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MEDUSA



REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Critical Thinking and Deconstructing Biases

Professional Learning Suite

For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: Cross Ssectional competences

Module No. 5

By: Skill Up Srl

Table of Contents

01 Why this subject matters

02 Learning Outcomes

03 Definition

04 How our mind reacts

05 Common media mistakes

06 How stories shape gender-based violence

07 What good practice looks like

08 Case study

09 Practical exercises and Checklist

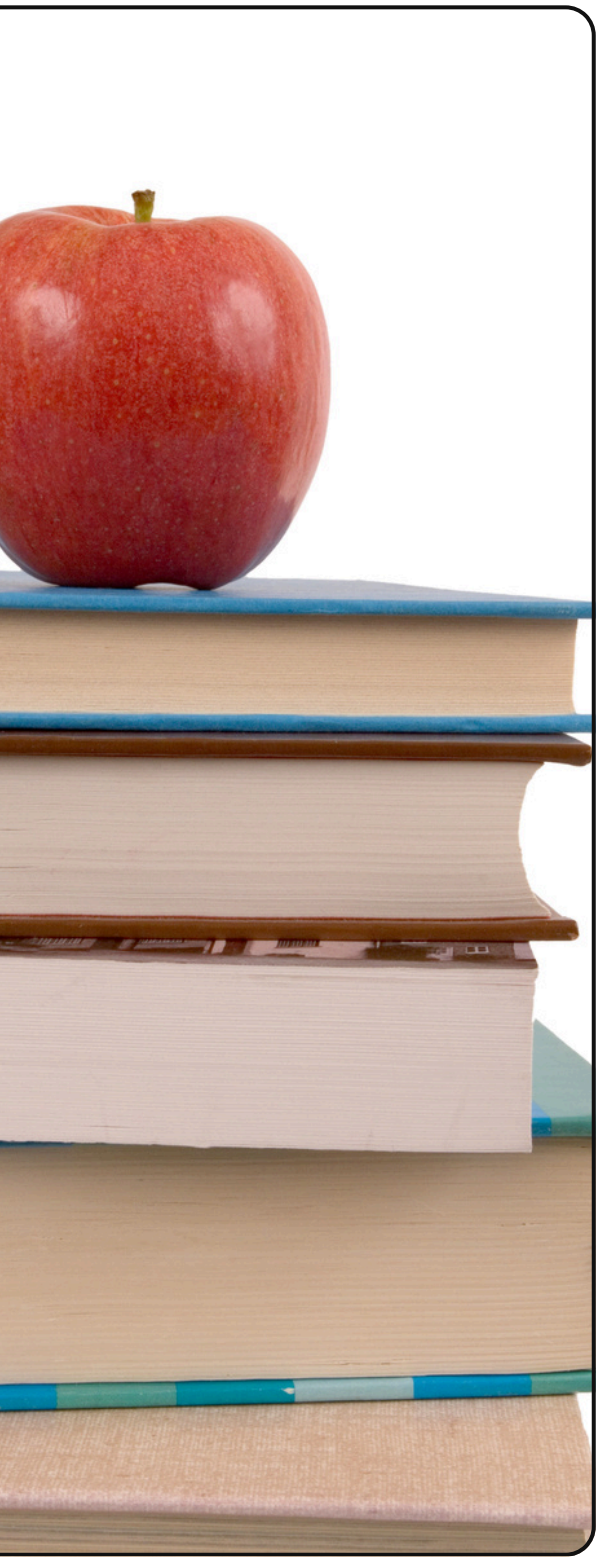
10 Resources



1. Why this subject matters

Every journalist and communication professional approaches a story through the lens of their own **lived experiences, cultural background, and societal conditioning**. When reporting on gender-based violence, unchecked biases can unconsciously seep into narratives, reinforcing harmful stereotypes, blaming victims, or excusing perpetrators. Cultivating **critical thinking** allows professionals to identify these blind spots, question assumptions, and produce journalism that is truly **objective, fair, and rooted in accountability**.

2. Learning Outcomes



01

By the end of this module, learners will be able to recognize **implicit and explicit cognitive biases** that influence how gender-based violence is perceived and reported.

02

Learners will be able to apply **critical thinking frameworks** to evaluate sources, assess story framing, and actively dismantle stereotypes during the drafting process.

03

Learners will be able to critically review their own newsrooms' historical coverage of gender-based violence to identify **systemic biases** and implement strategies for more equitable reporting.

3. Definition

In journalism, **critical thinking** is the objective analysis required to look beyond surface-level narratives and act as a defense against **cognitive biases**. These biases are automatic "mental shortcuts" rooted in stereotypes that can unintentionally skew how gender-based violence is reported. By applying critical thinking, communication professionals can intercept and dismantle these internal biases before they turn into harmful narratives.

4. How our mind reacts

The human brain processes vast amounts of information daily, inherently relying on "heuristics" (rapid mental shortcuts) to manage cognitive load and make quick decisions.

