

WOMEN'S MEDIA CENTER



**WRITING RAPE: HOW  
U.S. MEDIA COVER CAMPUS  
RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT**



## ABOUT THE WOMEN'S MEDIA CENTER

In 2005, [Jane Fonda](#), [Robin Morgan](#), and [Gloria Steinem](#) founded the Women's Media Center (WMC), a progressive, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization endeavoring to raise the visibility, viability, and decision-making power of women and girls in media and thereby ensuring that their stories get told and their voices are heard.

To reach those necessary goals, we strategically use an array of interconnected channels and platforms to transform not only the media landscape but also a culture in which women's and girls' voices, stories, experiences, and images are neither sufficiently amplified nor placed on par with the voices, stories, experiences, and images of men and boys.

Our strategic tools include monitoring the media; commissioning and conducting research; and undertaking other special initiatives to spotlight gender and racial bias in news coverage, entertainment, film, television, social media, and other key sectors.

Our recent publications include the books *Unspinning the Spin: The Women's Media Center Guide to Fair and Accurate Language* and *The Women's Media Center Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians*, as well as our reports "The Women's Media Center Guide to Covering Reproductive Issues" and "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media."

Our original content channels — WMC Features, WMC FBomb, WMC Speech Project, WMC Women Under Siege, and the "Women's Media Center Live with Robin Morgan" radio program — provide women's perspectives on both headline stories and timely events that are ignored, not wholly captured, or misrepresented in the mainstream media. Our content contributors are a racially and globally diverse group.

Our WMC training programs sharpen the media savvy and interview skills of women and girls. WMC SheSource, our ethnically diverse online brain trust of roughly 1,000 female experts on a wide array of topics, helps journalists, talent bookers, and other content producers to get their jobs done.

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# **WRITING RAPE: HOW U.S. MEDIA COVER CAMPUS RAPE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT**

Introduction.....	1
The gap and why it matters .....	2
Coverage and byline breakdowns.....	4
Breakdown of sourcing by gender .....	7
Breakdown of topics covered .....	8
Focus on sexualized violence in sports content.....	10
Moving forward .....	12
Methodology .....	13
Acknowledgments .....	14

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# Writing rape: How U.S. media cover campus rape and sexual assault

The majority of people raped in the United States are women — by far, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A [2014 CDC report](#) estimated that about 20 percent of women and just 2 percent of men have been raped during their lifetimes. Among college-aged women, that number is even higher: Twenty-five percent say they've experienced "unwanted sexual incidents" at school, according to a [2015 Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#). With multiple high-profile allegations of sexual assault at high schools and on college campuses (think Emma Sulkowicz [carrying her mattress](#) around Columbia University or the hubbub around [charges of gang-rape](#) at the University of Virginia published in *Rolling Stone*), the media has been plastering headlines about sexualized violence across its front pages at a steady pace.

Yet new findings from the Women's Media Center show a large disparity in just who is authoring stories about these sexual attacks, and what kinds of voices — and perspectives — are appearing in articles as a result. Our substantive look at how print media is covering rape and sexualized violence on campuses examines the gender of reporters, the gender of sources, and the topic focus. We collected data from 940 articles (news stories, op-eds, columns, and editorials) on high school and college sexual assault for the period between September 1, 2014, and August 31, 2015, from these top-circulation U.S. newspapers and wire services: The Associated Press (AP), *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Denver Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *The New York Times*, Reuters, *San Jose Mercury News*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*.

Our results show that coverage is significantly skewed toward the bylines and voices of men. Overall, men wrote 55 percent of the stories, while women wrote only 31 percent. (Another 14 percent of the stories did not contain bylines.) The disparity is more glaring in the coverage of sexual assault on campuses that appears in sports sections or in stories written by sports reporters — eight of the news outlets had zero bylines by women, and one outlet, AP, had only 1 percent of its stories in this arena bylined by women.

Furthermore, our research shows that the gender of the writer had a significant impact on how stories were covered, with women journalists not only interviewing the alleged victims more often than male journalists, but also writing more about the impact of the alleged attacks on alleged victims. A higher share of women journalists covered university policies and the prevalence of rape on campus, while a higher share of male journalists focused on campus proceedings and sports culture on campus.

