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A Framing Analysis of Intimate Partner Violence: A Case of HabariLeo and Mwananchi Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The purpose of the study was to examine how newspapers in Tanzania frame intimate partner violence. The study adopted the framing theory (Erving Goffman 1974). Study Design: The study used a longitudinal comparative research design using quantitative content analysis. The research was conducted between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2023 using HabariLeo, a government-owned newspaper, and Mwananchi, a privately-owned newspaper. Methodology: The study used a quantitative approach. The study population comprised all 3,652 editions published by the two newspapers over a five-year period, from 2019 to 2023, with each newspaper contributing 1,826 editions. Results: The findings show that hard news made up 69% of news stories and 81% of news and features were episodic. Official sources supplied 45% of source appearances and survivors only 5%. Over a quarter of incident headlines explained the violence through infidelity, jealousy, love, or illness. Conclusion: The two newspapers framed intimate partner violence as a crime of passion rather than a public problem.

Keywords: *Intimate Partner Violence, Framing Analysis, Tanzanian Press, Victim Blaming, News Sources, Headlines*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is harm caused by a current or former partner, including physical attacks, sexual violence, psychological abuse and controlling behaviour (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Globally, 27% of ever-partnered women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner (Sardinha et al., 2022), and in Tanzania the figure is about 40% (Halim et al., 2019). Much of this violence happens at home and is never reported to the police, so for many people a newspaper story is one of the few accounts of partner violence they will read. Kiswahili language newspapers reach far more Tanzanians than English language newspapers (Gidion, 2023) and carry about 80% of the country's newspaper coverage of gender-based violence (Hamad, 2024). How they report IPV therefore, shapes what many readers believe it is, why it happens and who is to blame.

A frame is the angle from which a story is told. By choosing which facts to include, whom to quote and which words to use, journalists tell readers what the problem is, what caused it, who deserves blame and what should be done (Entman, 1993). A single word can matter. On 14 March 2020, *Mwananchi* reported that a Dodoma court had sentenced a man for four years for killing another man found with his wife. The report called the dead man *mgoni*, a Kiswahili word for adulterer, and the headline spoke of a "wife found in act", suggesting before the second paragraph that the killing was a response to provocation.

Studies in North America, Europe and Australia find that newspapers report IPV mainly as isolated incidents, rely on the police and courts and often explain violence through the victim's behaviour or the perpetrator's emotions (Carlyle et al., 2008; Gillespie et al., 2013; Taccini & Mannarini, 2025). Studies in Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya report similar patterns (Ekweonu, 2020; Owusu-Addo et al., 2018; Wasunana & Maloiy, 2019). Tanzanian research has described the themes of IPV stories in 2023 (Mbapu & Ng'atigwa, 2024), the relevance of gender-based violence coverage (Hamad, 2024) and the obstacles journalists face (Hamad & Kitula, 2024). No study has examined how story types, sources, language and blame together frame IPV for Tanzanian readers.

This article addresses that gap through a framing analysis of IPV coverage in Tanzania's press, focusing on the state-owned *HabariLeo* newspaper and the privately owned *Mwananchi* newspaper between 2019 and 2023. It shows how these four features combine to define IPV, traces victim blaming to ordinary newsroom practices that can be changed, and examines the Kiswahili vocabulary of IPV reporting, which research on English-language media has not addressed.

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2. FRAMING THEORY

The study was guided by framing theory, first developed by Erving Goffman (1974), who argued that people make sense of events through frames, or interpretive schemes that tell them what is going on. In media research, framing describes how news promotes a particular reading of an issue through the selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration of information (Scheufele, 1999). Entman (1993) gave the theory its most widely used form, defining framing as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality" and making them "more salient in a communicating text," so as to define a problem, diagnose its causes, make a moral judgement and suggest remedies. The theory suits this study because it explains how a newspaper can shape public understanding of IPV without stating an opinion, simply through the stories it chooses, the people it quotes and the words it uses. Its main limitation is that frames can be identified subjectively. This study therefore, operationalised Entman's four functions through measurable features of coverage. Story type and headline subject show how IPV was defined, sources show who diagnosed its causes, language and blame show the moral judgement, and the presence or absence of thematic genres shows whether remedies were offered.

