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Citation: Mulupi, D. & Blumell, L. (2024). Gatekeeping Rape Culture: Kenyan News Coverage of Sexual Abuse and Femicide. *African Journalism Studies*, 44(2), pp. 153-170. doi: 10.1080/23743670.2024.2328524

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Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/32833/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2024.2328524>

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Gatekeeping Rape Culture: Kenyan News Coverage of Sexual Abuse and Femicide

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Abstract

This study examined how social institutional and social system level forces influenced Kenyan news coverage of the rape and murder of Sharon Otieno, and the subsequent arrest of a high-ranking politician charged in the case. It interrogates source use, personalization of the victim and alleged perpetrator, and use of rape culture (victim blaming, dismissing the event, threats to victim and surrogates) and anti-rape culture (support for the victim and mention of the systemic problem of sexual abuse and male power dominance) in the news coverage. Content analysis (N = 621) found official sources, particularly men, dominated the news as sources. While both men and women news sources used rape myths, women sources predominantly engaged in anti-rape culture. In-depth interviews with editors (N = 23) demonstrated how bribery by politicians and patriarchal cultural norms work in concert to sustain rape culture in news content.

KEYWORDS

anti-rape culture; bribery; femicide; gatekeeping; rape culture; sexual abuse

Introduction

About one in three women have experienced sexual abuse and violence in their lifetime (UN n.d.). Decades of scholarship on media coverage of sexual abuse and violence has evidenced problematic patterns of victim-blaming and narratives that excuse perpetrators (Blumell and Mulupi 2022; Ndhlovu 2020; Cuklanz 2022). Such narratives reinforce what sociologists have theorized as “rape culture,” essentially the normalization of male violence on women (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 2005). In recent years, activists have intensified efforts to challenge rape culture through movements such as MeToo (Garcia and Vemuri 2017; Kelland 2016). Although these movements have encouraged victims to come forward, and shifted some conversations, news coverage has evolved only marginally (Durham 2021; Mulupi and Blumell 2023).

Nonetheless, further study of how different media systems, especially outside of the Global North, are adapting to the MeToo movement is important. This study focuses on Kenya. Its media market is diverse and competitive (Omwoyo 2018) but, as a result of cross-media ownership (Mbeke 2010), five private conglomerates own the biggest daily newspapers and the majority of television and radio broadcasting licenses. Notably, politicians and their proxies have recently emerged as an important class of media owners (Nyanjom 2012). Similar to other contexts, Kenyan journalism is marked with precarity, evidenced by frequent mass layoffs and low pay for staff (Ireru 2016; Watta 2020), as well as declining audiences, advertising revenue and profits (Awiti 2019). While Kenya has a less-restrictive political and media system compared to other countries in Africa, the Kenyan press has been critiqued for being too oriented towards the state and the elite (Kivikuru 2017).

Recognizing the significance of the news media in shaping public attitudes, and the limited academic inquiry into Kenyan media (King'ori and Nyanoti 2021), we use a highly publicized abduction, rape, and murder to interrogate patterns of news coverage. Sharon Otieno was 7 months pregnant when she was abducted, raped and killed (The Daily Nation, September 8, 2018). Otieno was in a romantic relationship with Governor Okoth Obado, the elected executive head of Migori County (The Daily Nation, September 19, 2018). After disclosing her relationship to a local journalist, Otieno and the journalist were abducted by Obado's assistant and other unknown assailants on 3 September 2018 (NTV, September 6, 2018). The journalist managed to escape from a moving car, but Otieno's body was found the following day in a forest (The Daily Nation, September 5, 2018). Later reports noted she had been raped before being murdered (The Daily Nation, September 8, 2018). However, tests suggest the semen samples in a condom found near the crime scene belonged to an unidentified man. DNA samples also indicated Obado was the biological father of Otieno's fetus (The Standard, July 14, 2021). Governor Obado and one of his assistants were charged with Otieno's murder, while another of Obado's aides was charged with aiding and abetting murder (BBC, September 24, 2018). The trial is ongoing as of August 2023. The Kenyan news media covered this case extensively, from the initial kidnapping to the ongoing trial. Assessing how Kenyan news media reported this story and the logics and perceptions that guided decision making in the newsroom can illuminate the forces that shape journalistic practices and news content.

We therefore interviewed 23 editors and analyzed 621 news stories produced by four leading news conglomerates in Kenya—online coverage by two newspapers (The Daily Nation and

The Standard) and four TV stations (Citizen TV, KBC, KTN and NTV). Editors hold significant power in driving their organization's news agenda. They are gatekeepers (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), enacting and manifesting "ideals and practices of journalism on a daily basis" (Duffy 2021: 635). They assign reporters tasks, give guidance on sourcing and framing, and decide which events are worth reporting on, and to what degree of intensity. They also socialize reporters into the values, norms, and routines of journalism (Schudson 1989) such that eventually reporters frame stories and pursue a news agenda that is likely to appeal to their editor. Furthermore, editors act as a "mediator of competing interests," negotiating audience metrics, journalistic principles, the profit objectives of the news organization's management, and the interests of society (Duffy 2021: 636). Thus, Kenyan editors were best placed to reflect on and explain the choices their news organizations make when reporting instances of rape and femicide.