"We commissioned this research because of a critical need for greater nuance and sensitivity in reporting women's stories of rape and sexual assault in print media," said Julie Burton, president of the Women's Media Center. "This study is a chance for the U.S. media to take a hard look at where it stands on this kind of critical work and figure out how it plans to move forward in a more equitable way. Women who bravely come forward to report rape deserve media that represents their voices in equal measure to those of men."

Not all the news is bad, however: The media's focus on campus sexualized violence helped create a national conversation on the issue overall, and one outlet we

looked at, the *San Jose Mercury News*, not only achieved byline parity, it exceeded it, with women writing 71 percent of its stories on sexual assault. Three outlets also used more quotes from female sources than quotes from male sources in their coverage: the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Denver Post*. But these, unfortunately, were the exceptions to what we found was the rule.

## The gap and why it matters

The finding that women wrote only slightly less than a third of bylined stories on campus sexualized violence in some of the country's major print media aligns with [our previous research](#) on overall authorship in the media, no matter the subject: According to WMC's "[Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2015](#)" report, women write only 37 percent of total media stories. And bylines actually affect who comments on stories, [according to](#) Stanford Ph.D. student Emma Pierson, who studied nearly a million comments made on *The New York Times* website. Women contributed only a quarter of the comments in total, Pierson found, but they more frequently commented on articles written by women, no matter the section of the paper. Comments sections, regardless of the malevolence of some, constitute a forum for public discourse — they offer a chance for everyone's voices and opinions to be aired equally. If the assignment of sexual assault stories were distributed more evenly between male and female journalists, one potential outcome is that women would become more visible in online debates.

Our finding that there is a disparity in authorship on stories about campus sexual assault, however, is only part of the problem.

While male journalists wrote the majority of stories about the sexual assault of women on campus, they also used fewer female sources — that is, there were fewer women's voices in stories written by men. Just 28 percent of the quotes in stories by men were sourced from women (and 54 percent were from men), while in the women-authored stories, 42 percent of quotes were attributed to other women (and 38 percent to men). So women not only used more quotes from women than men did, they also quoted more women than men in their stories on sexualized violence, unlike male journalists, who used male voices nearly twice as much as female voices.

Overall, of the 7,520 total quotes in 940 articles, 3,586 (48 percent) were from men, while 2,374 (32 percent) were from women. An additional 817 (11 percent) were from organizations, and 743 (10 percent) came from sources whose gender could not be determined.

This critical gap in who is given space to speak in the media contributes to an ongoing sense of stigma that surrounds the topic of sexualized violence in this country. Female sources tended to speak about the impact of sexual assault on the alleged victim at a much higher rate than male sources — but were given less of a chance to be heard. Only 10 percent of the men quoted in the stories we studied talked about the impact on the alleged victim, while 22 percent of the women sources spoke about the impact on the alleged victim. So more input from female sources led to more information on how an assault may have affected the alleged victim — a critical piece of information that gives voice to the experience of those who say they suffered the crimes.

In the avalanche of coverage of major cases in general, readers rarely fully heard whether the self-identified victims suffered mental health issues or a loss of social

status. And they heard even more rarely about whether there was a similar loss or difficulty on the part of the alleged attackers. Nine percent of the content focused on the impact of rape and sexual assault on the alleged victim, while only 3 percent focused on the impact on the alleged perpetrator.

Much of the news coverage we looked at centered on high-profile cases such as an alleged sexual assault by college football player Jameis Winston at Florida State University, with 173 articles; an alleged rape of an unconscious student by four Vanderbilt University football players, with 29 articles; and the alleged rape of Sulkowicz at Columbia University, with 30. The November 2014 *Rolling Stone* story on the alleged gang rape of a woman at the University of Virginia topped high-profile coverage, with 195 articles — although these articles also sometimes used the discredited *Rolling Stone* story as a jumping-off point for discussions about journalism practice and ethics. In total, the *Rolling Stone* story accounted for 21 percent of articles covering high school and college rape and sexual assault during our research period.

We also extrapolated sports content — stories on sports pages or written by sports journalists — on sexualized violence on campus. The disparities in this arena were startling: Sixty-four percent, or 137 articles, were written by men, while only 7 percent, or 16 articles, were written by women. An additional 29 percent, or 61 articles, had no byline. This is in keeping with a [2014 study](#) from the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports and the Associated Press Sports Editors that found that men make up 87 percent of all sports reporters.

