

Gender-Based Violence, Media and Communications

Query: GBV Media and Communications: annotated bibliography on selected available guidance

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1. Background

Media reporting and representation of violence against women and girls presents particular challenges and tensions. What is a ‘good story’ for journalists or communications teams may not necessarily be in the interests of survivors. Equally, the ways in which sexual violence in particular is framed and understood, and the related taken-for-granted discourses, increases the need to recognise how stories can reinforce, replicate, or challenge how audiences make sense of this violence. Care, thought and specialist guidance is required to understand the representation of the complexity of gender inequality, the wider context of violence and the purpose it serves, the impact on survivors, and the competing narratives of ‘victimhood’ against the need to recognise the power relationships underlying GBV.

In addition, there can be tensions around the purpose of the reporting. For communications teams, the imperative may be to increase organisational visibility, attract donor attention, and garner an audience in a crowded field. These objectives may be at odds with ethical reporting of violence and engagement with survivors, and these issues need to be both explicit and addressed. It is not enough to claim “public interest” with no further explication, or to claim that reporting will in itself inherently “raise awareness” of the issue. The purpose of these stories needs to be articulated concretely, and the involvement of survivors carefully considered.

A further tension can be raised between the responsibility to a survivor’s safety and privacy, and their right to free expression and to tell their story. It is critical in these circumstances that the journalist take responsibility for the potential long-term consequences for a survivor’s participation. In an age of global digital media, it is not responsible to take at face value a statement such as “I want my story to be told”. Many survivors do not fully understand the wider implications of being identifiable, and in some cases believe that having spoken out in the media will protect them when the opposite is true. It may also be that someone is angry at the failure of the institutions to protect them, and believes public naming may precipitate action, which is also unlikely. In the context of an interview between someone who understands how media works and the ways in which identification can happen, and someone who may never have been involved with media, the onus of responsibility for maximising safety lies with the journalist. It is disingenuous at best to justify publishing stories or images that may make someone identifiable on the basis that “it was what they wanted”. Responsible reporting in

humanitarian settings, as elsewhere, means negotiating a compromise that allows for a story to be told without the person telling it to be identifiable.

The resources below recognise a number of issues as key in good and ethical reporting, summarised as follows:

The wider story

How do interviews with survivors illustrate and add to the wider story of why gender-based violence happens? Survivor stories with no contextual frame can become salacious and sensationalist without helping to illuminate the dynamics within which violence occurs. It is therefore essential to ensure there is a focus on the gendered dynamics and inequalities that make the violence possible. Dignifying survivors by situating their stories in the wider context is part of the duty of care of the reporter. It is also essential to consider who else could be interviewed to provide more context. Service providers, advocates and specialists may all be able to provide information and a perspective on the violence that means survivors do not need to be interviewed at all. First-person stories do not necessarily have to form the basis of GBV reporting.

The duty of care

Survivors may not find retelling their story to be a positive experience. Indeed, survivors may be retraumatised by the process of retelling, and find it difficult, exhausting and deeply emotional, rather than a healing process as is sometimes assumed. They will also likely have a heightened need to be believed and understood. As such, it is critical that the interviewer does not push for information, and especially not for graphic details – however much they feel this will add to the power of their writing. It is also critical that language used is specific, concrete and non-judgemental. It is the interviewer's responsibility to allow sufficient time for interviews with survivors, to understand the reactions of the interview subject, to end the interview if the subject appears distressed, to allow the subject to end the interview at any point, and to ask questions with care. It is recommended that interviewers, interpreters, photographers, production teams, and others involved in interviews with female survivors, are women.

The power relationship

GBV is grounded in power, control, and dehumanisation. It is therefore the interviewer's responsibility to manage the relationship with the subject in ways that do not reproduce the powerlessness or humiliation of being a target of violence. The subject should have as much control as possible over the pace of the interview, the subjects covered, the ways in which they talk about their experience, and when the interview ends. It is also important that there is follow-up: it is good practice to share the final piece with those who have been interviewed before it is published, so they can comment and prepare for it being public. As far as possible, the construction of a survivor's story should be a shared enterprise and not extractive, in order to reinforce the reconstruction of control over their life and narrative. Lastly, the survivor should be situated as a person whose experience is not their 'defining identity'. Rather, they should be recognised as a person with multiple experiences and relationships, and an identity that is more than a 'survivor'.

