

SILENCE AND  
OMISSIONS:  
A MEDIA GUIDE  
FOR COVERING  
GENDER-BASED  
VIOLENCE



**SILENCE AND OMISSIONS: A MEDIA GUIDE  
FOR COVERING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

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## PREFACE

Gender-based violence is a human rights violation that, in its extreme form, is fatal. Violence is part of a continuum of gender-based discrimination, harassment, and exclusion that debilitates women and deprives them of their ability to thrive and be equal members of society. Violence perpetrated against women because they are women happens in all corners of the globe and is committed by individuals, state, and non-state actors.

It has been three decades since advocates for the recognition of violence against women as a human rights violation started the Global 16 Days Campaign to end gender-based violence. Currently, the campaign is implemented in over 180 countries. Rutgers University's Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) is honored and humbled to have initiated and coordinated the campaign since 1991.

*Silence and Omissions*, the standard-setting guide developed with journalists and for journalists, is a result of CWGL listening to their testimonies and recommendations. Journalists who report on gender-based violence, sometimes at great risk to themselves, play a crucial role in influencing social norms by how they tell the story. *Silence and Omissions* shows the power of survivor-centered reporting, and how a human rights approach ensures the inclusion of multiple and intersecting identities; recognition of the root causes of violence that can lead to its prevention, and unbiased standards toward accountability.

The COVID-19 pandemic, disasters rooted in climate change, and conflicts continue to amplify gender-based vulnerabilities and violence. Social media, the #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo movements, and citizen journalism are shifting the discourse on how the media reports on gender-based violence. At this moment, journalism in action is shedding light on the lives of women, girls, and women journalists in Afghanistan. These reports are drawing the eyes of the world, and hopefully, contributing toward protecting those at risk of life-threatening persecution and the denial of rights.

We at CWGL are deeply committed to helping the media and other entities report on gender-based violence and protecting journalists who risk their lives in the course of their work. We hope *Silence and Omissions* will contribute to improving coverage in this vital area.

The role of journalists is fundamental in attaining a world without violence where women and girls can enjoy their inherent right to dignity, respect, and equity.

**KRISHANTI DHARMARAJ**  
*Executive Director*  
*Center for Women's Global Leadership*  
*Rutgers University*



## INTRODUCTION

Reporting on pain and violence is never easy. The intimacy involved in gender-based violence makes it even harder to report and write about clearly. Yet, journalists can and do shed light on these “private matters.” At its best, journalism works to dispel misperceptions and stereotypes, holds power to account, initiates changes in law, and provides the space for survivors to speak.

There are many guidelines for journalists reporting on gender-based violence, but the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University (U.S.) saw the need to bring together a wide range of resources and perspectives in one place, to help veteran journalists, media and communications workers, and journalists just starting out.

The Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence was formed in 2018 following an assessment of CWGL’s Global 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence Campaign. The assessment highlighted the essential role of the media in the public’s awareness of gender-based violence. The Initiative then gathered more than 100 journalists and media experts from across the globe to identify gaps in existing guidelines on gender-based violence reporting.

Six regional consultations were held in 2018 and 2019 in Australia, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico, Sri Lanka, and the United States. Learning from the expertise and wide range of experiences of participating journalists, CWGL decided to focus on the following recommendations:

- Utilize best practices, ethical standards and resources that support a survivors-centered approach
- Offer a human rights perspective to put gender-based violence stories in context and address root causes, as well as issues of accountability and redress
- Report on the continuum between discrimination and violence, and the intersecting factors and risks that contribute to such violence
- Focus on underreported, misreported, and unreported forms and targets of violence (including within marginalized communities)
- Examine the long-lasting impact of gender-based violence, as well as the efforts of policymakers, advocates and survivors to seek remedies and accountability
- Address new trends affecting gender-based violence reporting, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; new conflicts; increasing online violence; the role of #MeToo, and civil society initiatives working toward the elimination of gender-based violence, such as new digital tools, femicide observatories, and new human rights standards.

While referencing previous media guidelines for journalists on ethical journalist practices, CWGL's handbook provides a broad range of resources and recommendations aimed at journalists, schools of journalism, media trainers, gender and media studies researchers and educators, and NGO communications specialists working with the media on issues of gender-based violence.

CWGL's standard-setting handbook includes references to international human rights standards and accurate terminology to help journalists frame their stories. It also includes evidence-based analyses of media coverage; examples of best practices; case studies; personal essays from journalists reporting on gender-based violence and survivors; a resource list aimed at helping journalists identify a wider range of experts, and ideas for future coverage.

Examples of media coverage and gender-based violence studies are mostly limited to those published in English. But many of the selected resources are also available in other languages.

The guiding principles at the core of this handbook reflect the remarkable commonalities that emerged from CWGL consultations with journalists from 38 countries, and from subsequent guidance and contributions from them and other media professionals from around the world.

## ACRONYMS

### General terms

|              |                                                  |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>DV</b>    | Domestic violence                                |
| <b>FGM/C</b> | Female genital mutilation/cutting                |
| <b>GBV</b>   | Gender-based violence                            |
| <b>IPV</b>   | Intimate partner violence                        |
| <b>LGBTI</b> | Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex |
| <b>SGBV</b>  | Sexual and gender-based violence                 |
| <b>SRHR</b>  | Sexual and reproductive health and rights        |
| <b>VAW</b>   | Violence against women                           |

### International media organizations

|              |                                                            |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>CFWIJ</b> | Coalition for Women in Journalism                          |
| <b>CPJ</b>   | Committee to Protect Journalists                           |
| <b>EJN</b>   | Ethical Journalism Network                                 |
| <b>GAMAG</b> | Global Alliance on Media and Gender                        |
| <b>GIJN</b>  | Global Investigative Journalism Network                    |
| <b>GMMP</b>  | Global Media Monitoring Project                            |
| <b>IAWRT</b> | International Association of Women in Radio and Television |
| <b>ICFJ</b>  | International Center For Journalists                       |

|             |                                         |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>IFJ</b>  | International Federation of Journalists |
| <b>IMS</b>  | International Media Support             |
| <b>IWMF</b> | International Women's Media Foundation  |
| <b>RSF</b>  | Reporters Without Borders               |

### United Nations

|               |                                                                         |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>CEDAW</b>  | Convention/Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women |
| <b>CRC</b>    | Convention/Committee on the Rights of the Child                         |
| <b>ICPD</b>   | International Conference on Population and Development                  |
| <b>ILO</b>    | International Labour Organization                                       |
| <b>OHCHR</b>  | Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights                         |
| <b>UNESCO</b> | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization        |
| <b>UNFPA</b>  | United Nations Population Fund                                          |
| <b>UNICEF</b> | United Nations Children's Fund                                          |
| <b>UNODC</b>  | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime                                |
| <b>WHO</b>    | World Health Organization                                               |





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SURVIVORS ARE MORE THAN THEIR TRAUMA  
AND IT IS IMPORTANT TO PORTRAY THEM AND  
THEIR STORIES MORE BROADLY.

*Sherizaan Minwalla and  
Johanna E. Foster*

## CHAPTER 1

# A Survivor-Centered Approach

Acts of gender-based violence dehumanize and disempower victims. The immediate trauma is often followed by months or years of compounding forms of harm, such as poor health and political and social marginalization. Participation in decision making is important for many reasons, but crucially allows survivors to access healing, justice and redress.

In a media context, a survivor-centered approach means avoiding reporting practices that might cause harm, while also focusing on solutions and long-term care. When writing about sexual violence, this means explaining the context and the lasting repercussions of violence, such as forced displacement and children born of rape.

Ultimately, from a journalistic point of view, a survivor-centered approach is about recognizing survivors' agency, as well as relaying the infinite range of their suffering, their experiences, and their perspectives.

---

### **CWGL RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Prioritize the needs and interests of survivors
  - Protect the identity and dignity of survivors
  - Focus on the purpose of the story
  - Learn from survivors' perceptions of journalistic practices
  - Avoid retraumatizing or disempowering practices
  - Address survivors' quest for justice and redress
  - Avoid raising or reinforcing false expectations
  - Write/produce and edit positive news stories about changing attitudes and efforts to advocate against acts or patterns of violence
  - Write/produce and edit follow-up stories that address the long-term impact of gender-based violence on survivors
-

## 1.1 BALANCED PORTRAYALS

Best practices show how effective it is to avoid reductionist reporting and to instead portray gender-based violence survivors as whole human beings who can regain control of their lives, and even become agents of change. This may entail providing contextual information showing that violence is neither normal nor inescapable, as well as addressing what is being done about it, through positive news or follow-up stories.

The Sahiyo organization, for example, applies this perspective to the coverage of an enduring harmful practice in the Dawoodi Bohra community of India. Its *Resource Guide to Best Practice for Sensitive and Effective Reporting on Female Genital Cutting*<sup>1</sup> shows how to balance accounts of it with information about efforts to abandon it:

“If you focus on how [our] study shows that female genital cutting is prevalent among 80% of Bohras, the norm then becomes that female genital cutting is prevalent amongst the population and there is nothing a community can do about it,” the Guide says. “Thus, it is important to balance this information with the positive steps made towards eradication. In other words, you want to normalize change.”

The resource guide includes specific suggestions for how to balance female genital cutting stories:

- Interview people who have undergone female genital cutting or from the Dawoodi Bohra community who will publicly state they do not want to practice female genital cutting.
- Find people who have not done it to their daughters and include their stories.
- Highlight the changing attitude toward the practice.

Similarly, the New York-based Solutions Journalism Network seeks “to rebalance the news, so that everyday people are exposed to stories that help them understand problems and challenges, and stories that show potential ways to respond.”<sup>2</sup>

With regard to gender-based violence, this approach encourages reporting practices that show how survivors can both contribute to and benefit from a focus on solutions. In 2019, Solutions Journalism Network featured a cross-border story, “Three African Countries Providing Solutions in Fight against FGM.” It was published in the pan-African digital media platform *This Is Africa*.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of the story, based in Nigeria, is about a documentary, *Bleeding Flower*, produced to “create social awareness on the need to end this harmful practice ... The movie is beginning to have an impact. Many of [the women] who have been cut are speaking up and joining the movement.”

The Kenya section features Sadia Hussein who, with other female genital mutilation survivors in her community, tried, she said, to “put a stop to the high prevalence of female genital mutilation among Somali Kenyans, the most affected community in Kenya.” They succeeded in making their town “female genital mutilation free for 10 years, after managing to convince the cutters to abandon the practice for farming activities.”

The Senegalese story also describes civil society efforts, led by women, to eradicate female genital mutilation by encouraging alternative projects to help those women who performed female genital mutilation attain financial independence.



## 1.2 PROTECTING THE DIGNITY OF TRAUMA SURVIVORS

International human rights and humanitarian organizations working with survivors of torture (including gender-based violence) were among the first to warn against harmful approaches that researchers, aid workers and journalists might be using to pursue their documentation and investigative efforts.

Columbia University’s Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma published a collection of “Best Practices in Trauma Reporting,”<sup>4</sup> which acknowledged that “writing about people’s pain and suffering doesn’t come easily to most journalists.” In 2011, it issued specific “Guidelines for Reporting on Sexual Violence,”<sup>5</sup> a form of trauma that many journalists feel especially ill-equipped to cover.

Jo Healey, drawing from her own experience as a senior BBC news journalist and media trainer, best described this challenge in a 2019 blog for the Ethical Journalism Network:

“Our current culture is to practice on the grieving public until we reckon we get it about right. We rarely share with each other the skills we acquire and we rarely talk about our experiences. We seem to be the only professionals invited into these homes, with no formal training to be there. Nor is dealing with vulnerable contributors generally part of student journalism training. It is a risky state of play ... Training hundreds of journalists has shown me how many can feel vulnerable when faced with spending time interviewing, filming, and writing about people who are suffering. It is also clear that it matters to them that they don’t exacerbate people’s trauma. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all when dealing with people’s reactions and emotions, but there can be good practice which reporters can adapt, so that they can do their job, do it well and do no harm.”<sup>6</sup>

A growing demand for good practices led to the publication of Healey’s book “Trauma Reporting: A Journalist’s Guide to Covering Sensitive Stories.”<sup>7</sup> One of the contributors was Jina Moore, former Global Women’s Rights reporter and Africa Bureau Chief for *BuzzFeed News*, and former East Africa Bureau Chief for *The New York Times*.

The same year that the Dart Center issued its guidelines, Moore wrote *Covering Trauma: A Training Guide*<sup>8</sup> published by Search for Common Ground. Her premise was that “without a clear purpose, trauma journalism becomes sensationalism ... The darker side of human nature means that we are all potential voyeurs; good journalists must avoid that inclination, and help their listeners avoid it as well. One way to do that is to focus on the purpose of the story. Trauma journalism should have a larger purpose than simply recounting the grisly details of violence for curious listeners.”

““

***Without a clear purpose, trauma journalism becomes sensationalism.***

Moore encouraged journalists, before writing their story, to ask themselves four key questions:

- Does this story illuminate a larger public policy problem?
- Does this story help people understand the plight of trauma survivors?
- Does this story help – with information or with examples – communities recover from trauma?
- Does this story help survivors?

## 1.3 SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA COVERAGE

### 1.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Survivors' experiences of media interviews were finally brought into focus in the 2010s. *Deutsche Welle*, Germany's news broadcaster, organized a Global Media Forum in 2011 on the theme of human rights reporting. Dart Center Europe panelists talked about how to conduct such reporting without violating the rights of interview subjects. Some of the journalists most aware of this challenge addressed the need to humanize the victims, place them at the forefront of readers' minds, and also to avoid raising false expectations. As one participant put it: "Journalists have been turning up to post-conflict zones for decades, dangling the prospect that coverage will bring aid or intervention, and nothing has changed."<sup>9</sup>

In 2014, Amnesty International released a report on torture and sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq. The human rights organization talked to many Yazidi women who had been abducted and raped. In the context of these interviews, it documented the "significant pressure on women and girls who escaped IS captivity to speak to national and international media. Local media fixers and activists have often brought journalists to interview the escapees without first seeking their informed consent. In some cases, relatives have pressured them into giving interviews even when they clearly did not feel comfortable."<sup>10</sup>

A few months later, Sherizaan Minwalla, an Iraq-based human rights attorney, with expertise in access to justice for gender-based violence survivors, wrote an article for the *Daily Beast*: "Has Anyone Here Been Raped by ISIS?"<sup>11</sup> This headline – referencing the 1985 book by war correspondent Edward Behr "Anyone Here Been Raped & Speaks English?" – revealed her intent to warn against the eagerness of journalists reporting on atrocities against Yazidi women and girls:

"Journalists persist in finding those escaped victims to ask them about sexual violence they suffered in captivity, despite the fact that they are traumatized and may face retaliation or rejection if such details emerge ..." Minwalla wrote. "Journalists are not trained mental health workers and are not equipped to deal with victims who manifest psychological symptoms during an interview ... Every time a reporter asks a victim about her trauma, he or she reopens her wounds."

These observations led to a landmark study conducted by Minwalla and sociologist Johanna E. Foster (Monmouth University, U.S.). While aware of the concerns of some human rights researchers and advocates, they also realized that "missing from these critiques of journalists were the voices of Yazidi women

themselves. They noted that previous research “does not address survivors’ perceptions about tactics that journalists may use to gain access to survivors.”

As a result, two main questions framed their own research: “What do Yazidi women, themselves, think and feel about the processes by which women’s stories were gathered and shared” and “how can their perspectives inform the field of journalism in the practice of covering gender violence in conflict zones?”<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3.2 ETHICS AND REPORTING ON YAZIDI SURVIVORS OF ISIS CAPTIVITY

*The study authors summarized their findings and recommendations for this handbook.*

BY SHERIZAAAN MINWALLA  
AND JOHANNA E. FOSTER,  
SEPTEMBER 2019

The research we conducted on Yazidi women’s perspectives on journalistic practices after the ISIS genocidal attacks against the Yazidi people in 2014, has important implications for journalists covering sexual violence in conflict. Through 26 face-to-face interviews of displaced Yazidi women, and a content analysis of 75 English-language news articles published in the immediate aftermath of the attacks,<sup>13</sup> we found a pattern of widespread breaches of the United Nations Global Protection Cluster Media Guidelines for Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Contexts.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, we found that 100% of the 75 media articles analyzed included at least one breach of the UN Guidelines, including 61% that disclosed details that put survivors and their families at risk for stigmatization, shame, and retaliation by ISIS militants. Emerging from the reporting was

a singular narrative of rape that depicted Yazidi survivors as passive victims without agency, and lacked information about a comprehensive description of the women and the genocide. We also found that 85% of the Yazidi women in the study described incidents that could be defined by the UN Guidelines as evidence of unethical reporting practices, including promises of money or aid, pressure to reveal details of their traumatic experiences, and the disclosure of identity without consent. Of the 26 women interviewed, 85% reported that journalists’ disclosure of identifying information about survivors, including names and faces, put them and relatives still in ISIS captivity at risk for further violence.

As a result of these findings, we recommend the following for journalists covering gender and sexual based violence in conflict:

1. **Clarify the purpose of the story.** Reporting on such a sensitive topic should be for reasons other than simply human interest, because survivors sacrifice emotionally, and in terms of their safety and social status, by giving up their stories.

2. **Understand the context.** When reporting on gender-based violence in a conflict setting journalists should understand the context to ensure they are not putting their sources and relatives at risk. Background information can be sought from people living or working with conflict-affected communities who understand and can advise about political, cultural, and gender dynamics.
3. **Put survivors first.** The well-being and rights of survivors of gender-based violence comes before the right of the public to know about atrocities. Taking a survivor-centered approach requires prioritizing the needs and interests of survivors.
4. **Learn basic information about trauma.** Journalists working with gender-based violence survivors should understand how trauma affects people, and how interviewing someone with post-traumatic stress disorder can retrigger trauma by causing flashbacks and other symptoms. Journalists should adapt their interviewing techniques by taking these considerations into account.
5. **Treat survivors with dignity and respect.** Journalists should use correct terminology when referring to gender-based violence and avoid using the language of the perpetrator, such as “sex slaves,” in published reports. **Obtain informed consent.** Informed

consent requires that journalists get prior permission to do an interview, explain to survivors how their information will be used and discuss their rights during and after an interview, as well as the potential risks to them of publicizing their story. Survivors have at a minimum the right to:

- › Refuse an interview without any negative consequences
- › Refuse to answer questions
- › Take breaks
- › End the interview at any time
- › Withdraw consent before publication

Journalists should also consider how trauma might impact a survivor’s ability to provide informed consent, particularly when she is not in a safe, stable situation.

“”

*The well-being and rights of survivors of gender-based violence comes before the right of the public to know about atrocities. Taking a survivor-centered approach requires prioritizing the needs and interests of survivors.*

6. **Discuss risks of exposing identity.** Revealing details that disclose a survivor’s identity can put her and her family at risk of stigma and retaliation. This includes disclosing names, faces even partially covered with scarves, unique markings, such

as tattoos, and documents with names. It is important to inform survivors that information published on the internet will always remain public. Journalists are encouraged to be creative about finding images to accompany their reports with survivors’ photographs when there are any risks.

7. **Take precautions with minors.** Journalists should avoid interviewing child survivors of sexual violence given their young age and inexperience. If they do interview children, a parent or guardian must be present, and reporters should avoid asking difficult questions about rape and other trauma.

8. **Avoid probing questions about gender-based violence.** Asking survivors to discuss unnecessary details is unwarranted, as it puts survivors at risk of re-traumatization without serving their interests primarily.

9. **Go beyond the trauma.** Survivors are more than their trauma, and it is important to portray them and their stories more broadly. This can be done by asking women about their lives before the conflict, their current needs, and what they hope for their future – and then telling stories that frame them as full human beings and not simply victims. Also, journalists are encouraged to tell stories of resistance and courage of survivors to portray them as strong individuals and not only passive victims.

*“Survivors are more than their trauma and it is important to portray them and their stories more broadly.”*

### 1.3.3 A SURVIVOR’S MISSION

A Yazidi survivor named Nadia Murad shared the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize<sup>15</sup> for her efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. In her previously published memoir about her captivity and fight against ISIS, she wrote:

*“It never gets easier to tell your story. Each time you speak it, you relive it.”*

“My story, told honestly and matter-of-factly, is the best weapon I have against terrorism, and I plan on using it until those terrorists are put on trial ... More than anything else, I want to be the last girl in the world with a story like mine ... It never gets easier to tell your story. Each time you speak it, you relive it.”<sup>16</sup>

Countless journalists wanted to report on her story. The conflict between the urge and the cost of telling it became an important theme of the 2018 documentary film, *On Her Shoulders*,<sup>17</sup> which focuses on her advocacy work as a UN Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking. PBS Learning Media created an accompanying lesson plan, “Nadia Murad in the Public Eye: Analyzing the Moral Responsibility of the Media.”<sup>18</sup> It addressed the question: “At what cost does Murad tell her story, and for whose benefit?”

In the film, Murad mentions some of the most disconcerting interview questions she has faced, but she also concludes by giving examples of those she would prefer to be asked:

- What is the fate of those girls?
- How young are the girls who are going through this pain?
- What is the situation of the refugees who I visit in the camps?
- What is the situation of my people [her fellow Yazidis] in camps in Kurdistan and Sinjar Mountain?
- What must be done so Yazidis can have their rights?
- What must be done so a woman will not be a victim of war?

Murad started her own organization, Nadia's Initiative, in 2018. Its mission includes advocating for survivors of sexual violence. It has been partnering with the Institute for International Criminal Investigations and the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative of the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in the development of a draft "Global Code of Conduct for the Documentation and Investigation of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence." Its initial drafters introduced it as "a widely supported code of conduct for reporters, researchers, documenters and investigators that can help achieve greater respect for survivors' rights and better outcomes for survivors."

According to the joint launch statement,<sup>19</sup> the Murad Code, named after Nadia Murad, is meant to promote a survivor-centered approach to reporting and documenting, ensuring that the process is safe, ethical, and effective. The joint project, expected to be completed in 2021, will also include the drafting of a "Survivor's Charter" to express their wishes on how documenters should engage with them.

### 1.3.4 LEARNING FROM SURVIVORS: A VIDEO JOURNALIST'S EXPERIENCE IN MODELING BEST PRACTICES

*Marga Zambrana is an independent producer, video journalist and writer (Barcelona/Istanbul)*

BY MARGA ZAMBRANA, MARCH 2020

I had one of the best opportunities ever to work in spring 2017 with survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) jihadi terrorists against Yazidi women in northern Iraq.

Three years later, the Yazidi grassroots organization Yazda, together with the support of the NGO Norwegian Peoples' Aid decided to produce a documentary whose content would be decided by Yazidi survivors, in order to help them regain their dignity and strength.

As a female writer and video journalist covering the Middle East since 2013, I was selected due to my experience interviewing survivors of sexual violence in Asia, Europe, and specifically in the Syrian conflict. Coworkers generously referred me to Norwegian Peoples' Aid<sup>20</sup> as a respectful and ethical filmmaker who would protect the identity, safety and dignity of interviewees. I must say that during these interviews, as a freelancer, I had the luxury of time, contrary to other colleagues working under tight deadlines.

Both NPAid and Yazda members had been working with Yazidis since 2014. During the pre-production process and once I moved to Dohuk, their managers were

wary about the way I would approach their clients, in order to avoid re-traumatization during the interviews. I needed to change my mindset as well as a journalist, as I was there not just to explain their horrors, but their heroism. This was an advocacy documentary. The boundaries were set through an ethical agreement called "Client Meeting Request Form" in which basically the interviewer commits to avoid any topic of discussion regarding sexual violence or anything that could re-traumatize the survivor. It was a challenging project.

However, I was lucky enough to have the support of two of the best professionals in the sexual and gender-based violence sector, NPAid Program Manager Barbara Mali and psychologist Eivor Laegreid. The latter accompanied me during the first rounds of group interviews (called Focus Groups Discussions) and, as a therapist, she set the boundaries.

The psychologist and I met with about 40 survivors in three rounds of focus groups, including a separate group of men who had survived mass killings. When meeting with women, we would first explain the goal of the project and made clear that none of them was forced to talk. This approach helped them to relax. Some decided not to talk, others explained how they felt betrayed by local and international journalists who didn't respect their wishes for anonymity. At some point, the focus group became a sort of group



therapy, once some of them unveiled their traumatic memories. They felt free to talk about the topics they wanted to include in their documentary: their strength fighting back against their captors, their resilience and their identity. In the second round of interviews, we showed part of my previous footage interviewing survivors from other conflicts, whose identities were concealed. I also filmed some of the focus group discussions, and showed the footage to the survivors, so they could decide if they felt comfortable with it and regain control of their image.

Finally, we identified those who would be more open to talk about their trauma

on camera without being re-traumatized. Many survivors would be prone to say they wanted to talk in order to get justice, but Laegreid helped me to notice through their body language when the survivor was not really ready to talk. When we finally began the filming, we were surprised to find out that at least two survivors, once they were given the opportunity to regain control of what I was filming of them, were enjoying the interview, and it worked as a kind of therapy for them. A 14-year-old who had just been released after two years under ISIS even took my camera and began filming around in the refugee camp, expressing an interest in becoming a camerawoman.

### 1.3.5 A SURVIVOR AND TRAUMA SPECIALIST TESTIMONY

Some survivors of sexual violence, in the context of the #MeToo movement, have also come forward to talk about their perceptions of the impact of media coverage. In the United States, one of the first women to speak against former Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein was survivor Louise Godbold. In August 2019, she published a noteworthy piece about the costs and risks of media attention. The following is excerpted from the *Pacific Standard* magazine article:<sup>21</sup>

“One consequence of coming forward about a high-profile abuser is media attention. Often, our interactions with the people who claim to be helping us ‘get our story out there’ have ended up resurfacing feelings of exploitation and powerlessness that are associated with the original trauma.

I don’t believe that most media professionals wake up in the morning wanting to harm someone. They just want to do a good job and would be delighted if they could have some tangible pointers about how to ‘do no harm’ in the process ... Too often, I think, we survivors are misled into thinking that a kind reporter or sympathetic producer is a safe person, and then find ourselves retraumatized by our subsequent lack of control in the editing and distribution of the interviews. Not only do survivors suffer a loss of power and control, but we also rarely benefit from the emotional culling of our stories.

No one likes to give up power, and those who have it usually come up with all kinds of reasons not to relinquish it. Reporters and documentarians will argue that survivor input threatens ‘objectivity.’ But if objectivity is the goal, then allow the survivor to comment on the chosen narrative once it becomes clear; if we disagree with how the information is being framed, the disagreement should also appear in the report or documentary. Isn’t offering both sides of the story fundamental to objectivity?

Ultimately, I would like to see some of the power and control shift to survivors so we can depict ourselves as exactly that: survivors, not mere hand-wringing victims of Weinstein and other predators, which is how the media loves to portray us. We are survivors. We survived.”

### 1.3.6 A PHOTOJOURNALIST’S RULE: BE HONEST AND TRANSPARENT

*Handbook contributor Alice Driver is an independent journalist based in Mexico City, and the author of ‘More or Less Dead.’*

BY ALICE DRIVER, OCTOBER 2020

Indian photojournalist **Smita Sharma** contributed to a 2020 *National Geographic* package that illustrates what radical honesty and transparency look like in action. “Stolen lives: The harrowing story of two girls sold into sexual slavery”<sup>22</sup> chronicles the experiences of two underage survivors of sexual violence, who were trafficked in India and Bangladesh. The headline includes accurate, respectful language, avoiding judgmental or inaccurate terms, such as prostitute and sex-worker, which do not apply to minors. Stories that involve sex trafficking often refer to girls as women, which ignores that minors cannot consent to sex. Sharma provides examples of how to undertake a project that centers on the safety and well-being of survivors of violence.

Sharma, who was interviewed for this handbook, started investigating sexual slavery in India in 2015 as a personal project. When *National Geographic* commissioned a project in 2018, she had cultivated the contacts and built the trust needed to photograph two underage survivors of sexual violence without revealing their identities, or compromising their futures.

“The first and foremost thing is how you approach them and your honesty,” the photojournalist said of working with underage survivors of violence. “If you explain to them why you are there and your ultimate intention, people get it.”

Sharma recognized that building trust among survivors of sexual violence would require significant time—in this case, years. One issue that journalists often face is finding the funding to pursue such long-term projects that require a considerable commitment of time and resources. “I got some resistance,” Sharma said, “because obviously, nobody wants to talk about this

to journalists, especially gender-based violence. I continued this for three years.” Ideally, editors at media outlets will recognize that gender-based violence projects often require long-term support to produce more nuanced work.

In Sharma’s case, being honest and transparent with families and survivors of violence required that she protect them from potential shaming and violence that could occur after she left the village. Sharma also talked about how she presented herself to draw less attention: “I don’t carry a lot of gear; I carry basic minimum things. I never carry a camera bag because I don’t want to draw attention.” Journalists and photographers usually work on a story, and once it is published, move on to a different place or subject. However, their responsibility extends beyond the time spent with survivors of violence, and Sharma recognized that.

*There are creative, beautiful, and respectful ways to share stories about violence that acknowledge the power of silence and omission.*

Journalists must respect how survivors of violence want to discuss their experiences. Photographers, reporters, their editors and colleagues may have certain expectations about what survivors of violence should share, especially if significant time and money have been invested in a project. The pressure to sell articles, make a living, and get “likes” on social media can cause tension for journalists covering gender-based violence. The work

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may involve educating colleagues that survivors of violence do not owe journalists trauma, violence, or horror. We do not have the right to re-traumatize survivors.

There are creative, beautiful, and respectful ways to share stories about violence that acknowledge the power of silence and omission.

## 1.4 FOLLOW-UP STORIES

One way to ensure that news and in-depth narratives portray the survivors' experience multidimensionally is to write follow-up stories that offer an opportunity to describe the long-term impact of acts of violence. They can offer a better understanding of the complex and often conflicting emotions, reactions, and choices that inform survivors' lives in the wake of such abuses. Follow-up stories can also be about resilience, empowerment, and the quest for justice and redress, as well as actions that will benefit other women at risk.

Here are some opportunities, at the local or national level, that journalists can use as news pegs for such stories:

- Prosecution of perpetrators
- New policy or legislative developments
- New research/studies
- Community and advocacy initiatives/campaigns
- Relevant commemorative days (see Chapter 3)
- Anniversaries of gender-based violence- related events/cases
- Examples of impact of previous media stories
- Awards

As a bonus, following-up reassures the survivor that the journalist respects the time they took to tell their story and that there was a genuine attempt to understand it and connect.

For smaller communities and for some cultures, reciprocity may be an important norm and, as such, maintaining contact in and of itself reinforces the journalists' standing as members of a community, apart from the article's news value.

The selected articles below are compelling examples of the importance of following up on the long-term impact on survivors of some of the most severe forms of gender-based violence:

### Rwanda genocide

**“Rwanda Genocide Revisited: What Happened to the Children of Rape Victims?”**

*The Telegraph (April 20, 2019)*

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/rwanda-genocide-revisited-happened-children-rape-victims/>

## Taliban rule (Afghanistan)

**“Don’t leave us now”**

*Al Jazeera (2019)*

<https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2019/dont-leave-us-now/index.html>

## Boko Haram kidnappings

**“Six Years Ago, Boko Haram Kidnapped 276 Schoolgirls. Where Are They Now?”**

*National Geographic Magazine (March 2020)*

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2020/03/six-years-ago-boko-haram-kidnapped-276-schoolgirls-where-are-they-now/>

**“What Would Make a Woman go Back to Boko Haram? Despair”**

*The Guardian (Jan. 14, 2019)*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/14/woman-boko-haram-nigeria-militant-group>

**“Listening to the stories of Boko Haram’s wives”**

*Open Democracy (July 17, 2019)*

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/listening-to-the-stories-of-boko-harams-wives/>

**“Victims of Boko Haram feel like strangers when they return home to southern Nigeria”**

*The Conversation (May 25, 2020)*

<https://theconversation.com/victims-of-boko-haram-feel-like-strangers-when-they-return-home-to-southern-nigeria-138874>

## Yazidi genocide

**“Murad, Amal Clooney accuse leaders and UN of failing Yazidis”**

*Associated Press (Aug. 3, 2020)*

<https://apnews.com/3806c4d12d45226e7c4359c621f454ba>

## 1.5 RESOURCES

The following guides and guidelines have been selected for their emphasis on the dignity, safety, and agency of gender-based violence survivors, as well as for their relevance in a wide range of contexts and situations:

### ***Noticias que salvan vidas: Manual periodístico para el abordaje de la violencia contra las mujeres (News That Saves Lives)***

Amnesty International Argentina (2009). Available in Spanish only.

<https://www.fundacionavon.org.ar/noticias-que-salvan-vidas/>

### ***Reporting on Sexual Violence in Conflict***

Dart Centre Europe (2021)

Also available in Arabic, French, Spanish and Swahili

<https://www.coveringcrsv.org/resources/>

### ***Guidelines for Reporting on Violence Against Women***

International Federation of Journalists (2013).

Available in English, French, and Spanish.

[https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/IFJ\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Reporting\\_on\\_Violence\\_Against\\_Women\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Guidelines_for_Reporting_on_Violence_Against_Women_EN.pdf)

### ***Media Guidelines for Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Contexts***

Global Protection Cluster (2013). GPC is a network of NGOs, international organizations and UN agencies engaged in protection work in humanitarian crises.

<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5c3701d27.pdf>

### ***Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: A Journalist's Handbook***

UNFPA Arab States Regional Humanitarian Response Hub (2020).

Available in Arabic and English.

<https://www.unfpa.org/reporting-gbv-humanitarian-settings>

***Interviewing Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence***

Witness (2013). This guide is part of the international NGO's how-to video series. Available in Arabic, English, French, Shona, Spanish, Swahili and Zulu.

<https://library.witness.org/product/guide-to-interviewing-survivors-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>

***Trauma Reporting: A Journalist's Guide to Covering Sensitive Stories***

Jo Healey, Editor. Published by Routledge, London and New York (2020)

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TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING  
IS NOT ABOUT EXTRACTION.

*Jina Moore*

## CHAPTER 2

# Tools of the Trade

Covering gender-based violence requires radical honesty and transparency. The journalism community has undertaken significant efforts to provide journalists and photographers with the tools to create nuanced, respectful work.

This chapter provides concrete examples of what covering gender-based violence looks like in action. Journalists should report ethically. They should consider the impact of their work on survivors of violence and try to do no harm.

The rules for covering gender-based violence involve approaching a story with significant planning, thought, and respect for the survivors. Covering gender-based violence also requires an understanding of its cultural and political

**contexts. In practice, this means respecting survivors if they don't want to discuss what they have suffered and if they want to remain anonymous. Meaningful consent allows them to change their mind at any point during the reporting process up until the time of publication. Their safety and well-being always take precedent.**

**Independent Journalist Alice Driver authored section 2.3.6 and the introduction to this chapter.**

## 2.1 A CASE FOR MEANINGFUL CONSENT

*Handbook Contributor Jina Moore has covered gender, conflict, and human rights around the world since 2008. She teaches workshops in trauma-informed interviewing and ethics at several U.S. universities. She was the inaugural women’s rights reporter at BuzzFeed News and the East Africa Bureau Chief for The New York Times.*

BY JINA MOORE, JUNE 2020

- Meaningful consent comes from the survivor
- Meaningful consent is given for specific use
- Meaningful consent is given at an appropriate time
- Meaningful consent requests are repeated
- Meaningful consent is trauma-informed

Consent is a cornerstone of journalism. Without consent, we can’t interview people, which is a big part of our job and, depending on local laws, we can’t record them for audio, video, and still photography. Without consent, we’re often stuck.

In many kinds of stories, we get (or take) our consent implicitly: When the mayor sets an appointment for a 10-minute interview, we understand that s/he is consenting, or agreeing, to be interviewed. When protesters fill the town square, we often interpret their public presence as consent to appear in our coverage.

In stories featuring survivors of violence, the practices around consent change, or they should. I’ve often heard advocates for the vulnerable call this “informed consent,” but in my 15 years interviewing and writing about survivors of trauma, I have found this formulation more legalistic than holistic. That is to say that it’s fairly easy to tick the boxes of informed consent and still act in ways that can reasonably be considered unethical.

I have found it more useful, for myself and my sources, to think about what I call **meaningful consent**. The key question behind meaningful consent is: Do I believe that this person – whose moment of vulnerability and/or trauma plays a key role in my story – understands the physical and psychological risks that may be involved in sharing their experiences with me and my audience, and has freely agreed to do so?

Meaningful consent is not about applying a set of rules; it’s about accounting for context in a trauma-informed manner. I think about meaningful consent as a trauma-informed practice because most situations where meaningful consent is needed involve stories and sources dealing with the aftermath of trauma, tragedy, and crisis. The aftermath may take minutes, months, or years, but the principles of meaningful consent remain the same, and they provide overall guidance as you interpret the specificities of your stories, as well as your publication’s resources and needs, among other things.

### 1. Meaningful consent comes from the survivor.

In some cases, family members may offer their consent for you to tell someone's story. In other cases, professionals—your “fixer,” a victim's lawyer, her employer, an NGO's protection officer, a prison guard—may offer you permission to do an interview with a survivor. In both cases, those permissions may also be necessary to your work, by lowering cultural or administrative barriers to the interview. But no matter the setting, the culture, the language, or the time constraints, that consent is not enough. Individual consent is not institutional permission: You should never assume you have the consent to interview and/or photograph survivors because someone else gave you permission to speak to them. No one but the survivor has the power of consent.

### 2. Meaningful consent is given for specific use.

Clarity of purpose is good manners when you're interviewing a politician. It's crucial when you're interviewing a trauma survivor. They should know where their story is appearing, who the primary audience is, and how it will be accessed.

I usually keep a screenshot of the publication I am working for on my smartphone so that, even in remote areas with no internet, I can show someone what my publication looks like and how their story is likely to look when it runs. I also make sure they understand that the website I'm showing them, or have photographed, is available just as easily to everyone as it was to me just then.

It is our obligation as journalists to make sure people understand how we intend to use their information—and that we understand that consent is not fungible. Someone who agrees to let me record their voice so that my notes are accurate for print quotation is not tacitly agreeing to let me use that audio recording for a web documentary. In many parts of the world, some

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*No one but the survivor has the power of consent.*

media are more dangerous than others. Being quoted by name in a foreign newspaper is understood by many people I have interviewed as much less risky than being interviewed, even anonymously, for radio broadcast.

Unless you have explained your purpose and your intended use to a survivor of violence or crisis, you don't have meaningful consent.

### 3. Meaningful consent is given at an appropriate time.

Traumatic stress changes how the brain functions. In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic incident, survivors may be in shock. Researchers understand that the acute stress of a traumatic incident may last months; post-traumatic stress, which can be common especially to some forms of violence (e.g., sexual assault), may last longer. Both of these biological states can affect how people perceive and analyze information, including about their own risk.

Sometimes in journalism, we find ourselves present during, or with access to, the immediate aftermath of trauma. Imagine, for example, that we are writing a feature story about 24 hours on the block

with a local police officer. Imagine that we have agreed not to use the names of people the police meet, but we can write about what calls they respond to. Imagine that we follow police responding to a domestic violence call and find a woman who's been beaten by her husband, insists on his arrest, and repeats: "This is the last time he'll do this to me." Imagine that she insists that you write down her name and her quote: "I want you to tell the whole world that I called the cops on that bastard. Tell the world what a bastard he is."

We don't know from this encounter whether this woman is experiencing acute traumatic stress, or whether this is an episode taking place in a period of post-traumatic stress. We know it is likely, and from her behavior we can likely infer, that she is experiencing a surge in fight-or-flight chemicals, which convey signals from the brain to the body of life-threatening danger. We also don't know whether police will charge or book her abuser, and we have no information about her or his relationship to neighbors and extended family. So, we lack crucial information for assessing the level of risk that may be brought by the public disclosure she has invited.

We hear affirmation of consent in the words she says, but from this encounter alone we don't have meaningful consent—yet.

#### **4. Meaningful consent requests are repeated.**

It shows respect to confirm your consent again at the end of your interview. It shows professionalism to highlight for your interviewee the parts of the interview you think you're most likely to use—especially

if those pieces could make people feel fear, shame, or regret when they read them in the paper, or see them on TV later.

Magazine writers have long lead times and often have fact-checking processes that reinforce meaningful consent. Spot news journalists have to do this themselves. Very often, we don't. We think we don't have time or, if we're being really truthful, we're afraid someone may second-guess their choice to tell us the "best" parts of the story. In these moments, we should double-down on meaningful consent practice: Our professional training needs not be at odds with trauma-informed ethics.

What does that mean in practice? It means, for example, calling the woman you visited with the police a day or two after the arrest of her abuser to re-confirm her decision about going public with her identity and the violence she suffered. It means reminding her that you were present as a journalist and describing what you witnessed. It means talking to her about how safe she feels, on reflection, about disclosing what happened that night, and about how she thinks about managing the risks of disclosure. And it means removing from the record things you may otherwise permissibly write about quotes, facts, and other information that she may wish you had not seen, heard, or written down.

This is not "whitewashing the truth." This is adapting journalistic practice to findings from neuroscience, biochemistry, and psychology. In those fields, it is well understood that the brain cannot protect the body and simultaneously make abstract

decisions about media disclosure during or in the aftermath of a life-endangering incident.

### 5. Meaningful consent is trauma-informed.

The experience of trauma disorders someone's world—pulls time apart, undoes chronology, and undermines trust of fellow human beings. Ethically sound reporting on violence requires reporters to understand and acknowledge those ruptures by going out of their way not to reinforce or replicate them. This requires understanding and reflecting on the ways that trauma changes our usual professional practice.

In general, the rules of journalism assume that the journalist is a disempowered party. In most journalism, the journalist's work is at odds with the interests of the powerful, to whom the journalist is vulnerable through threats, intimidation, and other forms of influence. “On/off the record,” attribution, and recording, among other rules, have been developed over decades to help empower journalists in their work of holding the powerful accountable. Tools, such as freedom of information laws, press conferences, financial disclosures, and even the very expectation that someone will feel pressure to agree to an interview—all help journalists fulfill the public's right to know. They are a toolkit we use to help us extract information from powerful

people who, for reasons of self-interest, probably don't want to give it to us.

Trauma-informed interviewing is not about extraction. In the aftermath of someone's trauma, the journalist is not

the disempowered party. We are in control of the first, and sometimes the only, representation of someone's life. And that person usually does not have spokespeople, political allies, or rich friends

who can call our editors to denounce our coverage. Reporting on trauma situates us as the powerful party, so we must re-situate our rules by reimagining our practice not as “exposing the truth” but as doing the least harm to the people whose truths we hope to acknowledge, well and sensitively.

Meaningful, or trauma-informed, consent is not about ethics as abstraction. It is about reducing the potential for journalism to cause further harm. Because of how trauma works on the brain and in the body, it can be risky for survivors to talk to journalists. At the same time, talking to good journalists—to journalists who take care around meaningful consent and employ other crucial, trauma-informed tools, like active listening—can bring a sense of comfort to survivors. The ethics of this practice is not only in what we produce in our newspapers or on our airwaves. It's in the process we use to get there.

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*The ethics of this practice is not only in what we produce in our newspapers or on our airwaves. It's in the process we use to get there.*



## 2.2 INTERVIEWING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

Several excellent sets of guidelines on how to conduct interviews with gender-based violence survivors have already been published during the past decade, and particularly since 2018. They are part of the selected resources on gender-based violence reporting cited at the end of this chapter.

The guidelines in this section highlight some of the most important recommendations included in those resources, as well as others gathered by the Center for Women's Global Leadership during its multiple regional consultations with experienced journalists all over the world. They are also meant to reflect the perspectives and principles outlined in the first chapter, which discusses a survivor-centered approach.

### PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

Many of the journalists consulted brought up the constant pressure to identify gender-based violence survivors they can interview, and often without adequate time or preparation. As a result, they all emphasized the importance and beneficial results of research and planning.

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Seek advice of local service providers, community leaders, or relevant NGO representatives to identify and approach survivors who are best prepared to speak out.
- Learn about:
  - › How trauma impacts people
  - › Triggering settings, questions, and language
  - › Cultural- and community-appropriate terminology<sup>1</sup>
- Evaluate safety and security risks.<sup>2</sup>
- Choose the interpreter carefully. Speak with the interpreter ahead of time and explain the subject, interview style and language preferences.
- Accommodate survivors' preferences and needs to determine time and location of the interview, and who else will be present (including a support person for the survivor, if needed).
- Build trust with the interview subject and clarify expectations (especially if the story is expected to improve the survivor's situation). Avoid any appearance of a quid pro quo.
- Especially in cases of sexual abuse/violence, be sensitive to the fact that the survivor may prefer to work with female reporters, photographers, camera crew, interpreters, etc.
- If possible, send questions in advance or share them just before the interview formally starts.
- Ask yourself, is this story in the public interest? Am I holding power to account? Am I reporting on the issue as a whole, broadening public knowledge rather than repeating the details of the violent act alone?

## CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

In its 2017 guide for journalists and editors on gender-based violence reporting, the South African-based organization Sonke Gender Justice formulated the golden rule: 'Do not assume that all survivors are the same, be it in their experience or their reactions.'<sup>3</sup>

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Have an open and honest conversation about consent with the survivor. Make sure you are not unduly pressuring the survivor to take part in the interview against their will, and make sure they are not under outside, coercive pressure.
- Let the survivor know what angle/type of story you are working on, where it will be published, who will be able to access it, and if it will include videos/photos/audio or just text. Remember they can revoke consent at any point.
- Try and have a trauma-trained specialist in the room during the interview, if possible, or a trusted person to the survivor. Emphasis should be placed on the importance of the survivor's safety during the interview.
- Do not rush the interview: Allow time for breaks, silences, and “detours.”
- Start the interview with non-invasive, open questions.
- Ask survivors how they would like to be introduced to readers/viewers.
- Give survivors opportunities to guide the interview by asking questions such as “What would you like people to know about your experience?” or “Is there anything you would like to add?”<sup>4</sup>
- Avoid questions implying that:
  - › The survivor may share the blame for the harm done
  - › You doubt the veracity of her statements or the reliability of her memory
- Avoid interruptions, negative assumptions, or judgmental comments. An interview is not an interrogation!
- Respect boundaries and confidentiality.
- If relevant, include questions about how the survivor's community is addressing (or should address) the issues at stake (such as access to justice and resources).
- Make sure children are not present when discussing traumatic details of a violent event. When the story is published, make sure children are not identified in ways that could be harmful, especially when it comes to photographs and videos.

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- If at all possible, give survivors the opportunity to read or view the results of your interview.
- Be mindful of “jigsaw identification” risks,<sup>5</sup> if any details in your story might allow readers/viewers to identify a survivor protected by anonymity.
- Be prepared to inform survivors about local resources, such as help lines, direct services agencies, or humanitarian organizations.
- When relevant, consider follow up stories, such as survivors seeking justice, a perpetrator’s trial, violence patterns in the community, local efforts to address them, and new laws or policies.
- In cases where survivors are still at risk, monitor the possible impact of your story.

## 2.3 SELECTING EXPERT SOURCES

Human rights and humanitarian organizations, women’s rights advocacy groups, migrant/refugee rights organizations, service providers, and women/gender studies researchers are obvious sources of expertise at the local and country level. Equally helpful are some of the sources compiled by the Global Media Monitoring Project in their global “**Database of Female News Sources**,” appended to their 2015 report: [http://cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports\\_2015/global/gmmp\\_global\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports_2015/global/gmmp_global_report_en.pdf)

This report is available in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. The 2020 report is available from *Whomakethenews.org*, a knowledge, information and resource portal on applied media research.

*Medium* contributor Jemimah Njuki, writing on “How the media must do better in how it covers gender-based violence,”<sup>6</sup> identifies the selection of experts as a top priority: “First, [journalists] must seek experts to help them contextualize and theorize these issues. These experts exist at nongovernmental organizations, research facilities, universities and more.”

Several media critics, however, have been warning journalists against gender biases that lead to the selection of fewer women as expert sources. The *Global Media Monitoring Project 2015* cited above showed that “the percentage of women as persons giving testimony based on direct observation has stood still at 30% over the past 10 years. An insignificant two percentage point increase in women as experts was achieved during the period, leading to the current 19% share, almost similar to women’s proportion as persons interviewed as spokespersons (20%).”<sup>7</sup>

Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, columnists for *The New York Times Interpreter*, wrote eloquently about such gender biases in February 2018:<sup>8</sup>

“We all know we should make an effort to quote more female experts. Women are underrepresented in news coverage – by a ratio of three-to-one, studies consistently show – which both reflects and deepens gender biases in who gets to be considered an authority. Our perch on the international desk, where we write a news column examining global affairs through political and social science, should, in theory, grant us the perfect opportunity to correct this sort of bias.

“But the truth – we are reminded every time we try to quote female experts – is that the gender balance of our articles is only the final step in a process of gender discrimination that begins long before we pick up a phone to begin reporting. We’ve learned to see our role as journalists as important, but also as just the most visible component of a vast social machinery that equates expertise with maleness.”

Adrienne LaFrance, executive editor of *The Atlantic*, had the insight to analyze her own gender biases based on two years of reporting.<sup>9</sup> “In 2013, about 25% of the people I quoted or mentioned were women.” In 2015, that percentage was even down to 22. One of her conclusions was: “Yes, my job is to serve readers by finding the best sources for my stories, but why assume that the best source isn’t a woman? By substantially underrepresenting an entire gender, I’m missing out on all kinds of viewpoints, ideas, and experiences that might otherwise sharpen and enhance my reporting.”