When it came to what kinds of voices made it into stories about sexualized violence on high school and college campuses within sports sections or by sports reporters, the gap was tremendous: Seventy-five percent of quotes in sports content were from male sources, while only 10 percent were from female sources. Another 11 percent were from organizations. The gender of quoted sources could not be determined for an additional 4 percent of the quotes.

Anyone relying on sports coverage to keep up with stories involving athletes and sexualized violence are receiving a seriously skewed kind of coverage, one that clearly prioritizes the voices of men.

## Coverage and byline breakdowns

When it came to covering high school and college sexualized violence in 2014-2015, several news outlets outpaced others in volume.

The Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, and Reuters had the largest percentage of coverage about sexualized violence overall, regardless of the gender of the writer. Here's how the 12 organizations ranked from most coverage to least during the research period:

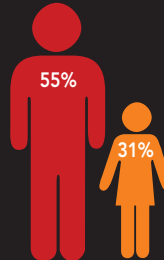
The Associated Press:	195 stories	21 percent
<i>The Washington Post</i> :	149 stories	16 percent
Reuters:	143 stories	15 percent
<i>The New York Times</i> :	110 stories	12 percent
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i> :	70 stories	7 percent
<i>New York Daily News</i> :	56 stories	6 percent
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> :	52 stories	6 percent
<i>New York Post</i> :	50 stories	5 percent
<i>USA Today</i> :	40 stories	4 percent
<i>San Jose Mercury News</i> :	35 stories	4 percent
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i> :	23 stories	2 percent
<i>The Denver Post</i> :	17 stories	2 percent

## Writing rape: WMC study finds crucial gap in coverage by gender



### Byline disparity in campus sexual assault coverage:

Men wrote 55 percent of stories, while women wrote 31 percent.

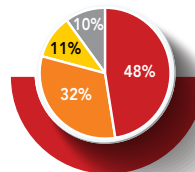


**OVERALL**  
14% did not contain bylines

### News outlets used more male voices overall

Only 3 of 12 outlets used more quotes from female sources than quotes from male sources in their sexual assault coverage: *San Jose Mercury News*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Denver Post*. Reuters came in last, with only 13% of its quotes sourced from women.

