing audio and video content that gives a different perspective and challenges traditional stereotypes. Here, working with the many NGOs and activists to give platform to their efforts can have a significant impact.

Training journalists is key to better reportage of these issues: getting the right information from the right sources, interviewing multiple parties – including officials, family members, and specialists.

Femicide is a complex and global issue, and Palestine has not been spared this violence because of other conflicts it faces. But condemning political violence while accepting domestic violence is a paradox that makes a mockery of peace.