Hence, when it comes to reporting on gender-based violence specifically, identifying and quoting female experts is essential. It furthermore counterbalances the fact that some of the most frequent media sources, such as law enforcement, community leaders and family representatives, tend to be male.

The COVID-19 pandemic also created disinformation challenges for journalists. In October 2020, the International Center for Journalists and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (New York) published the initial results of their survey on the impact of COVID-19 on journalism worldwide.<sup>10</sup> The main findings were related to news sources:

- 46% of journalists who responded identified politicians and elected officials as a top source of disinformation.
- 81% reported encountering disinformation at least weekly
- Respondents picked Facebook as the most prolific disinformation spreader
- Nearly half said sources feared retaliation for speaking to journalists during the pandemic. Those findings may have easily spilled over to reporting on the increased and intensified forms of gender-based violence associated with the pandemic.

## 2.4 SELECTING PLACEMENT, TERMINOLOGY AND HEADLINES

News editors should take into account the importance of placement of gender-based violence stories alongside unrelated images and stories. Layout should ensure that the story placement does not implicate unrelated people featured in the news, nor trivialize the gender-based violence-related story.

Editors who write headlines, teasers and other space-limited display type need to resist the temptation to err on the most salacious side of crimes involving violence against women. Headlines, teasers, subheads and others should:

- Center the focus on victims
- Avoid blaming victims and making the perpetrator appear victimized
- Speak to the crime, rather than the gore

### TIPS FOR EDITORS COMMISSIONING STORIES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE. EDITORS SHOULD:

- Give reporters the time to follow up on stories about gender-based violence
- Learn about trauma-safe interviewing techniques and include these lessons in staff trainings
- Make sure stories on gender-based violence emphasize solutions
- Remember that gender-based violence is rooted in misogyny and patriarchy
- Avoid commissioning stereotypical or derogatory stories about gender-based violence
- Remember that gender-based violence is a human rights violation
- Ask these questions before publication: is this story in the public interest? Is it holding the powerful to account? Am I reporting thematically on an issue, rather than rehashing violent details? Am I protecting anonymity wishes of vulnerable people?
- Allow survivors anonymity in text, photo, and video, as well as ensuring reporters obtain informed consent before carrying out interviews

*Handbook Contributor Jane Gilmore is an Australian freelance journalist and columnist for The Age and Sydney Morning Herald. Her book Fixed It: Violence and the Representation of Women in the Media was published by Viking in 2019.*

BY JANE GILMORE, MARCH 2020

I have been studying and writing about the dangers of distorted journalism regarding men's violence against women for more than five years. I've also been using social media to spread practical examples of how it happens and how easy it is to correct. It's a project I call Fixed It,<sup>11</sup> and it has a reach of hundreds of thousands of people in Australia. It's a simple and extraordinarily effective means of helping media audiences understand what they're reading and notice how often implicit and explicit victim-blaming is embedded in journalism.

In simple terms, the Fixed It project concentrates on demonstrating two consistent flaws in media reporting of violence against women: centering perpetrators as victims or erasing them from the story, and blaming or erasing victims from the story.

Terms such as "jilted lover," "jealous husband" and "troubled marriage," which appear so frequently in media headlines, imply a good man was driven to violence after being wronged by a faithless woman. The context of coercive control or domestic abuse is erased and the responsibility for violence is implicitly shifted to the women's actions, rather than a violent man's

choices. Headlines, such as "Woman Died in House Attack," erase both the perpetrator and the violence, while a more precise head, such as "Ex-Husband Breaks Into Woman's Home To Kill Her," accurately summarizes the story. Similarly, "Loving Dad Dies in Fire With Children," would be corrected to "Man With History of Domestic Violence Murders Ex-Wife and Children."

A common trope in reporting on rape is to confuse the term with sex. Sexual abuse of children is too often referred to in the media as "child sex." Children cannot have "sex" with adults. They do not have the legal or moral capacity to consent, so it cannot be described accurately as "sex." It is rape, child abuse or sexual abuse. Using the words sex and rape interchangeably perpetuates the notion that rape is sex gone wrong, rather than a traumatic and criminal act committed by a perpetrator who chose to inflict violence upon another person. Examples include headlines, such as, "Police Charge Young Male With Illicit Attack on Young Mother," which I corrected to "Man Charged With Attempted Rape of a Woman," and "Drink Was the Downfall of Sex Abuse for Former Carer," which would more accurately have been reported as "Man Found Guilty of Raping Disabled Woman."

Media is the source of most of our information about the crimes violent men commit against women. When such crimes are reported inaccurately and when the reporting perpetuates myths that shift responsibility to the victims, it contributes to encouraging men's violence against women. Enlisting audience support for change is both educative and powerfully effective.



CWGL asked Gilmore to illustrate how she would recommend “fixing” some of the questionable headlines that followed, in the New York area press, the horrific murder of a woman by an abusive husband that she was in the process of divorcing. The man, who decapitated her, also slit the throat of her daughter before hanging himself.

As an example, Gilmore commented that the New York Post, in its Nov. 7, 2019, article<sup>12</sup> “made all the most common mistakes:

- It grouped victim and perpetrator, making his violence invisible
- It sensationalized it with terms like ‘grisly scene’
- It removed the context of domestic violence and made it sound like a stranger broke in to kill them all”

**3 people—including 5-year-old girl—dead in grisly scene in Harlem apartment**

**Man brutally murdered woman and 5yo daughter after making violent threats during divorce**

Clarifying her choice of terms, Gilmore added: “I chose to put the man, the crime, and the context in, and refer to her as a woman, rather than a wife, humanitarian, or mother,” as a number of other newspapers had, since “we are all more than our jobs and our relationships.”<sup>13</sup>

The #GBvinMedia Campaign initiated by the Feminism in India organization, also published an article in 2019<sup>14</sup> on the importance of headlines:

“One of the most glaring problems with how the media reports gender-based violence is its use of sensationalist headlines. ... While it is important to draw attention to cases of rape and gender-based violence, it is equally important not to turn a grievous crime into a media circus—something that begins to resemble entertainment.

“Sensationalist headlines tend to provoke the reader, highlighting the case’s “unusualness” and creating a spectacle out of the crime. They highlight the most barbaric aspects of the crime, and frame it in a way that is designed to inspire shock, horror and disgust. The perpetrator/s are characterised as monsters—outliers of society.

“ ... The solution to gender-based violence has to come from a systemic overhaul of society, not by focusing on the barbarism of a single case.”

“”

*The solution to gender-based violence has to come from a systemic overhaul of society, not by focusing on the barbarism of a single case.*

## 2.5 SELECTING PHOTOS AND GRAPHICS

Photo and layout editors should be involved in pre-interview planning, when possible. Photo editors:

- Need to be told of any ground rules agreed to by reporters concerning use of images and identity of survivors
- Need to know context for use of images
- Need to know whether the package is embargoed

The tension in gender-based violence work can result from expectations (whether on the part of journalists, photographers, or editors) about what survivors of violence should share. For too long, graphic photos and descriptions of violence have been the defining ways to cover gender-based violence, often to the detriment of the survivors. All work on gender-based violence, from selecting sources to conducting interviews to choosing photos and graphics, laying out the news and writing headlines should center the survivors' experience and respect their wishes, fears, and dreams.

In discussing the criteria for selecting photos and graphics, we should reflect on gender equality in photojournalism. As Daniella Zalcman, the founder of Women Photograph,<sup>15</sup> noted in a 2019 article,<sup>16</sup> “Anecdotally, we know that **roughly 15% to 20% of working photojournalists are women.**” To achieve equal representation, a world in which we don't view most news photos through men's eyes, requires that we hire more women and nonbinary photographers. Selecting images and graphics is often a long-term process involving an editor and a photographer or illustrator. The process requires that all parties consider the safety of survivors of violence to be paramount.

Those selecting photos and graphics should be aware of the laws in the region or country where they are publishing and make choices that will respect each survivor's right to safety and privacy.

During an interview<sup>17</sup> about her work in India for *National Geographic Magazine*,<sup>18</sup> photojournalist Smita Sharma discussed the importance of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, a comprehensive law passed in 2012 to protect children from sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography. The law also prohibits media outlets from publishing photos of minors who have survived violence.

In that September 2020 piece, Sharma wanted to capture the trafficked girls' personality and individuality, to focus on their humanity while hiding their faces. To achieve that, she explained, “I used, technically speaking, a lot of different types of lighting to accentuate certain parts of their personality when photographing them while hiding their identity. I told them I would hide their



*Trafficked in West Bengal (India): When she was 12, S. left her home in Narayanganj, Bangladesh, with a family acquaintance who promised to find her a job in Dhaka. She was handed over to a man who trafficked her to West Bengal, then sold her to a brothel in Mumbai (India). S. was enslaved for two years before police freed her and sent her to a shelter. Six*

*months later she met a woman who said she'd take S. back to Bangladesh but instead sold her to a brothel in Namkhana, a small town in West Bengal. After she was rescued again, S. has been staying at a shelter and waiting for her repatriation.*

© Smita Sharma

names and faces. I showed them the photos.” In Sharma’s portrait featured here, a halo of light emanates from behind the girl, identified as “S.” Her face lost in shadow, ensuring that no identifying features are visible. Even though we can’t see the girl’s face, the photo captures details that elicit emotion and tenderness.

Beyond not showing the girls’ faces, Sharma also had to be sure not to reveal any information that could lead to their identification. To respect anonymity in photography means thinking about identifying information, including scars, tattoos, clothing, and location, which could put a survivor of violence at risk of future shaming or violence. “For example,” she said in an interview for this Handbook, “if you are taking a photo of a house, you don’t want people to know the location.”

While working on the Human Rights Watch 2017 project on sexual violence by armed groups in the Central African Republic,<sup>19</sup> Sharma photographed female survivors of violence, who thought people might be able to identify them by their clothing. Part of centering the voices of survivors of violence means respecting their concerns. So, Sharma sent her fixer to the market to buy fabric and safety pins. The women wore fabrics from the market in Sharma’s portraits.

“It is not just the act of taking the camera and making the portrait,” she said. “It is much more than that.”

Every survivor of violence will have different fears and, as journalists, it is part of our ethical obligations to respect the trust they have placed in us and find creative solutions to put those fears to rest, and protect them, if possible, from further trauma.

Selecting photos and graphics also involves reviewing captions to make sure they respect the survivor of violence. For example, in her captions, Sharma identified the survivor only by her initial, allowing her to remain anonymous. She includes information about how the girl was trafficked into sex slavery but does not name individuals, nor provide details that could lead to people identifying the girl. Sharma does not describe explicit violence, nor use sensationalist or emotional terms when talking about the survivor.

In an October 2020 interview with the Photo Ethics Podcast,<sup>20</sup> Sharma discussed her work with survivors of violence:

“I did not ask them, ‘How were you raped?’ I think that is really wrong and very insensitive,” she said. “It takes time to work on something sensitive and something which is so difficult. And you don’t want to revictimize them by asking them difficult questions. I like to give them time, and I set it up for them to narrate what happened to them if they want to. It is their choice. Because I talk to them just as a human being. I share my own stories with them.”

## 2.6 RESOURCES

### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE REPORTING GUIDES FOR JOURNALISTS

The following resources have been selected and annotated to provide journalists with easy access to recommended reporting practices, some of them tailored to specific gender-based violence issues or cultural contexts. They are alphabetized under the name of the organization, institution, or agency that produced them.

#### ***Noticias que salvan vidas: Manual periodístico para el abordaje de la violencia contra las mujeres***

(News That Saves Lives: Journalism Manual for Covering Violence Against Women)

Amnesty International Argentina (2009), 71 pages

Adapted by Silvina Molina

Available in Spanish only

[https://amnistia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2018/09/Amnistia\\_Internacional\\_manualviolenciacontramujeres-1.pdf](https://amnistia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2018/09/Amnistia_Internacional_manualviolenciacontramujeres-1.pdf)

Includes detailed section on interviewing practices and a glossary.

#### ***Guideline on Gender Equality and Violence Against Women for Armenian Journalists and Media Workers***

Council of Europe (2020), 34 pages

Author: Iliana Balabanova

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/-/how-to-report-on-violence-against-women-in-the-media-guideline-for-armenian-journalists-and-media-professionals>

### ***Reporting on Sexual Violence***

Dart Centre Europe (2011), 2 pages

[https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/sexual%20violence%20tipsheet\\_final\\_27.08.11.pdf](https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/sexual%20violence%20tipsheet_final_27.08.11.pdf)

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Columbia University Journalism School, New York) also has an extensive library of online resources, especially for covering sexual assault, including on university campuses:

<https://dartcenter.org/resources?keyword=covering%20sexual%20assault>

### ***Reporting on Sexual Violence in Conflict***

Dart Centre Europe (2021)

<https://www.coveringcrsv.org/resources/>

A standard-setting tool for in-depth reporting.

### ***Reporting on Gender-Based Violence: A Guide for Journalists***

Equal Press (2020), 64 pages

<http://equalpress.ca/guidebook/>

Equal Press is a Canadian initiative that seeks to address how local news media represents gender-based violence. The guide focuses on marginalized communities (Indigenous, LGBTQ, migrants, and people with disabilities) It also includes sections on language and terminology, and a glossary.

### ***Use the Right Words: Media Reporting on Sexual Violence in Canada***

Femifesto (2015), 54 pages

<https://www.femifesto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/UseTheRight-Words-Single-Dec3.pdf>

Femifesto is a Toronto-based feminist organization. Its guide features practical checklists on terminology, frameworks and imagery, as well as tips on interviewing survivors.

***Gender-Based Violence in Media: A Media Ethics Toolkit on Sensitive Reportage***

Feminism in India (2019), 34 pages

Lead researcher: Asmita Ghosh

[https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/GBVInMedia\\_Report\\_FII.pdf](https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/GBVInMedia_Report_FII.pdf)

The toolkit focuses on sexual violence and rape culture. It addresses issues of victim blaming, and perpetrator portrayals.

***Resources for Women Journalists***

Global Investigative Journalism Network

<https://gijn.org/resources-for-women-journalists>

***Reporting Gender-Based Violence: A Handbook for Journalists***

Inter Press Service Africa (2009), 76 pages

Editor: Kudzai Makombe

Available in English and French

[http://www.ipsnews.net/publications/ips\\_reporting\\_gender\\_based\\_violence.pdf](http://www.ipsnews.net/publications/ips_reporting_gender_based_violence.pdf)

Covered topics include harmful practices, femicide, sex work and trafficking, gender-based violence in armed conflict, gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. The handbook features best practices along with sample news articles.

***Reporting on Gender-Based Violence: A Guide for Journalists and Editors***

Sonke Gender Justice and Health E-News, South Africa (2018, 2nd edition), 56 pages

Author: Marike Keller

<https://genderjustice.org.za/publication/reporting-gender-based-violence/>

The guide includes detailed dos and don'ts on language and interviewing practices, as well as appendices on referrals and codes of ethics/conduct in South African print and online media.

***Reporting on Violence Against Women and Girls: A Handbook for Journalists***

UNESCO (2019), 152 pages

Author: Anne-Marie Impe

Available in English and French

<https://en.unesco.org/news/reporting-violence-against-women-and-girls-unesco-launches-new-publication>

The first part of the handbook covers 10 thematic areas, including several harmful practices, trafficking, and online harassment of women journalists. The second part makes recommendations about how those topics should be addressed, framed, and covered.

***Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: A Journalist's Handbook***

UNFPA (2020), 35 pages

Available in Arabic and English

<https://www.unfpa.org/reporting-gbv-humanitarian-settings>

According to UNFPA, “the second edition of this handbook, originally launched in 2015, incorporates insights gained from training programmes and consultations organized with journalists in the Arab States region over the past five years.”

***Gender-Based Violence, Media and Communications***

UNICEF (2018), 7 pages

<https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2019-11/GBV%2C%20Media%20and%20Communications%20-%20Helpdesk.pdf>

Excellent annotated bibliography on reporting on gender-based violence against women and girls



***WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women***

World Health Organization and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2003)

Authors: Cathy Zimmerman and Charlotte Watts

[https://www.who.int/mip/2003/other\\_documents/en/Ethical\\_Safety-GWH.pdf](https://www.who.int/mip/2003/other_documents/en/Ethical_Safety-GWH.pdf)

These detailed recommendations about risks assessment, interviewing steps, and issues of confidentiality and consent were prepared for researchers, policymakers and service providers, as well as media professionals.

***Conducting Safe, Effective and Ethical Interviews with Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence***

WITNESS (2013), 14 pages

[https://gbv.witness.org/portfolio\\_page/conducting-safe-effective-and-ethical-interviews/](https://gbv.witness.org/portfolio_page/conducting-safe-effective-and-ethical-interviews/)

Available in Arabic, English, French, Shona, Spanish, Swahili, Xhosa, and Zulu.

WITNESS is an international human rights nonprofit organization that produces the Video for Change how-to series on filming safely, effectively and ethically. This practical guide, prepared for human rights advocates and journalists, is based on the “Do no harm” principle.

***Media Guidelines on Violence Against Women***

Zero Tolerance (2019), 32 pages

<https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Media-Guidelines-on-Violence-Against-Women.pdf>

Originally produced in 2011 by the Scottish charity Zero Tolerance, these updated guidelines focus on five forms of gender-based violence: rape and sexual assault, domestic abuse, harmful practices, commercial sexual exploitation, and online abuse.

## **TRAUMA-INFORMED BEST PRACTICES**

The following set of resources features best practices and standards that address trauma-informed interviewing more broadly. Their recommendations, however, are fully applicable to the field of gender-based violence reporting.

### ***Why Should I Tell You? A Guide to Less-Extractive Reporting***

Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA (2019), 20 pages

Author: Natalie Yahr

<https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/why-should-i-tell-you-a-guide-to-less-extractive-reporting/>

### ***Trauma and Journalism: A Guide for Journalists, Editors, and Managers***

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2007), 31 pages

Compiled and edited by Mark Brayne

<https://dartcenter.org/content/trauma-journalism-handbook>

### ***Covering Trauma: A Training Guide***

Search for Common Ground and Radio for Peacebuilding (2011), 21 pages

Author: Jina Moore

[https://www.sfcg.org/programmes/rfpa/pdf/2011-Covering\\_Trauma\\_Color\\_EN.pdf](https://www.sfcg.org/programmes/rfpa/pdf/2011-Covering_Trauma_Color_EN.pdf)

## REPORTING ON CHILDREN

Finally, it is important to be aware of resources that are specifically designed to help media professionals deal with children's rights issues and underage survivors of gender-based violence.

### ***The Media and Children's Rights***

Produced by MediaWise for UNICEF (2010, 3rd edition), 60 pages

<http://www.mediawise.org.uk/children/the-media-and-childrens-rights/>

### ***Guidelines for Journalists Reporting on Children: Principles and Guidelines***

UNICEF Europe and Central Asia

<https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/ethical-guidelines>

### ***Ethical Guidelines for Journalists***

United Nations Communications Group (UNCG), Afghanistan (2016) – 16 pages

[https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/2136/file/afg-publication\\_UN%20Ethical%20Guidelines%20for%20Journalists%20-%20English.pdf%20.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/2136/file/afg-publication_UN%20Ethical%20Guidelines%20for%20Journalists%20-%20English.pdf%20.pdf)

This publication has a special focus on reporting on children.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Canadian Equal Press guide focuses in part on such best practices: Equal Press (2020). *Reporting on gender-based violence: A guide for journalists*. Vancouver, British Columbia. Retrieved on Nov. 20, 2020, from [http://equal-press.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EP\\_Guidebook.pdf](http://equal-press.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EP_Guidebook.pdf)
- 2 As a recommended example of best practice, see The WITNESS Video for Change guide (p. 3): WITNESS (2013). *Conducting safe, effective and ethical interviews with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence*. Brooklyn, New York (USA). Retrieved on Nov. 20, 2020, from [https://gbv.witness.org/portfolio\\_page/conducting-safe-effective-and-ethical-interviews/](https://gbv.witness.org/portfolio_page/conducting-safe-effective-and-ethical-interviews/)
- 3 Sonke Gender Justice (2018). *Reporting on gender-based violence: A guide for journalists and editors* (p. 21). Cape Town, South Africa. Retrieved on Nov. 20, 2020, from <https://genderjustice.org.za/publication/reporting-gender-based-violence/>
- 4 For sample questions to ask survivors in an interview see, among others, Femifesto (2015): *Use the right words: Media reporting on sexual violence in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario. Retrieved on Nov. 20, 2020, from <https://www.femifesto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/UseTheRightWords-Single-Dec3.pdf>
- 5 Bould, S. (2011, September 20). *Editors warned over “jigsaw identification” in sex cases*. Hold-theFrontPage (United Kingdom). Retrieved on Nov. 20, 2020 from <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2011/news/press-watchdog-issues-reminder-about-sex-cases/>
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A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE  
NEEDS TO REPLACE CULTURALLY-TINTED  
LANGUAGE IN REPORTING INCIDENTS  
OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.

*Yakin Ertürk*

## CHAPTER 3

# The Human Rights Approach

The human rights perspective and resources introduced in this chapter are meant to help journalists contextualize acts of violence by exposing, among others, root causes and risk factors, as well as patterns that can be addressed through prevention and redress.

The terms “violence against women” and “gender-based violence” are often used interchangeably, including in media narratives. For the first time in the international human rights arena, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of violence against women (1993), stipulated that violence against women “means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological

harm or suffering to women.” This definition allows a focus on both the gendered roots and manifestations of this type of violence.

Gender-based violence can be directed at any person because of their gender. However, because it predominantly targets women and girls, it is often used synonymously with violence against women. In the interest of precision, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Committee later recommended using “gender-based violence against women.”

Gender-based violence, rooted in gender inequality, is a severe form of discrimination to the extent that it affects women disproportionately and denies its victims the enjoyment of their fundamental human rights. Women who experience intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization are especially at risk, for instance, as violence against lesbian and transgender women and/or against Indigenous women often shows. Similarly, a wide range of harmful practices are human rights violations anchored in discriminatory social norms.



### 3.1 MEDIA COVERAGE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

*Handbook contributor Yakin Ertürk, is a retired professor of sociology and former UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women (2003 – 2009).*

BY YAKIN ERTURK, APRIL 2018

#### Introduction

Women’s role as newsmakers in the traditional media (newspapers, radio, and television) has shown a slow increase over the years. Underrepresentation of women in newsrooms and in media decision-making importantly affects the type of information that is conveyed as news and what messages are given, as well as how subjects get portrayed.

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action<sup>1</sup> identified “Women and the Media” as a priority area for women’s empowerment and called for balanced and nonstereotyped reporting of women and related matters. Developments in this regard, however, have lagged behind the attention other critical areas of concern received over the years. While the slow increase of women’s representation in the media may account for this relative neglect, power and market dynamics of the media world itself may be major contributing factors.

Growing concern about violence against women as a human rights violation and a public policy issue has turned renewed attention to the role of media in shaping public opinion about gender issues. Sexual brutalization of women,

sensationalized news articles about the violence and portrayal of women as “sexual objects” in advertisements continue to be marketable commodities that reinforce gendered discrimination. Changing these tendencies – and ensuring that the media plays a constructive role in challenging gender inequality and discrimination in society – requires not only increasing women’s representation in the sector, but also sensitizing it with gender-competent standards and guidelines. The Journalism Initiative undertaken by Rutgers’s Center for Women’s Global Leadership is a response to this need.

#### International Normative Framework on Gender-Based Violence Against Women

The entry of violence against women into the realm of international policy and law broke the silence around violence, gave it visibility, and brought the taken-for-granted values, truths and practices of everyday life – whether in intimate relationships or within institutions – under scrutiny. Thus, as the global women’s human rights advocacy gained momentum, the issue of Violence against Women came out from the private to the public domain, at the national and international level, and attracted increasing media coverage, although biased and distorted at times.

This development has been contentious and problematic both at the official level, as well as within the women’s movement.

Those critical of the universal human rights paradigm argued that, by focusing on Violence against Women, the global women's movement has reinforced the victimization image of women, particularly those in the global south, and entrapped them into a victim-subject identity. Selective coverage in the media often reinforced those perceptions.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the controversies, the struggle to end violence appealed to women around the world more so than any other international gender agenda. It has challenged the conventional human rights paradigm (demystifying the public/private dichotomy); transformed state doctrine (from do no harm to prevent harm, i.e., negative responsibility to positive responsibility), and contributed to the criminal justice system with new classifications of crimes (such as domestic violence, marital rape, and stalking, just to count a few). This broadened understanding of human rights with Violence against Women at its center also broadened the concept of due diligence, mandating states and other actors, including the media, to change the rules by which they do business.

Both customary and conventional international law establish that states have due diligence obligations for preventing, responding to, protecting from, and providing remedies for acts of Violence against Women, irrespective of who the perpetrator is. In my capacity as the

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*The prevention principle of the due diligence standard can be a useful framework for journalists in developing gender competent reporting guidelines.*

Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in 2006, I submitted a report<sup>2</sup> to the Human Rights Commission on the current application of the due diligence standard and concluded that the standard is not fully explored, particularly in terms of the prevention principle. If applied properly, it can be an effective tool in bringing about the necessary social change for the eradication of Violence against Women. While the due diligence standard is advanced as a state obligation, civil actors are

increasingly utilizing it in their work. In this respect particularly, the prevention principle of the due diligence standard can be a useful framework for journalists in developing gender competent reporting guidelines.

### **Moving Beyond Law and Order and Common Biases**

Having the right policies and laws in place is, no doubt, of paramount importance in the promotion and protection of rights. The existing normative framework at the international level is fairly comprehensive for the prevention of Violence against Women. The present shortcomings lie particularly in: the lack of commitment and political will to respect women's human rights; inadequacy of human rights monitoring and follow-up mechanisms, and a narrow understanding of Violence against Women, which reduces the problem to, among others, “poor victims,” “deviant men,” “misogynous cultures,” and “harmful traditional practices.”

The latter is often the source of selective and biased reporting. It must be borne in mind that different forms of Violence against Women are merely distinguishable in terms of HOW; the underlying WHY is often common, i.e., unequal patriarchal gender structures. A crime of

passion, which may be perceived as an individual and isolated act, and receives a few lines on the third page of a newspaper, and the culturally defined “honor crimes,” which are often featured

as a top story, are in fact one and the same in terms of sustaining a system of patriarchal consent and women’s subordination.

Violence against Women is not about numbers but about systematic and structural inequality that breeds violence to preserve male privilege and power. In other words, women experience violence not only disproportionately but also systematically, with the aim to ensure that they stay in their place. Violence against Women is a tool of patriarchal control, whether in the home or work, whether in the West or East, whether during peace or war.

Violence against Women is a continuum. Different spheres (public/private) and contexts (war/peace) where violence

takes place are interrelated and intersectional with alternative systems of domination (patriarchy, class, ethnicity, etc.). Thus, there are multiple layers of subordination and risks of violence for different groups of women.

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*A human rights perspective needs to replace culturally-tinted language in reporting incidents of violence against women.*

Violence against Women is a violation of basic rights within the context of established power relations, often condoned by the state and society. Many of the forms of abuse that women

experience in the name of privacy of the home, or harmful traditional practices, would amount to torture and inhumane treatment punishable under international and national law, if they were to occur in public institutions. Therefore, a human rights perspective needs to replace culturally-tinted language in reporting incidents of Violence against Women.

Last but not least, the understanding of normality masks our perception. We tend to see and respond to forms of abuse that are different from what we are accustomed to—the exotic as opposed to the ordinary. This not only reinforces the process of “othering,” but it also normalizes and obscures the abuses inherent to our own way of life.

## 3.2 THE HUMAN RIGHTS CONTEXT

### 3.2.1 BEHIND ACTS OF VIOLENCE

Eradication of gender-based violence, in all its manifestations, hinges on awareness that it violates a wide range of human rights and can never be accepted as normal. Such violations should not be reported as private, isolated, accidental, justifiable, or unavoidable occurrences.

Many forms of violence constitute crimes that need to be prevented and prosecuted. Vulnerability to gender-based violence is not an inherent characteristic of women's lives, but it often results from deeply rooted and interconnected factors.

The purpose of the following classification is to highlight the multiplicity of factors potentially leading to gender-based violence so that journalists can better put news stories into context and connect them, whenever appropriate, to related issues and situations in the affected community. Referring to systemic causes may also allow the audience to discern broader patterns of abuse.

None of the following lists are meant to be exhaustive.

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## WHAT LEADS TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

### Root causes

- Historical and structural inequality
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Social norms and cultural prejudices
- Sex and gender stereotyping
- Misogyny
- Colonialism
- Slavery
- Patriarchal culture
- Social and economic marginalization, and systems of disenfranchisement
- Caste systems
- Normalization of violence
- Systemic impunity and abuses of power e.g. by the state, law enforcement and in prisons

### Conducive contexts<sup>3</sup>

Here are key examples of specific contexts/situations that increase the vulnerability of women:

- Armed conflicts
- Exposure to violence
- Humanitarian crises
- Economic insecurity/deepening poverty
- Lack of state accountability
- Discriminatory law enforcement
- Political unrest and backlash
- Natural and ecological disasters
- Pandemics
- Displacement and migration
- Drug-related violence
- Detention
- Geographical remoteness
- Abusive domestic settings

### Contributing factors

As an extreme form of discrimination, gender-based violence is often linked to a wide range of causal or risk factors that contribute to its prevalence and severity. These factors include:

- Race or ethnicity
  - Class
  - Indigenous or minority status
  - Immigration status
  - Statelessness
  - Homelessness
  - Marital and/or maternal status
  - Language
  - Age
  - Economic status
  - Health status
  - Pregnancy
  - Type of employment
  - Place of work
  - Religious or political affiliation
  - Sexual orientation or gender identity
  - Disability
  - Education level
-

### 3.2.2 INTERSECTIONAL VIOLENCE

The variety of root causes and factors point not only to how they can aggravate gendered differences in the enjoyment of human rights, but how they rarely contribute in isolation to acts of violence. Many factors can also be both a cause and a consequence of such acts: a woman victimized because of her marginalization, for instance, can be further ostracized after being raped.

In 2009, the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights published a 15-year review of the work of the initial two Special Rapporteurs on violence against women. “Intersectionality of discrimination and continuum of violence” were identified in the review as one of the main conceptual gains over that period of time:

“Multiple layers of discrimination combine to heighten the vulnerability of women and their experience of violence and most typically result in a continuous chain of violence for marginalized women. This marks a departure from the flat narratives of gender-based violence that tend to homogenize the diverse experiences of women, as well as from approaches that tend to fragment the experience of each individual woman.”<sup>4</sup> Although referring to a human rights analysis, this observation fully applies to media narratives that overlook the complexity of intersecting forms of violence.

Feminist research has played a key role in developing the intersectionality concept and applying it to specific fields, such as media monitoring and reporting. In 2019, for instance, the organization Feminism in India published *Gender-Based Violence in Media: A Media Ethics Toolkit on Sensitive Reportage*. Intersectionality is one of the key highlighted concepts:

“In a society as pluralistic as India, women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence is often not only due to their gender, but other marginalizations like caste, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, disability, etc., which intersect in complex ways. ... Dalit women, transgender women and women with disabilities, for example, face a much higher proportion of sexual violence than able-bodied, dominant caste, cisgender women.”<sup>5</sup>

In an article<sup>6</sup> published by *The Conversation*, a nonprofit news site, on the anniversary of the Dec. 9, 1989, Montreal massacre, feminist scholar Yasmin Jiwani writes about gender-based violence in Canada:

“Power dynamics also adversely affect women: class, religion, age, sexuality and ability impact vulnerability to violence. ... The violence Indigenous women experience is rooted in colonialism, during which time they were sexually exploited by traders, colonial agents and miners. These relations of power still persist and influence how Indigenous women are perceived negatively and as disposable others. It is these intersections between gender, religion, sexuality, indigeneity and other aspects of identity that put specific groups of women at increased risk of violence.”

The “erasure” of some minority women is an especially acute form of intersectional discrimination and violence. The following examples illustrate how statistics and unidimensional reports or stories can exclude the experiences of women victimized on the grounds of multiple identities.

### “The erasure of Romani women” in Europe and intersectional violence

“The conceptualization of race and gender as separate and even unrelated categories has perpetuated the marginalization of Romani women,” wrote essayist and human rights lawyer Alexandra Oprea. “Race and gender do not exist in isolation. Minority women often experience multiple forms of discrimination as a result of race and gender ... For Romani women, multiple discrimination translates into high illiteracy rates, few employment opportunities, poor physical and psychological health, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence.”<sup>7</sup>

In her essay, Oprea cites the example of a report on the status of women’s rights in Romania in which “there is no mention of the race-related barriers that prohibit many Romani women from escaping domestic violence. One such barrier is the fear of police brutality directed against Roma which can deter them from reporting domestic violence to the police. Another topic not dealt with in the one-dimensional analysis is Romani women’s reluctance to report domestic violence for fear of reinforcing dominant stereotypes of the ‘violent Romani man.’”<sup>8</sup>

### The erasure of transgender women of color in the United States

The mic.com news site in the United States features the series and database *Unerased: Counting transgender lives*.<sup>9</sup> Its “analysis of transgender homicide cases from 2010 onward provides ample evidence that violence against trans people is an intersectional problem, exacerbated not just by race and gender but also by poverty stemming from discrimination,” according to its website.

The site highlights the case of Aryah Lester, a black trans woman from Miami who describes living with the constant risk of violence:

“I tell people that I already have three strikes. As I’m walking down the street from far, far away, you may only see my color, and that’s one strike. And then as I come a little closer, you see my femininity, and that’s another strike ... And then when I get closer you may just see that I’m trans.”<sup>10</sup>

In an article by Rick Rojas and Vanessa Swales,<sup>11</sup> *The New York Times* referred in September 2019 to a possible “epidemic” of killings of transgender women of color, detailing the multiplicity of factors that lead to such bias crimes. The article included a quote by the Human Rights Campaign’s Sarah McBride that best characterized this intersectional violence: “The prejudices don’t add upon one another, they multiply upon one another.”

### 3.3 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AS A FORM OF TORTURE

Some international human rights instruments introduced later in this chapter provide accountability criteria and tools for dealing with gender-based violence that amounts to torture.

“Classifying an act as ‘torture’ carries a considerable additional stigma for the State and reinforces legal implications, which include the strong obligation to criminalize acts of torture, to bring perpetrators to justice and to provide reparation to victims,”<sup>12</sup> according to a 2008 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture.

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*The prejudices don’t add upon one another, they multiply upon one another.*

The following examples illustrate how a human rights framework can inform journalists’ choices of terminology, and story angles.

#### Domestic violence

“Under international law, and regardless of questions of State responsibility and of individual criminal culpability ... domestic violence always amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and very often to physical or psychological torture,”<sup>13</sup> the UN Rapporteur on torture wrote in 2019. This human rights lens can serve journalists in providing a wider framework for their audience to understand the severity of incidents, or patterns of domestic violence.

#### Asylum

The classification of an act as torture can also benefit women who seek asylum on grounds of past or feared gender-based persecution. However, immigration laws, policies and practices do not always comply with the universal right to asylum. A March 2020 investigation by *BuzzFeed* reporter Adolfo Flores<sup>14</sup> described the case of a Guatemalan woman who, before being allowed into the U.S., failed several non-refoulement interviews, even though she had been assaulted and tortured with acid. Many such asylum claims, unfortunately, often go unreported.

#### Sexual violence

At the end of 2018, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights published two key decisions holding Mexico and Venezuela accountable for gender-based violence amounting to torture. The Court concluded that the victims of sexual violence actually suffered torture due to the presence of intent, severe physical and mental suffering, and the purpose to discriminate on the basis of gender. Reporting on the landmark case known as the Women of Atenco, who were brutalized by the Mexican police, multimedia National Public Radio journalist José Olivares highlighted the testimony of flower vendor Norma Jiménez Osorio:



“Sexual torture destroys lives, destroys families and entire communities. ... The surviving victims have had to rebuild themselves, alone. But we cannot forget the state was responsible. It is important to sanction everyone responsible for these events. We are not requesting anything extraordinary. We are looking for the truth; we are looking for justice. And we want certainty that this will not be repeated.”<sup>15</sup>

While focusing on the perspective of survivors, this reporting also ensures that the human rights dimension of the story (an international court rendering a decision based on the recognition of gender-based violence as a means of torture) helps readers understand the importance of redress and accountability.

### 3.4 HARMFUL PRACTICES

The criteria for determining which forms of gender-based violence fall under this umbrella have evolved over time. The human rights framework, at the international and regional levels, provides definitions and analyses that can guide journalists with terminology and explanatory choices. Whether deeply rooted in discrimination, or emerging from social or cultural norms and expectations, harmful practices occur across all regions of the world.

The main human rights reference, in this area, is the 2014 **Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices**. Key statements of this UN document are excerpted here:

#### UN RECOMMENDATIONS ON HARMFUL PRACTICES

“Harmful practices are persistent practices and forms of behavior that are grounded in discrimination on the basis of, among other things, sex, gender and age, in addition to multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering. The harm that such practices cause to the victims surpasses the immediate physical and mental consequences and often has the purpose or effect of impairing the recognition, enjoyment and exercise of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and children [par. 15].

“Harmful practices are deeply rooted in social attitudes according to which women and girls are regarded as inferior to men and boys based on stereotyped roles. They also highlight the gender dimension of violence and indicate that sex- and gender-based attitudes and stereotypes, power imbalances, inequalities and discrimination perpetuate the widespread existence of practices that often involve violence and coercion [par. 6].

“Harmful practices are endemic to a wide variety of communities in most countries. Some are also found in regions or countries in which they had not been previously documented, primarily owing to migration, whereas, in other countries where such practices have disappeared they are now re-emerging as a result of such factors as conflict situations.” [par. 8]

Prevalent practices that receive significant international media coverage in some countries but not in others include **early and forced marriages; female genital mutilation/cutting; son preference and female**

**infanticide; dowry murders, and polygamy.** However, there is a wide range of other practices carried out without consent that impact the dignity and health of women and girls, and can lead to equally severe suffering.

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### **OTHER HARMFUL PRACTICES**

- Harmful practices to protect girls from pregnancy or sexual violence (e.g., breast ironing)
  - Harmful sexual initiation rites
  - Harmful practices related to child delivery
  - Virginity testing
  - Forced abortions
  - Mercy killings
  - Menstruation-related violence
  - Body modifications performed for beauty or marriageability purposes (e.g., neck elongation)
  - Beauty practices to comply with social norms or sexual fetishes (e.g., some forms of cosmetic surgery)
  - Harmful widowhood practices/rituals
  - Witch burning
  - Acid attacks
  - Stove burning
  - Food taboos and deprivation
- 

Regardless of their origin, justification or characteristics, those harmful practices can be described as violations of any or all of the following rights: to life, health, physical integrity, dignity, and security, as well as the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Under human rights frameworks, they are not to be normalized, condoned, or accepted whether in the name of religion, culture, custom, or tradition.

## HOW TO AVOID MISLEADING NARRATIVES

The media should consider referring to:

- Opposition to these practices *within* the countries/regions where they currently exist. A 2013 UNICEF study,<sup>16</sup> for instance, showed that a majority of women and girls in 19 African countries believed that FGM should end. UNICEF data from 2018 show that over 3,000 communities in 17 countries had “participated in a public declaration of support for the abandonment of FGM.”<sup>17</sup>
- Local or national advocacy for the elimination of harmful practices, as well as positive changes achieved through legislative reforms and community organizing efforts, including prevention initiatives.
- The specific role of journalists whose reporting and courage have contributed to the condemnation and even banning of harmful practices in their respective countries, such as:
  - › **Mae Azango** (of *FrontPage Africa*, Liberia), whose coverage of female genital mutilation led some government officials and traditional leaders to denounce the practice.<sup>18</sup>
  - › **Rana Husseini** (of *The Jordan Times*) whose investigations of so-called honor crimes have been credited for Jordan’s legal changes regarding the punishment of perpetrators.<sup>19</sup>
  - › **Chi Yvonne Leina**, a Cameroonian journalist who broke the story about breast ironing, a practice used to prevent girls from attracting men at an early age.<sup>20</sup>
- Lesser known harmful practices that constitute equally severe forms of women’s rights violations. Discrimination and violence against menstruating women, for instance, have been the subject of noteworthy reporting on the impact of harmful taboos and rituals in both Nepal<sup>21</sup> and Zimbabwe.<sup>22</sup>

## UNDERREPORTED OR MISREPORTED ISSUES

Journalists working for Western media may wish to offer perspective in reporting:

- Discriminatory and harmful practices that are often labeled as “foreign” may exist domestically without the knowledge of the general population: As an example, few people know about child marriages in the United States. More than half the states have no minimum age for marriage, and between 2000 and 2015, over 200,000 minors were married in the U.S.<sup>23</sup>
- Refugees and immigrants, once established in their host region, often continue to follow practices from their native countries. In the U.S., for instance, a 2016 study (2010–2013 data)<sup>24</sup> estimated that over 500,000 girls were either victims or at risk of FGM. As of summer 2020, 12 states still had no laws to ban the practice. Similarly, breast ironing, a spreading practice in the United Kingdom, is accepted as a “cultural practice,” instead of prosecuted as a form of child abuse.<sup>25</sup>
- An increasing number of women are seeking political asylum on grounds that they would risk gender-based persecution, if returned to a country where such practices occur. Their plight, when denied asylum, often goes unreported.
- The phrases ‘honor killing’ and ‘honor crime’ should be avoided without caveats or further explanations. Author and attorney Rafia Zakaria makes the point that the term “would never be attached to any of the thousands of white-on-white cases of intimate partner violence.” Despite the fact that intimate partner violence and so-called honor crimes “are iterations of the same forces of patriarchal dominance.”<sup>26</sup>
- Practices that are often identified with “cultural traditions” in developing countries may take different forms in the West.<sup>27</sup> They may be “self-inflicted,” especially in the area of “beauty practices” involving dietary or surgical harm, but such practices are often still related to the perpetuation of male dominance-driven stereotypes and expectations.

### 3.5 WOMEN AT INCREASED RISK OF VIOLENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the importance of reporting through a human rights lens on the gendered aspects of its impact, both for the general public and those who have managed the crisis response.

In April 2020, the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls stated:

“As governments attempt to tackle the unprecedented public health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are deeply concerned that women and girls are suffering even more egregious violations of their human rights. ... The dramatic increase in women’s caregiving responsibilities, the rise in what was already an epidemic of sexual and domestic violence, the continued feminization of poverty, the proliferation of barriers to healthcare, especially pregnancy-related health care, will profoundly jeopardize women’s safety and well-being, economic security, and participation in political and public life, both during and after the pandemic.”<sup>28</sup>

The UNFPA State of World Population 2020 report – available at <https://www.unfpa.org/swop> – highlighted the heightened risks for women and girls to be subjected to harmful practices, such as FGM, child marriage and son preference as a result, among other contributing factors, of increased poverty, school closures, and reduced access to services.

Shobha Shukla, founding managing editor of the India-based Citizen News Service, writing on “The rise in gender-based violence during COVID-19,” provided examples (from the Asia Pacific region) of the pandemic’s impact on marginalized women in particular. <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO2005/S00142/rise-in-gender-based-violence-during-covid-19-warrants-a-gendered-response.htm>

Shukla’s article concluded that “the gendered impacts of COVID-19 must be considered. Sexual and other forms of gender-based violence are a violation of human rights [which] denies the human dignity of the individual and hurts human development.”

(The domestic violence section of this handbook, in chapter 7, deals more specifically with increasing rates during the pandemic.)

Finally, the pandemic also has threatened workers' rights and reproductive rights, as shown in two April 2020 Al Jazeera articles:

- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/06/domestic-workers-middle-east-risk-abuse-amid-covid-19-crisis>
- <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/governments-coronavirus-restrict-women-rights-200412095859321.html>

### 3.6 CASE STUDY: REPORTING ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS DIMENSIONS OF ABORTION

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BY MELISSA UPRETI, JUNE 2020

“Thank you for giving us a new way to talk about abortion,” is one of the most gratifying things that a person has ever said to me after reading something that I had written as a human rights lawyer. It happened at the launch of a human rights fact-finding report that I coauthored 10 years ago. The report examined the impact of the criminal ban on abortion in the Philippines, and the comment came from a journalist. Her feedback took me by surprise because, when I had written the report, journalists were not the audience that I had in mind. My legal analysis and recommendations were geared toward the government and 15 different institutional actors. Knowing fully well how polarizing and discomforting the issue of abortion is in the predominantly Catholic Philippines, I had spent almost an hour at a press conference talking about the human rights dimensions of abortion to make a compelling legal case

for the government to amend the nation's nearly 300-year-old criminal ban.

When I first heard the leading journalist's words, I felt a great sense of relief. I asked her to explain exactly what she meant. She responded that she would no longer be forced to talk about abortion only as a sin or crime, but that she could now talk about it as a human right.

Within an hour, I had a completely different experience while in a recording studio for Al Jazeera, where I went to answer questions about the findings of my report. The tenor of the interview left me feeling like I had been part of a spectator sport. It didn't matter that I said women were dying and being subjected to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, in violation of their basic human rights, for terminating unwanted pregnancies. The interviewer bombarded me with the typical inflammatory and ideological arguments used by opponents of abortion that were conveniently phrased as questions. It was all on the pretext that viewers were able to “hear both sides of the debate.” The experience left me feeling like I had been used for a crude form of entertainment:

Facts did not matter, and the lives of the women whose stories I told did not matter.

When it comes to an issue like abortion, facts based on science and public health data, and women's lived experiences are the two kinds of information that are most important for the public to hear. The knowledge and understanding built through this information can be used to ensure that our laws, policies and practices promote justice and protect the rights and dignity of women. Advancing these goals does not constitute advocacy but acting in the public interest.

### **Human Rights Norms and Standards Matter**

Reporting on abortion is crucial for shaping public opinion against unjust laws and policies that target and restrict women's access to and decisions about abortion. Increased and more nuanced reporting is needed to expose the harm that is done through unnecessary restrictions that at best have no medical basis and at worst criminalize women for their decisions. Both compromise the physical and emotional health and safety of women, rob them of their autonomy and inflict violence.

Human rights accrue at birth and denial of access to a health service that only women ever need constitutes discrimination. Governments are obligated under international law to ensure that abortion services, like any other health service, are available, accessible, affordable, provided in a manner that is acceptable, and meet a basic standard of care. Abortion is a form of health care and a decision that women have the right to make for themselves: It

is a human right. Criminalization of abortion, denial of access to safe abortion, and delays in access, constitute gender-based discrimination and violence. This is often experienced in the form of unsafe abortion, which is a leading cause of pregnancy-related morbidity and death. Forced pregnancy and forced continuation of pregnancy are also explicitly recognized as gender-based violence.<sup>29</sup>

### **Terminology Matters**

Some of the most commonly used expressions seen in reporting on abortion include the terms "pro-lifers" in referring to opponents of abortion, and "unborn child" to personify and create empathy for the fetus. Combined with frequent references to pregnant women as "mothers," such usages effectively legitimize harmful gender stereotypes and contribute to gender-based violence. Furthermore, they erase pregnant women from the stories and "invisibilize" the gravity of their personal experiences.

A public health expert surveyed abortion coverage in three leading U.S. newspapers. Her 2018 study<sup>30</sup> findings were published in the National Institutes of Health's Women's Health Issues journal.

"Abortion is covered as a political issue more than a health issue," study author Katie Woodruff wrote. "The personal experiences of people who get abortions are present in only 4% of the sample, and language personifying the fetus appears more often than women's abortion stories." Her study concludes that "news does not support public understanding of abortion as a common, safe part of reproductive health care. Such framing may undermine public



support for policies that protect access to this common health care service.” It also contributes to abortion stigma and helps legitimize what pregnant women experience as violence.

### Reporting Matters

The importance of reporting women’s experiences with unwanted and unplanned pregnancies and bringing them into the public discourse cannot be underestimated, because violence against women in the form of denial of access to safe abortion has been normalized by law, policy and practice for a long time. Women are not a homogenous group. The likelihood and level of violence that they experience is linked to multiple factors, including age, race, and income. Therefore, at best, reporting must take an intersectional approach.

Bearing this reality in mind, one excellent example of reporting on abortion is Zoe Carpenter’s in-depth article “Ecuador’s Crackdown on Abortion Is Putting Women in Jail,”<sup>31</sup> published in *The Nation* in May 2019. Free of misleading and politically charged rhetoric, this article focused on women’s personal experiences with abortion and situated them in a broader legal, historical, political and social context. While the headline gets straight to the point and draws the reader’s attention to one of the harshest outcomes of Ecuador’s restrictive law, i.e., the incarceration of women, its two-part discussion had sufficient space to present the facts and trends. These ultimately revealed the complicity of the state and society in perpetrating and condoning the violence through the systematically harsh treatment of women seeking abortion.

Ruth Michaelson’s September 2019 article<sup>32</sup> in *The Guardian*, “Moroccan journalist jailed for abortion that she says never happened,” shows how reporting on abortion is crucial to expose how women can be unjustly and systematically targeted for violence and harassment through the misuse of restrictive abortion laws. Centering the journalist’s ordeal, this report reveals the larger political context in which the incident occurred and the government’s opportunistic use of the law as a political tool to persecute a woman journalist. It shows the convergence of different human rights concerns, including a restrictive law that denies women their bodily autonomy, attacks on freedom of the press, and Morocco’s failure to comply with its international obligations. The denial of such fundamental freedoms is critical to understanding the far-reaching impact of the country’s restrictive abortion law and its misuse to violate human rights through gender-based violence.