2.1 How Frames Are Built in the Newsroom

Frames are rarely chosen deliberately. They emerge from the routines and deadlines of news production (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Crime reporters depend on the police and courts for reliable information (Tuchman, 1978), and the crime story emphasises who did what, where and when rather than why. A police statement about a killing therefore yields a short, event-centred report almost automatically, while an account of how abuse develops requires time, expertise and sources beyond the criminal justice system.

2.2 Story Types and Event-Centred Reporting

Iyengar (1991) distinguished episodic stories, which focus on a single event, from thematic stories, which place events in their social context, and found that episodic coverage leads audiences to hold individuals rather than society responsible. Hard news is usually episodic. In a national sample of United States newspapers, 88.3% of IPV articles were episodic (Carlyle et al., 2008), and Australian and African studies report the same tendency (Ekweonu, 2020; Owusu-Addo et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2016).

2.3 Sources and the Power to Explain

Sources decide who explains the violence. Because IPV stories often begin with an arrest or a trial, police officers, prosecutors and judges dominate (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2016). Survivors, advocates and specialists could provide that history but are seldom quoted (Richards et al., 2011; Taccini & Mannarini, 2025).

2.4 Language, Sensationalism and Blame

Language carries the moral judgement. Coverage of violence against women often shifts blame onto women by focusing on what they did, and presents men's violence as a reaction to provocation (Meyers, 1997). Gillespie et al. (2013) identified frames that blame the victim or excuse the perpetrator as overwhelmed by emotion, and Hong Kong newspapers reported partner killings as acts "out of love" (Hernández, 2018). Headlines that leave out the perpetrator draw attention away from the person who used violence (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017).

2.5 IPV Reporting in Tanzania

In Tanzania, norms that treat men as heads of households and value family privacy shape how partner violence is understood (Feinstein et al., 2010; Jewkes, 2002), and the absence of a domestic violence law leaves much of it outside clear legal categories. Newsrooms lack journalists trained in gender-based violence, invest little in investigative reporting and struggle to obtain timely data (Hamad & Kitula, 2024). Each of these conditions pushes coverage towards the short crime report.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The study used a quantitative approach, which explains a phenomenon through numerical data analysed with statistical methods (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2018; Creswell, 2014). Its design was a framing analysis conducted through a longitudinal, comparative quantitative content analysis, the latter defined by Berelson (1952) as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (see also Riffe et al., 1993). Coverage was examined over five years in two newspapers with different owners, and the quantitative analysis was supplemented by a close reading of headlines and of stories whose language pointed to blame.

3.2 Newspapers and Study Period

HabariLeo and *Mwananchi* newspapers were selected purposively. Both publish in Kiswahili, Tanzania's national language, and so reach far more readers than English newspapers (Gidion, 2023). They also represent the country's two ownership groups. Ownership shapes which topics are covered and how (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), and government newspapers tend to follow state communication agendas (McQuail, 2010). *Mwananchi*, published by Mwananchi Communications Limited, sells about 40,000 copies a day and holds roughly 71% of the Kiswahili newspaper market (Reporters Without Borders [RWB], 2018). *HabariLeo*, launched on 21 December 2006, is the government's official Kiswahili daily, published by Tanzania Standard (Newspapers) Limited.

The period from 2019 to 2023 covered the year before COVID-19, the two pandemic years and the two years after, a time when lockdowns and economic stress were linked to higher risks of partner violence (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2021). Editions were consulted in the newspapers' libraries.

