

Grace Millane: “She should have been safe here”

Katelyn Appleyard and Shirley Jülich, School of Social Work, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This research examined how news media framed the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane and whether it was consistent with journalists’ guidelines for reporting violence against women (VAW). Previous literature on media reporting of VAW has found that victims and perpetrators of VAW were *othered* to obscure them from the context of the larger social issue that VAW presents and that victims were blamed for their assaults.

APPROACH: Employing a singular case study research design, we conducted a thematic analysis of the documents that reported on the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane. Some 25 articles were extracted from the Newztext database, an archive of Aotearoa New Zealand newspaper sources. Five themes were generated from the texts and were compared to previous literature about news media reporting on VAW.

CONCLUSIONS: This study concluded that journalist guidelines, although available, do not seem to be widely used. This has led to victim blaming and minimising sexual violence in the news media.

Keywords: Violence against women; rough sex gone wrong; media reporting; guidelines for journalists

Grace Millane was a British backpacker who visited Aotearoa New Zealand in 2018 as part of her overseas experience. Assisted by a dating application, she arranged to meet a man on the eve of her 22nd birthday (Owen & Saxton, 2018). That night, he murdered her (Edwards, 2020). She was missing for several days before her body was found. This tragedy became front-page news and has been described as the most publicised murder case in Aotearoa New Zealand history (Henshilwood, 2019). The man who murdered Grace is intentionally unnamed throughout this article to minimise any further attention on him and to focus attention on Grace and other victims of violence, hence we refer to Grace by her first name to personalise her.

Grace’s death is one of countless examples of VAW for which Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest rates in the OECD. Between 2009 and 2018, 125 women died as a result of intimate partner violence (New Zealand Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2021). Since 2014, Aotearoa New Zealand has recorded yearly increases in the number of reported sexual crimes (United Nations, 2018). Despite this, one of the narratives that emerged following Grace’s murder was that “she should have been safe here,” a statement from then Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern (Owen & Saxton, 2018). This emphasis on Aotearoa New Zealand being a safe place for women is in contradiction with its statistics for VAW.

According to the Social Workers Registration Board (n.d.), one of the key competencies of social workers is to “promote the principles of human rights and social and economic justice”. The role of the social worker is two-fold: it is examining and challenging the mechanisms of oppression that advance power and privilege (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2023) whilst supporting clients to survive the social conditions they are exposed to. Social workers are appropriately positioned to understand the mechanisms of social inequity and how these operate within the media arena. The media has the authority to reinforce the power of the abuser by isolating victims and reinforcing myths about worthy and unworthy victims (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). This should be interrogated to bring about social change.

Research from the UK found that headlines reporting on domestic violence tended to blame victim-survivors for the abuse they were subjected to, and in the case of femicide, their characters were often attacked (Lloyd, 2020). Lloyd cited several headlines in the UK media specifically in relation to the trial prosecuting Grace’s murder: “Grace Millane was a member of BDSM [Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism] dating sites and asked ex-partner to choke her during sex, court hears” (*Evening Standard*, 2019); Grace Millane murder trial: Backpacker died ‘accidentally during sex ... Backpacker died ‘when sex act went wrong’ (*BBC*, 2019)”. This raised the question as to whether the media are reporting responsibly on VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Given the extensive reporting about Grace, we opted to examine the coverage of the murder trial and the narratives to which the public and victim-survivors were exposed. Grace’s family similarly experienced the media attention and no doubt read many of these news reports. We acknowledge how difficult this would have been and note that they have used the international attention to raise awareness of VAW (Hutt, 2020). We, too, aim

to raise awareness of VAW, by presenting the research undertaken by the first author as part of her master’s of Applied Social Work. The second author, her supervisor, comes from a background of reading and researching in the sexual violence sector.

This article begins by focussing on the terminology used in the field of VAW. We then outline common rape myths and describe the role of the media in upholding myths in the way VAW is reported. We go on to briefly describe the various guidelines available to journalists reporting on VAW, before discussing the research methods and presenting the findings of the media analysis. We finish by exploring the implications of the research findings.

Terminology

The terminology used when referring to crimes of VAW is contentious. Gender-based violence, often used interchangeably with VAW (World Health Organisation, 2021), speaks to any harmful act directed at a person due to their gender (UN Refugee Agency, n.d.). It aims to acknowledge that this kind of violence occurs because of the subordinate status of women in society compared to men. The United Nations has defined VAW as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (United Nations, 1993, p. 2)

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organisation as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless

of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work. (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149)

Intimate partner violence refers to behaviour occurring within an intimate relationship causing psychological, physical or sexual harm (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, n.d.). Family violence refers to violence that occurs in the context of a family within the home environment (World Health Organisation, 2021). Similarly, the Aotearoa New Zealand Domestic Violence Act 1995 refers to violence inflicted by a person in a domestic relationship, not necessarily intimate with the victim.