Another *Guardian* article,<sup>33</sup> Liz Ford’s “U.S. abortion policy is ‘extremist hate’ and ‘torture’, says UN Commissioner,” is a good example of reporting that quotes a highly reputable human rights expert to inform the reader that bans on abortion violate women’s human rights under international law. They violate the right to health and result in torture. This recognition is used as a basis to call abortion bans out as a form of “extremist hate” and gender-based violence. These framings reflect important developments in international law and are likely to remain confined to the legal discourse unless they are brought to the public by journalists.

## **3.7 RESOURCES**

### **3.7.1 WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK: A CHRONOLOGY OF UN LANDMARK DOCUMENTS RELEVANT TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

#### **1979: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women**

The Convention entered into force as an international treaty in 1981 and established the first international bill of rights for women. It acknowledged in its preamble that discrimination “violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity.” The convention, however, does not explicitly mention violence against women, which was not yet officially regarded as a human rights issue.

#### **1994: Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development**

This comprehensive program was adopted by 179 governments meeting in Cairo in September 1994. One of the key principles framing the whole program of action states: “Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women’s ability to control their own fertility, are cornerstones of population and development-related programmes. The human rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of universal human rights.” Chapter VII defines reproductive rights.

#### **1995: Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**

The Fourth UN World Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995. 189 countries unanimously adopted this declaration, which is considered the key global policy document on gender equality. The Platform’s 12 critical areas of concern include the human rights of women; violence against women and girls; women and armed conflict, and women and the media. In terms of governmental intervention strategies, the Platform identifies two essential needs for: “adequate gender-disaggregated data and statistics on the incidence of violence,” and “mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programs so that before decisions are taken an analysis may be made of their effects on women and men, respectively.”

**1998: Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**

The statute that establishes the ICC is the first international treaty to establish conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence as crimes against humanity, war crimes, and even, in some instances, genocide. It includes in its jurisdiction numerous sexual offenses and gender-based crimes among the most severe crimes of international criminal law. In particular, the list of acts that can be prosecuted as crimes against humanity (“when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack”) includes, under article 7(g), “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.”

**2000: UN Security Council Resolution 1325**

This resolution on women, peace, and security refers to the Beijing commitments and acknowledges that “women and children account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons.” It also “emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls.”

**2014: Joint General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and General Comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on Harmful Practices**

Harmful practices are defined as “persistent practices and forms of behavior that are grounded in discrimination on the basis of, among other things, sex, gender, and age, in addition to multiple and/or intersecting forms of discrimination that often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering.” The document also spells out “the criteria that such practices should meet to be regarded as harmful” and focuses on female genital mutilation, child and/or forced marriage, polygamy, and so-called honor crimes.

**2017: Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women Committee General Recommendation (GR) No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence Against Women**

General Recommendation No. 35 updates the 1992 General Recommendation No. 19, cited above. Specifically, the Committee stressed that, since the latter was adopted in 1992, “most State parties have improved their legal and policy measures to address diverse forms of gender-based violence against women.”

Also noteworthy is the recognition that “the prohibition of gender-based violence has evolved into a principle of customary international law. GR 19 has been a key catalyst for this process.”

GR No. 35 also updates the concept of violence against women: “This document uses the expression ‘gender-based violence against women’ as a more precise term that makes explicit the gendered causes and impacts of the violence. This expression further strengthens the understanding of this violence as a social – rather than individual – problem, requiring comprehensive responses, beyond specific events, individual perpetrators and victims/survivors. The Committee considers that gender-based violence against women is one of the fundamental social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women with respect to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated.”

Its paragraph 37 specifically recommends “the creation or strengthening of self-regulatory mechanisms by the media, including online or social media, aimed at the elimination of gender stereotypes,” as well as “guidelines for the appropriate coverage by the media of gender-based violence against women.”

### **2019: International Labor Organization Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work**

The Convention defines violence and harassment as “a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices [that] aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm.” It applies to the public and private sectors, as well as to the formal and informal economies.

In its preamble, the 2019 Violence and Harassment Convention acknowledges that “gender-based violence and harassment disproportionately affects women and girls, and that an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach, which tackles underlying causes and risk factors, including gender stereotypes, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and unequal gender-based power relations, is essential to ending violence and harassment in the world of work.”

The accompanying Recommendation 206, adopted by the International Labor Organization General Conference, supplements the Convention with implementing proposals. It specifies, among others, that “particular attention should be paid to the hazards and risks that arise from discrimination, abuse of power relations, and gender, cultural and social norms that support violence and harassment.”

### 3.7.2 REGIONAL INSTRUMENTS

#### **1994: Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women**

The Convention was adopted within the framework of the Organization of American States and is otherwise known as the Belém do Pará Convention. Since its adoption in that Brazilian city, “the Convention has made a significant contribution to strengthening the Inter-American Human Rights System. For the first time it established women’s right to live a life free of violence,” according to the OAS. A decade later, a Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention was established to determine progress by the party states in implementing the convention.

Its work led, in 2015, to the adoption by the Sixth Conference of States Party to the Convention of its Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women, the first regional agreement explicitly devoted to the issue.

The last paragraph of this declaration “encourages the media, advertising companies and social networks to develop and/or include in codes of ethics the issue of discrimination against women in politics by the media and the political harassment and/or violence to which they are subjected, underscoring the need to present women in a fair, respectful, broad and varied manner, at all levels of hierarchy and responsibility, eliminating sexist stereotypes that disqualify or hide their leadership in all decision-making spaces.”

#### **2003: Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa**

This binding legal framework is also known as the Maputo Protocol, in reference to the Mozambique capital where it was adopted by the Assembly of the African Union. “Unlike any other women’s human rights instrument, the Maputo Protocol details wide-ranging and substantive human rights provisions for women, covering the entire spectrum of civil and political, economic, social and cultural as well as environmental rights,” according to an African Union media advisory.

Rights and protections that the Protocol specifically defines and addresses:

- Right to Dignity (Art. 3): “Ensure the protection of every woman’s right to respect for her dignity, and protection of women from all forms of violence, particularly sexual and verbal violence.”
- Right to Life, Integrity and Security (Art.4)
- Elimination of Harmful Practices (Art. 5), and Protection of Women in Armed Conflicts (Art. 11)
- Health and Reproductive Rights (Art. 14)

- Widows' Rights (Art.20): Ensure that “widows are not subjected to inhuman, humiliating, or degrading treatment.”
- Special Protection of Elderly Women (Art. 22) and of Women with Disabilities (Art.23)

### **2011: Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence**

Otherwise known as the Istanbul Convention, this is the most recent binding treaty on violence against women. It entered into force in 2014. For the first time in 2020, non-member states of the Council of Europe were able to accede to the Convention.

It is the first legally binding instrument to define gender: “It shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.”

Chapter V spells out all the forms of criminalized (or otherwise sanctioned) violence against women. It is worth noting that these include psychological violence (through coercion or threats), stalking, and sexual harassment defined as “any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.”

The Convention's Chapter VII covers migration and asylum with a mandate for all state parties to “take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that gender-based violence against women may be recognized as a form of persecution.”

The Convention emphasizes the importance of prevention measures that include the “participation of the private sector and the media (Art. 17). In 2016, the Council of Europe commissioned a study on the rationale for Article 17 in addressing “the link between the media's portrayal of women and men, their reproduction of gender stereotypes, and violence against women.” It also gives examples of how the media can engage in the prevention of violence against women.

### **3.7.3 SELECTED REPORTS BY UN INDEPENDENT EXPERTS**

#### **Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences**

##### **Integration of the human rights of women and the gender perspective (2006)**

UN Commission on Human Rights, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on the Due Diligence Standard as a Tool for the Elimination of Violence Against Women*

<https://undocs.org/E/CN.4/2006/61>

Submitted by Special Rapporteur Yakin Ertürk, this report focuses on the due diligence standard as a tool for the elimination of violence against women. It “examines the shared responsibilities of State and non-State actors with respect to preventing and responding to violence and other violations of women’s human rights.”

#### **Intersections between culture and violence against women (2007)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/4/34>

Presented to the Human Rights Council by Special Rapporteur Yakin Ertürk

#### **Adequacy of the international legal framework on violence against women (2017)**

<https://undocs.org/A/72/134>

This report, submitted by Special Rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović, stemmed in part from the need for “closing the gap in the incorporation and implementation of existing international and regional instruments on violence against women and providing victims with adequate protection measures and services, as well as efficient remedies.”

#### **Online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective (2018)**

<https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/38/47>

This report, submitted by Special Rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović, reiterates that “violence against women is a form of discrimination and a human rights violation.” Its related premise is that “the consequences of and harm caused by different manifestations of online violence are specifically gendered, given that women and girls suffer from particular stigma in the context of structural inequality, discrimination, and patriarchy. Women subjected to online violence are often further victimized through harmful and negative gender stereotypes, which are prohibited by international human rights law.”

#### **Rape as a grave, systematic and widespread human rights violation, a crime and a manifestation of gender-based violence against women and girls, and its prevention**

This report was presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2021 by Special Rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović.

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/26>

## **Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment**

### **Strengthening the protection of women from torture (2008)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/7/3>

The report, submitted to the Human Rights Council by Special Rapporteur Manfred Nowak, addresses what constitutes torture both in the public and private spheres.

### **Gender perspectives on torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment (2016)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/31/57>

The report, submitted to the Human Rights Council by Special Rapporteur Juan E. Méndez, examines the legal framework for issues, such as the torture of LGBTQ people, rape and sexual violence, trafficking, domestic violence, and harmful practices.

### **Relevance of the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment to the context of domestic violence (2019)**

<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/74/148>

The interim report, submitted to the UN General Assembly by Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer, analyzes the types of conduct that amount to torture, as well as the legal responsibility of states.

## **Report of the UN Independent Expert on the protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (2018)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/38/43>

This report, the first submitted to the Human Rights Council by Victor Madrigal-Borloz, is a global overview of this type of violence, including an analysis of its root causes.

### **3.7.4 OTHER RESOURCES**

#### ***Handbook for Legislation on Violence Against Women***

UN Women (2012) 68 pages: [https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2012/12/unw\\_legislation-handbook%20pdf.pdf?la=en&vs=1502](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2012/12/unw_legislation-handbook%20pdf.pdf?la=en&vs=1502)



The handbook outlines the international and regional legal and policy framework, and provides guidance for its implementation through national laws addressing violence against women. It comes with a supplement on *Harmful Practices Against Women*.

***Speak Up, Speak Out: A Toolkit for Reporting on Human Rights Issues***

Internews (2012) 184 pages: [https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews\\_SpeakUpSpeakOut\\_Full.pdf](https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_SpeakUpSpeakOut_Full.pdf)

“This toolkit is both a human rights reference guide and a workbook for journalists who want to improve their ability to report on human rights issues in a fair, accurate, and sensitive way,” according to the Speak Up Speak Out website. “Both professional journalists and citizen reporters are in a unique position to shed light on human rights violations. ... Linking events to human rights standards can make the story more newsworthy.”

The toolkit, by the U.S.-based nonprofit Internews, includes two specific sections on women’s rights and on human rights and gender-sensitive reporting.

***Reporting on Violence Against Women and Girls: A Handbook for Journalists***

UNESCO (2019) 152 pages: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371524>

The handbook includes several sections of good practices and guidance for reporting on various harmful practices.

***World Organization Against Torture Violence Against Women Program (2019)***

<https://www.omct.org/violence-against-women/reports-and-publications/2019/06/d25377/>

This program provides briefings on a wide range of issues, including a report on “Protecting Women From Violence Through the UN Convention Against Torture.” OMCT is a global coalition of international NGOs fighting against torture, summary executions and enforced disappearances. The organization can also connect the media with experts on related issues.

***National Day of Remembrance on Violence Against Women (Canada)***

Jiwani, Y. (Dec. 5, 2018). “Less talk, more action: National Day of Remembrance on violence against women”: <https://theconversation.com/less-talk-more-action-national-day-of-remembrance-on-violence-against-women-108139>

This article by Canadian scholar Yasmin Jiwani illustrates both the complexity of intersectional violence and the reporting opportunities that relevant

national or international commemorative dates offer. Jiwani is Concordia University Research Chair in Intersectionality, Violence, and Resistance.

<https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/coms/faculty.html?fpid=yasmin-jiwani>

***Promoting and Protecting Human Rights in Relation to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sex Characteristics: A Manual for National Human Rights Institutions***

Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions and the UN Development Programme (2016) 244 pages: [https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/hiv\\_aids/promoting-and-protecting-human-rights-in-relation-to-sexual-orientation.html](https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/democratic_governance/hiv_aids/promoting-and-protecting-human-rights-in-relation-to-sexual-orientation.html)

Although written in the context of the Asia Pacific region, this manual outlines the international developments in human rights law that protect the universal rights, among others, of lesbians and transgender women facing gender-based violence. It includes a section on the **Yogyakarta Principles** (2006, 2017), a universal guide to human rights that affirms binding international legal standards relating to sexual orientation and gender identity, with which all states must comply.

***Legal Frameworks: The Nexus of Gender-Based Violence and Media***

International Media Support (2020) 10 pages: <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/legal-frameworks-the-nexus-of-gender-based-violence-and-media/>

This legal briefing note is “aimed at media practitioners and highlights the main frameworks that mention the role of the media.”

### 3.7.5 INTERNATIONAL COMMEMORATIVE DAYS: NEWS PEGS TO REPORT ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

|                |                                                                      |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Feb. 6</b>  | International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation    |
| <b>March 8</b> | International Women's Day                                            |
| <b>April 7</b> | World Health Day                                                     |
| <b>May 3</b>   | World Press Freedom Day                                              |
| <b>May 17</b>  | International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia      |
| <b>June 19</b> | International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict |
| <b>June 20</b> | World Refugee Day                                                    |
| <b>June 26</b> | International Day in Support of Victims of Torture                   |
| <b>July 17</b> | Day of International Criminal Justice                                |
| <b>Aug. 9</b>  | International Day of the World's Indigenous People                   |
| <b>Oct. 1</b>  | International Day of Older Persons                                   |
| <b>Oct. 11</b> | International Day of the Girl Child                                  |
| <b>Oct. 15</b> | International Day of Rural Women                                     |
| <b>Nov. 2</b>  | International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists     |

**Nov. 20** Transgender Day of Remembrance and Resilience

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**Nov. 25** International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women

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**Dec. 1** World AIDS Day

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**Dec. 3** International Day of Persons with Disabilities

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**Dec. 10** Human Rights Day

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**Dec. 18** International Migrants Day

The Global 16 Days of Activism Campaign Against Gender-Based Violence, launched in 1991 by the Center for Women's Global Leadership, runs annually from Nov. 25 to Dec. 10. It also includes, on Dec. 6, the anniversary of the Montreal massacre.

## ENDNOTES

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AROUND THE WORLD A ... COLD VIOLENCE  
CONTINUES. IT'S THE VIOLENCE OF  
INDIGNITY, OF FORGETTING, OF CARELESSNESS  
AND OF NOT LISTENING.

*Cathy Otten*



## CHAPTER 4

# Reporting on sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings

Media reports often present gender-based violence in conflict as if it exists in a vacuum. However, UN Secretary-General António Guterres's March 2021 report to the Security Council examined broader patterns and trends of conflict-related sexual violence as a "tactic of war, torture, and terrorism in settings in which overlapping humanitarian and security crises, linked with militarization and the proliferation of arms, continued unabated."<sup>1</sup> The challenge for journalists is to avoid losing sight of the big picture.

## 4.1 THE BIGGER PICTURE

“The extreme violence that women suffer during conflict does not arise solely out of the conditions of war; it is directly related to the violence that exists in women’s lives during peacetime,”<sup>2</sup> the UN Independent Experts stated in their 2002 assessment on the impact of armed conflict on women.

““”

*Conflict can exacerbate pre-existing patterns of gender discrimination and inequality.*

The International Crisis Group confirmed this assessment when its Director of Research, Isabelle Arradon, warned: “In ways that can be easy to overlook, conflict can exacerbate pre-existing patterns of gender discrimination and inequality, leaving women and girls with few survival options.”<sup>3</sup> Those patterns were clearly illustrated in the 2018 report of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar:

“In examining the situation of sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar, the Mission also reviewed the situation of gender inequality more broadly. It found a direct nexus between the lack of gender equality more generally within the country and within ethnic communities, and the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence.”<sup>4</sup>

A landmark UN Security Council resolution (S/RES/1325, 2000) called on all member states to take special measures in conflict settings to protect women and girls from such violence, especially rape and other forms of sexual abuse. The Security Council framework on conflict-related sexual violence includes nine follow-up resolutions, the most recent of which was adopted in 2019.

This latter resolution (S/RES/2467)<sup>5</sup> was hailed by the UN for “strengthening prevention through justice and accountability and affirming, for the first time, that a survivor-centered approach must guide every aspect of the response of affected countries and the international community.”<sup>6</sup> This included the explicit recognition of the needs and rights of children born of sexual violence.

Resolution 2467, however, fell short of expectations in several important ways:

- The threat of a U.S. veto led to the exclusion from its final language of any references to “sexual and reproductive health” (perceived by the Trump administration as condoning abortion), or to the International Criminal Court’s role in prosecuting perpetrators.
- The final resolution did not include the initial recommendation for the establishment of a U.N. monitoring body, which had been reported in the media (notably by *Foreign Policy Magazine*, *PassBlue*, and *The Guardian*).
- As noted by Liz Ford in *The Guardian*, “progressive text on strengthening laws to protect and support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who could be targeted during conflict” was also removed.<sup>7</sup>

Those shortcomings underscore the importance of monitoring both governments' compliance with human rights commitments and the resistance of many to establish or strengthen protection and accountability mechanisms. Survivors of conflict-related sexual violence are especially at risk to be revictimized by impunity, as well as the lack of transparency and political will.

In this respect, it is important for the media to report on the investigations and landmark prosecution cases of the **International Criminal Court (ICC)**. The **Rome Statute**, which established The Hague-based ICC in 1998,<sup>8</sup> defined the following crimes under the jurisdiction of the Court:

- **Crimes against humanity**, including “Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.” Article 7 (1) (g)
- **War crimes**, including the above crimes “and any other form of sexual violence also constituting a serious violation of article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions.”<sup>9</sup> Article 8 (2) (e) (vi)

The ground-breaking “**Policy paper on sexual and gender-based crimes**” published in 2014 by the ICC Prosecutor’s Office<sup>10</sup> clarified the scope and implications of the Statute. It emphasized that the Office:

- “Recognizes that sexual and gender-based crimes are amongst the gravest under the [Rome] Statute.
- “Will apply a gender analysis to all crimes within its jurisdiction, examining how those crimes are related to inequalities between women and men, and girls and boys, and the power relationships and other dynamics which shape gender roles in a specific context.
- “Will strive to ensure that its activities do not cause further harm to victims and witnesses.
- “Supports a gender-inclusive approach to reparations, taking into account the gender-specific impact on, harm caused to, and suffering of the victims affected by the crimes for which an individual has been convicted.”<sup>11</sup>

Those issues can also be reflected in contextual and follow-up reporting by journalists covering such crimes. Landmark ICC judgments and developments in current cases provide an important opportunity to report on their potential impact and more broadly on the critical issues of impunity and accountability:

- **Dominic Ongwen case (Uganda)**: A former top commander in the Lord’s Resistance Army rebel group, Ongwen (whose arrest warrant was issued in 2005), was finally convicted on 61 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes and sentenced in May 2021 to 25 years. Charges included rape,

sexual slavery, child abduction, forced marriage, and forced pregnancy. *The Guardian* highlighted the case as “one of the most momentous in the ICC’s 18-year history.”<sup>12</sup> It was indeed the first time that forced pregnancy was prosecuted before an international court, and forced marriage as a crime against humanity at the ICC.

- **Bosco Ntaganda case (Democratic Republic of the Congo):** The former Congolese rebel leader, indicted in 2006, received a 30-year sentence (the longest handed down by the ICC) after having been found guilty of 18 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including rape and sexual slavery. Ntaganda was the first person to be convicted of sexual crimes by the ICC. The 2019 conviction was upheld by the ICC Appeals judges in March 2021. A previous Appeals Chamber decision (2017) found that it had indeed “jurisdiction over the alleged war crimes of rape and sexual slavery of child soldiers.”<sup>13</sup> This decision was hailed as “one of the most important developments in international humanitarian law in the last 120 years where one more impunity gap for sexual and gender-based crimes has been closed.”<sup>14</sup>
- **Al Hassan case (Mali):** Al Hassan was the de facto chief of the Islamic Police enforcing Sharia law in Timbuktu, including policies that resulted in the rape and sexual enslavement of women and girls. His trial started in July 2020. According to a June 2021 report by the International Federation for Human Rights and Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice, the achievement in this case is that the charges against him include “the crime against humanity of persecution on gender grounds – an unprecedented charge before the ICC ... . The Office of the Prosecutor alleges that Al Hassan particularly targeted women and girls on the basis of gender, imposing restrictions on them motivated by discriminating opinions regarding gender roles.”<sup>15</sup>

In contrast with the ICC prosecution of individuals, the **International Court of Justice** – also based in The Hague – is the principle judicial organ of the UN and a civil court that hears disputes between countries. In 2019, The Gambia filed a case against Myanmar, on the grounds that its military committed atrocities against ethnic Rohingya Muslims, including rape, in violation of the UN Genocide Convention. *PassBlue*, reporting on this unprecedented prosecution, commented that “the case has the potential to enhance feminist international law, while reinforcing the need to carry out the global women, peace and security agenda.”<sup>16</sup>

It’s important to note that there are also substantial criticisms of the ICC and international justice framework. Yale Professor Samuel Moyn points out that the ICC was originally promoted by lesser nations, but has since “become a forum for accusing their leaders alone.” Moyn writes that the “rise of international criminal accountability has occurred alongside the eclipse of prior schemes of global justice, which promoted not retributive punishment but

social renovation to achieve liberty and equality.” Here, Moyn’s argument allows us to think about a type of social justice reporting that illuminates social ills and pushes for systemic changes that move beyond the focus on retribution and the individual.<sup>17</sup>

## 4.2 CHALLENGES AND SETBACKS

Political failures and setbacks constitute a huge challenge to the eradication of sexual violence as a tool of war and an inescapable byproduct of armed conflicts, in spite of all the legal protections, government commitments and international mechanisms.

The complex elements of this challenge – all contributing to the vulnerability and prolonged suffering of survivors – were forcefully summarized by Pramila Patten, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, when she briefed the Security Council in July 2020.<sup>18</sup>

Sexual violence is used as a war tactic and a political tool to dehumanize, destabilize and forcibly displace populations across the globe ... , she stated. “Wartime sexual violence as a biological weapon, a psychological weapon, and an expression of male dominance over women sets back the cause of gender equality and the cause of peace ... . Sexual violence is characterized by staggering rates of impunity and recidivism.”

“”

*When these decisions are not gender-based in their design, they will be gender-biased and exclusionary in their effect.*

In addition to the issue of governments’ non-compliance, Patten focused on the diversity of survivors’ experiences, which are often dismissed when it comes to policy-making and the provision of funds and services: “When these decisions are not gender-based in their design, they will be gender-biased and exclusionary in their effect.”

Survivors’ expectations are also too often crushed by delays and setbacks in their quest for justice, as illustrated by the plight of the Yazidi minority in Northern Iraq since 2014. Challenges remain, although the UN Team in charge of investigating the ISIL crimes against Yazidis established in 2021 that those crimes constituted genocide (repeating the legal designation originally made by the UN Commission for the Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in 2016). Nadia Murad, a Yazidi survivor and co-winner of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize, concluded in her remarks to the UN Security Council: “Evidence has been found, but we are still searching for the political will to prosecute.”<sup>19</sup> The issue highlights ongoing difficulties when it comes to enforcing UN designations, and the frustration felt by many survivors over human rights discourse.

In his March 2021 report on conflict-related sexual violence,<sup>20</sup> UN Secretary-General Guterres highlighted some of the most severe challenges: “Over the past decade the level of compliance by parties to conflict remains appallingly low. As noted in the gap assessment included in my previous report [2020], over 70% of the listed parties are persistent perpetrators, having appeared in my annual reports for five or more years without taking remedial or corrective actions.”

Referring to these annual reports, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović, noted:

“Of the 19 States monitored by the Secretary-General, only seven states have ratified the [ICC] Rome Statute ... . Of those States that had not, only Myanmar had no statute of limitation for rape in times of peace or conflict. Having a statute of limitation for the prosecution of rape contributes to the widespread impunity for perpetrators.”<sup>21</sup>

The news site *PassBlue*, through its independent coverage of the UN, has monitored many such challenges, including those emerging from the annual Security Council debates on sexual violence in conflict. It pointed to the fact that the April 2021 debate, for instance, was to “address victims’ care rather than the responsibility of countries to stop such abuses and prosecute perpetrators.”<sup>22</sup>

On the occasion of that same debate, the UN LGBTI Core Group (an informal cross-regional group of UN member states) also denounced the lack of compliance and stated that:

“The Core Group underscores the need to ensure that survivors’ rights are respected, and that all victims of sexual violence have access to justice, assistance, reparations and judicial redress ... . Members [states] should recognize that all survivors, including those who are targeted on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, are unique individuals with different experiences and needs, and that any support to assist and empower survivors must be contextualized, paying particular attention to multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities.”<sup>23</sup>

In many parts of the world, the impact of the **COVID-19 pandemic** has compounded those challenges and setbacks. In his March 2021 report, Guterres noted:

“The socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic led to the use of harmful coping mechanisms, such as child marriage, as desperate parents living in internal displacement settings in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen arranged marriages for girls as young as 10 years old.”

The work of humanitarian service providers, he added, was “impeded by insecurity, access constraints and chronic underfunding, as already scarce resources were redirected towards the COVID-19 response.” This statement echoed the warning previously issued by May Maloney, the Sexual Violence Adviser of the International Committee of the Red Cross, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Nov. 25, 2020):

“When we layer crisis atop crisis – such as an armed conflict with a public health emergency in the context of a global climate emergency – the risks of sexual and gender-based violence spiral, while the available support shrinks and becomes siloed or fragmented.”<sup>24</sup>

“”

*When we layer crisis atop crisis – such as an armed conflict with a public health emergency in the context of a global climate emergency – the risks of sexual and gender-based violence spiral.*

### 4.3 PEELING BACK THE LAYERS FOR AUDIENCES

Unidimensional reporting falls short of educating the audience about conflict-related sexual violence. No matter how compelling individual stories of suffering are, they provide greater understanding when framed to shed light on root causes, and impacts of abuse and impunity patterns.

The notion that conflicts exacerbate pre-existing forms of gender-based violence especially needs to be taken into account when reporting on sexual violence in specific conflicts and on post-conflict developments. “What is quietly emerging, but long known among humanitarian aid organizations,” *The Lancet* warned, “is that alongside conflict-related rape, violence by intimate partners is also highly prevalent and is likely to continue long after peace agreements have been signed.”<sup>25</sup>

A standard-setting guide for journalists on covering sexual violence in conflict zones, published in May 2021 by **Dart Centre Europe**, included an important section titled “Remember: Sexual violence is never the only dimension to the story.”<sup>26</sup> It warns journalists against the “danger of getting lost in one corner of the story.”

“If you don’t provide enough focus on the wider context,” Dart’s guide clarifies, “a piece risks becoming a human-interest story ... that lacks any real purpose and offers audiences little understanding of what is happening or where solutions might lie ... . Failure to bring in wider contexts can impoverish your reporting, push away audiences and marginalize survivors.”

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#### “REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT” EXCERPTS FROM DART CENTRE EUROPE’S 2021 GUIDELINES (SECTIONS 1 AND 7)

“Before setting out, make sure you research the following dimensions:

- “What conflict-related sexual violence is and how rape and other forms of sexual violence impact individuals and their communities
- “The power politics and broader security picture in the local area, gender dynamics and cultural attitudes about sexual violence ...
- “The cultural and religious context – including local attitudes to conflict-related sexual violence, gender-based discrimination and power imbalances within families ...



- “Local laws in the area and any implications disclosures may have for the safety of sources and their ability to seek further judicial redress”

“Be sure to broaden the story in the following ways:

- Be careful not to predict ruination or to reduce people to the worst things that happen to them ... . However bleak things look, it is inaccurate and prejudicial to imply that recovery is impossible.”
- “Consider that there may be other crimes beyond rape. Survivors may lose loved ones and their homes and be forcibly displaced ... .”
- “Help your audience see paths to potential solutions by doing justice to the full political and social context.”

“”

*However bleak things look, it is inaccurate and prejudicial to imply that recovery is impossible.*

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The Dart Centre’s guidelines directly apply to some of the lessons learned in the context of both the 2014 **Yazidi genocide** and its aftermath, and the **South Sudan civil war**, which had started the year before.

In her analysis of the 2014–19 “UK newspapers’ portrayals of Yazidi Women’s Experiences of Violence under ISIS,”<sup>27</sup> researcher Busra Nisa Sarac concluded: “The extent to which these women are the victims of violence is more highly emphasized compared to the ways they have resisted and overcome this violence. This kind of portrayal then avoids our seeing the whole story that includes women’s resistance and agency.” Instead, reporting on coping mechanisms and activism initiatives, for example, provides a fuller, more nuanced portrayal.

Sarac singled out British journalist Cathy Otten’s reporting. In a thoughtful follow-up piece in *The Guardian* (July 2017),<sup>28</sup> Otten acknowledged: “It was only much later in my reporting on how some Yazidi women managed to escape and return that I became aware of how important stories of captivity and resistance were to dealing with trauma.”

Otten, who was based in Iraq working as a journalist for five years, gave a remarkable account of her experience covering ISIS’ attacks on the Yazidi population, including the mass rapes targeting women, in a book titled *With Ash on Their Faces*. In her introduction, she reflected on some of the often unspoken challenges of reporting in complex and overwhelming conflict and post-conflict settings.

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## “THE VIOLENCE OF INDIGNITY, OF FORGETTING AND OF CARELESSNESS”

*Excerpts from the introduction to With Ash on Their Faces by Cathy Otten (Fingerprint Publishing, India, 2017), reprinted with the author’s permission (May 2021).*

“Around the world, a broader kind of cold violence continues. It’s the violence of indignity, of forgetting, of carelessness and of not listening. It’s there in the way politicians talk about refugees, and in the way the stateless are sometimes written about and photographed by the western media. It’s there in the way humans dismiss other humans as less worthy of protection or care. When cold violence and hot violence merge, we get the perfect storm of genocide, of mass killings inflicted on the most vulnerable ... .

“Yezidis have suffered massacres and oppression for generations. But there was something different about the ISIS attack that took place in the late summer of 2014. This time the western media took notice. [...] The Yezidis became the embodiment of embattled, exotic minorities against the evil of ISIS. This narrative has stereotyped Yezidi women as solely passive victims of mass rape at the hands of perpetrators presented as the embodiment of pure evil. While rightly condemning the crimes, this telling doesn’t leave room for the context and history from which the violence emerged ... .

“Though this book engages extensively with the history of storytelling as a means of promoting survival and resistance in the face of captivity, it does so without claiming that the practice is always successful. The telling of individual stories can seem to offer redemption, but it can also work to hide ongoing political failures that prevent redress and renewal and can even lead to further violence.”

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Researcher Carolina Marques de Mesquita, referring to analyses of the U.S. coverage of South Sudan’s civil war (including her own in 2016)<sup>29</sup> and pointing at the unidimensional representation of women survivors, mentioned some of the issues that most media reports did not address, such as women’s own response to the violence, and the other challenges they may face during and after the conflict.

“Within the United States, South Sudan women are often presented exclusively as victims of gang rapes and other forms of sexual violence, Marques de Mesquita concluded. “Further, media give little opportunity for these women to speak about events firsthand – journalists and aid workers often speak on their behalf.”<sup>30</sup>

## 4.4 FOLLOW-UP IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

The impact of sexual violence often manifests itself most acutely in post-conflict settings when:

- The sexual violence escalates
- The crimes committed are not investigated and perpetrators go unpunished
- Survivors are internally displaced, forced to become refugees or stateless
- Survivors are stigmatized and rejected by their own communities or families
- Children are born of rape
- Targeted minorities are further marginalized
- Survivors are threatened for their activism against impunity, as well as redress and peace efforts
- Survivors have limited or no access to resources and services
- Media attention has waned

“All forms of gender-based violence, in particular sexual violence, escalate in the post-conflict settings,”<sup>31</sup> The UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women Committee emphasized in its general recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict and post-conflict situations. Using Sierra Leone as a case in point, *OpenDemocracy* reported on the work of Women’s Forum, Sierra Leone. Its lead researcher, Rosaline Mcarthy, concluded:

“What we have found in this work is a shift from conflict-related sexual violence as a tool of war during active combat to broader and more entrenched issues like poor relationships between armed forces, former rebels and civilians; breakdown of law and order; and post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by victims. Poverty and social exclusion are also serious problems experienced by survivors, and these can lead to further vulnerability to violence. These are all factors that contribute to a continuum of violence from war to peace time: although fighting has ended, violence, suffering, and social challenges continue.”<sup>32</sup>

“”

*Although fighting has ended, violence, suffering, and social challenges continue.*

### 4.4.1 UNDERREPORTED STORIES: HIDDEN OR NEGLECTED CRISES

#### • Humanitarian crises

Out of the 10 most underreported humanitarian crises of 2020, according to CARE International,<sup>33</sup> two have been occurring in countries also on the UN conflict-related sexual violence 2020 “watchlist”:

› **Central African Republic**

Warning that the humanitarian situation there is the “world’s forgotten crisis,” CARE underlined the compounded effects of rampant poverty, natural disasters, the pandemic, and the ongoing attacks by armed groups in spite of the 2019 peace deal. The UN Secretary-General’s 2021 report mentioned the striking example of measures taken to control the COVID-19 virus transmission, including the Ministry of Justice’s release of prisoners, among them 59 rapists.<sup>34</sup>

› **Mali**

CARE links the gravity of Mali’s crisis, in addition to the fact that “Mali is one of the most unequal countries in the world for women,” to the stark reality that 90% of the population lives below the poverty line. The UN Secretary-General’s report referred to the escalation of conflict-related sexual violence since the August 2020 coup d’état. It also notes that those “violations occurred in a context of harmful social norms, with 89% of women and girls between 15 and 49 years of age having undergone female genital mutilation.”<sup>35</sup>

• **Lack of access and documentation:** The case of **Tigray (Ethiopia)**

The conflict-related sexual violence crisis developed in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia initially within communications and media blackouts. A Jan. 21, 2021, press statement by Pramila Patten, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict,<sup>36</sup> was instrumental in alerting the international community. The call for the prohibition of the use of sexual violence and the urgent protection of civilians was based on the:

- › Flow of refugees
- › Alleged rapes
- › Reports of the military demanding sex in exchange for basic commodities
- › Lack of access to the conflict area
- › Increased requests for emergency contraception, sexually-transmitted infection testing, and trauma counseling

Direct reporting from the region has been thwarted by multiple communication and access restrictions, fears of stigmatization and retaliation, and by attacks against journalists attempting to cover the crisis. This situation can best be illustrated by the example of freelance journalist **Lucy Kassa**. As a special correspondent to the *Los Angeles Times*, Kassa (an ethnic Tigrayan) filed one of the very first stories (in the U.S. media)<sup>37</sup> based on rape survivors’ testimonies and initial reporting by international humanitarian and human rights organizations. On Feb. 11, 2021, the same day that her article was published, the *Los Angeles Times* also ran Kassa’s account of her Addis Ababa home having been ransacked three days earlier. She wrote:

“My motivation is to uncover the truth of a war that has gone mostly unreported... . The men in my home threatened to kill me if I kept digging into stories about the situation in Tigray. They also harassed me about my past coverage.”<sup>38</sup>

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## A JOURNALIST’S DUTY

In an eloquent follow-up article for the June 29, 2021, issue of *The New Humanitarian*, Lucy Kassa addressed the traumatic impact of the Tigray conflict and her almost daily conversations with witnesses and survivors. She summarized how she perceives her duty as a journalist:

“Everywhere you look in Tigray, there are heartbreaking stories: Dead bodies half-eaten by dogs, emaciated children dying from man-made starvation. The misery is just endless.

“I am not satisfied with reporting the crimes I have uncovered so far. I know that what I have exposed is just the tip of the iceberg. But at least I am relieved that the stories that made me restless and depressed did not remain in the dark. I am relieved that I fought for them to come to light, and the rest is for the reader to judge.

“I am not a politician nor an activist. I do not support any political group or hold any opinion. My duty as a journalist is to present the facts on the ground. It is not me that speaks: It is the truth which reveals itself through me.”<sup>39</sup>

“”

*My duty as a journalist is to present the facts on the ground. It is not me that speaks: It is the truth which reveals itself through me.*

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- **Connecting land-grabbing conflicts and sexual violence**

A 2020 report by the Switzerland-based International Union for Conservation of Nature<sup>40</sup> examines the use of gender-based violence as “an enforcement mechanism for land and property grabbing,” and sexual extortion as a means to access land rights. In 2018, the Denmark-based International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, had looked more specifically at Indigenous women who are the target of rape in Bangladesh land-related conflicts.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, in 2019, the Centre for Women, Peace and Security of the London School of Economics published a blog on sexualized violence and land grabbing focusing on the example of “the forgotten conflict and ignored victims in West Papua,” an Indonesian territory.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.4.2 REPORTING ON IMPUNITY AND THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE

Reporting on crimes of sexual violence needs to be followed by post-conflict reporting on transitional justice initiatives and mechanisms. Both the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence<sup>43</sup> and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have underscored and documented the importance, as well as challenges, of transitional justice. In her 2014 report to the Human Rights Council, High Commissioner Navi Pillay stated:

“Addressing gender-based and sexual violence in societies transitioning from conflict or repressive rule is vital to ensuring accountability and sustainable peace. Transitional justice processes can help to realize the rights of victims of such violence and can be instrumental in identifying and dismantling the underlying structural discrimination that enabled it to occur.”<sup>44</sup>

The following situations are meant to give journalists examples of best practices in reporting on the aftermath of conflicts, such as the fight against impunity as a main obstacle to the elimination of sexual violence. They were also selected to illustrate the key role that journalists can play in writing against forgetting.

##### Sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge (Cambodia)

“The Sexual Abuse of Cambodia’s History Is No Longer Invisible”  
(June 23, 2015)

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jinamoore/theres-no-more-hiding-cambodias-history-of-sexual-abuse>

As the global women’s rights correspondent for *BuzzFeed*, Jina Moore reported on the decades-long silence surrounding those crimes, even once a special tribunal, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, was set up. “The legal investigators,” Moore wrote, “like so many historians before them, largely missed one of the most common crimes of the Khmer Rouge: sexual violence.” One of the main reasons was that “the real crime [of rape] was buried by bureaucratic language as ‘organized marriage.’”

##### Waiting for justice in the Balkans

“They cannot forget. Neither should we.” (Sept. 12, 2017)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/9/12/they-cannot-forget-neither-should-we/>

In this Al Jazeera opinion piece, Amnesty International’s Balkans researcher Jelena Sesar wrote about the plight of the thousands of Bosnian women

who survived the “rape camps” during the 1992–95 war, but are still denied justice and reparation. The suffering of many of the victims endured as a result of, among others, stigmatization, guilt, unemployment and poverty, psychological trauma, poor health, and lack of legal support. And it is further compounded, Sesar wrote, because “most survivors will not live long enough to see justice being done.” A survivor that she quoted said:

“The apology is important to us. It shows us society recognizes we were not responsible for what happened to us and the guilt lies elsewhere. When I watched one of the convicted war criminals admit his guilt and break down in court, saying he was genuinely sorry for all he did, I was deeply moved. I forgive him a little.”

“”

*The apology is important to us. It shows us society recognizes we were not responsible for what happened to us.*

**“Kosovo’s attempt to help wartime rape survivors reopens old wounds”  
(May 10, 2018)**

<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2018/0510/Kosovo-s-attempt-to-help-wartime-rape-survivors-reopens-old-wounds>

This *Christian Science Monitor* article shows the complexity of issues linked to some governments’ efforts to provide recognition and restitution to survivors. Two decades after the 1998–99 conflict in Kosovo, the government finally adopted legislation providing compensation for rape survivors. Journalist Kristen Chick, however, reported on the resulting challenges for protecting the anonymity of survivors and the “unrealistic levels of documentation” requested from applicants.

## **Sexual violence and impunity in Colombia**

**“Colombian reporter Jineth Bedoya Lima gives voice to abused women”  
(Dec. 14, 2013)**

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/14/jineth-bedoya-lima-colombia-women>

**“It opens a window of hope: Case will potentially set precedent for sexual violence survivors in Colombia” (March 15, 2021)**

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/mar/15/jineth-bedoya-colombian-journalist-sexual-violence>

*The Guardian*, in several follow-up articles, has reported on sexual violence in warfare in Colombia, weaving in a compelling manner the evolution and aftermath of that protracted conflict with the story of journalist Jineth Bedoya Lima. Now Deputy Editor of *El Tiempo*, she has both covered the abduction, torture, and rape of women and, in 2000, suffered the same at the

hands of paramilitary fighters after interviewing a detained militia leader. In the 2013 *Guardian* article, Bedoya Lima specified:

“In Colombia, the levels of impunity for crimes of sexual violence have reached 98%. Of the 150,000 rapes of women that had been recognized by the paramilitary groups, only 2% have resulted in guilty verdicts.”

*The Guardian’s* March 2021 article was published on the day of Bedoya Lima’s testimony before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. It quoted Jonathan Bock, the executive director of Colombia’s Press Freedom Foundation (FLIP), one of the organizations providing legal representation:

“This case is incredibly important as it provides the opportunity to set a precedent for the region on sexual violence carried out against journalists under the banner of armed conflict. Sexual violence against women was one of the great atrocities of the conflict and Jineth has come to represent hundreds of survivors.”

In a June 2021 update for the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas,<sup>45</sup> Bock also emphasized Bedoya Lima’s revictimization through the frequent retelling of her story, including during the March Inter-American Court hearings. On October 18, 2021, the Court ruled that Colombia is responsible for her abduction and torture and ordered a series of remedies to protect women journalists.

**JINETH BEDOYA’S STATEMENT**

*Jineth Bedoya Lima prepared the following remarks to be presented in March 2020 for the Center for Women’s Global Leadership’s “Global Dialogue” on ending gender-based violence in the world of work, which was canceled due to the pandemic. Translation by Marilse Rodríguez-García.*

Today I can bear witness to what it is like to die time and again during 20 years of impunity. Today I know that I have to come alive time and again, in the midst of indifference, oblivion, and being victimized

***Today I can bear witness to what it is like to die time and again.***

anew, because being a woman has led me to confront targeting, discrimination and, of course, having to bear the blame.

Now I am fully aware that I am part of a scandalous statistic: More than two million women raped during the Colombian armed conflict because they were women, and one of thousands who face harassment and abuse while doing their job.

The Office of the Attorney General, the Colombian entity responsible for investigating and prosecuting crimes, took 11 years to ask the basic questions to establish the crime committed against me and still has not delivered the results of my claim.



It wasn't until 2016 that the paramilitary I had never been able to interview acknowledged his responsibility for the crimes committed against me; he was identified as one of the actual perpetrators. But this man owes me and Colombia the rest of the truth.

There has been no investigation of the generals of the Police and the Army who were implicated in my journalistic investigations and who would have benefitted from silencing me.

I decided the week after I was freed that the best way to end the pain was through suicide. But I lacked the courage to do it, or perhaps my love for my work got the best of me, because journalism gave me a second chance to live.

These have been very difficult years, with deep depressions, serious health problems, and a second suicide attempt. Despite that, I never, never wanted to stop working in journalism, and by my efforts I earned a position at the newspaper *El Tiempo*, the most important in Colombia. Today I am its Deputy Editor.

Almost 20 years after the crime that was perpetrated against me, I still have to work with a security scheme (seven bodyguards) constantly protecting me. I have to travel in an armored car and, to be able to do my work as a reporter, I often have to hide from my bodyguards in order to protect my sources.

On May 25, 2000, they silenced me. The investigation I worked on for so many years was interrupted by what happened to me that day. To date, I have not been able to publish it. But perhaps it is time to do so, despite

the risk. I don't have anything to lose. On the contrary, these years of struggling to claim my rights and those of millions of women allowed me to take my case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2010. And, toward the end of 2019, the Inter-American Court accepted my complaint.

For the first time, the Colombian government will be judged before an international tribunal for the crime of sexual violence. I believe that this is why I am still alive; because my case is one of millions, but to obtain a sentence for this crime will set a precedent not only for Colombia, but for the hemisphere.

On Sept. 9, 2009, I decided to speak publicly about my rape. That was the day the campaign "No Es Hora De Callar" – Now Is Not the Time to Remain Silent – was born. With that I began my work of calling attention to and compiling cases of sexual violence, abuse and harassment, and training dozens of journalists in Colombia and Latin America on how to report on gender-based violence.

Raising my voice made possible that, by presidential decree, the anniversary of my kidnapping (May 25) was declared the National Day to Commemorate Victims of Sexual Violence. And today I belong to the Gender Parity Initiative being established by the Colombian state government, to work toward equity in the workplace, as well as to stop and punish harassment and abuse.

There is much to be done. Certainly, some other day the depression will return because it is difficult to turn the page when impunity lives with you.

### 4.4.3 SURVIVORS' AGENCY AND SOLUTIONS STORIES

When reporting on sexual violence in conflict, the media, understandably, tend to focus on the atrocities that victims endure and on the scope of the devastation caused by this weapon of war. Survivors, however, as well as human rights and humanitarian workers, keep stressing how crucial it is to also write about their role in rebuilding communities, seeking judicial redress, and advocating for peace.

Following are some examples of media coverage that describe their quest for solutions and successfully portray survivors as women rights' defenders, organizers, and agents of change.

#### SEMA, the Global Network of Victims and Survivors to End Wartime Sexual Violence

**'Impunity reigns': Six survivors of sexual violence speak out (June 24, 2019)**

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jun/24/impunity-reigns-six-survivors-of-sexual-violence-speak-out>

The network was founded in 2019 as an initiative of the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation. Dr. Mukwege, a Congolese gynecologist and women's rights advocate, shared the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize with Yazidi survivor Nadia Murad. The network, among other services, provides a model of care for the legal and psychosocial support of survivors and advocates for concrete solutions in addressing wartime sexual violence.

One of the SEMA members ("sema" means "speaking out" in Swahili) featured by *The Guardian*, is Carmen Zape Paja, from the Indigenous Nasa community, who was raped by FARC rebels in Colombia. She is using traditional tools to protect the rights of Indigenous women targeted by wartime sexual violence.

#### Organizing against post-conflict gender-based violence in Colombia

**"The Invisible Army of Women Fighting Sexual Violence in Colombia" (Oct. 24, 2016)**

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a5278013/domestic-violence-sexual-abuse-colombia/>

This thorough piece of solution journalism,<sup>46</sup> set in the Afro-Colombian port city of Buenaventura, described the different ways that women organize to cope with and mitigate the impact of wartime sexual violence, its normalization, and challenges faced by survivors who attempt to report it.

## Mobile courts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

“DRC: Mobile courts deliver justice to remote areas” (Sept. 26, 2016)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/9/26/drc-mobile-courts-deliver-justice-to-remote-areas>

This Al Jazeera article<sup>47</sup> looked at the mobile courts system set up to hear the cases of survivors of sexual violence in isolated areas, such as the small city of Bunia, in the eastern DRC. It also reports on the role of NGOs who both support the courts and challenge their effectiveness in fighting the impunity that prevents the reduction of conflict-related sexual violence.

Media houses interested in solutions-oriented reporting can disseminate relevant recommendations to governments included in the UN documents that are mentioned in the Background information at the start of this chapter.

### 4.4.4 CASE STUDY: BRINGING JUSTICE THROUGH MEDIA ATTENTION

*American journalist Lauren Wolfe was the founder of the Women Under Siege Project of the Washington, D.C.-based Women’s Media Center. The project site publishes investigations from around the world into conflict-related sexual violence.*

#### The Village that could not sleep

*Excerpted from Lauren Wolfe’s account, which was published by the Center for Journalism Ethics (2016)*

“Unknown men in an impoverished village of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo were kidnapping dozens of girls at night, gang-raping them, and leaving them in a desiccated

***I realized that international media attention might bring justice to this village.***

cassava field. Aged 18 months to 11 years old, the girls were “destroyed,” they told me. For two years, I’d been the only Western journalist reporting on these rapes – which allegedly involved sorcery – when I realized that international media attention might bring justice to this village. I went to DRC to do a long-form story for *The Guardian*.

After days of immersive reporting, I identified the alleged perpetrator, which no one had seemed to be able to do in all that time. The man was a member of parliament running a kind of makeshift militia. I confirmed that an investigator, with whom I began an intense journalist-source relationship – had also identified the same suspect. He and I

were the only ones who knew, he said. I consequently agreed with him that I would not reveal anything publicly until arrests were made. They would be imminent, he said.

