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What Shapes Feminist Journalism? Comparing Dutch and French Reporting on Street Harassment

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Abstract

What leads journalists to adopt feminist framings by linking news topics to gender-based inequalities? While scholarship often mobilizes individualized explanations, such as journalists' personal beliefs, this article investigates how structural factors inform feminist journalism. It draws from Dutch and French media reports on street harassment and interviews with journalists and their sources. Concepts of gender-based violence were largely absent from Dutch articles, whereas feminist framings dominated French reports on this issue. This article shows how the institutionalization of feminism and the existence of newspaper sections dedicated to gender issues inform whether journalists consider feminist knowledge as compatible with objectivity standards.

Keywords

feminist journalism, gender beat, street harassment, journalistic norms

Scholars have identified feminist journalism and gender beats, that is to say reporters' thematic specialization on gender issues, as “steppingstones” for news organizations to advance beyond reporting that privileges White male perspectives (Heckman, 2023; Kurvinen, 2023). However, feminism is also commonly viewed as impinging on journalistic objectivity (North, 2009, p. 755). Understanding what leads journalists to conceive of feminism as relevant expertise or as personal ideology harming objectivity is valuable for practitioners championing egalitarian reporting. Moreover, deciphering

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the logic behind journalists' choices to present issues as being about gender or not is important for understanding how shared definitions of social problems arise and subsequently inform media consumers, including reformers.

However, scholarly explanations of what leads to adopting or eschewing feminist journalistic roles in producing gender framings remain scarce. Scholarship on feminism and journalism is characterized by a conceptual divorce between, on the one hand, studies on the representation of feminism and gender in the media (Sheridan et al., 2006; Worthington, 2008), and, on the other, a smaller body of work on journalists' opinions and ideals with respect to feminism (Byerly & Ross, 2006; North, 2009). This leaves a gap on how feminist ideals inform journalists' reporting practices (Mellado, 2015) and how these, in turn, produce framings in the press (Heckman, 2023; Van Dalen et al., 2012). As a result, existing scholarship often relies on individualized explanations, such as journalists' personal ideologies (Mendes, 2011; North, 2009). Societal and institutional factors encouraging journalists to mobilize feminist knowledge and concepts remain underexplored.

To address this gap and explore what leads journalists to employ feminist framings of social problems, this article strategically compares Dutch and French reporting on street harassment. Although scholarship systematically points at gendered power structures as a cause of street harassment (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023), this comparison illustrates that the media has not always reported on it as a gender issue. Qualitative content analysis of 380 newspaper articles and interviews with 21 journalists and 71 of their sources bring to light a striking contrast. Whereas feminist framings dominated French reporting on street harassment, concepts of gender-based violence and male domination were conspicuously absent from Dutch press coverage of this issue in the period 2012–2018. Moreover, the interviews show how journalists in these two countries thought differently of invoking feminist concepts with respect to objectivity norms (Hartley & Askanius, 2021; Tuchman, 1972): while Dutch journalists reporting on street harassment conceived of feminism and feminist concepts as an ideology that threatened journalistic objectivity, their French counterparts saw feminism as valuable expertise. Comparatively analyzing what informed contrasting journalistic practices in reporting on the same issue—street harassment—provides unique insight into what leads journalists to employ feminist framings by linking issues to gender inequality and male dominance.

Drawing on this case study, the article highlights the need for scholarship to analyze feminist journalism not simply as a matter of personal convictions and socialization outside of the news organization, but as informed by their professional habitus. It highlights, first, how in some national contexts feminist reformers have attained sufficient institutionalization for journalists to treat them as “primary definers” (Harjuniemi, 2023), that is to say as the authoritative sources on a given issue. Second and most innovatively, this article shows that the editorial organization of newspapers, namely the existence of sections dedicated to gender beats, encourages journalists to adopt feminist framings. Without accounting for journalists' shared professional ideals and rules, scholarship risks either essentializing journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 16)—for instance, by suggesting that French journalists are inherently more politically oriented than Dutch—or over individualizing them through failing to

acknowledge that convictions are shaped by social relations. Beyond gender and feminism, this article highlights the need to consider how external and internal factors inform how journalists define what objectivity means in practice.

Theoretical Background

The Representation of Sexual Violence and Street Harassment in the News

News reports often frame sexual violence cases as interpersonal conflicts rather than due to systemic problems, such as male domination (Easteal et al., 2015; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013). They commonly feature expressions that cast doubt on victims' stories (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019) or describe victims' appearances as "inviting" or "provocative" (Worthington, 2008). Recent scholarship moves beyond the "misogynist media perspective" that has dominated feminist media research. Instead, a more varied picture emerges of how feminist framings of gender-based violence as related to structural gender inequalities sometimes find their way into mainstream media (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2006). For instance, Starkey et al. (2019) identified recurring shifts in news reporting on sexual violence ever since #MeToo, notably a stronger focus on victims' stories. Moreover, scholarship has become increasingly attentive to how gender, race, and class intertwine in representations of gender-based violence in the media (Byerly et al., 2023; Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023).

While street harassment was long a neglected issue (Fairchild, 2023), the establishment of various activist organizations led to increased media attention worldwide in the 2010s. Although a rapidly growing body of work studies how victims define street harassment (for an overview, see Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023), few studies analyze how it is represented in the media. Mowri and Bailey (2023) highlighted how framings presenting harassment in public transportation as symptomatic of broader gender inequality were less frequent in Bangladeshi newspapers than narrow legal framings. Simões and Silveirinha (2022) noted a relatively high diversity in framings in Portuguese newspapers: while "non-issue frames" of street harassment being harmless and an irrelevant topic prevailed, gender-based violence framings sometimes also found their way into the media (pp. 627–629). Moreover, media in numerous contexts framed street harassment as a problem primarily caused by migrant or racialized minority men (Dekker & Duyvendak, 2024). Although these studies provide valuable insights into how sexual violence and street harassment are represented in the media, research restricted to the analysis of published news content cannot *explain* the prevalence of specific framings.

Feminist Journalism: A Matter of Personal Ideology?

