



## Media and Gendered Violence in Canada and Romania

By Valentina Marinescu

### Abstract

The present comparative analysis starts from the preeminence and widespread social issue of violence against women and children in the entire world and focused on two countries: Romania and Canada. Despite the fact that these countries seemed to have little in common regarding the economic, social and political life we consider that the phenomenon of violence against women and children displayed some fundamental, basic characteristics that could be similar. Moreover, a focused international comparison might shed new light in this area. The article will try to offer an answer at the following question: What is the link between the ways in which journalists re-present gender in their portrayals of violence against women and the general legal framework that regulate this issue in the case of Canada and Romania?

### Key words

gender violence, domestic violence, child abuse, media

## Domestic violence in Canada and Romania

In 2006, *Statistics Canada Today* (2006) released a comprehensive summary about the prevalence and severity of violence against women in Canada. Findings from the report show that women are more likely than men to be the victims of the most severe forms of spousal assault, as well as spousal homicide, sexual assault and stalking. Trends in various types of violence against women, as recorded in Canadian police statistics, are mixed. Sexual assault is one of the most under-reported crimes. Fewer than 10% of sexual assaults in both survey years were reported to the police. The report found that eight out of every 10

spousal offenders were reported to police on only one occasion during the 10-year time frame. Persons accused of repeated spousal violence (those with two to four police-reported incidents of spousal violence) accounted for 18% of the total. Only 1% was considered chronic abusers and they were involved in five or more reported incidents.

According to the same report, victims' decisions to report violence to criminal justice and social services depend on a variety of factors, some of which include fear of the offender, shame and embarrassment, and regional availability of services. The majority of victims of spousal assault and over 90% of sexual assault victims did not

seek support from the criminal justice system or social services. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of female victims of spousal assault who contacted police or social services remained steady, with the same trend for the number of women accessing shelter services.

In Romania the statistics concerning the most grave offences of violence (Nicoara, Ojog 2006) show that in 2005, 40 parents were victims of the homicide committed by their children, there were 54 victims of murder committed by spouses, 29 victims of body injuries or grave body injuries committed by spouses and 11% were victims of hits that caused the death of the spouse. Referring to children victims of their parents' violence, figures show that in 2005, 23 victims of murder were recorded, out of which 15 were minors; also, 43 children were victims of parents who ill-treated them and 20 were raped by their parents. Moreover, in the same year, 5 children were the object of sexual corruption by their parents. In relation to economic violence, the same report indicates that in 2005, parents abandoned 2837 minor children. The emotional/psychological and the social forms of violence against women and children are not easy to reduce to statistics and almost impossible to punish.

The phenomenon of family violence in Romania is a "dual phenomenon," existent not only on the real plane, but also in Romanian women's and men's "collective mentality." In 2003, data resulting from national research regarding "Violence inside Families and at Working Places" (CPE 2003, 114) showed both the *real* manifestation of the family violence phenomenon for the whole studied sample of the population (n=1250 individuals).

14% from the sample declared that they had been victims of family violence during their lifetime and 8% declared the same for the last 12 months before the inquiry. The "collective mentality" was reflected in the number of persons who agreed with assertions like: "beating comes from heaven," "the husband who does not beat his wife does not truly love her," and "a wife is her husband's property."

The shape of this mixed set of relations is the way in

which models of preventing and fighting violence against children and women from the West and North America, in particular, are different from those utilised in other cultures. For example, in Romania, as compared with Canada, the beating of a child by his/her parents is still considered a part of the socialisation process by the family. Education is for a large amount of the population a family issue and the "law for preventing and fighting against domestic violence" does not contain any specific regulations related to these practices, as opposed, for example, to the Youth Protection Act in Quebec (1977).

### Media's role

In this context, an important question arises and its answer constitutes the main research objective of the comparative between Romanian and Canadian: To what degree and in what way do the mass media contribute to the preservation and consolidation of violence against women and children as a social issue?