By utilizing a mixed-methods approach to data collection (Creswell and Miller 2000) that uses quantitative analysis of news content and qualitative in-depth interviews of editors, this study identifies patterns in news coverage, as well as the attitudes of gatekeepers responsible for the news content. This approach makes important contributions to gatekeeping research on the understudied fifth level of gatekeeping called the social system (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). The social system level measures attitudes, culture, and ideologies that inform the gatekeeping process, which often go unmeasured. Previous research shows problematic patterns of covering sexual violence (Bonnes 2013; Ndhlovu 2020; Cuklanz 2022), but few studies have measured how ideologies influence gatekeepers while covering these topics. Specifically, we measure common cultural attitudes that make up what's labelled as rape culture. These attitudes include victim blaming, victim shaming, and normalizing gender-based violence. Conversely, we also measure attitudes that challenge these common cultural myths, which we label as anti-rape culture.

Another outcome of our mixed-methods approach is to measure social institutional-level forces that include the influence of government and politics. This study looked at the intertwining relationship between politicians and news gatekeepers, and the persistence of men's dominance as news sources. As such, we demonstrate how elite sources, particularly politicians and government officials, exemplify their power through framing events according to their personal interests. Furthermore, the study shows how behind-the-scenes influences such as bribery of journalists and news gatekeepers' concerns about the financial health of their news organizations impact news coverage of sexual violence.

Literature Review

The gatekeeping process entails decision making by gatekeepers from news sources to reporters to editors as information flows through different channels (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Conceptualizations of gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Vos 2009) and the hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker and Reese 2014) classify five forces that influence gatekeeping. The levels range from the micro to macro: individual, routines, organizational, social institutions and social system. Although different forces work at each level, multiple forces can simultaneously influence news content. This study focuses on the social institutional and social system levels. The next section will discuss how forces at the social institutional and social system levels shape news content.

The social institutional level

News media operate in wider environments and are often influenced by powerful economic and political social institutions (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). The social institutional level primarily focuses on how official sources from public institutions, like governments, impact journalists and ultimately news coverage (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Official news sources, especially politicians, exemplify their power through increasing the salience of an issue and framing events according to their personal interests (Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2016; Munnik 2017). Moreover, journalists favor official sources over ordinary citizens (Bullock 2008; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2016) as they are perceived to have authority (Berkowitz 2019). A secondary aspect of the influence of sources on news coverage of sexual violence is the privileging of men's voices. Scholars consistently find that women news sources have less influence on news cycles than men sources (Berkowitz 2019; Semujju 2015). Marginalizing women's voices in news coverage of sexual abuse and violence has serious ramifications because sources can reflect views, experiences and opinions that either challenge or condone anti-woman violence (Blumell and Mulupi 2022; Meyers 1997). Therefore, the first area of exploration for this study was source use through the social institutional level:

RQ1a: How are different sources utilized in news coverage concerning Sharon Otieno and Okoth Obado?

RQ1b: How do the sampled editors describe source use for this case?

The social system level

Research at the social system level examines cultural norms and ideologies in societies and to what extent that influences news gatekeepers (Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Shoemaker and Vos 2009). These are understudied but significant influences because cultural norms are often so normalized, they are perceived as inevitable rather than socially constructed (Gitlin 1980; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). For this study, we focus on prevailing attitudes towards sexual abuse and violence and how that impacts news coverage and news professionals, which can be labelled broadly as rape culture (Burt 1980). Because Otieno was raped during her abduction and murder, considering rape culture and anti-rape culture is relevant to understanding how misconceptions and problematic attitudes about sexual violence manifest in news.

Rape culture

The term rape culture describes societies where sexual abuse and male perpetrated violence is so pervasive that rape is normalized and mythologized rather than understood in terms of its frequency, how it occurs, who are the perpetrators, and who are the victims (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 2005; Johnson and Johnson 2021). Rape culture maintains power structures and casts doubts on the validity of the victims (Weiss 2009) by using common rape myths, including that the victim was asking for it, the accused didn't mean to, the victim secretly wanted it, it's not a big deal, and the victim is lying (Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999: 59; McMahon and Farmer 2011). Research in Kenya shows that rape victims are often doubted (Munala et al. 2018).