Research into journalists' attitudes toward feminism as an ideal helps illuminate framing choices in reporting on sexual violence and harassment. In this rather small body of work (Kurvinen, 2023), the presence or absence of feminist framings is often

explained through the degree to which journalists ascribe to a feminist ideology and the power relations enabling or preventing them from putting it into practice (North, 2009, p. 740; Van Zoonen, 1989). Baker Beck (1998) argued that most media tend to treat feminism as a “dirty word” and eschew feminist framings of social problems because they have a “distaste for active, assertive women” (p. 139). Faludi’s (1991) pioneering research sparked a long tradition of backlash theory investigating the resistance of mainstream journalists to the “F-word” (Mendes, 2011). North (2009) observed how female journalists downplay any feminist position—even when they personally hold feminist views—because colleagues associate feminism with being “overly emotional” and “angry” as well as with subjectivity and pushing politics “too far” (p. 755). Explanations of how sometimes feminist framings do find their way into mainstream media similarly refer to the extent to which journalists adhere to a feminist ideology (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Starkey et al., 2019).

The comparative case study presented in this article confirms how such resistance among journalists often results from feminism being defined as conflicting with a commitment to objectivity and neutrality (Hartley & Askanius, 2021). However, by analyzing journalists’ relation to feminism mainly in terms of ideology and personal convictions, much previous scholarly work tends to individualize the matter. Recent work on hierarchies of influences (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016), journalistic roles (Van Dalen et al., 2012), and journalism cultures (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) aligns in showing how journalists’ professional practices and framing choices are informed not only by their personal beliefs, but also by societal and organizational factors. Moreover, because how journalists speak about feminism—an example of role perception—does not necessarily align with their reporting practices—an example of role performance (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Mellado, 2015)—more research is needed on feminist journalism that goes beyond role perception.

By analyzing feminist journalism as a social practice informed by societal and institutional factors, this article contributes to broader debates on journalistic roles. Research in this tradition has expanded upon classic dichotomies, such as between neutral gatekeepers and advocates (Janowitz, 1975). While descriptive journalism refers to passive and indifferent journalistic approaches, on the more interventionist (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 372) end of this continuum, advocacy journalism has been defined as reporting guided by a reformist impulse (Waisbord, 2013). However, journalistic roles are primarily studied in isolation from news content. This article follows up on Mellado’s (2015) plea for connecting the two through analyzing what informs how journalists see and perform their professional role and how, in turn, this leads to the production of specific news content (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

This article highlights how institutional factors both external and internal to journalism (respectively, the institutional power of and active frame-setting by feminist organizations and state actors, and newspapers’ editorial organization) informed Dutch and French reporters’ relationship to feminism and news content on street harassment. The next two sections discuss existing scholarly work on (a) journalist–source

relations and (b) editorial organization, and the gaps that remain with respect to how they shape reporting on feminism and gender.

Factors External to Journalism: Feminism and Institutionalized Sources

How the relationship journalists have with their sources informs news content is a blooming research field (Berkowitz, 2019; Franklin & Carlson, 2010). Frame-setting activities by activists, politicians, or others in promoting certain issue attributes (for instance, street harassment as caused by gender inequalities) may inform how journalists report on it (Scheufele, 1999, p. 116). A fundamental consideration in this field is the reliance of journalists on institutionalized sources (Schlesinger, 1990). Hall et al.'s (1978) influential analysis of news production emphasized that journalists rarely devise their own understandings of an issue, instead playing a secondary role in reproducing the framings of "primary definers" (p. 59; Chadwick et al., 2020; Miller, 1993). According to this analysis, journalists tend to reproduce the framings of elected officials, spokespeople for recognized research institutes, or members of powerful lobbies not simply due to shared material interests. Rather, to adhere to the demands of objectivity and neutrality, journalists must rely on "accredited" sources who are recognized as authorities on the issue at hand (Harjuniemi, 2023). This institutionalization empowers sources to impose primary definitions of an issue, thus controlling the "sphere of legitimate controversy" (Hallin, 1984). Although alternative sources can provide other framings, their weaker institutionalization often forces them to conform to the frames and vocabulary of primary definers.

Gender plays a significant role in journalist–source relations. While in Western democracies men are overrepresented as experts in the media (Niemi & Pitkänen, 2017), women journalists more than men journalists tend to attach greater credibility to women sources (Zoch & Turk, 1998) and are likelier to showcase women in news coverage (Armstrong, 2004). Journalists' tendency to rely on institutionalized sources has often been a disadvantage for feminists. In the 1970s, journalists struggled to cover the women's movement according to normal professional logics, because it did not have one clearly identified spokesperson (Tuchman, 1978). Goldsmith Kasinsky shows how journalists reporting on the Tailhook scandal—which involved the sexual assault of 83 women at a 1991 convention of U.S. aviation officers—relied almost completely on official government press releases to report on the event. Doing so, they passively reproduced the White House and military "boys will be boys" interpretation of the event while giving little space to feminist framings that challenged these views (Goldsmith Kasinsky, 1998, p. 94). Similarly, Pitchford et al. (2021) showed how reporting on sexual harassment cases at U.S. university campuses echoed the framings of the most institutionalized actors—campus directors—highlighting confusion, doubt, and haziness (p. 374). However, we currently know little about how the greater institutionalization of feminist reformers impacts news reporting. This question is particularly urgent given that many countries have recently created or strengthened policy departments specialized in gender equality (Jacquemart et al., 2020).

Factors Internal to Journalism: Feminism and Newspaper Editorial Organization

Newspapers' internal organization also shapes reporting practices, including how journalists choose between a multiplicity of potential sources and the prominence they give each viewpoint (Miller, 1993; Schlesinger, 1990). A key element to consider is the journalist's "beat": their thematic specializations and journalistic routines (Magin & Maurer, 2019). Within the hierarchy of influences model, routines and beats constitute one of the organizing principles that affect media content (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). They shape how journalists process new topics or unexpected events (Berkowitz, 2019; Lund & Olsson, 2015).

Specialized journalists are recruited not only for their knowledge, but also because they can reach a specific public through their proximity with a certain readership (Marchetti, 2005). Their proximity to sources and knowledge of the field affect how they treat information (Reich, 2012). For instance, Juhem (1999) observed how the attention left-wing newspapers paid to the French organization SOS Racisme in the 1980s emerged from ideological proximity between editorial boards and the organization's founders—both opposed to the far-right party Front National. This proximity often leads to accusations that journalists are in complicity with their sources or are spokespeople or activists for a cause rather than neutral reporters (Magin & Maurer, 2019). North (2009) argued that subjectivity and complicity with sources are more often seen as a problem for feminism than other ideologies or beliefs, such as affinity with a political party (p. 755).

