

Intimate Partner Femicide in Romania: An Analysis of the Online Media News

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Убийство на интимен партньор в Румъния: анализ на новините в онлайн медиите

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Abstract

The study presents the results of the analysis of the way in which the Romanian online media covered the cases of intimate partner femicide committed between 2011-2015. The term intimate partner femicide was used to designate all the homicide committed intentionally by a current or former intimate partner against the woman partner (wife, girlfriend, concubine). The information regarding the intimate partner femicide was identified with the help of Google Chrome search engine and some key words. In the end, I identified N=2282 articles where 184 femicide cases committed between intimate partners. The analysis of the information regarding the intimate partner femicide cases was made with the help of a grid analysis structured on four dimensions: data regarding the violence act, data regarding the aggressor and victim, and data regarding the history of the relationship. The study highlights the journalists' lack of interest in describing the context in which femicides occurred and the lack of correlation between the acts of domestic violence and intimate partner femicides. Moreover, few journalists include information regarding the way of contacting the institutions of victim protection and thus they do not use an important occasion to contribute to the readers' information about the way in which they can interfere and help a victim.

Keywords: intimate partner femicide, victim, offender, online media, Romania

Резюме

Статията представя резултатите от анализ на начина, по който румънските онлайн медии отразяват случаите на убийство на интимен партньор, извършено между 2011-2015 г. Терминът фемид на интимен партньор е използван за обозначаване на всички убийства, извършени умишлено от настоящ или бивш интимен партньор срещу жената партньор (съпруга, приятелка, наложница). Информацията относно убийството на интимния партньор беше идентифицирана с помощта на търсачката Google Chrome и някои ключови думи. В крайна сметка идентифицирах 2282 статии, в които са налице 184 случая на фемид, извършени между интимни партньори. Анализът на информацията относно случаите на убийство на интимен партньор е направен с помощта на мрежов анализ, структуриран в четири измерения: данни за акта на насилие, данни за агресора и жертвата и данни за историята на връзката. Проучването подчертава липсата на интерес на журналистите да описват контекста, в който са се случили фемидите и липса на връзка между актовете на домашно насилие и убийствата на жени от интимен партньор. Нещо повече, малко журналисти включват информация относно начините за контакт с институциите за защита на жертвите. По този начин не се използват тези

поводи, за да се допринесе за информиране на читателите за начина, по който могат да се намесват и да помогнат на жертвите.

Ключови думи: убийство на интимен партньор, жертва, нарушител, онлайн медии, Румъния

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Introduction

In Romania, but not only, there is an attempt to maintain the public's attention to the issue of violence against women. In the context of the Covid-19 influenza pandemic, it is very difficult to include on the public agenda other topics than those generated by Covid-19. However, the situation was a little bit different before this pandemic. The Romanian media constantly brought to the public's attention cases of women killed by their partners or by other people. Non-governmental organizations also tried to draw attention to violence against women and they even managed to obtain important legislative changes for the protection of victims. However, Romania continues to register a femicide rate (2016-0.9/100,000) twice higher than the average rate recorded in the Member States of the European Union (2016-0.42 /100,000) (Eurostat, 2020). The recent project named COST *Femicide across Europe* (2013-2017) coordinated by Shalva Weil and Consuelo Corradi brought together researchers from 27 countries and created the necessary context for meetings of European researchers in order to discuss and drive researches on risk factors and trends in this type of crimes. In Romania, few studies have tackled the issue of some types of femicides (Balica & Stockl 2016, Balica 2016, Balica 2017, Balica 2018 a, b). Unfortunately, in Romania no national study has been conducted to identify specific risk factors for femicide, nor is there a discussion in the public space about a strategy to prevent murder against women. The present study seeks to make up for the lack of analyzes focused on femicides and to identify sources of information on this type of homicide, given that official statistics (police or prosecutor's office) do not record relevant information on femicide characteristics (eg sex, age or the relationship between the victim and the aggressor).

The present study shows the results of the analysis of the way in which the online media in Romania covered the cases of intimate partner femicides committed between 2011-2015. More precisely, I tried to identify the type of information that journalists from the online media in Romania include in the articles that report on cases of femicides committed between intimate partners. I have chosen to make this type of study due to two reasons. First of all, I wanted to know if I can use the online media as information source for future criminological researches regarding femicides committed in Romania. Given that at the time of this study we do not yet have data on the particularities and risk factors of femicides and the initiation of some research at a national level to collect data on this type of murder seems unlikely, media may be a source for exploratory assessment of risk factors. In this regard, the purpose of this type of analysis was to identify the elements that are included by journalists in the body of articles on femicide

cases. Secondly, I aimed to highlight the way in which online media journalists present acts of lethal violence, aggressors and victims. I did all this as I wanted to identify new possibilities to prevent femicides via means of communication. In other words, I think that a coherent and straight way to inform the public regarding femicide may become an important element of a strategy of femicide prevention.