#### Source quotes by gender



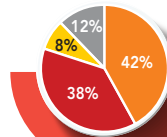
● men ● women ● organizations ● unknown

## How the writer's gender affected content

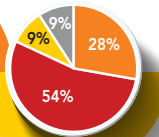


### WHO WAS QUOTED

#### by women journalists



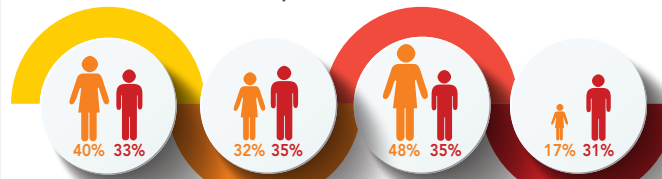
#### by men journalists



Sources  
● women  
● men  
● organizations  
● unknown

### WHAT THE WRITERS WROTE ABOUT

● women journalists ● men journalists



Wrote about alleged victim behavior or impact on alleged victim

Wrote about alleged perpetrator behavior or impact on alleged perpetrator

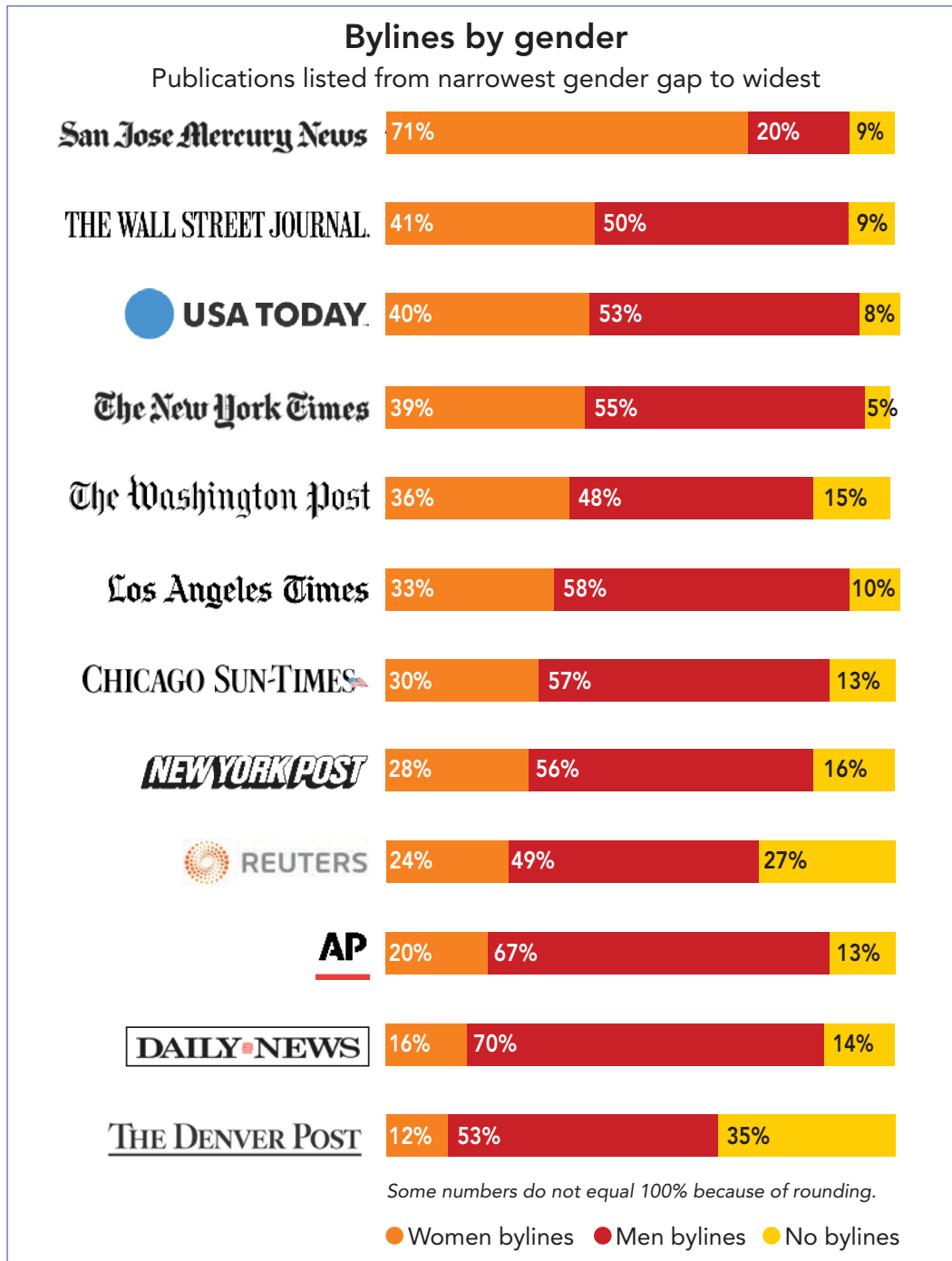
Wrote about fraternities/sororities, rape culture, or rape prevalence

Wrote about sports culture

\*This study looked at news coverage of high school and campus sexualized violence for 2014-2015 in 12 top U.S. media outlets.

Some outlets reflected a narrower gender gap among writers than others. Female bylines outnumbered male bylines at the *San Jose Mercury News*, with 71 percent of stories authored by women — even though the volume of stories was comparatively low, with just 35 stories. It was the only media outlet that achieved (and exceeded) parity.

*The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times* all had about 40 percent of their sexual assault stories written by women writers. *The Denver Post* had the worst showing, with just 12 percent female bylines on these articles. *The New York Daily News* came in second to last, with just 16 percent female bylines.