The organization of beats and the prominence given to feminist beats differs over time and between newspapers (Barker-Plummer, 2010; Bastin, 2024). Traditionally, beats such as women's rights, education, and social issues tended to be given less prominence than "masculine" news on politics (North, 2016). Moreover, women tend to be overrepresented in specializations at the bottom of newsrooms' hierarchy, such as cultural journalism and "soft news" on topics such as youth and fashion (Lévêque, 2017; Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023). Tabloids mixing traditional news and lifestyle stories were an early source of feminist perspectives in the media. An erosion of the division between tabloid and quality news also eroded the division between serious "masculine" politics and personal "women's issues" (Sheridan et al., 2006). Political events can contribute to the emergence or prominence of specific beats (Velloso, 2022). For instance, after #MeToo, newspapers across countries introduced or gave more prominence to gender beats (Hartley & Askanius, 2021; Heckman, 2023).

Context

Although France has traditionally been described as a country of universalist gender-blindness (Delage, 2017; Saguy, 2003), beginning in the 1990s, the institutionalization of feminism expanded in French policy (Jacquemart et al., 2020). Several governmental bodies were created, such as the High Council for Equality Between Women and Men, and, in large cities, municipal services specialized in gender and inclusion.

Throughout the 2010s, a multiplicity of active feminist organizations weighed in on policy and received extensive media coverage (Delage, 2017). The politicization of street harassment illustrates this trend.

From 2014 onward, this issue was put on the agenda by a strong feminist movement, notably the organizations *Osez le féminisme!* and *Stop harcèlement de rue*. They framed street harassment as a by-product of male domination and the first advance in a continuum of violence against women (Dekker, 2024). The issue was subsequently discussed primarily by governmental institutions specialized in gender equality, notably the High Council for Equality between Women and Men; Paris's Service for Equality, Integration, and Inclusion; the Ministry for Women's Rights (under Pascale Boistard of the Socialist Party); and the State Secretary's office for equality between women and men (under Marlène Schiappa of center-right party *En Marche*). These services implemented various campaigns employing a similar feminist framing, focused on letting victims speak out and linking street harassment to violence against women and male domination (Dekker, 2023).

The prevalence of feminist approaches in policy does not mean racialized framings linking street harassment to migration were absent. Especially in debates on the introduction of a national law, street harassment was represented as a problem of disadvantaged areas and racialized minority men (Archat, 2024; Calderaro, 2023; Gayet-Viaud & Dekker, 2021). Notably, far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen made statements linking street harassment to migration, although in general these claims were not accompanied by concrete policy proposals and far-right politicians did not become key spokespersons in the press. The most significant contrast with the Netherlands lies not so much in the prevalence of racialized framings, but in the marginality of feminist movements and state actors in the Dutch politicization of street harassment.

Indeed, street harassment emerged as a public problem in the Netherlands in a very different context as regards gender politics. Up until the 1990s, the Netherlands had a powerful feminist movement, which played a major role in pushing for policies addressing sexual violence from a gender-based perspective (Roggeband, 2012, p. 784). The early appointment of ministerial positions dedicated to gender was key to providing the Netherlands with one of the most extensive sets of gender equality policies in Europe (Henig, 2002, p. 30). In the following decades, however, the Dutch feminist movement lost much of its power and visibility (Celis et al., 2012, p. 123; Davidson, 2021), and policy departments specialized in gender equality were abandoned at the national and city level (Roggeband, 2012, p. 791). Illustrating this trend, feminist organizations played a marginal role in putting street harassment on the agenda.

Instead, the politicization of street harassment illustrates the increased "culturalization" of gender politics in the Netherlands, as issues of gender-based inequality and violence are integrated into anti-immigration politics (Mepschen et al., 2010). The right-wing parties VVD and *Leefbaar Rotterdam* played a leading role in putting street harassment on the political agenda, framing this problem as mainly caused by immigrants and racialized minorities. They joined forces with the organization *Stop Straatintimidatie*, concentrating their political efforts on introducing local ordinances to criminalize street harassment. Subsequently, street harassment policies were mainly

developed by policy departments specialized in safety and youth rather than gender equality. Overall, the subject of gender inequality was conspicuously absent from Dutch political debates and policies on street harassment, as the focus was on the race and migration background of (potential) perpetrators (Dekker & Duyvendak, 2024).

Research Questions and Data Collection

To understand what shapes feminist journalism, both on the level of news output and that of role conception and performance, this article innovatively combines content analysis of newspaper articles and interviews with journalists and their sources. For this reason, the data analysis section is divided into two parts. The research question guiding the first part on the representation of street harassment in newspaper articles (**RQ1**) is:

- *To what extent did Dutch and French newspapers represent the issue of street harassment as related to feminism and gender?*

RQ2 seeks to explain the different national representations of street harassment found through **RQ1**. Consequently, the second part of the data analysis draws from the interviews and is guided by the following question:

- *What explains the different reporting practices of Dutch and French journalists leading to different dominant framings?*

To answer **RQ1**, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of all articles mentioning “street harassment” (“*harcèlement de rue*” in France and “*straatintimidatie*” in the Netherlands) in nine major newspapers between 2012 and 2018, downloaded through LexisNexis. I selected national newspapers with conservative, center/center-left, and left-wing orientations (based on data about the political orientation of their readership (AD, 2015; Statista, 2022)): the Netherlands’ *De Telegraaf* (print run: 353,000; orientation: conservative), *NRC Handelsblad* (202,097; center-left), and *De Volkskrant* (210,685; left-wing); and France’s *Le Figaro* (325,755; conservative), *Le Monde* (323,565; centrist), and *L’Humanité* (36,261; left-wing). In addition, I analyzed the leading local newspapers of the three cities that these articles cited as centers of public and political debates on street harassment: Rotterdam’s *AD Rotterdam* (297,823; centrist), Amsterdam’s *Het Parool* (41,571; center-left), and Paris’s *Le Parisien* (283,154; centrist). That totaled 190 Dutch articles and 290 French articles.