Methodology

In the sphere of intimate partner femicide (IPF) I included all the cases of homicide committed intentionally by an intimate partner or a former intimate partner against the current woman partner (wife, girlfriend, concubine) or against the former partner. In order to create the core of the research I selected all the homicide cases committed between Romanian citizens, in Romania or in another country regardless the age of the victim or of the aggressor.

The data regarding IPF cases were extracted from the articles published in the online media in Romania between 2011 and 2015. The identification of articles which presented IPF cases was made with the help of Google Chrome search engine and some key words. Due to the fact that the term femicide is not used in the Romanian language I had to use key words to allow the identification of all articles that talked about femicide. Therefore, in the first phase I used the key words "he killed his wife/ former wife", "he killed his girlfriend/ former girlfriend", "he killed his concubine/ former concubine". In the second phase I extracted from the articles found in the first phase key words which were used in order to identify as well other articles that were tackling the femicide cases. The key words used were: the name of the aggressor, the name of the victim, the weapon used for committing the crime and the city where the homicide took place. In the end, I identified N=2282 articles where 184 femicide cases committed between intimate partners (IPF) were presented between 2011 and 2015.

The analysis of the information regarding the femicide cases was made with the help of a *Femicides Registration Sheet* structured on more dimensions: data regarding the violence act (motivation, modus operandi, used weapons, localization), data regarding the aggressor (age, education level, profession, residence, health state, alcohol abuse), data regarding the victim (age, level of education, profession, residence) and data regarding the history of the relationship (duration of the relationship, history of violent acts, status of the relationship at the time of IPF). The registered data were processed with the help of the SPSS 22 program.

Results and discussion

Intimate partner femicides and the online media

In the period 2011 – 2015 in the online media from Romania 298 femicide cases were presented out of which 184 cases (61.7 per cent) were femicides committed between intimate partners (IPF). The Romanian journalists gave a higher attention to the femicide cases committed between intimate partners in 2011 and 2014, when most of the cases (approximately 75 per cent) were FIP cases. In the other analyzed three years (2012, 2013, 2015), the percentage of femicide cases committed between intimate partners was of approximately two thirds (see Table 1). Journalists preferred to bring to the readers' attention also cases of women murdered by relatives (sons, daughters, siblings, neighbors or other unknown persons).

Table 1

Number of femicides committed between intimate partners presented in the online media

Year	Femicides	Intimate partners femicides	
		Number of cases	%
2011	24	18	75
2012	71	41	57.75
2013	82	48	58.53
2014	59	44	74.5
2015	62	33	53
Total	298	184	100%

The intimate partner femicides were covered in an average of 12.4 articles while other types of femicide were presented in an average of 10.4 articles. The femicide cases committed between intimate partners in 2013 and 2014 were presented in a higher number of articles (the average for 2013 = 14.6; the average for 2014 = 19.3) than the average for the analyzed period (see Table 2). The IPF cases were covered differently, the analysis of the number of articles that presented the femicide cases emphasized the fact that the number of articles varied between 1 and 59 articles/ per case. When they made the articles, the Romanian journalists included only some information about the way in which the violent acts with woman victims took place. Certain information regarding violent acts was mentioned even in the title of the articles, while other information was included in the body of the articles.

Table 2*Number of articles published in the online media*

Year	<i>Intimate partners femicide (IPF)</i>	Number of articles	Average of articles
2011	18	96	5.3
2012	41	334	8.1
2013	48	700	14.6
2014	44	850	19.3
2015	33	302	9.1
Total	184	2282	12.4

The date of the IPF (day, month, day of the week, the cities and counties where the violent acts occurred were easily identified for most of the cases. Journalists mentioned this information in all the analyzed articles. Taking into consideration the analysis of the information regarding the cities where the crimes took place, I could notice that approximately two thirds of the IPF covered in the online media happened in the rural environment (58 per cent), and the rest in the urban environment (42 per cent). Therefore, journalists from the online media gather information for all the IPF cases regardless of the environment where they were committed.