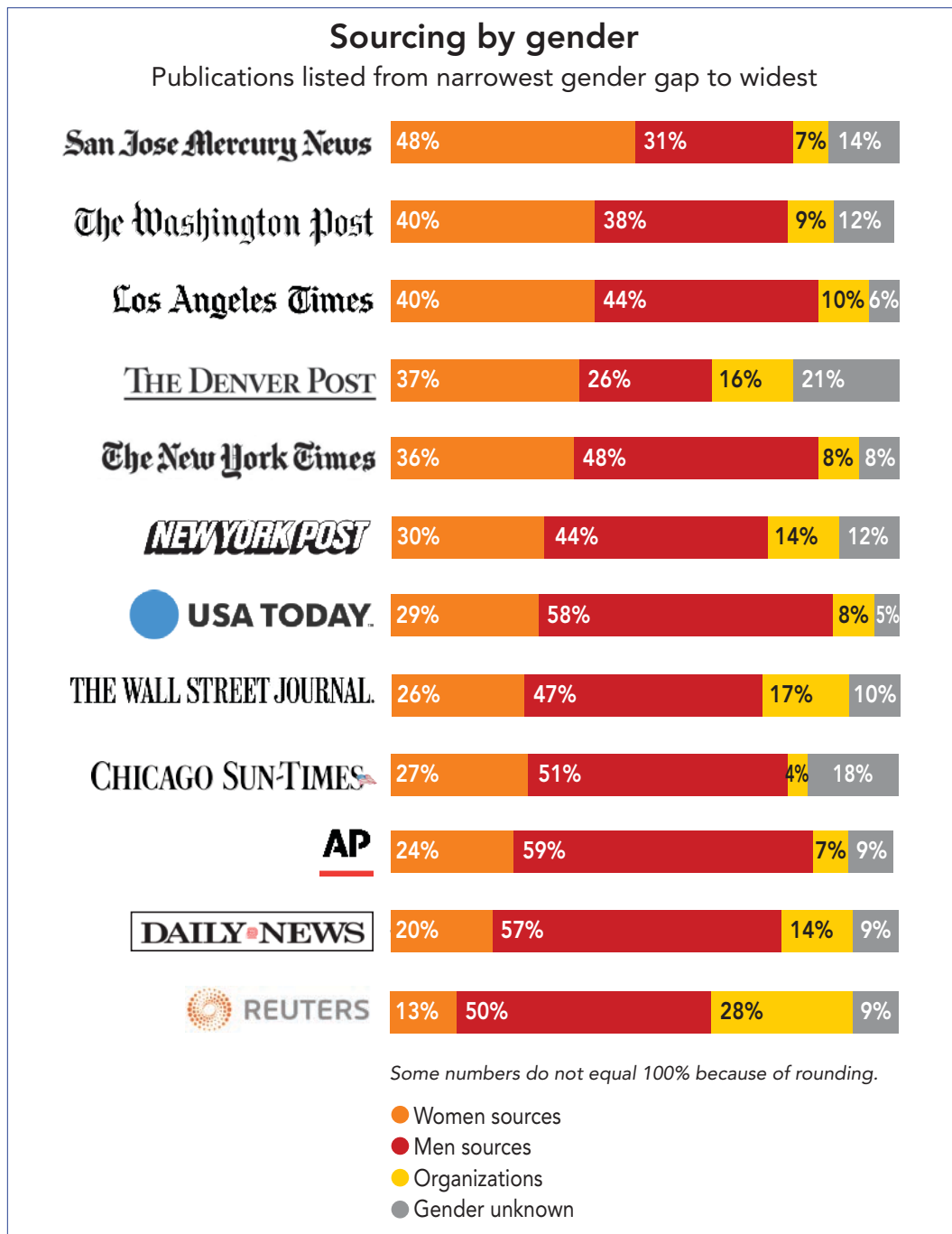


Graphic produced by the Women's Media Center

Source: Women's Media Center

## Breakdown of sourcing by gender

When we further parsed whom the media turned to as sources for its stories on high school and college sexualized violence, we found that the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Denver Post* were the only outlets to use more quotes from female sources than quotes from male sources in their coverage. The two wire services in our study fared poorly: AP used female voices in 24 percent of its total, and Reuters came out on the bottom, with only 13% of its quotes sourced from women. The lack of women sources in of wire service stories is amplified by the nature of wires, whose stories run in many, many outlets across the country.



Source: Women's Media Center

Writers used a variety of sources in their sexual assault stories, with students constituting a large number of sources. Across the stories studied, alleged victims were used as sources more than twice as often as alleged perpetrators.