Five months later, no arrests had been made and four more girls had been raped. I began to grapple with the hardest decision of my career: How could I publish a story that might do anything to stop this horrifying violence? Sharing too much information or publishing at all could bring harm not only to the investigation itself but to the families being victimized. Do I wait until arrests are made, despite the fact that there has been no move toward making them in nearly three years? I made a decision finally. The results were immediate... ”

“[*The Guardian*] op-ed went up on June 20. Four hours later, suddenly, the warrants to arrest the MP and 67 of his men were issued. Twelve hours later the men were all in custody. The

investigator emailed me to say: ‘We have made the arrests. You can go ahead and publish everything now.’

In my nearly 20 years as a reporter and editor, I have always had a solid belief that our work can and must highlight suffering, injustice, and under-told stories. What happened in this small village in DRC reaffirmed that journalism done exactly and without fear can create change for the public good. I began the process of reworking my long-form piece to reveal all without identifying my central source, as I’d learned my connection to him was already bringing him threats from his superiors, who did not want him to get (much deserved) credit for the arrests.

In August, my long-form story went out in the print edition of the newspaper. I protected the identity of my local sources, and allowed the voices of the survivors to be heard around the world. Not a single girl in Kavumu has been abducted or raped since.”

## 4.5 RESOURCES

### 4.5.1 BACKGROUND (REPORTS AND WEBSITES)

#### **Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)**

[www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)

ACLED is a U.S.-based disaggregated data collection, analysis, and global crisis mapping project. See the 2019 key data points and high-risk areas on sexual violence in conflict:

[https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACLED-Fact-Sheet\\_-Sexual-Violence-in-Conflict\\_6.2019.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACLED-Fact-Sheet_-Sexual-Violence-in-Conflict_6.2019.pdf)

#### ***‘I don’t know if they realized I was a person’: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia***

Amnesty International (August 2021) 39 pages

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR2545692021ENGLISH.PDF>

#### ***The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia***

Asia Foundation (September 2017) 264 pages

<https://asiafoundation.org/publication/state-conflict-violence-asia/>

The book includes a chapter, “Conflict in Asia and the Role of Gender-Based Violence,” which was written by Jacqui True, Director of Monash University Center for Gender, Peace, and Security, in Melbourne, Australia. (pp. 230–239)

#### **“Sexual violence in armed conflicts: A violation of international humanitarian law and human rights law”**

International Review of the Red Cross (2015), 96 (894), 503–538. Also available in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish.

<https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/sexual-violence-armed-conflicts-violation-international-humanitarian-law-and-human-rights>

Author Gloria Gaggioli, former Thematic Legal Adviser at the International Committee of the Red Cross, is the Director of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights.

### **Justice Without Frontiers**

<http://www.jwf.org.lb/>

This NGO, based in Beirut, Lebanon, works toward the advancement of international criminal justice and promotes the rights of women who are victims of sexual violence in conflict. Attorney Brigitte Chelebian is the founder and director of the organization.

### ***“Conflict Zones and COVID-19’s Impact on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Reporting”***

Monash University (Melbourne, Australia). December 2020.

By Jacqui True, and co-authored with Sarah E. Davies, Phyu Phyu Oo, and Yolanda Rivereros-Morales.

<https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/12/08/1381856/conflict-zones-and-covid-19-its-impact-on-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-reporting-and-research>

### **Mukwege Foundation**

<https://www.mukwegefoundation.org>

International human rights organization working with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. It is based in The Hague. Dr. Denis Mukwege of the Democratic Republic of Congo, was a 2018 Laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize.

### **Nadia’s Initiative**

<https://www.nadiasinitiative.org>

Founded by Nadia Murad who shared the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize with Dr. Mukwege. She is a leading advocate for survivors of genocide and sexual violence. The organization, headquartered in Washington, D.C., advocates globally for survivors of sexual violence, while focusing on rebuilding Yazidi communities. It is a key consultant in the development of the draft Murad Code (see below).

### ***The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes***

Oxford University Press (January 2022) 984 pages

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-atrocity-crimes-9780190915629?cc=us&lang=en>

Includes a chapter by Kim Thuy Seelinger and Elisabeth Wood on Sexual Violence as a Practice of War: Implications for the Investigation and Prosecution of Atrocity Crimes.

### **SEMA Network**

[www.semanetwork.org](http://www.semanetwork.org)

SEMA is a global network of victims and survivors to end wartime sexual violence and impunity, headquartered in The Hague.

### **Synergy for Justice**

<https://www.synergyforjustice.org>

London-based, women-led justice organization working globally to advance accountability for torture and sexual violence.

See especially:

#### ***Knowledge, Attitudes and Stigma Surrounding Sexual Violence in Syrian Communities***

(April 2021)

[https://synergy-for-justice.cdn.prismic.io/synergy-for-justice/36206196-a307-4486-8651-eda8b178e266\\_FINAL\\_Stigma+Report\\_EN+April+2021.pdf?mc\\_cid=2128b45eea&mc\\_eid=3cc25cfda7](https://synergy-for-justice.cdn.prismic.io/synergy-for-justice/36206196-a307-4486-8651-eda8b178e266_FINAL_Stigma+Report_EN+April+2021.pdf?mc_cid=2128b45eea&mc_eid=3cc25cfda7)

#### ***Principles for Global Action: Preventing and Addressing Stigma Associated with Conflicted-Related Sexual Violence***

Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (UK Foreign Office), September 2017

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/645636/psvi\\_Principles\\_for\\_Global\\_Action.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/645636/psvi_Principles_for_Global_Action.pdf)

### **Trial International**

<https://trialinternational.org>

This Geneva-based international NGO fights impunity for international crimes and publishes annual reports on the prosecution of sexual violence:

[https://trialinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Unforgotten\\_2019.pdf](https://trialinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Unforgotten_2019.pdf)

### **We Are Not Weapons of War (WWoW)**

<http://www.notaweaponofwar.org>

Available in Arabic, English, French and Spanish

The organization's founder and President Céline Bardet is an international jurist specializing in war crimes. WWoW fights impunity against rape as a war crime.

### **Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice**

<https://4genderjustice.org>

Based in The Hague, this international women's human rights organization advocates for gender justice through the International Criminal Court, as well as domestic courts and mechanisms. Its 2019 consultation with survivors of sexual violence and civil society led to the development of principles on sexual violence.

### ***The Hague Principles on Sexual Violence***

<https://4genderjustice.org/ftp-files/publications/The-Hague-Principles-on-Sexual-Violence.pdf>

Available in Arabic, English, French, Georgian, Russian and Spanish

This set of three documents includes The Civil Society Declaration on Sexual Violence which “provides guidance on what makes violence ‘sexual’, especially to survivors.”

### **UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub**

The regional hub, based in Amman, Jordan, publishes monthly Regional Situation Reports for the Syria Crisis, which regularly include information about the humanitarian impact of the conflict and its gender dimensions.



## United Nations

<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/digital-library/reports/sg-reports/>

Each April, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict releases the UN Secretary-General’s report on this issue.

### 4.5.2 RELEVANT HANDBOOKS AND MEDIA GUIDELINES

#### *Reporting on Sexual Violence in Conflict*

Dart Centre Europe (May 2021). Available in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Swahili

<https://dartcenter.org/resources/reporting-sexual-violence-conflict>

A set of comprehensive guidelines “designed for deeper learning, quick reference and easy sharing with colleagues.” Aimed at promoting contextual reporting and a better understanding of the impact of trauma, these thoughtful guidelines focus on interviewing best practices that respect the dignity and voice of survivors.

#### **“Visual choices: Covering sexual violence in conflict zones”**

by Nina Berman (May 13, 2021)

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Columbia Journalism School, New York)

<https://dartcenter.org/resources/visual-choices-covering-sexual-violence-conflict-zones>

#### *Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence During Conflict*

by Nayanika Mookherjee and Najmunnahar Keya (2018). Available in Bangla and English.

<https://www.ethical-testimonies-svc.org.uk/>

This unique set includes guidelines for journalists and researchers documenting wartime rape, a graphic novel, and an animated film. It is based on research by Mookherjee, Anthropology Professor, on the 1971 war that led to the formation of Bangladesh and resulted in the rape of 200,000 women by the Pakistani army. Interviews with survivors led to the development of those guidelines for ethical reporting and documentation.

### ***IICI Guidelines on Remote Interviewing***

Institute for International Criminal Investigations (August 2021) 14 pages

<https://iici.global/0.5.1/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IICI-Remote-Interview-Guidelines.pdf>

These guidelines were drafted to help conduct remote interviews mostly in the context of investigations into grave human rights violations in conflict-affected areas. Although prepared for investigators and researchers working for international entities such as UN agencies, NGOs and commissions of inquiry, the guidelines can also be very useful to media professionals.

### ***Reporting for Change: A Handbook for Local Journalists in Crisis Areas***

Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2004)

Available in Arabic, English, Farsi, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Russian

<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/print-publications/reporting-change-handbook-local-journalists-crisis-areas>

Geographic focus is Central Asia.

### ***Murad Code***

<https://www.muradcode.com/draft-murad-code>

This Draft Global Code of Conduct for Investigating and Documenting Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (named after Yazidi advocate Nadia Murad) is the result of a remarkable interdisciplinary collaboration between Nadia's Initiative, the UK government's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI), and the Institute for International Criminal Investigations. The Code is being drafted for organizations and individuals, such as journalists, investigators, researchers, and interpreters, who work in direct contact with survivors.

### ***Conflict-Sensitive Coverage: A Manual for Journalists Reporting Conflict in West Africa***

Edited by Audrey S. Gadzekpo (2017)

School of Information and Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

[https://www.academia.edu/30870534/Conflict-Sensitive\\_Coverage\\_A\\_Manual\\_for\\_Journalists\\_Reporting\\_Conflict\\_in\\_West\\_Africa](https://www.academia.edu/30870534/Conflict-Sensitive_Coverage_A_Manual_for_Journalists_Reporting_Conflict_in_West_Africa)

Includes a chapter on "Media coverage on gender during conflict and peace-building" by Peace Adzo Medie.

***Guidelines for Gender and Conflict-Sensitive Reporting***

UN Women Europe and Central Asia (2019). Available in English and Ukrainian.

<https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/guidelines-for-gender-and-conflict-sensitive-reporting>

***Reporting on Violence Against Women and Girls***

by Anne-Marie Impe

UNESCO publication (2020) 153 pages

Available in Arabic, English, French, Kirghiz, Russian and Spanish

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Includes a section (1.9.) on “violence against women in conflicts” (pp.82 – 93)

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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE  
IS A CRITICAL HEALTH ISSUE.

*UN Committee on the Elimination of  
Discrimination Against Women*



## CHAPTER 5

# Reporting on violence against sexual and reproductive health rights

Human rights organizations, UN agencies and academic institutions have published numerous reports on discrimination and violence against the sexual and reproductive health rights of women and girls.

But such monitoring and research has not resulted in more media coverage and public awareness. Contributing to this, according to communications and gender researcher Victoria Andelsman Alvarez, are the overall “sidelining of reproductive and sexual health issues” in the media and “the persistence of cultural and professional patterns that marginalize stories about women’s rights issues.”<sup>1</sup> When those are related to bodily autonomy and integrity, their episodic

portrayal is too often limited to newsmaking tragedies or controversies, or tainted by harmful stereotypes and stigmas.

*“The gender gap in coverage of reproductive issues,”*<sup>2</sup> a 2016 study by the Washington, D.C.-based Women’s Media Center, used the example of the U.S. media landscape to address the dominance of male voices in bylines and quoted sources. These findings were particularly evident in wire service stories, which are widely disseminated.

This section seeks to identify generally underreported issues, and propose resources that may help reduce coverage gaps and shortcomings specifically around sexual and reproductive rights. Selected examples of media good practices and newsworthy opportunities can provide some guidance and enhance the scope, depth, accuracy, and impact of reporting on them.

## 5.1 DEFINITIONS

The foundation for the protection of sexual and reproductive health rights was laid in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 12 affirms “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.”<sup>3</sup>

The 1979 **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**, in its Article 16 on marriage and family relations, articulates the specific obligation of countries to ensure that men and women are granted “the same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, Article 12 requires states parties to the Convention to eliminate any form of discrimination that would deny them the right to the highest attainable standard of health.

The **Programme of Action of the landmark UN International Conference on Population and Development** held in Cairo in 1994 and adopted by 179 countries, included the first precise definitions of sexual and reproductive health and articulation of related rights.<sup>5</sup> It also noted some of the main factors that may hinder their enjoyment, such as “discriminatory social practices, negative attitudes towards women and girls, and the limited power many women and girls have over their sexual and reproductive lives.”

International standards and state obligations were further clarified, among others, by two UN committees that have been addressing the complex dimensions of those issues:

- The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women that monitors the implementation of the convention, in its General Recommendation No. 24 (1999), outlined the obligations of states parties to the Convention “to protect rights relating to women’s health since gender-based violence is a critical health *Gender-based violence is a critical health issue.*”<sup>6</sup>
- The Committee in charge of monitoring the implementation of the 1966 Covenant, in its General comment No. 22 (2016), stressed that enjoyment of those rights is further restricted when people, especially women and girls, “experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that exacerbate exclusion in both law and practice.”<sup>7</sup> Disproportionately affected groups, as identified by the Committee, are “poor women, persons with disabilities, migrants, Indigenous or other ethnic minorities, adolescents, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex [LGBTQI] persons and people living with HIV/AIDS ... Trafficked and sexually exploited women, girls and boys are subject to violence, coercion and discrimination in their everyday lives ... Women and girls

living in conflict situations are disproportionately exposed to high risk of violations of their rights, including through systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization.”<sup>8</sup>

The Committee also spelled out that the core obligations of the 171 states that ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights include the enactment and enforcement of “the legal prohibition of harmful practices and gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation, child and forced marriage and domestic and sexual violence, including marital rape,” as well as the adoption of “measures to prevent unsafe abortions.”<sup>9</sup>

**The UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls** has also made significant contributions to the articulation of the right to health and the obstacles to its nondiscriminatory enjoyment. Its 2016 analysis of this issue addressed the “instrumentalization of women’s bodies for political, cultural, religious and economic purposes.”<sup>10</sup> It specifically looked at the harmful effects of son preference in patriarchal cultures; stigmatization (for instance, regarding menstruation and menopause), and the discriminatory use of criminal law.

The Working Group has also commented on the evolving international human rights framework, as well as the regressive trends affecting its application at the states’ level, especially around the criminalization of pregnancy termination.<sup>11</sup>

The Working Group has looked at the exacerbated violations of the rights to health and safety in situations of crises. In 2021, it warned that, in addressing prevention and responses, “if the focus is strictly placed on a sudden event or a series of events as the defining element of a crisis, the gendered impact experienced by women and girls and the underlying determinants of the crisis which affects them in very specific ways are at risk of not being fully addressed.”<sup>12</sup> This frequently applies to the media coverage of such crises.

The 2021 UNFPA *State of World Population* report, which focused entirely on bodily autonomy and integrity, further commented that “as a general principle, rights related to bodily integrity prevent the State from intruding on someone’s physical body without obtaining free and informed consent. The foundation for this notion flows from Article 7”<sup>13</sup> of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which stipulated: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”<sup>14</sup> Many violations that do not rise to that level of harm still have, however, a traumatizing and dehumanizing impact.

## 5.2 THE IMPACT OF SYSTEMIC, DISCRIMINATION-ROOTED, AND INTERSECTIONAL VIOLENCE

Sexual and reproductive health services need to be available, accessible, affordable and acceptable for all women and girls, and not restricted by inequalities, prejudice and stigmatization that amplify women’s risks of being abused and exploited.

Intersecting forms of discrimination and abuse can further increase the vulnerability of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and communities. Examples include: Women with disabilities who are also Indigenous or in the throes of humanitarian emergencies; migrant domestic workers affected by their legal status; transgender women living with HIV, and adolescent girls in stateless communities. All of them face additional risks, barriers and injustices, including being denied access to essential health services or being exposed to sexual violence.

“”

*Intersecting forms of discrimination and abuse can further increase the vulnerability of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and communities.*

The harmful reproductive health outcomes of sexual violence are frequently neglected, especially when media coverage focuses on its most immediate or attention-grabbing circumstances, instead of its impact in terms of reproductive rights violations.

Although those violations do increase in situations of crisis, it should be noted that some of the historically marginalized communities most at risk from intersectional violence are often in a “persistent state of crisis” as illustrated by the testimonies received in 2021 by the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. It noted that many women belonging to ethnic and minority groups (including Indigenous, Roma, and women and girls of African descent) “have been systematically subjected to reproductive violence, including forced pregnancy and sterilization.”<sup>15</sup>

### 5.2.1 WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES

The underreported and intersecting forms of discrimination and abuse that these women are subjected to are especially critical issues. Worldwide, one in seven people is a person with a disability, for an estimated total of one billion people.<sup>16</sup>

“Women with disabilities face multiple barriers to the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights, equal recognition before the law and access to justice,”<sup>17</sup> the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its General comment No. 3 (2016) noted. The Special Rapporteur, in a 2017 report focusing on violence against girls, stated that “disability is more prevalent

among women, and that the intersection between young age, disability and gender results in both aggravated forms of discrimination and specific human rights violations against girls and young women.”<sup>18</sup>

The Delhi-based digital news magazine *The Bastion*, reported that “although their reproductive rights are enshrined in numerous legal instruments, an alarming 93% of women and girls with disabilities in **India** have been, and continue to be, denied them.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to their vulnerability to sexual violence, it said, they are also at risk of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, forced sterilization and suicide.

In the **United States**, according to the National Indian Country Clearinghouse on Sexual Assault,<sup>20</sup> “American Indian/Alaska Native people with physical, mental, cognitive and mobility disabilities suffer some of the highest rates of sexual violence.” Less than 3% of women report these crimes in part because most perpetrators “serve as the victim’s primary caregiver. Thus, the victim may be dependent upon [him] for food, clothing, health-care and shelter.”

## 5.2.2 FORCED STERILIZATION

Forced sterilization, recognized by the UN as a form of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, is one of the most egregious examples of reproductive violence based on overlapping systems and forms of discrimination, including where women with disabilities are concerned. Also targeted, as described in a UN interagency statement, are women living with HIV, Indigenous and ethnic minority women and girls, as well as transgender and intersex persons.<sup>21</sup>

The following situations illustrate ongoing violations that are ripe for sustained media attention, while the selected examples of investigative reporting feature impactful best practices.

- In **China’s** northwestern minority regions, campaigns to drastically reduce birthrates among the Muslim population have been oppressing women through compulsory sterilization, mandatory gynecological exams and birth control, and forced abortions. The often-referenced reporting of Associated Press’ global investigative team was a model of detailed and nuanced coverage that has contributed to counteracting the Chinese government efforts to “erase” those women, including through punitive internment.<sup>22</sup>

As part of its “Under-reported Stories” on women’s rights, the *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, a year later, published an exclusive news update based on a data analysis by German researcher Adrian Zenz that exposed the ongoing drastic suppression of Uyghur birth rates.<sup>23</sup>

Coverage from the *Washington Post* is also worth mentioning for its focus on the neglected Kazakh minority, in addition to Uyghur women. Correspondent Amie Ferris-Rotman, after receiving a 2020 Human Rights Watch Merit Award for her investigative feature, tweeted: “Speaking to ethnic Kazakh women, we uncovered sexual violence and humiliation which rights groups said revealed a wider pattern of abuse directed specifically against women, aimed at curbing their ability to reproduce.”<sup>24</sup>

- In the **United States**, the media has been instrumental in exposing involuntary sterilizations against a disproportionate number of incarcerated women of color, including:
  - › The California-based Center for Investigative Reporting coverage of California state prison practices, such as unauthorized tubal ligations and coercively soliciting approval for sterilization during labor.<sup>25</sup>
  - › The following year, the Center for Investigative Reporting’s social scientist Lindsay Green-Barber described the impact of the story: “Media across the country were reporting on the investigation, there were many editorials published nationally and internationally, and California lawmakers responded to the story immediately after it was published, calling for an investigation.”<sup>26</sup>
  - › Investigations by the non-profit news organizations, *The Intercept*<sup>27</sup> and *Prism*,<sup>28</sup> among others, of the inhumane treatment of migrant women in the Irwin County Detention Center in the state of Georgia. The abuses included unnecessary and nonconsensual hysterectomies and the denial of access to abortion care for teens who were pregnant as a result of rape. In May 2021, the government announced the closure of that detention facility.

### 5.3 REPRODUCTIVE VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

“Women and girls are disproportionately exposed to a high risk of violations of their rights, including through systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization,”<sup>29</sup> warned the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights in its General Comment No. 22 (2016). When crises arise, not only is violence exacerbated but newly recognized forms of gender-based violence occur, such as **reproductive violence**.

While needing to focus on current conflict situations, the media can follow up on past conflicts that continue to affect the mental and reproductive health of survivors, in part due to a lack of accountability and support services.

- The International Criminal Court, in February 2021, convicted Dominic Ongwen, a former commander of the Lord’s Resistance Army, of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in **Uganda** in the early 2000s, including rapes and sexual enslavement. *Al Jazeera* reported that “Ongwen was the first person convicted by the ICC of the crime of **forced pregnancy**, for abducting and raping so-called ‘wives,’ some of whom were underage.”<sup>30</sup>

According to scholar Rosemary Grey (University of Sydney, Australia), it was also “the first [case] to expressly consider the reproductive autonomy of **individual** women and girls.” Grey further stressed that the responsibility of raising children born as a result of violence is “a burden which is compounded by the disproportionate impact of poverty on women and girls, and the social stigma that women who become pregnant by ‘the enemy’ often face.”<sup>31</sup>

Although the international coverage of Ongwen’s sentencing in May 2021 was quite extensive, it rarely addressed those multi-layered issues of reproductive violence and justice.

- Some of the less covered conflicts of our time, such as the persistent civil war in **Cameroon**, have also seriously endangered the reproductive health rights of women. Although the media has reported on rape and other forms of sexual torture, the indirect impact of this Anglophone Crisis has been overlooked. A noteworthy exception is the reporting done in 2020 by Radio France Internationale: “Women bear the brunt of violence in Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis.”<sup>32</sup> Among the internally displaced civilians, pregnant women have been delivering babies in the bush, and young girls who have been assaulted deal with resulting health issues.
- The abuses committed between 2009 and 2016 as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast **Nigeria**, including the abduction of an estimated 7,000 women and girls, were widely reported in the media. Despite 23% of those internally displaced persons having been adolescent girls of



reproductive age,<sup>33</sup> the coverage often overlooked such issues as sexually transmitted infections, sex trafficking, early and forced marriages, and forced pregnancies. Also lacking were mentions of the ongoing consequences (including on maternal mortality and morbidity) of the survivors' lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services.

- The plight of internally displaced women whose reproductive health rights have been violated during the **Syrian conflict** has been consistently documented by UNFPA. This includes pregnant women who had to give birth unassisted while seeking shelter or who had miscarriages on the road.

UNFPA's Jordan-based Regional Syria Response Hub has assisted and trained journalists reporting on gender-based violence in humanitarian settings.<sup>34</sup> In addition to addressing core ethical principles for journalists, it also has been providing guidance on covering reproductive and sexual violence.

## 5.4 REPORTING GAPS, HIDDEN IMPACT, AND NEW ANGLES

This section illustrates how to address reporting gaps, seek new angles and perspectives, pay attention to the hidden impact of crisis situations (such as the COVID pandemic), and monitor developments, especially in the legislative and policy areas.

### 5.4.1 ABOUT ABORTION

The denial of safe abortion is discriminatory and a form of gender-based violence recognized by international law,<sup>35</sup> which should be reflected in media coverage. Reporting on the adoption of restrictive laws and policies, and on trends and advocacy efforts to remove them, can be especially challenging for journalists to cover accurately, fairly, and safely.

Often missing from such coverage is the lasting impact on the health of women. The UN Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 36 (2018) clearly stipulated that “restrictions on the ability of women or girls to seek abortion must not, inter alia, jeopardize their lives, [and] subject them to physical or mental pain or suffering.”<sup>36</sup>

In a September 2019 joint statement, UN human rights experts further noted:

“Denial of access to safe and legal abortion drives service provision underground into the hands of unqualified practitioners, and exacerbates the risks to the health and safety of the affected women, in the form of pregnancy-related injuries and death. It is estimated that 25 million unsafe abortions take place every year, causing the preventable deaths of about 22,000 women, almost all in developing countries. Additionally, an estimated seven million women and girls experience injuries resulting in impairment and infertility.”<sup>37</sup>

Coverage of the following abortion-related issues illustrates ways in which impactful stories can address some of the most neglected or mischaracterized situations.

#### “A story that needed to be told”

In an email to the Center for Women’s Global Leadership,<sup>38</sup> *The Guardian* journalist Liz Ford summarized her interest in reporting on one of the “immoral sentences”<sup>39</sup> imposed in **El Salvador** on several women accused of illegal terminations of pregnancy after having suffered stillbirths.

“In 2014, I heard that women in El Salvador were being charged with aggravated homicide and imprisoned for up to 40 years after experiencing an obstetric emergency. It shocked me beyond anything I’d heard before. It was chilling to think that a woman who has already experienced the pain and grief of miscarriage or stillbirth could end up handcuffed to a hospital bed and accused of murder because a doctor believed she had attempted an abortion. El Salvador has a total ban on abortion. This was a story about injustice, about women’s reproductive rights and about poverty. As well as receiving inadequate healthcare, the convicted women came from low-income backgrounds and were given insufficient legal advice.”

Other articles in *The Guardian*, under either Ford’s<sup>40</sup> or Nina Lakhani’s byline,<sup>41</sup> have focused on similar sentences following different types of obstetric emergencies. In several cases, follow-up stories have included an examination of the hidden and cruel impact, including for girls and rape victims, of such a prosecutorial approach. In a landmark case also reported by *The Guardian* in March 2021, civil society plaintiffs requested that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights “mandate that the state take responsibility for failing to guarantee [the victim’s] rights to health and life.”<sup>42</sup>

### The harmful practice of “abortion reversal”

The global media platform *openDemocracy* produced a standard-setting investigative series in 2021 on a “potentially dangerous, unproven and unethical”<sup>43</sup> treatment to reverse medication-based abortions. “

As of March 2021, doctors willing to prescribe this so-called abortion pill reversal had been identified on four continents. *OpenDemocracy* findings suggested that “women’s lives are being put in jeopardy by misinformation and harmful practices”<sup>44</sup> that may prove fatal.

*Women’s lives are being put in jeopardy by misinformation and harmful practices.*

After the *openDemocracy* series, the UK General Medical Council opened an investigation and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada denounced the practice.

### Sex-selective abortions

A UN interagency statement drafted in 2011 by the WHO Department of Reproductive Health and Research<sup>45</sup> indicated that “sex selection in favour of boys is a symptom of pervasive social, cultural, political and economic injustices against women, and a manifest violation of human rights ... As a result, women are often under immense family and societal pressure to produce sons. Failure to do so may lead to consequences that include violence, rejection by the marital family or even death ... Evidence shows that if

women do not have access to safe abortion services they often turn to unsafe options – or if they cannot terminate a pregnancy, they are forced into child-bearing until a boy has been born.”

This joint UN statement, among others, addresses the complexity of sex-selective abortions’ root causes, individual motivations, implications, and possible solutions. Many aspects of this practice, including historical, legal, and ethical, are often overlooked or oversimplified in the media coverage of the problem. This could be remedied by:

- › **Acknowledging the specific forms of coercion and reasons behind women’s decisions** without demonizing the women who opt to terminate such pregnancies (on grounds listed, for instance, in the BBC online “Ethics Guide”).<sup>46</sup>
- › **Avoiding myths and assumptions.** This is especially important in the case of Western media reporting on the practice in other parts of the world or within local immigrant communities. Some of those myths and assumptions were clearly addressed in a 2014 study on sex-selective abortion laws in the U.S. by the University of Chicago Law School International Human Rights Clinic and the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum:<sup>47</sup>
  - › “India and China are not the only countries where male-biased sex ratios at birth exist. [These] can be found in many countries throughout the world, including those with predominantly white populations,” such as some countries of the South Caucasus and Western Balkans, which have some of the most skewed sex ratios at birth.<sup>48</sup>
  - › “An analysis of recent national data of sex ratios at birth of foreign-born Chinese, Indians and Koreans shows that these groups have more girls overall than white Americans.”

*Healthy Debate*, a Canadian source of healthcare information, published an analysis of research and reporting on sex-selective abortions in Indo-Canadian communities.<sup>49</sup> It especially mentioned occasional media reinforcement of stereotypes by framing the issue as an imported, questionable practice devoid of its economic, social, and cultural context. The tendency is often compounded by the reliance on non-disaggregated data that is presented without context.

“By only sparking public conversation around the issue when a research study is published, the media fossilize the Indo-Canadian community and neglect important movements of resistance to daughter devaluation that are taking place both in Canada and India,” Toronto-based *Healthy Debate* contributors Amrita Kumar and Manvir Bhangu wrote.

- › **Addressing the complexity of remedies.** This challenge has been especially well articulated in the media both by an article in *The Conversation* (2018) – “The ethical case against sex-selective abortion isn’t simple”<sup>50</sup> – and by *NBC News* under the byline of journalist and attorney Safia Samee Ali, who reported on an increasing number of U.S. states adopting legislation banning sex-selective abortions.

“Since the laws are being framed as an equal rights issue as opposed to a reproductive rights issue,” Ali wrote, “it has become a divisive quandary.”<sup>51</sup>

Media coverage of prenatal sex selection would overall benefit from greater focus on specific approaches to challenging underlying norms and attitudes, and promoting community-based solutions that are proving more effective than legal prohibitions. Given this deeply patriarchal context, journalists also need to keep the pregnant women at the center of the story and take into account the implications, among others, of government bans.

An excellent example of nuanced reporting on the complexity of those issues<sup>52</sup> – including historical and cultural contexts, from economic pressures to inheritance laws – is *The Guardian’s* coverage by Suzanne Moore of prenatal sex selection in **Armenia**, which banned the practice in 2016. At the time of her reporting in 2018, the country had one of the highest sex ratios at birth in the world (111.1). According to Moore, in the eastern region of Gavar, it even reached 120.

Her article addressed the considerations underlying the preference for boys, including the expectation that they will become breadwinners and provide for the family in old age. She also stressed the degree to which girls are not valued. “In the past”, Moore wrote, “if the last child was a girl, she might be called [Bavakan], the Armenian word for ‘enough,’ as if no one could be bothered to name her.”<sup>53</sup>

“”  
*If the last child was a girl, she might be called [Bavakan], the Armenian word for ‘enough’.*

She also reported on the converging efforts of civil society, the government, and international agencies to campaign against sex-selective abortion and promote human rights. “The article was widely translated and discussed in Armenia,” she wrote in a later blog.<sup>54</sup> “It is one of the pieces I have written that I am most proud of, as it helped to shift things.”

Moore’s reporting was later credited for having contributed to the success of the “My Name is Enough” civil society project: “We proudly wanted to share the results of the campaign with you,” one of its organizers wrote in an email to her, “because everything was based on your article and we truly owe you for its success.”<sup>55</sup> Armenia now has a declining sex ratio imbalance.

### 5.4.2 AT-RISK LGBTI PERSONS

Discrimination and violence related to sexual and reproductive health and rights impact LGBTI people on account of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics. The **Yogyakarta Principles**<sup>56</sup> outline the protection of those rights under international law, especially the right to the highest attainable standard of health and the protection from medical abuses.

#### “Corrective” treatment and violence

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex is not a medical condition. However, “gender incongruence” remained on the list of “mental and behavioural disorders” of the World Health Organization International Statistical Classification of Diseases as late as its 2019 edition (ICD-11). In its coverage of the WHO update, the BBC included an analysis by Gender and Identity Correspondent Megha Mohan, which is a noteworthy example of best practice in its inclusion of remaining concerns voiced by experts and advocates.<sup>57</sup>

A 2020 global report of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims<sup>58</sup> surveyed the range of so-called conversion or reparative therapy practices that can amount to torture or ill-treatment. It described many of the practices that have been condemned by UN independent experts and international human rights organizations. In a noteworthy explanatory piece (May 2021),<sup>59</sup> the BBC reported government responses to the banning of such harmful practices.

- In a 2015 joint report with the International Center for Research on Women, the World Bank gave the example of “corrective rape” to “cure a lesbian or bisexual woman of her non-normative sexuality by forcing her to have sex with a man or many men.” The report added that “documented cases in South Africa, Thailand, and India are on the rise.”<sup>60</sup>

A blog on “corrective” rape targeting Black lesbians in South Africa, published by the Leiden Institute for the Interdisciplinary Study of the Law,<sup>61</sup> addressed “the normalization of gendered and racialised violence” and the scourge of impunity in a country where “to date [January 2021] only three cases have gone to trial successfully.”

In addition to showing the context-specific patriarchal violence resulting in the literal demonization of lesbians and transgender people, the following articles demonstrate the importance of the perspective and experience of survivors, including their struggle with impunity and, in many instances, their desire to become agents of change:

- › “Corrective Rape: “I was raped to ‘cure’ me of being a lesbian” (Marie Claire).<sup>62</sup> This October 2019 first person account highlighted the role of the fundamentalist Christian movement in Jamaica.

- › “Lesbian ‘witches’ chained and raped by families in Cameroon” (Reuters, October 2018)<sup>63</sup> focused on punitive and “corrective” practices linked to witchcraft beliefs.
- › “Exorcisms and ‘corrective’ rape: Inside Indonesia’s controversial LGBT ‘conversion’ therapies” (*South China Morning Post*, April 2021).<sup>64</sup> This article opened with the mention of “practices still widely carried out by faith-based organizations in the world’s largest Muslim majority nation, as well as some commercial entities.”

Singling out the faith- or belief-based dimension of such forms of gender-based violence, however, can result in overlooking their prohibition under international law, or oversimplifying their root causes.

- Amnesty International denounced human rights violations against intersex individuals who are being “subjected to non-emergency, invasive and irreversible medical treatment in an attempt to ‘normalize’ their bodies and which could carry lifelong harmful effects.”<sup>65</sup>

Both the UN Committee against Torture and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have also commented on such surgical procedures in considering reports submitted by the governments of Austria, China, Denmark, Germany, Ireland and France.

### Gender-affirming care

This includes a broad range of procedures that transgender people deem necessary to affirm their gender identity and medically transition through gradual changes of their physical appearance. Access to such interventions is often limited or denied, and “transgender people worldwide experience substantial health disparities and barriers in accessing appropriate services,” according to a human rights manual published jointly by the Asia Pacific Forum and the UN Development Programme.<sup>66</sup>

A 2021 study by the University of California Los Angeles School of Law<sup>67</sup> examined those restrictions in the 10 U.S. states that have passed or are considering legislation denying gender-affirming care to transgender minors which would impact over 45,000 youths and put many of them at risk of suicide.

In his 2020 report on COVID-19’s impact, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity,<sup>68</sup> raised additional “concerns about accessing hormones and other gender-affirming care, which, in some cases, have now been deemed non-essential.”

## Gender recognition

Another form of grave violation of transgender people’s rights to dignity, bodily integrity, and health, as reported by the Associated Press, is the 2019 decision of Japan’s Supreme Court to uphold a law that “effectively requires [them] to be sterilized before they can have their gender changed on official documents ... . The 2004 law states that people wishing to register a gender change must have their original reproductive organs, including testes or ovaries, removed.”<sup>69</sup>

Reporting from India supported by the U.S.-based Fuller Project also addressed the situation of transgender people barred from accessing social and medical services without legal gender recognition, which requires proof of surgery, among other documentation.<sup>70</sup>

### 5.4.3 AT-RISK HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Women working for the protection and promotion of sexual and reproductive rights are at risk in many parts of the world. A 2019 UN report on the “Situation of women human rights defenders” highlighted such risks. Special Rapporteur Michel Forst wrote that these “are often considered private or shameful matters ... that may be perceived as challenging religious and cultural norms and may trigger a backlash from religious and conservative groups.”<sup>71</sup>

Women defenders who promote accountability, provide direct assistance to survivors, or work specifically on sex workers’ rights, can face increased levels of threats and attacks. A brief published in 2020 by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (as part of its series on sexual and reproductive health and rights) outlined the trends restricting the rights of those defenders, including “increased repression, violence and impunity ... through defamation campaigns, judicial harassment and criminalization ... as well as restrictive and divisive donor policies.”<sup>72</sup>

The brief also referred to a previous report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders<sup>73</sup> that specifically cited the occasionally compounding role of the media, deploring stereotypical portrayals targeting women defenders who fight against sexual violence, female genital mutilation and other practices.

### 5.4.4 THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the media has reported quite extensively on the increase in gender-based violence, such as child marriages, female genital mutilation and domestic violence. The reduction or cessation of sexual and reproductive health services, however, has received significantly less attention.



When those services are deemed nonessential or deprioritized, marginalized women, pregnant women, women in detention or in refugee camps, among others, are at great risk.

In 2020, *openDemocracy* started documenting cases of abuse and mistreatment of women during childbirth, in tracking the global impact of COVID-19 on women's rights, including on maternal deaths under lockdowns. This remarkable investigation exposed, among others, forcible separations from newborns, withdrawal of pain medication, and procedures performed without consent. But most of those abuses top the list of untold stories.

Also neglected is the underrepresentation of women at the decision-making level which has impacted the management of the pandemic and obfuscated its gendered dimensions. An Inter Press Service opinion piece<sup>74</sup> by Raquel Lagunas, Gender Team director at the UN Development Programme (UNDP), however, addressed this gap. Lagunas mentioned the importance of monitoring governments' pandemic resources and decisions that may ingrain gender biases, including through UNDP/UN Women "COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker."<sup>75</sup> The tool can be especially valuable for the media, as well.

## 5.5 RESOURCES

### 5.5.1 GUIDES FOR JOURNALISTS

#### ***Learning Resource Kit for Gender-Ethical Journalism (Book 2, Chapter 4: Sexual and reproductive health)***

World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and International Federation of Journalists (2012) 66 pages. Available in Arabic, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.

[https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/who-makes-the-news/Imported/learning\\_resource\\_kit/learning-resource-kit-book-2-eng.pdf](https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/who-makes-the-news/Imported/learning_resource_kit/learning-resource-kit-book-2-eng.pdf)

#### ***Reporter's Toolkit: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Worldwide***

Universal Access Project (2017) 61 pages

[http://www.universalaccessproject.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Reporters-Toolkit-on-Sexual-and-Reproductive-Health-and-Rights\\_June-2017.pdf](http://www.universalaccessproject.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Reporters-Toolkit-on-Sexual-and-Reproductive-Health-and-Rights_June-2017.pdf)

Universal Access Project is an initiative of the United Nations Foundation.

#### ***A Journalist's Guide to Sexual and Reproductive Health in East Africa***

Population Reference Bureau (2011) 56 pages

<https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/09022011-east-africa-media-2011.pdf>

Although focusing on seven East African countries, this publication of the Bureau's International Media Program can be very useful in a wider range of contexts.

#### ***Reproductive Justice Media Reference Guide***

Forward Together (2017) 14 pages. Available in English and Spanish.

<https://forwardtogether.org/tools/media-guide-abortion-latinx-community/>

This guide was designed for Latina-oriented media in the U.S., with a focus on reporting on abortion.

***How to Report on Abortion: A guide for journalists, editors, and media outlets***

International Planned Parenthood Federation (2017) 4 pages. Available in English and Spanish.

<https://www.ippf.org/resource/how-report-abortion-guide-journalists-editors-and-media-outlets>

***The Gender Gap in Coverage of Reproductive Issues***

Women's Media Center (2016) 21 pages

<https://www.womensmediacenter.com/reports/the-gender-gap-in-coverage-of-reproductive-issues>

An analysis of “news stories, columns, op-eds, and editorials published in 12 high-circulation media outlets and widely used wire services” based in the United States. Includes recommendations for media outlets on how to improve their coverage of reproductive issues.

**5.5.2 UNITED NATIONS DOCUMENTS**

***International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action***

UNFPA (1994), 177 pages. Available in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish

<https://www.unfpa.org/events/international-conference-population-and-development-icpd>

Adopted at the ICPD Conference held in Cairo in September 1994.

***General comment No. 22 on the right to sexual and reproductive health***

UN Committee on Economic and Social Rights (2016). Available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/832961?ln=en>

This is a general comment on Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966.

## **REPORTS FROM THE UN WORKING GROUP ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS**

### **Eliminating discrimination against women with regard to health and safety (2016)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/32/44>

Presented to the Human Rights Council in April 2016. The report focuses in part on the instrumentalization of women's bodies (Section III.D).

### **Women's autonomy, equality and reproductive health in international human rights: Between recognition, backlash and regressive trends (2017)**

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/wg/WomensAutonomy-EqualityReproductiveHealth.pdf>

Position paper on termination of pregnancy (October 2017)

### **Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights in crisis (2021)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/38>

Presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2021.

## **UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEURS' THEMATIC REPORTS**

### **The rights to sexual and reproductive health (2004)**

<https://undocs.org/E/CN.4/2004/49>

Report presented to the Commission on Human Rights by Paul Hunt, Special Rapporteur on the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

### **Policies and practices that impact women's reproductive rights and contribute to, cause or constitute violence against women (1999)**

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1487619?ln=fr#record-files-collapse-header>

Report presented to the Commission on Human Rights by Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences.

### **A human rights-based approach to mistreatment and violence against women in reproductive health services with a focus on childbirth and obstetric violence (2019)**

<https://undocs.org/en/A/74/137>

Report by Dubravka Šimonović, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, transmitted to the UN General Assembly seventy-fourth session.

### **Applying the torture and ill-treatment protection framework in health-care settings (2013)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/22/53>

Thematic report presented to the Human Rights Council by Juan Méndez, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The report also addresses the emerging recognition of different forms of abuses in health-care settings, including related to reproductive rights violations (Section IV.B).

### **Gender perspectives on torture and other and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment (2016)**

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/31/57>

Thematic report presented to the Human Rights Council by Juan Méndez, Special Rapporteur on torture. Includes a section on the “torture and ill-treatment of women, girls, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons in health-care settings” (Section III.D).

### **Sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women with disabilities (2017)**

<https://undocs.org/A/72/133>

Report by Catalina Devandas Aguilar, Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, transmitted to the UN General Assembly 72nd session.

### **Violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity during the coronavirus disease pandemic (2020)**

<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/75/258>

Report by Victor Madrigal-Borloz, Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, transmitted to the UN General Assembly 75th session.

## **UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND (UNFPA) STATE OF WORLD POPULATION REPORTS**

### **Against my will: Defying the practices that harm women and girls and undermine equality**

UNFPA (2020). 164 pages

[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA\\_PUB\\_2020\\_EN\\_State\\_of\\_World\\_Population.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_PUB_2020_EN_State_of_World_Population.pdf)

The 2020 edition of this annual report focused on son preference, female genital mutilation, and child marriage.

### **My body is my own: Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination**

UNFPA (2021). 164 pages

[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Sowp2021\\_Report\\_-\\_EN\\_web.3.21\\_0.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Sowp2021_Report_-_EN_web.3.21_0.pdf)

This report focused on bodily autonomy regarding women's decisions about health care, contraception and sex. It includes a chapter on international treaties and declarations that form the foundations for bodily autonomy and integrity rights.

## **5.5.3 OTHER RESOURCES**

### ***The State as a Catalyst for Violence Against Women: VAW and Torture or other Ill-Treatment in the Context of Sexual and Reproductive Health in Latin America and the Caribbean***

Amnesty International (2016) 88 pages. Available in English and Spanish.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr01/3388/2016/en/>

### ***Body Politics: A Primer on Criminalization of Sexuality and Reproduction***

Amnesty International (2018) 220 pages. Available in English, French, and Spanish.

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL4077632018ENGLISH.PDF>

***Reframing Gender-Based Violence as a Reproductive Health Issue***

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Center for Women (2005) 16 pages

<https://arrow.org.my/reframe-gbv-as-health-issue/>

***Promoting and Protecting Human Rights in Relation to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sex Characteristics: A Manual for National Human Rights Institutions***

Asian Pacific Forum and UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub (2016) 244 pages

[https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/hiv\\_aids/promoting-and-protecting-human-rights-in-relation-to-sexual-orientation.html](https://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/democratic_governance/hiv_aids/promoting-and-protecting-human-rights-in-relation-to-sexual-orientation.html)

***Accountability for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Humanitarian Settings***

Center for Reproductive Rights (2021) 67 pages

<https://reproductiverights.org/accountability-for-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-in-humanitarian-settings/>

***International Human Rights References to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights***

ILGA Europe (2007) 184 pages

<https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/webversion.pdf>

This compilation report relates to LGBT populations and HIV/AIDS and STIs.

***A Database of UN Resolutions and Expert Guidance on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights***

International Planned Parenthood Federation Western Hemisphere / Sexual Rights Initiative (updated in 2021). Available in English, French and Spanish.

<https://www.unadvocacy.org/#/en/>

This tool, developed for advocacy work at the UN level, offers both a searchable database and a terminology section.

#### 5.5.4 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

##### ***COVID-19, Gender, and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Digest***

A weekly online digest of the Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

<https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/resources/the-heilbrunn-department-of-population-and-family-health-at-columbia-mailman-covid-19-gender-and-sexual-and-reproductive-health-digest/>

##### ***The Right of Everyone to Sexual and Reproductive Health: Challenges and Opportunities During COVID-19***

Human Rights Watch (2021) 9 pages

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/10/right-everyone-sexual-and-reproductive-health-challenges-and-opportunities-during#>

Human Rights Watch submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health

##### ***How Has COVID-19 Affected Women's Rights During Childbirth?***

openDemocracy (2020)

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/womens-rights-during-childbirth-help-us-track-globally/>

The results of this investigation into cases of abuse and mistreatment of women in labor around the world was published on July 16, 2020.

##### ***COVID-19: A Gender Lens***

UNFPA (2020) 9 pages. Available in UN official languages + Portuguese, Tajik, and Turkish

<https://www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19-gender-lens>

This technical brief addresses the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promotes gender equality.



***The Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Girls With Disabilities***

UNFPA and Women Enabled International (2021) 68 pages

<https://www.unfpa.org/featured-publication/impact-covid-19-women-and-girls-disabilities>

This report is a global assessment on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, and related rights. Case studies are from Chile, Fiji, Malawi, and England.

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IMPACT MIGHT JUST BE  
THE HOLY GRAIL OF TODAY'S  
MEDIA, BOTH DESIRED AND ELUSIVE.

*Lindsay Green-Barber*



## CHAPTER 6

# Reporting Challenges

The Center for Women's Global Leadership consulted with over 100 women journalists and media experts from 38 countries before developing the format and content of this handbook. The initial global meeting was followed by six regional workshops held over a period of two years (2018–2019).<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the remarkable diversity of backgrounds and experiences, the challenges and gaps identified and prioritized by those media professionals were strikingly similar, and also consistent with the findings of gender and media experts analyzing trends in the coverage of gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup>

## 6.1 SELECTED KEY FINDINGS FROM CWGL JOURNALISTS CONSULTATIONS

### BIASES AND STEREOTYPES IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE REPORTING

Media coverage can unintentionally perpetuate biases and stereotypes, thereby leading to a mischaracterization of the reasons why gender-based violence occurs, why many women don't report it, and why innumerable perpetrators are emboldened by impunity. As a result, acts of violence are at times sensationalized, and women are further objectified.

“Instead of decreasing, sexism and misogyny in media have increased dramatically during the last decades,” wrote Aimée Vega Montiel, chair of the Global Alliance on Media and Gender. “Findings [from current feminist research] have demonstrated how media content reproduces sexist stereotypes that associate male identity with violence, domination, independence, aggression, and power, while women are linked to emotions, vulnerability, dependency, and sensitivity. In particular, news reports of violence against women tend to represent women as responsible for the violence of which they are victims.”<sup>3</sup>

### DECONTEXTUALIZED STORIES

Gender-based violence incidents are often reported as disconnected from root causes (especially structural discrimination), contributing factors, and the realities of local communities. “Until recently,” a 2016 Australian study on media coverage found, “violence against women has been largely reported in the media by focusing on seemingly isolated events, rather than reporting [it] as a social problem.”<sup>4</sup> Gender-based violence reporting, whether focusing on the family or conflict situations, rarely addresses the whole cycle of violence, from prevention to prosecution.

### MISSING HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

Gender-based violence is a serious human rights violation, as outlined in the third chapter of this handbook. But it is infrequently reported as such, in part due to a lack of understanding of its conceptualization in international law.

Research by the Global Media Monitoring Project, however, found that, “while the gender dimensions in the quality of reporting are more or less similar between women and men journalists, there is one exception: the stories by women journalists are more likely to be anchored in a human rights or gender equality policy framework.”<sup>5</sup>

Episodic narratives (refer to Chapter 6.3.1 for an explanation of Episodic and Thematic framing) can prevent the public from understanding how gender-based violence limits women's ability to exercise their rights and obfuscate patterns of discrimination and abuse. Relatively few stories – only 10% of those analyzed by the Global Media Monitoring Project in 2010 – referred to enforceable human rights standards.<sup>6</sup>

## VOICELESS WOMEN

Much news reporting on gender-based violence suffers from the lack of representation of women as subjects and sources, as well as within the leadership of media institutions.

The voices of gender-based violence survivors are often ignored or “distorted” and drowned by prejudiced, or even victim-blaming comments by law enforcement, male witnesses, relatives or acquaintances and, of course, perpetrators. Countless survivors' stories are also dismissed for not meeting standards of verification.