When faced with a **deeply complex and emotionally charged issue** like gender-based violence, the mind tends to default to fast, instinctive, and emotional processing. This automatic response bypasses the slower, more deliberate critical analysis required for objective reporting. As a result, communication professionals may unknowingly fall prey to specific cognitive traps:

- **Confirmation Bias:** Actively seeking out or heavily weighing information that confirms preexisting societal beliefs, like looking for reasons why a victim was targeted based on their behavior, clothing, or location, rather than examining the perpetrator's choices;

- **Fundamental Attribution Error:** Overemphasizing personal characteristics while ignoring broader situational or systemic factors. This often manifests as labeling a perpetrator a "monster" (framing them as an unpredictable individual anomaly) rather than recognizing established patterns of coercive control;

- **Affinity Bias**: Unconsciously favoring or empathizing more deeply with subjects who share the writer's or the dominant culture's background, which can lead to unequal, less comprehensive coverage for victims from marginalized communities.

5. Common media mistakes

Common media mistakes in this case often stem directly from **unchecked cognitive biases** that dictate who receives sympathy and who receives scrutiny. For instance, the **"ideal victim" narrative** occurs when reporters unconsciously reserve compassion only for survivors who fit a narrow, flawless societal mold.

Conversely, when a perpetrator shares the journalist's or the dominant culture's background, affinity bias can trigger **misplaced empathy**; reporters might soften their language by highlighting the abuser's successful career, status as a "family man," or supposed emotional distress, which subtly excuses the violence.

Furthermore, confirmation bias frequently leads newsrooms to rely on **inaccurate stereotypes**, obscuring the systemic reality of coercive control and shifts accountability away from the perpetrator's deliberate choices.



6. How stories shape gender-based violence

When media narratives are driven by **bias**, they act as a mirror that reflects and magnifies society's **worst prejudices**.

Framing a story around what a victim was wearing, where they were walking, or their relationship history shifts the public's focus and societal blame away from the perpetrator, often leading to **double-victimisation**.

This biased storytelling tells survivors that they will be judged rather than believed, **significantly lowering reporting rates** and allowing a **culture of impunity and silence** to thrive.

7. What good practice looks like

Poste Italiane represents a historically significant case study in female employment and leadership in Italy, while also showing a positive trend for the female-related bias deconstruction on the workplace. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the company became one of the first structural gateways for women to enter public employment, initially hiring them as telegraphists and mail carriers. This provided women with an independent, stable income and a recognized social position, even while navigating severe patriarchal constraints of the era, such as legal requirements to remain unmarried or obtain a husband's permission to work.

Fast-forwarding to the present day, the corporate demographic reflects a profound structural transformation: women currently account for 53% of Poste Italiane's total workforce. Furthermore, they hold significant leadership positions, directing 60% of the company's local offices and comprising 46% of its middle management and executive roles.

ALLEY OOP - ILSOLE24ORE, 01/04/2026
A well written article about bias deconstruction, female emancipation and society shift in Italy





8. Case study

"The femicide of 14-year-old Agostina Vega in Córdoba, Argentina, centers on a residence where the teenager was lured and murdered.

The primary suspect is 33-year-old Claudio Barrelier, the ex-boyfriend of the victim's mother, who actively facilitated the encounter by paying for Agostina's taxi to his home. Though he currently maintains his innocence, he is formally accused of the femicide.

The brutality of this killing and the calculated cover-up have reignited nationwide Ni una menos protests, with demonstrators demanding justice amid a political climate where the current government is actively dismantling gender-based violence support programs **(IL POST 2026)**

- After reading the article, what biases can you spot in the narrative?
- What measures can a journalist adopt to avoid those biases?
- Is the narrative in the article promoting the reader's critical thinking?

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Focus Box:

Facts, Assumptions, and Logical Fallacies

Critical thinking in journalism requires the strict ability to separate verifiable facts from interpretations and assumptions.

- Fact: Objective, verifiable data (e.g., "The police arrived at 10:00 PM").
- Interpretation: Assigning meaning based on context (e.g., "The response was delayed").
- Assumption: Unverified beliefs often rooted in stereotypes (e.g., "She was walking alone at night, so she took a risk").

When assumptions replace facts, journalists often fall into Logical Fallacies — flawed reasoning that distorts the truth in GBV reporting:

- *False Cause (Post hoc ergo propter hoc):* Falsely linking the violence to an immediate trigger, shifting the blame (e.g., "He killed her because of jealousy" or "because she asked for a divorce"). Violence is a choice rooted in power and control, not an inevitable reaction to an event.
- *Ad Hominem:* Attacking the victim's character, lifestyle, or past behavior to implicitly justify the abuse, rather than focusing on the perpetrator's actions.

9. Practical Exercises

01 The Source Audit

Objective: To distinguish verifiable facts from interpretations, and identify bias in sources and media claims.

Duration: 30 minutes.

Materials: A printed or digital news article reporting on a recent gender-based violence case, two highlighters (different colors).

Instructions (step-by-step):

- Read the provided news article carefully.
- With the first color, highlight all the verifiable facts (data, times, official statements).
- With the second color, highlight all the assumptions, interpretations, or emotionally charged labels (e.g., "crime of passion," "monster," "provocative").
- List the sources interviewed or quoted in the article. Are they balanced, or do they lean heavily on one perspective?

