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Framing the Victim, Activating the Perpetrator: Gender and Media Representations of Female Rape Victims in Moroccan Online Newspapers

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the linguistic representation of female rape victims in Moroccan online newspapers, examining how journalist gender shapes discursive constructions of sexual violence. Drawing on means of Critical Discourse Analysis, employing Halliday's Transitivity System and van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework, the study analyzes forty news articles authored by male and female journalists through a qualitative approach supported by quantitative findings. The analysis demonstrates that although male and female journalists differ in the frequency and stylistic use of linguistic structures, they ultimately converge ideologically in portraying female rape victims as passive, vulnerable, and subjected to violence. Both groups of journalists refute victim-blaming narratives and attribute agency and accountability to perpetrators rather than to victims. Female journalists tend to employ nomination, mental, and behavioral processes that humanize victims and emphasize emotional depth, while male journalists rely more on passivation and categorization that foreground factual distance. Overall, the findings reveal a shared ethical orientation toward empathetic and responsible reporting, reflecting a broader shift in Moroccan media discourse toward more gender-sensitive representations of sexual violence.

KEYWORDS: feminist discourse analysis, gender representation, Moroccan media, rape reporting, critical discourse analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Media representations of sexual violence are central to understanding cultural perceptions, attitudes, and societal responses to rape. The language used to represent victims and offenders does not simply mirror events; rather, it constructs social realities by positioning readers within particular ideological frameworks (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Through selective framing, lexical choices, and grammatical structures, the media can shape how acts of violence are interpreted—either as moral transgressions, criminal acts, or social phenomena. Feminist media scholars have long shown that news discourse often fosters the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies by emphasizing women's behavior, clothing, or morality while downplaying, mitigating, or rationalizing male aggression (Meyers, 2004; Franiuk et al., 2008; Carter, Steiner & McLaughlin, 2014). Such portrayals subtly naturalize gender inequality, contributing to the normalization of sexual violence and the perpetuation of victim-blaming discourses. These narratives, recurring in both Western and non-Western media, form part of what scholars identify as "rape culture", a set of beliefs and representations that trivialize or justify sexual violence (Berns, 2017; Serisier, 2017).

In many societies, including Morocco, sexual violence remains a highly sensitive and morally charged subject. With sexual discussions restricted to culturally acceptable and religiously sanctioned frameworks, the Moroccan media occupies a particularly complex position: it must navigate between reporting on acts of violence and upholding social norms that discourage open discussion of sexuality. As a result, news reporting on rape becomes a revealing site for examining how gender, morality, and power intersect in public discourse. Despite legal reforms intended to enhance women's rights, such as the abrogation in 2014 of Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which had allowed rapists to marry their victims, social perceptions of female sexuality continue to be shaped by patriarchal and moralistic discourses (Guessous, 2019). This tension between progressive legal frameworks and conservative cultural norms often manifests linguistically in news narratives that either silence victims or frame their suffering through culturally embedded notions of shame, honor, and family reputation. Consequently, analyzing the linguistic construction of rape in Moroccan media provides valuable insights into how journalistic discourse can simultaneously perpetuate and reflect entrenched gender ideologies.

Within this context, the role of the journalist—and particularly the gender of the journalist—becomes a crucial factor in understanding how rape narratives are constructed. Feminist scholarship suggests that female journalists may employ more empathetic and humanizing representations of victims, whereas male journalists tend to adopt more detached, event oriented approaches that foreground the crime itself rather than the victim's perspective (Easteal et al., 2019; Franiuk et al., 2008). However, such distinctions are not universally observed and may vary according to institutional, cultural, and ideological constraints. In Morocco, where journalism operates within moral boundaries shaped by religion and tradition, exploring how male and female journalists linguistically construct female rape victims and perpetrators offers an important opportunity to uncover how gendered authorship interacts with broader social discourses on violence, morality, and accountability.