Rape culture narratives have other damaging consequences when they seep into news content such as increasing the likelihood of the audience's endorsement of rape myths (Li, Kim, and O'Boyle 2017; Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello 2008). Research on news coverage of sexual abuse and violence suggests the news media tacitly, and sometimes overtly, perpetuate the abuse of women by advancing damaging stereotypes and rape myths (Cuklanz 2022). In South Africa, Bonnes (2013) found newspaper coverage featuring rape myths that placed blame on the victim, de-emphasized the role of the perpetrator and employed racist narratives about typical and atypical perpetrators. Similarly, Ndhlovu's (2020) inquiry of Zimbabwean newspaper coverage of rape cases involving the clergy revealed a pattern of dismissing the veracity of women rape victims as well as blaming victims' poor judgment for "consulting dubious self-styled prophets" (810). In Kenya, newspaper representation of women killed by intimate partners denigrated victims by describing them as "promiscuous gold diggers on whom men were generally dependent for sexual favours" (King'ori and Nyanoti 2021: 232).

Anti-rape culture

Although rape myths are still widely accepted, activists' and scholars' efforts to combat rape culture have caused an increase of anti-rape culture in society and in legacy and social media (Kelland 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019). Anti-rape culture counters rape myths and establishes that sexual abuse and violence are rooted in societal power structures and are acts of power (Garcia and Vemuri 2017). Notably, anti-rape culture messages increase news consumers' likelihood of believing victims' stories (Franiuk, Seefeldt, and Vandello 2008). Scholars have recently noted the use of anti-rape culture discourses in news coverage of sexual abuse and violence, particularly in the wake of the MeToo movement (Aroustamian 2020). In this case, Otieno's family was willing to speak openly with reporters, although previous research shows people coming forward to defend victims or victims/survivors are likely to receive public backlash (Durham 2021). This study thus incorporates the developing area of research on rape culture and anti-rape culture. We ask:

RQ2a: How do rape culture acceptance and anti-rape culture manifest in the news coverage?

RQ2b: How do the editors describe the influence of culture on news coverage?

Rape culture disproportionately personalizes the perpetrator while either ignoring or disproportionately negatively personalizing the victim. Equally, another way to increase anti-rape culture is to personalize victims rather than stereotyping them. We ask:

RQ3a: How does news coverage personalize Sharon Otieno and Okoth Obado?

RQ3b: How do editors personalize Sharon Otieno and Okoth Obado?

Methods

This mixed-methods study (Creswell and Clark 2011) combines content analysis (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2014) of Kenyan TV and online newspaper coverage (N = 621) of the rape and murder of Sharon Otieno and in-depth interviews with 23 news editors (16 women and 7 men).

Content analysis

Sampling

The sampling time frame was 9 months beginning 3 September 2018, encapsulating the initial peak coverage of Otieno's disappearance and later sporadic coverage of court proceedings related to the crime. News organizations were selected purposively (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2014) to focus on organizations with the widest audience reach. We therefore selected the two largest daily newspapers in Kenya, namely The Standard and The Daily Nation, the top three leading television broadcasters by audience numbers (NTV, KTN and Citizen TV), and Kenya's only state-owned television broadcaster, KBC (Murunga 2020). The sample included video of TV news broadcasts by NTV, KTN and Citizen TV, textual website coverage of Citizen TV and KBC, and online newspaper coverage of The Daily Nation and The Standard. We searched for the term "Sharon Otieno" on the websites and official YouTube accounts of the sampled news outlets. Excluding stories that mentioned Otieno in passing (e.g. stories about other cases of femicide) left a sample of 621 news items.

Code development

To code source use (RQ1 and H1), we identified 14 variables: Obado himself, Obado surrogate (family, friend, employee), Obado's political party, other political parties, defense lawyer, Sharon Otieno (social media posts or past quotes from family), Otieno surrogate (family/friend), prosecution lawyer, activist (not formally associated with NGO), civil society representatives (NGO, religious leader, scholar, etc.), police, eyewitness, ordinary citizen, and celebrity. We coded for the presence (= 1) or absence (= 0) of these source categories in news content. We did not measure the total count of each individual category. This is to say, that if three police officers appeared as news sources in a story, we coded that as 1 to indicate the presence of "police" as a source category in that story. A second part of coding for source use was two ratio variables that counted the use of men and women sources. If five men spoke in a story, for example, we recorded that as five men. The gender of sources was determined through use of nouns, pronouns, titles, and using a search engine if necessary. None of the news sources were identified as non-binary in the sampled news content.

This study developed four indices to answer the research questions (RQ2 and RQ3): rape culture acceptance, anti-rape culture, personalization of Otieno, and personalization of Obado. Each index is based on previously tested and published research (Blumell and Mulupi 2022). The rape culture acceptance index comprises four dichotomous variables that were adapted from research on rape culture patterns (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 2005) and rape myths (Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974; Burt 1980; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999). The four variables are: negative comments towards victim (includes all negative adjectives towards victim such as being a liar, gold-digger, promiscuous); victim blaming (responsibility is placed on victim such as she was asking for it, she deserved it, etc.); dismissal of events (the rape and/or murder is downplayed, excused, or stated as another less severe crime); and threats to those defending the victim (usually made towards victims who come forward, in this case including family because the victim is dead).