The low percentage of women quoted as experts or spokespersons, and the underrepresentation of women as journalists and editors, can result in the erasure of gender-sensitive news judgment essential to conveying gender-based violence root causes, manifestations and impact.

## TERMINOLOGY ISSUES

Terminology matters, regardless of the cultural or linguistic context, and especially when journalists report on sexual violence, at home or in conflict situations. Language can perpetuate assumptions, biases and stereotypes. It can obscure – or reveal – the most significant dimensions of gender-based violence. Shaming or blaming terminology leads to stigma and silence.

Deploring “tragic events” for instance, is very different from writing about them as “human rights violations” or as “crimes.” Instead of conveying a sense of randomness and inevitability, the latter specifically refers to key issues of justice and accountability.

Precision and accuracy, especially in headlines and photo captions, should not suffer in the quest to draw website traffic or newsstand sales.

## REPORTING GAPS

Many forms and targets of gender-based violence still go underreported or unreported altogether. Such gaps sometimes result from the risks of reporting

on gender-based violence, especially when it is state-sanctioned. More commonly, the incidents don't rise to newsworthiness due to the "normalization" and acceptance of violence, in particular against women and girls from marginalized minorities and communities.

Gender-based violence coverage is frequently characterized by a fragmentation of issues. Often unmentioned are the multiplicity of intersecting factors that, in any single instance, can lead to discrimination-based abuses.

Multiple studies across the globe are raising the awareness of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, but the media focus on its increasing pervasiveness is lagging. In particular, more reporting is needed on the impact of threats and their potential to translate into real life acts of violence.

### **PAUCITY OF POSITIVE STORIES**

Survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment are often portrayed through narratives that focus on their attempts to avoid the escalation of abuse or the circumstances leading to it. Victimhood accounts abound, as low-hanging fruit, instead of stories addressing prevention, advocacy, justice systems, and community solutions. Many survivors are claiming the right to be heard as agents of change whose experiences and perspectives should contribute to the eradication of violence.

### **IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS**

"An important dimension of the gender-based violence and media relationship," Global Alliance on Media and Gender scholar Aimée Vega Montiel wrote, "is the increase in violence against women journalists."<sup>7</sup>

Many participants in our consultations voiced great concerns about the harassment and violence that target them globally because of their gender and their professional activities, including their coverage of gender-based violence.

The accumulation of threats and other forms of intimidation, especially online and through various technological devices, may lead to self-censorship, silencing, and decisions to leave the profession. These new forms of abuse may also result in acts of violence and related trauma symptoms that impair women journalists' ability to function professionally and exercise their basic human rights out in the field, as well as in their workplace.

### **LACK OF STANDARDS, GUIDELINES, AND TRAINING**

Despite increases in recent years in the number of media institutions, UN

agencies and non-governmental organizations offering professional guidelines and trainings for gender-based violence reporting, these too often remain inaccessible, difficult to identify and, in some cases, simply ignored by editors and news media managers. Media houses need to address the harmful lack of knowledge- and evidence-based reporting, as well as specialized skills required for gender-based violence coverage. More broadly, they need to recognize the newsworthiness of the topic and professionalize its approach.

Journalists at the workshops also commented that guidelines and trainings, to be effective, must be available in tandem, and supplemented with networking, mentoring, “practicing” opportunities, and access to expert sources.

They especially mentioned the need for ongoing guidance dealing with situations that may unintentionally harm actual or potential victims. These risks include retraumatization of survivors, copycat crimes, the raising of false expectations of help, revenge acts from family or community members, and “jigsaw identification.”<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The consultations were held in Sri Lanka, Jordan, Australia, Mexico, the United States, and Kenya.
- 2 Six of the experts participated in CWGL consultations: Tasneem Ahmar (Pakistan), Yasmin Jiwani (Canada), Sarah Macharia (Kenya), Tarisai Nyamweda (South Africa), Margaret Simons (Australia), and Aimée Vega Montiel (Mexico).
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- 8 “Jigsaw identification” refers to media stories that allow the unintentional identification of an unnamed person through the inclusion of details that can be pieced together.

## 6.2 THE IMPACT OF HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Harassment of journalists is nothing new. But over the past decade especially, reports of harassment and violence targeting women journalists have been increasing significantly around the world. As more and more media, human rights organizations and UN entities document this trend, it is essential to also focus on its impact on journalists, including their coverage of gender-based violence.

### 6.2.1 KEY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Most of the over a hundred women journalists who participated in the Center for Women's Global Leadership's regional consultations in 2018–19<sup>1</sup> emphasized the numerous gender-based challenges they face in the workplace, in the field, and online, as well as their direct and indirect effects. Wanting to ensure that the issue was recognized and addressed at the highest level, we partnered with the UN Office of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and with UNFPA to convene a global **Expert Group Meeting on violence against women journalists**. The virtual meeting, co-hosted by the International Association of Women in Radio and Television, took place on March 13, 2020.

In June 2020, the UN **Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović**, presented her report on “Combating violence against women journalists”<sup>2</sup> to the UN Human Rights Council. The report, in addition to using testimonies provided by media professionals during the March Expert Group Meeting, drew from submissions received from 16 governments, UNESCO, and civil society organizations.<sup>3</sup>

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### EXPERT GROUP MEETING KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Harassment and violence occur around the world at an increasing rate
- Women journalists are targeted both for their work and their gender
- Women journalists experience gender-specific threats and attacks
- Increasingly, online harassment is identified as the biggest concern (across regions and types of media)
- Women are underrepresented in statistics and accounts of violence against journalists

- The impact of harassment and violent attacks is often misunderstood or dismissed and underreported by the media
- A culture of sexism, misogyny and impunity exacerbates the frequency and impact of threats and attacks

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During the expert group meeting, Liz Ford, from *The Guardian*, discussed the findings of a 2016 study commissioned by her newspaper. It analyzed the 70 million readers' comments recorded on its website during the previous 10 years. This research, according to *The Guardian*, "provided the first quantitative evidence for what female journalists have long suspected: that articles written by women attract more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men, regardless of what the article is about."<sup>4</sup> However, *The Guardian* "also found that some subjects attracted more abusive or disruptive comments than others. Articles about feminism attracted very high levels of blocked comments. And so did rape."<sup>5</sup>

Media expert Marija Šajkaš, a consultant with Reporters Without Borders, referred to the findings of the organization's 2018 report "Women's rights: Forbidden subject."<sup>6</sup> She mentioned the issue of women journalists who get threatened or punished both for speaking out as women, and for covering "women's issues." The title of the report's opening chapter is: "Covering women's rights can kill."

“”

***Covering women's rights can kill.***

Addressing working conditions in the newsroom, Šajkaš said that journalism is perceived in many parts of the world as a "provocative" occupation for women, and considered incompatible with marriage and family values. This can result in workplace harassment or sexual violence at home.

Journalist Chi Yvonne Leina shared her own stories about the discrimination and abuse she faced working in a Cameroonian newsroom. The objectification of women journalists, she explained, is widespread in a culture where they are perceived as rebels and often prevented to report on harmful practices, such as breast ironing and female genital mutilation.

Similarly, when *BBC World Radio* journalist Violet Gonda<sup>7</sup> returned to Zimbabwe after being banned from her country for 16 years, she was called a rebel, accused of sleeping with opposition leaders and spreading "fake" news. She was briefly detained and also became a victim of cyberbullying.

Lagipoiva Chelle Jackson,<sup>8</sup> a Samoan independent journalist, outlined the additional risks faced by women journalists working in small countries, such as the Pacific Island States, where the community has easy access to them. Their reporting on local issues can result in threats of retaliation, which have



discouraged many women from taking up the profession. A 2019 national assessment by the Journalists Association of Samoa found that 74% of women journalists had been threatened, including through social media, telephone calls to their workplace, and harassment in person.

Those testimonies were consistent with the trends identified through several global and regional studies and surveys (see Resources at the end of this section) conducted during the past 10 years. When the Committee to Protect Journalists published its report on “The silencing crime: Sexual violence and journalists,”<sup>9</sup> in 2011, its introduction stated that “few cases of sexual assault against journalists have ever been documented.” The report stressed all the barriers that prevent journalists from talking about their traumatic experiences and noted that “most of the individuals interviewed by Committee to Protect Journalists had not previously disclosed” them.

Since then, many reports on the issue of violence against women journalists have focused on three trends:

- Increase of online harassment
- Impact of workplace harassment
- Impunity<sup>10</sup> (within media institutions, in the context of either threats and attacks by community members, and state-sanctioned violence)

“Online trolling remains one of the most critical tools that has been weaponized against women in the media,” Kiran Nazish, founding director of the Coalition for Women in Journalism, said. “We have noticed that these threats have often also leaked from the virtual into the physical world.”<sup>11</sup> This newer trend is based on cases of violence against women journalists that The Coalition documented in 2020.

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*Threats have often also leaked from the virtual into the physical world.*

### 6.2.2 THE RISKS OF GENDER-RELATED REPORTING: GROWING ONLINE THREATS AND ATTACKS

Online violence against journalists has become a growing problem globally with significant, and often underreported impacts on journalists, the profession, and press freedom. Among several important resources, a standard-setting interdisciplinary study, commissioned by UNESCO and produced by the International Center for Journalists, illustrates the gendered dimensions of these alarming forms of misogynistic harassment and abuse.

UNESCO initially published a report<sup>12</sup> in December 2020, based on a global survey of journalists conducted by ICJF between September and November. It reached over 900 validated respondents spread across 125 countries, 714 of

whom were women journalists. Then, in April 2021, UNESCO released a research discussion paper<sup>13</sup> based on a thematic analysis of extensive global data to identify trends associated with online violence against women journalists.<sup>14</sup> UNESCO planned to publish the final book-length report later in 2021 to detail the country case studies,<sup>15</sup> analyze the relevant legal and normative frameworks and assess responses from news organization and social media companies.

“Online violence has become the new frontline in journalism safety – and women journalists sit at the epicenter of risk,” the introduction to the April 2021 research paper stated. “The psychological, physical, professional, and digital safety and security impacts associated with this escalating freedom of expression and gender equality crisis are overlapping, converging, and frequently inseparable. They are also increasingly spilling offline, sometimes with devastating consequences.”

Four key statistics from the global survey shed some light on the scope, manifestations, impact and triggers of online violence against women journalists:

- 73% of survey respondents identifying as women said they had experienced online violence.
- 18% of them received threats of sexual violence.
- 20% said they had been attacked or abused offline in connection with online violence they experienced.
- 49% identified gender-related reporting as the coverage most often associated with heightened attacks.

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***49% identified gender-related reporting as the coverage most often associated with heightened attacks.***

The gender-themed coverage includes a wide range of issues, such as reproductive health and rights; sexual assault; domestic violence; femicide; transgender issues, and digital misogyny. It also refers to stories about the #MeToo movement, feminism, and International Women’s Day, among other topics.

Women journalists mentioned in news reports or studies related to their own experience of harassment or violence are themselves at heightened risk. On May 7, 2021, shortly after the release of the UNESCO/the International Center for Journalists paper mentioning her case, reporter Patricia Devlin received new threats through Facebook,<sup>16</sup> while Taylor Lorenz at the *New York Times* was viciously attacked on Twitter when she shared an associated piece of research published by the International Center for Journalists<sup>17</sup> and commented on her own experiences of online violence.

“Overall, the trigger stories are often about women breaking gender norms,” Dr. Julie Posetti, the International Center for Journalists study’s lead researcher and author, said in an interview with the Center for Women’s Global Leadership.<sup>18</sup> “The resulting violence shows a clear pattern of shared experiences from all parts of the world. This form of hate speech is networked and grows exponentially.”

The study, titled “The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists,” also examined the different ways in which online violence impacts women journalists, from missing work or quitting jobs to relocating and abandoning journalism altogether. “Relentless misogynistic threats impact mental health and productivity and often lead to self-censorship. Disinformation campaigns ruin personal and professional reputations, and some journalists simply pull back from reporting on gender-based violence,” Posetti added.

One of the contributors to the UNESCO research, Australian journalist and academic Jenna Price, wrote about her own situation in a *Canberra Times* piece headlined “Why I stopped writing about family violence.”<sup>19</sup>

“Mostly the [messages] just used the usual terms of gendered abuse directed at women who have opinions about anything” Price wrote. “But one was so terrible, so frightening, so threatening, that I resolved to take a brief break from writing about violence against women.”

Increased coverage can actually serve to mitigate the alarming impact of gender-based violence targeting the journalists who report on it. According to Posetti, many news organizations “no longer shy away from advocating for press freedom and journalism safety, which means they are more open about gender-based attacks on their journalists,” and more women journalists are writing about their own experiences of online violence. That is a new and welcome trend, which challenges the principle that has traditionally prevented journalists from discussing the personal effects of their work, for fear of “becoming part of the story.”

The media coverage of the UNESCO/the International Center for Journalists survey and research paper illustrated the heightened concerns about the risks faced worldwide by women journalists and the desire to seek solutions, with headlines such as “Online abuse of women journalists is a crisis we can no longer ignore”<sup>20</sup> or “*The Guardian* view on online abuse of female journalists: A problem for all.”<sup>21</sup>

In both instances, the articles referred to surveys conducted by the newspapers themselves alerting their readership to the seriousness of the issue within their respective institutions.

The author of a *Toronto Star* article, Public Editor Bruce Champion-Smith, had previously asked the women journalists in *the Star* newsroom about the kind of online abuse to which they had been exposed. He found that most emails and social media messages were “bullying and misogynistic, xenophobic and racist.” He further noted that “the level of abuse seems tied to the story topic, with race and gender sparking the worst responses.”<sup>22</sup>

Several women journalists that we worked with also emphasized the intersecting dimensions of online violence when they are also targeted, for instance, on account of their ethnicity, religion, or gender identity.

## RACISM AND SEXISM HARM US

*Handbook contributor Sofía Carrillo Zegarra is an Afro-Peruvian independent journalist and Nacional radio host. In May 2017, she reported a racist putdown by an immigration officer at Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima. Her TV interview, uploaded to YouTube, received about 200 comments and 30,000 shares, of which about 70%, she estimates, constituted racist and/or sexist harassment. She provided a sample of the social media comments against her to the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent when it visited Peru in February 2020. Her essay, written for this handbook, was translated from Spanish by Marilse Rodríguez García.*

BY SOFÍA CARRILLO ZEGARRA  
JUNE 16, 2020

*“It’s obvious you need a psychiatrist because your self-esteem has been trailing you since you were born ...”*

*“Go take a bath black zovacona\* you must be a delinquent, i wipe my balls with your feminism”*

*“assassin of Afro-Peruvian fetuses ...”  
(for defending women’s right to choose)*

*“and that monkey [dressed] in red”*

*“The black woman wants to ‘swing’ with her rich kurruñao talk to pantaleón, the Minister of Culture and Women.” \*\**

*“Enough little black girl, calm down, it’s over, just give me your number because you have a good tail”*

### — Users of Twitter and Facebook

Journalists, female and male, constantly point out that their job is “to give voice to the voiceless.” What happens when throughout our lives we have been among the voiceless, among the invisible, among

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***What happens when throughout our lives we have been among the voiceless, among the invisible.***

those racialized women whose lives are invaded by sexist, racist, male chauvinist, and classist violence? Is there any space for us, the Afro-descendant women journalists?

The phrases that open this article were compiled from hundreds of racist and sexist insults and offenses I have received in recent years for raising my voice to defend a woman’s right to choose, the rights of the Afro-Peruvian people and of the LGBTQI community, and for taking stands against racism and all types of discrimination—epithets that animalize, ridicule, and hypersexualize me repeatedly and with impunity.

And yes, I am a victim of harassment on social media and even my freedom of speech has been abridged, since a media outlet had to withdraw my posts from its Facebook page due to the crude racist and sexist violence unleashed against me for expressing an opinion about the conditions under

which Afro-descendant and racialized women live in Peru. Currently, I have the opportunity to develop as a journalist in a state radio program, but being a human rights activist allows my voice to be known in other media.

In this context, it is important to understand, from the point of view of the feminist movement, the human rights movement, and the journalism guild, that the work of women journalists in their diversity and the informative approach to social, cultural, economic and political events in our countries, must have an intersectional perspective that includes, as categories of analysis: race-ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

When we cover gender-based violence, we must also consider racist aggression toward Afro-Peruvian women, in the personal as well as the professional realms. In Peru, racism and sexism are expressed in explicit and in covert ways, in the real world and the virtual one.

Penal code changes were made in Peru in 2018. They provide for punishment of crimes such as bullying, sexual harassment, sexual blackmail, and the distribution of images or audiovisual material with sexual content. However, racist insults and slander are not included as aggravating factors.

The path of an Afro-descendant journalist and activist is tremendously exhausting on both personal and professional levels.

Undoubtedly, racist and sexist aggression intensifies when the person who denounces it self-identifies as an Afro-descendant

woman, as distinct from a White or Mestiza woman. There is no antiracist policy that requires an accounting of the impunity with which ethno-racial discrimination and structural racism persist in this country, although some civil society organizations, particularly from the feminist and Afro-feminist movements, have disavowed the racist and sexist violence.

For all these reasons, I reaffirm the need to have an intersectional focus that places on the public and political agendas the multiple vulnerabilities that we Afro-descendant and racialized women journalists face when we defend the rights of women and the right to freedom from discrimination of our people and our communities. It is also important for the journalism association to take concrete steps that visibly promote the safety and protection of those of us who practice the profession, thereby contributing to structural changes in a racist, male chauvinist, patriarchal society.

It's essential to ensure that female Afro-descendant journalists and communication professionals are no longer made invisible, that our racialized bodies are not forced into anonymity and that our voices are no longer silenced. We Afro-descendant feminist women are resisting, and silence is no longer an option.

Editor's notes:

\*Zovacona: Racist insult that ridicules Afro-descendants identifying them as dirty

\*\*Kurruñao: Allusion to a Peruvian "cat-eating" festival.

In this case it refers to the Afro-Peruvian woman's backside. Pantaleón: Peruvian comedic novel and film character who, as a military captain, is assigned to recruit prostitutes.

### 6.2.3 THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS

A global survey, conducted in 2018 by the International Women’s Media Foundation and TrollBusters (U.S.),<sup>23</sup> looked at both the short and long-term impact of attacks, threats, and online abuse on women journalists and their reporting. Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents said that they avoided covering certain topics, while 29% considered leaving the profession. Others mentioned problems with sources and interviewees. The study also mentioned that “freelancers felt particularly vulnerable after online attacks.”

Gender-based violence is one of the topics that can put women journalists at risk. CWGL, at the invitation of UNFPA, addressed this issue at the November 2019 Nairobi Summit, which marked the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development. One of the CWGL panelists, Sarah Macharia, coordinator of the Global Media Monitoring Project, said:

“Women journalists who ethically cover stories about gender-based violence are human rights defenders in their own rights, and they often face challenges, including misogynistic attacks online and offline ... and fighting for the freedom of expression of their sources, when they themselves are being silenced.”<sup>24</sup>

A Lab on Online Harassment of Women Journalists took place May 3, 2019, World Press Freedom Day, through a partnership of UNESCO and the World Wide Web Foundation, among others. Women representing African media organizations discussed “how they are subject to misogynistic abuse online when covering a range of political issues, especially related to women’s rights and gender-based violence.”<sup>25</sup>

In her 2021 report on violence against women journalists, UN Rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović addressed its potential repercussions:<sup>26</sup>

“Media reporting on such issues is an important game changer, as it can demonstrate how widespread gender-based violence really is. The media has the power to change public opinion and in doing so can put pressure on Governments to introduce changes to law and practice to combat it.”<sup>27</sup>

This power is denied when women journalists are silenced, when they self-censor and when they need to leave jobs or change assignments. It is also diminished when violence is compounded by lingering gender gaps in the workplace, as well as gaps in news judgment used to select subjects and sources. The 2020 report of the Global Media Monitoring Project shows that the percentage of female subjects and sources in monitored print, radio and television news stories not only ranged between 14% and 35% (depending on the world region), but also reflected “a consistent 5–7 [percentage] point gap between women and men reporters.”<sup>28</sup>

While it is essential to bring attention to the underreported impact of the intimidation and silencing of many women journalists, it is equally important to amplify the voice, in the media, of those whose resilience and ability to resist keep women's rights in the limelight.

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### **'THREATS ARE A FAMILIAR THING FOR ME, IT'S BACKGROUND NOISE' THE CASE OF SVETLANA ANOKHINA**

Svetlana Anokhina is a journalist and women's human rights defender from the Republic of Dagestan, in Russia's North Caucasus. She is the chief editor of *Daptar*, the only media platform in the region that focuses on women's issues, such as domestic violence, selective abortions, early marriages, and female genital mutilation.

In 2016, she published the first article in Russia on female genital mutilation, "a practice still carried out on young Muslim girls living in the highlands and resettlement areas of Dagestan."<sup>29</sup> The story triggered a lot of hateful reactions and insults because, Anokhina said in a 2021 interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists,<sup>30</sup> "I challenged three 'sacred' things: Religion. Tradition. And the myth that the women in the Caucasus are the most unoppressed of all unoppressed."

In July 2020, Anokhina received death threats over the phone seemingly resulting from a just published article that she said was "critical of authorities failing to properly investigate domestic violence cases and femicides."<sup>31</sup> Although she identified the caller, she was unable to convince the police to initiate proceedings against him. She subsequently fled Russia but continued to work for *Daptar* from exile and returned to Dagestan months later. In an interview with *Meduza*,<sup>32</sup> a Latvia-based online newspaper, however, Anokhina concluded after the traumatic July episode: "Threats are a familiar thing for me, it's background noise."

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*Feminism has become a very triggering topic ... and is seen as almost demonic.*

In June 2021, Anokhina was arrested in a domestic violence shelter, as she tried to stop a police raid. She was subsequently released.

Interviewed by the Committee to Protect Journalists about the challenges she faces when reporting on gender-based violence, Anokhina explained: "There is an ideological platform that unites many of my critics. They see my work as opposing Islam because I am talking about equal rights ... . There is a strong pushback against the feminist movement. Feminism has become a very triggering topic ... and is seen as almost demonic."<sup>33</sup>

The physical risks of field reporting and the increasing scope and severity of online violence seem to have somewhat overshadowed the impact of abuses in the workplace. Women journalists who are ignored, intimidated, or retaliated against when they report them endure mental and emotional repercussions that deeply affect their work and may even cause them to leave the profession.

- A report on “Sexual Harassment in the Media” showed that 47% of the women who participated in the 2020 survey conducted by Women in News<sup>34</sup> in Africa, had been sexually harassed at work.
- A 2017 survey of primarily U.S. media by the *Columbia Journalism Review* found that 41% of respondents had experienced sexual harassment in a newsroom. Staff Writer Alexandria Neason noted: “We heard back from not a single one of the 149 newsrooms we contacted to participate.”<sup>35</sup>
- Results from a 2019 French survey revealed that 49% of female respondents (representing 270 newsrooms) experienced verbal sexual abuse.<sup>36</sup>

Often underreported are overlapping risks of violence at work and at home. One such case was the November 2019 murder of Pakistani woman journalist **Arooj Iqbal**. In August 2020, Reporters Without Borders conducted its own investigation<sup>37</sup> and concluded:

“Arooj Iqbal will go down in Pakistan’s history as the first woman journalist to be murdered because of her work.” She was murdered “a few hours before the publication of the first issue of *Choice*, the local newspaper she had just founded.”

Iqbal’s family claimed that her ex-husband “killed her or had her killed.” Just a few days before her murder, she had filed a domestic violence complaint with the police. One motive for the crime was allegedly that she might “become a direct competitor of her ex-husband by launching her own newspaper.” A journalist himself, he was also her former editor. Weeks later, Iqbal’s brother was “forced to accept” a financial compensation agreement in exchange for the family forgiving the alleged murderer. And so ended the case, with an “honour crime” settlement. In a country where it is estimated that only 4% of all journalists are women, such impunity can only have a chilling effect, especially when media organizations and unions (as in Punjab) traditionally do not protect women journalists.

For independent journalists, the issue of protection is even more crucial. Kashmiri freelance photojournalist **Masrat Zahra** was taken into custody in April 2020 under India’s Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, for “uploading anti national posts.” In a July interview for the Women’s Media Center, Zahra speculated that she was most likely targeted “to send a message to other journalists: ‘If we booked a woman under terrorism charges, we can do this to all of you.’ Or maybe it’s because I am the only woman photojournalist to



cover the conflict, and my work brings forward a female perspective.”<sup>38</sup> Later, speaking from Germany where she is currently residing, Zahra confirmed: “I am being targeted because of my identity as a woman and also because of my work, which focuses on the brutalities faced by women and children in Kashmir.”<sup>39</sup>

## 6.2.4 RESOURCES

### A. General Resources (organization names in alphabetical order)

#### **Coalition for Women in Journalism**

International NGO documenting threats and attacks faced by women journalists around the world. Publishes monthly status reports:

<https://womeninjournalism.org/reports#country-REPORTS>

#### ***The Silencing Crime: Sexual Violence and Journalists***

Committee to Protect Journalists (June 2011)

<https://cpj.org/reports/2011/06/silencing-crime-sexual-violence-journalists/>

#### ***The Threats Follow Us Home***

Committee to Protect Journalists (September 2019)

<https://cpj.org/2019/09/canada-usa-female-journalist-safety-online-harassment-survey/>

A survey of women journalists’ safety in Canada and the United States

#### ***Journalist Sector Focus***

Center for Women’s Global Leadership (November 2019)

<https://16dayscampaign.org/campaigns/journalist-sector-focus/>

A resource guide for the Global 16 Days Campaign on gender-based violence in the world of work.

#### ***Women Journalists and Freedom of Expression***

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (October 2018)

Available in English and Spanish, 77 pages

<http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/docs/reports/WomenJournalists.pdf>

Report on discrimination and gender-based violence faced by women journalists within the countries of the Organization of American States



*Zaina Erhaim is a former war reporter from Syria, now living in exile. She is featured in the documentary »Velvet Revolution« produced in 2017 by IAWRT (Nupur Basu, Executive Producer). In her interview*

*for the film she said: »I did not set out to be a war correspondent, the war came to my doorstep.«*

*Picture courtesy Zaina Erhaim*

***Velvet Revolution***

International Association of Women in Radio and Television (2017)

<https://www.iawrt.org/projects/2017/velvet-revolution>

Nupur Basu (India) is the project director and executive producer of this documentary which focuses on the challenges faced by women journalists from seven different countries covering conflict for different media.

***IFJ Survey: One in Two Women Journalists******Suffer Gender-Based Violence at Work***

International Federation of Journalists (November 2017)

<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/ifj-survey-one-in-two-women-journalists-suffer-gender-based-violence-at-work/category/press-releases.html>

***The Safety of Women Journalists: Breaking the Cycle of Silence and Violence***

International Media Support (October 2019)

Available in English and Somali, 31 pages

<https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/the-safety-of-women-journalists/>

Features nine countries, including Somalia.

***Violence and Harassment Against Women in the News Media:******A Global Picture***

International Women's Media Foundation (June 2018) 38 pages

<https://www.iwmf.org/resources/violence-and-harassment-against-women-in-the-news-media-a-global-picture/>

Published in collaboration with the International News Safety Institute (London)

***Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting***

International Women's Media Foundation (September 2018), 51 pages

<https://www.iwmf.org/attacks-and-harassment/>

Co-authored with TrollBusters (USA)

***Journalists in Distress Network***

<https://cpj.org/emergency-response/journalists-in-distress-network/>

Includes 18 international organizations that provide direct assistance to journalists

### ***Sexism's Toll on Journalism***

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (March 2021) Available in Arabic, English, French, Persian, Portuguese, and Spanish, 37 pages

<https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-publishes-report-sexisms-toll-journalism>

### ***Three Young Women TV Workers Gunned Down in Jalalabad (Afghanistan)***

Reporters Without Borders (March 2021)

<https://rsf.org/en/news/three-young-women-tv-workers-gunned-down-jalalabad#:~:text=Sadida%20Sadat%20and%20Shahnaz%20Roufi,were%20aged%2020%20or%2021>

### ***RSF's 2020 Round-up: 35% Rise in Number of Women Journalists Held Arbitrarily***

Reporters Without Borders (December 2020)

<https://rsf.org/en/news/rsfs-2020-round-35-rise-number-women-journalists-held-arbitrarily>

### ***Brazilian Website for Women Targeted After Report on Abortion***

Reporters Without Borders (September 2019)

<https://rsf.org/en/news/brazilian-website-women-targeted-after-report-abortion>

Report on threats and attacks against the female-run online newspaper *AzMina*

### ***UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists***

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/observatory>

Searchable database (by country, date, and gender, among others)

### ***Combating Violence Against Women Journalists***

Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences to the UN Human Rights Council (May 2020) Available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish

<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/52>

### ***The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity***

Report of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly (August 2017) Available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish

<https://undocs.org/en/A/72/290>

Includes “Strengthening the safety of women journalists” (Section V)

## B. Online Violence Against Women Journalists

### Online Violence Response Hub

Coalition Against Online Violence

<https://onlineviolenceresponsehub.org/>

This is a project of coalition partners International Women’s Media Foundation and the International Center for Journalists. The Response Hub went live in July 2021 and provides resources and research on online violence.

### *Global Survey on Online Violence Against Women Journalists*

International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and UNESCO (December 2020), 17 pages

Authors: Dr. Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord

Available in Arabic, English, French and Spanish

<https://www.icfj.org/our-work/icfj-unesco-global-study-online-violence-against-women-journalists>

### *The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists*

ICFJ and UNESCO (April 2021), 93 pages

Authors: Dr. Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir, Diana Maynard, Kalina Bontcheva, and Nermine Aboulez.

[https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/The%20Chilling\\_POSETTI%20ET%20AL\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/The%20Chilling_POSETTI%20ET%20AL_FINAL.pdf)

### *Global Survey on Online Abuse of Women Journalists*

International Federation of Journalists (November 2018)

<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/ifj-global-survey-shows-massive-impact-of-online-abuse-on-women-journalists.html>

### *Byte Back: A Journalist’s Guide to Combat Cyber Harassment in South Asia*

International Federation of Journalists (March 2017)

<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/byte-back-ifj-launches-guide-to-combat-cyber-harassment-in-south-asia.html>

***Women Journalists and the Double Bind: The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan***

Media Matters for Democracy (January 2021)

<https://mediamatters.pk/media-matters-for-democracy-launches-a-new-study-examining-the-impact-of-online-harassment-on-women-journalists/>

***New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists***

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media (2016), 60 pages

Available in English and Russian

Editor: Becky Gardiner

<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/3/220411.pdf>

***Safety of Female Journalists Online***

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (Vienna, Austria)

<https://www.osce.org/fom/safety-female-journalists-online>

Resources on online harassment of women journalists

**TrollBusters**

<http://www.troll-busters.com/>

This website provides resources for targets of online abuse (founded by Dr. Michelle Ferrier, USA).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The first convening took place in July 2018 in Sri Lanka. Three of the participating journalists were interviewed for a *Himal Southasian* podcast on the topic of violence against women journalists in the region. <http://himalmag.com/the-southasian-conversation-women-in-media/>
  - 2 United Nations, General Assembly, *Combating violence against women journalists: Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences*, A/HRC/44/52 (6 May 2020). Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/52>
  - 3 Three civil society organizations (Article 19, Global Alliance on Media and Gender, and the International Media Support) submitted detailed reports in March 2020. Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/srwomen/Pages/vawjournalists.aspx>
  - 4 Gardiner, B., Mansfield, M., Anderson, I., Holder, J., Louter D., & Ulmanu, M. (2016, April 12). The dark side of Guardian comments. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 Reporters Without Borders (2018). Women's rights: Forbidden subject. Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from [https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/womens\\_rights-forbidden\\_subject.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/womens_rights-forbidden_subject.pdf)
  - 7 Violet Gonda is the President of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television.
  - 8 Lagipoiva Cherele Jackson, representing the Samoa Media Council, at the time was the Chief Editor of CWGL's Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence, and the Editor of the March 2020 EGM report.
  - 9 Wolfe, L. (2011). The silencing crime: Sexual violence and journalists. *Committee to Protect Journalists*. Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://cpj.org/reports/2011/06/silencing-crime-sexual-violence-journalists/>
  - 10 United Nations, General Assembly, *The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity: report of the Secretary-General*, A/72/290 (4 August 2017). See section V on "Strengthening the safety of women journalists." Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://undocs.org/en/A/72/290>
- See also the statement by the Global Alliance for Media and Gender (GAMAG):
- GAMAG (2019, November 2). *End impunity on crimes against women journalists*. Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://gamag.net/2019/11/08/end-impunity-on-crimes-against-women-journalists/>
- 11 Nazish, K. (2021, February 25). *We must address the war on women journalists, online and offline*. Digital Content Next. Retrieved on Aug. 15, from <https://digitalcontentnext.org/blog/2021/02/25/we-must-address-the-war-on-women-journalists-online-and-offline/>
  - 12 Posetti, J., Aboulez, N., Bontcheva, K. Harrison, J. & Waisbord, S. (2020). *Online violence against women journalists: A global snapshot of incidence and impacts*. UNESCO. Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136/PDF/375136eng.pdf.multi>
  - 13 Posetti, J., Shabbir, N., Maynard, D., Bontcheva, K., & Aboulez, N. (2021). *The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists*. UNESCO. Discussion Paper available in Open Access under the Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA3.0 IGO). Retrieved on Aug. 15, 2021, from <https://en.unesco.org/publications/thechilling>
  - 14 This data included: 173 long-form interviews conducted with international journalists, editors and other experts; the survey data; 15 country case studies and two big data case studies that analyzed 2.5 million social media posts directed at prominent women journalists in the UK and the Philippines.
  - 15 Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Lebanon, Tunisia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Poland, Serbia, Sweden, UK, Brazil, Mexico and the U.S.

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## 6.3 ROLE AND IMPACT OF JOURNALISTS REPORTING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

### 6.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, journalists' views of their role vary a great deal and range from strictly informing readers, listeners, and viewers to influencing public opinion, holding those in power accountable and contributing to change. How they perceive their role is often expressed – intentionally or not – through the framing of their news stories, which directly impacts the public's reactions and understanding of events and issues.

Framing is a part of news judgment that affects the selection of topics, incidents, facts, and perspectives. It is reflected in the choice of headlines, terminology, sources and interview questions, among others.

Media practitioners and critics often contrast what is being termed as episodic framing and thematic framing. The distinction is especially useful when applied to gender-based violence reporting.

**Episodic framing**, which is commonly used in gender-based violence news reporting, refers to a tendency to represent events and incidents as isolated or disconnected, and centered on individual circumstances, behaviors and motivations. An article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* on “Reframing sexual violence,”<sup>1</sup> said about a 2010 study conducted by the FrameWorks Institute (U.S.):

“When researchers asked people to explain why sexual violence occurs, they talked about individuals' internal motivations. They described sexual violence as the result of a perpetrator's moral or psychological failing, and a 'victim's' inability to ensure her safety.”

Since 2017, this type of framing has been reflected quite clearly in the media coverage of #MeToo. The *Review* article pointed out that “its focus on individuals, and celebrities in particular, does not necessarily help people understand the problem's systemic nature.”

**Thematic framing**, on the other hand, is characterized by a contextual, big picture approach that highlights links, patterns and trends. Moving beyond the private sphere, it seeks to address issues at the structural or institutional level and connects individual stories to contextual factors.

In the area of gender-based violence, thematic framing is used by journalists who see their role as helping the public understand the complex drivers, manifestations and impact of the problem at the community level. Through this framing, the narrative is no longer about a random occurrence of personal tragedies, but about patterns of abuse, issues of accountability, and the quest for remedies and solutions.

As outlined in the third chapter of this handbook, a human rights perspective helps to put gender-based violence in context and can be a foundation for its thematic framing. A **rights-based approach to journalism** has been promoted in different ways by several media organizations and experts. According to Canadian journalist and scholar Thomas Rose, a human rights-based approach to journalism “seeks to amend the standard role of journalism in a democracy to include the principle that advancing human rights should not be an ad hoc endeavor but a fundamental function of a journalist’s everyday obligations.”<sup>2</sup> Reinforcing this notion, the 2015 Global Media Monitoring Project report states about the coverage of violence against women:

“*Advancing human rights should not be an ad hoc endeavor but a fundamental function of a journalist’s everyday obligations.*”

“A rights-based approach to journalism underlines media’s role in society ... [It] means linking issues reported to human rights standards, identifying the right bearers and duty holders, giving particular attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups and creating space for the marginalized to be heard.”<sup>3</sup>

A Freedom House 2019 study of Moldovan media coverage, which perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices against women and marginalized groups, concluded that “a human rights-based approach to media reporting is a paradigm-shifting framework capable of substantially improving the quality and impact of media work.”<sup>4</sup>

More broadly, from this perspective, the media has a role to play in educating the public about its rights, but also to monitor their protection and hold those in power accountable.

### 6.3.2 ADVANCING PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Providing accurate information that can educate and empower readers, listeners, and viewers involves the awareness-raising responsibility to counter and mitigate stereotypes and prejudices. It is about challenging assumptions, misperceptions, and attitudes that can foster gender-based violence or lead to its acceptance and normalization. For editors, managers, and media house owners, it is also about ensuring that the women’s experiences and concerns are deemed newsworthy and not trivialized or deprioritized as “women’s business.”

Journalists and news managers also need to exercise good judgment around the influence that narratives, terminology and tone may have on the public’s perceptions and responses. Bangladeshi journalist Raisa Chowdhury, in an article on “The need to revise how gender-based violence is reported,”<sup>5</sup> showed how sexual assault stories, for instance, often focus on the victim’s life, instead of the violence of the perpetrator. As a result, Chowdhury added, “public reaction inclines towards sympathy rather than anger. But right now, we need rage

more than sympathy.” She also noted that this kind of coverage reflects “a clear distinction between the ways in which violence against women is reported in contrast to other crimes.”

In a piece for *The Washington Post* on “The loaded language of sexual assault,” writer and former criminal defense attorney Michele Sharpe reached a similar conclusion when she commented on the use of the term “accuser” for victims of sexual violence:

“Victims of the crimes of rape have had an entire lexicon of specialness foisted upon them. That vocabulary sets sexual assault victims apart from victims of other crimes and supports the long history of patriarchal insistence on control of women. It insinuates that the person who was assaulted is unreliable.”<sup>6</sup>

The relevance of framing and terminology in shifting public dialogue in the U.S. was perfectly illustrated in the aftermath of mass shootings that took place in several spa businesses in Atlanta in March 2021, resulting in the death of eight people, six of them identified as Asian women (of Korean and Chinese descent). Initially, the media coverage was criticized for amplifying racial and gender-based biases, and focusing on the suspect’s dismissive motivations as relayed by the police.

Several journalists, however, were able to take advantage of this opportunity to educate their peers and the public about the role of the media in countering traditional narratives, including stereotypes and assumptions. The Asian American Journalists Association, for instance, “urged newsrooms to take caution with language that could further fuel the hypersexualization of Asian women, which has been linked to violence and discrimination.”<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, *MSNBC* Columnist Hayes Brown was one of the rare voices to raise the question: “Were the Atlanta shootings a case of femicide?”<sup>8</sup> His informative and nuanced opinion piece suggesting that “when sex and gender play a large part in the motivation of a woman’s murder, we should have a common way to refer to it,” was a welcome invitation to further public debate on the issue.

Adding context to this type of crime need not interfere with the time-honored journalistic duty of refraining from convicting the accused in the media.

### 6.3.3 AMPLIFYING AND DIVERSIFYING VOICES

Most of the journalists that the Center for Women’s Global Leadership worked with stressed the importance of amplifying survivors’ voices while diversifying perspectives and sources by interviewing community experts and service providers, as well as representatives of marginalized communities that are especially affected by gender-based violence.

In an interview about her 2020 UNESCO Press Freedom Prize, Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya Lima declared: “What I believe is that we journalists cannot lose track of to whom we have responsibility ... . Being able to give someone a voice, I think, is the best reward for reporting.”<sup>9</sup>

*Being able to give someone a voice, I think, is the best reward for reporting.*

The following account shows how journalists have joined forces to conduct an award-winning investigation based on the testimonies of sexual abuse survivors from university campuses all across Indonesia.

### HOW JOURNALISTS COLLABORATED TO AMPLIFY THE VOICES OF SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

*Handbook contributor Evi Mariani is a former Managing Editor of the Jakarta Post, an English-language national media outlet in Indonesia. She is now an independent journalist.*

BY EVI MARIANI, SEPTEMBER 2020

I have been honored to be part of a small team of journalists in Indonesia that focus on revealing the hidden crimes of sexual abuse on university campuses. We formed the collaboration to help Indonesia end such crimes by amplifying the voice of the victims.

Our work has won two prestigious awards, the Tasrif Award at the national level, and the regional Award for Excellence in Public Service Journalism from the Society of Publishers in Asia.

In Indonesia, journalists who focus on sexual abuse issues and have a perspective to help victims to be heard are a rare breed. Most journalists would write about sexual violence using the police perspective, which too often blames the victims.

Our team, consisting of journalists from The *Jakarta Post*, *Tirto.id* and *VICE Indonesia*, was indeed small. Initially, BBC Indonesia was part of our collaborative project and, even then, the core team numbered not more than 15 people.

We named the collaboration #NamaBaik-Kampus, loosely translated into English as “campus reputation.” We chose this name because university and government officials often used those three words – *nama baik kampus* – to muffle the voice of sexual abuse victims.

“Don’t tell anyone about the sexual abuse because you would tarnish our campus reputation,” the officials would say to victims.

We wanted to turn around the meaning of that phrase and tell the policymakers that the reputation of your institution would be even better if you listen to victims and set up a protocol and a system in which they would have a safe space to speak and get justice.

The idea to form this collaboration came in late 2018, when an incident at a campus in Yogyakarta, coincidentally my alma mater, made national headlines for months. A

*Tirto.id* team, led by Editor Fahri Salam, initiated the collaboration. All of us shared the same perspective about how to approach the stories: Victims' welfare must come first.

When we found that one victim withdrew her consent to be interviewed, none of us said that we had to push her. We simply decided to move on to find another brave victim. It was upsetting that we could easily find other victims, since there were plenty and the sexual abuse happens everywhere, as our collaboration uncovered. But it was also encouraging to find that many of them were brave enough to speak to journalists.

[In February and March 2019] we used Google Forms to collect more data about these hidden crimes. In the end, we received 174 testimonies, mostly from female students, in 79 universities in 29 cities across Indonesia. Most of the perpetrators were students, closely followed in second place by university lecturers, who were almost all male. Some victims seemed to point to the same man as the perpetrator, meaning that at least

one lecturer had been getting away with abusing students for years.

We believe there were many, many more.

We keep reminding ourselves why we are doing this: We want journalism to help end sexual violence everywhere, regardless of the background. We are doing this so that victims can be heard – and so there will be no more victims in the future. And we believe, as journalists, that we can take part in this.

#### Related links:

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/27/the-jakarta-post-wins-2020-sopa-award-with-namabaikkampus-collaboration.html>

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/08/the-jakarta-post-wins-two-tasrif-awards-for-collaborative-investigations.html>

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/hashtag>NamaBaikKampus>

### 6.3.4 KEEPING THE SPOTLIGHT ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Reporting best practices include follow-up stories that allow journalists to keep the spotlight on specific topics or situations, and to better address the scope and complexity of the problem. Journalist Liz Ford, for instance, reflecting on *The Guardian* coverage of women in El Salvador who were being charged with aggravated homicide following obstetric emergencies, wrote:

“I did not think our coverage would lead to instant policy change in El Salvador. I do, however, believe we have raised greater awareness of what some women experience. I continue to live in hope that things will improve. But until then, I plan to do what I can to keep the spotlight on this issue.”<sup>10</sup>

If time allows, journalists can delve deeper into the complexity of issues and to address some key questions, such as:

- What are the trends or patterns that emerged over time?
- How did the violence impact survivors and the community long term?
- Who was held accountable? How did the justice system respond?
- What, if any, solutions to the problem have been proposed and implemented?
- Are there any challenges to a corrupt justice system?

In the context of conflict-related sexual violence, not keeping the spotlight on a given situation or crisis (either post-conflict or as a result of “media fatigue”) can be especially detrimental. Writing about the media’s role in covering mass atrocities, such as the 2017 persecution of the Rohingya population by the Myanmar security forces, Canadian investigative journalist Annie Hylton wrote:

“Before long, the cameras will inevitably go home, and the media will focus on another breaking story. The consequences of this business model, according to media and human rights experts, cannot be overstated.”<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the 1994 Rwanda genocide, several media outlets have kept the spotlight on rape survivors and the plight of their children born from those rapes. Israeli photojournalist Jonathan Torgovnik wrote a follow-up story about them for *The New York Times* 25 years after the genocide. The opening paragraph poses the key questions that journalists, among others, have the responsibility to address:

“What are the effects of being born of rape in the name of genocide? How are mothers who survived this brutal violence in Rwanda dealing with the trauma and complexities of their lives and the long-lasting, multigenerational impact of what was done to them?”<sup>12</sup>

Twenty-two years after the genocide, *BuzzFeed’s* global women’s rights reporter Jina Moore wrote a different type of follow-up article, focusing on three rape survivors who had testified at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (1997). “[Their] stories helped convict a man for rape as a crime against humanity for the first time in history,” Moore noted. Her role was to let her readers know about the ramifications for survivors of such a landmark conviction. One of them told her: “I think for all the women who’ve been through that, we’re all dead women standing.”<sup>13</sup>

In his foreword to the 2007 edition of *Crimes of War*, South African Judge Richard Goldstone, former prosecutor of the Rwanda International Criminal Tribunal, commented:

“*Accurate, timely, and thoughtful coverage of war crimes can have an impact far beyond any immediate calculation.*”

“Reporters and other observers at the frontline of conflict often voice frustration that their reports and efforts hardly dent the public consciousness and do little to change an intolerable situation; but the fact is that accurate, timely, and thoughtful coverage of war crimes can have an impact far beyond any immediate calculation.”<sup>14</sup>

### 6.3.5 LEVERAGING THE POWER OF JOURNALISM TO PREVENT AND ERADICATE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Several intergovernmental agreements have emphasized the role of the media in preventing and eradicating gender-based violence:

- **The Southern Africa Development Community**, in its 2008 Protocol on Gender and Development: “States Parties shall take appropriate measures to encourage the media to play a constructive role in the eradication of gender-based violence by adopting guidelines which ensure gender sensitive coverage.” (Article 30.3)<sup>15</sup>
- **The Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention**, in its 2008 Declaration on Femicide: “The media should play a role in the ethical education of the citizenry, promote gender equity and equality and contribute to the eradication of violence against women.”<sup>16</sup>
- **The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence** (known as the 2011 Istanbul Convention): “[State] Parties shall encourage ... the media, with due respect for freedom of expression and their independence, to participate in the elaboration and implementation of policies and to set guidelines and self-regulatory standards to prevent violence against women and to enhance respect for their dignity.” (Article 17.1)<sup>17</sup>

In 2016, the Council of Europe published a special document on the implementation of Article 17,<sup>18</sup> focusing on two main topics:

- › The link between the media’s portrayal of women and men, their reproduction of gender stereotypes and violence against women
- › Promotion of a positive role for the media in preventing violence against women

Many of the journalists that we worked with during its regional consultations spoke of seeking to raise awareness and change attitudes, practices, laws and policies to contribute to the prevention and eradication of gender-based violence. Jordanian journalist Rana Hussein was especially eloquent in addressing this role.



## **RANA HUSSEINI: “SHATTERING THE CULTURE OF SHAME AND FEAR”**

*Rana Hussein participated in the 2018 Amman workshop, which was co-hosted by UNFPA Arab States Regional Humanitarian Response Hub. She won the Arab Woman of the Year Award 2019 for Social Impact “for her role in inspiring women to stand against violence and injustice.”<sup>19</sup>*

*Hussein was featured in UNFPA’s journalism handbook on “Reporting on gender-based violence in humanitarian settings” (March 2020),<sup>20</sup> excerpted here with permission of UNFPA:*

“When you are attempting to shatter the culture of shame and fear surrounding gender-based violence, you need to expect some resistance at first,” explains Rana Hussein, an award-winning Jordanian journalist, author, and human rights activist who has been influential in bringing so-called “honour” crimes against women to public attention and encouraging changes in the law in Jordan to bring stronger penalties for these types of crimes.

If you are considering actively covering gender-based violence, there is definitely a learning curve involved, but the value of the work is unquestionable,” adds Hussein. “It took some time for me to build my network—to cultivate a growing number of sources and to build sufficient trust so that my reporting not only became impactful but also began changing long-standing perceptions about women, girls and violence within the community.

Hussein began reporting in 1993, back when issues surrounding women’s rights, social norms, and gender-based violence were seldom openly discussed in the public sphere. As a staunch activist for equality, Hussein began leveraging the power of journalism to raise awareness on the issues impacting women and girls. By adopting a straightforward and fact-based approach, her reporting quickly began having an impact.

I wanted to investigate the stories I heard on a daily basis from family members, neighbours, and colleagues, all of which showed a growing pattern of abuse,” recalls Hussein. “Later, my investigations took me to a variety of other sources, including forensic experts, lawyers, former judges, and social workers, all in an attempt to illustrate as accurately a picture as possible for my readers.”