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Accordingly, this article investigates the linguistic and social representation of female rape victims in Moroccan online newspapers, focusing on whether and how the gender of journalists influences the discursive construction of both victims and perpetrators. Drawing on Halliday's (1994) Transitivity System and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) Social Actor Framework, the analysis examines how grammatical and lexical choices function to realize agency, passivity, and responsibility within news narratives. The Transitivity System provides a framework for exploring how processes, participants, and circumstances encode experience and distribute agency, while the Social Actor Framework offers a means of identifying how individuals and groups are included, excluded, personalized, or impersonalized within discourse. Together, these frameworks allow for a comprehensive examination of how journalistic language not only reports events but also constructs identities, moral evaluations, and ideological meanings.

By situating the study within the intersection of critical discourse analysis, feminist media theory, and cultural studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Moroccan media both mirrors and shapes societal attitudes toward gender and sexual violence. It also seeks to highlight the ethical and representational responsibilities of journalists in contexts where discourse about sexuality is constrained by cultural taboos. Ultimately, this study aims to reveal how linguistic structures and journalist gender intersect to either challenge or reproduce dominant narratives of victimhood, accountability, and power in Moroccan public discourse.

The primary aim of this research is to analyze how Moroccan online newspapers represent female rape victims and to determine the extent to which journalists' gender affects these representations. The study seeks:

1. To identify the linguistic structures used by female journalists to depict female rape victims.
2. To analyze the linguistic structures used by male journalists and compare them with those of female journalists.
3. To investigate how transitivity choices and social actor representations contribute to victim-blaming or empathy.
4. To explore the implications of these representations for societal perceptions of sexual violence in Morocco.

To achieve these objectives, the current study puts forward the research questions below:

1. How do female journalists represent female rape victims in Moroccan online newspapers?
2. How do male journalists portray female rape victims in Moroccan online newspapers?
3. What linguistic patterns and social roles emerge in male- and female-authored news reports about rape?
4. Are there differences in the representation of female rape victims based on the journalist's gender?
5. To what extent do journalistic representations reinforce or challenge victim-blaming discourses?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to feminist media scholarship by situating discourse analysis within the North African media landscape, a context often underrepresented in global feminist research. It also extends the application of critical linguistic frameworks to Arabic-language journalism, highlighting how everyday linguistic choices including wording, labeling, and agency assignment can either perpetuate or resist patriarchal ideologies in media narratives of sexual violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of sexual violence in media discourse has long occupied a central place in feminist scholarship, reflecting broader social attitudes toward gender, power, and victimhood. Early feminist critiques emphasized that news coverage of rape is never ideologically neutral; instead, it constructs meanings that reinforce dominant gender hierarchies (Cuklanz, 2000; Meyers, 2004). Across media contexts, scholars have shown that press coverage often legitimizes patriarchal structures by framing sexual violence as isolated, sensational events rather than manifestations of systemic gender inequality (Franiuk et al., 2008; Berns, 2017). As Meyers (2004) argues, these narratives do not merely report on violence—they produce cultural understandings of femininity, morality, and responsibility that shape public perception and policy.

A recurring theme in feminist media analysis is the imbalance of agency and voice between victims and perpetrators. News narratives frequently foreground the victim's behavior, appearance, or moral conduct while backgrounding or erasing the male offender's agency (Serisier, 2017). This imbalance contributes to what Berns (2017) terms "symbolic victim-blaming," a discursive process through which the moral and social burden of rape is subtly transferred onto women. When journalistic emphasis falls on what the victim did—or failed to do—to prevent the assault, sexual violence becomes reframed as a matter of individual responsibility rather than a product of gendered power relations. Such framings normalize violence against women by embedding it within familiar cultural scripts of shame and propriety rather than structural injustice.