The anti-rape culture index draws on Kelland (2016), Jordan (2012), Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (2005), and Johnson and Johnson (2021). It, too, consists of four dichotomous variables: Support for victim/family who came forward (counteracting the fear and backlash people face when coming forward), mention of systemic problem of sexual abuse (counteracting rape culture that promotes sexual abuse and violence are a result of a bad apple instead of systemic

issue), mention of rape culture (to bring awareness to rape culture), and mention of male power dominance (the foundation of counteracting rape culture is to situate sexual abuse and violence as an act of power not sexuality).

The final indices were formed based on variables that personalize the two major actors. The Obado index consisted of five variables that are commonly used to express sympathy for the perpetrator with the intent to diminish or thwart justice (Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999; Weiss 2009): impact on career, impact on family, impact on self, impact on reputation, and defense of character. The Otieno index used four variables that humanize the victim and the impact of the crime: impact on family, acknowledgment of tragedy, use of the word victim, and acknowledgment of the victim's robbed future.

Intercoder reliability

We tested intercoder-reliability with a sample of 60 coding units (about 10 percent). Three rounds of coding produced satisfactory reliability for all variables using Cohen's Kappa with indices ranging between .80 and 1.0.

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews entail asking open-ended questions to understand participants' lived experiences, thoughts, and opinions (Wengraf 2011). The data used here were collected as part of a larger research project focused on the intersection of gender and media in Kenya. Researchers primarily conducted face-to-face interviews during a field trip to Nairobi, Kenya in December 2019. Three interviews were conducted in January and February 2020 via telephone with participants who were unavailable to meet in person during the field trip. The interviews were semi-structured.

Sampling procedure

Ethics approval for data collection was granted by the host university and NACOSTI, the Kenyan authority that handles research licensing. We directly contacted editors, sometimes using snowballing (Streeton, Cooke, and Campbell 2004), i.e. getting recommendations of participants and local journalism networks. The sample size (23 editors) complies with the recommendation that single case studies have 15–30 interviews (Marshall et al. 2013). The 23 editors (16 women and 7 men) we interviewed worked for the leading daily newspapers and national broadcasting stations in Kenya: The Standard and The Daily Nation newspapers as well as NTV, KTN, Citizen TV and KBC. Nearly all the interview participants were involved in the reportage of the story of Sharon Otieno, performing a range of editorial and managerial tasks. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The interviews lasted between 20 and 72 min, with an average of 47 min. Table 1 provides more details about the participants.

Thematic analysis

The first researcher transcribed interviews and anonymized the files. After initial reading and discussion of the data, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis by developing codes and key themes emerging from the data (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). The researchers employed the four stages of themes (Green et al. 2007). data analysis: immersion, coding, categorizing and generation of themes. Guided by the research questions, each researcher independently reviewed the data and identified emerging codes and themes. The analyses were shared twice before revising the themes based on a final round of discussions.

Table 1. In-depth interview participants.

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Job title	Medium
1	Angela	Woman	Features Editor	Print
2	Anita	Woman	Magazine Editor	Print
3	Ashley	Woman	Special Editor	Print
4	Cindy	Woman	Managing Editor	Print
5	Joyce	Woman	News Editor	Print
6	Juanita	Woman	Magazine Editor	Print
7	Karen	Woman	Chief Sub-Editor	Print
8	Katrina	Woman	Magazine Editor	Print
9	Leah	Woman	Deputy News Editor	Print
10	Lucy	Woman	Assignments Editor	Print
11	Margaret	Woman	News Editor	Digital
12	Miriam	Woman	Assistant News Editor	Print
13	Rosa	Woman	Digital Editor	TV
14	Susan	Woman	Science Editor	Print
15	Violet	Woman	News Editor	TV
16	Wendy	Woman	News Editor	TV and radio
17	John	Man	Investigations Editor	TV
18	Ken	Man	Business Editor	Print
19	Nathan	Man	Production Editor	Print
20	Newton	Man	Production Editor	Print
21	Peter	Man	Managing Editor	TV
22	Robert	Man	News Editor	Print
23	Thomas	Man	Associate Editor	Print

Findings

The findings have been split into three subsections allowing for the reporting of quantitative and qualitative results simultaneously. Therefore, answers to each RQ include both content analysis and the in-depth interviews.

Source use in news content

RQ1 sought to understand how different sources were utilized in the news coverage (RQ1a) and how the editors described the social institutional influences in this case (RQ1b). We coded for RQ1a by recording the presence or absence of different source categories in news content. Table 2 outlines the M and SD of each source type. Civil society representatives

Table 2. Source use and point-biserial correlations.