According to the existing literature, media plays a significant role as part of the social control apparatus, reproducing as well as representing violent behaviour and social order. This media role works at two levels, that of the content of media message and that of the practices of journalism. The research literature points primarily to two effects of media images of "violent behaviour." One is the amplification of crime and violent behaviour, and the second is the creation

of anxiety and fear of violence and crime. Many scholars have emphasised the role of the media in defining and shaping problematic social reality. Sociologists studying the social construction of violent behaviour have suggested that journalism contributes to the emergence of social problems by dramatising events, managing public indignation, or engineering “moral panics” about certain types of crime and deviance (Cohen 1972; Cohen and Young 1973). It has been also argued that journalism can serve an active and important role in the process of deviancy amplification. Cohen (1972) has argued that media definitions of reality must not be viewed in isolation but as influencing and being influenced by the reality-defining practices of other social agencies, such as the police, the courts, politicians, and interest groups. The effect that attributed to the joint practices of such institutions is that of a creation of an “amplification spiral.” Within this process, what was initially defined as a problem by the different agencies was subject to increased magnification.

Media texts disseminate and present gender stereotypes as real and natural human characteristics. In fact, as Connell shows, some images of gender-hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity predominate over others (Connell 1995, 615). This tendency in media texts is a matter of subordination of women, authority, aggression, while technical competence and emphasised femininity is subordinate to and defined by this hegemonic masculinity. Organised around themes of dependence, sexual receptivity, and motherhood, this femininity is characterised by “the display of sociability rather than technical competence .... and [by] fragility in mating scenes” (Connell 2002, 1987, 187).

Gender images in the media are frequently seen as delivering natural portraits of women. In fact, as most representations used in media texts, they are social constructions and depend on norms, values and experiences that in some events dominate a given society with a contextual and national character (Brown 1994; Lorber & Farrell 1991; Lorber 2005; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2002).

## The findings

Both the qualitative and the quantitative research methods demonstrate this. Based on a “methods’ triangulation” principle and for validity reasons, two main methods of data collection had been used: quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis. The sample of data analysed is composed by the articles dealing with violence against women and children published by twelve newspapers, six Romanian and six Canadian in the same period of time: 1 June to 31 December 2006. The Romanian newspapers were all central (edited in the country’s capital – Bucharest) and distributed nationwide: *Ziua (The Day)*, *Romania libera (Free Romania)*, *Adevarul (The Truth)*, *Jurnalul National (The National Journal)*, *Libertatea (The Freedom)* and *Gandul (The Thought)*. Only two Canadian newspapers were national-the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* - one was a provincial (from Quebec region) - *Le Soleil* - and three were local (based in Montreal) titles - *La Presse*, *LeDevoir* and the *Gazette*. The total number of daily copies for each title was included and the total number of articles analysed was up to 805 articles: 313 articles in Romania’s and 492 in Canada’s cases respectively.

The comparative results of Canada and Romania showed that both type of national media had defined in a “realistic manner” the violent acts against women by using figurative photos (that is, images intending to deliver the image of a real, actual fact) in 176 and 120 cases for the Canadian and Romanian sample respectively. This fact connects with the findings, which indicated that in both types of press the maximum frequency of publishing such type of article had occurred in the first ten pages of any of the newspapers analysed.

The social order reproduced in both types of national - Canadian and Romanian – newspapers made an appeal at the “primary definers of the violent situation” (the State’s institutions, the Courts, the Police and the set of laws that punish and fight against this type of violent acts). Yet, the findings are in contradiction with the classical definition and place of those “primary definers” (Cohen, 1972, 1996, 2003; Katz, 1988, 1999). This constitutes a paradox from our perspective. In the period selected, the Canadian and Romanian journalists had

only named the police as an “institutional primary definer” in a given situation following the classical vein, as opposed to the other traditional “primary definers: the Court and the Laws, “which appear to be secondary definers” in the sample studied.