The motivation of committing intimate partner femicide could be identified for all the cases. Amongst the most frequent reasons that generated IPF were the frequent conflicts (fights) between aggressors and victims (45 cases/ 24.4 per cent) associated with alcohol consumption (28 cases/ 15.2 per cent) or jealousy (33 cases/18 per cent). The victims' infidelity (19 cases/ 10.3 per cent) and the infidelity suspicion (22 cases/12 per cent) were the motivation of committing an important number of IPF. The victim's wish to leave the violent aggressor (7 cases/ 3.8 per cent), the victim's separation from the aggressor (12 cases/ 6.5 per cent), the victim's refusal to have intimate relations with the aggressor (6 cases), the victim's refusal to get back together with the aggressor (12 cases/ 6.5 per cent) and filing for divorce (7 cases/ 3.8 per cent) were elements that made some aggressors initiate acts of lethal violence. There were also IPF correlated with the victims' attempts to execute judicial sentences regarding children's custody (one case), the right of selling one property (one case), aggressor's eviction from the house (2 cases). Only in few cases articles mentioned the fact that the victims were exposed to violent acts during their relation with the aggressor (8 cases) and there was just one victim who had filed a complaint for acts of domestic violence.

The way in which homicides were committed and the used weapons were frequently mentioned by journalists. The analysis of this information emphasized the fact that, almost half of the IPF were committed with a knife (46.7 per cent). The aggressors also used in a pretty high number (35.9 per cent of the cases) some objects from their household (ax, hammer, fork, wooden stick, hearth, hoe). Fire weapons were mentioned only in one case. The small number of cases where fire weapons appear is determined by the strict way in which the access to guns is regulated in Romania. Fire weapons can be owned only by some types of persons (dignitaries, police officers, military, magistrates, diplomats) who obtain a gun license and only under the conditions specified by Law no. 295/2004 on the regime of weapons and ammunition republished in the Official Gazette of Romania no. 425 of June 10, 2014. The time of committing the murder (moment of the day) was mentioned as well for most cases (95.1 per cent). Approximately 70 per cent of the femicides took place in the time period 18.00 – 6.00 and the rest happened during the day.

Intimate partner femicides occurred most of the times in the household of the family. More than half of the homicides were committed in the victim and aggressor's common house (98 cases – 54.4 per cent). Some crimes were committed in the house where the victim used to live after her separation from the aggressor (23 cases – 12.8 per cent). Other crimes were committed in the house where the aggressor lived (9 cases- 5 per cent). In a large number of cases (42 cases – 23.3 per cent) the victims were killed in public spaces (bus stations, on the street, in front of the church, downtown), means of transportation or isolated places (park, meadow, orchard, agricultural field). Journalists were very precise in describing the venues where the femicides took place and thus, the readers could find out, for example, even the room where the conflict happened or the room where the body was found. Among the information found every time in the analyzed articles we can mention those regarding the wounds identified on victims (number of wounds and their localisation at the level of victims' bodies).

History of the relationship

The information regarding the history of the relationship between the partners involved in IPF is quite important as it can constitute landmarks for the way in which a relation affected by violence (verbal, psychological and physical) can be transformed in an act of lethal violence. In order to obtain information regarding the history of the relation between the victim and the aggressor, journalists must struggle to make investigations because such information is not most of the times mentioned in the press releases of the police.

As I wanted to have as much information as possible regarding the way of IPF representations, I included in the analysis grid also indicators through which I could identify the way in which the relationship between the victim and the aggressor was described. Thus, I wanted to emphasize the interest (or lack of it) of journalists to present femicides and the context in which they occurred. And as it is important for the public to be informed about the factors which lead to the act of femicide and the correlation between femicides and the acts of conjugal violence which characterized the relation between the aggressor and the victim.

The analysis of articles published in the period 2011-2015 showed the fact that for more than half of the IPF (99 cases/ 53,2 per cent) the duration of the relation between the two partners was not mentioned. For the cases in which the duration of the relation was mentioned (86 cases/ 46.8 per cent), journalists commented even on the size of this period of time. Most IPF for which the duration was mentioned happened between partners who lived together between 7 months and 15 years (67 cases/ 36.5 per cent). The number of femicides committed between partners with a relation of up to 2 years (20 cases/ 11 per cent) was almost equal to that of cases committed between partners who had known each other for over 2-5 years (23 cases/ 12.5 per cent) and also equal to that of spouses who had had a relationship for 5 to 10 years (24 cases/ 13 per cent). On the other hand, the number of femicides committed in the case of couples with a longer relation seems to be smaller (7 cases for a relationship of 10-15 years and 12 cases for relationships of over 15 years).

