

# **Australia: Rape is not 'sex', and 'broken hearts' don't cause murder. Women are dying - and language matters**

Friday 25 October 2019, by [GILMORE Jane](#) (Date first published: 31 August 2019).

**A year after Jill Meagher was murdered, Tracy Connelly was too. The different ways each crime was reported speaks volumes**

In July 2013 a woman called Tracy Connelly was murdered in Melbourne. It made headlines in most of the national newspapers, all of which used some variation of the phrase "St Kilda prostitute killed". The story dropped off the front page of every website within a day.

Less than a year before Tracy's murder, [another woman, Jill Meagher, was murdered](#). Remember Jill? How could we forget her? So young, so beautiful, so beloved, so normal. The reporting reached saturation with a gorgeous photo of her happy, smiling face. We saw footage of her poor, heartbroken husband and heard the shocked and trembling voices of her colleagues at the ABC. The coverage went on for weeks. It made her a real person to everyone who read about her murder.

But what about the "St Kilda prostitute"? Was she not just as much a person as Jill? Tracy Connelly was 40 years old when she was murdered. She lived just a few streets from my house. Tracy was real; she was a person, she had a community who valued her and a boyfriend who loved her. Why was she so dehumanised in the coverage of her murder?

The answer is, of course, all too obvious. She wasn't a person, she was a "prostitute". The reporting on the man [who is charged with murdering Michaela Dunn](#) mostly avoided the pejorative term "prostitute" and replaced it with "sex worker" but the dehumanising of another woman killed by a violent man showed nothing much has changed in seven years. News stories sensationalised the work both women did and ignored the parts of their lives that made them a person; the coverage of Jill Meagher's murder, on the other hand, humanised her thoroughly.

The way the media chose to frame Tracy's story, by constantly referring to her as a "prostitute", suggested that in some way she deserved what happened to her. That she should have known better, and that she was asking for trouble by doing the work she did.

The opening lines of a story about her murder in the Age in July 2013 read:

"Tracy Connelly had walked St Kilda's red light district for at least a decade and knew her work was dangerous. In 2005, her minder was run over by a man who was angry that she refused to get in his car, Ms Connelly once told a court."

What if, instead of "St Kilda prostitute brutally murdered", the headline had been: "Tracy Connelly brutally murdered in her home"?

What if they'd led with a photogenic image of Tracy's beautiful, pale, smiling face and this

paragraph:

“Tracy Connelly’s traumatised boyfriend discovered her body in their home yesterday afternoon. There was no sign of forced entry and police believe she may have been killed by someone she knew. Tearful friends talked about what a caring, loving person Tracy was, and how devastated their community is by this horrible crime.”

Would Tracy be a person to us then? Would she be so easily forgotten? Or would we have to wait until her killer, like Adrian Bayley, attacked a white, middle-class woman for the world to remember that a murdered woman is a person? That no person asks for or deserves murder, or any other form of attack. That blaming the victim is never acceptable, regardless of their profession, clothing, activities or housing circumstances.

Being a sex worker is dangerous. But it’s not as though sex workers are surrounded by dangerous chemicals or heavy machinery or wild animals. It’s dangerous because they are working with men. Their work makes them vulnerable to the sort of men who want to be violent to women who have little means of defending themselves. It’s not the people who do sex work who cause the danger. It’s the men who take advantage of their circumstances to commit violence. But the underlying assumption, that sex workers are responsible for the violence done to them, is reproduced and exacerbated by news media reports.

The media (both mainstream and social) are easy to blame because they are our only source of information about what happens in the wider world, beyond our immediate circle. The way they frame that information – the words they use, the level of coverage and importance given to a story, the type of details that might be emphasised or omitted – influences how we think of it. Jill Meagher, ABC staffer, was one of their own. They reported her death as the tragic event it was. Tracy was not one of their own – her life was very different from the vast majority of mainstream journalists’ lives – so she was reduced to a stereotype.

The simplicity of the Fixed It project, where I take a red pen to headlines, hadn’t occurred to me back then, but I wrote for the King’s Tribune about Tracy and how her murder had been portrayed in the media. The response was overwhelming. People in her community got in touch to tell me about the rage they felt seeing Tracy dehumanised by every newspaper in the country. [Women](#) from all over the world sent me headlines from their local news outlets, saying journalists turned murdered women into salacious, sensationalised clickbait. The most heartbreaking were the people who knew and loved a murdered woman, and had to watch as the media blamed her for her own murder and made excuses for the man who killed her.

“Why don’t journalists think women are people?” read the subject line of one email.

After Tracy’s murder and the contemptible way it was reported in the press, I started seeing it everywhere. Not just in crime reports but also in political reporting, sports reporting, even articles about musicians and artists. Women are not people in the eyes of the news, at least not the way men are. Women are tits and arse, they’re glamorous or fat, they’re wives or mothers or stupid or demanding or nagging or annoying or sweet or pretty. Men, on the other hand, are fully-rounded, complex people – as long as they’re not too “womanlike”.