Language and framing

Language needs to be clear, concrete and specific, and should avoid the clichés of gendered violence. Sexual violence in particular should be described as violence, and not as sex. Care must be taken not to minimise, justify or explain the actions of perpetrators through the common tropes of gender. Perpetrators are not 'monsters' or 'evil' (as in, different to other people); they are most often very ordinary. Alcohol, poverty and stress are not the roots of GBV, and there should be no direct or indirect causal association of these with a perpetrator's action. The violence needs to be situated within the

wider context of gendered inequality, and connected to wider patterns of violence against women and girls. Language should also name the violence clearly, and not obfuscate.

Safety and confidentiality

Survivors face particular risks when they speak out about their experiences. They risk potential retaliation from their perpetrator, or those associated with perpetrators, and being misunderstood by their communities. GBV does not end with an ‘incident’: the ripples and consequences for survivors can be far-reaching and long-lasting. The overriding concern of reporting around GBV must be the safety of survivors, in the immediate and longer-term, both directly and indirectly. It is not appropriate to use information or visuals that risks making them identifiable (including ‘jigsaw identification’). It is also critical to ensure that referencing is agreed with a survivor, along with a discussion about the potential reach of their words. Understanding that stigma for survivors can be a secondary traumatic experience means that anonymity, confidentiality and privacy are paramount, as a significant component of recovery from trauma is recovering a more complex identity beyond being just a ‘survivor of violence’. As such, it is a reporter’s responsibility to ensure the experience of violence does not become the survivor’s defining identity in their community.

A second consideration is the safety of service providers. Providing services to survivors can be a highly contentious issue, and staff and volunteers providing these services also need to be protected and to have their exposure minimised.

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All of these issues are covered to greater or lesser extents in the documents below. The longer handbooks (*‘Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis’*, *‘Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence; A Media Toolkit for Journalists for Better Media Coverage’*, and *‘Handle With Care’*) provide more detailed background to the ethical principles and more concrete examples of best practice. They also articulate with more depth the issues and theory underpinning the core principles, and provide strong rationales for working in this way. These may be particularly helpful for GBV programming staff in supporting survivors to engage with journalists and communications teams who do not have a GBV background, and in managing how a programme engages with journalists and communications teams. They may also be helpful for communications staff and journalist who do not have a depth of understanding or a specialism in GBV, to help them re-frame their practice in relation to these issues.

The shorter tip-sheets are grounded in these principles without the same depth of background, and can be used as practical guidance in planning and engaging in developing stories around GBV. For programming staff, they may be useful as a kind of ‘minimum standards’ to expect from journalists and communications teams wishing to develop the stories.

2. Resources

The resources below address the core issues around reporting GBV, providing good practice standards, examples, and guidance to ensure that reporting is safe, responsible, contributes to a wider public understanding of violence, and does not harm (directly or indirectly) survivors. These resources provide varying levels of background and detail, and have different emphases on the various aspects of ethical reporting. Taken together they provide a solid foundation for communications teams, programmes teams working with journalists, and for journalists working with these issues. Not all of the resources are specifically focussed on humanitarian contexts, however, the principles articulated are highly transferable and relevant.

Global Protection Cluster (2013) *Media Guidelines for Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Contexts* (8 pages)

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GBV-Media-Guidelines-25July2013.pdf>

These guidelines focus on the core principles of GBV reporting and the ethics of interviewing survivors. Reporting on GBV is positioned through prioritising survivors' safety and best interests, while 'human interest' is recognised as an inadequate purpose for a story. The potential of positive impact for survivors, specifically, must be articulated beyond simply 'raising awareness' (to what end?), promoting an organisation or its programming, or generating donor interest.

The guidance includes sections on language, with a glossary and suggested terminology; the importance of anonymity and confidentiality; the needs of survivors being interviewed; and the unethical use of images that may directly or indirectly enable survivor identification. The responsibility to protect against further potential harm overrides the 'consent' of a survivor to be identified.

Guidance is provided on the role of organisations in facilitating interviews between journalists and service users, with particular emphasis on the unequal balance of power between service users and service providers. There is also recognition of the potential for reprisals to services, service staff and organisations, which is not covered in other guidance.

UNFPA (2014) *Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis: A Journalist's Handbook* (40 pages)

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/reporting-gender-based-violence-syria-crisis-journalists-handbook-enar>

This is comprehensive guidance for journalists reporting on GBV, focussed on the Syria Crisis but widely applicable. It includes sections on: clarifying what GBV is, and challenging misconceptions; the importance of, and guidance on, terminology (including a comprehensive glossary); ethical principles; and informed consent.