The victims' and aggressors' marital status represents an important element for analyzing the risk factors specific to intimate partner femicides. Recent researches emphasized the fact that there is a high risk of committing some types of femicides when victims decide to get separated from the abusive aggressor (Balica 2018). Unfortunately the presence of this risk factor for femicides committed between intimate partners was not yet confirmed. The lack of interest for this type of violence, but also the difficulties which researchers need to overcome make it difficult to initiate a representative research focused on this subject (risk factors specific to femicides in Romania).

Analyzing the information included by journalists in the articles about IPFs we can notice that, at the time of the crime, most victims were married (61 cases/ 34.7 per cent) or in relations of concubinage with the aggressors (80 cases/ 45.5 per cent). What is interesting is the fact that, in approximately 17 per cent of the cases, the homicide took place even after the victims tried to leave the abusive aggressors through divorce (9 cases/ 5.1 per cent), separation (20 cases/ 11.4 per cent) or through expressing the intention to divorce (2 cases). Therefore, the

victims' separation from the aggressors and the breaking of relationships can become risk factors for women who were victims of domestic violence.

Another type of information included in the articles was connected to the violence born by victims over the relation ending with IPFs. In approximately two thirds of the cases (132 cases/ 71.4 per cent) verbal conflicts between victims and aggressors were mentioned. For more than a third of the cases, acts of physical violence were signaled (66 cases/ 35.5 per cent). The victims talked to their relatives about the acts of violence which they bore in approximately one fifth of the cases (40 cases/ 21.6 per cent). A small number of victims filed a police complaint (21 cases/ 11.3 per cent) and they received protection order (4 victims). Before being killed, 3 victims received death threats from aggressors. Journalists managed to obtain information also about the case history of some aggressors convicted for acts of domestic violence (7 aggressors were penally sanctioned).

Victims of intimate partner femicides

Most femicides presented in the media in the period 2011-2015 had acts of violence with only one victim (176 cases/ 95.1 per cent). However, there were also cases when the aggressor murdered more persons (9 cases) found close to the wife victim at the time of the murder. Only five cases had two victims, three cases had 3 victims and only one case had 6 victims. In the case of these homicides with more victims, most of the victims were of female gender (20 women and 5 men). In total there were 201 victims. In this section I will present only the information regarding women killed by husbands (N=184).

Journalists wrote especially about some information regarding victims. For most of the victims the first name and last name were mentioned entirely (N=154; 83.7 per cent). The information which appear in almost all the cases is also the one about the victims' age (162 cases; 87.6 per cent), residence environment (urban-41.8 per cent, rural-58.2 per cent) and about the country where victims used to work (95.1 per cent worked in Romania and 1.6 per cent worked abroad). The same thing does not happen in the case of other dates regarding victims. Journalists mentioned to a smaller extent the information regarding the level of education (8 victims; 4.9 per cent), profession (33 victims/ 18.4 per cent), alcohol abuse (37 victims; 20 per cent) or drug abuse (2 victims; 1.1 per cent) and the health state (111 victims; 60 per cent).

“Special orphans”¹ – children of the families where femicides occurred

¹ Anna Constanza Baldry is the one who introduced the concept of "special orphans" to designate children from families in which the mother was killed and the father was sentenced to prison for the murder.

Few studies regarding femicides brought into discussion also the situation of children from the families where the mother was murdered by the father. The situation seems to change in some European countries with a tradition in the domain of preventing femicides. I am talking about Italy, the country in which the vastest research regarding the situation of children from the families affected by femicide was made. Anna Constanza Baldry (2017) is the one who drew the attention over the "special orphans" from Italy, fact which led to legislative modifications meant to protect these children.

Up to now, in Romania there was no analysis of the consequences which intimate partner femicides have over children who come from families in which mothers were killed by their partners. The analysis of articles from the online media emphasized the fact that almost one third (58) of the intimate partner femicides were committed in families with children. The number may even be higher as it is possible that journalists did not publish this information unless they had access to it or they considered that the article was becoming more visible if information about children is mentioned.

