

Passive Voices

By Anna Greer

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The passive voice is used far too much in the media when the topic of a story is gender motivated violence and intimidation, writes Anna Greer.

One of the first things journalism students learn is to avoid the passive voice. So, you have to wonder why journalists are drawn to using passive voice when the subject of their article is male violence against women. What classically happens is that the actors in these stories are sidelined and we're left with the women who get raped, sexually harassed, or beaten.

Passive voice is used to indicate that the subject of a verb is undergoing, not performing, an action or process, and it realigns the importance and agency of the subjects and objects within a sentence. For example, 'the rice is being fried by the cook' is a passive construction; while 'the cook fried the rice' is an active one. In the passive version of this sentence, the object ('the rice') becomes more important and of greater focus than the subject, 'the cook.'

But what is most interesting about passive voice is that it can completely elide the subject from the sentence and situation. For example, one can simply say 'the rice is being fried' and the cook disappears.

Usually, these kinds of stylistic nuances are only of interest to academics or sub-editors. But removing the active participants from articles on abuse and harassment has important consequences for the overall meaning of the article.

A recent story in the Sydney Morning Herald was a perfect example of passive voice subverting the object/subject relationship. 'Don't Want to Be Harassed? Stop Acting Like a Man' read the headline. The article reported on a Canadian study which found that, in the workplace, men were more likely to sexually harass women who didn't conform to traditional gender roles. In the process, it used passive voice to shift blame from the perpetrators of sexual harassment and placed it squarely on the shoulders of the victims.

This can best be shown if you change the passive constructions of the piece into active ones. Take the lead paragraph of the article:

Behaving like 'one of the boys' to get ahead at work may not be the best strategy for women. A study had found that alpha-females are more likely to suffer sexual harassment.

Change this to:

A study has found that male employees are more likely to sexually harass 'alpha-females.'

And change this:

Women who display what many regard as traditional male traits - such as assertiveness, independence and ambition - are more often the targets of sexual harassment than

'feminine' women, the Canadian research has found. The situation is worst in workplaces dominated by men, where women with so-called masculine personalities - described in the study as 'uppity' - suffered more than twice the harassment of other women.

To this:

The Canadian research has found that men target and sexually harass women who display assertiveness, independence and ambition. Instances of sexual harassment are most prevalent in workplaces dominated by men.

The use of passive voice in articles such as this, subconsciously shapes the way people view violence against women. It is an insidious and unquestioned practice. In the passive voice version of the above story, men apparently don't harass and intimidate women, women just run around getting themselves harassed. If active voice had been used, would the same conclusions be drawn? Would it have the same headline? No.

This is not merely an isolated incident or slip of the sub-editor's metaphorical knife. It is a wide-spread practice - in news articles on the subject of rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and domestic violence - to have the perpetrators painted out of the picture, either partly or completely.

A quick search of 'rape' in Google News will reveal teasers filled with the passive voice. For example, 'the gang-rape of a 21-year-old woman by as many as 12 men,' instead of: 'As many as 12 men gang-raped a 21-year-old woman.' The reporting of a recent 'honour killing' in Iraq reveals the same: 'Du'a Khalil Aswad ... was condemned to an honour killing by men in her family,' instead of 'Men in Du'a Khalil Aswad's family condemned her to an honour killing.'

Positioning a male abuser as the actor in a news article on sexual assault isn't accusing all men of being abusers, just as identifying women as victims doesn't imply that all women have suffered from sexual harassment or intimidation in the workplace. But let's be real here. Men are the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of violence against women - as they are the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of violence against men, for that matter. And using the passive voice in articles on gendered violence positions female victims as somehow the root of the problem. It shifts the responsibility and blame from the actor to the person on the receiving end of the abuse.

As the Canadian study showed, sexual harassment and assault is a crime of power, not passion. It is used against women who defy social norms and it is used as a weapon to intimidate women back into submission. It's a reminder to those women who are considered 'too big for their boots' that there are consequences for women who try to get ahead.

When women are identified as the victims of gender-motivated violence and intimidation, the perpetrators must be identified as the actors. The use of passive voice cloaks this reality. Let's place the blame where it belongs - squarely on the shoulders of the abusers.