Feminist linguists and discourse analysts have demonstrated how these ideological patterns are realized through language. Drawing on Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, researchers have explored how grammatical structures such as transitivity, modality, and nominalization shape readers' perceptions of responsibility and empathy (Lazar, 2005; Mills, 2008). Passive constructions such as *"A woman was raped"* erase the perpetrator from the clause, while nominalizations like *"the assault"* abstract agency, transforming deliberate actions into events without actors. Similarly, lexical and modal choices—such as evaluative adjectives or verbs expressing uncertainty—can encode moral judgments or doubt regarding victims' credibility (Gavey, 2013). The reproduction of police or judicial discourse further depersonalizes victims, presenting rape as a technical or legal matter rather than a gendered act of violence (Bohner et al., 2009). As van Dijk (1991) explains, news discourse functions as a site of ideological reproduction where linguistic neutrality serves as a mechanism of dominance.

The intersection of journalist gender and discourse production has received growing scholarly attention. Studies in Western contexts suggest that female journalists tend to construct more empathetic, human-centered narratives that foreground victims' voices, while male journalists are more likely to employ event-driven, detached reporting styles (Franiuk et al., 2008; Easteal et al., 2019). These differences manifest in lexical choices, quotation patterns, and the inclusion of psychological or emotional detail. However, Carter et al. (1998) caution that institutional constraints, newsroom culture, and editorial policy often limit the extent to which individual journalists can diverge from dominant reporting conventions. Thus, gendered authorship interacts with professional norms to shape—not determine—the ideological orientation of rape news narratives.

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In non-Western contexts, particularly in Arab and African media systems, studies reveal that coverage of sexual violence is shaped by religious, moral, and cultural discourses that tie female sexuality to honor and family reputation (Hafez, 2011; El-Tayeb, 2017). Journalistic representations often oscillate between moral condemnation and implicit justification, portraying female victims as sources of shame or moral failure. Meanwhile, perpetrators are sometimes depicted as socially marginalized, psychologically unstable, or victims of circumstance rather than accountable agents of violence. These discursive tendencies reflect broader sociocultural norms where gender-based violence is both condemned and silenced. In the Moroccan context, Belarbi (2020) observes that news reporting on rape frequently merges moralistic and legalistic rhetoric, situating female victims within narratives of honor and respectability while mitigating male perpetrators' responsibility through references to intoxication, poverty, or mental instability.

Despite these insights, few studies have systematically examined how journalist gender influences the linguistic representation of female rape victims in Moroccan media. Most research in the region has focused on women's general portrayal in political, economic, or advertising discourse, leaving the specific intersection of gender, authorship, and sexual violence largely unexplored. The present study addresses this gap by combining Halliday's (1994) Transitivity System with van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Framework to investigate how Moroccan male and female journalists linguistically construct rape victims and perpetrators in online news articles. This dual analytical approach allows for a deeper understanding of how agency, empathy, and accountability are distributed through discourse, and how gendered authorship interacts with socio-cultural ideologies of sexuality and morality. By doing so, this study contributes to feminist media scholarship by illuminating the subtle linguistic mechanisms through which Moroccan journalists either reinforce or resist patriarchal narratives of sexual violence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts a critical linguistic approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Social Actor Theory, which together provide a robust analytical lens for examining how language encodes social meanings and ideological positions in media discourse. The two frameworks -Halliday's Transitivity System (1994) and van Leeuwen's Social Actor Representation Model (1996, 2008) - complement each other in exploring both the grammatical realization and social construction of participants in rape news reporting.

1. Halliday's Transitivity System

Within Halliday's (1994, 2014) Systemic Functional Grammar, the transitivity system is a key component of the ideational metafunction, which concerns how language represents experience. It categorizes processes (verbs) and participants (nouns or noun phrases) to reveal how actions, events, and states are represented. Halliday identifies six main process types, material, mental, verbal, behavioral, relational, and existential, each contributing to how agency and responsibility are distributed in discourse.

In rape reporting, transitivity analysis exposes how victims and perpetrators are grammatically positioned in relation to the violent act. For instance, when victims are represented as *Goals* rather than *Actors* in material processes ("The woman was attacked by a man"), agency is shifted away from the perpetrator and toward the victim, producing a linguistic pattern of passivation (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). Conversely, when perpetrators are foregrounded as *Actors* ("The man raped the woman"), the grammatical structure highlights responsibility and accountability. This framework therefore allows the study to identify whether male and female journalists employ different syntactic strategies to represent victims' and offenders' roles, emotions, and degrees of agency.