These definitions are criticised for their gender neutrality. While people of all genders can (and do) experience violence, sexual violence, such as what happened to Grace, is a gendered crime with men overwhelmingly reported as the perpetrator and women or girls overwhelmingly reported to be victims (Chelsea-Jade et al., 2022; World Health Organisation, 2005). For the purposes of this article, the term VAW is used as it draws most attention to the fundamental role that gender plays. While it could be contestable as to which form of VAW Grace was subjected, she was indisputably the victim of VAW.

A concept that features in this article is *othering*. To *other* means to separate and distance from other perpetrators or victims as well as the wider public (Carll, 2003). Othering is a process of alienation achieved through stereotyping, isolating behaviour and imposing a narrative (Renau et al., 2023). It is frequently used to explain or justify rape myths that facilitate sexual violence.

Rape myths

Burt (1980) described rape myths as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—in creating a climate hostile to rape victims” (p. 217). Further, these myths included the false beliefs that women can resist

being raped, they ask for it, only bad girls are raped, women regularly make false accusations of rape, and rapists are sex-starved or insane. Later, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) built upon this, concluding that rape myths are generally false beliefs widely and persistently held to justify the sexual aggression of men towards women.

Coverage of specific events is imperative given the powerful, educational function of media (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). It has been argued that the reproduction of myths in the media regarding sexual violence and intimate partner violence provide the script for men’s violence towards women (Edwards, 2020). These scripts then continue to be reproduced in private settings where VAW largely takes place. This is further replicated in public arenas such as courtrooms, to which the media has access.

New narratives supporting rape myths are continually developing. Rough sex gone wrong (RSGW) is increasingly gaining traction as a rape myth and is providing men with readily available defences to justify VAW. RSGW goes hand in hand with victim-blaming (Edwards, 2020) and was prominent in the prosecution of the murder of Grace (Yardley, 2020). It reframes male violence as part of a consensual sexual relationship involving sadomasochism in cases that result in death (Yardley, 2020). Even women’s attempts to resist are branded as “play acting” in a “rape game” (Edwards, 2020, p. 300). This poses a serious challenge due to the overlapping nature between definitions of rough sex and sexual violence, (Chelsea-Jade et al., 2022).

In prosecutions of RSGW trials overseas, defence stories have claimed that the victim initiated rough sex and that it was their preferred form of sexual intercourse (Edwards, 2020). Evidence suggests that some juries have been persuaded by this narrative and delivered *not guilty* verdicts as a result. Some 43 instances of this occurred between 2000 and 2018 in the UK alone (Edwards, 2020; Yardley, 2020). However,

rough sex resulting in accidental death is not well evidenced. Consensual rough sex, typically, is not correlated with violence or injuries that are more than superficial (Burch & Salmon, 2019). It should be remembered that it is not relevant— if Grace wanted rough sex, she did not ask to be murdered.

VAW and the media

News media are very influential in determining what is topical to the society in which they are reporting (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). Such influence is a powerful tool for drawing attention to problems such as VAW and has the potential to drive legislative and social change (Impe, 2019). However, at its worst, media influence can fuel VAW, reinforce stereotypes and contribute to obscuring social issues (Dissanayake & Bracewell, 2022).

Decisions regarding what is and what is not newsworthy are largely filtered through a western, heteronormative, male lens, that contributes to the world in which society operates (Carll, 2003; Gilchrist, 2010). This has implications across all aspects of this social issue, from the likelihood of women experiencing abuse to seek help, to the justice process where jurors, lawyers and judges are informed by the media in their social environment (Carll, 2003; Fanslow et al., 2010). News media have been heavily criticised for their representation of VAW as isolated events, where blame is assigned to either the victim or perpetrator who are othered (Carll, 2003; Sutherland et al., 2016).

Victim blaming in VAW is often justified through persistent and pervasive myths about the morality of women through the interrogation of their behaviour and disbelief that the event was as severe as reported or occurred at all (Milesi et al., 2020). This can be seen in the binary that media will often reinforce between good and bad victims. Good victims are “seen as innocent and worth saving or avenging, whereas bad women are seen

as unworthy and beyond redemption” (Gilchrist, 2010, p. 3). These binaries justify the value of some lives over others and serve to mediate feminine sexuality (Gilchrist, 2010). Similarly, perpetrators are also othered through news representation as being sick or disturbed individuals. This supports the myth that VAW is a result of a particular pathology without examining the social root of the issue: the unequal position of men and women in society (Carll, 2003, p. 1603; Wardle, 2007). However, Carter et al. (2014) differed from Carll (2003), concluding that in domestic violence reporting, perpetrators are often portrayed sympathetically. This narrative emphasises that an otherwise normal man was compelled by outside forces in a spontaneous incident that has resulted in violence (Yardley, 2020). Whether the perpetrator is othered or framed sympathetically, the structural causes of VAW remain unacknowledged.

The media have also focussed on the valuing of certain subgroups of women over others (Stillman, 2007). For example, news media’s almost singular infatuation of reporting on VAW that occurs against young, conventionally attractive, wealthy, white women. This phenomenon has been coined “missing white girl syndrome” (Stillman, 2007). Research in this field has found that indigenous women and women of colour are not only underrepresented but largely invisible in the media despite their overrepresentation as victims of VAW (Gilchrist, 2010). Gilchrist’s (2010) study found that First Nation women in Canada were five times more likely to experience a violent death than other Canadian women and they received three-and-a-half times less coverage in the media. Further, any articles were shorter and not likely to appear on the front page of print media. There are likely to be similarities across other indigenous populations globally, including Māori. This research does not aim to focus on this issue, but it is important to acknowledge its significance.