Source	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rape culture <i>r_{pb}</i>	Anti-rape culture <i>r_{pb}</i>	Otieno personalization <i>r_{pb}</i>	Obado personalization <i>r_{pb}</i>
Okoth Obado	.19	.39	.09*	-.13***	-.08*	.42***
Obado surrogate	.10	.29	.09*	-.08*	-.5	.14***
Obado's party	.16	.36	.11***	.35***	.18***	-.01
Defense lawyer	.17	.37	.05	-.18***	-.09*	.31***
Sharon Otieno	.03	.16	.21**	.02	-.01	.01
Otieno surrogate	.17	.38	.20	.33***	.39***	-.07
Prosecution lawyer	.16	.36	-.04	-.12**	-.06	-.02
Other parties	.05	.21	.14***	.18**	.04	.01
Activist	.04	.36	-.07	.18***	.05	-.09*
Civil society representatives	.36	.48	-.09*	.01	-.01	-.01
Police	.14	.35	.03	-.04	-.01	-.02
Eyewitness	.08	.27	-.04	.03	.02	-.08
Ordinary citizen	.06	.23	.18***	.06	-.02	.12**
Celebrity	.01	.08	.07	.01	.03	-.02

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

were used as sources in the majority of the sampled news content, appearing in 36 percent of news articles. Obado was used as a source in 19 percent of analyzed news content whereas Otieno surrogates appeared as sources in 17 percent of the data. The variable of Sharon Otieno was used if coverage included any previous statements from her; this was infrequent (3 percent of sampled news content). Overall, official sources were present in the majority of the coverage. Besides Otieno surrogates and Otieno herself, the remaining non-official sources were eyewitnesses (8 percent of stories), activists (4 percent of stories), and ordinary citizens (6 percent of stories), appearing in a small portion of the coverage. Regarding gender, 962 sources were coded as men and 359 sources were coded as women. Hence, men dominated as news sources, accounting for 72.8 percent of sources compared to women, who made up 27.2 percent of sources. As such, news organizations privileged the voices of powerful elites, particularly official sources who were mostly men.

When asked about the motivations undergirding use of sources, all the editors agreed that Kenyan politicians hold great leverage over journalists. Furthermore, they all emphasized that besides the position of legitimacy and power of a politician like Obado, powerful people (mostly men) control the press through bribery, threats, and advertising funds. This places Obado and his surrogates as more than just commonly used sources but having the ability to quash stories that are seen as inflammatory. As Joyce explained, "You know where it

involves a prominent person like the governor, attempts will be made to ensure that the story is not as objective as it should be.” Editors acknowledged bribery, or as it’s called in Kenya, “brown envelopes”: Brown envelopes are very common when dealing with politicians. Sometimes it’s quite open. A politician will have a function and people will even queue for the money. Or they will say they are buying you lunch and give money to one of you and then it will be distributed later. (Ken)

These bribes are extended to limit news coverage, favor the politician, or not run the story all together. Regarding Otieno’s murder and Obado’s subsequent arrest, news coverage wasn’t avoidable. Editors acknowledged, however, altering stories and downplaying reporting in cases due to bribery and organizational financial concerns.

There’s a thin line. Even if the governor is wrong, this paper needs money from advertisers. Have we ever done business with the county government headed by Obado? Yes. Do they give us business? Yes. So, we need to be balanced. Even if we write a story, we can’t hit him so much It is normal to kill stories to appease key advertisers. (Miriam)

The underlying goal is to avoid jeopardizing much-needed funds. As Cindy said, “Sometimes you have to see what the best interest of the business is What is the best interest of the business?” By contrast, victims and victims’ families rarely can thwart the unethical efforts of politicians. They and their victimization are secondary to journalists, given economic concerns. This explicitly bothered 10 of the editors, who acknowledged that the coverage in this case highly favored Obado and that rape and femicide are underreported in Kenya: “Most of the time unless it’s a public personality involved in the defilement or rape case—such stories don’t see the light of day” (Leah).

Presence of rape and anti-rape culture

Turning to the social system level, RQ2 asked how rape culture acceptance and anti-rape culture manifest in news coverage (RQ2a) and how the editors perceive the influence of culture on news coverage (RQ2b). An independent t-test was run between medium and the indices. Results show no significant differences between TV ($M = .05$, $SD = .12$) and online print ($M = .06$, $SD = .13$) and the rape culture index, $t(620) = -1.18$, $p > .05$. There were also no significant differences between TV ($M = .15$, $SD = .22$) and online print ($M = .12$, $SD = .20$) and the anti-rape culture index, $t(620) = 1.29$, $p > .05$. Both TV and online print used the anti-rape culture index ($M = .14$) more in news coverage than rape culture ($M = .055$). This is to say that overall, narratives challenging rape culture appeared more frequently compared to narratives that endorsed rape culture. It’s a positive finding that is also tempered by the overall low usage of the anti-rape culture index. Next, calculations were made between the indices and presence of different source categories in news. This combines the social institutional level forces and social system-level forces to show to what extent do sources enact cultural and counter cultural norms. Table 2 shows point-biserial correlations between sources and the rape culture acceptance and anti-rape culture indices. As expected, stories that featured Obado, Obado’s surrogates, Obado’s political party, and other political parties were correlated with the rape culture acceptance index. Surprisingly, stories that featured Otieno’s own words and ordinary citizens were also correlated with the rape culture acceptance index. For the anti-rape index, stories that featured Otieno’s surrogates, activists,