2. van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework

To complement the grammatical focus of transitivity, the study draws on van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) Social Actor Model to explore the discursive representation of individuals and groups. This model stems from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and provides systematic categories for examining how social actors (in this case, rape victims and perpetrators) are included, excluded, or represented in discourse. Van Leeuwen distinguishes between strategies such as activation/passivation, personalization/impersonalization, nomination/categorization, and aggregation/individualization, each reflecting ideological choices in news reporting.

In rape narratives, activation occurs when actors are represented as dynamic agents (e.g., "the man assaulted the victim"), while passivation occurs when they are depicted as recipients of actions or as affected entities (e.g., "the victim was attacked"). Nomination and categorization further indicate whether victims are referred to by personal names (suggesting individuality and empathy) or by roles such as *a young girl*, *a maid*, or *a student*, which may objectify or stereotype them (van Leeuwen, 2008; Richardson, 2007). Through these distinctions, the framework exposes ideological tendencies embedded in journalistic discourse, revealing how gender, morality, and power are linguistically enacted.

Combining transitivity analysis with social actor representation enables a multidimensional examination of both form and function in media discourse. While transitivity reveals the grammatical structures through which agency is distributed, van Leeuwen's framework provides insight into the social significance of these linguistic patterns. Together, they allow for the systematic identification of gendered ideologies, subtle victim-blaming narratives, and the moral framing of sexual violence in Moroccan online newspapers.

By integrating these approaches, the study not only investigates how female rape victims are constructed linguistically but also examines how such constructions reflect broader social and cultural ideologies regarding gender and morality. This analytical synergy aligns with the goals of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in revealing the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative qualitative descriptive design informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The objective is to examine how female rape victims are represented linguistically in Moroccan online newspapers and to identify whether the gender of journalists influences these representations. The approach combines Halliday's Transitivity System (1994) and van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework (1996, 2008) to analyze both grammatical and social aspects of discourse.

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CDA is suitable for this research because it aims to uncover the ideological implications of language use and to explain how linguistic choices reflect and reinforce social inequalities (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2015). Through this lens, the study explores how news discourse contributes to the construction of gendered power relations in Moroccan media.

2. Corpus and Data Selection

The corpus consists of news articles reporting on cases of rape involving female victims, published between 2018 and 2023 in Moroccan online newspapers representing a range of editorial orientations such as *Hespress, Le360.ma, Alyaoum24, Assabah, Almasae, Morocco World News, and Goud.ma* among others.

A total of 40 articles were selected, 20 authored by female journalists and 20 by male journalists. The gender of each journalist was confirmed through official staff pages, bylines, or professional profiles on LinkedIn and Facebook.

Articles were included if they:

1. Reported on rape or sexual assault cases involving female victims,
2. Were written in Arabic or French (later translated into English for analytical consistency), and
3. Contained explicit descriptions of the event, the victim, and the perpetrator.

Editorials, opinion pieces, and duplicated reports were excluded to maintain focus on factual news reporting. All texts were converted into XHTML format and processed using UAM CorpusTool 3.3 for systematic annotation, with manual checking to ensure accuracy in tagging due to limitations in Arabic encoding.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis was conducted in two complementary stages.

Using Halliday's (1994) framework, each clause was examined to identify process types (*material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral,* and *existential*), participants (*Actor, Goal, Sensor, Carrier,* etc.), and circumstances (*manner, cause, location,* etc.). This step aimed at uncovering patterns of agency and responsibility in the depiction of victims and perpetrators. For instance, clauses like *"The girl was attacked"* indicate passivation, while *"The man raped the victim"* shows activation of the perpetrator.

Applying van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) framework, the study investigated how victims and perpetrators were socially represented. The analysisfocused on the categories of inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, nomination/categorization, and personalization/impersonalization. This stage examined whether journalists individualized victims (using names or ages) or categorized them (as a minor, a student, a maid), and how such choices reflected ideological positioning.