Media guidelines for reporting on VAW

Guidelines for journalists exist in a variety of forms. The Associated Press Stylebook first published in 1977 tends to focus on grammar and usage (Boston University, n.d.) and has little advice for reporting on sexual violence other than being mindful of local legislation regarding terminology. Wood et al. (2013) found similar in their review of *Intro: A Beginners Guide to Professional News Journalism* which provides guidance for journalists in Aotearoa New Zealand. They found a mere “three sentences – in a 453 page book – that are both inadequate and inaccurate” (Wood et al., 2013, p. 9).

As a response to media reporting of VAW, many countries have developed guidelines for journalists to monitor the way in which they report these tragic events (Sutherland et al., 2016). Guidelines specifically developed for reporting on domestic and family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand (Edmond & Hann, 2007) suggested journalists:

1. Identify the murder/incident as domestic violence.
2. Place it in the context of local and national statistics and recent events.
3. Provide information about the nature of domestic violence.
4. Use experts as sources (including referrals to helping agencies).
5. Name family violence as a crime.

Guidelines specific to reporting sexual violence provided the following six points for journalists to consider when reporting sexual violence (Wood et al., 2013).

1. Sexual violence is not “just sex”.
2. It is rare for a survivor to lie about being raped.
3. Violent stranger danger sexual violence is rare.
4. Unfortunately, rapists do not stand out.
5. Being raped is worse than being accused of rape.
6. Sexual violence has no excuses.

These guidelines were further developed with the sexual violence sector to provide a more comprehensive set of best practice for journalists (Toah-NNEST, n.d.). They have been available since approximately 2018, however we were unable to locate a copy in the public domain.

The *AP Stylebook* and *Intro: A Beginner’s Guide to Professional News Journalism* have an online presence and were relatively easy to locate. They are accessible to the media in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere, but with their focus on language usage have little relevance for reporting sexual violence. Those guidelines developed specifically for the family violence and sexual violence sectors are relevant, particularly the sexual violence guidelines, but difficult to locate. The media are unlikely to be using these guidelines due to their inaccessibility. This contrasts with the strict *Media Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide* (Ministry of Health, 2021). Codified in Sections 71 and 71A of the Coroners Act 2006, guidelines to assist media were established by the Suicide Prevention Office in collaboration with a cross section of Aotearoa New Zealand media organisations.

Research methods

This project used a single case to study media reports. Any woman who has died from VAW is worthy of being the focus of a case study. For the purpose of this research where only one case was studied, an influential case was chosen for the extent of data that it provided (Wiebe et al., 2010). For this reason, the murder of Grace was chosen as the case to examine, however, Grace’s case is not necessarily representative of others (Babbie, 2016). Due to the extent of reporting on the case, and the heightened attention devoted to it, the reporting is likely to have an increased impact.

Data was collected using the Newztext electronic database, an archive of over 19 Aotearoa New Zealand newspaper sources. Among these 19 newspapers are the two

largest producers of online news, *Stuff* and the *New Zealand Herald*; together, they have the largest readership base (Roy Morgan, 2021). The database was searched by using the keywords “Grace Millane” with a date range that encompassed the period of the murder trial and was limited to *Stuff* and the *New Zealand Herald*. Potential articles were screened by reading the headline and the first paragraphs of the article to ensure that each article in the data pool met the inclusion criteria. The articles were excluded if they did not meet the criteria or were duplicate articles. Although the media landscape is increasingly diverse, we limited the inclusion of articles as follows:

1. Articles were published between the 4th of November 2019, when jury selection for the trial began, to the 22nd of November 2019 when the jury gave their verdict.
2. The articles must address the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane.

Document analysis was used to generate themes from the news articles using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first author examined each article to familiarise herself with the data set and coded the emerging common themes. New codes were established where needed for emerging themes. Articles were then reread by both authors to ensure that the codes and themes were accurate. Although the process of data collection was unobtrusive, the method of data analysis of documents was not. Researchers use their own cultural understandings of the social world to engage with the socially constructed meanings embedded within the documents (Bowen, 2009).

Ethics

The project was peer reviewed, and it was determined that an ethics approval was not necessary as it was analysing data available in the public arena. The primary focus of this research was the way news media engaged with this story, the ethical issue

at the forefront was the potential impact of using Grace’s story as a topic of research, especially for people who knew and loved her. We did not reach out to Grace’s family as we did not have ethical approval to do so. The data highlighted a previous victim of this perpetrator which has been commented on in the findings below. We endeavoured to be particularly sensitive from the outset to ensure that both Grace and the previous victim were upheld with dignity. This at times was challenged by the data which highlighted the ways journalists did not achieve this sensitivity. However, it is our hope that social workers and others will support the need to continually draw attention to and challenge injustices to promote change.