other parties, and Obado's party all had a significant positive correlation. Notably, Obado's association with his own party has been unstable, and therefore, the findings reflect his party was an inconsistent ally to Obado. Not surprisingly, there was a negative correlation with Obado and Obado's surrogates.

The next statistical analysis run for the indices was to understand to what extent the gender of sources impacts the prevalence of rape culture and anti-rape culture. Tables 3 and 4 show simple linear regressions between the indices and the gender of the sources. While both women and men sources were significant in terms of rape culture, only women sources were positively correlated with anti-rape culture.

Editors were asked about how sexual abuse and violence are discussed in newsrooms and included in news coverage. The answers were polarized according to the gender. All but one woman editor described the conversations as problematic with high emphasis on victim blaming and shaming. Only one of the seven men editors thought there was an issue. The gender divide in how editors perceive newsroom conversations on sexual violence can be explained by several factors. First, a previous survey found nearly 8 in 10 Kenyan women journalists have experienced sexual harassment in their workplace (Blumell and Mulupi 2021). It is likely that women editors were more cognizant of the problematic narratives around sexual abuse because of their own personal experiences at work and in society. Second, literature suggests men endorse rape myths more than women (Johnson, Kuck, and Schander 1997).

Table 3. Simple linear regression of men as news sources, df(1, 619).

	B (SE)	β	t	F	R	ΔR^2
Rape culture	.01 (.004)	.19	6.94	22.89***	.19	.04
Anti-rape culture	.01 (.006)	.07	1.75	3.06	.07	.005
Otieno personalization	.02 (.01)	.10	2.61	6.82**	.10	.01
Obado personalization	.03 (.01)	.2	5.15	26.47***	.20	.04

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 4. Simple linear regression of women as news sources df(1, 619).

	B (SE)	β	t	F	R	ΔR^2
Rape culture	.02 (.01)	.12	3.04	9.25**	.19	.04
Anti-rape culture	.07 (.01)	.33	8.7	75.66***	.33	.11
Otieno personalization	.04 (.01)	.21	5.48	29.67***	.21	.05
Obado personalization	-.01 (.01)	-.04	-.88	.76	.04	.001

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

In the case of Otieno, conversations focused on her culpability in her abduction, rape, and murder. An important consideration here is that in a highly religious and conservative society as Kenya's, women's sexuality and morality is heavily policed in ways that don't apply to men: "Immediately when it was reported everybody blamed Sharon [Otieno] because how does a student date a married man. We had those kinds of discussion" (Angela). Similar to previous news coverage that framed victims as seeking money, status, attention, etc. the

women editors noted how men in the newsroom framed Sharon: The men especially say, did you see how she was dressed? Or she stole the guy's money. Did you see her stealing the money? And anyway, even if she stole, what is the story? The story is that a girl has been raped or murdered. The story is not that she stole his money. (Ashley)

The women editors also agreed that the details of the rape and brutal murder were overlooked. Rosa described how her organization's news editor shuts down rape stories as too gruesome, which results in a lack of coverage: So, the stories are not pitched because they know they'll be shut down ... another reaction you always get when you pitch such a story is, "Okay, next, do we have another story?" So basically, your story is not important.

The sampled news coverage showed that rape was mentioned in only 9 percent of coding units. Except for John, who stated coverage was bad for both Obado and Otieno, the remaining men editors were either indifferent or engaged in victim blaming when describing Otieno. For example, Newton used the term "victim card" to describe the rape and murder of Otieno: "There were also stories seemingly trying to idolize her and play the victim card of somebody who was lured with money, impregnated and killed by powerful people" Newton's comment is reflective of the stereotype of "ideal victims," which Otieno appeared not to fit from the perspective of the men editors due to her relationship with Obado. Even though she had been brutally murdered, they did not view her as a "real victim," essentially enacting the rape myth "she deserved it." In terms of counteracting harmful gendered stereotypes about rape, or as what we refer to as anti-rape culture, 11 of the editors (all women) stated they try consistently to change how sexual abuse and violence are discussed in newsrooms and covered in news media. Most expressed frustrations over the incremental progress, although Angela did note improvement here: "We covered it extensively and I think we help people now understand the power play."