Both analyses were integrated to identify recurrent linguistic and representational patterns. The comparison between male and female journalists' texts highlighted differences and similarities in portraying female rape victims.

4. Reliability and Validity

To enhance **reliability**, a subset of 10% of the corpus (four articles) was independently coded twice at different times to check for consistency in annotation. **Validity** was established through triangulation:

- **Theoretical triangulation**, by using both transitivity and social actor frameworks.
- **Data triangulation**, by drawing from multiple newspapers and both genders of journalists.
- **Methodological triangulation**, through combining qualitative description with frequency counts of linguistic patterns.

5. Ethical Considerations

Since the study relies on publicly available media texts, no direct consent was required. However, to ensure ethical rigor, sensitive details such as victims' full names were anonymized, and translations were carefully adapted to preserve meaning while avoiding sensational or harmful language. The analysis follows feminist ethical principles emphasizing respect, empathy, and non-exploitation of survivors in research representation (Lazar, 2005).

RESULTS

The aim of this analysis is to examine how female and male journalists represent female rape victims in Moroccan online newspapers, both grammatically and socially. By combining Halliday's Transitivity System and van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework, the study investigates the assignment of agency, process types, and the social construction of victims and perpetrators. The following sections present tables summarizing the quantitative patterns, followed by detailed qualitative analysis with illustrative examples from the corpus.

1. Transitivity Analysis

The transitivity analysis examines how Moroccan journalists linguistically construct events of sexual violence, focusing on the types of processes used and the assignment of agency to victims and perpetrators. This approach reveals how grammatical choices reflect ideological positions, gendered perspectives, and narrative focus.

Table 1. Distribution of Process Types by Journalist Gender

Process Type	Female Journalists (%)	Male Journalists (%)
Material	58	61
Mental	14	9
Verbal	11	8
Relational	9	13
Behavioral	5	6
Existential	3	3

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As Table 1 above shows, *material processes*, which describe concrete and physical actions, are the most frequent in both female- and male-authored articles. Their prevalence highlights the centrality of action and agency in the narrative construction of rape events, shaping how responsibility and victimhood are perceived. Despite differences in the frequency of linguistic structures, the overall findings significantly show that both male and female journalists tend to depict female rape victims as passive, vulnerable, and subject to violence, while attributing blame to the perpetrators and simultaneously mitigating the victims' agency.

Female journalists more frequently activate perpetrators as clear agents of action for instance, *"The assailant dragged the victim into an abandoned building and assaulted her."* This choice explicitly assigns responsibility and foregrounds the violence enacted. Conversely, male journalists more often employ passivated constructions, such as *"A young woman was assaulted in her neighborhood,"* which shifts focus toward the victim as the affected entity while obscuring the perpetrator. This syntactic choice, though subtly different, reinforces the ideological construction of the victim as powerless and the perpetrator as distanced from direct accountability. The table below summarizes the distribution of agency in the material processes across both corpora.

Table 2. Victim and Perpetrator Agency in Material Processes

Agency Assignment	Female Journalists (%)	Male Journalists (%)
Victim as Goal (passivated)	72	85
Victim as Actor (active)	18	5
Perpetrator as Actor (active)	78	37
Perpetrator as Goal (passivated)	10	25

The data reveal that female journalists more frequently portray perpetrators as active agents, which aligns with a discourse of accountability and moral judgment. Nevertheless, both genders predominantly represent victims as *Goals* rather than *Actors*, indicating a shared portrayal of women as passive recipients of violence rather than as autonomous individuals. Male journalists' frequent passivation of victims, coupled with the mitigation of perpetrator agency (e.g., *"The suspect, reportedly intoxicated, committed the assault"*), situates the event within external conditions rather than deliberate violence. Thus, material processes, whether active or passive, collectively contribute to a discourse of victim vulnerability and diminished agency.