My qualitative content analysis sought to identify “diagnostic framings” of how the problem of street harassment was represented (Snow & Benford, 1992). Because the objective of the analysis is to understand how journalists and their sources define street harassment, I refrain from providing my own definition. I aimed for inductive category development (Mayring, 2004) through a step-by-step process. First, I analyzed 50 Dutch and 50 French newspaper articles without any a priori categories and identified several recurring themes (as codes). During this process, some initial codes

were split into multiple codes and others placed together. At 50 articles for each corpus, I reached saturation as I found no new ways of presenting the problem. The codes were then stabilized and clustered as constituting a specific diagnostic frame of the problem, one of which was what I call the feminist framing (the others, not discussed in this article, were racialized, individualized, anti-stigma, and dismissive diagnostic framings).

I follow Entman (1993) in conceiving of frames as involving the selection of specific elements of a perceived reality “in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and or treatment/recommendation” (p. 52). Consequently, I use the term “feminist frame” not to convey that there is only one feminism, but rather to refer to representations of street harassment as being about (a) gender-based violence, (b) male domination, (c) gender inequality, (d) feminism, and/or (e) sexism. These five themes corresponded to the codes I associated with the feminist framing. A research assistant re-coded the first 50 press articles, to assist in stabilizing these codes. For each article, I coded whether one or multiple of the codes associated with one of the five diagnostic framings was present. If any of the five codes associated with the feminist framing were present in an article, I listed it as containing a feminist framing. This allowed me to compare the prevalence of feminist framings of street harassment between newspapers, countries, and periods.

To strengthen the qualitative content analysis, I conducted a frequency analysis of terms and expressions in the Dutch and French corpora and, within them, for each year between 2012 and 2018. Because the French corpus comprised more articles than the Dutch, I divided the frequency of a term by the number of articles in the national corpus to arrive at average number of mentions per article. The frequency analysis was conducted on terms relating to the codes used for the qualitative coding (e.g., “gender-based violence,” “feminism”) as well as on specific people, organizations, policy/activist initiatives, and events. The latter allowed me to analyze to what extent street harassment was related to feminist actors or events (e.g., a feminist protest).

To answer **RQ2** and understand how specific framings were produced, I could not restrict my analysis to printed content without analyzing the production processes behind the finished product (Schlesinger, 1990, p. 66). I therefore conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with journalists working for the newspapers included in the content analysis. For each newspaper, I interviewed the one or two reporters who published the most articles on street harassment and one editor responsible for the section publishing the most articles on street harassment (see Supplementary File). I inquired into why they started reporting on the topic, their source selection, and how they dealt with key issues such as feminism.

To understand how journalist-source relations informed media coverage, I additionally conducted 71 interviews (39 in the Netherlands and 32 in France) with politicians, policymakers, activists, and scholars involved with the issue of street harassment, many of which journalists spoke to as sources. I asked them about their relationships with journalists, strategies and difficulties with respect to media access, and (how they responded to) recurring questions from journalists. This article focuses primarily on

journalists' perspectives, but interviews with sources provided crucial background information on journalist–source relations.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the author. They lasted between 45 and 120 min. All interviewees consented to be quoted verbatim and were anonymized. Interview data were similarly coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti.

Comparing Feminist Framings in Dutch and French Newspapers

In the French corpus, the first occurrences of the term “*harcèlement de rue*” date back to 2012. These articles dealt with the short film *Femme de la rue*, a documentary about street harassment in Brussels. That year, Dutch newspapers published several articles on the documentary without using the word “*straatintimidatie*,” which did not appear until 2014. In the following years, the framing of street harassment from a feminist perspective as an act of violence against women remained marginal in the Netherlands, while in France, this framing remained dominant.

One or a multiple of the manually applied codes associated with the feminist framing were present in 24% of Dutch articles (45/190) and 91% of French articles (263/290). In the Dutch corpus, the code for gender-based violence was most frequent (present in 22 newspaper articles), followed by 11 for sexism, eight for gender inequality, six for feminism, and four for male domination. In France, sexism was the most frequent code (present in 180 articles), followed by feminism (110), gender-based violence (105), gender inequality (45), and male domination (31). In both corpora, many articles contained multiple of these codes.

The greater prevalence of feminist framings in the French than in the Dutch corpus can be further observed through a variety of criteria illustrated by the frequency analysis of terms and expressions, people, organizations, initiatives, and events. Figure 1 visualizes how, in articles on street harassment in French newspapers (2012–2018, $N = 290$), terms associated with feminism or gender-based violence appeared much more frequently than in Dutch press coverage (2012–2018, $N = 190$). For instance, “feminis-” is mentioned on average 1.09 times per article in the French corpus and 0.03 times per article in the Dutch corpus.

As for frequently mentioned actors, eight out of 10 of the most frequently mentioned people and organizations in the French corpus were specialized in gender equality, most notably the state secretary for equality between women and men Marlène Schiappa (238 mentions) and victim/activist Marie Laguerre (46). In Dutch press coverage, none of the 10 most frequently mentioned people and organizations were specialized in gender or publicly identified as feminist. Instead, Dutch media referred predominantly to local right-wing politicians and parties that linked street harassment to migration, most notably Leefbaar Rotterdam alderman Joost Eerdmans (175), the VVD (105), and Leefbaar Rotterdam (105).¹

The greater presence of feminist framings in France is further illustrated by comparing how press articles linked street harassment to specific events. In France, street harassment was often linked to gender equality protests, such as International Women's

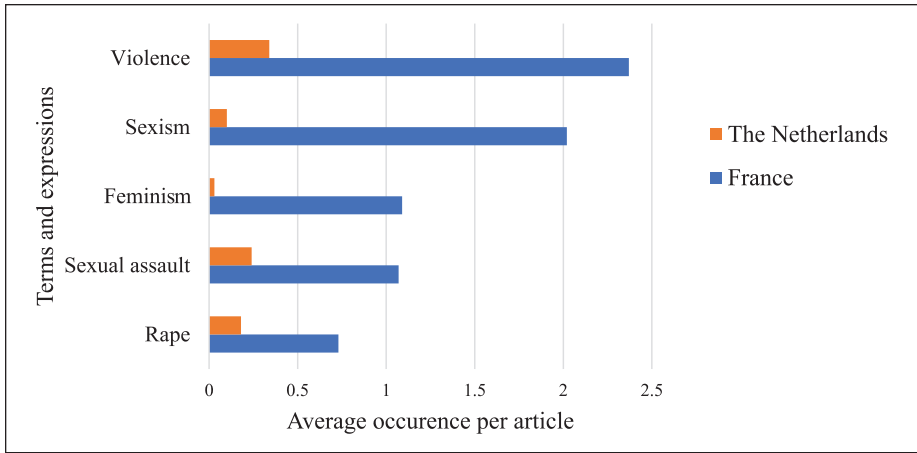


Figure 1. Mentions of Terms Associated With Feminism and/or Gender-Based Violence.