This gave Hussein more insight into the phenomenon of so-called “honour” crimes, in which women and girls were being murdered in the name of preserving or “cleansing” the family name. She reported on the subject frequently to ensure that it remained a part of public discourse, making sure that criminal proceedings were also covered extensively.

From there, women’s rights and issues became her area of expertise, launching a career that inspired countless other reporters to break through the walls of silence on gender-based violence.

The impact of journalists reporting on gender-based violence, and especially on sexual and domestic violence, can benefit from a prevention approach. In an analysis of U.S. media coverage on sexual violence, the Berkeley Media Studies Group recommended a “prevention perspective which focuses on root causes and ways to change societal and community norms to reduce the incidence of sexual violence ... Framing the news about sexual violence in the context of prevention can help shift the public’s and policymakers’ perception of sexual violence from a sense of risky, random inevitabilities to a focus on specific rates, causes of violence and prevention strategies.”<sup>21</sup>

The role of news media in primary prevention was also the subject of a 2017 Australian study that concluded:

“By making visible the issue of violence against women, news media helps to construct and regulate public understanding. The Australian news media can potentially create a space for violence against women to be understood not as private or shameful matter, but as a problem that should and can be prevented ... Overall, the findings reinforced the importance of media as a primary prevention tool, its potency in influencing community attitudes, and the increasing importance of social media and its interaction with traditional news media.”<sup>22</sup>

Journalists do not necessarily set out to impact the outcome of specific situations or cases, but their investigations can positively contribute to issues of justice and accountability.

### CASE STUDY: “THE TRUTH THAT WE FIND IS THE GOAL”

*Elizabeth Flock is a U.S.-based journalist and documentary filmmaker with a focus on gender and justice. She was interviewed by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership for this case study on April 23, 2021.*

Independent American journalist **Elizabeth Flock** spent approximately nine months in 2019 reporting on the case of Brittany Smith, who faced life in prison in Alabama for shooting and killing a man who was an old acquaintance. Smith said that he had raped and

threatened her earlier that night. She was charged with murder, although she consistently claimed that she acted in self-defense.

After laying out the facts about the circumstances of the rape and killing, Flock examined a wide range of issues and data points that shed light on the context and complexity of the case, from rape-kit examinations to court-appointed attorney systems, and from the handling of sexual violence complaints by the police to the geographic and gender disparities in self-defense law.

Flock’s pursuit of the truth resulted in a lengthy investigative piece published in

the Jan. 13, 2020, issue of *The New Yorker* magazine.<sup>23</sup> Smith’s “Stand Your Ground” hearing to consider her claim of self-defense started the next day. In a follow-up article dated Feb. 3, Flock reported that, despite Smith’s multiple injuries, neither the district attorney nor the judge believed her story about that night, including that she had been sexually assaulted. Her claim was denied.

In October 2020, a month before her trial was due to start, Smith accepted a plea deal and was sentenced to 20 years in prison. However, she was expected to only serve seven months of the sentence and to be released to house arrest in May 2021. According to Flock, “this type of conviction – to serve just seven months for murder – is very unusual, and sentences seem to vary a great deal based on media attention. Without it, Smith likely would have served more time.”

In her quest for missing data, Flock went so far as to commission an analysis of FBI homicide statistics to look at “the differences in outcomes for women and men who claim self-defense.” This review of justifiable

homicides showed that in Alabama “women lost their cases 25% more often than men did,” a disparity even more pronounced than at the national level.

Flock pointed out that a significant number of judges and prosecutors are not trained in understanding the complexity of trauma and can be influenced by clichés and assumptions associated with domestic violence and sexual assault.

According to Flock, “media investigations can contribute to improving the criminal justice system” if they adhere to essential standards of fairness and accuracy. “The truth that we [journalists] find”, she concluded, “is the goal.”

Flock also stressed the key role of local media coverage, which often becomes the source of national headlines and in turn can generate international attention. In this instance, *The Independent* (UK) and other British publications covered Smith’s case quite extensively in October 2020 and referred specifically to the reporting in *The New Yorker* articles.

Although seeking impact is a common quest, assessing it is especially challenging, even for media professionals engaged in explanatory or investigative journalism. Impact is most commonly measured by changes in laws, policies and practices, or by positive changes in the lives of specific individuals or communities.

A rarely documented discussion of this topic was published by the Nieman Journalism Lab of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University.<sup>24</sup> Its author, Lindsay Green-Barber, former media impact analyst for the U.S.-based Center for Investigative Reporting, uses the example of a 2013 extensive investigation conducted by the center into the sexual harassment

“”

*Impact might just be the holy grail of today's media, both desired and elusive.*

and rapes of female farmworkers.<sup>25</sup> “This project,” she wrote, “has had impact in the strongest sense of the word: real-world change affecting the daily lives of hundreds – maybe thousands – of vulnerable women.” The lesson learned from Green-Barber’s research<sup>26</sup> and own practice, is that “impact might just be the holy grail of today’s media, both desired and elusive.”

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WHAT DOES IT TAKE  
TO MAKE A WOMAN'S KILLING  
IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO BE REPORTED?

*Maryam Azwer*



## CHAPTER 7

# Lessons from Gender-Based Violence Reporting

Journalists from around the globe, who met at the consultations convened by the Center for Women's Global Leadership in 2018 and 2019, discussed the key lessons learned from their experience reporting on all aspects of gender-based violence.

The journalists said that regardless of its prevalence and context, gender-based violence is preventable and should be portrayed as a violation of universally protected basic rights and freedoms.

## HIGHLIGHTED LESSONS

- Securing relevant and reliable data may require:
  - › Seeking disaggregated data (broken down by gender, age, race, location, etc.)
  - › Questioning data trends: for instance, do they reflect changes in violence rates or in reporting trends among victims?
  - › Being aware of data gaps: what are official statistics not counting/measuring?
  - › Reporting on women's perceptions of risks as well as actual incidents of violence
- Learning from expert sources: Academic experts, NGOs, advocates, and service providers can give invaluable context, story ideas, and guided access to survivors.
- Understanding that individual stories are more compelling when linked to patterns of harassment and violence, root causes, contributing factors and other forms of discrimination and abuse in the community.
- Contributing to the public discourse by exposing the multiple reasons why a majority of women may not report incidents of harassment or violence and exploring the lessons learned from the #MeToo movement.
- Focusing the narrative on key issues of prevention and accountability, regardless of the immediate circumstances leading to acts of violence (in the life of a perpetrator or a victim, for example) or increases in patterns of violence (such as during the COVID-19 pandemic).
- Following up on news stories broadens the public understanding of key issues such as:
  - › Implementation and impact of new laws and policies addressing gender-based violence
  - › Accountability of perpetrators and government agencies
  - › Long lasting impact of violence on the dignity, health, and livelihood of survivors
  - › Community-based solutions
- Featuring traditionally underreported or unreported issues, such as the disproportionate and multi-layered impact of gender-based violence on the most vulnerable: girls, migrants, Indigenous communities, LGBT people, informal sector workers, migrants, and disabled women, among others.

## 7.1 FEMICIDE

### 7.1.1 THE CONCEPT OF FEMICIDE

The term “**femicide**,” although coined in the 19th century, was popularized in the ’70s by the late feminist sociologist Diana Russell. She defined it as “**the killing of females by males because they are female...** . When the gender of the victim is irrelevant to the perpetrator, the murder qualifies as a non-femicidal crime.”<sup>1</sup>

Russell hoped that the term could become a tool to mobilize against this most extreme form of gender-based violence, but it took almost three decades for the concept to be disseminated. In 2004, she met a prominent Mexican politician and feminist scholar, Marcela Lagarde, who invited her to speak in Juarez, Mexico. Lagarde later chaired a commission on femicide in the Mexican congress. Freelance journalist and former Fulbright scholar Aaron Shulman credited Lagarde for the spread of her advocacy efforts to Guatemala where, he wrote in the Dec. 28, 2010, edition of *The New Republic*:<sup>2</sup>

“Activists, in dialogue with their Mexican counterparts, grew enthusiastic about using the term to combat murders in their own country, which had become a kind of Juarez writ large... . Thus the idea of ‘femicide’ struck a chord. In 2008, prompted by a domestic campaign and international pressure, the Guatemalan congress passed Decree-22, the Law Against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence Against Women.”

“The word [*feminicidio*] has certainly affected Guatemalan culture, becoming a part of the national lexicon and entering the speech of everyday people as well as sensationalist tabloids,” Shulman wrote. “And there has been a significant increase in reports of violence against women brought to the police. What’s more, the word has been a useful tool for people trying to roll back Guatemala’s culture of impunity, providing publicity and legitimacy to anti-femicide groups which have found it easier to send offenders to jail.”

Globally, no universal consensus has been reached on the definition of femicide/feminicide, but the term is increasingly used to include a wide variety of gender-related killings of women punishable under domestic laws. It is worth noting that not all languages have a precisely equivalent term; the scope of the concept may vary semantically and legally. At the international level, however, femicide has been recognized as the most extreme form of gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup>

The late Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, who investigated the Ciudad Juarez femicides, in the Mexican border state of Chihuahua, summarized the essence of the term:

“Men are not killed for being men. Women are killed for being women, and they are victims of masculine violence because they are women. It is a hate crime

against the female gender. We cannot ignore this. These are crimes of power. Yes, men are killed like flies, but they are not killed for being men.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, after founding the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, Myrna Dawson highlighted the misogynistic roots of femicide:

“” *Until we label misogynistic killings for what they are, their underlying motivations will be obscured and our ability to respond disabled.* “Femicide is the misogynistic killing of women by men,” she said. “We need to label it as such to distinguish it from the killing of men – they too are most often killed by men, but for different reasons and in different situations... . Until we label misogynistic killings for what they are, their underlying motivations will be obscured and our ability to respond disabled.”<sup>5</sup>

Government and intergovernmental entities, as well as academics, women’s rights advocates, and human rights law experts, have contributed different definitions of the word “femicide.” Following are several complementary definitions selected by CWGL to help journalists relay its complexity to their viewers and readers. This terminology is also directly related to issues of data collection, legal protection and remedies, accountability, and prevention.

## SELECTED DEFINITIONS OF FEMICIDE

### Declaration on Femicide (2008)

Article 2, adopted by the Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Organization of American States Convention of Belém do Pará.

**“Femicide is the violent death of women based on gender, whether it occurs within the family, a domestic partnership, or any other interpersonal relationship; in the community, by any person, or when it is perpetrated or tolerated by the state or its agents, by action or omission.”**

<http://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/docs/DeclaracionFemicidio-en.pdf>

### Understanding and addressing violence against women (2012)

World Health Organization

**“Femicide is generally understood to involve intentional murder of women because they are women, but broader definitions include any killings of women or girls.**

Femicide differs from male homicide in specific ways. For example, most cases of femicide are committed by partners or ex-partners, and involve ongoing abuse in the home, threats or intimidation, sexual violence or situations where women have less power or fewer resources than their partner.”

[https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77421/who\\_rhr\\_12.38\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=F8F7709885A617D2B500A2EB44C88FDB?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77421/who_rhr_12.38_eng.pdf;jsessionid=F8F7709885A617D2B500A2EB44C88FDB?sequence=1)

### **Modalities for the establishment of a femicide or gender-related killing watch, 2016**

A thematic report by Dubravka Šimonović, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

“Femicide, or the gender-related killing of women, is the killing of women because of their sex and/or gender ... . It is a clear violation of women’s rights, including the right to life, freedom from torture and to a life free from violence and discrimination.”

<https://undocs.org/A/71/398>

Those definitions encompass the main manifestations of femicide, initially categorized, in 2012, by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo.<sup>6</sup> Most categories were later adopted, among others, by the European Institute for Gender Equality<sup>7</sup> and by the *Latin American Model Protocol for the investigation of gender-related killings of women*.<sup>8</sup>

Although designed specifically to guide the investigation and prosecution of these crimes, the protocol can also be very helpful to journalists reporting on them: It clearly identifies the different categories and types of femicide, their gender-related motives and root causes (especially in terms of intersectional discrimination), and the marginalized women most at risk.

### **MAIN CATEGORIES OF FEMICIDE**

- Intimate partner killing
- Killings of women and girls in the name of so-called “honor”
- Targeted killings of women and girls in the context of armed conflict

- Dowry-related killings
  - Killings of women and girls based on gender identity or sexual orientation
  - Ethnic and Indigenous identity-related killings
  - Female infanticide and feticide<sup>9</sup>
  - Deaths from harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation
  - Deaths from neglect, starvation, or ill-treatment
  - Targeted killings of women linked to human trafficking, drug dealing, small-arms proliferation, organized crime, and gang-related activities
- 

### 7.1.2 NUMBERS MATTER

Journalists face a major challenge when it comes to accessing reliable data on femicide. Visual journalist Corinne Chin best formulated the issue in an article about the murder of women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico:

“Femicide is not just the killing of victims who happen to be female. It’s a systematic violation of human rights. Whether through domestic violence or sexual assault, the victims of femicide are women who were killed *because* they are women. Because of this standard’s high burden of proof – and because so many women never have been found – official statistics are almost certainly unreliable.”<sup>10</sup>

Dubravka Šimonović, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, outlined new processes for the establishment of a femicide observatory in her September 2016 report to the UN General Assembly. The report stressed that “one of her immediate priorities is the prevention of femicide and the use of data on violence against women as a tool to that end... . She proposed that data on the number of femicides, disaggregated by the age and ethnicity of victims, and indicating the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, should be published annually.”<sup>11</sup> The special rapporteur is still issuing an annual call for femicide-related data to encourage states to gather and publish updated statistics.<sup>12</sup>

In her 2016 report, the special rapporteur also gave several examples of data collection good practices that reporters may find useful to access statistics from their respective countries or use as comparative data.<sup>13</sup>

One such example of good practice is the **Femicide Census Project**, which collects data on femicide within the United Kingdom. It publishes annual statistics on the killings by men of women and girls over age 14 and, in addition

to domestic violence cases, it includes a variety of sexually motivated attacks. The census, published in February 2020, reports on femicides in 2018.<sup>14</sup>

When the Femicide Census was launched in February 2015, *Time* magazine published an article headlined, “Someone is Finally Starting to Count Femicides.”<sup>15</sup> National Correspondent Charlotte Alter took that opportunity to note that “The U.S. does not track ‘femicide’ specifically, because we tend to call these murders ‘female homicides.’ And while there is a lot of research on fatal domestic violence, the data is not usually presented in the broader context of women being killed by men ... Even if the U.S. is not quite on board with the phrasing yet, ‘femicide’ advocates say that the word is a useful way to think about these kinds of murders. Femicide includes any kind of murder where the victim’s gender is a factor in her death.”

That *Time* article illustrates the importance of linking terminology and data collection. A noteworthy attempt at documenting gender-related killings of women at the global level is the Global Study on Homicide published annually by the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). In its 2019 report,<sup>16</sup> the agency addresses the challenges of obtaining and compiling such data:

“The availability of data on intimate partner/family related homicide means that such killings of females are analysed in greater depth than other forms of ‘femicide’ and that the analysis focuses on how women and girls are affected by certain norms, harmful traditional practices and stereotypical gender roles. Although other forms of gender-related killing of women and girls are described, such as female infanticide and the killing of Indigenous or aboriginal women, given severe limitations in terms of data availability, only literature-based evidence is provided.”

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES

### “The women killed on one day around the world”

As part of its annual “100 Women” feature, the *BBC News* website released, on Nov. 25, 2018, a very effective investigation of the global prevalence of femicide.<sup>17</sup> The *BBC* chose the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women to report on its initiative. It had spent the previous month monitoring media reports of gender-related killings of women from a single day (chosen randomly), Oct. 1. Its reporters identified 47. This became an opportunity to combine personal stories behind the numbers with an examination of global trends based on UN statistics.

The next day, *BBC Monitoring* published a follow-up piece, “Violence against women: The stories behind the statistics,”<sup>18</sup> detailing the research methods:

“”

**What does it take to make a woman’s killing important enough to be reported?**

“Despite our experience in media observation, this was not something that we – or, we believe anyone – had done before. It was not only about ensuring editorially robust data-gathering; it was about surfacing as many of the individual stories as we could find.” The piece ended with a key question: “It makes you wonder: What does it take to make a woman’s killing important enough to be reported?”

Illustrating another example of good practice, the reporting was immediately followed by helpful information and advice to women at risk of violence or abuse.

**“#OneByOne: The murdered women in Pernambuco” (Brazil)**

Launched in April 2018 by journalists working for the *Jornal do Commercio de Comunicação* media network, this documentation project (#UmaPorUma)<sup>19</sup> told the stories of all women murdered in 2018 in the state of Pernambuco. The initiative, which involved 26 women journalists, led to the publication of a remarkable eight-page special edition on Feb. 3, 2019.

Aside from providing detailed statistics and analyses, the issue featured examples of best practices:

- Following-up: “The topic of femicide has always been in our daily lives. The feeling that each of us had is that we did daily coverage, but we did not follow up,” Julliana de Melo, one of the participating journalists, said.<sup>20</sup>
- Selecting pictures, illustrations and infographics that allow a non-sensationalizing portrayal of victims and fully respect their dignity.

**“Voces Perdidas” (Lost Voices) in Mexico**

In 2016, Mexican journalist and activist Frida Guerrero started documenting, investigating, and tallying every case of femicide in Mexico. First in a blog and in a *Vice Mexico* weekly column, and more recently on her remarkable website, *vocesperdidas.mx*, she tells the stories behind the statistics. At the same time, she exposes the impunity that fuels the normalization of gender-based violence, even in its most extreme forms. Guerrero pointed out on her website that out of the more than 3,000 cases of women murdered in Mexico in 2019, only 726 had been investigated as femicides.

**“Not One Less”: An obituary for victims of femicide in Argentina**

A comparable attempt to tell the stories behind the numbers was pursued by the largest newspaper in Argentina, *Clarín*. On June 3, 2020, it published a special obituary section featuring more than 300 women murdered in that country in the year prior to May 1, 2020.<sup>21</sup> The date was chosen to mark the fifth anniversary of



the protest movement Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) against the increasing number of femicides in Argentina and the region. The concept originated in Uruguay in 2019 when, as part of UN Women AD campaign “Gender obituaries”, the names of femicide victims were published in the daily funerals section of every newspaper.

The *Clarín Group* special section included the names of transgender victims of femicide, and showed the increased number of murders since the corona virus pandemic began.

### “Murder at Home” (Kenya)

“Murder at Home” is a Newsplex project exploring the impact of gender-based violence on Kenyan communities. Newsplex, the data journalism desk of the Nairobi-based *Daily Nation*, uses data analysis to inform public debate. Newsplex infographics and analysis, on Nov. 30, 2019, marked the Global 16 Days Campaign by highlighting the specific impact of gender-related killings.<sup>22</sup>

Earlier that year, scholar and trauma researcher Dr. Kathomi Gatwiri co-founded Counting Dead Women – Kenya, a Facebook page recording every woman’s murder reported in the Kenyan media. In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor* she said: “This data is important because numbers don’t lie... These are numbers – and faces and stories – that you cannot argue with.”<sup>23</sup> Conversely, her statistics are regularly used by the media to report on both the root causes and impact of femicides.

“”

Such examples of journalistic good practices are consistent with the key recommendation made by the Committee of Experts on violence of the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission of Women in their 2008 *Declaration on Femicide*:

“We also recommend to the media that it adopt codes of ethics to deal with cases of violence against women, especially femicides, promoting respect for the dignity and integrity of victims and avoiding the dissemination of morbid details and sexist or degrading stereotypes of women. The media should play a role in the ethical education of the citizenry, promote gender equity and equality and contribute to the eradication of violence against women.”<sup>24</sup>

*We also recommend to the media that it adopt codes of ethics to deal with cases of violence against women, especially femicides, promoting respect for the dignity and integrity of victims and avoiding the dissemination of morbid details and sexist or degrading stereotypes of women.*

### 7.1.3 LEARNING FROM ANALYSES OF FEMICIDE MEDIA COVERAGE

During the past decade, several scholars from the Americas working in the field of gender-based violence and criminal justice have made significant contributions to the analysis of the media coverage of femicide.

Lane Kirkland Gillespie (Boise State University, USA) and Tara Richards (University of Nebraska, USA) conducted a study<sup>25</sup> based on a sample of 299 known cases of femicide (defined in this case as “the killing of a woman by a male intimate partner”). Those cases were mentioned in a total of 995 newspaper articles in the state of North Carolina (USA). This 2011 study “Exploring News Coverage of Femicide: Does Reporting the News Add Insult to Injury?” analyzed victim blaming, sources of information, and the use (or not) of an intimate partner violence (IPV) framework. The latter is especially important in terms of reporting best practices. The researchers sought an answer to the following question: “Did the articles portray the event as isolated or within the context of IPV as a social issue?” The study findings were summarized as follows:

“Articles that were framed as IPV [13.6%] were contextually different from those that were not. First, these articles included the perspective of domestic violence advocates, statistics on the prevalence of intimate partner abuse, and resources for victims and their families. Second, articles framed as IPV frequently placed blame for the femicide on inadequate response by the criminal justice system or faulty criminal justice practices.”

A 2013 Canadian study authored by Myrna Dawson (as Director of the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability) and Jordan Fairbairn,<sup>26</sup> and based on the analysis of intimate partner homicide in three Toronto newspapers, revealed some similar findings:

“Results suggest that, in more recent years [1998–2002], news coverage is more likely to report a previous history of intimate partner violence and less likely to employ news that excuses or justifies the perpetrator’s actions. However, coverage continues to employ victim-blaming news frames and to portray intimate partner homicide as an individual event, in part, through the absence of the voices of violence against women organizations, researchers, and service providers as legitimate authorities.”

Chilean legal scholar Patsili Toledo and Chilean journalist and academic Claudia Lagos, referring to the work of Gillespie and Richards, published another study on “The Media and Gender-Based Murders of Women.”<sup>27</sup> Theirs was commissioned by the Heinrich Boll Foundation and examined cases from Europe and Latin America.

According to Toledo and Lagos, the media frames, including the police and victim-blaming frames, “maintain a critical disconnection between femicides, presented as isolated, individual cases, and domestic violence as a broader social problem.”

The following case studies, from journalists based in Mexico and Honduras respectively, illustrate some of the issues raised by those researchers.



*María Sagrario González Flores mural (Mexico): “Every time I share my daughter’s story, I feel that she lives on,” said Paula Flores, whose daughter María Sagrario González Flores disappeared on April 6, 1998. María Sagrario’s body was eventually discovered in an empty lot in Juárez, and it was clear she’d been raped and*

*murdered. Since then, Paula Flores has dedicated herself to preventing violence against women in the city. In this photo, taken in 2016, she stands in front of her house where she had a muralist paint a portrait of Sagrario.*

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### A. What's Love Got to Do With It? When Femicide Is Framed as a Crime of Passion

*Handbook Contributor Alice Driver is a Mexico City-based independent journalist, and the author of 'More or Less Dead.'*

BY ALICE DRIVER, MARCH 2020

“Cupid’s to Blame,” read the headline in *iPásala!*, a Mexico City newspaper. The article included a graphic photo of Ingrid Escamilla, 25, who had been stabbed, skinned and disemboweled by her boyfriend. He had immediately confessed to everything. Escamilla was murdered on Feb. 8, 2020, in Mexico City. *iPásala!*, one of the first newspapers to publish the story, framed it as a crime of passion and in addition to showing the mutilated body of the femicide victim with the story, a picture of her remains was also published on its front page, alongside a photo of a woman in a bikini. *iPásala!* is far from the only media outlet to have framed femicide as a crime of passion and the proliferation of graphic photos of femicide victims in the Mexican media has been an issue for the past two decades. Feminists have long argued that publishing graphic photos of victims, especially without the permission of their families, re-victimizes the women.

In Escamilla’s case, police who arrived at the scene made the decision to film the perpetrator, Erick Francisco, 46. He was shirtless and covered in blood. They allowed him to explain that he had killed his girlfriend because she had threatened to kill him first. And then the police leaked

the video to the press, which allowed the perpetrator of the crime to control the discourse surrounding the femicide victim.

In researching my book, *More or Less Dead*,<sup>28</sup> which is about femicide in Mexico, I discovered that in many cases, misogyny of the police and other officials involved in investigating the crimes – ranging from comments speculating that the victim was a prostitute to telling journalists that femicide was a crime of passion – played a central role in how the violence was later covered in the media. Police also leaked photos of Escamilla’s mutilated remains to the media. The images sent shockwaves through the country and led to massive public protests about the levels of violence against women and the way victims of femicide are re-victimized by the media.

To change the way femicide is represented in the media in Mexico and around the globe requires a discussion, such as the one that appeared in [bajopalabra.com](http://bajopalabra.com), about the ethics of how femicide victims are represented in print and photography. The prevailing coverage tends to focus on the physical violence and on describing it as gruesomely as possible, while showing shocking, graphic photos. That kind of coverage reads like trauma porn and, although some argue that people need to be shocked in order to pay attention, the problem is that no level of violence against women – not even what Escamilla experienced – is shocking enough. The issue at the heart of how femicide is covered in the media is that violence against women sells, particularly when it is represented in a sensational way. As journalists, we need to think about how we can represent the

lives of victims with respect and to question police or other officials who frame such violence in misogynistic terms. Nobody, especially not perpetrators of femicide, should be provided with a media platform to justify violence against women.

In response to the publication of photos of Escamilla's body, feminist groups around Mexico encouraged citizens to upload pictures of beautiful landscapes to social media with the hashtag #JusticeForIngrid in Spanish. They did it to counter the fact that one of the top searches on social media and on Google related to Escamilla was for photos of "Ingrid Escamilla body skinned." Their efforts ensured that such searches would be overwhelmed by the photos that feminists and other citizens had posted.

Feminists, via coordinated protests around Mexico, have forced the media to recognize the prevalence of sexist, victim-blaming discourse around femicide. In a period of a few weeks, feminists had called for the creation of Ingrid's Law, which was later proposed by Ernestina Godoy, the attorney general for justice in Mexico City. The law, if passed, would sanction public servants who leak images from open police investigations.

At a protest against femicide organized in Mexico City on Feb. 14, 2020, feminists chanted "our bodies are not a show" and held protest signs that read, in Spanish, "We demand responsible journalism that doesn't revictimize us." The protests forced the media to listen to and interview women and thus begin to discuss the ethics of how femicide victims have been represented. In the long run, it is

women – many of them having been victims of violence – who will put their bodies in the streets and fearlessly voice their concerns to change the way femicide victims are represented in the media.

## **B. Media violence against Honduran women**

*Wendy Funes is an independent investigative journalist based in Honduras. This case study was adapted from an article published by "Reporteros de Investigación" in February 2018.<sup>29</sup>*

**THE ADAPTATION WAS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY MARILSE RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA.**

A study of the messaging that two daily newspapers in Tegucigalpa conveyed in 2016 reports about crimes against women's lives finds that they constructed a narrative that justified their deaths by reinforcing gender roles, labeling, stigmatizing and revictimizing the primary victims/survivors, as well as the secondary victims (family members/community). The newspapers' coverage demonstrated media violence. It was built on a similar construct of gender in both newspapers, which represented the events without proper investigation, basing the news on anonymous sources that, in most instances, transmitted messages from a faceless official voice.

Another principle from which the media violence sprang was the very similar structure in both newspapers, with active voice for the aggressors and the police,

and passive voice for the women, their family members, and survivors. Because of the use of this language, the aggressors seemed to be active, while the victims were always stereotyped as passive.

Victims and their families, revictimized, also suffered symbolic violence from the media exposure of the bodies through graphic language, as evidence that a man exercised power over their bodies and “ended their lives.”

My preliminary study analyzed 12 news articles of crimes against women’s lives within the context of violence against women. It was conducted through a critical analysis of the narratives. The articles from news reports were selected randomly for the study as a proposed first approach to the analysis of discourse in media criminology.

The lack of objectivity in the articles is a result of basing most of the information on anonymous official sources, without contrast, without a survivor’s voice, people who witnessed the events, secondary victims (family), or professionals on matters of security, criminology, sociology, anthropology, or psychiatry. This latter group could help understand the reality of criminal phenomena as part of a social totality with different explanations and diverse solutions.

The newspapers focused their attention on the police-penal optics and limited death to criminal violence, without exploring social and structural violence promoted by the culture of war and death as a “means for peace.” This in turn reinforces the

symbolic violence and expressive violence that, according to feminist anthropologist Rita Laura Segato, serve to send a message of control and power from the victimizer, while in the coverage there is a kind of normalization or banalization of the violence.

The news was constructed with poor language, word redundancy, excessive use of pronouns in sentences, passive voice, ambiguous paragraphs, and imprecise data. “It would have been jealousy.” The use of the verb “to be” in the conditional represents a sense of anteriority or refers to hypothetical actions. It serves to mitigate the reporter’s responsibility in the newsroom. In this context, the conditional mode suggests a lack of commitment to reliability and validity, that is, it implies doubt as to the information.

“She was a graceful woman who liked to show her figure on Facebook; she liked to post photos to her Facebook page modeling her body, receiving hundreds of ‘likes’ every time she posted an image of her figure,” quotes one purported news report, without specifying a source and without exploring the personality of the victim to explain the reason for that journalistic conclusion.

The newspapers’ message was based on describing the motivation for each act; that is, media attention was focused on the criminal signature, rather than on the *modus operandi*, which might help solve the crime. Anonymous police officers offered their narratives at the scene, revictimizing the women without first investigating the possibility that the scenes of women’s violent deaths may have been altered, given complaints about police corruption.

In the analysis, the photographs communicated: doubts about the behavior of the victim; commiseration; doubts about sexual freedom and the victims' showing off of their bodies in social media; anguish of family members; police as the only responsible authority; loneliness in tragedy; death as a mechanism of distraction and spectacle to satisfy the curiosity of the groups of inquisitive people who hang around the scene of a crime and, at the same time, the help and solidarity that ensue from the incident.

The news in both newspapers obscures the entire set of aggressors' behaviors and focuses only on the criminal behavior directed against the life of the female victims. It leaves out of the scene the subjugated people who obey and keep the victims helpless. While a man who was driving "was forced to," it is said of the woman that "she was removed." The use of that verb objectifies her, and she ceases to be an animate subject, becoming an inanimate one. The representation is based on the defects of the aggressors, without specifying the emotions or virtues of each character.

#### 7.1.4 "THAT'S NOT HOW IT WAS. YOU NEED TO GET THIS RIGHT."

A woman whose sister was murdered in an incident of domestic violence was quoted as saying: "After having read certain reports, I imagined my sister shouting: 'No, no, that's not how it was. You need to get this right.'"

That quotation is included in a 2018 publication of the London-based feminist organization Level Up: *Dignity for dead women: Media guidelines for reporting domestic violence deaths*.<sup>30</sup> Level Up's advocacy work to end sexism in the United Kingdom led it to create these guidelines to "set a bar for journalistic standards on fatal domestic abuse stories and help put an end to families of victims having their grief and trauma compounded by irresponsible reporting." Its initial guidelines, after input from UK journalists (including from the BBC and the *Huffpost*), were adopted by the UK's two main press regulators: The Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO) and Impress. The guidelines can be accessed through the "External resources for journalists" section of the IPSO website.

In its introduction, Level Up asks journalists: "Before you write about fatal domestic abuse, understand that:

- "When someone has been killed by their partner or ex-partner, this is usually the endpoint to a sustained period of coercive control – not an isolated incident. Including the broader context is a matter of accuracy.
- "Research shows that narratives of 'romantic love' in domestic abuse deaths can lead to lighter sentencing in court.

- “Insensitive reporting has lasting traumatic impacts on victims’ families. Cultural and religious insensitivity detracts focus from the woman’s life that has been lost.
- “Every article on fatal domestic abuse is an opportunity to help prevent future deaths.”

“”

*Every article on fatal domestic abuse is an opportunity to help prevent future deaths.*

“”

*You can’t consent to your own murder.*

Vox senior reporter Anna North recommends those guidelines in an excellent analysis of victim-blaming patterns in the media coverage of some types of femicide. Her Nov. 21, 2019, article features the case of Grace Millane, a British woman who was fatally strangled in New Zealand. Her “accidental” death was attributed by the perpetrator and his defense lawyers to her “sexual fetishes”, which were also the focus of the media coverage of his trial. North concluded: “As the prosecutor pointed out, ‘you can’t consent to your own murder.’”

“It is reasonable for media outlets to cover the defense’s strategy”, North added in her *Vox* article, “but the way they cover it matters ... Many media outlets were leading with the defense’s argument without giving equal prominence to the prosecution. While the attention to the [victim’s] sexual past may reflect a cultural tendency toward victim-blaming, it is also a strategy by media outlets to drive clicks by focusing on sex.”<sup>31</sup>

### 7.1.5 SELECTED GLOBAL AND DOMESTIC DATA RESOURCES

#### UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Since her 2015 call for all states to establish a femicide watch and publish disaggregated data on femicide, UN Special Rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović, has issued annual calls for nations’ submissions and provided links to the reports from each responding country.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/Issues/Women/SRWomen/Pages/CallForFemicide2019.aspx>

#### United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The first UNODC “Global Study on Homicide” was published in 2011. At the time of writing, the most recent study was dated July 2019. Booklet 5 of the report covers “Gender-related killings of women and girls” (68 pages):

The appended table provides useful information about which offenses are counted as “femicide” in the 18 countries (all in Latin America) that include a legal definition of such offenses in their respective criminal codes.

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet\\_5.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf)



### **Fem[in]icide Watch**

This global platform, launched in 2017, is a joint project of the United Nations Studies Association (UNSA) Global Network and UNSA Vienna

<http://femicide-watch.org/>

### **Academic Council of the United Nations System (May 2017)**

“Establishing a Femicide Watch in Every Country” (Femicide publication, Volume VII, May 2017)

<https://acuns.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Femicide-Volume-VII-Establishing-a-Femicide-Watch-in-Every-Country.pdf>

### **Small Arms Survey Research Notes**

“A Gendered Analysis of Violent Deaths” (November 2016):

[http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/H-Research\\_Notes/SAS-Research-Note-63.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/H-Research_Notes/SAS-Research-Note-63.pdf)

### **Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability**

Its website features a comprehensive review of all the different types of femicide, as well as a library which includes global and regional resources.

<http://femicideincanada.ca/library>

### **It Starts With Us**

“Honors the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, trans, and two-spirits” and provides information about Canadian community databases documenting their murders.

<http://itstartswithus-mmiw.com/>

### **Violence Policy Center (USA)**

“When Men Murder Women” (September 2020)

<https://vpc.org/studies/wmmw2020.pdf>

### **Women Count USA**

A femicide accountability project (includes a database)

<https://womencountusa.org/about>

### **Observatorio de feminicidios (Argentina)**

The Argentine Ministry of Security established the Observatory in 2016.

[http://www.dpn.gob.ar/documentos/Observatorio\\_Femicidios\\_-\\_Femicide\\_Report\\_2017\\_-\\_SSEC\\_OFDPN.pdf](http://www.dpn.gob.ar/documentos/Observatorio_Femicidios_-_Femicide_Report_2017_-_SSEC_OFDPN.pdf)

### **Observatorio Femicidios Colombia**

<https://observatoriofemicidioscolombia.org/>

### **National Citizen Observatory on Femicide (Mexico)**

Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio (OCNF). This is the largest femicide watch/observatory in Latin America.

<https://www.observatoriofemicidiomexico.org/>

### **European Observatory on Femicide (EOF)**

EOF is a network of country research groups in Europe and Israel.

<http://eof.cut.ac.cy/about-eof/>

### **Trans Murder Monitoring**

This is a global monitoring project (started in 2009) of Berlin-based Transgender Europe.

<https://transrespect.org/en/trans-murder-monitoring/>

### **Féminicides par compagnons ou ex (France)**

This volunteer collective has been documenting since 2016 murders by current or ex-partners reported in the French press or through social media. A major 2019 Agence France Presse investigation was based on their data.

<https://www.facebook.com/femicicide/>

**Femicide Observation Center Germany**

<https://kristina-wolff.de/>

**Feminicidio.net (Spain)**

This independent observatory has been registering femicides in Spain since 2010.

<https://feminicidio.net/category/informes-y-cifras/>

**We Will End Femicide Platform (Turkey)**

Kadin Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu (KCDP)

Publishes annual reports, including statistics, on femicides in Turkey.

<http://kadincinayetlerinidurduracagiz.net/veriler/2890/2019-report-of-we-will-end-femicide-platform>

**Féminicides Algérie (Algeria)**

<https://feminicides-dz.com/>

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SUDDENLY THERE IS A UNIVERSAL UNDERSTANDING OF  
WHAT IT MEANS TO BE LOCKED DOWN AT HOME.  
WE ARE, IN OTHER WORDS, CLOSER TO UNDERSTANDING  
THE TERROR OF ENFORCED INSULATION THAN EVER BEFORE

*Bonita Meyersfeld*

## 7.2 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### 7.2.1 TERMINOLOGY

In English, several terms are used interchangeably: domestic violence or abuse, family violence, and intimate partner violence. **Domestic violence** is the term chosen in this handbook to reflect the lack of cross-cultural consensus on what defines a family structure. As early as 1996, the first UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, recognized that “discussions on family violence have failed to include the broad range of women’s experiences with violence perpetrated against them by their intimates when that violence falls outside the narrow confines of the traditional family.”<sup>1</sup> She defined domestic violence as “**violence that occurs within the private sphere, generally between individuals who are related through intimacy, blood or law.**”<sup>2</sup>

In a report to the UN General Assembly,<sup>3</sup> the Special Rapporteur on torture, Nils Melzer, clarified in 2019 that “domestic violence includes a wide range of abusive conduct, from culpable neglect and abusive or coercive or excessively controlling behavior that aims to isolate, humiliate, intimidate or subordinate a person, to various forms of physical violence, sexual abuse and even murder. In terms of the intentionality, purposefulness and severity of the inflicted pain and suffering, domestic violence often falls nothing short of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” As such, it is considered a human rights violation that can lead, in its most extreme form, to femicide (see previous section).

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*Domestic violence often falls nothing short of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.*

As opposed to intimate partner violence, which refers to forms of abuse and controlling behaviors within an intimate relationship, domestic violence can also encompass abuse against a child or elder, and abuse by any member of a household, including domestic workers. Since the adoption of the Istanbul Convention<sup>4</sup> in 2011, it can also include **economic violence as a form of coercive control that deprives victims of their autonomy and dignity.**

**Domestic abuse** is sometimes the preferred terminology to avoid limiting this form of violence to its physical manifestations.

“Using the term domestic abuse has spurred a discussion in Australia on the parts of abuse that go unnoticed, such as coercive control and systematic campaigns of domination and degradation” said Australian investigative journalist Jess Hill, who won the 2020 Stella Prize for her book on the topic.<sup>5</sup>

## 7.2.2 PREVALENCE, CAUSES, AND RISK FACTORS

### SELECTED STATISTICS



*The global lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence among ever-partnered women aged 15–49 is*

**27%**

The *Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020* report by UN Women<sup>6</sup> includes a comprehensive source of statistics in its chapter titled “When home is where the harm is.” In particular, it provides new global and regional data on the “proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15–49 subjected to **physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner** in the previous 12 months”. The world average is 18%, the highest proportion being 35% in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). According to UN Women,<sup>7</sup> this global average represents 243 million women and girls.

The *World's Women 2020 Trends and Statistics* report,<sup>8</sup> published at five-year intervals, features the latest available data for 112 countries during the period from 2005 to 2018. It was compiled by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). The countries with the highest proportion of violence were Afghanistan (46%), Equatorial Guinea (40%), and Vanuatu (33%). Other key findings are:

- 58% of countries have recorded a decrease in intimate partner violence since 2005
- Younger women (15–29 years) are at increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence
- One in three women will experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner at some point in her life

Meanwhile, a 2018 WHO study<sup>9</sup> estimated that “the global lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence among ever-partnered women aged 15–49 is 27%,” with the highest rate (51%) in Melanesia.

In the United States, according to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (CDC 2018),<sup>10</sup> “1 in 4 women experienced sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner and reported an intimate partner violence-related impact during their lifetime.”

### CAUTIONARY TALES

Those sets of statistics illustrate the need to exercise caution when interpreting data. In this regard, the above reports are important for journalists as they spell out some of the variables and challenges affecting this type of





ONE IN THREE WOMEN WILL  
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POINT IN HER LIFE.

data collection. Regional averages, in particular, can obfuscate significant differences among countries and encourage assumptions.

The *World's Women 2020* report acknowledges, for instance, that “some issues with comparability persist owing to the absence of agreed international definitions in historical data, as well as inconsistent age ranges used in different surveys.”

Similarly, an article in the *Medical Journal of Australia*<sup>11</sup> stressed that available data can vary significantly based on definitions used and the source of public data, such as police, hospitals, courts, community surveys, and clinical studies, among others.

In addition to seeking reliable sources of data, journalists conducting research may also want to explore some of the underlying causes and other factors that contribute to specific incidents or patterns of domestic violence that they are reporting on. It is especially important that these factors be part of an explanatory process, and not perceived as justifications. The multiple causes and predictors of such violence are also key to addressing measures needed to reduce its prevalence.

## DECONSTRUCTING CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

### Root causes

- Gender inequality, derived assumptions of relative value and worth, and sexist stereotypes
- Normalization of spousal roles and “rights” that endanger the autonomy and safety of women
- Normalization of domestic violence, especially when specific forms of violence are condoned, such as wife beating and marital rape
- Men’s sense of entitlement to a position of power and coercive control within the family
- Impunity (perpetrators not condemned or punished, perception that women are legitimate targets of violence, and victim-blaming)
- Perception of domestic violence as a “private matter”
- Objectification of women, especially through portrayals of women in entertainment and news media, as well as advertising

### Conducive contexts

- Previous/ongoing exposure to violence in the home
- Economic insecurity and deprivation
- Discriminatory access to education, employment, land and property rights
- Inadequate social policies and laws
- Lack of access to domestic violence resources and remedies, including barriers to reporting
- Guardianship laws imposing, for example, travel limitations
- Lockdowns and curfews, such as those resulting from epidemic/pandemic restrictions
- Natural disasters

### Contributing factors

- Age
- Substance abuse
- Homelessness
- Poor health, including mental health issues
- Child abuse
- Threats of separation or divorce
- Disabilities
- Unemployment of men that results in their inability to provide for the family

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It is further worth noting that many country-level statistics do not reflect the increased vulnerability of marginalized communities, and therefore can hide the roots, interaction and impact of multiple risk factors. This was especially well demonstrated in a 2020 report on *Native Hawaiians at risk of [intimate partner violence] during COVID-19*.<sup>12</sup> It stated:

“It is inappropriate to infer that the higher incidence of intimate partner violence experienced by Native Hawaiians is attributable to intrinsic characteristics and/or cultural values and practices. Similar to other Native peoples, the higher rates of violence cannot be divorced from oppressive external

conditions such as colonization, denial of self-determination, racialized system and structures, and economic stress.”

Addressing the prevalence of domestic violence against Indigenous women, the World’s Women 2020 report advocated for their inclusion in surveys on violence against women. As an example, it cites a finding from Australia based on 2016 disaggregated data:

“Aboriginal women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalized from family violence and almost 11 times more likely to be killed as a result of violent assault,” the report said.<sup>13</sup>

### 7.2.3 IMPROVING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COVERAGE: THREE MEDIA PROFESSIONALS’ PERSPECTIVES

#### A. “Why journalists need to do better in reporting on domestic violence”<sup>14</sup>

*Hannah Storm, is the former CEO and Director of the London-based Ethical Journalism Network (EJN). The following is excerpted from a commentary she published on the EJN website on June 12, 2020.*

“[Journalists] must ensure they do not reinforce damaging stereotypes, nor perpetuate narratives that blame the person who was abused, and they must give context to the situation, and offer those at risk and facing the reality of domestic violence, the resources they need to be able to access help and support safely.

“And yet, we so often see headlines that shift the blame of abuse away from the perpetrator. We see labels and language used to describe the act which deflects from the fact it is a form of abuse and a crime. How often do we see news media

using terms such as ‘thwarted husband,’ ‘cheating wife,’ ‘crime of passion,’ or euphemistic references to sex that imply consent rather than rape or sexual assault? How often do we see references to what the woman was wearing, or if she had been drinking, or something else that implies she was somehow to blame for what happened to her? The answer is far too often. Journalists need to recognize that they have a responsibility in their reporting of domestic violence.

“... Many women live in shame, fear, and silence for a long time. As journalists, it is not up to us to question why a survivor might have taken so long to break her silence. It is up to us to see this as a valid response to violent abuse. By extension, journalists must understand the need to minimize harm for survivors and for others who have found themselves impacted by the legacy of domestic abuse.

“Ethical journalism needs to be rooted in accountability, humanity, and accuracy.

We have a responsibility to be accountable to our audiences and to ourselves, and where others within our industry fall foul of these principles we need to call them out ... The media has a responsibility to recognize the impact its reporting has. The media has a responsibility to be better at covering issues that continually undermine women, that reinforce misogyny, that give rise to gendered violence.”

### B. “How do we improve our reporting?”

*Handbook contributor Margaret Simons is an Australian independent journalist and writer.*

BY MARGARET SIMONS, MARCH 2020

On the morning of 19 February 2020, Hannah Clarke, 31, and her three children were on their way to school when the children’s father leapt into the passenger seat of their car, doused them all with kerosene and set them alight, before taking his own life. The children died on the spot. Clarke died in hospital.

It was an awful example of the most common kind of gender-based violence in Australia – intimate partner violence, or what some call domestic violence. And while the media reports were full of grief and outrage, some well-worn tropes were trotted out.

Had the perpetrator been “pushed too far,” some media reports asked. Or, at

the other extreme, the murderer was described as a “senseless monster.”

“We blame the monster, rather than the man ... and the society that allowed these murders to unfold” gender violence researcher Annie Blatchford said. “All at the expense of the broader and blatantly obvious problem of domestic violence which sees, on average, one Australian woman murdered every week.”<sup>15</sup>

Australian journalism on intimate partner violence, like much across the Western world, has persistent faults. First, there isn’t enough reporting. Homicides make the headlines but most of the violence, including coercive control and psychological abuse, is still regarded as a private matter, taking place out of sight of both law enforcement and media.

When particularly violent cases draw a lot of media attention, there is victim blaming, sensationalizing and attempts, as with the Clarke case, to rationalize it as the work of “monsters.”

How do we improve the reporting?

““

*We found sources are the biggest single influence on reporting.*

I have led a research project aimed at answering that question. We studied media reports, and interviewed

editors, producers and reporters at outlets where the reporting had improved.

It won’t come as a surprise to working journalists that we found sources are the biggest single influence on reporting.

First, there is the police force – always an important source. It was when police in the state of Victoria began collecting statistics in a new way, separating out the recording of domestic violence cases, that the extent of the problem became visible to local reporters and editors.

Another, less traditional but increasingly important source was social media. When an outlet reported on intimate partner violence, it got a big response from readers and viewers, many offering stories from personal experience. Newsrooms took social media response as a sign that their audiences were ready to hear more – and that this was an issue of direct relevance to them.

Finally, there was the role of individual newsroom leaders and journalists. In all the cases we studied where reporting had improved, there were one or two newsroom leaders – editors, producers and senior reporters – who had driven and led that change.

Sometimes they had personal experience of the problem. More often, they were confronted by a particularly awful incident, and made the key shift from seeing this not as exceptional and unusual, but as a high-water mark of a pervasive social problem.

To sum up, we found the main drivers of improved reporting on intimate violence were:

- Availability and attitude of sources
- Influence of social media responses to media outputs, and how this was understood within newsrooms

- Influence of individual journalists and newsroom managers
- Individual incidents of family violence, and how these came to be perceived within newsrooms as evidence of a widespread social problem.

We found that guidelines or “how to” sheets aimed at journalists had limited effectiveness unless they were part of a broader effort, including training.

On the other hand, we had success with using social media to foster a peer-to-peer conversation among journalists on the challenges of intimate partner violence reporting. Better reporting resulted, using a wider variety of sources.

Meanwhile, our research helped spur efforts by the Australian federal advocacy body Our Watch<sup>16</sup> to fund media training for victims and survivors of domestic violence, so they can be supported in becoming a new kind of “expert” source.

It would be wrong to suggest that the problem is fixed. As the reporting of the Clarke case shows, the nature of intimate partner violence is still widely misunderstood and misrepresented by the Australian media.

On the other hand, there was also a great deal of responsible and socially aware reporting of this awful case – reporting I don’t think would have occurred just a few years before.

It is too soon to say with confidence that media practice is improving – but at least we have some insights on how to get there.

### C. “Giving a voice to survivors”

*Handbook contributor Eunice Kilonzo is an award-winning journalist and content generation manager who formerly worked for the Daily Nation (Kenya).*

BY EUNICE KILONZO, JUNE 2020

Reporting on gender-based violence is not the easiest. It is tough. It is disheartening. Listening to the survivors—male or female—is a stark reminder of how closely and commonly such violence exists behind closed doors.

One such case was that of Jackline Mwendu, whose hands were chopped off by her husband because of a childless marriage. I learned about her story, by chance, one Sunday afternoon in 2016 while on an otherwise uneventful shift. My colleague had just visited her in a hospital and posted a brief and some of her photos on a work WhatsApp group. It was barely 150 words, but I remember reading it repeatedly. I was shocked. The attack not only left her without hands, but her swollen face had stitches crisscrossing her hairline, eyes, and neck. Later, we discovered that she had lost some teeth and hearing in one ear as a result of the attack.