3.3 Population, Sampling and Unit of Analysis

The population comprised all 3,652 editions published by the two newspapers in the period, 1,826 for each newspaper. Editions were selected through constructed week sampling, a stratified random method that represents every day of the week (Luke & Caburnay, 2011; Riffe et al., 1993). For each newspaper, 54 dates were drawn in each year except 2022, when 52 were drawn, giving a target of 536 editions. Eighteen could not be located, six of *Mwananchi* and twelve of *HabariLeo*, leaving 518 editions for analysis (262 of *Mwananchi* and 256 of *HabariLeo*).

The unit of analysis was the individual IPV story. IPV was defined as physical, sexual or psychological harm, or controlling behaviour, by a current or former partner (WHO, 2021). The final sample comprised 58 items, 45 from *Mwananchi* and 13 from *HabariLeo*.

3.4 Instrument, Measures, Reliability and Ethics

Data were recorded on a pretested code sheet and codebook and entered into Excel, and frames were identified following Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). Story type was coded in eight categories. Frame was coded as episodic or thematic (Iyengar, 1991) for the 47 news reports and features, since opinion genres are argumentative by design. Sources were coded as the types of people or institutions cited, so one story could contain several. Headlines were coded by subject as murder, physical abuse or educative content, and stories as sensationalised where they used graphic, emotive or speculative language.

The 37 headlines reporting a specific killing or assault were also coded for whether the person who used violence was the grammatical subject of an active verb, the gender of the person harmed, and whether the headline explained the violence through the victim's conduct or through emotion or circumstance. The headlines were published in Kiswahili and are given here in English translation.

Construct validity was supported by drawing variables from earlier studies of IPV coverage (Bollen, 1989). The pretest results were analysed with Scott's pi, and a coefficient of .80 or above was taken as reliable (Krippendorff, 2004). The Open University of Tanzania granted ethical clearance, and the media houses concerned were informed of the study. Only published content was analysed, and no victim or survivor is named in this article (WHO, 2013).

4. FINDINGS

The findings follow Entman's (1993) four functions of framing, namely defining the problem, explaining it, judging it and pointing to solutions.

4.1 Defining the Problem: Hard News and Event-Centred Stories

IPV reached readers mainly as hard news. Of the 58 items, 40 (69.0%) were news reports, a share that was almost the same in *Mwananchi* (68.9%) and *HabariLeo* (69.2%) (Table 1). Features made up seven items (12.1%) and columns four (6.9%). There were three follow-up stories, two letters to the editor, one editorial and one foreign news report, and no cartoon on IPV appeared in either newspaper during the five years. *HabariLeo* published far fewer items, but a larger share of its coverage came as features and columns (30.8%, compared with 15.6% in *Mwananchi*). The editorial, both letters and all three follow-ups appeared in *Mwananchi*.

Table -1: Types of IPV Items Published by Mwananchi and HabariLeo, 2019–2023

Story type	*Mwananchi* n (%)	*HabariLeo* n (%)	Total n (%)
News report	31 (68.9)	9 (69.2)	40 (69.0)
Feature	5 (11.1)	2 (15.4)	7 (12.1)
Column	2 (4.4)	2 (15.4)	4 (6.9)
Follow-up story	3 (6.7)	0 (0.0)	3 (5.2)
Letter to the editor	2 (4.4)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.4)
Editorial	1 (2.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.7)
Foreign news	1 (2.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.7)
Cartoon	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Total	45 (100.0)	13 (100.0)	58 (100.0)

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

The type of story largely decided the frame. Of the 47 news reports and features, 38 (80.9%) were episodic and nine (19.1%) were thematic. Twenty-six headlines (44.8%) reported a killing and 11 (19.0%) a physical assault, while 21 (36.2%) were educative or informative. Only one headline concerned sexual violence, a report on the number of women raped, and none concerned psychological, economic or controlling abuse. For readers of both newspapers, IPV was overwhelmingly something that ended in injury or death.