Day (mentioned 60 times), and popular feminist hashtags, such as #PayeTonTaf (“Pay your job”) to post accounts of harassment at work (40) and #PayeTaFac (“Pay your college”) to call out harassment at universities (30). In the Netherlands, by contrast, no articles in the corpus linked street harassment to International Women’s Day. While many French articles linked street harassment to #MeToo and its French equivalent #BalanceTonPorc (“Denounce your pig”), this link was mostly absent in the Dutch corpus even though both countries covered #MeToo extensively. Between 2017 and 2018, the terms “MeToo” and “BalanceTonPorc” together appeared 152 times (0.52) in the French corpus, compared with 15 times (0.08) in the Dutch corpus.² In France, mentions of these hashtags produced frequent comparisons of harassment on the street with that at work and other places. The infrequency of links to #MeToo in the Netherlands further illustrates how street harassment stayed separate from debates concerning gender-based violence. In November 2015, a Dutch hashtag for sexual violence awareness #ZegHet (“Say it”) on Twitter received extensive public attention. However, most articles were about rape and domestic violence. In the street harassment corpus, only one article mentions “ZegHet.”

In France, the debate was structured between those who tried to politicize the problem and those who minimized it. While 91% of articles contained a code associated with the feminist framing, 38% included a code associated with a dismissive framing. In the Netherlands, both framings were marginal: 24% for feminist compared with 11% for dismissive. The qualitative coding illustrates how many French articles juxtaposed personal experiences shared by victims with victim-blaming by those who do not take the problem seriously. Minimizers often criticized anti-street harassment activism by defending French “gallantry,” a position relayed both in conservative and left-leaning newspapers. In an op-ed in *Le Monde*, actress Catherine Deneuve, along with 99 other women, criticized #MeToo and street harassment activism, claiming that

the liberty to be “hit on” (*importuné*) was “indispensable to sexual freedom” (Collectif, 2018). While *Le Figaro* published several op-eds mostly supporting Deneuve and her co-signatories, their op-ed was heavily criticized by many feminists. So, although a feminist framing was dominant in France, it existed in opposition to a recurring dismissive framing. Dutch media, to the contrary, rarely referred to people dismissing the problem, nor were those pleading for policies on street harassment presented as opposing minimizers.

Explaining the Production and Absence of Feminist Frames

During our interviews, journalists in both countries expressed being committed to the objectivity norm. This resonates with findings from the Worlds of Journalism Study, whose country reports highlight how objectivity and “reporting things as they are” are among the main role orientations of both Dutch (Hermans, 2016, p. 2) and French (Mercier & Hanitzsch, 2017, pp. 1–2) journalists. However, how journalists defined what being an objective reporter of street harassment meant in practice differed greatly.

Feminism and Journalistic Objectivity: The Contrasting Views of French and Dutch Journalists

France. French journalists said they found it important to present street harassment as a serious problem and counter those who minimized it. To avoid stereotypes and misrepresentations, they emphasized the need to mobilize victims’ testimonies, either gathered themselves or found through feminist organizations. A *Le Parisien* reporter stated,

You have to explain women’s testimonies well to leave no room for caricature. . . . It’s the treatment of women’s rights. I don’t want to be sentimental, but it’s evident that they are topics that have long been caricatured. (P19; see Supplementary File)

While engaging in objectivity as a strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972) by distancing themselves from emotion, many French journalists adopted an active journalistic voice (Mellado, 2015, p. 600) as advocates of a specific interpretative angle for events—namely, of structural male domination. They utilized feminist concepts in their articles, such as “continuum of violence against women” and “rape culture.” When I asked a *Le Monde* reporter why she focused mostly on women and victims, in contrast to Dutch journalists’ focus on perpetrators, she pointed to her own experiences, replying,

What was important for me to show was how ubiquitous it is, unspoken but present, and how important its impact on victims is . . . Because I’m a woman and it’s my experience . . . I had a very painful experience in the banlieue where I lived. I couldn’t go out in a skirt, I didn’t go to certain streets because they were problem streets The political attention for the topic really validated my personal experience and shed new light on it. (P17)

Multiple women journalists I interviewed stated that their own experience as victims motivated them to adopt an approach that counters the minimization of the problem. This illustrates how gender informs journalists' reporting practices (Armstrong, 2004; Zoch & Turk, 1998). Nonetheless, both women and men journalists in France advocated an understanding of street harassment as being related to structural gender inequalities. Gender cannot fully account, therefore, for the overall stronger tendency in France for journalism to promote a specific social cause.

The Netherlands. Dutch journalists, by contrast, suggested that using terms such as “feminism” and “sexism” and linking street harassment to gender-based violence such as rape and other acts indexed by #MeToo constituted a form of ideological journalism that should be avoided. A *De Telegraaf* reporter stated, “There is a strong line between rape and street harassment. You can't compare one to the other . . . I don't feel my personal opinion matters in that respect” (P5). North (2009) observed how feminism is often viewed as “irrelevant to journalism and indeed as impinging on journalistic objectivity” (p. 755), which is illustrated by a statement by an *AD* reporter:

I try not to have a judgment. “Feminism” and “sexism” clearly communicate what you think about it . . . I wouldn't use those terms so quickly in my own text. It's more appropriate for an op-ed than in a factual piece. . . . Maybe I have a bit of a negative connotation with feminists. To me, if you're against street harassment, that's very normal. . . . I'm not an activist, so I keep things as neutral as possible. (P1)

Some reporters stated not liking the label “feminist,” thus confirming the dirty word theory. Other journalists showed a personal affinity to the term. Regardless, individual feminist convictions and activism did not always lead to the use of feminist framings. Even journalists identifying with feminism in their personal lives explained that they tried to avoid words such as “feminism” or “sexism” in their articles. This was echoed by a *Het Parool* reporter.