Limitations

As with any research, there are limitations to this data-collection method. By analysing media articles alone, a relationship cannot be drawn between media reporting and societal behaviour or thinking and, therefore, the impacts on victim-survivors remain unknown (Scott et al., 2014). Due to the scale of this research, generalisation is not possible, subsequently the extent to which the findings of this research are applicable to other cases is unknown. The in-depth analysis of one case would not be considered representative of most acts of VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019). It does, however, provide further opportunities for research to be conducted on a bigger scale that could compare the findings of this research to other cases.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the news articles revealed five themes. The first two themes, victim blaming and minimisation, are related to the rape myths discussed above. The third theme focussed on how the perpetrator was othered by focusing on his maladaptive psychopathology. The fourth highlighted other factors that were framed

as contributing to Grace's death and the final theme outlined how journalist guidelines were not followed.

Theme 1: Victim blaming

Victim blaming is a response that both implicitly or explicitly suggests that the victim is to blame for the sexual violence they have experienced. Across the 25 articles, 11 articles included victim blaming language or narratives that were used covertly in the context of RSGW. An example of a narrative that was heavily reported was Grace's sexual history included sexual acts from past relationships, dating application use and websites linked to bondage, domination, submission, and masochism (BDSM). While the BDSM narrative was dominant across the 25 articles, only twice was there reference to the ways Grace had safely participated in these sexual acts historically.

Other examples of victim blaming language included lengthy quotes from the perpetrator where he described Grace initiating rough sex: "Grace brought up the topic of bondage and asked him to hold her down and grab her neck" (Hurley, 2019b, np; Owen, 2019a, np); "Millane enjoyed her partner putting his hands around her neck" (Hurley, 2019d, np). There were 22 other sentences across the 25 articles with similar connotations that enhanced a victim-blaming narrative.

Theme 2: Minimisation

Minimisation or downplaying the significance of Grace's death, was evident across the 25 articles. Grace's death was frequently referred to as a "sexual misadventure" (Hurley, 2019f, np), a "perfectly ordinary, casual sexual encounter between a young couple" (Hurley & Leask, 2019a, np) or "A perfectly ordinary sexual encounter" (Gay, 2019a, np). Several references were made about Grace being strangled as "an act designed to enhance their sexual pleasure that went wrong" (Hurley & Leask, 2019a, np). These versions

of what occurred that night came from the defence lawyer's argument, which was a significant part of the trial. However, more care could have been taken by journalists to minimise the impact this kind of testimony has in enhancing rape myths in their reporting.

In nine of the 25 articles, similar minimising language was used to describe not only Grace's death, but a previous victim of the perpetrator. This person described the perpetrator suffocating her during a sexual act by holding her down so that she could not breathe. She had to pretend loss of consciousness for him to stop. In all the articles that described this, it was never referred to as an assault or a criminal act. Instead, it was referred to as the "suffocation episode" or the "incident" (Gay, 2019b). One article in which the previous victim's story was the main narrative, the headline focused on her emotional response to being asked to continue giving evidence the following day, rather than her testimony of assault. The article and its headline minimised the serious nature of the assault. By contrast in another article, this victim's story was headlined: "I was gasping, I couldn't breathe" (Hurley, 2019e,np) giving appropriate attention to the seriousness of the assault she survived. However, even in this article, her story is minimised by not referring to what happened to her as an assault or a criminal act.

Theme 3: Othering

Carter et al. (2014) found that, in news media reporting of domestic violence murders, perpetrators are framed as either being model citizens whose actions are a surprise, or that their maladaptive psychopathology is the cause of their actions. The latter was certainly how the perpetrator of Grace Millane's death was framed. The majority of this framing is on attributes that other him. In every article he is framed negatively with particular attention devoted to his "labyrinth of storytelling and lies" (Hurley, 2019a, np) "A pathological liar" (Leask, 2019, np)

The articles referenced the inaccuracies told to police or the dehumanising actions he took following Grace's death, including photographing her body, going on a date, and his Google search history.

Theme 4: Other factors

Other factors, such as the consumption of alcohol, were used in the media as an explanation as to why Grace had died, rather than acknowledging her death in the context of VAW. In seven of the 25 articles, both Grace and the perpetrator's consumption of alcohol were used as an explanation or as a contributing factor to the cause of her death: such as "Tequila seemingly the choice of alcohol for the night" (Hurley & Leask, 2019b, np) Comments made in articles included "alcohol was a factor" (Owen, 2019b, np) "alcohol could inhibit the way a person bounces back" (Hurley, 2019c, np) and how the perpetrator and "Millane order[ed] several more drinks" (Hurley & Leask, 2019b, np). This angle further contributed to blaming Grace for her death.

Theme 5: Lack of adherence to guidelines

The articles indicated that the guidelines for journalists reporting sexual violence and domestic or family violence (Edmond & Hann, 2007; Toah-NNEST, n.d.; Wood et al., 2013) were not used. Only one of the 25 articles put Grace's death in the wider context of VAW in Aotearoa, New Zealand. As Mau (2019) pointed out, "violence against women takes many forms". Three reports contextualised Grace's death in VAW, another three articles included relevant information about VAW, four included expert testimony or outside experts that gave further information about VAW, but none included helplines for victims or perpetrators of VAW. There were two articles that significantly highlighted Grace's death as fitting within the wider societal issue of VAW and one that appeared to follow most

of the journalists' guidelines for reporting on family violence as outlined above.