4.2 Explaining the Violence: Who Was Quoted

The newspapers relied mainly on the criminal justice system to tell readers what had happened. The police were the single largest source, accounting for 19 of the 82 source appearances (23.2%), and the courts for a further nine (11.0%). Together with political figures, who were cited nine times (11.0%), official sources made up 45.1% of all source appearances. Relatives of the victim and witnesses together accounted for 20 appearances (24.4%), mostly in reports of killings. Non-governmental organisations were cited 12 times (14.6%), lawyers and other experts five times (6.1%), doctors and hospitals three times and religious leaders once. Survivors spoke in only four items (4.9%).

Relatives and witnesses, quoted mostly after killings, could humanise the victim but also spread uncertainty, as in "Confusion surrounds tragic case of man allegedly killing his wife" (*Mwananchi*, 26 August 2020).

4.3 Judging the Violence: Language and Blame

Much of the coverage used dramatic language. Thirty-seven items (63.8%) were sensationalised, the same number as the headlines reporting a specific killing or assault. Headlines such as "Husband pours acid on wife's face" and "Love dispute turns deadly: Man kills wife, then himself in tragic incident" emphasised the method and drama of the violence.

The coding of the 37 incident headlines shows how grammar and explanation distributed responsibility (Table 2). In 24 headlines (64.9%), the person who used violence was the subject of an active verb, as in "Husband kills pregnant wife". In the other 13 (35.1%), that person was missing or pushed to the end of the sentence, as in "Woman allegedly killed by husband" or "Burial of woman allegedly killed by husband". Twenty-six headlines concerned harm to a woman and four concerned harm to a man. The man responsible was missing or displaced in eight of the 26 headlines about women (30.8%), while the woman responsible was the subject of all four headlines about men.

Table -2: Agency and Explanation in Headlines Reporting a Specific Incident of IPV (n = 37)

Headline feature	n	%
Perpetrator as subject of an active verb	24	64.9
Perpetrator missing or displaced	13	35.1
Person harmed: woman	26	70.3
Person harmed: man	4	10.8
Person harmed: other or unclear	7	18.9
Explanation: conduct of the person harmed	6	16.2
Explanation: emotion or circumstance	4	10.8
No explanation offered	27	73.0

Note. Incident headlines are those reporting a murder or a physical assault. Headlines are English translations of Kiswahili originals.

Ten incident headlines (27.0%) explained the violence in the headline itself. Six pointed to the conduct of the person harmed, including "Man ends life over wife's infidelity", "Man kills wife claiming she had infected him with HIV", "Woman attacked after alleged affair with married man" and "Fatal encounter during act of fornication". Four pointed to emotion or circumstance, such as a "jealousy rage", a "love dispute" or a dispute over gambling. In each case, the reason given by the perpetrator, or assumed by the reporter, became the reason given to readers.

The stories developed these explanations. *Mwananchi*'s report of 10 December 2020, "Man ends life over wife's infidelity", built its account of a 54-year-old man's suicide around his anger at customers who spoke to his wife at their home brewing business, so that her alleged conduct explained his death. A report from Dumila, Morogoro Region, described a wife's forced confession to an affair as the moment that "enraged" her husband before he killed her, her mother and a neighbour. Similarly, "Son kills father in defense of mother" centred the son while the mother's abuse disappeared from view.

4.4 Pointing to Solutions: Coverage at the Margins

Coverage that treated IPV as a social problem existed mostly outside the news pages. The 21 educative headlines included calls for collective action and pieces on the rise of IPV during COVID-19 and on men's experiences of abuse, mostly in features and columns. Across five years the two dailies published four columns, two letters, one editorial (*Mwananchi*, 24 March 2021) and only three follow-ups, so readers rarely learned what happened after an arrest.