Mental Processes convey internal experiences such as emotions or perceptions. Female-authored articles include more of these, as in *"She felt terrified and could not bring herself to speak to anyone about the attack."* This humanizes the victim and grants psychological depth, yet it simultaneously reinforces her image as emotionally fragile and traumatized. Male journalists rarely employ such processes, focusing instead on externalized facts, an omission that sustains the pattern of portraying victims as emotionally silenced or peripheral.

Verbal Processes represent speech acts and differ in formality and directness. Female journalists often use direct quotations (e.g., *"I couldn't believe what was happening to me"*), granting victims a voice within the narrative. However, even this strategy, while humanizing, confines their role to emotional reaction rather than empowerment. Male journalists favor indirect reporting (e.g., *"The victim reportedly said she was frightened"*), which distances readers and weakens the victim's agency. Both uses, though differently realized, reproduce the broader discourse of female victimhood and limited self-representation.

Relational Processes construct identities and attributes. Male journalists use them more frequently, often to describe perpetrators in mitigating terms, *"The suspect, a man in his twenties, was reportedly mentally unstable."* This shifts moral focus away from the criminal act toward contextual or psychological explanation, subtly justifying behavior. Female journalists employ relational processes to describe victims' social or personal contexts (e.g., *"Hajar, a 17-year-old high school student, was attacked near her home"*) which fosters empathy but also reinforces vulnerability through emphasis on age and innocence. Both uses serve ideological functions: one rationalizes male violence, the other accentuates female fragility.

Behavioral Processes, situated between material and mental types, describe physiological or emotional actions. Female journalists use them to intensify realism and emotion, e.g., *"The victim trembled as she recounted the attack."* Such constructions evoke sympathy but maintain the victim's passivity. Male journalists' behavioral descriptions are restrained, e.g., *"The victim appeared distressed,"* minimizing emotional involvement. In both corpora, the behavioral portrayal aligns with the recurrent image of the woman as emotionally affected and physically subdued.

Finally, Existential Processes, which simply assert the occurrence of events (e.g., *"There was a report of sexual assault in Casablanca"*), are used sparingly by both genders. While they provide factual objectivity, their impersonal structure detaches the crime from individual experiences, depersonalizing the event and erasing both agency and emotion.

In summary, although the frequencies of process types differ, both male and female journalists participate in a shared discursive pattern that constructs female rape victims as passive, vulnerable, and acted upon rather than acting. The cumulative linguistic choices, whether in material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, or existential processes, collectively foreground violence and suffering while minimizing agency, thereby reinforcing gendered ideologies of helpless femininity and male dominance.

2. Social Actor Representation Analysis

The social actor analysis investigates how Moroccan online journalists construct the identities of female rape victims and their perpetrators. Using **van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework**, the study examines strategies such as **nomination, categorization, impersonalization, activation, passivation, and mitigation**. This analysis reveals how journalist gender influences the degree of personalization, accountability, and ideological positioning in news reporting.

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2. The Social Actor Analysis Results

2.1 Victim Representation

Table 3. Representation of Victims by Journalist Gender

Representation Type	Female Journalists (%)	Male Journalists (%)
Nomination (using name)	40	10
Categorization (role or social type)	45	60
Impersonalization (anonymous)	15	30

As shown in Table 3, both female- and male-authored articles employ a range of representational strategies when referring to female rape victims; however, their frequencies reveal notable variation. Female journalists tend to use nomination more frequently, identifying victims by name and contextual details, as in *"Hajar, 17, a high school student, described the attack as terrifying."* Such nomination practices individualize the victim and foreground her humanity, enabling readers to empathize and recognize her as a real social actor rather than an abstract figure.

Male journalists, in contrast, more often rely on categorization or impersonalization, as in *"A minor was assaulted in her neighborhood"* or *"A young woman was reportedly attacked."* These strategies construct the victim as a generic or anonymous participant, thereby reducing personal identification and emotional proximity.

Yet, despite these stylistic divergences, the overall discourse in both male and female articles resists overt victim-blaming. Even when male journalists employ impersonal or categorical references, the syntactic and lexical framing positions the victim as the affected participant, not as a contributor to the assault. This consistent representation of victims as vulnerable and subjected to violence indicates a shared ideological stance that rejects discourses of provocation or moral culpability often found in patriarchal reporting traditions.