In every article, Grace's death was described in a way that made it clear a crime had occurred. Reports were cautious as to how the crime was labelled given the ongoing nature of the trial during the reporting period. Yet, as previously noted, another victim's assault was not highlighted as a criminal act, despite her being suffocated and held down non-consensually during a sexual act. While some articles acknowledged Grace's death as fitting within the wider societal issue of VAW, warnings of graphic content were provided in seven of the 25 articles, all of which were produced by the *New Zealand Herald*.

Discussion

The predominant rape myth that was reported throughout the news representation of the murder trial, was RSGW. The violence towards Grace was discussed as being part of a consensual relationship whereby her death was a tragic accident (Edwards, 2020). This is evident in quotes from the defence lawyer with the sentiment that this was "a perfectly ordinary sexual encounter" (Gay, 2019a, np) with the emphasis on the BDSM narrative. Although in Grace's particular story her perpetrator was found guilty, this is not always the case for victims whose stories do not make the news. The degree to which the RSGW rape myth impacts juries is largely unknown, although there is some evidence suggesting that juries have been persuaded by this myth and delivered not guilty verdicts (Edwards, 2020). The impact of the emphasis on the rough-sex narrative is that it highlights the hurdles victim-survivors have to go through to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the police, the court system and the public (Bows & Westmarland, 2017).

The RSGW rape myth emphasises that women are responsible for what happens to them including their deaths, further obscuring the structural inequality that is

the true cause of VAW (Yardley, 2020). In this sense, the attribution of alcohol playing a fundamental role in causing Grace's death also places responsibility on Grace because of her choices. Quotes such as "the backpacker [had] several drinks on the night she died, including tequila shots and cocktails" (Hurley, 2019g, np) emphasised the choices Grace made and framed them as having contributed to her death. This highlights that for women to achieve legitimacy, and therefore status as a good victim, each decision they make leading up to their assault is scrutinised with the advantage of hindsight to discredit them (Bows & Westmarland, 2017; Burt, 1980; Gilchrist, 2010; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). This pattern of discrediting the legitimacy of victims means they are not only scrutinised for their actions immediately leading up to their assault, but also in other areas of their prior lives.

The use of minimising language throughout the articles was an example of what happens to victim-survivors when they report or tell their stories. The description of the abuse used varying degrees of minimisation. For Grace, most of the language that minimised what happened to her were quotes from the defence lawyer who argued that her death was the result of an accident. This highlights the challenge journalists face to accurately report on events but also to consider the implications and authority they have in that reporting.

The minimising language was even more apparent in the story about the perpetrator's previous victim. The abuse she survived was not described as a criminal event despite being physically suffocated by the perpetrator and feigning unconsciousness to stop the assault. Instead, this was referred to as the suffocation episode (Gay, 2019b, np). Given the high status attributed to Grace's case because of the public attention, her story was likely minimised to a lesser extent than the previous victim who was not afforded the same status (Stillman, 2007).

Such reporting is likely more representative of the experience of victims' media coverage (Dissanayake & Bracewell, 2022; Ringin et al., 2022; Stillman, 2007).

The reproduction and proliferation of rape myths in media representations have provided the script for VAW which is then reproduced in both private and public arenas (Edwards, 2020). A surprising finding of this study was how this script would present so plainly. In a few articles, the perpetrator's explanation of the RSGW rape myth was detailed in an extensive and dominating way. In the context where the victim's narrative cannot be shared, it allows for the perpetrator's uninterrupted authorship of the events and marginalisation of the victim's voice (Carter et al., 2014).

Grace's character was put on trial in the courtroom and then broadcast in the public arena through the news media (McGlynn, 2017). Her previous sexual relationships and dating application use were extensively reported on with entire articles focussed on this aspect of the trial. This framing of Grace served to reduce her credibility as a victim and implied that she was more likely to consent (McGlynn, 2017). Although the defence lawyer stated there would be no blame or shame assigned to Grace throughout the trial, the emphasis on her sexual history served to reinforce the binary between good and bad victims and mediate feminine sexuality, thereby blaming and shaming her (Gilchrist, 2010).

Perpetrators are either portrayed sympathetically or othered with an emphasis on their sick or disturbing nature (Carll, 2003; Carter et al., 2014). The latter was certainly true in this case, which possibly contributed to the high levels of public scrutiny of the perpetrator before his trial even began. The impact of othering detracts attention from the institutional power relations that underpin violence between men and women (Livholts, 2021). Notably, the perpetrator's actions were described after the trial as

“callous” (Owen, 2019c, np) highlighting possible maladaptive psychopathology.