Ethically, the guidance is driven by survivor-centred practice, and makes a helpful distinction between what is 'in the public interest' and what is 'of interest to the public', enabling a challenge to reporting that is sensationalist, voyeuristic, misleading, and/or focussed on scandalising details rather than the core issue. The principles of protecting sources and doing no harm also provide a framework for ensuring the privacy and dignity of survivors, including attention to the possible consequences of speaking, the potential for 'jigsaw' identification (indirect, through multiple small details), and questions about when it is and is not appropriate to talk to survivors directly (organisations, service providers may have a better overview and more to contribute to a story). Consent and visual representation are also covered clearly, and in the interests of survivors. Explicit recognition that payment for interviews is poor ethics is helpful.

The section on interviewing is clear and defined by the principle of doing no harm, including a recognition that telling and re-telling a story can be re-traumatising. It challenges assumptions of 'victimhood' and unethical expectations/assumptions that all survivors will have similar reactions or be representative of a narrow social narrative of what being a survivor means. Overall, the guidance asks journalists and communications teams to think carefully about the story they are trying to tell, their reasons for telling it, ensuring survivor experiences are not misappropriated, misused, or treated carelessly, and that survivor safety, privacy, dignity and control is prioritised.

UNFPA (2013) *Nine Ethical Principles: Reporting Ethically on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis* (12 pages)

<https://www.unfpa.org/resources/nine-ethical-principles-reporting-ethically-gender-based-violence-syria-crisis>

This document is a powerpoint summary of a longer UNFPA document, condensing the more detailed information into short precis. It provides a useful introduction to the full document, and serves as a reference guide for assessing the process and outputs of a reporting exercise. The 9 ethical principles are: accuracy; fairness; impartiality (non-judgement of survivors, specifically); duty to inform; respecting privacy; sources; payment for interviews; do no harm; a survivor-centred approach.

GBV AoR Working Group (2010) *Handbook for Coordinating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings*, Global Protection Cluster (p. 62-3 + Annexes A12- A20)

https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/GBV_Handbook_Long_Version.pdf

Media and communications are one short section in this wider handbook, and therefore this is not a comprehensive guide or detailed in its approach. The focus is more on the ways in which programmes can engage with media, rather than guidance *for* media/communications. It includes a short summary of ways to engage with media; and on press releases, press statements, press conferences and interviews, and how to plan and design these to be concise, targeted and focussed on a core message.

Annexes include ways to develop effective messaging, and one-page practical summaries of key points in planning. It includes a short reference to both Ethics and Sensitivity, and the Ethical Journalism Initiative. These are very short; more detailed and nuanced guidance can be found in other documents. It is recommended that this guidance is not used as a stand-alone resource as it does not provide sufficient clarity on identity protection or consent.

One-page summaries on preparation for engaging with journalists can be useful for those who have little experience with media, and limited access to support or training. These could have value with programme staff, for example, in practising and rehearsing for involvement with media.

Women's Media Centre (2017) *10 Dos and Don'ts on How To Interview Sexualised Violence Survivors* (6 pages)

<http://www.womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/10-dos-and-donts-on-how-to-interview-sexualized-violence-survivors>

This is a concise, informal summary of ethical interviewing practice when working with survivors. It is written for journalists, by a journalist who specialises in covering these stories, and is intended to improve practice for non-specialists. It is a potentially useful document for people working in communications or media teams, and for programme teams working with and/or around journalists.

The guidance positions survivor safety as a greater responsibility than the need for 'the story', and names specific practices that are directly harmful and should not be acceptable. She also uses specific personal examples to illustrate difficult ethical decisions, and the process by which the final decisions were made. 'Consent' is recognised as complex, beyond a single or simple question, and consent to identification overridden by a responsibility to the safety and dignity of a survivor.

Lastly, the writer clearly articulates that reporting on sexual violence, and working with survivors, often demands the opposite of 'normal' reporting: letting sources lead an interview, thinking about what the source needs rather than what the story needs, taking the time needed by a source, and understanding that the narrative is unlikely to be complete.

Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women (2012) *Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence; A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage* (42 pages)

<http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf>

This comprehensive guide was produced to improve reporting on rape and sexual violence. While it is intended for a domestic US audience, much of the content is applicable to humanitarian contexts. It has been written with a specific recognition that the standards and ethics of journalism are challenged and tested in the reporting of sexual violence:

‘Neutrality is a goal that can never be achieved; it is an ideal we aim towards. This is evidenced by the high percentage of articles written on rape and sexual violence that focus their inquiries and investigations on the victims, without asking critical questions or further investigating the perpetrator(s). Similarly, these articles help perpetuate rape myths by incorporating superfluous descriptions that are dependent on victim-blaming language.’