Her story was more than a brief, I thought. She was alive. Could we hear her story, from her own voice? With the guidance of our colleague, I set out—alongside a driver and the then-photo editor—on the over 100 kms (60 miles) journey to meet Mwendu. We tracked her down at her

father’s compound, about an hour and a half from Nairobi.

Of all my stories, this was the hardest interview to do. How do I ask questions with tact—in a way that doesn’t reactivate her pain and grief, and cause additional trauma? No one trains you about how to do this kind of reporting. You learn on the job—a tough and dicey place to be.

We got the story; I filed it and went back home.

I woke up the next morning to calls and texts from my peers, asking for Mwendu’s contact information. I got emails from organizations, government officials, philanthropists all asking how they could help. The article was picked up by other media houses, political leaders were talking about it; it was a hot topic of national discussion. I was glad that we were having the discussion, not just of the violence but other underlying issues, such as infertility, human rights and the role of our legal system. Gradually, it brought to the fore the different gender perspectives and understanding of gender-based violence in Kenya. Some readers and callers sympathized with Mwendu, but were quick to ask: “But what exactly did she do to her husband?” There were deeply-rooted beliefs of male supremacy (and the inverse, powerlessness of women) held by both genders in varying degrees.

The seesaw nature of opinions, not just in the country but among my colleagues in the newsroom, showcases how tough and misunderstood gender-based violence was. Some pushed to tell the story

while failing to call it gender-based violence, while others, like myself, opted for a semblance of a survivor-centered approach, where Mwendu was at the center of the reporting process.

It was a tough balance, especially in the follow-up articles on Mwendu. They included how she got support to go to South Korea to get prosthetics, a new house and seed funding to start a business. I always asked myself, how is this in her best interest while doing no harm, nor exposing her to stigma?

That story paved the way for me to truly understand my role as a journalist: the duty to inform; respect for privacy and confidentiality; ensuring that the reporting is sensitive as it is factually right; thoroughly informing the source of the

consequences of appearing in the media; being objective in the reporting and, therefore, not judging, discriminating, and apportioning blame on the survivor.

I am also sensitive to the dilemmas of writing some of these important stories: How soon is too soon to interview a survivor? How do I keep my biases in check? How about my language, diction, and am I using the correct terminology? But more importantly, how do I write in a way that does not shift the focus away from the survivor?

The link to Eunice Kilonzo's story in the *Nation* (2016) is:

<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/battered-woman-says-why-she-remained-in-abusive-marriage-1223988>

#### 7.2.4 COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE SURGE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES

On the occasion of International Women's Day, on March 8, 2020, *BBC World Service* was one of the first major media organizations to sound the alarm about the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women.<sup>17</sup> Increasing instances of domestic violence were identified as one of the five main areas of concern. The others included: school closures, risks faced by frontline care workers and migrant domestic helpers, and longer-term economic impact.

Reports of domestic violence initially surfaced on Chinese social media.

"The coronavirus pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges, as victims were stranded inside their homes with no help from the outside world available," the SupChina news platform reported. "Meanwhile, for survivors seeking protective orders from courts, counseling and legal services have been largely inaccessible."<sup>18</sup>



*The Guardian's* early global coverage of the impact of pandemic restrictions is a good example of the importance of the role of journalists in alerting their audience to the scope and severity of the domestic violence crisis:

**“Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence” – March 28, 2020**

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

**“Calamitous: Domestic violence set to soar by 20% during global lockdown” – April 28, 2020**

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/28/calamitous-domestic-violence-set-to-soar-by-20-during-global-lockdown-coronavirus>

Contemporaneous coverage by the *New York Times* highlighted the need to report on the worsening forms of domestic violence, which led to an increased use of the term “intimate terrorism,” referring to the trauma of coercive and controlling aggression:

**“A new COVID -19 crisis: Domestic abuse rises worldwide” – April 6, 2020**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>

Media outlets also played an important role in highlighting trends in global responses (including relief measures) to what some started naming as the “other” pandemic: gender-based violence. *Al Jazeera*, on April 25, 2020, published an especially insightful piece by Bonita Meyersfeld, editor of the *South African Journal on Human Rights*. She wrote:

“Before the global lockdown, most governments did little to combat gender-based violence ... . The global lockdown has seen a type of intervention in domestic violence cases that is most unusual. For the first time, a handful of states are creating, funding and implementing some very clever steps to help women locked in abusive homes ... . The conflation of physical violence, mental manipulation and threats of harm, form a barrier to liberation that can be as restrictive as prison walls ... . One must ask why it took a pandemic to focus leaders’ minds on another pandemic (gender-based violence) and the gritty details of interventions that will actually work for victims. I speculate that one of the reasons is that suddenly there is a universal understanding of what it means to be locked down at home. We are, in other words, closer to understanding the terror of enforced insulation than ever before.”<sup>19</sup>

“”

*Suddenly there is a universal understanding of what it means to be locked down at home. We are, in other words, closer to understanding the terror of enforced insulation than ever before.*

Two days later, by contrast, *The Diplomat*, an international current-affairs magazine for the Asia-Pacific region, focused on the gaps in India's efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic:

“Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's eager and abrupt lockdown policy came down with many gender-blind spots – putting the country's most vulnerable at a disproportionately greater risk than others. Women remained largely absent from the government's COVID-19 policy in spite of the uptick in intimate partner violence and the knowledge that in India, a woman is subjected to an act of domestic violence every 4.4 minutes.”<sup>20</sup>

Journalists referring to the surge in domestic violence during the pandemic may want to pay particular attention to some of its underreported aspects:

- Increase in domestic burdens and responsibilities, such as care giving and home schooling, which reinforce inequitable divisions of labor
- Exacerbation of pre-existing challenges, such as access to food and water, and to domestic violence services
- Lack of female participation in decision-making related to the management of the crisis
- Impact of prolonged periods of isolation and abuse on women's mental health
- Disappearance of informal sector jobs affecting the survival of a majority of women workers such as street/market vendors and domestic workers
- Intensification of the violence and severity of its associated risks, as described, among other media, in a study from Zimbabwe covered by Radio France Internationale<sup>21</sup>
- Connections with previous crises, such as natural disasters, that illustrate ongoing patterns and inadequacies, especially in terms of governments' responses and reporting standards

### **7.2.5 REPORTING ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LAWS AND POLICIES**

References to relevant domestic laws and policies can greatly enhance the quality and impact of media reporting on domestic violence. The following examples from Cyprus, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, and the United States feature best practices that contextualize media coverage of domestic violence and bring up a wide range of key issues, from contributing factors to remedies, and from prevention to prosecution.

### A. “Real progress in North over domestic violence”

*Cyprus Mail*, Jan. 20, 2020

<https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/01/20/real-progress-in-north-over-domestic-violence/>

The article discusses a significant rise in victims’ reports of domestic violence since 2018, which “signals an important boost in confidence that justice will be served,” not an increase in violence. This trend was attributed to 2014 amendments to the legal code that criminalized gender-based violence and resulted in the police adding a specialized gender equality unit and a violence intervention unit.

That *Mail* article by Lizzy Ioannidou reflects many of the **best practices** to enhance domestic violence coverage by including multiple perspectives:

- › Impact of government actions or inactions
- › Analysis of statistics and trends
- › Implementation of new laws and policies, including both positive results and remaining obstacles. (In this case, high rents and low wages were preventing women from fleeing their abusers.)
- › The cycle of violence
- › Obstacles to filing complaints
- › Availability of services, such as shelters
- › Human rights perspective, such as referring to a recent UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Committee report
- › Perspectives of local experts, such as advocates and service providers

### B. “Decriminalisation of domestic violence in Russia leads to fall in reported cases”

*The Guardian*, Aug. 16, 2018

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/16/decriminalisation-of-domestic-violence-in-russia-leads-to-fall-in-reported-cases>

This follow-up article on a reverse trend examined the impact of the law amended 16 months prior that decriminalized certain forms of domestic violence. (Russian law does not treat domestic violence as a stand-alone criminal offense.)<sup>22</sup>

### C. “French women demand action amid high domestic violence rate”

Associated Press, Nov. 22, 2019

<https://apnews.com/3556845f3ab74186a26ec6d10739f9ca>

The article reports on the French government’s announcement of “measures that are expected to include seizing firearms from people suspected of domestic violence, prioritizing police training, and formally recognizing psychological violence as a form of domestic violence.” Reporter Claire Parker also wrote that “European Union studies show France has a higher rate of domestic violence than most of its European peers.”

### D. “Domestic abuse bill condemned for ignoring ‘gendered nature’ of violence amid austerity cuts”

*The Independent*, July 16, 2019

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/domestic-abuse-bill-parliament-criticism-theresa-may-women-men-violence-a9007151.html>

Maya Oppenheim, Women’s Correspondent of the UK *Independent*, reports on a domestic abuse bill, which “has been roundly condemned by campaigners for not recognizing the ‘gendered nature’ of domestic violence.”

“Women are more likely to have sustained physical or emotional abuse, or violence which results in serious injury or death,” a Women’s Aid representative told Oppenheim. “Violence against women is rooted in gender inequality. It is essential that this is explicitly recognized in the domestic abuse bill. To solve any complex social problem, we have to start by defining it, and we know that a gender-neutral definition does not work for this highly gendered issue.”

### E. “In Bali, a woman’s feet were cut off: #MeToo time for Indonesia?”

*South China Morning Post*, Nov. 25, 2018

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/2174642/bali-womans-feet-were-cut-metoo-time-indonesia>

Published on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, this article addresses the issue of “a deep-rooted culture of victim blaming” in Indonesia resulting in the dismissal of domestic violence claims. Significant increases in such violence are also attributed to the fact that “the bill for the elimination of domestic violence has been stuck in Indonesia’s national legislature for 14 years. This bill to promote human rights, achieve gender equality, protect survivors of violence and punish offenders has clearly not been a top priority for the government.”

## F. “Public comment ends for proposed changes that eliminate gender-based asylum”

*The Fuller Project*, July 15, 2020

<https://fullerproject.org/story/asylum-regulations-women-girls-domestic-gender-violence/>

Investigative journalist Erica Hellerstein reported for the Fuller Project, a global nonprofit newsroom dedicated to reporting on women, that the coronavirus pandemic had diverted Americans’ attention from regulations that would eliminate the possibility of obtaining political asylum on grounds of domestic violence. They seem to specifically target the increasingly high number of women fleeing gender-based persecution from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

## G. “In Puerto Rico, an epidemic of domestic violence hides in plain sight”

*Gen (Medium publication)*, June 29, 2020

<https://gen.medium.com/in-puerto-rico-an-epidemic-of-domestic-violence-hides-in-plain-sight-c459d31ef616>

In this article, journalist Andrea González-Ramírez investigates the response of the Puerto Rican governmental entities following hurricane Maria (September 2017) and subsequent disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic:

“The cascading crises have given new urgency to the longstanding problems in how the police and courts respond to domestic violence, along with the underfunding of victim services. And they have highlighted how the government’s misguided response continues to leave the island’s women vulnerable.”

## 7.2.6 SELECTED GUIDELINES TO REPORT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### United Kingdom

#### *Media Guidelines on Violence Against Women*

Published by the Scottish charity Zero Tolerance (2019 edition)

<https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/work-journalists/>

#### *Media Guidelines for Reporting Domestic Violence Deaths*

Online publication of the feminist organization Level Up (2018)

<https://www.welevelup.org/media-guidelines>

## Kosovo

### *Reporting on Domestic Violence: Guidelines for Journalists*

Published by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo (2018)

<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/2/404348.pdf>

## Australia

### *How to Report on Violence Against Women and their Children*

Published in 2019 by Our Watch, an independent NGO established by the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments

<https://media.ourwatch.org.au/resource/how-to-report-on-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2019-national-edition>

### *Domestic and Family Violence: A Media Guide*

Published by the Queensland Government (reform program to end domestic and family violence)

<https://www.csyw.qld.gov.au/resources/campaign/end-violence/domestic-family-violence-media-guide.pdf>

### *“Survivors of Violence: The Dos and Don’ts of Reporting their Stories”*

by Loni Cooper (2016).

Available through the “Uncovered” website, a project of the Centre for Advanced Journalism at the University of Melbourne.

<https://uncovered.org.au/survivors-violence-dos-and-donts-reporting-their-stories>

### *Advisory Guideline on Family and Domestic Violence Reporting*

Australian Press Council (2016)

[https://www.presscouncil.org.au/uploads/52321/ufiles/Guidelines/Advisory\\_Guideline\\_on\\_Family\\_and\\_Domestic\\_Violence\\_Reporting.pdf](https://www.presscouncil.org.au/uploads/52321/ufiles/Guidelines/Advisory_Guideline_on_Family_and_Domestic_Violence_Reporting.pdf)

## New Zealand

### *Reporting Domestic/Family Violence: Guidelines for Journalists*

Developed by Stephanie Edmond and Sheryl Hann for the New Zealand “It’s Not OK” campaign.

<http://www.areyouok.org.nz/assets/AreyouOK/Media/Guidelines-for-Reporters.pdf>

## United States

### *Online Guide for Journalists Covering Domestic Violence*

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2015)

<http://dvonlineguide.org/en/>

## 7.2.7. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) Washington, D. C.

A series of articles and guidelines for and by journalists from around the globe who have reported on COVID-19. Several resources relate specifically to the coverage of domestic violence or include relevant tools. Among them:

“Reporting on gender-based violence during quarantine” (June 10, 2020)

<https://ijnet.org/en/story/reporting-gender-based-violence-during-quarantine>

“The health crisis at home: Reporting on domestic abuse” (June 30, 2020)

<https://ijnet.org/en/story/health-crisis-home-reporting-domestic-abuse>

### Center for Health Journalism, University of California Annenberg School of Journalism, U. S.

“The coronavirus crisis is also a domestic abuse crisis: Keep these tips in mind to cover it” (May 29, 2020).

<https://www.centerforhealthjournalism.org/2020/05/29/coronavirus-crisis-also-domestic-abuse-crisis-keep-these-tips-mind-cover-it>

### European Institute for Gender Equality

*The Covid-19 Pandemic and Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the European Union (March 2021)*

Available in English and 23 other European languages

<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/covid-19-pandemic-and-intimate-partner-violence-against-women-eu>

### **Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health, Columbia University (New York)**

<https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/resources/the-heilbrunn-department-of-population-and-family-health-at-columbia-mailman-covid-19-gender-and-sexual-and-reproductive-health-digest/>

This weekly *COVID-19, Gender, and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Digest* is a compilation of important global, regional and national studies and media reports on the pandemic and GBV, including domestic violence.

### **International Media Support (IMS), Copenhagen**

“Media, remember gender in your COVID-19 coverage” (March 26, 2020)

<https://www.mediasupport.org/news/media-remember-gender-in-your-covid-19-coverage/>

### **Uks Research Center (Pakistan)**

*Pakistan Media in the Time of COVID-19: A Gendered Focus (April 2021)*

<https://uksresearch.com.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Pakistani-media-in-the-time-of-Covid-19.pdf>



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THE ALL POWERFUL ARE  
NO LONGER THE UNTOUCHABLE.

*A group of  
UN human rights experts*

## 7.3 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

### 7.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Harassment and violence in the world of work are a global phenomenon that disproportionately impacts women. In addition to infringing upon the “inalienable right to work,” they constitute a form of discrimination and a human rights violation. While precluding workers’ enjoyment of the right to live free from violence, they affect their health, safety, and dignity. In sectors dominated by women workers, this negative impact is often compounded by lower standards and discriminatory practices.

Documenting the prevalence and trends of such global violence has been so far immensely challenging and statistics are often unavailable. National statistics use different sets of definitions and classifications and do not necessarily provide disaggregated data that would shed light on the specific ways in which women are affected. In addition, multiple barriers prevent them from reporting the abuses they face.

The International Labor Organization, a United Nations agency, adopted its standard-setting Violence and Harassment Convention in June 2019.<sup>1</sup> Article 1 clarifies that “the term ‘gender-based violence and harassment’ means **violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately, and includes sexual harassment.**” The Convention recognizes the right of every worker to a world free from violence and harassment.

The International Labor Organization also adopted its Violence and Harassment Recommendation.<sup>2</sup> Although not legally binding, it provides critical guidance and stipulates that governments “should adopt appropriate measures for sectors or occupations and work arrangements in which exposure to violence and harassment may be more likely, such as night work, work in isolation, health, hospitality, social services, emergency services, domestic work, transport, education or entertainment.” (par. 9)

The Recommendation also spells out the particular vulnerability of women migrant workers and workers in the informal economy, as well as the types of support, services, and remedies that should be made available to victims of gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work. (par.17)

The International Labor Organization Convention states that protection and prevention measures should extend to contexts and situations beyond the workplace (as in the physical space provided by an employer), such as work-related transportation, communications, and accommodation (Article 3). Those

measures should also apply to all workers “irrespective of their contractual status,” such as apprentices, trainees, and volunteers. (Article 2)

Finally, an essential contribution of this convention is the recognition that “domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety, and that governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations and labour market institutions can help to recognize, respond to and address the impacts of domestic violence.” (Preamble)

### 7.3.2 FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Many forms of harassment and violence encountered in the world of work are often overlooked and unreported. However, since 2016, first in advance of the drafting of the International Labor Organization Convention and later in support of ratification and implementation efforts, several international human rights and workers rights organizations have identified and documented an increasing variety of abuses. They offer key resources for journalists seeking background information and data at the global level, as well as case studies or news updates that can help identify story ideas and experts.

The **International Trade Union Confederation**, which played a key role in representing workers during the International Labor Organization Convention process, proposed the following classification of the multiple forms of gender-based violence faced at the workplace or in transit:<sup>3</sup>

- “Physical abuse, including assault, battery, attempted murder and murder
- “Sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault
- “Sexual harassment
- “Verbal and sexist abuse
- “Bullying
- “Coercion
- “Psychological abuse, intimidation and threats of violence
- “Economic and financial abuse
- “Stalking”

**Global Labor Justice** published a series of reports to the International Labor Organization on gender-based violence in global garment supply chains, based on interviews with women garment workers. The 2018 reports<sup>4</sup> identified over 20 different forms of violence organized in five different categories:

- Acts that inflict physical harm
- Acts that inflict mental harm
- Acts that inflict sexual harm or suffering (from harassment to rape)
- Coercion, threats, and retaliation
- Deprivations of liberty

Since then, Global Labor Justice has joined forces with the **International Labor Rights Forum** to defend the rights of the estimated 150 million workers in global supply chains and also bring “a gender lens on global worker issues [that] has been largely absent from employer and government responses” to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

The international NGO **Human Rights Watch**’s advocacy for global standards to end violence and harassment in the workplace has greatly contributed to the documentation of a wide range of abuses affecting primarily women and gender-nonconforming workers, and resulting in psychological, sexual and economic harm. Since 2018, the organization’s research has focused in part on garment workers and domestic workers.<sup>6</sup>

Human Rights Watch has also been reporting on different forms of sexual harassment occurring across the globe: harassment resulting from a hostile working environment, and “quid pro quo” harassment. The latter takes place when a job decision or benefit is linked to the rejection of, or submission to, an unwelcome or offensive form of sexual conduct.

### 7.3.3 HIGH-RISK SECTORS

Although all workers are potentially at risk, there are some sectors in which exposure to violence and harassment is more pervasive. Many forms of abuse in the world of work are unrecognized, unreported or underreported, both by their victims and the media. Therefore it is important for journalists to be aware of the main situations and sectors, compounding multiple underlying forms of discrimination, that put women workers especially at risk.

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#### A. Informal work

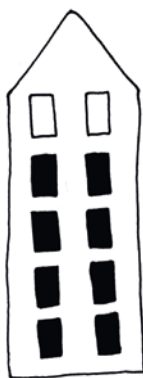
The International Labor Organization estimates that 740 million women, across 119 countries, are engaged in informal employment. According to the organization, in many parts of the world women represent a majority of the informal economy workforce. This is the case in more than 90% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 89% in Southern Asia and nearly 75% in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

*740 million women, across 119 countries, are engaged in informal employment.*

On the occupational safety and health page of its website,<sup>8</sup> the International Labor Organization highlights the risks of informal work, which often involves the most dangerous jobs and conditions across all sectors. “Typically, informal sector units are small-scale, engaging mainly non-waged and unorganised workers in precarious work processes and labour arrangements, largely unregulated and unregistered, falling outside of state regulations and control,” the International Labor Organization says. “High exposure to risks combined with low coverage of social protection place most informal economy workers in a very vulnerable situation.”

Those who work in public spaces are often harassed or attacked by members of the public (including customers), other workers, or law enforcement representatives. In most of those situations, the lack of accountability increases their vulnerability.

Such conditions of work significantly increase the risks of workers becoming targets of gender-based violence and not having the ability to pursue any kind of remedy or relief. Further, the impact of COVID-19 and its economic fallout have been particularly devastating for informal women workers.



*An estimated  
67 million people  
are employed as domestic  
workers globally of which  
80% are women.*

### WHO ARE THE INFORMAL WOMEN WORKERS?

**Domestic workers:** An estimated 67 million people are employed as domestic workers globally of which 80% are women. One in 25 women employed worldwide is a domestic worker.<sup>9</sup> The wide range of services they provide include cleaning, washing, cooking, shopping and providing care for children and the elderly. Many of these workers are migrants and belong to disadvantaged communities. As they live in their place of work, constraints on mobility and isolation from their families often make them easy prey for violence and abuse, and limit their ability to seek protection.

**Home-based workers:** They are typically either self-employed or subcontracted by third parties. Their work can range from assembling microelectronics to finishing garments for large multinational companies. Many are vulnerable to violence in the home, which may worsen when they do not earn their usual income. They also face harassment and violence in their communities through evictions by landlords and demands for sexual favors from intermediaries.

**Street vendors:** They routinely face harassment, verbal and physical abuses and beatings from state authorities, as well as evictions, and violent arrests, which may be related to their





*Justina Mokoena (left) and Liberia Mapesmoawe (right) are both waste pickers on the Boitshepi landfill in South Africa and members of the growing Majakathatha Cooperative. They sort through what the municipal and private trucks dump there, looking for valuable recyclables which they sell to a middleman. This provides an income and reduces the volume of waste buried in*

*the landfill. The coop is fighting to have the price of recyclables regulated so that waste pickers receive fair payment for the glass, metal, plastic, and paper they remove from the landfill.*

*© Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment (Creative Commons Licensing CC\_BY\_NC 4.0)*

immigration status. These women have faced demands for transactional sex for access to trading space, licenses, permits, and goods.

**Agricultural workers:** Women comprise 50% to 70% of the informal workforce in commercial agriculture<sup>10</sup> (including plantations, tea gardens, horticulture, dairy farming, and fish farming). Migrant agricultural workers are especially at risk of violence and exploitation, such as forced and unpaid labor. Lack of access to sanitation facilities disproportionately affects women and results in a higher risk of gender-based violence.

**Waste pickers:** 80% of the estimated 15 million waste pickers worldwide<sup>11</sup> work in the informal economy and often belong to marginalized communities. They are subjected to social stigma, and experience physical assault, including from local authorities. Women may encounter demands for transactional sex for access to waste and recycling processes. They also face additional challenges and risks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

**Transport workers:** The informal sector of transport industries includes many occupations where women are especially at risk of abuse and exploitation: pushing carts and pedicabs, selling gas at road sides, working as vendors and cleaners in bus and train stations, and as porters and guides, among others.<sup>13</sup>

**Sex workers:** Sex work is not only unrecognized as legitimate work by most governments, but criminalized, which makes sex workers extremely vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, including from enforcement agents who often arbitrarily detain, harass, and abuse them. The deeply institutionalized stigma against sex workers encourages even more violence from law enforcement agents. Police may raid their homes or workplaces, and sexually assault or rape them. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been reports of increased violence. In Kenya, for instance, “a surge in physical attacks and killings of sex workers has sent a chill through the community. This spike in violence has been attributed not only to clients, but also to the police and other community members who blame them for spreading the coronavirus.”<sup>14</sup>

*Adapted from CWGL “Global 16 Days Campaign Advocacy Guide” (2020)<sup>15</sup>*

## B. Garment workers

Global Labor Justice research showed that “concentrated in short term, low-skill, and low-wage positions, [the women garment workers] are at daily risk of gender-based violence and harassment at work ... They may be targets of violence on the basis of their gender, or because they are perceived as less likely

or able to resist.”<sup>16</sup> These abuses may occur in the actual workplace, during commuting, and while staying in employer-provided housing.

Global Labor Justice 2018 reports thoroughly documented the risk factors and practices that led to multiple forms of gender-based violence in 113 Asian factories then supplying to Gap, H&M, and Walmart. In its coverage of the reports,<sup>17</sup> *The Guardian* quoted the following response from H&M: “We welcome any initiative strengthening the human rights of women at work. We will go through every section of the report and follow up on factory level with our local teams based in each production country.”

An important role of the media, in this case, is to address accountability issues and conduct follow-up reporting to inform the public about the due diligence efforts of those global companies.

### C. Service and hospitality workers

Union organizations across the globe, among others, have drawn attention to the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the service and hospitality industries (especially hotels, restaurants, casinos, and bars). Some of the main risk factors they have identified are:

- Working hours and precarious conditions
- “Sexualized environment [that] can encourage customers to treat employees as sex objects rather than workers. General hospitality is frequently misjudged and perceived as invitation of sexual advances.”<sup>18</sup>
- Tip-based service industry: “Working for tips enables and facilitates gender-based violence, as customers feel entitled to attention and approval for their money, and managers often feel more empowered to comment and advise on physical appearance.”<sup>19</sup>
- Significant obstacles to reporting abuses faced especially by young women, part-time employees, and immigrant women
- Absence of investigations and corrective measures, as well as enforcement of written policies.

### D. Migrant workers

Migration and displacement, whether caused by poverty, conflict, or natural disasters, has led many women into precarious work. Women workers lacking documentation or in irregular situations can be more attractive to employers who are able to recruit them on less favorable terms.

Migrant domestic workers (over 73% of which are women<sup>20</sup>), care workers, and farmworkers are among the groups most often cited as workers doubly

marginalized by their occupation and migrant status and, consequently, more exposed to harassment and abuse.

The UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls examined trends in “Women’s human rights in the changing world of work.”<sup>21</sup>

“”

*[Journalists] can alert their readers or viewers to the abuses. They may help to change the climate of public opinion, even policy, so that life becomes better for workers.*

Addressing demographic changes, the 2020 report notes that women increasingly migrate for work. When they do, domestic and care workers not only face gender bias but also discrimination based on their legal status, class, caste, race and ethnicity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant domestic workers forced to go back home have been further stigmatized or abused upon their return.

#### 7.3.4 UNDERREPORTED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

The International Labour Organization stressed, in a 2020 media toolkit,<sup>22</sup> that “[journalists] can alert their readers or viewers to the abuses. They may help to change the climate of public opinion, even policy, so that life becomes better for workers.” They can also increase public awareness of the usually underreported dimensions of the global prevalence and impact of gender-based violence in the world of work. These include:

- The range of root causes, such as the imbalance of power between employers and vulnerable workers, gender stereotypes, rampant and intersecting forms of discrimination, economic vulnerability, and a culture of impunity
- Women and girls who are especially vulnerable to harassment and violence at work:
  - › Underage workers, such as victims of child labor and schoolgirls
  - › Undocumented workers
  - › Racial/ethnic minorities and Indigenous women
  - › Transgender and gender-nonconforming workers
- Significant obstacles to reporting abuses
- Tolerance of misconduct and failures to investigate
- Lack of protections at the employer or government level (according to the World Bank, approximately one third of the world countries do not have laws prohibiting sexual harassment in employment.<sup>23</sup>)
- Impact of domestic violence

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## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS A WORKPLACE ISSUE

A noteworthy contribution of the International Labor Organization Violence and Harassment Convention is the recognition, in its preamble, that “domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety” and that governments, as well as employers, can provide support and protection to its victims.

Preventing employers’ discrimination or retaliation against women workers who experience domestic violence has become even more of a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic, when so many of the victims have been confined at home.

The increase of technology-facilitated forms of abuse also needs to be exposed as a means for perpetrators of domestic violence to disrupt their victims’ capacity to work and pursue their threats and harassment remotely.

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### 7.3.5 MEDIA COVERAGE OF WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE: IMPACT OF THE #METOO MOVEMENT AND LESSONS LEARNED

The #MeToo movement was started in 2006 by American activist Tarana Burke as a peer community initiative to support survivors of sexual violence. The hashtag, however, only went viral 11 years later, in October 2017. It has spread to many parts of the world, in parallel with other movements, such as “Ni una menos” in Latin America. It has been hailed as a global movement and a transformative moment. It has spread to many parts of the world, in parallel with other movements, such as “Ni una menos” in Latin America, and #AmINext in South Africa.

“What is so significant about the moment [is that] it is no longer just about individuals, it is about society,” a group of UN human rights experts said in a joint statement. “It is not about so-called morals and honour, it is about women’s rights as human rights ... the all powerful are no longer the untouchable.”<sup>24</sup> *The all powerful are no longer the untouchable.*

Against the backdrop of increased public awareness and advocacy efforts, the UN General Assembly adopted in December 2018 a landmark resolution recognizing that “sexual harassment is a form of violence and a violation and abuse of human rights.”<sup>25</sup>

When the International Labor Organization Violence and Harassment Convention was adopted the following year, the Reuters headline read: “U.N. labour body adopts #MeToo pact against violence at work.”<sup>26</sup> Commenting on the discussions that led to the treaty, International Labor Organization Director-General Guy Rider told Reuters: “The momentum and the significance of this process has been accentuated by the #MeToo movement.”

The online international news service *Women's eNews* chose the headline “Two years after #MeToo: New treaty anchors workplace protections.” The article states that the new treaty was “fueled by the outpouring of experiences that women articulated in the wake of #MeToo.”<sup>27</sup> Inter Press Service, meanwhile, called it “#MeToo movement’s powerful new tool.”<sup>28</sup>

This media framing underscores how the movement has impacted press coverage of sexual harassment and violence in the world of work.

The *Columbia Journalism Review* reported on how frequently the hashtag appears in news articles published globally between October 1, 2017, and April 1, 2019, or used on Twitter during the same period. The article also mentions some “breakthrough moments”, as well as a list of hashtags used around the world: [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/reach-of-metoo.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/reach-of-metoo.php)

The Washington D.C.-based Women’s Media Center published in 2018 a 15-month study of the coverage of sexual harassment and assaults in 14 U. S. leading newspapers.<sup>29</sup> It showed that, following the first major articles exposing such abuses in the entertainment industry, the percentage of sexual assault stories mentioning the movement increased by an average of 50%.

““”

***The #MeToo movement has shined a much-needed light on survivors and the stories that need to be told.***

Reflecting on the findings and lessons learned from the study, WMC President Julie Burton stated: “We focus on media coverage because of its profound impact in telling society who has power and what matters. The #MeToo movement has shined a much-needed light on survivors and the stories that need to be told.”<sup>30</sup>

WMC concluded its story with the following recommendations for journalists:<sup>31</sup>

- “Use precise and empowering language and distinguish words like ‘harassment’ from ‘assault’ based on clinical definitions and formal charges, rather than selecting one arbitrarily.
- “Create a specific journalist beat or section area for sexual assault and harassment of women, and train journalists on how to cover and investigate these kinds of stories sensitively.
- “Think carefully about which cases your media outlet is choosing to cover, and which it is ignoring. How can the media give a broader voice to those who do not yet have it?
- “Understand the impact that media coverage makes on societal perceptions of issues like sexual assault and wield this power with thought and care.
- “Build inclusive newsrooms.”

In the #MeToo context, the call for sensitive and ethical reporting is more relevant than ever, given, among others, the level of scrutiny that victims’ prior behavior or perceived character traits often undergo in the media.

*In the following essay, Handbook Contributor Lucia Graves summarizes some of the lessons she learned since she was granted an interview by one of Donald Trump's accusers in July 2016. Graves is a columnist and feature writer for Guardian US.*

BY LUCIA GRAVES,  
JUNE 2020

When #MeToo stories go public, we often demand perfect victims but they seldom exist—and it is a standard used to favor the accused both in news coverage and in courtrooms.

When I was first reporting on Jill Harth's sexual assault claim against Donald Trump for *The Guardian* in July 2016,<sup>32</sup> Trump's team presented friendly correspondence between Harth and Trump that occurred in the years following the alleged attack as evidence to counter her claim. The emails showed Harth requesting to be hired as a personal makeup artist to the presidential candidate and requesting privileged access to Trump at a rally. The suggestion was that Harth could not possibly have been assaulted by a man she had sought out for social and professional advantage down the road, and his campaign's response helped bury the story for months. And yet it's well documented that trauma victims often go on to have nuanced and sometimes friendly relationships with past abusers. Harth's explanation for her overtures to Trump—that as a businesswoman, she felt she could not afford not to solicit his help—are in line with what we know about how the abused sometimes

try to leverage deeply flawed systems of power to their advantage, seeking help or favors from influential figures who have wronged them.

Such behavior has become more widely recognized. Former Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was convicted in 2020 on

rape and sexual assault charges, despite remaining in touch and even on friendly terms with women who would go on to accuse him. During the trial, plaintiff Jessica Mann's narrative was complicated by the fact that she'd continued to have con-

sensual sex with Weinstein even after she was raped by the producer, and had accepted his invitations to high-profile events; the jury ultimately found in her favor.

The standard is worth revisiting in view of the character of Tara Reade<sup>33</sup> having become a topic of national debate following her accusations against Joe Biden during the 2020 presidential campaign. Some aspects of an accuser's character are relevant in considering the veracity of their claims—for instance, whether they lied about their credentials under oath, as prosecutors are now investigating whether Reade did.<sup>34</sup> But other things are not, such as whether she ever spoke positively about her time working for then Senator Joe Biden, or the fact that she was once admonished to “dress more modestly.”

Looking ahead, it is important that journalists parse questions of character carefully and report on those that are relevant,

*“It is important that journalists parse questions of character carefully and report on those that are relevant, rather than headlining and leading stories with ones that are not.”*

rather than headlining and leading stories with ones that are not. And, when alleged victims can be shown to have stayed in touch with their abusers, that information should be contextualized. Whether they continue to have a romantic relationship with a person even after an assault, as Mann did with Weinstein, or seek

a powerful figure out for professional or personal advancement, as Harth did with Trump, survivors may act or react very differently. Weinstein's conviction, despite the complicating behavior of his accusers, suggests progress in our understanding of these issues. But there's still much work left to do.

The media focus on celebrity cases has often distracted from the coverage of sexual harassment and assault within powerful institutions where abusers are protected by anonymity and structural lack of accountability. An example of this is how the United Nations has been able, in many cases, to protect itself against media scrutiny, as illustrated by a December 2020 opinion piece on *Devex*, a media platform for the global development community.

### “ASYMMETRY OF POWER”

*Excerpts from an opinion piece by Claudia Ahumada and Malayah Harper<sup>35</sup>*

“Who do we remember from the #MeToo story of the decade – Rowena Chiu or Harvey Weinstein? Most people will recognize the name Harvey Weinstein as that of a serial predator of women. Yet do we remember the women who speak up? As #MeToo swept the globe, some of the most appalling stories of abuse emerged from the United Nations. These abuses thrive in the U.N. due to its unique structure that prevents accountability and transparency.

In matters of workplace sexual harassment, the U.N. investigates and reports to itself. By being both party and judge of the proceedings, establishing both the rules and their application, and failing to have the expertise to support survivors throughout the process.

“Investigations into abuse are often called by U.N. entities to ‘calm’ media storms that erupt after stories emerge. ... These investigations take years to complete and U.N. officials know – what many survivors do not – that they are under no obligation to release their findings.

In fact, precedence indicates that they do not. Not to the women who spoke out, not their governing board, to no one. Also unsaid is that while the findings remain private, the names of the staff members who provided testimony are visible to the agency. The asymmetry of power is undeniable.”



Finally, at a global level, it is worth noting that in several countries women journalists themselves have played a key role in igniting or contributing to the visibility of the movement by courageously coming forward to talk about their own experience of sexual harassment or assault in the workplace:

### Bangladesh

“#metoo: Daily Star senior staff apologizes as newspaper probes sexual assault” (Dhaka Tribune, November 2018): <https://www.dhakatribune.com/media/2018/11/23/metoo-daily-star-senior-staff-apologizes-as-newspaper-probes-sexual-assault>

### Benin

“MeToo in Benin: ‘Fed-up’ journalists decry harassment in the media” (AFP, May 2020): <https://news.yahoo.com/metoo-benin-fed-journalists-decry-harassment-media-150930612.html>

### Colombia

“Latin America’s Me Too movement takes aim at abuse of power, machista culture” (October 2020). The article mentions the two women journalists who “touched off a media firestorm when they leveled sexual harassment and abuse allegations last month against prominent author and journalist Alberto Salcedo Ramos.” <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/latin-america-s-me-too-movement-takes-aim-at-abuse-of-power-machista-culture/50000262-4357699>

### Georgia

“#MeToo is reaching Georgia” (BBC, October 2018). The video clip features a TV presenter who was the first woman in the Eurasian country to sue her boss for alleged sexual harassment: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-45837071>

### Uganda

“#MeToo campaign in Uganda” (International Association of Women in Radio and Television, 2018): <https://www.iawrt.org/news/metoo-campaign-uganda>

## AN EXAMPLE OF #METOO REPORTING BEST PRACTICES FROM NEW ZEALAND

Starting in 2018, the national news media organization *Stuff* (New Zealand) featured an ongoing #MeToo investigation on workplace sexual harassment and assault.<sup>36</sup> Readers were asked to share their personal experiences, primarily through emails, social media, and hotline phone messages. These were then analyzed to set up a triage system that would allow the journalists team to connect survivors assessed to be most at risk with support services. Team leader Alison Mau said in a *Stuff* interview:

“We will be able to help people that come to us to find legal help, if they need it, to lay a police complaint, if they want to, and to access counseling. There is a level of care specifically in place for this project. Even if people don’t want to talk on the record, at least we will be able to point them in the right direction.”<sup>37</sup>

An analysis of the collected testimonies identified four major themes:

- Women blaming themselves for what happened to them
- Challenges to report it
- Revictimization resulting from the complaint process
- Long-term impact of sexual harassment and assault

In 2019, *Stuff* published a piece headlined “One year on, what has changed?”<sup>38</sup> “Our work has had an impact,” it concluded.

“We exposed the size of the problem, using a widespread survey to reveal rising rates of sexual harassment complaints in 1400 public sector bodies.” The article documented the value of this type of investigative journalism through a list of examples where specific follow-up actions or corrective measures were taken as a result of the published stories.

James Hollings, co-founder of the New Zealand Centre for Investigative Journalism, conducted an assessment in 2019 of *Stuff*’s #MeTooNZ campaign in a special issue of *Journalism Practice* on “Journalism and sexual violence.”<sup>39</sup> Hollings reviewed 49 stories based on approximately 400 testimonies received over a period of 16 months.

Both the *Stuff*’s self-assessment and Hollings’ interviews of its investigative team provide a rare opportunity to learn from a distinctive news reporting approach and tested best practices:

- **Acknowledging the limitations of the “balance” concept:**<sup>40</sup> Hollings found that the practice of giving similar weight to both sides of the story, or “issue dualism,” takes the attention away from the complexity of its context and impact as a human rights issue. He further noted that, “in #metoo reporting, it has been found to give more power to the accused by shifting focus away from the issue itself and its effect on the survivors, to the effect on the abusers.”

- **Claiming a “campaign” approach:** A multiplicity of stories over a long time period allowed the *Stuff* journalists team to build contacts, trust, skills, and expertise, to expose workplace patterns, and more broadly consider what works and what doesn’t regarding sexual harassment training and policies. Reporting on systemic issues (such as dismissal and cover-up of complaints), in the case of the #MeTooNZ campaign, had a clearly stated goal of influencing policy decisions to prevent workplace abuses.
- **Adopting survivors-led practices:** “At all stages”, Hollings concluded, “The survivor was given control over whether the story would be pursued... .

While [it] was being compiled, survivors were sometimes given a chance to collaborate in how it was written, in the sense of deciding which aspects should be highlighted.” This approach also entailed establishing clear ground rules, addressing risks as well as expectations, and prioritizing the needs and safety of the survivors.

- **Offering journalists adequate training, mentorship, and support:** The length and scope of the *Stuff* investigative project pointed at the challenges of such specialized reporting and the need for media organizations to provide skills-building and professional support opportunities.

## #METOO NEWS COVERAGE: EXAMPLES OF NOTEWORTHY REPORTING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

### Egypt

“Rape, power and corruption: Is this Egypt’s MeToo moment?”

Middle East Monitor (Sept. 24, 2020)

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200924-rape-power-and-corruption-is-this-egypts-metoo-moment/>

### France

“In France, the #MeToo movement has yet to live up to women’s hopes”

National Public Radio (May 19, 2019)

<https://www.npr.org/2019/05/19/719691001/in-france-the-metoo-movement-has-yet-to-live-up-to-womens-hopes>

## India

### **“The #MeToo tracker by the Indian Express”**

The Indian Express (Oct. 30, 2018)

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/me-too-tracker-the-indian-express-5404631/>

### **“One year after India’s big #MeToo wave, a reality check”**

ThePrint (Oct. 12, 2019)

<https://theprint.in/features/one-year-after-india-big-metoo-wave-reality-check/304787/>

## Italy

### **“Vatican meets #MeToo: After decades of silence, nuns talk about abuse by priests”**

Associated Press (July 27, 2018).

<https://apnews.com/article/f7ec3cec9a4b46868aa584fe1c94fb28>

## Mexico

### **“#Metoo Mexico is a historic opportunity”**

Página12 (May 6, 2019)

<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/191911-el-metoo-mx-es-una-oportunidad-historica>

## Senegal

### **“The Me Too movement was silent in Senegal.**

**These women are trying to change that”**

CNN (Dec. 19, 2018)

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/19/africa/senegal-as-equals-intl/index.html#:~:text=%22Nopiwouma%20was%20never%20going%20to,entrepreneur%20Olivia%20Codou%2C%20told%20CNN.>

## United States

### **“The #MeToo movement:**

**News and reporting on sexual harassment and abuse”**

The New Yorker (March 25, 2019)

<https://www.newyorker.com/tag/me-too>

“She Said is the best book about journalism I have ever read. Here are its best lessons for journalists”

Insider (Oct. 7, 2019)

<https://www.insider.com/she-said-journalism-harvey-weinstein-investigation-book-2019-10#:~:text=%22She%20Said%2C%22%20a%20new,journalism%20I've%20ever%20read.>

### 7.3.6 SELECTED RESOURCES

#### A. WEBSITES (INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND NETWORKS)

##### **Domestic Violence at Work Network**

<http://dvatworknet.org/>

##### **International Domestic Workers Federation**

<https://idwfed.org/en>

##### **Global Labor Justice**

<https://globallaborjustice.org/>

##### **Solidarity Center**

<https://www.solidaritycenter.org/>

##### **Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)**

<https://www.wiego.org/press-room>

The UK-based nonprofit organization is an international network of informal workers unions and associations, researchers and statisticians, as well as practitioners from development agencies. Their website has a very helpful section for journalists seeking resources, statistics, and experts.

**B. THE FOLLOWING REPORTS, STUDIES, AND WEBSITES PROVIDE STATISTICS, DATA ANALYSES, CASE STUDIES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO THE SECTORS AND ISSUES OUTLINED IN THIS HANDBOOK SECTION.**

**International Labour Organization**

*Violence and Harassment Against Women and Men in the World of Work*

(2017) 171 pages

[https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/wcms\\_546645/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/actrav/info/pubs/wcms_546645/lang--en/index.htm)

Includes an excellent section on “domestic violence as a world-of-work issue.” (Section 5.9)

*Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*

(2018) 164 pages

[https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/wcms\\_626831/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/wcms_626831/lang--en/index.htm)

*Addressing Violence and Harassment Against Women in the World of Work*

(2019) This handbook was produced with UN Women – 124 pages

<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2019/addressing-violence-and-harassment-against-women-in-the-world-of-work-en.pdf?la=en&vs=4050>

*Safe and Healthy Working Environments Free from Violence and Harassment*

(2020) 94 pages

[https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/resources-library/publications/wcms\\_751832/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/resources-library/publications/wcms_751832/lang--en/index.htm)

**International Labor Organization Convention 190**

*Violence and Harassment Convention*

2019 (No. 190)

[https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/108/committees/violence-harassment/wcms\\_711570/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/108/committees/violence-harassment/wcms_711570/lang--en/index.htm)

***Safety and Dignity at Work: A Guide to the 2019 International Labor Organization Violence and Harassment Convention***

(Human Rights Watch, 2020) 32 pages

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2020/06/ILO\\_advocacy\\_brochure\\_0620.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/06/ILO_advocacy_brochure_0620.pdf)

***Protecting Workers from Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in Europe***

(European Public Service Union, 2019) 13 pages

[https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/EPSU%20Briefing%20Report%20ILO%20190\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/EPSU%20Briefing%20Report%20ILO%20190_FINAL_0.pdf)

This briefing is a comparative analysis of ILO Convention 190 (2019) and the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011).

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AS SURE AS THE SUN  
WILL RISE FROM THE EAST TOMORROW,  
I KNOW I WILL BE RAPED.

*Some people call me Emma, others Mary.  
I don't mind either name.*

## 7.4 GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC SPACES

Gender-based violence and harassment in public spaces<sup>1</sup> are an everyday occurrence for many women and girls. Across the world, women report verbal harassment in streets, fear of being alone in public, both during the day and after dark, and unwanted touching and sexual assaults in deserted or crowded spaces.

In spite of its global pervasiveness, sexual harassment has rarely been prioritized and addressed as a human rights issue. For instance, a World Bank report<sup>2</sup> showed that only 18 governments had adopted laws protecting women against it by 2016. Where legal and policy frameworks do exist, however, implementation is often poor.

Gender-based harassment and violence in public spaces can range from intimidation and threats to sexual harassment (including catcalling and stalking), and from sexual assault to femicide. It happens on streets, public transportation, parks, beaches, schools, workplaces and refugee camps, as well as what might be deemed essential spaces, such as public toilets, eateries, and more. Women are especially at risk in marginalized communities, and during times of crisis, natural disasters, and conflict.

Gender-based violence in public spaces reduces women and girls' freedom of movement, ability to participate in school, work, and public life. It curtails their access to essential services, including timely and safe access to sexual and reproductive health services, and limits their enjoyment of cultural and recreational activities, inhibiting the personal development necessary for their overall health and well-being.

In 2013, the UN Commission on the Status of Women specifically expressed “deep concern about violence against women and girls in public spaces, including sexual harassment, especially when it is being used to intimidate women and girls who are exercising any of their human rights,”<sup>3</sup> including the right to work. Later, making cities inclusive and safe became a core component of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015),<sup>4</sup> as well as the UN New Urban Agenda (2016).<sup>5</sup>

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 190 (2019)<sup>6</sup> “applies to violence and harassment in the world of work, including public and private spaces:

- Where they are a place of work
- During work-related trips
- When commuting to and from work.”

Certain types of work have to be done in public spaces. For example, street vendors, fuelwood carriers, and waste pickers must work in public to ensure their livelihoods. Women are especially vulnerable to poor infrastructure, stigma, and discrimination, which further increase their risk of experiencing violence and harassment. In addition, street vendors, waste pickers, and sex workers often face attacks from police or state actors, as well as a variety of other arbitrary punishments, such as evictions, violent arrests, and immigration status investigations. They also report harassment and abuse from the public.

#### **7.4.1 UNSAFE CITIES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS: THE PREVALENCE OF HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE**

Since 60% of humanity is projected to live in cities by 2030,<sup>7</sup> the vulnerability of women and girls in urban communities is gaining more attention both among human rights advocates and in the media. Although the mobilization around this issue started in the '70s and '80s thanks to the feminist movements, its increasing impact has benefited from a series of landmark global studies and civil society initiatives of the past decade. All have also contributed to shifting the narrative from “protecting” women (through restrictions or surveillance) to increasing their autonomy and agency.<sup>8</sup>

Several key studies have revealed the prevalence and impact of such violence, and shown how young women and girls are often especially at risk:

#### **WORLD ASSOCIATION OF GIRL GUIDES AND GIRL SCOUTS**

As part of the 2017 global 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign, the association conducted a poll on the places and spaces where girls and young women feel the most unsafe.<sup>9</sup> Based on over 7,000 responses received:

- 70% said the street was the most unsafe place in their community
- 52% said the fear of harassment made them avoid public transportation and other public spaces
- 43% would not report harassment

The following year, another international poll conducted through UNICEF's U-report platform, showed that, out of almost 10,000 respondents, 81% of girls agreed that governments should pass laws to end public harassment “in order to make them feel less vulnerable.”<sup>10</sup>



*Approximately 90% of the workforce in this backbreaking trade of carrying fuelwood from Entoto Mountain into Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) are women.*

© Christopher Lett

## PLAN INTERNATIONAL

In 2018, the UK-based global children’s rights organization published two significant reports on the harassment and violence against girls and young women in major metropolitan areas. An online perception-based survey of experts was conducted in 22 cities across six continents. According to Plan International, it was “the first of its kind to examine the safety risks facing girls and young women on such a large scale, highlighting the universality of the dangers they face in cities across different societies and cultures.”<sup>11</sup>

The risks were rated in each city under six primary areas of concern, sexual harassment being, according to the survey results, “the biggest global safety concern for girls – worst in Bogota and Johannesburg.” 78% of the experts surveyed said harassment in public spaces occurred very or fairly often, and girls and young women were at high or extremely high risk of being harassed in their city. Other safety risks in decreasing order of prevalence were: sexual assault and rape (Hanoi being the safest city); theft and robbery; kidnap and murder (Kampala being by far the worst); and acid attacks (especially in Bogota and Delhi).