This research found that rape myths were reproduced in the news reporting the prosecution of Grace’s murder and were exacerbated by a lack of adherence to any of the reporting guidelines for journalists. The impact of these two factors meant that Grace’s story was isolated from the context of all forms of VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand, ignoring an important social issue (Carter et al., 2014). This is of particular concern in Grace’s story due to the scale of interest attributed to this singular event by the public and the media, meaning the powerful, educational function of the media was not optimised (Christian, 2018; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). This has concerning implications for victims and perpetrators of VAW as it perpetuates the violence victims experience in the way it represents them (Livholts, 2021).

Conclusion

We aimed to interrogate how journalists used their authority to construct the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane. We concluded that through their covert victim-blaming narrative, with its roots in a western, heteronormative, male lens, the reporting of this trial “did violence”, not only to Grace, but to all victim-survivors (Carll, 2003; Gilchrist, 2010; Livholts, 2021). Journalists have significant power in framing the way readers understand social issues (Bowen, 2009). Interrogating their authority and their contribution to the construction of a social issue like VAW is imperative and the responsibility of all, including social workers.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, social workers are challenged to understand the mechanisms of oppression, interrogate power, authority, and privilege, and advocate for human rights (Social Workers Registration Board, n.d.). However, social workers are not immune to the power and authority of the media. The prevalence of VAW in Aotearoa

New Zealand suggests they are likely to be working with clients who are victims of sexual violence, family violence and more generally, VAW. They need to be vigilant and ensure they are not replicating the messaging in media reports. Further, they need to understand that media reports can isolate victims of VAW and reinforce the rape myths. The challenge for social workers is to advocate for their clients and promote principles of human rights in the face of the media’s power in upholding the rape myths that are prevalent not only in the media but also in our communities. Further research should be undertaken to determine the extent of the media impact on social workers and how this influences social work practice.

The wider field of VAW is continually challenged by the differing terminology used to describe such a diverse scope of violence. The emergence of new myths such as the RSGW myth is evidence of the ever-changing landscape of myths regarding VAW (Fanslow et al., 2010). Guidelines for reporting sexual violence need to be regularly reviewed and updated. They not only need to be accessible but also an accepted industry standard supported by newspaper editors. The strict guidelines on reporting suicide are an example as to how this could be successfully achieved. Consideration could be given to legislating the commitment to accurate and respectful media reporting, an expectation that is contained in Section 3 of the Victims of Offences Act. This could have a powerful impact on how VAW is presented in the media and, consequently, how it is perceived in society.

Received: 9 November 2023

Accepted: 12 December 2023

Published: 16 April 2024

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge Grace Millane, her loved ones and all those impacted by

violence against women. We see you and your suffering and walk alongside you towards a future where everyone can thrive.

References

- Anastasio, P. A., & Costa, D. M. (2004). Twice hurt: How newspaper coverage may reduce empathy and engender blame for female victims of crime. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 51(9–10), 535–542. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-004-5463-7>
- Babbie, E. R. (2016). *The practice of social research* (14th ed.). Cengage Learning US.
- BBC News. (2019). *Grace Millane murder trial: Backpacker died "accidentally during sex", murder accused claims*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-esssex-50468890>
- Boston University. (n.d.). *Associated Press style guide*. https://www.bu.edu/com/files/2021/04/WC_apstyle.pdf
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Bows, H., & Westmarland, N. (2017). Rape of older people in the United Kingdom: Challenging the "real-rape" stereotype. *British Journal of Criminology* 57(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azv116>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.
- Burch, R. L., & Salmon, C. (2019). The rough stuff: Understanding aggressive consensual sex. *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, 5(4), 383–393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40806-019-00196-y>
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38(2), 217–230. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.38.2.217>
- Carl, E. K. (2003). News portrayal of violence and women: Implications for public policy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46(12), 1601–1610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203254616>
- Carter, C., McLaughlin, L., & Steiner, L. (2014). *The Routledge companion to media and gender*. Routledge.
- Chelsea-Jade, S., Marianne, E.-S., & Dominic, W. (2022). Masochist or murderer? A discourse analytic study exploring social constructions of sexually violent male perpetrators, female victims-survivors and the rough sex defense on Twitter. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.867991>
- Christian, B. (2018, December 12). Grace Millane: New Zealand pays tribute as thousands attend vigils for killed backpacker. *Evening Standard*. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/grace-millane-new-zealand-pays-tribute-as-thousands-attend-vigils-for-killed-backpacker-a4015071.html>
- Coroners Act 2006. <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2006/0038/latest/DLM377057.html?src=qs>
- Dissanayake, H., & Bracewell, P. (2022). Family violence in the news: An analysis of media reporting of family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Kōtuitui*, 17(2), 242–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2021.1976224>
- Domestic Violence Act 1995. <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1995/0086/latest/DLM372117.html>
- Edmond, S., & Hann, S. (2007). *Reporting domestic/family violence. Guidelines for journalists*. It's not OK. Ministry of Social Development. <https://silo.tips/download/reporting-domestic-family-violence#>
- Edwards, S. S. M. (2020). Consent and the "rough sex" defence in rape, murder, manslaughter and gross negligence. *The Journal of Criminal Law*, 84(4), 293–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022018320943056>
- Express. (2019, November 19). Grace Millane was member of BDSM dating sites and asked ex-partner to choke her during sex, court hears. *Evening Standard*. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/grace-millane-was-member-of-bdsm-dating-sites-and-asked-expartner-to-choke-her-during-sex-court-hears-a4290251.html>
- Fanslow, J., Robinson, E., Crengle, S., & Perese, L. (2010). Juxtaposing beliefs and reality: Prevalence rates of intimate partner violence and attitudes to violence and gender roles reported by New Zealand women. *Violence Against Women*, 16(7), 812–831. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210373710>
- Gay, E. (2019a, November 7). Grace Millane murder accused "went on Tinder date while her body was in his apartment". *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/117139286/grace-millane-murder-accused-went-on-tinder-date-while-her-body-was-in-his-apartment>
- Gay, E. (2019b, November 12). Grace Millane murder trial: Witness weeps as she's told she has to come back for a second day. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/117316088/grace-millane-murder-trial-witness-weeps-as-shes-told-she-has-to-come-back-for-a-second-day>
- Gilchrist, K. (2010). "Newsworthy" victims?: Exploring differences in Canadian local press coverage of missing/murdered Aboriginal and white women. *Feminist Media Studies*, 10(4), 373–390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2010.514110>
- Grabosky, P. N., & Wilson, P. R. (1989). *Journalism and justice: How crime is reported*. Pluto Press.
- Henshilwood, E. (2019, November 27). Justice for Grace Millane: A new Commonwealth contempt framework? <https://inform.org/2019/11/27/justice-for-grace-millane-a-new-commonwealth-contempt-framework-erica-henshilwood/>
- Hurley, S. (2019a, November 21). Grace Millane murder trial: "It was an accidental death" - defence. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-murder-trial-it-was-an-accidental-death-defence/KA434NHDLXH2GSGPGH4RPA3O5E/>
- Hurley, S. (2019b, November 14). Grace Millane murder trial: Accused admitted she was dead in second police interview. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-murder-trial-accused-admitted-she-was-dead-in-second-police-interview/ALIFX5E23GSE2OXLZE7COY6O54/>
- Hurley, S. (2019c, November 13). Grace Millane murder trial: Accused feared backpacker was a "catfish", lied to police about night she died. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-murder-trial-accused-feared-backpacker-was-a-catfish-lied-to-police-about-night-she-died/EKV55CUGZVNOHRBRY2S55T7EOA/>
- Hurley, S. (2019d, November 21). Grace Millane murder trial: Jury hears all the evidence as defence closes case with