I see myself as a feminist. But in an article, you should try to remain neutral and keep things simple. Otherwise it scares people off. Is it a feminist debate? I think you can find many women who find it bothersome to be accosted on the street but who don't present themselves as feminist. You'd exclude them by using that term. It's a pretty charged term in the Netherlands. (P7)

The absence or presence of links to gender-based violence or feminism thus should not be attributed only to a journalist's personal opinion, but rather also seen as a reflection of their professional habitus.

Despite sharing a commitment to objectivity, what this meant in practice differed. Irrespective of their gender and personal convictions, most Dutch journalists considered it needlessly ideological to link street harassment to feminist concepts such as gender-based violence and sexism. For most French journalists, however, being objective required adopting an interventionist role by advocating an understanding of street harassment as objectively related to gender-based inequalities. Why the difference?

Whereas the Worlds of Journalism Study finds that interventionism—journalists’ active support of particular values, positions, groups, and social change—is generally uncharacteristic of how journalists in Western countries perceive their own role (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 372; Hanitzsch et al., 2011, p. 280), these interviews show how on specific topics—in this case, gender-based violence—national differences exist in the degree to which journalists identify with interventionist roles. The interviews reveal that they resulted from national differences both external and internal to journalism, respectively, (a) feminist institutionalization and frame-setting and (b) the editorial organization of newspapers.

“It’s People From the Field Who Compel Me to Make That Link”: The Importance of Feminist Institutionalization and Frame-Setting

France. The French case illustrates how in some contexts feminist state actors and organizations have attained sufficient institutionalization for journalists to treat them as primary definers (Harjuniemi, 2023), that is to say, as the authoritative sources on the topic of street harassment. Their legitimacy as a source was reinforced by their active frame-setting on street harassment (see Context above).

All French journalists I interviewed indicated that their main sources were institutions and organizations specialized in women’s rights and gender-based violence, while almost none referred to right-wing politicians. A journalist for *Le Figaro* explained how active frame-setting by feminist organizations encouraged her to link street harassment to gender-based inequalities and violence.

Feminist organizations like Osez le féminisme! and Stop harcèlement de rue were the first to start talking about street harassment . . . I spoke to them multiple times and they situate street harassment in a continuum of violence against women: sexual assault, rape, gender inequalities. So, as a reporter it made sense to make that link. (P14)

A *Le Parisien* reporter stated that she was encouraged to connect the issues both by feminist organizations and policy departments specialized in gender equality.

I could make the link myself with gender equality education, but they’d tell me here [at the newspaper]: “What’s your hook [*accroche d’actualité*]?” . . . It’s people from the field who compel me to make that link. . . . The Department of State for Equality—because they initiated large measures—the Fondation des femmes, feminist organizations. . . . When I handled the governmental plan, all forms of sexist and sexual violence were in it. (P19)

Connecting street harassment to gender-based oppression was logical for French journalists, because the sources that they considered as authoritative on this issue made that link as well. The strength and frame-setting role of feminist organizations and gender equality policy departments gave them sufficient institutional legitimacy for journalists to treat them as primary definers of the issue of street harassment.

The Netherlands. The interviews with Dutch journalists illustrate how, in the late 2010s, state institutions and civil society organizations employing a feminist or gender-based perspective were insufficiently institutionalized and thus inadequately powerful for journalists to treat them as primary definers. Journalists explained how, given that feminists were neither frame-setters nor important institutional actors on the issue of street harassment, they rarely referred to them as sources. For instance, when asked whether she spoke to feminist activists or researchers, a journalist writing for *AD* responded:

Not with feminist activists, no. Well, Stop Straatintimidatie: are they feminists? They don't want women to be harassed on the street—to me, that seems like a pretty normal desire. . . . I wouldn't describe them as “the feminists of Stop Straatintimidatie.” You'd be putting a label with a judgment on it, an interpretation. In the Netherlands you don't have that so much. There's *Opzij*, a feminist monthly, but otherwise feminism is not that alive There's COC³ for gays. But for women . . . I really don't know. (P1)

The COC was the only organization this journalist mentioned, which reflects the reality of a Dutch political landscape in which feminist movements have lost popularity and momentum since the 1990s (Roggeband, 2012, p. 791). In contrast, LGBTQIA+ organizations, notably the COC, have succeeded in maintaining a strong independent organizing body and a voice in public debates (Davidson, 2021).

Instead, journalists treated right-wing parties VVD and Leefbaar Rotterdam as primary definers. They did so, first, because these parties played a leading role in putting street harassment on the political agenda. All Dutch journalists I interviewed indicated that these politicians were their main sources, and that they almost never mentioned feminism, #MeToo, or gender-based violence. When I asked an *AD* reporter whether politicians or other sources ever linked street harassment to rape or other acts of violence, he responded: “No, not a single time. . . . Political measures were taken on the basis of this study [by researchers at Erasmus University Rotterdam], which [found that street harassment] was clearly not about rape and the like” (P2). The reporter felt that linking street harassment to rape or #MeToo would be inappropriate extrapolation.

If it would've been in the study, if the researcher had said it's a form of violence against women, and violence against women happens this often, I would've included it. But now I would've had to make that link myself. . . . The discussion in the city council was about catcalling, whistling, hassling, that kind of thing, not about rape. . . . There is no decrease in the number of incidents since #MeToo. . . . So for me, there was no reason to talk about that and make that link. . . . If you write an article on street harassment, it's not very useful to extrapolate all kinds of things because it won't make things clearer.

Since right-wing parties have developed an active and visible profile on gender equality issues over the last 10 years—especially when such issues could be related to migration—they were furthermore able to obtain primary definer status, to the

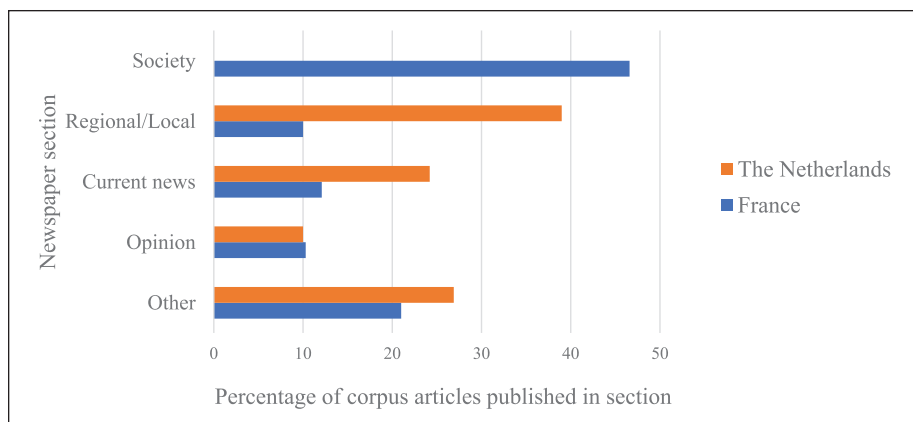


Figure 2. Articles on Street Harassment Per Newspaper Section.

detriment of feminist organizations. A reporter for *De Volkskrant* emphasized how, in her view, these parties are institutionalized sources on women's rights issues.