Expected Output: A visual map of the article showing the ratio of facts versus assumptions, and an audit of the sources used.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- Are the assumptions in the article presented as if they were objective facts?
- Who is given the "voice of authority" in the sources, and whose voice is missing?

02 The Bias Reversal

Objective: To detect affinity bias and gendered double standards in journalistic framing.

Duration: 20 minutes.

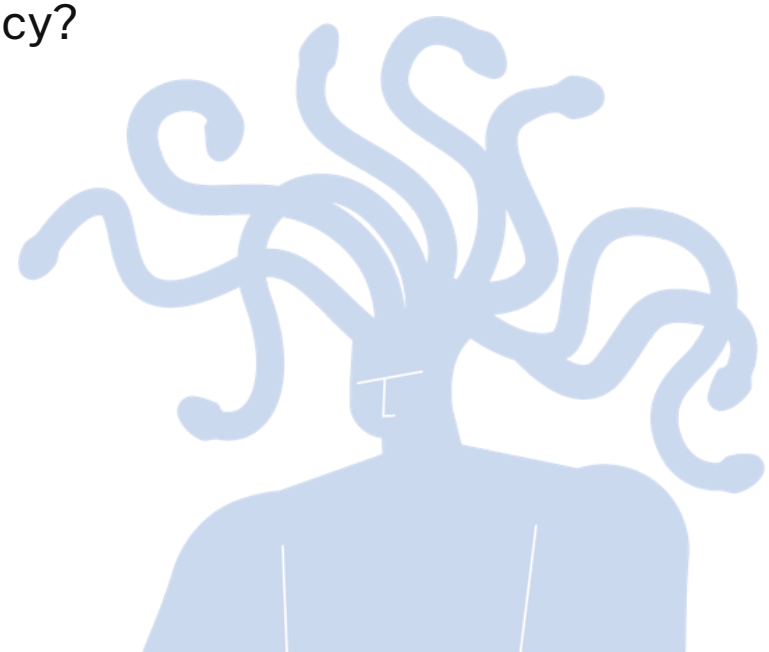
Materials: Pen and paper.

Instructions (step-by-step):

- Take a biased sentence from a mainstream news report that scrutinizes a female victim's background or behavior (e.g., "The victim, who was wearing a short skirt, had been drinking").
- Rewrite the sentence by applying the exact same level of scrutiny to the perpetrator's background.

Expected Output: A set of rewritten sentences that expose the absurdity of the original framing.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:
Why does it feel unnatural or strange to scrutinize the perpetrator's clothing, habits, or relationship history?
How does the original framing act as an Ad Hominem logical fallacy?



03 The "Why" Chain

Objective: To actively dismantle cognitive shortcuts, cultural myths, and "False Cause" fallacies in reporting.

Duration: 30 minutes.

Materials: Pen and paper.

Instructions (step-by-step):

- Take a common, emotionally charged media statement often used to excuse violence, such as: "He killed her out of jealousy."
- Ask "Why?" to that statement and write the answer. (e.g., "Why was he jealous? Because she wanted a divorce").
- Ask "Why?" to the new answer, repeating this chain five consecutive times to dig past the immediate excuse down to the systemic issue.

Expected Output: A root-cause analysis tree that moves from a superficial assumption to a structural reality (e.g., coercive control, patriarchal norms).

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- How does the initial "jealousy" frame act as a False Cause fallacy?
- How does reaching the 5th "Why" change the way a journalist should write the headline?

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Checklist time!

Bias spotting card

Before publishing an article on gender-based violence, use this critical thinking checklist to evaluate your information, sources, and claims. If you answer "No" to any of these questions, revise your draft.

- [ ] Fact Separation: Are the objective, verifiable facts clearly separated from my own (or the public's) interpretations and assumptions?
- [ ] Logical Fallacies: Have I avoided "False Cause" fallacies (e.g., implying the violence was an inevitable reaction to a divorce, an argument, or jealousy)?
- [ ] Source Audit: Have I critically evaluated the claims made by my sources, ensuring I am not simply echoing neighborhood gossip or unverified character judgments?
- [ ] Ad Hominem Check: Have I removed any irrelevant details about the victim's clothing, behavior, or past choices that implicitly shift the blame away from the perpetrator?

If one or more boxes are ticked, revise the article!

Resources

- Harvard Business Review, *Cognitive Bias, Unconscious Bias Training That Works,* From the Magazine (September–October 2021) https://hbr.org/2021/09/unconscious-bias-training-that-works
- S. Rossitto, *Violenza sulle donne*, il racconto dei media tra passi avanti e il nodo dell'hympathy, 10 aprile 2026, il Sole 24 Ore https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2026/04/10/violenza-donne-media/?uuid=90_HATvC9Ds&refresh_ce=1
- STEP Project, Department for Equal Opportunities, https://www.progettostep.it/ricerca/
- UN WOMEN, H*alf the world, only a quarter of the news: Women appear or are heard in just 26 per cent of all broadcast,* radio and print clips, 4 September 2025 https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/09/half-the-world-only-a-quarter-of-the-news

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Thank You!

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