- Whiplr messages. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-murder-trial-jury-hears-all-the-evidence-as-defence-closes-case-with-whiplr-messages/AV4EQPO4Y7PFAAEHPOJ4QAOXRY/>
- Hurley, S. (2019e, November 12). Grace Millane murder trial: Pathologist tells jury backpacker died from “pressure on the neck”. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-murder-trial-pathologist-tells-jury-backpacker-died-from-pressure-on-the-neck/7SX5REBZ2T3XZ5R5LUAY72D7UA/>
- Hurley, S. (2019f, November 20). Grace Millane murder trial: Sexual preferences and accused’s “life through Tinder” canvassed. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-murder-trial-sexual-preferences-and-accuseds-life-through-tinder-canvassed/TB2GEP7X2KAFFB5IMN4OYOW37A/>
- Hurley, S. (2019g, November 19). Grace Millane trial: Accused “playing out his life through Tinder”—defence lawyer. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-trial-accused-playing-out-his-life-through-tinder-defence-lawyer/OWOO7XXQ3PNUMDB4ZX7BRCGKUY/>
- Hurley, S., & Leask, A. (2019a, November 7). Grace Millane trial: Jury hears two versions of events on night backpacker died. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/grace-millane-trial-jury-hears-two-versions-of-events-on-night-backpacker-died/DXYJE5PL2IUADYOZNOQVOJV45E/>
- Hurley, S., & Leask, A. (2019b, November 8). “Probable blood”: The tests in room of Grace Millane’s alleged killer. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/probable-blood-the-tests-in-room-of-grace-millanes-alleged-killer/5AG4GDUBOBLN5SFHBMZS7LMKUA/>
- Hutt, K. (2020, November 20). Grace Millane’s family “heartbroken” after her father David dies of cancer. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/123455211/grace-millanes-family-heartbroken-after-her-father-david-dies-of-cancer>
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2023). *Global social work statement of ethical principles*. <https://www.ifsw.org/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles/>
- Impe, A. (2019). *Reporting on violence against women and girls: A handbook for journalists*. UNESCO Publishing. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371524/PDF/371524eng.pdf.multi>
- Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B., & Lozano, R. (2002). *World report on violence and health*. World Health Organisation. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615_eng.pdf
- Leask, A. (2019, November 22). Millane murder verdict: Murderer’s stepbrother “shed tears” at result, but pleased justice served for Grace. *NZ Herald*. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/millane-murder-verdict-murderers-stepbrother-shed-tears-at-result-but-pleased-justice-served-for-grace/KWV5Y7AFRY2DXPPLH2VGOQ6AZE/>
- Livholts, M. (2021). The loathsome, the rough type and the monster: The violence and wounding of media texts on rape. In V. Burr & J. Hearn (Eds.), *Sex, violence and the body* (pp. 194–211). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths: In review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18, 133–164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1994.tb00448.x>
- Lloyd, M. (2020). Examining domestic violence and abuse in mainstream and social media: Representations and responses. In S. Ramon, M. Lloyd, & B. Penhale (Eds.), *Gendered domestic violence and abuse in popular culture* (pp. 33-60). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83867-781-720201003>
- Mau, A. (2019, November 10). The cycle of silencing victims is beyond frustrating. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/117282610/alison-mau-the-cycle-of-silencing-victims-is-beyond-frustrating>
- McGlynn, C. (2017). Rape trials and sexual history evidence: Reforming the law on third party evidence. *Journal of Criminal Law*, 81(5), 367–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022018317728824>
- Milesi, P., Süssenbach, P., Bohner, G., & Megías, J. L. (2020). The interplay of modern myths about sexual aggression and moral foundations in the blaming of rape victims. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(1), 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2622>
- Ministry of Health. (2021). *Media guidelines for reporting on suicide*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide>
- New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse. (n.d). *Intimate partner violence*. <https://www.nzfvc.org.nz/intimate-partner-violence>
- New Zealand Family Violence Death Review Committee. (2021). *Intimate partner violence deaths in Aotearoa New Zealand: Fact sheets*. New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse. <https://library.nzfvc.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=7161>
- Owen, C. (2019a, November 14). Grace Millane’s alleged murderer admits disposing of her body in second police interview. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/117402739/grace-millanes-alleged-murderer-admits-disposing-of-her-body-in-second-police-interview>
- Owen, C. (2019b, November 19). Grace Millane murder trial: Alcohol “a likely factor in backpacker’s death”. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/117540666/grace-millane-murder-trial-alcohol-a-likely-factor-in-backpackers-death>
- Owen, C. (2019c, December 18). Grace Millane: Backpacker’s murderer loses conviction and sentence appeal. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/300187651/grace-millane-backpackers-murderer-loses-conviction-and-sentence-appeal>
- Owen, C., & Saxton, A. (2018, December 15). Grace Millane: “We are listening,” says the Government. *Stuff*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/109353207/grace-millane-british-backpacker-will-take-her-final-journey-home-this-weekend>
- Renau, D., Stanley-Clarke, N., & Mafie’o, T. (2023). Social workers and their understanding of neoliberalism, advocacy, and othering. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 35(3), 44–57. <https://anzswjournal.nz/anzsw/article/view/997>
- Ringin, L., Moran, M., & Thompson, S. C. (2022). Analysis of reporting of family violence reporting in print media in regional Western Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 46(3), 255–261. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13205>
- Roy Morgan. (2021). *Almost 3 million New Zealanders read newspapers and nearly 1.8 million read magazines*