216	Students
202	Campus officials
188	Media/journalists
109	U.S. private citizens (e.g.: family members, community members)
90	Legal representatives
86	State officials
74	Professors
73	Local officials
49	Analysts
40	Alleged victims
39	U.S. officials
35	College sports officials
34	Women's organizations
31	Fraternities/sororities
25	Advocacy and lobbyists
24	High school officials
15	Alleged perpetrators
13	Sports professionals
10	District attorneys
9	NGOs (not including women's organizations)
7	Federal court officials
5	Military officials
1	U.S. politicians

### Breakdown of topics covered

The research analyzed topics covered in these stories, finding that nearly half of quotes discussed official proceedings on rape (including campus proceedings, civil suits, criminal proceedings, discipline, federal investigations, legislation, other legal proceedings, and university policy); a quarter discussed rape culture and sports culture (fraternities, sororities, and rape prevalence); while others talked about the circumstances of the event (alleged attacker behavior, alleged victim behavior) and the impact of the event on the alleged perpetrator or victim. There were also a significant number of stories that covered the *Rolling Stone* story and its fallout in journalism.

41 percent	Rape proceedings
25 percent	Rape culture
13 percent	Circumstances of event
12 percent	Impact of event on alleged victim or perpetrator
8 percent	<i>Rolling Stone</i> /UVA (including stories that used this as a launching point to discuss journalism practice)

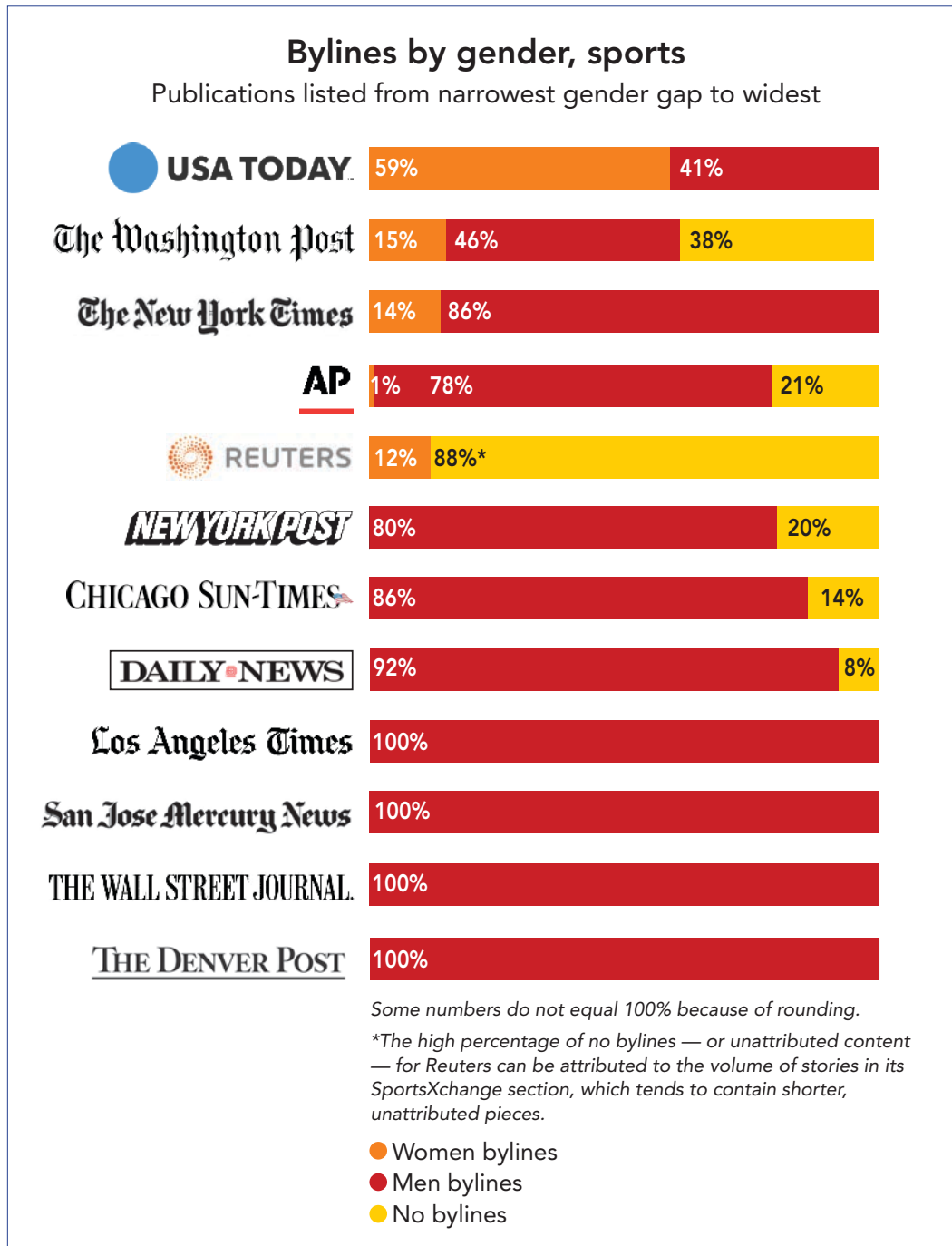
When the data are divided by gender of the journalist, it is clear that male and female journalists covered the story differently. Forty percent of female journalists wrote about the alleged victim's behavior or the impact on the alleged victim, whereas only 33 percent of male journalists did. On the other hand, male journalists used quotes about the behavior of or impact on the alleged perpetrator slightly more often than female journalists, 35 percent versus 32 percent.