After responding to the treatment of Tracy in the media, I continued writing articles and blogposts about it, but nothing ever really cut through. Then, in September 2015, one of the major news sites in Australia published an article about a man who murdered his ex-girlfriend under the headline: “Townsville police say selfie could have led to alleged stabbing murder”. I pulled out my phone, fixed the headline and snapped it back on Twitter. Fixed It was born.

Here you go [@newscomauHQ](#) I fixed it for you. [pic.twitter.com/Lqfx7wV0dR](https://pic.twitter.com/Lqfx7wV0dR)

— Jane Gilmore (@JaneTribune) [September 30, 2015](#)

Within a few months I was regularly scanning news sites and by the beginning of 2016 I had set up daily Google alerts for any news story about men's violence against women. I was making the fixes on a daily basis and posting them on a website I had originally set up as a focal point for my freelance writing. Over the next two years Fixed It gained a strong social media following and I found myself regularly speaking at public events and writing articles about the way the media reports men's violence against women. I incorporated it into my master's degree and spent hundreds of hours researching the cause and effect of this kind of reporting. My book of the same name is the culmination of all that work.

There have been hundreds of headlines in Fixed It over that time. Drunk teenagers getting themselves raped, lying sex workers, houses committing rape, brooms beating women, loving fathers killing their children, Susan Sarandon being old in public, broken hearts causing murder, women too stupid to understand superannuation, Bill Clinton's wife running for president, 40-year-old men in "sexual relationships" with 12-year-old girls, the prime minister of England's legs, women too old to be hot while playing football, domestic violence "stunts", "sex romps" killing MPs, countless invisible murderers and endless victim blaming.

Here you go [@thetimes](#) I fixed it for you because there are no excuses for men who kill women and children. [#FixedIt](#) [#ValeLauraFigueira](#)<https://t.co/LIEmNeT81p>  
[pic.twitter.com/arcxJlmsKe](https://pic.twitter.com/arcxJlmsKe)

— Jane Gilmore (@JaneTribune) [May 13, 2019](#)

In all that time, only one editor has ever got in touch to ask how they could write stories about women differently. Otherwise, journalists and editors don't engage. And I understand. No one likes to be publicly smacked down, and it can be frustrating and humiliating to be accused of sexism or victim blaming - particularly if the journalists involved think I don't understand the pressures they're under or the legal restraints they must work within. This was certainly true in the early days of Fixed It. But now I have a much better understanding of and more sympathy for court reporters and editors of online news who have to do far too much with far too little. I also recognise the limitations of reporting on crimes that have not been through the court. You can't call someone a rapist if he has not been convicted of rape.

But even taking into account these limitations, there are ways to rethink how we report such crimes. For example, you can (and should) call it an "alleged rape" instead of "sex". The presumption of innocence does not prevent someone describing an alleged crime. No reporter would ever write that an accused car thief was driving their own car home because it hadn't yet been proven in court that he stole it.

Here you go [@newscomauHQ](#) I fixed it for you because alleged rape is not sex and adults don't have a "secret romance"...[#FixedIt](#) [#RapeIsNotSex](#)  
[#VictimBlaming](#)<https://t.co/wkhhtF5UpI> [pic.twitter.com/HK03Zpu5v2](https://pic.twitter.com/HK03Zpu5v2)

— Jane Gilmore (@JaneTribune) [June 24, 2019](#)

Sexual violence, however, appears to present reporters and editors with difficulties that don't occur in any other criminal act. Far too often, alleged rape is reported as "sex", which is not a crime. Rape is not sex and no one has ever been charged with having consensual sex. "Kris Kafoops faces court over sex claim" is as inaccurate in reporting on an alleged rape as "Kris Kafoops faces court over driving a car claim" would be in reporting on an alleged car theft.

The rules of sub judice contempt require that journalists cannot report someone is guilty of a crime before they are convicted, which is why the word "alleged" is so ubiquitous in crime reporting. This does not explain or excuse the way rape is so often described as sex, as if the words are interchangeable. They're not. It happens because all the myths about violence are so deeply embedded in our culture, and further entrenched by journalism.

There was a vast difference in how Tracy Connelly and Jill Meagher were treated. Tracy was dehumanised, Jill was not, and this is not unique to Australia or even to modern reporting. For millennia, women have been divided into "good women" - wives and mothers, sweetly pretty, conservatively dressed nice girls - and "bad women" - sirens and sex workers, drug addicts, page three models and drunken, promiscuous sluts. Good women are helpless victims but bad women ask for trouble. The reality is that there is no type of woman who could conceivably deserve violence but this entrenched division of good and bad women still strongly influences how traditional media report on complex issues, and reduces women to these arbitrary categories.

Journalism needs more voices and more faces. It needs to widen its perception of the world and understand that women, people of colour, people with disabilities and people of different genders and sexualities are all news consumers. And they are not interested in news that ignores their existence or dismisses them as archaic stereotypes.

- *Fixed It* is published on Tuesday 3 September by Penguin Random House. Jane Gilmore is appearing at [Melbourne writers festival](#), which runs from 30 August until 8 September

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## Jane Gilmore

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The Guardian

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