The difference lies not in the journalists' moral alignment but in their discursive means: female journalists humanize through personalization, while male journalists construct empathy through the structural emphasis on the crime itself. Thus, while variation in frequency exists, both groups converge in portraying victims as passive, vulnerable, and undeserving of blame, shifting accountability toward the perpetrators.

2.2 Perpetrator Representation

Table 4. Representation of Perpetrators by Journalist Gender

Representation Strategy	Female Journalists (%)	Male Journalists (%)
Activation (named, active agent)	78	37
Passivation (agent omitted)	10	45
Mitigation (circumstances given)	12	18

As Table 4 indicates, female journalists overwhelmingly activate perpetrators, explicitly identifying them as responsible agents of the assault. Sentences such as *"The man dragged the victim into an abandoned building and assaulted her"* exemplify a pattern that assigns direct moral and grammatical responsibility to the offender. This discursive strategy foregrounds agency and highlights accountability, aligning with a socially responsive and justice-oriented narrative.

Male journalists display a comparatively higher reliance on passivation and mitigation, as in *"The attack occurred while the suspect was reportedly intoxicated"* or *"The man, described as mentally unstable, committed the act."* These constructions may momentarily dilute the perception of individual blame by embedding the act in broader circumstantial contexts. Nevertheless, the underlying syntactic structure continues to attribute agency and culpability to the perpetrator, rather than shifting responsibility toward the victim.

This convergence is critical; while female journalists construct accountability through overt activation, male journalists achieve a similar ideological outcome by contextual framing. Both discourses refute victim-blaming and reinforce the perpetrator's responsibility. The linguistic differences, therefore, reflect gendered stylistic tendencies rather than conflicting ideological stances.

Corpus evidence supports this interpretation. In a female-authored article, the line *"Hajar, 17, was attacked while walking home. The assailant grabbed her and dragged her into an abandoned building"* establishes clear agency and emphasizes the brutality of the act. Similarly, a male-authored article reads, *"A young woman was assaulted in her neighborhood. The suspect, reportedly intoxicated, carried out the attack,"* where the perpetrator remains the grammatical actor despite mitigating details. In both examples, the crime remains agent-driven, and the victim's passivity signifies harm rather than complicity.

The Social Actor Analysis demonstrates that linguistic representation in Moroccan online newspapers, though quantitatively varied across gender, reveals a shared ideological alignment in resisting discourses that blame or dehumanize female victims of sexual violence. Female journalists' strategies of nomination and activation intensify empathy and moral engagement, while male journalists' preference for categorization and contextual mitigation maintains factual detachment without exonerating perpetrators.

Together, these patterns underscore a discursive shift toward accountability and empathy, reflecting broader transformations in Moroccan media discourse concerning gender, violence, and social justice. Both male and female reporters contribute, albeit through different linguistic pathways, to reconstructing rape narratives in ways that reject victim-blaming, emphasize female vulnerability, and attribute moral agency to offenders, advancing a more progressive framing of sexual violence in the Moroccan press.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the linguistic and social construction of female rape victims and their perpetrators in Moroccan online newspapers, highlighting the nuanced role of journalist gender in shaping representation. By applying Halliday's Transitivity System

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alongside van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework, the analysis demonstrates systematic patterns in both grammatical structuring and social actor portrayal, offering insights into the ideological positioning embedded within media discourse.

Concerning transitivity analysis, material processes, describing concrete actions, dominate across both female- and male-authored articles, reflecting a shared journalistic focus on the reporting of events. However, female journalists employ mental and verbal processes more frequently, foregrounding victims' emotional and cognitive experiences. For example, sentences such as *"She felt terrified and could not bring herself to speak to anyone about the attack"* highlight the victim as an experiencing subject, contributing to humanization while simultaneously reinforcing her vulnerability. Male journalists, by contrast, rely more heavily on relational processes to describe perpetrators' social or psychological states—e.g., *"The suspect, a man in his twenties, was reportedly mentally unstable"*—which can subtly shift attention away from the act itself and its moral implications. Despite these differences in frequency and stylistic preference, both male and female journalists ultimately construct narratives that attribute agency and accountability to perpetrators while portraying victims as passive recipients of violence, effectively rejecting victim-blaming discourse. These patterns echo prior research on the ideological effects of grammatical structures in news discourse (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998).