Survivors' own words, though rare, changed the meaning of a story when they appeared. In a follow-up published on 5 September 2023, *Mwananchi* reported the reaction of a woman whose hands had been severed by her former husband when he was sentenced to 13 years in prison:

> *"The day my wrists were cut, I awoke from the sleep of death, engulfed in pain. … I may not fully understand the law, but I believe that without severe punishment for such actions, oppression will continue to thrive."*

5. DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 The Crime Desk Builds the Frame

The findings show all four of Entman's (1993) functions working in the same direction**.** The 80.9% episodic share is close to the 88.3% reported for United States newspapers (Carlyle et al., 2008) and consistent with systematic review evidence (Taccini & Mannarini, 2025) and with African studies (Ekweonu, 2020; Owusu-Addo et al., 2018).

Ownership made little difference. The share of news reports was almost identical in the two newspapers. *HabariLeo* gave a larger share of its smaller output to features and columns, perhaps reflecting the development mandate of the state press, but the numbers are too small for firm conclusions. Both shared the route by which IPV entered the newsroom, a police statement or a court case, and that route produced similar frames (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Tuchman, 1978).

5.2 Who Explains IPV

Reliance on the police, courts and officials matches studies elsewhere (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2016) and leaves the explanation of causes to institutions concerned with single incidents. The rarity of survivors, at under 5% of sources, is the most important gap. The one survivor quoted at length turned a severe assault into a story of injustice and continuing oppression.

Non-governmental organisations supplied almost 15% of sources, more than is often reported (Richards et al., 2011), so Tanzanian civil society already has some access to the press. Their voices appeared mainly in features, however, which separated the context they offered from the incidents readers saw most often.

5.3 How Language Assigns Blame

The language of the coverage reproduced victim-blaming and perpetrator-excusing frames found elsewhere (Gillespie et al., 2013; Meyers, 1997). Explanations such as infidelity, an alleged HIV infection or a "love dispute" echo the "out of love" framing of partner killings in Hong Kong (Hernández, 2018) and place the cause in the woman's behaviour rather than the perpetrator's decision. Agentless headlines removed the man responsible in almost a third of headlines about women, as in British newspapers (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017).

The Kiswahili vocabulary of the coverage adds a dimension absent from research on English-language media. A word such as *mgoni* carries a verdict that a neutral translation would not, so responsible reporting in Kiswahili needs attention to everyday words of moral judgement.

In all four headlines about men harmed by women, the woman was the subject and no explanation was offered, consistent with evidence that male victims are reported differently (Hanson & Lysova, 2023). Perpetrators may be named most clearly when their behaviour defies gender expectations, although the small number of such headlines calls for caution.

5.4 Implications for Journalism Practice

Because these frames arise from routine, practice can change them. Headlines should name the person who used violence as the subject and avoid presenting the perpetrator's justification as the cause. Incident reports should include at least one source beyond the police and courts, with information on where help is available (WHO, 2013). Editors should develop Kiswahili style guidance on morally loaded words such as *mgoni*, and newspapers should commit to follow-ups, editorials and features that link cases to patterns, laws and services.

These changes need investment in trained reporters, dedicated gender-based violence desks and access to data, which Tanzanian newsrooms currently lack (Hamad & Kitula, 2024).

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

The study covered two Kiswahili newspapers, a sample of 58 items and a single coder, and it analysed blame through headlines and selected stories rather than full texts. Future research could code responsibility in complete stories, interview journalists, test how Kiswahili word choices affect readers and compare print with online coverage.

6. CONCLUSION

HabariLeo and *Mwananchi* framed intimate partner violence as a crime of passion rather than a public problem. Hard news dominated, the police and courts explained events, survivors were rarely heard, and the language often placed the cause of violence in the victim's behaviour or the perpetrator's emotions. Thematic coverage existed but was confined mainly to features and columns.

These frames arose not from hostility towards victims but from routine crime reporting, everyday words of moral judgement and under-resourced newsrooms. Because practices can change, newspapers that name perpetrators, quote survivors and specialists, choose Kiswahili words with care and follow cases through could present partner violence as a preventable pattern of harm rather than a private tragedy.

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