Personalization of Otieno and Obado

The final research question continued exploring rape culture and anti-rape culture in the social system level by asking about news coverage personalization (RQ3a) and editors' personalization (RQ3b). An independent t-test was run between medium and the personalization indices. The personalization indices measured how Obado was humanized and presented in a sympathetic manner using five variables, namely impact on career, impact on family, impact on self, impact on reputation, and defense of character. For Otieno, the personalization index used four variables that humanized the victim and the impact of the crime, namely impact on family, acknowledgment of tragedy, use of the word victim, and acknowledgment of the victim's robbed future. Results show no significant differences between TV ($M = .14$, $SD = .19$) and online print ($M = .20$, $SD = .20$) and the personalization of Obado, $t(620) = -1.43$, $p > .05$. There were also no significant differences between TV ($M = .11$, $SD = .19$) and online print ($M = .13$, $SD = .20$) and the personalization of Otieno, $t(620) = -.82$, $p > .05$. With these indices, the Obado personalization was slightly higher in news coverage than the Otieno personalization.

Table 2 shows point-biserial correlations between sources and the personalization indices. As expected, Obado, Obado surrogates, and the defense lawyer were significantly correlated with the Obado personalization index. This indicates that these sources likely advanced narratives that represented Obado in a sympathetic manner or as the victim of career, reputational and personal harm. Also as expected, Otieno surrogates were significantly correlated with the

Otieno personalization index. Similarly, these sources likely acknowledged the loss suffered by Otieno and Otieno's family. Surprisingly, Obado's political party was correlated with the Otieno personalization index, but this could be explained by Obado's fallout with his party (ODM Party) weeks before Otieno's murder (KBC, July 29, 2018). Ordinary citizen sources were positively correlated with the Obado personalization index, again indicating sympathy for Obado. Tables 3 and 4 show significance for women news sources and Otieno, and significance for men sources and Otieno and Obado. This is to say that women as news sources were more likely to empathize with and acknowledge the loss suffered by Otieno and her family, whereas men as news sources were more likely to empathize with both Otieno and Obado.

As noted above, the editors were divided along gender lines both in terms of perceptions of sexual abuse and the news coverage. Six of the seven men commented that the news coverage was biased against Obado. In comparison, only one woman commented that the coverage was fair. The other 15 women editors commented that the coverage was lenient on Obado. Thomas complained, "The media essentially prosecuted and judged Governor Obado based on police statements and quotes that were not part of official court records." Yet, Juanita stated, "I think we actually dignified him instead of making him the villain." Ashley also pointed out that in attempts to personalize Otieno, both surrogates and critics positioned Otieno as a cautionary tale for other women and girls to learn from—placing the responsibility on them not to be raped or murdered.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how macro-level gatekeeping forces, namely the social institutional and social system levels (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), influence news coverage of sexual abuse and violence against women in Kenya. Content analysis of 621 TV and online stories enabled us to map out news coverage patterns and in-depth interviews with 23 Kenyan editors shed light on their views of their newsroom practices and culture.

Answers to RQ1 showed the power of politicians on Kenyan news media, which is consistent with previous research (Ileri 2016). Behind-the-scenes influences are often invisible in news coverage and are rarely made transparent to the public. But researchers can map social institutional forces as sources that can dictate news frames and assert their power on news professionals who do not want to risk advertising revenue (The Standard, September 9, 2020). It's also a reflection on the standing of Kenyan news professionals, who are underpaid and face frequent layoffs (Ileri 2016; Watta 2020). Politicians exploit news industry vulnerabilities. Sacrificing sexual violence victims is perceived to be necessary in order to keep business open. However, it should also be noted that other official sources that we categorized as civil society representatives (religious leaders, NGO representatives, scholars, etc.) were also prominently used. Another continuing consequence of social institutional level forces is that they are disproportionately male-dominated, and so men continue to have more influence as sources in news coverage (Berkowitz 2019; Semujju 2015), even for a topic such as sexual abuse and violence where women are overwhelmingly disproportionately affected. Removing the worn-out excuse that there are no women to speak on a topic doesn't seem to increase women's likelihood of being news sources.

The social system level was important in understanding how sexual abuse and violence are ultimately reported on. Both rape culture (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 2005) and anti-rape culture were observed in the Otieno coverage, showing that politicians and civil society representatives are also influenced by the social system. Politicians engaged in both rape and anti-rape culture narratives, whereas Obado and his surrogates engaged with rape culture. Ordinary citizens also engaged in rape culture, through negative comments towards Otieno and victim blaming. Notably, Otieno's own words as posted on her Facebook account, as well as alleged personal conversations recounted by family and friends, were also used to reinforce rape culture. These narratives perpetuated the stereotype of Otieno as a gold-digger who lived a lavish lifestyle financed by Obado and thereby endorsed victim blaming and the notion that she deserved her fate. For example, *The Standard* (September 6, 2018) described a WhatsApp exchange between Otieno and a friend in which Otieno states a man, presumably Obado, wants to buy her an expensive house.