This guide includes specific and concrete examples on language, and the ways in which thoughtless language reinforces unhelpful assumptions and ideas about both perpetrators and survivors. Safety of the survivor is core in the outlining of the ethical principles, overriding ‘public interest’ and a good story. This guidance reinforces the primacy of protecting the source, especially in an age of digital global media, and is clear that survivors should be anonymous and non-identifiable regardless of their ‘consent’ to being named. It also provides examples of good and bad reporting, with critique and analysis of why stories constitute problematic or responsible reporting.

Guidance for interviewing includes a specific focus on the kinds of questions that can and should be asked, and language to be avoided. It is also explicit about a preference for women interviewers, producers, photographers and interpreters as a core component of creating a safe environment for a survivor. This is the only document that makes reference to the obligations of interpreters and translators in terms of confidentiality, and the protection of the dignity of survivors.

Lastly, there is guidance about the reliance on statistics, how to interrogate and critically analyse the available statistics on GBV, and ways to use statistics appropriately.

Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (2011) *Reporting on Sexual Violence*, Columbia University (3 pages)

<https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>

This is a short, bullet-pointed summary on how to prepare for and conduct interviews. The guidance is focussed on the safety and dignity of a survivor, and the more nuanced and complex ethics of reporting on sexual violence. It includes a focus on women interviewing survivors, the need for specialist briefing around sexual violence in preparation for the story into the causes and impacts, and the responsibility to think about the wider and longer-term impacts of reporting for survivors and for wider communities. This is useful as a summary guide, and as an introduction to best practice.

Zero Tolerance (2018) *Handle With Care: A guide to responsible media reporting of violence against women* (45 pages)

<https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Full-version-of-Handle-With-Care.pdf>

This guide positions itself as best practice in reporting on violence against women and girls, going further than legal requirements on journalists, and providing a ‘handbook of moral guidance’.

The guide includes a summary page of 12 recommendations, covering the ways in which reporting on sexual violence reflects a position on gender inequality (assumptions about survivors and about perpetrators), (un)examined assumptions and popular myths around VAWG, and the responsibility of journalists to protect the safety and dignity of survivors. It is also explicit about the need to ensure that any images used do not distort the story, contribute to the problem, or objectify women.

A section on definitions and language reinforces the need for accuracy, clarity and a non-sensationalising tone. Case studies are used to demonstrate how central stories can be told without compromising ethical standards of safety and care.

The inclusion of a long chapter on common misunderstandings and concerns is particularly helpful as a reference point to unpick and re-frame commonly held assumptions, highlighting the need to recognise explicitly the gendered nature of these kinds of assaults. Alcohol, poverty and the 'cycle of violence' are also addressed as inappropriate ways to frame a story or as inferences for perpetrator motivation. Responsible reporting requires telling the whole story, including the reality that an ostensibly one-off assault may be part of a wider pattern of abuse by perpetrators.

Safety, anonymity and the privacy of survivors is prioritised, with specific reference to not presenting or framing survivors as 'passive victims'. Even when the impact of violence has been devastating, it is essential to recognise survivors as being more than this experience. Guidance for conducting an interview reflects the need to take survivors' experiences and needs seriously at all times.

National Union of Journalists (2013) *Guidelines for Journalists on Violence Against Women* (3 pages)

<https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-guidelines-on-violence-against-women/>

This short summary document articulates key points around the issues, guidance on including references and sources of support, language and framing, and the need to avoid the 'passive voice' (for example, 'women were raped'). The guidance also includes nuance on the idea of 'impartiality' in journalism and the importance of not commenting in ways that could be viewed as blaming survivors or excusing/justifying/minimising the actions of perpetrators. The safety and anonymity of survivors interviewed is recognised as paramount. The guidance highlights the need to report on successful prosecutions, the ways in which women have survived their experience, and to show survivors as more than victims in order to avoid replicating and reproducing the narrative of 'helpless, passive victims'.

Ethical Journalism Initiative (2012) *Guidelines for Reporting on Violence Against Women* (1 page)

<http://ethicaljournalisminitiative.org/en/contents/ifj-guidelines-for-reporting-on-violence-against-women>

A one-page, 10-point summary of core ethical issues, covering: language, framing, safety and respect for survivors, the wider story, clarity and specificity, and the need to recognise the gendered nature of the violence.

Women's Resource Centre (2017) *Reporting Guidelines Resource Pack* (5 pages)

<https://thewomensresourcecentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Reporting-Guidelines-Resource-Pack.pdf>

A summary and links to further resources and guidance, curated by the Women's Resource Centre and the BBC. Links include specialist organisations (mental health, faith-based organisations, LGBT organisations and so on), articles, and journalist sources.

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