For the purpose of this analysis and in order to clarify this paradox, the Court and the Laws have been named “secondary indicators” instead of “secondary definers.” Concerning an organisation fighting against violence, it receives the proper name of “secondary definer” given that it is funded by the Government but it is a non-profit private organisation. This outcome shows the clear differences among the media appeal to public and private in the journals of both countries.

The data of the content analysis shows that the acts, which were under the Police investigation had been covered by the newspapers in a higher ratio than those that were under judiciary’s investigation (Court). On this topic, there has been published 195 Canadian and 271 Romanian articles respectively.

The main legal “pillar” invoked in both Romanian and Canadian articles in relation to images of violence against women was the “Penal Code.” 273 Canadian articles and 69 materials from the Romanian sample made reference to the punishments of the violent act in accordance with the national “Penal Code” stipulations.

An important aspect to note is the way in which mass communication makes public the norms that characterise such communities (Seato, 2005). In this regard, the differences might be stated as follows: the Canadian articles had quoted a large amount of “normative” sources – the experts in violence against women and children’s issues (304 quotations), the advocates (193 quotations), the policemen (326 quotations), the members of the Jury (264 quotations). In the Romanian case, their quotations were set at a minimum: 115 quotations from the Policemen, 25 quotations for the Court’s representatives and only one advocate quoted.

In analysing the way of “framing” the information about

violent acts against women, we used the distinction between simple, short news and in-depth articles. The content analysis results indicate that both Canadian and Romanian media favored the in-depth, large presentations of acts of violence against women (387 articles in the Canadian sample and 205 articles in the Romanian one). Much more, our analysis showed that the accent on gender as the main trait of the actors involved in the violent act disregard important characteristics involved in the journalistic description (for example, age, level of education, occupation, ethnicity and others. Thus, in both types of newspapers (Romanian and Canadian) the journalists cite “gender” and the image of women to construct the notion that a person of feminine gender is the victim of violent acts. We have used the intersection of six main variables in decomposing the “social identities” of the mediatised image of a women – physical traits, psychological characterisation, socio-ethnic belonging to a group, ethnic identity, religious characterisation and “race.” On these bases, the results of the quantitative analysis pointed out a relevant similitude in the hierarchy of main axes of women’s represented images within the media, both in Canadian and Romanian cases.

- a focus on the physical dimension of women’s identities in building their general image, both national media stressing the belonging of the victim to “gender”: feminine;
- the mediatisation through newspapers of the ethnic dimension in the case of women’s images. In this case we count 157 cases in the Canadian newspapers and 63 cases in the Romanian ones; and
- the minimum use of religious affiliation and the reference to “race” – for the Romanian and Canadian articles (60 women were religiously characterised and 84 had been racially differentiated, while in the Romanian case, 9 women were religiously characterised and, respectively, 2 cases in which their presentation inside an article comprised also the reference to “race”).

In the qualitative comparative analysis we establish some “thematic structures” of the texts that could offer us some indications about the elements used by the journalists in re-constructing acts of women and children. We had differentiated among some sets words that

could be considered as “clues” of the macro-structures of the Romanian and Canadian newspapers’ texts:

- words that denote the actors involved in acts of women and children; and
- words that constitute the normative vocabulary”- that is, those words that refer to the state’s institution, the laws and the ways of punishing women and children acts. According to van Dijk (1988:228) the biased and “stereotype-laden” character of a title is particularly true of all information and discourse that presupposes variable and conflicting, social and political attitudes.

One important difference between Romanian and Canadian ways of presenting the issue of violence against women was found in the analysis of the articles’ headlines. Thus, some of the elements that could comprise it were mentioned only in 13 occasions within the Romanian titles, while in the Canadian case they were recorded 116 times. From here, the lexical references at the legal aspects related to the women and children in the Canadian newspapers covered all the stages of punishing and fighting such acts. Words like “the court”, “the process”, “the policemen”, “the law-expert” and “prison” plus “the jail” had built a Canadian legal world more rich and easy to understand than that made only from “prison”, “police” and “law” in the Romanian case.