Another major finding is that both women and men as news sources were found to be significantly correlated with the rape culture index. While women and girls make up the majority of victims of sexual abuse and violence, they are socialized in an environment that places the responsibility to avoid abuse on the shoulders of women and girls (Weiss 2009). For example, some women politicians demanded justice for Otieno and also referenced her as a cautionary tale for other young women to avoid dating older wealthy men. Ultimately such opinions amplify rape culture. This element of sources engaging in both rape culture and anti-rape culture narratives is not surprising when we consider the stereotype of an "ideal victim" who is narrativized as pure, innocent and blameless (Christie 1986). Previous studies have shown mediated representations of sexual and gender violence follow the "virgin/vamp," "good/bad" and "ideal/non-ideal" dichotomies that situate victims as blameless and others as blame-worthy (Benedict 1993; Clinnick, Ison, and Hooker 2023). News accounts which stated that Otieno was separated from her husband (*The Standard*, September 15, 2018), was in a transactional relationship with a married man, and had been warned by her mother "to stop dating politicians" (*Nation*, September 6, 2018) signalled Otieno's "non-ideal" victim status. Although the accounts of Otieno's lifestyle and relationships might be facts, the binary of ideal/non-ideal victim undermines public understanding of gendered violence, and is rooted in patriarchal notions of acceptable forms of femininity.

Rape culture attitudes were reflected in how the sampled editors recalled discussions of victim blaming, shaming, and labeling Otieno as a gold-digger, echoing previous research on Kenyan news coverage (King'ori and Nyanoti 2021). Such alarming biases against a murder victim reflect the sexism of newsrooms. An overlooked part of gatekeeping is how the social system can influence the organizational environment as well as the individual gatekeeper.

Our focus on anti-rape culture was situated in recent advancements of feminist activism such as the MeToo movement. An important step in anti-rape culture is to shift news values that heavily concentrate on drama (Harcup and O'Neill 2017), reinforce stereotypes, and promote rape culture (Cuklanz 2022) to more nuanced approaches that position sexual abuse, violence and, in this case, femicide as societal and global issues propagated by strict gendered norms. This shift was evident in the presence of anti-rape culture in the coverage. Indeed, a positive step was that anti-rape culture was slightly more prevalent here than rape culture.

Unfortunately, the newsroom discussions on the Otieno case illustrate the change of coverage remains superficial. Educating news professionals about rape and anti-rape culture is crucial.

News coverage personalized—that is, humanized and sympathized with—both Obado and Otieno. Rape culture involves pitying the accused, especially if the accused is a public figure, while demonizing or dismissing the accuser (Silveirinha, Simões, and Santos 2019). Overall, Obado received slightly more personalization than Otieno through coverage in which sources empathized with the negative impacts on Obado’s career, his reputation and personal well-being, and negative impact on his family and friends. Essentially, even though Otieno lost her life in a brutal manner, and her family and friends lost a loved one, news coverage still overwhelmingly positioned Obado in a more sympathetic light. Moreover, looking at the gender of sources shows that men were predominantly quoted to personalize Obado and both women and men were used to personalize Otieno. The personalization of Obado by men extended to the newsroom. The men editors interviewed showed concern for Obado’s reputation and largely perceived him to be the victim. One editor did not refer to Otieno by name and instead talked about her as “that woman.”

While a case study is beneficial in carefully assessing how this particular story was reported, one limitation is that such findings may not be generalizable. Interviews were also based on a non-representative sample. Women accounted for the majority of our interview participants even though men are the majority of editors in Kenyan newsrooms. This is partly because of snowball sampling, but we did also struggle directly recruiting men who were either unresponsive to our communication, or did not commit to scheduling a meeting. It is likely that men editors were put off by the study’s focus on rape and femicide, topics that are often stereotyped as “women’s issues” even though they impact all of society. However, our mixed-method approach yielded rich data on how and even why Kenyan news media report sexual abuse and femicide. Future research should be comparative, including internationally. Research on how social media engage with these stories would also help explain how macro gatekeeping forces operate in other media.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that politics exerts a powerful force in Kenyan news-making directly through bribery of journalists and indirectly via advertising revenues and shareholding in news organizations. Patriarchal culture and ideology also emerged as a major influence on the news. Along with our theoretical contributions to gatekeeping research, the study has several practical implications for journalists on improving news coverage of sexual violence. News personnel need training and increased awareness of this topic. Interviews show problematic and biased ideas that often propagate rape culture. Journalists should increase their use of women and non-binary people as sources and should include more experts and activists who can help dispel continuing rape culture myths. Fully eliminating rape culture from news coverage will be difficult for journalists because rape myths are often promoted by those accused or defending the accused—two primary sources for journalists in these cases. However, using experts and activists advances public awareness and raises the bar for what is acceptable in public discourse. News organizations need to continue working towards eliminating patriarchal structures in newsrooms given their many damaging effects on journalists and the news.

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