The policy proposals [on street harassment] came from Leefbaar and the VVD. . . . I had already spoken to them before, for their policy plan on honor killings, and a project in Rotterdam on emancipation of girls with a migration background. Leefbaar works with many organizations specialized in that. (P4)

These findings confirm the primary definer thesis that to adhere to demands of objectivity, journalists tend to rely on sources recognized as authoritative on the issue they are reporting on (Chadwick et al., 2020; Harjuniemi, 2023). In the Netherlands, feminist actors lacked the institutionalization and frame-setting role played by their counterparts in France (see Tuchman, 1978 for similar findings). Having a news hook was important to journalists in both countries. For Dutch journalists, this made linking street harassment and gender equality needlessly ideological, while it made doing so logical in France.

How Newspaper Editorial Organization May Favor Feminist Journalism

France. The centrality of feminist framings of street harassment also resulted from a factor internal to journalism, namely the existence, within French newspapers, of sections dedicated to gender issues. Most journalists covering street harassment wrote for their newspaper's society section, often on the subspecialties (Marchetti, 2005) of "family" and "women's rights." Figure 2 visualizes how 46.6% of articles was published in society sections. This professional orientation caused the issue to be primarily covered by journalists who were already in contact with feminist activists, politicians, and scholars, to whom they turned when street harassment emerged. This

is exemplified in an excerpt from my interview with a *Le Monde* reporter, who was part of a #MeToo taskforce created in 2017.

Journalist: [My principal sources were] the Ministry of Women's Rights, feminist organizations, the High Council for Equality [Between Women and Men], experts in urbanism, sociologists.

Author: Were they people you were already in contact with before working on this topic?

Journalist: The ministry, yes. Feminists, yes. . . . I'm always in contact with the ministry, and the High Council for Equality had done other topics as well, so I knew them well. I've been doing this [family and women's rights] section for a long time, since 2011, so I had time to get acquainted with these people. (P17)

A society section editor for *L'Humanité* indicated how his specialization led him to write about the politicization of street harassment as a by-product of increasing attention to gender-based violence related to #MeToo and other sexual harassment controversies.

It's really a topic that is part of the Society section's remit Society follows questions of sexism, feminism, violence Over the years, I've written a lot on violence against women We relate it directly to the question of sexism. (P12)

Marchetti (2005) highlighted how the society section is often a space where specializations became redefined in response to emerging news and political developments. In many newspapers, society sections and family and women's rights subsections provided space for journalists who identified as feminists and saw themselves as frame-setters on related issues.

Journalists' embeddedness in society sections also led them to adopt another central orientation that resonated with how feminist organizations framed street harassment: countering minimization of this problem by focusing on victims' perspectives. A *Le Monde* journalist explained that the method of gathering personal testimonies from ordinary citizens was often used within the newspaper's society section and women's rights subsection: "We pay much attention to victims, poor people, sick people. . . . When a topic emerges, victims should talk about it first" (P18). A *Le Parisien* reporter explained how social media has facilitated this.

In the Society section we approach topics by testimonies, that's our trademark. For street harassment you take metro line 6⁴ and interview women. . . . I get in touch with victims from #PayeTaShnek, or Facebook or Twitter, they're easy to find. Like with #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc. (P21)

French journalists' active journalistic voice in advocating the interpretative angle of male domination and in focusing on victims' experiences, including their own, emerged not only from their personal convictions and frame-setting by feminist

organizations and state actors. It was facilitated by the organization of French newspapers—specifically, their society, women’s rights, and family sections providing space for specialized gender beats. These findings align with studies on how “soft news” sections often provide forums in which journalists, predominantly women, can adopt roles traditionally associated with political journalism—such as being a change agent or advocate (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022).

The Netherlands. By contrast, all Dutch journalists I interviewed stated that their newspaper had no specific women’s rights section, nor were gender beats a common specialization in either left or conservative-leaning newspapers. Consequently, most reporters covering street harassment were not embedded in feminist networks, and they did not think of contacting feminist researchers, activists, or politicians.⁵ A journalist for *De Telegraaf* stated, “We don’t have anyone who’s specialized in gender or women’s issues. . . . I’ve written a lot about street harassment but I’m not familiar with feminist organizations. I wouldn’t know who to talk to” (P6). When I asked a journalist for left-leaning newspaper *De Volkskrant* whether he could think of feminists to interview on street harassment, he responded visibly embarrassed.

I must confess I can’t give you any names that come to my mind. . . . I cover the The Hague-Rotterdam region. That’s how I came across it: it became a local theme in Rotterdam. . . . Sure, I could interview all kinds of organizations. But if I write about it, that’s because something’s going on in Rotterdam politics. (P3)

Because the topic surfaced in the Rotterdam and Amsterdam city councils, most journalists who covered it specialized in local politics. Most articles (39%) were published in regional or local news sections (Figure 2). This localization contributed to the topic’s disconnection from feminism and #MeToo. While most journalists writing on street harassment worked on local politics, articles on #MeToo were written mostly by journalists reporting on national or international politics. A *De Telegraaf* reporter essentially rejected the topic, saying,

[For questions about #MeToo] you’re knocking on the wrong door with me, sorry. #MeToo is really a national thing. I don’t think we really had a #MeToo discussion in Rotterdam. . . . I can’t make that link. I’m here in Rotterdam, on top of the news. Those things are in Amsterdam.⁶ I think you should really ask yourself what you want from me. I can only tell you about Rotterdam and street harassment. (P5)

The fact that street harassment was covered by journalists with different specializations was partly the result of how street harassment was politicized in each country: at the initiative of local right-wing parties in the Netherlands and of feminists in France. However, the contrasting framings also resulted from structural differences in the organization of newspapers in each country. The women’s rights and family sections in which many French journalists reported on street harassment did not exist in Dutch newspapers. In that sense, French newspapers can be said to be organized in a manner

that is more conducive to the production of feminist framings than Dutch newspapers. Besides these subsections, the society section generally created space for journalists with a gender beat.