Journalists also skewed toward covering different cultural aspects of the story depending on their gender. Forty-eight percent of female journalists quoted sources on fraternities/sororities, rape culture, and rape prevalence, compared to 35 percent of male journalists. Thirty-one percent of male journalists quoted sources on the nexus between sexualized violence and sports culture; 17 percent of female journalists quoted sources on this topic.

## Focus on sexualized violence in sports content

Twenty-three percent of the content analyzed in the research appeared on sports pages or was written by sports journalists, such as much of the coverage about Winston at Florida State University.

A close examination of this content shows a reflection of the wide gender gap across the board in sports content, with the exception of *USA Today*, which exceeded gender parity. This gap is tied to the fact that only 13 percent of all sports reporters in 2014 were women, according to a 2014 study from the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida.



Source: Women's Media Center



## Writing rape: WMC study finds crucial gap in sports coverage by gender



### Disparity in sports section coverage referencing campus sexual assault:

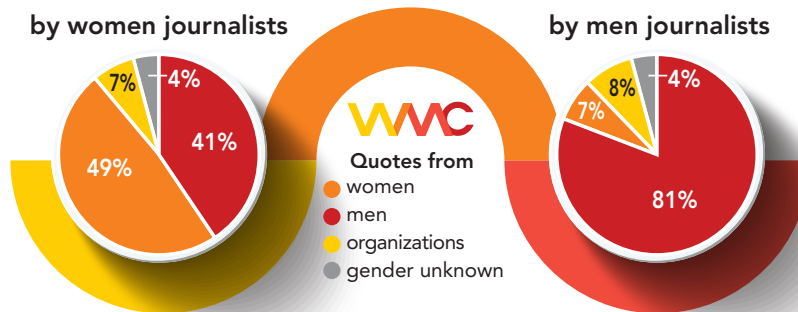
Men wrote 64 percent of stories, while women wrote 7 percent.

8 news outlets had 0 bylines by women. Only 1 percent of AP's sports stories referencing campus sexual assault were bylined by women.



**OVERALL**  
29% did not contain bylines

## Who was quoted



The impact on alleged victims received less than 2% of coverage in sports stories referencing sexual assault.



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Of quotes published by sports journalists, 75 percent came from male sources, 10 percent from female sources, 11 percent from organizational sources, and 4 percent were gender unknown.

Female sports journalists cited roughly the same proportion of quotes from male sources (41 percent) and female sources (49 percent) as female journalists did in the overall data (38 percent and 42 percent). However, male sports journalists used a much higher proportion of quotes from male sources compared to male journalists in the overall data: 81 percent vs. 54 percent, and a much lower proportion of female sources: only 7 percent vs. 28 percent. As shown in the data, male sports journalists sought expert opinions from women at a much lower rate than female sports journalists.

The topic coverage by sports journalists was heavily skewed toward sports culture and campus proceedings. The impact coverage mainly discussed the impact on the alleged perpetrator (e.g. suspension from team; the impact on the sports careers of those falsely accused, such as in the case of Brian Banks, a football player accused of raping a woman at his high school in California; or the potential for lawsuits that might affect the future earnings of high-profile athletes, such as in the Jameis Winston case). The impact on alleged victims received less than 2 percent of coverage in sports coverage.