Analysis of agency within material processes further reinforces this convergence. Female journalists consistently activate perpetrators and occasionally grant limited agency to victims, signaling both accountability and recognition of victims' responses. Male journalists more frequently passivate victims and contextualize perpetrators' actions, yet even in these constructions, the perpetrator remains the primary agent of the violent act, ensuring that blame is not shifted onto the victim. Such grammatical choices demonstrate that while stylistic strategies differ, the ideological outcome remains consistent: perpetrators are responsible, and victims are not held culpable, aligning with feminist principles of ethical reporting (Cameron, 2010; Lazar, 2007).

The representation of social actors, applying Van Leeuwen's social actor framework, similarly reflects gendered stylistic tendencies while maintaining shared ideological outcomes. Female journalists tend to nominate victims and activate perpetrators, producing individualized and morally accountable narratives. For instance, *"Hajar, 17, a high school student, described the attack as terrifying"* positions the victim as a human subject, fostering empathy and ethical engagement. Male journalists more frequently employ categorization, impersonalization, and mitigation—e.g., *"The suspect, reportedly intoxicated, carried out the assault"*—which abstracts the victim and provides contextualizing details about the perpetrator. Nevertheless, these strategies do not endorse victim-blaming; rather, they maintain the perpetrator as the locus of responsibility, reinforcing accountability while varying in stylistic presentation.

The combined transitivity and social actor analyses reveal that linguistic and social choices in Moroccan online news are not neutral. Female journalists' strategies foreground empathy, victim humanization, and perpetrator accountability, whereas male journalists often adopt structural and contextual methods that depersonalize victims while maintaining ethical attribution of responsibility. These findings suggest that gender differences in reporting primarily reflect stylistic and narrative approaches, rather than ideological divergence, and highlight the subtle but important ways in which media discourse shapes public perceptions of sexual violence. The study underscores the necessity of gender-sensitive journalism training and ethical awareness in reporting, ensuring that news narratives support accountability, humanization, and the rejection of victim-blaming in sexual violence coverage.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how male and female journalists in Moroccan online newspapers linguistically and socially construct the representation of female rape victims and their perpetrators. Drawing on Halliday's *Transitivity System* and van Leeuwen's *Social Actor Framework*, the analysis revealed that, although there are differences in the frequency and stylistic use of linguistic structures, both male and female journalists converge in depicting female victims as passive, vulnerable, and subjected to violence, while assigning agency, accountability, and moral responsibility to perpetrators.

Female journalists tend to emphasize the victims' emotional and cognitive experiences through the use of mental and behavioral processes and nominations that humanize and individualize them. Male journalists, on the other hand, rely more on passivation, categorization, and contextual mitigation, yet their representations also contribute to rejecting victim-blaming narratives and maintaining perpetrators as the central agents of the crime. These findings suggest that differences between male and female journalists are largely stylistic rather than ideological, reflecting varying journalistic practices rather than divergent moral stances.

The implications of these findings are significant for feminist media studies and journalistic ethics. They demonstrate that Moroccan online journalism, while operating within a socio-cultural context shaped by patriarchal norms, shows an emerging ethical awareness and resistance to traditional victim-blaming discourse. By foregrounding the perpetrator's accountability and depicting victims with empathy and dignity, journalists, regardless of gender, can contribute to reshaping public attitudes toward sexual violence and promoting gender justice in media representation.

Ultimately, this research underscores the need for ongoing gender-sensitive training and ethical reflection within newsrooms. Encouraging journalists to critically engage with linguistic and discursive choices can foster a media environment that challenges structural inequalities, empowers survivors, and supports a more humane and just portrayal of gender-based violence.

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