Unlike their Dutch counterparts, many French journalists who reported on street harassment had already constructed a professional identity around feminism. While Saguy (2003) argued in 2003 that the French press tended to “discredit plaintiffs and trivialize sexual harassment” (p. 17), most journalists writing about street harassment in the 2010s privileged the perspectives of victims/women over those of perpetrators/men. In this period, a “field of women’s advocacy” was increasingly institutionalized not only in French state institutions, activism, and research (Jacquemart et al., 2020), but also in the press.

Conclusion

Journalists’ relationship to feminism must be understood not only on an ideational level, but also on an organizational level. The belief that bringing in feminist concepts and knowledge is beneficial to objective reporting is encouraged by the interplay between (a) feminist institutionalization and frame-setting and (b) the existence of news sections dedicated to gender issues. Beyond feminism and gender, these findings illustrate the need to consider how factors external and internal to journalism inform how journalists define what objectivity means in practice.

French journalists were encouraged to treat feminists as primary definers of street harassment by strong feminist institutionalization and frame-setting. The legitimacy of feminist knowledge in the French press was reinforced by the existence of newspaper sections devoted to gender and women’s rights, but also that of a society section specialized in reporting on activism and victims’ perspectives. The editorial organization of newspapers fostered a professional habitus that led French journalists to consider how reporting objectively on street harassment meant adopting an interventionist role advocating an understanding of street harassment as objectively related to gender-based inequalities. The Netherlands illustrates opposite trends. Local right-wing parties’ politicization of the issue caused its coverage to be included in local news sections. Had Dutch newspapers had gender beat sections, journalists would have likely been more embedded in feminist networks. In turn, this would likely have led them to include their viewpoints in articles even though they were not the actors mobilizing most actively on street harassment.

The findings on the relevance of these two factors for feminist reporting are based on what journalists themselves indicated was important for how they reported on street harassment. However, this qualitative interview-based research is restricted to showing how specific factors inform journalists’ work and has limitations in establishing causal influences. Future research including a larger sample would do well to compare the influence of feminist institutionalization and editorial organization to alternative explanations of feminist journalism, notably in terms of journalists’ socialization outside the news organization and national journalism cultures.

In relation to the former, a limitation of this article is that it did not systematically compare journalists' prior socialization (e.g., education, social class). The analysis drew from arguments in the hierarchy of influences literature on the importance of institutional and societal influences for feminist journalism, rather than individual beliefs and habitus developed through socialization outside the newsroom (Lund & Olsson, 2015; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). However, an interesting question for future research is whether there are national differences in the extent to which journalists encounter feminist knowledge during their education and how this informs professional practices. Moreover, while this study showed how newsroom organization and frame-setting inform journalists' work irrespective of their gender, it would be interesting to study how journalists' gender interacts with societal and institutional influences to produce feminist journalism. This would urge us to question to what extent the culture of masculinity in newsrooms (Ross & Carter, 2011; Steiner, 2020; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021) may factor into willingness by journalists, especially women journalists, to cover gender beats.

This case study also illustrates the continued relevance of national journalism cultures despite forces of globalization (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 11). It shows major national differences in coverage of street harassment, although analysis of coverage of a specific topic can only have limited implications for Dutch and French journalism overall. This analysis illustrates how a field of women's advocacy (Jacquemart et al., 2020) became institutionalized in French journalism, which played a central role in the 2010s at mediatizing gender equality issues—one of which was street harassment. However, this is not proof that French journalism is wholly more feminist than Dutch journalism. We know, for instance, that more gender-balanced news is often enabled less by increased coverage of women in "mainstream" topics, but rather through increased reporting on topics related to gender, such as #MeToo (Barker-Plummer, 2010, p. 149; Bastin, 2024). Whether French journalists who are not specialized in gender still use more feminist concepts when reporting on topics such as business or politics than their Dutch counterparts is another question for future research.

Street harassment continues to be a major issue in French and Dutch media. It received renewed Dutch press coverage in 2024, when a national law was introduced banning street harassment. In France, radical right party *Rassemblement National* has made street harassment an increasingly central part of their political discourse, as spokespeople claim that some neighborhoods have become "no-go zones" for women because of harassment by racialized men. Whether this leads to a weakening of feminist framings in press coverage is an interesting question for future research. The contrasting and changing coverage of street harassment makes it a strategic issue to investigate how changes in the political climate impact journalistic cultures.

Should journalists be encouraged to use feminist framings? As Fileborn and O'Neill (2023) indicated based on a review of street harassment research, an overwhelming majority of studies point to gendered power structures and gender inequality as the key causes of street harassment (pp. 126–127). Moreover, the experience of street harassment may remind women that they might face other forms of sexual violence, such as

groping and rape (Donnelly & Calogero, 2018). In that sense, the dominant diagnostic framing in French newspapers is more in line with academic diagnoses of street harassment, while Dutch journalists miss elements deemed crucial by most experts of the issue.

These findings have implications for professionals who want to encourage gender beats. Instead of lamenting the lack of feminism reflected in individual journalists' opinions or writings, the analysis presented here encourages practitioners to consider how the editorial organization of newspapers enables or discourages gender beats. Given the news hook standard, most journalists cannot be expected to produce feminist framings on their own without prior frame-setting by feminist organizations or state actors. Nonetheless, creating sections dedicated to gender issues would compel journalists to play a more active role in finding feminist sources even when they are not the main agenda-setters. Such changes at the editorial level can thus produce news coverage that is more attentive to structural gender inequalities.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Why journalists reproduced racialized framings of street harassment is explored elsewhere (Dekker & Duyvendak, 2024).
2. Media in the Netherlands used the term "MeToo" and, unlike in France, there was no native-language term for this hashtag and debate.
3. COC is the oldest and most prominent Dutch LGBTQIA+ organization.
4. This refers to the metro line near *Le Parisien*'s office.
5. Articles that did provide a feminist framing were mostly published in the opinion section and not by journalists regularly covering the topic, but by columnists or activists.
6. This refers not to the Amsterdam region but to the general editorial board of *De Telegraaf* headquartered in Amsterdam.

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