## **Moving forward**

Stories that primarily affect women are not being told by women in equal numbers, according to our research. Simply reporting on cases of sexualized violence is no longer enough. With a continuing disparity in the makeup of newsrooms in the U.S., it's time for those who are responsible for hiring to create actual parity. This research clearly shows how the gender of the journalist affects what story is told, and without diversity in our newsrooms, we are not getting the whole story. The voices of those who say they have been victimized and are willing to speak out — often a difficult decision, and one that can result in open mudslinging, shaming, and trolling — are not being given the space and consideration they deserve. The public does not receive the kind of information that can lead to meaningful change in how we perceive these cases. When we don't know the consequences of a crime on a woman's life or those of her family and friends, it is hard to expect sympathy or even empathy — and especially justice.

Beyond finally hiring enough women to create equality in journalism, there is much that can be done with existing staff already working in newsrooms. Our research shows that assigning stories on sexualized violence to women journalists leads to a different kind of coverage, one that more often includes alleged victims' voices. One way to improve coverage would be to achieve gender parity in assigning these stories. Another would be to seek out more women as sources in all reporting. In addition, newsrooms must train reporters and editors on **how to** sensitively cover stories of sexualized violence, as well as train male journalists to do a better job of seeking out female sources.

"Our research shows that print media have a great deal of work ahead, in all regards," said WMC's Burton.

The media can be a force for change in how victims are treated, whether by their own communities or in public and legal spheres as they attempt to pursue justice.

We can shift away from a press that relies heavily on a male perspective of events or prioritizes discussions of male sports culture over coverage of rape culture, **as happened with** the 2012 Steubenville rape. We can begin right now to move toward a fourth estate that gives a platform to voices that have been silenced in this country for far too long.

## Methodology

*The Women's Media Center commissioned Novetta (www.novetta.com), a Virginia-based analytics research company, to conduct this study using a hybrid machine analysis and human analysis process. Selected media included the top 10 national newspapers by circulation and two wire services. (Note: The San Jose Mercury News was one of the top-10 circulated papers in 2013 when we first began this research. It is no longer in the top 10, but we have included and continued to monitor the outlet for consistency.)*

*Content with key words or phrases, such as "rape" and/or "rapist" or "assault and/or sex or sexual" and "university" or "college" or "campus" and released to Factiva by monitored outlets were retroactively ingested. Supplemental clipping to capture all publicly available content not released to Factiva was conducted for the following outlets: San Jose Mercury News, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal. Only content exceeding 500 words in length from Reuters and The Associated Press was aggregated. In long pieces covering multiple topics (such as summaries of sports news across the U.S.), only content relevant to rape and sexual assault on college and high school campuses was processed for analysis. Content from The Associated Press and Reuters was counted only once. If the story was counted as part of the wire count, it was not counted if the same story ran in one of the 10 newspapers.*

*Percentages throughout were rounded to the nearest whole number.*

### **Editor's note:**

*We have used the word "victim" throughout instead of "survivor" to denote a singular category whether the person allegedly attacked survived or not.*



## Acknowledgments

### This report's authors

Lauren Wolfe is the director of WMC Women Under Siege project and an award-winning journalist who **has written for** publications from *The Atlantic* to *The New York Times*. She is also a **columnist at *Foreign Policy*** magazine and on the advisory committee of the International Campaign to Stop Rape & Gender Violence in Conflict. Previously, she was the senior editor of the Committee to Protect Journalists, where she broke ground on the issue of journalists and sexualized violence. She studied at Wesleyan University and Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, and is the recipient of the 2012 Frank Ochberg Award for Media and Trauma Study and four Society of Professional Journalists awards. In 2013, *Foreign Policy* named her one of its "**FP Twitterati 100**," and Action on Armed Violence listed her as one of the "**Top 100 Most Influential Journalists Covering Armed Violence**."

Stacia L. Brown is a freelance writer on issues of race, gender, parenting, culture, and education based in Baltimore, Maryland. Her work can be found at *The Washington Post*, where she is a weekly contributor to the Act Four blog, *The New Republic*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Atlantic*, and various other publications.

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