- in 2021. Roy Morgan. <https://www.roymorgan.com/findings/8776-new-zealand-roy-morgan-readership-results-newspapers-and-magazines-june-2021-202109130613>
- Scott, W., Metzler, K., & Flick, U. (2014). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Social Workers Registration Board. (n.d.). *Ngā Paerewa Kaiakatanga Matua core competence standards*. <https://swrb.govt.nz/practice/core-competence-standards/>
- Stillman, S. (2007). "The missing white girl syndrome": Disappeared women and media activism. *Gender and Development*, 15(3), 491–502. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070701630665>
- Sutherland, G., McCormack, A., Easteal, P., Holland, K., & Pirkis, J. (2016). Media guidelines for the responsible reporting of violence against women: A review of evidence and issues. *Australian Journalism Review*, 38(1), 5–17. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2832441
- Toah-NNEST. (n.d.). *Reporting sexual violence: Guidelines for journalists*. New Zealand Government.
- UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). *Gender-based violence*. <https://www.unhcr.org/gender-based-violence.html>
- United Nations. (1993). *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/eliminationvaw.pdf>
- United Nations. (2018). *UN crime trend statistics: Sexual violence*. <https://dataunodc.un.org/data/crime/sexual-violence>
- Wardle, C. (2007). Monsters and angels: Visual press coverage of child murders in the USA and UK, 1930-2000. *Journalism*, 8(3), 263–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884907076461>
- Wiebe, E., Mills, A. J., & Durepos, G. (2010). *Encyclopedia of case study research*. SAGE Publications.
- Wood, N., Dickson, S., & Tauwi Caucus of TOAH-NNEST. (2013). *Reporting sexual violence in Aotearoa New Zealand*. <https://toah-nnest.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/03.ReportingSexualViolence.pdf>
- World Health Organisation. (2005). *Researching violence against women: Practical guidelines for researchers and activists*. World Health Organisation.
- World Health Organisation. (2021). *Violence against women*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
- Yardley, E. (2020). The killing of women in "sex games gone wrong": An analysis of femicides in Great Britain 2000–2018. *Violence Against Women*, 27(11), 1840–1861. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220966956>
- Ylikoski, P., & Zahle, J. (2019). Case study research in the social sciences. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 78, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2019.10.003>