Regarding the identity of the individuals involved in the violent act, the analysis of the articles’ headlines showed a new difference between the two ways of covering the social issue of violence against women. The Romanian newspapers published articles with a pre-eminent “child-centric” character (65 occurrences of words that were derived from the noun “child”). In the Canadian case there was recorded a “feminine-biased” type of headlines (“woman”, “wife”, “girl”, “mother” were the words which recorded the greater usage within the Canadian titles analysed: 120 occurrences, as compared with the words enclosed in the “child” family - 40 occurrences).

The ways in which journalists topically assigned the positions and role of the women and children in the headlines were as such interesting “indicators” of their subordinate role within the women and children acts

depicted in the newspapers. That way of constructing the headlines had implicitly sent stereotypes related to their first-degree (and socially accepted) positions of helpless victims of the violent acts. Semantically, this common element found in the case of two different types of newspapers also suggested that women and children would have less the role of responsible agents in such events. In other words, both Canadian and Romanian journalists stressed and reconstructed the same “biased” and negative images of women and children as passive actors involved in acts of violence, that is, the role of “perfect victim” that was socially ascribed to them.

### Conclusion

Dobash (1979) traces the origin of violence against women in the structure of the patriarchal family and points out that this is a form of male control and domination within a social hierarchy. Dworkin (1981) places this hierarchy within the context of the “seven tenets of male supremacy.” The second tenet is that “men are physically stronger than women and, for that reason, have dominion over them” (Dworkin 1981, 14). Along with that dominion, she adds, is the capacity to terrorise a whole class of persons (the third tenet) and the right to own women (tenet five) (Dworkin 1981, 14-19). We can assume that our analysis reinforces the above-mentioned theoretical considerations.

Also, our analysis was, to a certain degree, in accordance with the existing literature, the results pointing out that the “reproduction” of social order had deployed both local and transnational traits. In both countries, the reciprocal relations between the state and the media contribute to the projection of a specific social order in relation to violent acts, producing what is nationally thinkable about the nature of crime and strategies to control it. At the transnational level, both media used the police as “primary definers” of the violent acts, but we noticed significant differences related to the reconstruction within the media texts for the practices of the significant social agencies involved in punishing acts of violence against women and children– the courts, politicians (Cohen 1972). The journalistic treatments of raw information seemed to “obey” the same editorial

logic that assign to these kind of texts second-rank place in the hierarchy of news, a sort of half-hard news. This conclusion was in line with the observation of existing literature, according to which (Dowler, Fleming, Muzzatti, 2006):

“The portrayal of crime and justice is blurred, especially within news content, in which the most serious and violent crimes are given an entertaining angle and presented as ‘hard’ news, even though the facts are often distorted and misrepresented.”

Despite the fact that both Canadian and Romanian journalists made an equal appeal at the general legal national framework regulating that domain, we assessed that this type of information was not “adequate” to help the ordinary reader in changing his/her perception about the legal punishments applied in that case. That is, on the basis of the frequencies recorded at this time it was obvious that neither the Canadian nor the Romanian public could know exactly the specific law for preventing and fighting against violence against women and children. Only in four cases for the Romanian sample we recorded the mentioning of law no 217/2003 that is devoted to preventing and fighting against violence against women and children. Moreover, little mention occurred of the steps an individual could follow after such an act took place. From here, despite the differences they displayed in the functioning of the two legal and social work systems, we could suppose that, irrespectively of their geographical, social, ethical or national dependencies, the journalists would expressed a sort of social non-involvement in reporting this type of news, a sort of “self-assumed” neutrality.

● **Writers Bio**

Valentina Marinescu, Ph. D, Reader at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work – Bucharest University (Bucharest, Romania). She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in media and society, and methods of researching mass communication. Her interests lie in media and communication studies in Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania, and in gender studies.

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