However, it is important that journalists gave even the number of children from the family where femicide happened. Thus, I could find out that in the period 2011-2015, 174 children coming from 84 families were affected by femicide. According to the data published by journalists, one third of the femicides were committed in families with two children (34 cases). Approximately one third of the violent acts were committed in families with only one child (29 cases). The number of families with more children was smaller (11 cases with 3 children, 7 cases with 4 children, 2 cases with 5 children and one case with 6 children). Sometimes journalists mentioned also the age of the children. Unfortunately, the age was mentioned only in 35 cases. For the cases where the age of the children was available, I noticed that most of them were minors (30 cases).

Aggressors

The information about the aggressors included in the structure of the analyzed articles was quite limited when talking about most indicators included in the analysis grid. For most aggressors I could identify only information regarding age (151; 81.6 per cent), residence environment (178; 96.2 per cent) and the country where aggressors used to work (181; 97.8 per cent). Most of the aggressors lived in the rural environment (107; 57.8 per cent). The great majority of aggressors were working in Romania at the time of committing the homicide (95.1 per cent). Journalists included little information about the level of education (4 aggressors), profession (50 aggressors, 27 per cent), health state (62 aggressors; 34.1 per cent), and alcohol

consumption (67 aggressors; 36.2 per cent). All the criminal history of the aggressors was mentioned only for few of them (26 aggressors; 14.1 per cent). What is interesting is the fact that for all the aggressors mentioned as having penal history, the type of the committed felony was mentioned (16 aggressors convicted for criminal violence and 10 aggressors convicted for thefts, traffic of drugs and home invasion).

Conclusions

The analysis made at the level of articles published in the online media about the intimate partner femicide cases emphasized some particularities of the way in which the acts of violence, victims and aggressors were described. I noticed, thus, the journalists' interest especially for presenting the information about modus operandi, time of the homicide, localization of the homicide, used weapons and localization of wounds on victims. The journalists' preoccupation for describing precisely the elements connected to the violent act can be explained by their desire to catch the public's attention. Journalists wanted to highlight the special character of the case by insisting on some aspects which could have given uniqueness to the described femicide case. This was the reason for which they described in detail the used weapons and the localization/ number of wounds made on the victim's body. My attempt to identify the victims' and aggressors' socio-demographic features was limited by the lack of information regarding the actors involved in the violent acts. This time also, the journalists' desire to draw the attention over cases of femicides was supported only by the gathering of some information. I could identify both for victims and for aggressors the age, the residence environment and the country where they were working. For very few victims and aggressors I could find out information about the education level, profession, health state, alcohol consumption and criminal history.

The studies made in other countries drew the attention over the journalists' lack of interest in describing the context in which femicides occurred. More precisely, journalists do not make the connection between the femicide cases presented by them and other cases produced in the same way or in the same period of time (Gillespie et al, 2013). Moreover, journalists do not include information regarding the acts of domestic violence to which victims had been exposed during the relationship (Bullock and Cubert 2002, Campbell et al 2007, Richards et al 2011, Taylor 2009).

The analysis of articles from the online media highlights the fact that the previously mentioned situation is also present in the case of journalists from Romania. The lack of correlation between the acts of domestic violence and intimate partner femicide makes the

public think that femicides are spontaneous acts which cannot be prevented and diminishes the role of domestic violence acts in the dynamics of the abusive relationship ended with the death of the woman. Moreover, few journalists include information regarding the way of contacting the institutions of victim protection and thus they do not use an important occasion to contribute to the readers' information about the way in which they can interfere and help a victim.

On the other hand, I noticed the fact that some journalists included information about the history of the relation between victims and aggressors. The analysis of the cases covered in the online media showed that there is a higher vulnerability of relations with a small age, but this does not necessarily mean that the relations with an age of more than 15 years are not exposed to the risk. The victims' separation from the aggressive partners through divorce or just through leaving the home represents a major risk for the victims' life. In this context, the authorized institutions, the victims' families and the community should give a higher attention to protecting women who got out of an abusive relation. Moreover, we need to initiate campaigns of information regarding risks of femicides and the ways to interfere in order to protect victims or potential victims. I consider also necessary to form police officers and other professional categories who come into contact with victims and aggressors in order to correctly identify the risks of domestic violence and to act for preventing femicides.

The analysis of articles emphasized also the fact that journalists mentioned, in most cases, some information which allows the identification of victims and their localization by readers (last name and first name, city). The fact that this information remains in the online environment and can be easily accessed by the family members (children of the affected family), the members of communities where femicides were committed (and not only) can contribute to the stigmatizing the children of the families in which these violent acts took place. This is how I recommend greater attention from journalists to the way they report on cases of femicides.

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