Plan International’s other report, “Unsafe in the city: The everyday experiences of girls and young women,” was based on *Free to Be*, a map-based social survey tool that was developed with the help of girls and young women. It polled them, in a way they would not face recrimination, about where they felt safe or unsafe in their cities.<sup>12</sup> The research was conducted over a period of six weeks in five cities: Delhi, Kampala, Lima, Madrid, and Sydney.

Some of the key findings were:

- Whether walking to school, work, shopping areas or meeting places, the street is where girls and young women spent the most time and felt most unsafe (between 59% and 79% of respondents), followed by public transportation.
- Sexist male behavior is a root cause of the problem, not how the girls “look” and “act”.
- The inaction of bystanders (especially in crowded places) and local law enforcement reinforces the perception that harassment is not only normal but the fault of the victims. Women and girls mentioned blaming themselves, avoiding public spaces that they experience as unsafe, and not reporting abuses.
- The dangers that they fear often lead them to leave school or jobs and limit their time away from home, restricting their rights to education, work, and freedom of movement.



“Despite the differences of context, culture and geography, the experience of harassment and the consequent feelings of both fear and anger are universal across the five cities,”<sup>13</sup> the study concluded.

## ACTIONAID

ActionAid International, a global anti-poverty federation headquartered in Johannesburg, since 2011 has documented the gender impact of violence and urbanization in a series of reports titled “Women and the City.” The initial reports (2011 and 2013) emphasized insecurity, sexual harassment, and abuse in half a dozen cities. They showed how “women’s fear of violence restricts their movement, limiting their use of public spaces, their movement from their homes and as a result, their full enjoyment of a range of human rights.”<sup>14</sup>

The 2015 baseline study, involving 3,000 women and girls from urban communities in seven different countries, further demonstrated how gender-based violence is a systemic issue. In Brazil, the report found:

“Women and girls reported changing the way they dressed, their behaviour and their daily routes in order to feel safer, yet they felt unable to speak about sexual harassment and assault. This was because of a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system to hold perpetrators to account, and the fear that they themselves would be blamed for the abuse.”<sup>15</sup>

In its 10-country 2017 study “Whose City?”<sup>16</sup> ActionAid looked at the impact of violence against women and girls as a “global pandemic” threatening urban communities. It was based on a comparative assessment of the measures in place to address violence against women in each country, selecting indicators, such as the use of a gender perspective in urban and transport planning and design. The resulting scorecard ranked Nepal as the best, in part because of the legal framework and policies in place. A key finding, however, was that “public spaces are becoming more unsafe” in Nepal, especially in the area of public transportation.

This was confirmed by a scoping study conducted during that same year by ActionAid Nepal in earthquake affected districts.<sup>17</sup> This safety audit also stressed how girls (especially those aged 10–14 years) face higher risks, and how few victims (4%) ever report violence in public spaces.

A key outcome of these studies was the recognition that “the public safety of women and girls has to be understood from a rights perspective and must be included in planning, with a focus on the right to mobility rather than restrictions on women.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, journalists need to ensure that their reporting on public space dangers does not contribute to “deter women from accessing the streets by making

““

*The public safety of women and girls has to be understood from a rights perspective and must be included in planning, with a focus on the right to mobility rather than restrictions on women.*

their families/communities police them more closely,”<sup>19</sup> as Sameera Khan wrote for the *Feminism in India* platform, or by “the adherence to stereotypes that blame [their] way of dressing or behavior for the unwanted conduct,”<sup>20</sup> as the Inter Press Service handbook on gender-based violence reporting stated.

Safety is not the responsibility of those who cannot enjoy it. Patriarchal norms that devalue women and deny their autonomy ultimately lead to the impunity of perpetrators. They also prevent those obligated to ensuring public spaces safety from being held accountable.

### CASE STUDY: A FOCUS GROUP ON PUBLIC SAFETY IN YEMEN

The Center for Women’s Global Leadership, with support from UNFPA, organized focus groups on public safety in nine different countries in late 2020.<sup>21</sup> In Yemen, 17 young women (mostly college students) discussed their use of public space, their own experience of harassment, and its impact on their lives.

The most frequently mentioned spaces where incidents of harassment or violence occurred were:

- Street
- School (college)
- Public transportation (bus)
- Shopping malls / supermarkets
- Souks (marketplace)
- Cafés

Participants also cited parks, gardens, beaches, gas stations, places of entertainment and festivals.

The perpetrators they mentioned included boys, older men, fellow students, teachers, car/bus drivers, and police.

The safety of the focus group allowed the young women to candidly describe the commonality, ubiquity, and deep impact of their experiences. The daily exposure to all forms of verbal and physical sexual harassment led them to talk about the multiple ways in which such inescapable abuses restrict their lives and infringe upon their basic rights, such as freedom of expression and movement, access to education and leisure, and access to drinking water.

The young women felt that the conflict in their country has led to gradually worsening their oppression and harassment, and to their suffocating feelings of being sub-human and not belonging: “Home-land should be where you feel safe,” one participant said.

They talked about everything they had to avoid (walking, taking the bus, going out at night, wearing certain clothes) or give up altogether: taking public transportation, going to school, to hospitals, meeting friends, and engaging in recreational activities. They described being frightened, anxious, stressed, and traumatized, and

dealing with long-term psychological problems, mental health disorders, and family conflicts. And some of them even said that they yearned for “a planet for themselves only” or an “island just for women.”

Their discussions also included suggestions about what would help address public safety issues, such as improving street lighting and holding perpetrators accountable, among others.<sup>22</sup>

When reporting on the pervasiveness and severity of harassment and violence in public spaces, journalists should consider:

- Highlighting their direct and lasting impact on women’s autonomy, life decisions, and livelihood, rather than focusing on the nature of the harassment and on how victims may have “provoked” or avoided it.
- Avoiding the assumptions or stereotypes that reinforce the perception that public harassment is “normal.” This can occur when it is dismissed as a minor aggravation, if it is not physical, or as something “to be expected” if women choose to use public spaces, for instance, without escorts or adequate precautions.
- Reporting on populations that may be disproportionately affected, such as LGBTQ individuals, women with disabilities, younger girls and migrant, immigrant, or refugee women. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, transgender women have been victimized by gendered lockdown policies. Several Latin American countries (Panama, Peru, and Colombia) initially chose to allow women and men to go out on alternative days only, which resulted in increased harassment and hate crimes against the transgender community.<sup>23</sup>
- Referencing comparative studies,<sup>24</sup> when time allows, to address the complexity of the issues and help the audience better understand some of their root causes or contributing factors. These may include perpetrators taking advantage of crowded spaces, and the absence of accountability, among other factors.
- Using surveys about safety perceptions,<sup>25</sup> in addition to prevalence data. Such surveys show, among others, how **perceptions** (depending on gender) result in significantly different behavior changes.
- Exploring the multiple reasons why many “women don’t report, police don’t investigate, and prosecutors don’t prosecute.”<sup>26</sup>
- Reporting on proposed or implemented community solutions<sup>27</sup> to the gendered impact of public safety issues.

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*They yearned for “a planet for themselves only” or an “island just for women.”*

#### 7.4.2 STREET HARASSMENT: “THE STORIES THAT PAINT A PICTURE OF STATISTICS”<sup>28</sup>

Street harassment, as broadly defined, includes a multiplicity of unwanted and degrading interactions encountered when people leave home to go to work, go to school, and go shopping; when they need to access public services and facilities, and when they want to socialize or worship. For women in particular, this means being subjected to demeaning comments and behaviors on a daily basis, without recognition that these violate some of their most basic rights and needs, and without recourse.

The following examples of media coverage illustrate the value of some of the recommendations listed in the previous section.

##### Morocco

Several studies<sup>29</sup> and press reports have rightly focused on women’s responses to street harassment and assaults. Responses varied from internalizing gender norms and stereotypes (“More women than men blamed the victim’s appearance for provoking harassment,” according to a UN Women/Promundo 2017 survey<sup>30</sup>); developing coping mechanisms, confronting harassers, reporting incidents of violence, and mobilizing for change.

An August 2018 news report in the *Middle East Eye*<sup>31</sup> highlights the culture of impunity that persisted after the adoption, earlier in the year, of a law against harassment and violence against women, including in public spaces. Although it provides for jail time and fines, the article noted, “Moroccan women say they are reluctant to file charges in such matters. That’s because when it comes to public spaces, men in Morocco are raised to think they must constantly assert their masculinity. [They] feel entitled to women’s bodies.” In reality, the new law, according to human rights lawyer Stephanie Bordat quoted in the article, is “a cosmetic law that is hard to enforce because of limited police power and strict evidence requirements.”

The article also referred to the launch of the first mobile app in Morocco allowing women to “anonymously file a report and provide information about the location, the nature of what happened and descriptions of the victim and aggressor.” The article concluded: “These initiatives are designed to build public awareness and understanding about the impact of sexual harassment in Morocco. But the toughest task for the anti-harassment advocates may be changing the mentality of men.”

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*The toughest task for the anti-harassment advocates may be changing the mentality of men.*

Women’s mobilization against sexual harassment and assaults has given survivors a voice, especially since the August 2018 launch of the grassroots movement #Masaktach (I will not be silent)<sup>32</sup> – co-founded by freelance journalist

Aida Alami – and sometimes referred to as the Moroccan #MeToo. The Masak-tach campaign was triggered in part by the shocking case and media coverage of the abduction and torture of a 17-year-old girl. Alami decided to cover the case when she saw what she called the ‘horrific way the media covered [it], which brutalized this teenager a second time.’<sup>33</sup>

## France

The high incidence of street harassment in France has received a lot of media attention, especially in the context of the #MeToo Movement,<sup>34</sup> some of it having effectively highlighted how women experience it multiple times throughout their lives, and how it impacts them long term. Media coverage of egregious cases and #MeToo advocacy have also contributed to the August 2018 law on sexual harassment, which has been credited in part for the deterrence effect of “on-the-spot” fines.

A high profile case in 2020 demonstrated again the role that the media can play in breaking the silence around street sexual harassment and assaults, and the prevailing culture of acceptance and impunity. The French magazine *Neon*<sup>35</sup> published the results of an extensive investigation in which scores of women accused Parisian street artist and photographer Wilfrid Azencoth of harassing them on the streets of Montmartre, and then sexually assaulting them after having lured them to his studio. The assaults were alleged to have taken place between 2009 and February 2020.

A few days after the first installment was published on June 22, investigators opened an inquiry, and one day after the second article came out on July 6, 25 women filed a collective complaint. On Oct. 2, Wilfrid A. was indicted and placed in pre-trial detention. The *Neon* investigation is a prime example of allowing survivors to discover that their experiences were not isolated incidents, and to be given an opportunity to speak out and seek accountability.

## Australia

A perception survey published in a 2019 report of the Community Council for Australia<sup>36</sup> found that half of the female respondents did not feel safe walking alone at night, and 1 in 4 women (as opposed to 1 in 24 men) didn’t walk alone in their neighborhoods after dark. The 50% of women who did not feel safe represents the highest rate among the 37 countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

“The explanation for this is not that violence against women is worse in Australia than anywhere else in the,” Jane Gilmore wrote in reporting on these findings in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. “The report suggested it has more to do with women’s perception of risk and their trust that their community will believe them and act to protect them.”<sup>37</sup> Such gender gaps show how the fear

of violence, not just the experience of it, has a potentially debilitating and disproportionate impact on women’s lives.

An earlier report on street harassment by the Australia Institute specifically documented<sup>38</sup> the gender gap regarding actions undertaken to ensure personal safety: It found that 90% of women took at least one of 12 actions listed in the survey, within the previous year, in order to ensure their safety, whereas 40% of the male respondents said they took none.

### 7.4.3 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE: “WHAT IS NOT MEASURED IS NOT KNOWN”

A landmark poll conducted by YouGov for the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2014),<sup>39</sup> as well as the more recent *Guardian* series on “Extreme cities” and “Ideal Cities” underscore how the media can keep shining a light on pervasive forms of harassment and violence, even though they may be taken for granted by governments and public transportation agencies, as well as by a large percentage of the public across the globe.

#### A. Data challenges

Reporting on the gendered dimensions and impact of this urban safety issue is challenging in part due to the lack of adequate data collection and analyses. Flavie Halais, a Montreal-based independent journalist, rightly noted in a 2020 *Wired* magazine article: “What is not measured is not known, and the world of transit data is still largely blind to women and other vulnerable populations... . Data collection often fails to consider the travelling experience of women,”<sup>40</sup> including incidents of sexual harassment and violence.

Halais’ article clearly exposes the need for disaggregated data,<sup>41</sup> especially broken down by gender, and the fact that “data collection often fails to consider the traveling experience of women.” Given this reality, journalists can turn to studies that look at the specific mobility risks, needs and patterns of female transit users, and learn from their respective methodologies to formulate their own questions and investigations.

- **Perceptions** are an essential part of the experience, as illustrated by the safety concerns raised by targeted survey questions:
  - › The YouGov survey for the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2014) included the following questions:
    - › “How safe do you feel travelling alone at night in the city where you live?”
    - › “How confident are you that other people would come to your assistance if you were being abused on public transport?”

- › “Safe public transport is available in the city where I live. Agree or disagree?”
- › A Sonke Gender Justice study (2019)<sup>42</sup> on “Women and girls’ experiences of gender-based violence on public transport” in South Africa. It included a section on “women’s perceptions of risk to their safety and personal security.” A survey asked women, for instance, how likely they were to be robbed, sexually harassed, and to avoid taking public transportation altogether.
- › A report (2019) by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) on “Understanding how women travel.”<sup>43</sup> The transit agency survey found that safety concerns force Metro riders to change their behavior, including not riding transit. Metro users were also asked about their perceptions of the police officers on board buses and trains.
- **Data gaps** (when data are neither collected nor accessible) can distort the assessment and characterization of a global problem such as the risks and challenges encountered by women using public transportation.
- As part of its “Data Gap” investigative series, *The Globe and Mail* published in 2019 a landmark study on Canadian transit passengers who were targets of sexual violence between 2013 and 2017:<sup>44</sup> “The Globe obtained and analyzed scores of records to find out how the country’s 22 largest public transit systems track and handle sexual misconduct.” The Globe’s analysis was based on statistics obtained through dozens of Freedom of Information requests. Some of the exposed data gaps included:
  - › Cases of passengers discouraged by transit staff to file complaints
  - › Records of incidents not reported to the police
  - › Incidents taking place at bus stops/shelters/terminals or subway/train stations
  - › Incidents that transit agencies did not think met criminal offense thresholds (e.g. leering, voyeurism)
  - › Misclassified incidents
  - › Unsuccessful assault attempts

“”

## B. A gender and human rights issue

In a world of “normalized” discriminatory practices and sexist behaviors, it is easy to overlook access to mobility as access to basic rights: equality, safety, bodily integrity, and of course freedom of movement. Whether restricted by their fear or by their

*In a world of “normalized” discriminatory practices and sexist behaviors, it is easy to overlook access to mobility as access to basic rights.*

actual experience of harassment and assault, women may also be unable to go to school or go to work.

“Cities should present a land of opportunities. But if gender considerations are not systematically integrated into city design, planning, and governance, the cities and the public spaces become the land of discrimination, exclusion, and violence,”<sup>45</sup> Lakshmi Puri, a former UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, said in a March 2015 session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

The gender dimensions of public transportation are linked to the type of work that mostly women do (such as caregiving, domestic work, and shopping) when they have to rely on public transportation for frequent trips, including at night and during the overcrowded peak hours. The type of transport they use is often dictated by their economic status, or need for shorter trips, and may translate into higher safety risks.<sup>46</sup> For those reasons, women often become “captive riders.”<sup>47</sup> The lack of transportation alternatives, other than reducing their mobility, increases their exposure to harassment and assaults.

In an important study of “Sexual harassment on public buses and trains in Sri Lanka,”<sup>48</sup> UNFPA underlined its connection to “the deeper issues of gender imbalances within societal structures,” as well as its impact on restricting women’s basic rights and freedoms. The study, conducted in 2016, showed that 90% of female respondents had been sexually harassed in buses and trains – with more than one in four having experienced harassment at least monthly. In addition, 60% were unaware that it was a punishable crime, and 92% of the victims did not seek help from law enforcement. Moreover, 37% reported that the incident adversely impacted their job performance.

As part of the 2018 Global 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign, UNFPA sponsored a photojournalism series,<sup>49</sup> in collaboration with British photographer Eliza Hatch. The series featured the stories and voices of 16 Sri Lankan women who had experienced sexual harassment on public transportation.

### **C. Underreported issues**

Media coverage of gender-based violence related to mobility is usually linked to the publication of new studies,<sup>50</sup> to egregious cases triggering strong social media reactions,<sup>51</sup> to new legislation<sup>52</sup>, and to advocacy campaigns<sup>53</sup> trying to raise awareness and prompt action to address the problem.

Meanwhile, the root causes, prevention, and long-term impact of such violence are often neglected issues, as is the quest for accountability and solutions. Examples of underreported dimensions, trends, and impact are:



- Harassment and violence against female riders in transportation hubs, train/metro stations, parking lots, and bus stops/shelters
- Harassment and violence against female transportation workers from customers, passengers and the general public. The risks they can be exposed to have been especially well documented by the European Transport Workers' federation.<sup>54</sup>
- The aftermath and subsequent developments in high-profile cases.

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### NIRBHAYA CASE (INDIA)

A student was gang-raped and murdered on Dec. 16, 2012, on a Delhi bus, sparking widespread protests. The BBC followed up with a 2017 story on the impact of the case (“Was Delhi gang rape India’s #Metoo moment?”).<sup>55</sup> Reporter Geeta Pandey concluded:

“The biggest change has been the one in attitudes – sexual attacks and rapes have become topics of living room conversations and that is a huge deal in a country where sex and sex crimes are a taboo. Taking control of the conversation is the first step to India becoming a better place for women. Every incident, big or small, is being discussed and written about, and women’s rights to safe living and equality have been under much greater scrutiny.”

Three years later,<sup>56</sup> when four men were hanged for committing that crime, Pandey’s follow-up story addressed the issue of punishment and deterrence.

“Some say strict punishment, swiftly delivered, will instill a fear of the law in the public mind and deter rape, but experts say the only permanent solution to the problem is to dismantle the hold of patriarchal thinking, the mindset that regards women as being a man’s property.”

- 
- Statistical trends, such as increases in sexual harassment reports that reached 42% on the London Underground between 2015 and 2019,<sup>57</sup> and 70% in Melbourne train stations between 2015 and 2018.<sup>58</sup>
  - New forms of harassment, such as cyber-flashing,<sup>59</sup> which occurs when a stranger sends sexual images to a passenger’s device through smartphone technology.
  - Governmental campaigns/responses,<sup>60</sup> urban planners and NGOs’ recommendations, and women’s rights activists/social entrepreneurs’ initiatives,

such as the Safetipin app available in India since 2013, and now in over half a dozen other countries and five languages.<sup>61</sup>

- Consequences of avoiding public transportation for safety reasons. Trying to reduce the risks of harassment and violence on public transportation significantly limits options to access workplaces and services.

#### **7.4.4 REPORTING ON SPECIFIC RISKS AND SOLUTIONS: THE CASE OF STREET AND MARKET VENDORS**

Women who labor in the informal economy work are at higher risk of gender-based violence, especially when they work in public spaces and fall victims to criminalization and livelihood threats.

Media coverage rarely delves into the multiple forms of harassment, punitive measures, and assaults against women street vendors. They routinely face challenges in accessing sanitation, water and public transportation, and fall prey to evictions, stigmas against migrants, and various discriminatory or repressive regulations (including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic). Reporting on those risk factors is especially important in countries where women represent the majority of street vendors.

The following stories, focusing on three major cities, illustrate the value of reporting not only those challenges, but also solutions emerging from the participation or initiatives of the women vendors themselves.

##### **Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea):**

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/feb/29/market-day-in-papua-new-guinea-harassment-women-un-safe-cities>

Annie Kelly, Editor of *The Guardian* “Human Rights in Focus” series, reported on the plight of women vendors who “are bullied by market security, intimidated by police and sexually harassed throughout the day.” The focus of her story, however, was on the “more than 3,000 women [who] formed 12 vendor associations to represent their concerns to local authorities.”

This initiative took place as part of UN Women “Safe Cities Global Initiative.”<sup>62</sup>

##### **Kampala (Uganda):**

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/aug/19/men-fear-us-kampalas-market-women-unite-against-harassment>

Also published by *The Guardian*, this story by Alice McCool described how women market vendors had organized, with the support of the Institute for

Social Transformation, to protect themselves against sexual harassment: 240 women representatives in the Nakawa market collected complaints that lead to perpetrators being fined or expelled. This story was also framed around the adoption of the International Labor Organization Convention 190 (2019), which protects workers, including from the informal sector, against all forms of harassment and violence.

### **Dar es Salaam (Tanzania):**

<https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/womensadvancement/articles/2018/09/24/tanzanian-women-traders-fight-gender-abuse-in-the-market-place>

This article addressed the specific issues of market vendors assaulted by male customers: “Being subjected to gender-based violence is a daily occurrence. The fear and stress of being targeted can make it difficult for women to earn a living, hindering their economic potential,” freelance journalist Kizito Makoye Shigela wrote. His article focused on the attempt by a local NGO, Equality for Growth, to provide remedies against those abuses by raising awareness of women’s rights, as well as helping women vendors protect themselves and report incidents of harassment and violence.

#### **7.4.5 HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST UNSHELTERED HOMELESS WOMEN: “THE VIOLENCE OF LOOKING AWAY”<sup>63</sup>**

Unsheltered homeless people mostly live in urban public spaces not meant for habitation such as parks, abandoned lots, streets, sidewalks, and doorways. Many studies and news reports on homelessness, unfortunately, do not provide data broken down by gender.

A June 2020 blog by the U.S. National Alliance to End Homelessness<sup>64</sup> addressed this lack of gender analysis. Author Jackie Janosko, reviewing government statistics for the 2016–19 period, noted the alarming gender disparities and trends among the U.S. unsheltered population: The number of men increased by 20%, of women by 35%, and of transgender people by 113%. Janosko also quoted studies mentioning that “women are at a higher risk of dying prematurely,” of experiencing longer losses of housing and higher levels of trauma.

Government statistics from the United Kingdom, where street homelessness increased by 169% between 2010 and 2017—a period of austerity politics—also showed that women die at a younger age (42).<sup>65</sup> In spite of those distressing numbers, and some major reporting initiatives by the UK media,<sup>66</sup> very little is said about gender-based harassment and violence against unsheltered people.

In contrast with extensive reporting on the issue of domestic violence as a leading cause of homelessness, the lack of gender-based violence documentation and reporting, once women are on the street, is striking. Even when statistics are broken down by gender, the experience of women often remains untold, in spite of their vulnerability to misogynistic behavior and assaults by acquaintances, strangers, pimps, and sex traffickers.

One exception worth mentioning is a 2016 policy statement of the Brussels-based European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless:<sup>67</sup>

““”

*The gendered violence endured while homeless leads to the further marginalization and social exclusion of homeless women.*

“Research shows that once homeless, women are at increased risk of exposure to further gender-based violence and trauma, as a consequence of homelessness. Their living situation exacerbates trauma and puts [them] at a higher risk of abuse ... The gendered violence endured while homeless leads to the further marginalization and social exclusion of homeless women.”

In spite of this recognition, though, two of two European Federation reports 2020 reports – on the experience of homeless Roma and of homeless migrant women in Europe – barely touched on the issue other than mentioning the fear of being separated from their children and of seeking help because of the multiple stigmas they may be carrying from previous gender-based violence traumas.

On the other hand, a 2019 study on the experiences of Roma homeless women living in Malmö, Sweden,<sup>68</sup> having to survive by begging in public spaces, showed how these marginalized communities experience a range of bias crimes from harassment to sexual violence.

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has also noted that women living on the street are at higher risk of being abused than women who are housed. Indigenous women, over represented in the homeless population, are three times more likely to face violence.<sup>69</sup> The organization is also trying to bring attention to the issue of “survival sex”: “Some people experiencing homelessness turn to sex work as a means of staying alive or obtaining the necessities of life.”<sup>70</sup> This further increases the risks for unsheltered women to be harassed and stigmatized.

“Across the world, women rough sleepers face unique challenges living on the streets,” wrote Alasdair Soussi, a Glasgow-based freelance journalist, on the unseen violence faced by homeless women on the streets of his city,” and “Scotland is no exception. But many Scots are unaware of this dark underbelly of female existence where stories of sexual exploitation abound.”<sup>71</sup>

## THE LIFE OF A STREET MOTHER IN ELDORET, KENYA

*As told to reporter and Handbook Contributor Eunice Kilonzo, this story is excerpted from an article published in Nation Africa on Nov. 14, 2016 and updated on July 5, 2020.<sup>72</sup>*

*It was originally published as a first-person narrative so that readers could “hear” the street mother’s voice. The Nation’s editors felt it was the best way to give the story the authenticity it deserved and ensure that it would resonate with them. The Nation continued to receive positive feedback after the story was reposted in 2020 on its new website.*

It is hard for me to separate the street from my life, and so I told her that I’d just tell her the story of my life. Period. I will just speak, and she will do the writing later on, joining the strands of my barely comprehensible narrative to make something out of it.

Some people call me Emma, others Mary. I don’t mind either name. I am aged 24, I live in the streets of Eldoret, I am four months pregnant with my fourth baby, and I am HIV-positive.

These streets are chock-full of many like me. We are used to the stares, but, honestly, I can’t stand them.

My days are like those of any other street child; I scavenge to eat, slug it out for a place to put my head at night, and, because I am a woman, spend the better part of the night fighting off loonies trying to rape me.

I have lived that life for nearly eight years now. I came here together with my siblings from Turkana in search of a better life. We did not have anything worth living for at home, and so we embarked on the long journey here, spending nights in the cold and enduring the elements for days on end.

I am often raped on the streets. My worst nightmare is going to the river to take a bath in the cover of darkness, when there are no prying eyes.

That cover of darkness also provides the perfect blanket for rapists, and so, as sure as the sun will rise from the east tomorrow, I know I will be raped if I make my way to the river to take a bath.

When I beg enough money I go to the public washrooms to shower there. They are much safer, but not always affordable.

They do not know that I am sick; that I have HIV. And I don’t think I’ll tell them, because their brand of violent sexual perversion leaves no room for dialogue.

I am on medication though, and I have taken my antiretrovirals religiously for the last seven months. Sometimes the challenges in these streets make me desperate for food as I cannot take my ARVs without eating. When I don’t get enough money from my begging rounds, I get desperate and hawk my body to the street kids for whatever morsels they can spare me.

It breaks my heart when I see young street girls—some as young as eight—come to the streets to find a new life. Because I know that, like me, they will have it rough.

#### 7.4.6 RISKING THE WORST TO ACCESS WATER AND SANITATION

According to the United Nations, in 2018 the number of people living in urban informal settlements (slums) reached over one billion.<sup>73</sup> There is a need for more media coverage of the pervasive dangers they face, especially the harassment and violence against women and girls who have to walk long distances to access water and sanitation, among other essential public services.

“The failure of States to ensure the adequate provision of water and sanitation in public spaces has a particularly negative, and often disproportionate, impact on women and girls, and their enjoyment of a great number of their human rights,” warned Léo Heller, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation in a 2019 report that emphasized risks in the public spaces of urban areas.<sup>74</sup>

An especially useful case study on this issue was published by Amnesty International in 2010.<sup>75</sup> The report, “Risking rape to reach a toilet,” described the widespread violence against women seeking access to water and sanitation in the informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya. The lack of policing and street lighting, compounding the shortage of toilets and places to wash, significantly increase the risks of sexual harassment and assaults, and threaten the rights of women and girls to dignity and privacy.

Similar risks have been documented in the informal settlements of Cape Town, South Africa. A 2016 Reuters article<sup>76</sup> focused on the dangers faced by their residents, especially women, due to inadequate sanitation. Paola Totaro, reporting from Khayelitsha, one of the five largest informal settlements in the world, referred to an innovative study by Yale University (U.S.)<sup>77</sup> connecting sexual assault risks to the number of available sanitation facilities and the average time walking to access them. Based on these calculations, it was estimated that 635 sexual assaults took place each year in Khayelitsha.

A George Washington University (Washington, D.C.) study<sup>78</sup> estimated that over 13 million women in Sub-Saharan Africa alone, are responsible for the daily collection of water, leaving them vulnerable to sexual violence due to high access risks. Although exposed by researchers during the past decade,<sup>79</sup> these widespread forms of gender-based violence are still neglected by the media.

## ENDNOTES

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TOO OFTEN NATIVE WOMEN AND GIRLS  
GO MISSING THREE TIMES:  
IN LIFE, IN DATA, AND IN THE MEDIA.

*Abigail Echo-Hawk*

## CHAPTER 8

# Training, Ethics, and Glossaries Resources

Changing minds and shifting narratives is never easy; it takes time and resolve. Following CWGL's regional consultations, a number of women journalists from around the world became media trainers, working to lead change and promote good reporting in their own countries and regions.

Teaching best practices on gender-based violence reporting requires creative diligence and ingenuity. The stories below from women journalists turned media trainers in Syria, Yemen and India, show how the lessons gathered together in this guidebook are already being disseminated across the world.

## 8.1 TRAINING MEDIA TO REPORT ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT AREAS

*Handbook Contributor Fahmia Al-Fotih was UNFPA Yemen Communication Analyst when she trained journalists in that country. She now works at UNFPA Liaison Office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as a Communication and Knowledge Management Specialist.*

BY FAHMIA AL-FOTIH, JULY 2020

Brutal and prolonged conflicts, such as the one in Yemen, negatively impact media reporting. Due to the nature of the conflict, local media have become more politicized and humanitarian issues have been minimized. A Yemeni study published by the Studies & Economic Media Center found that humanitarian stories, including gender-based violence issues, accounted for only 7.5% of the coverage sample. That category of news has been marginalized and ignored by media since the Yemeni Crisis erupted a decade ago. There is no consideration or attention given to the poor and needy, particularly women and girls, who have most suffered from the conflict.

Journalism constitutes one of the few available avenues through which gender-based violence survivors can share their stories and voice their agony. Unfortunately, journalists can inadvertently become part of the problem when they fail to adhere to basic principles of ethical reporting, particularly when the pursuit of politicized and sensational stories is often prioritized.

To counter such coverage, the UNFPA Yemen country office has organized journalist trainings since 2017 to discuss ethically and sensitively covering gender-based violence in humanitarian crisis settings. The reporters have been able to share ideas, ask questions, and gain insights that could lead to more professional gender-based violence coverage. The trainings are meant to equip journalists to thoughtfully handle these issues, and to protect the safety and lives of survivors who wish to speak out.

Television shows, print articles and more than 10 radio programs dealing with gender-based violence were produced or published after the first training. The “Voices of Women” radio program featured survivors of gender-based violence, as well as lawyers, psychologists and other experts.

One of the survivors said in a radio program that she had been subjected to sexual violence by her husband – and she blatantly called it rape. That was strikingly bold. We never imagined in such a conservative society as Yemen – where gender-based violence terminology is not yet accepted – that a woman could come forward and speak about marital rape.

That inspired us to continue and train more media. The trainees are usually from all forms of media and represent both regional and international media houses.



During the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence in 2020, we targeted new journalists, who were about to graduate from university.

It is always helpful to provide informative and durable tools to which journalists can refer during the reporting process. So, we produced a small brochure and short video clip in both Arabic and English. The journalists were able to save it in their own mobiles and keep sharing it via WhatsApp, while some trainers have used it in their media training. We also screened this clip for a meeting of the subcluster of NGOs and UN agencies coordinating gender-based violence humanitarian action, and many of those participants requested that we share it with them. They said the Nine Ethical Principles published in 2015 by UNFPA for reporting on gender-based violence are not only useful for media personnel but also for humanitarian organizations. In addition, some UNFPA offices in the region asked that we also allow them to use the short clip in their training programs.

After the 2019 International Conference on Population and Development, which was convened by UNFPA, graduates from our previous journalist trainings formed a network to contribute to fulfilling the outcomes and commitments of the conference.

The network has created an annual competition, International Conference on Population and Development Best Story, with entries that adhere to the Nine Ethical Principles. In 2020, we received hundreds of submissions. They were all so

good that it was hard to select winners. What makes me proudest is that the members of the network are really committed, and they keep producing more stories. They have embraced gender-based violence issues and understand the imperative to protect the safety and lives of gender-based violence survivors.

We were unable to conduct face-to-face trainings in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The UNFPA instead conducted four virtual trainings for journalists on ethical reporting and how COVID-19 has deepened the vulnerabilities of gender-based violence survivors. Despite connectivity challenges, the virtual trainings have brought together journalists from different governorates across the country, which would have been logistically difficult if the training had been done in-person, given the nature of the conflict in Yemen. The virtual trainings provided ample room for the exchange of ideas, experiences and stories.

More than 50 powerful stories have been produced showcasing the impact of COVID-19 on gender-based violence and reproductive health services. The story angles have highlighted inequalities and specifically the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women and girls. For example, a story shed light on how funerals took place for the men who died of COVID-19, but not for the women. Other stories showed how lockdowns were unfairly imposed only on women-owned businesses, and how family elders, who feared contracting COVID-19, started writing wills that purposely disinherited female heirs. Pandemic-related increases in domestic violence, divorce rates

and the impact on mental health of gender-based violence survivors were all reported in the stories.

All these trainings that UNFPA has done over the years have helped build a solid foundation for specialized journalism in Yemen and created a network of journalists who are experts on reporting on gender-based violence. Ultimately, the 300 journalists who have been trained since 2017 are equipped to

explore underreported stories, while better understanding the impact of coverage on survivors and communities, as well as how to use best practices when it comes to the actual reporting.

“”

*These trainings have influenced the media to more ethically report on humanitarian issues in Yemen.*

In addition, these trainings have influenced the media to more ethically report on humanitarian issues in Yemen. We are honored to see that other

UN agencies have started replicating this model of media engagement.



*Gender-based violence training for journalists  
(September 2019), Hadhramaut Governate of Yemen.*

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### 8.1.1 GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR REPORTING AND TRAINING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

*Handbook Contributor Milia Eidmouni is the co-founder and former Regional Director of the Syrian Female Journalists Network. She is a Media and Gender Trainer.*

BY MILIA EIDMOUNI, JUNE 2020

Reporting on gender-based violence plays a vital role in challenging the patriarchal society, advocating, and lobbying for passage and implementation of effective laws and policies. When I decided to study journalism, my parents didn't accept my choice easily and tried to convince me to go for a "typical career." I was 17 years old and received my parents' concern as part of their "over-protecting attitude." It didn't occur to me to think: I'm experiencing one type of gender inequality, and how the patriarchal system and culture control women's lives and freedom of choice.

After graduating from journalism school, I followed my passion for covering women's issues. I worked for more than 10 years between reporting, drafting gender policies, and training other women and men journalists on gender-sensitive reporting, believing in the collective work and long-term process, to foster a social change around gender-based violence.

Deep understanding of the root causes of the issue as it connects directly to the political, economic, and social situation in the country will help media workers shift

the narrative, challenge the stereotypical image of women in media, and tackle society's taboos.

Changing the narrative about women and girls came with resistance at first. But it has proven effective to insist that women and girls' rights are also a priority and that providing guidance to media workers to create positive and gender-balanced content can be the first tangible change.

As co-founder of the Syrian Female Journalists Network, I have worked with the emerging Syrian media and journalists from different countries in the region. I have found that the following tips are important for journalists when covering gender-based violence stories:

1. Avoid generalization and judgmental language. Language and correct terminology are important pillars in your story, countering stereotypical phrases about violence against women and LGBTQ people that still dominate media coverage. Ensure you are giving minorities and women an active role in your stories, instead of victimizing them, or talking on their behalf. Creating a list of wrong and right terms and phrases will help you to write an ethical report that reflects a human rights perspective.
2. Understand the root causes of the issue and question with a critical eye when seeking information from an official organization, nongovernmental

organizations and gender specialists. Ask for facts and sources of support and services available for survivors and victims of gender-based violence.

3. Keep learning and building your gender-sensitive writing skills. Many media and women's rights organizations provide journalists with training opportunities and guidebooks on how to cover gender-based violence from a human rights perspective. You can enroll in this training and get to share your experience and gain insights from other colleagues and experts.
4. Be aware that gender issues are not only women's stories. Using a gender lens, search for the invisible stories of struggle that minorities face too, such as: gender-based violence committed against the LGBTQ+ community, refugees, girls and men. Each voice matters, and your report might challenge the social norms and press for changes in discriminatory laws.
5. Do No Harm. When interviewing survivors of gender-based violence give them the time to decide whether they want to do the interview or not, and explain when and how you will use the story. Respect their privacy, record their voices and take pictures, if needed, after they consent to those activities. It is good to have a psychosocial support expert present during

the interview to provide help in case the questions cause re-traumatization.

6. Seek legal expert advice for your story, to ensure you are referring to the right laws in your country, and that you will not unwittingly put your interviewee at any kind of risk.
7. Make a database of local experts and organizations that provide direct support for gender-based violence survivors. This database will help you build a strong and in-depth report, and help you avoid contacting the same expert for all your articles. Make sure you have different voices and genders, based on the angle of your story and the type of information that each source provides.

The media coverage on gender-based violence is increasing in the Middle East and North Africa region, thanks to the women and feminist movements, and women-led media initiatives. They are taking an important role in tackling the untold stories and amplifying women's voices from different backgrounds. Media organizations should adopt and create gender quality assurance measures and develop internal policies/ethical guides that promote gender equality and gender justice. What is more, they should do this within their workplace to ensure the media reports are meeting the standards of best practices to cover gender-based violence stories.

### 8.1.2 TRAINING RURAL WOMEN TO USE DIGITAL STORY-TELLING AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

*Handbook Contributor Stella Paul is an award-winning journalist from India. She works as an Inter Press Service reporter and as World Pulse Global Lead Trainer.*

BY STELLA PAUL, JUNE 2020

“I don’t know why a man thinks he has the right to hurt a woman,” says Madhuri Deshkar – a sarpanch (head of a village council) turned women’s rights activist in Bhandara district of India’s Maharashtra state. As a grassroots leader, Deshkar has never shied away from calling out those perpetrators of gender-based violence, but she usually spoke at meetings and social events within her community. Lately, however, she has taken a new route to express her thoughts and opinions: digital storytelling.

Pratibha Ukey is also an activist based in the Nagpur district of Maharashtra. Single women like her in Nagpur are often deprived of property rights by relatives, forcing them to struggle for survival. Ukey has also begun to write against this discrimination using digital tools.

Minakshi Birajdar is from the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. As a young widow, she was ridiculed and humiliated for being a social activist which caused her mental stress and pain. Today, besides economically empowering women of her community, she is using digital storytelling to raise awareness against gender-based violence.

Deshkar, Ukey and Birajdar have one thing in common: they are Fellows of the Collective Impact Partnership (<https://riseuptogether.org/collective-impact-partnership/>), a project focused on providing support to grassroots women leaders in Maharashtra working on economic empowerment. Twenty-two women were chosen for this project. Each one received a financial grant and was trained in leadership skills and digital storytelling.

As the global lead trainer of World Pulse ([www.worldpulse.com](http://www.worldpulse.com)) – one of five project partners, I had the joy of training these 22 women leaders. During my training, they learnt digital storytelling, digital safety and digital networking, before being connected with a safe web platform designed especially for them by World Pulse.

It was a challenge from the very beginning: Despite their vast experience as grassroots leaders, the trainees knew nothing about storytelling. Each of them had a smartphone, but knew nothing beyond phone calls, taking photos and sharing over WhatsApp. And perhaps the biggest of the hurdles was that, although each one of them had a hundred stories to tell, nobody knew how to articulate them. Last but not least, the technical issues about writing on a digital platform seemed too overwhelming a task as they barely understood English.

However, their enthusiasm and passion for being heard by a greater community made up for their lack of digital skills

and – after the very first of our training sessions during which I focused on “Nobody speaks for me, I speak for myself” – they began to write their stories.

Each one of them had powerful narratives. To begin with, they chose one subject that was truly close to their hearts: gender-based violence.

Madhuri Deshkar wrote about a woman being beaten by a man in broad daylight. When she confronted him, he replied ‘I am her husband,’ implying that he had the authority to treat his wife however he wanted. She then wrote how she got him punished for the crime. It was a courageous act for a woman in a rural society, where women are not expected to challenge a man. The story received great feedback and was commented upon by fellow members who also survived gender-based violence and were now fighting against it. Read the story here (<https://www.worldpulse.com/community/users/madhuricip/posts/88483>)

In her stories, Pratibha Ukey has been highlighting the plight of women who are wrongly denied property rights. She calls this denial a clear form of gender-based violence since only women experience it, especially

widows. “For me, denying a woman her legitimate right to property is gender-based violence that we all need to stand against,” she says. Here is one of her stories: <https://www.worldpulse.com/community/users/pratibha-cip/posts/92519>

Ukey has also been actively observing the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign (<https://www.world->

“”

*Nobody speaks for me,  
I speak for myself.*

[pulse.com/community/users/pratibha-cip/posts/93033](https://www.worldpulse.com/community/users/pratibha-cip/posts/93033)).

Minakshi, who fights for the welfare of women whose husbands have committed suicide due to drought and crop failure, writes award-winning stories about climate change increasing the burden of gender-based violence in her community.

Read her stories here: <https://www.worldpulse.com/community/users/minakshib/posts/88776>

As a trainer, it is both challenging and spiritually fulfilling to see these powerful yet unheard voices finding their own audience, especially on a platform they once knew little about. To see them forging connections and stirring actions on gender-based violence through their stories also is a big motivation.

## 8.2 SELECTED RESOURCES FOR MEDIA EDUCATORS AND TRAINERS

Several of the listed resources were developed with specific national or regional audiences in mind. They were selected for this chapter, however, because of the broader relevance of their content and tools regarding gender-based violence reporting.

### AFRICA

#### ***Reporting Gender-Based Violence: A Handbook for Journalists***

Inter Press Service (2009)

Editor: Kudzai Makombe

Available in English and French

[http://www.ipsnews.net/publications/ips\\_reporting\\_gender\\_based\\_violence.pdf](http://www.ipsnews.net/publications/ips_reporting_gender_based_violence.pdf)

#### ***Gender-Based Violence Prevention Network 16 Days of Activism Campaign: Media Training Module***

Gender-Based Violence Prevention Network (2015)

<https://preventgbv africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Media-Training-Module.pdf>

Although developed for advocacy organizations working with the media, this module can also be useful for journalists covering the global campaign on ending gender-based violence. The gender-based violence Prevention Network, based in Kampala, Uganda, is represented in 18 African countries.

### EUROPE

#### ***Gender Sensitization Manual on Media Reporting on Gender-Based Violence***

Care International Balkans (2017)

<https://beta.youngmeninitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Gender-Sensitization-Manual-on-Media-Reporting-EN.pdf>



***Preparing a Training for Journalists and Students of Journalism***

UN Women Bosnia and Herzegovina (2017)

<https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/bosnia/un%20woman%20prirucnik%20nasilje%20nad%20zenama-dodatak%20en-web.pdf?la=en&vs=1208>

This Training of Trainers publication supplements UN Women’s Media Coverage of Gender-Based Violence Handbook.

**MIDDLE EAST*****Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis:  
A Training Manual***

UNFPA (2016)

Available in English and Arabic

<https://www.unfpa.org/es/node/14906>

***Reporting on Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings:  
A Journalist’s Handbook***

UNFPA (2020)

Available in English and Arabic

Author: UNFPA Arab States Regional Humanitarian Response Hub

<https://www.unfpa.org/reporting-gbv-humanitarian-settings>

UNFPA produced a companion training video (12 minutes) on the principles and ethics of reporting on gender-based violence.

***Reporting Gender-Based Violence: Guidance Material for Journalists***

UNFPA Lebanon

[www.reportinggbv.com](http://www.reportinggbv.com)

This website was developed by Reem Maghribi, and is maintained by Sharq.org, a pan-Arab NGO whose projects focus on media development. Maghribi is a Gender and Communication Consultant and Media Trainer.

***Working with Gender-Based Violence Survivors:  
A Reference Training Manual***

UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2012)

<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/working-gender-based-violence-survivors>

Although developed for humanitarian frontline workers, this training tool offers useful resources and guidance for journalists working with gender-based violence survivors.

**NORTH AMERICA**

“”

***Too often Native women and girls go missing three times – in life, in data and in the media.***

The following resources were selected more specifically for journalists reporting on Indigenous people and communities. This focus stems from the lack of Indigenous voices in the mainstream Canadian and U.S. media, especially around the issue of gender-based violence. As Abigail Echo-Hawk, Chief Research Officer for the Seattle Indian Health Board, said in an interview with the HuffPost “Too often Native women and girls go missing three times – in life, in data and in the media.”

***Reporting on Gender-Based Violence: A Guide for Journalists***

Equal Press (2020)

[http://equalpress.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EP\\_Guidebook.pdf](http://equalpress.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EP_Guidebook.pdf)

Includes a chapter on “GBV and Indigenous people.” Equal Press is a Canadian initiative that “seeks to address how local news media represents gender-based violence.”

***Indigenous Media Guides***

Native American Journalists Association (2021)

<https://najanewsroom.com/8724-2/>

These brief media guides were developed to help non-Indigenous journalists report on First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities in Canada.

NAJA, currently based at the University of Oklahoma in Norman (U.S.), “works across the media industry to ensure accurate and contextual reporting about Native people and communities.”

***Reporting and Indigenous Terminology***

Native American Journalists Association

[https://najanewsroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NAJA\\_Reporting\\_and\\_Indigenous\\_Terminology\\_Guide.pdf](https://najanewsroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NAJA_Reporting_and_Indigenous_Terminology_Guide.pdf)

***Changing the Narrative About Native Americans; A Guide for Allies***

First Nations Development Institute (2018)

[https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/%E2%80%A2MessageGuide-Allies-screen-spreads\\_1.pdf](https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/%E2%80%A2MessageGuide-Allies-screen-spreads_1.pdf)

The First Nations Development Institute (based in Colorado and New Mexico, U.S.) designed this tool as “a quest to replace false narratives.” Although not developed specifically for the media, it can help journalists dispel myths and misconceptions.

## 8.3 MEDIA ETHICS GUIDELINES

Several of these resources do not specifically cover gender-based reporting. But many of their broader principles are applicable and can be used in gender-based violence media trainings or courses.

### ***Codes of Ethics***

Accountable Journalism website (hosted by the Reynolds Journalism Institute of the Missouri School of Journalism in the U.S. and by the Ethical Journalism Network)

<https://accountablejournalism.org/ethics-codes>

A unique and comprehensive “compilation of international codes of media ethics from around the world.”

This is a searchable database.

### ***Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists***

International Federation of Journalists

<https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists.html>

### ***IFJ Guidelines for Reporting on Violence Against Women***

International Federation of Journalists

[https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/IFJ\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Reporting\\_on\\_Violence\\_Against\\_Women\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Guidelines_for_Reporting_on_Violence_Against_Women_EN.pdf)

### ***Learning Resource Kit for Gender-Ethical Journalism (2012)***

International Federation of Journalists and World Association of Christian Communication

<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/gender-equality/article/wacc-and-ifj-resource-kit-to-strengthen-gender-ethical-journalism.html>

Includes a survey of media policies and codes from over 30 countries.

**Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)**

This UK-based international network offers the following relevant online courses:

***The Ethical Journalist's Toolkit***

Developed in collaboration with the Thomson Foundation

<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/courses>

***Photographer's Ethical Toolkit***

Developed in collaboration with the Thomson Foundation and the Photography Ethics Centre.

<https://thomsonfoundation.edcastcloud.com/learn/the-photographer-s-ethical-toolkit-self-paced-6636>

***Ethical Reporting on Domestic Violence (EJN)***

<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/ejn-launches-six-point-guide-for-journalists-reporting-domestic-violence>

***Nine Ethical Principles: Reporting Ethically on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis***

UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub (Amman, Jordan)

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

## 8.4 GLOSSARIES

The recent publication of comprehensive glossaries dedicated to gender-based violence terminology led CWGL to compile a selection of those currently available in English and online, instead of creating its own.

### GENERAL GLOSSARIES

#### ***Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: A Glossary from A to Z***

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), (2020)  
Available in Arabic, English, Farsi, French and Spanish, 110 pages

[https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/atoz\\_en\\_book\\_screen.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/atoz_en_book_screen.pdf)

The glossary includes detailed definitions of 61 essential words. Its audience includes journalists.

“While words can help give survivors of sexual and gender-based violence visibility, truth, and justice, they can also discriminate, re-victimise, and destroy,” Guissou Jahangiri, FIDH Vice-President, wrote.

“”

*While words can help give survivors of sexual and gender-based violence visibility, truth, and justice, they can also discriminate, re-victimise, and destroy.*

#### ***Gender-Based Violence Terminology***

Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University, Ontario, Canada.

<http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/docs/LearningNetwork-GBV-Glossary.pdf>

Two versions are available: the PDF version can be downloaded (96 pages), or the definitions (185 terms) can be accessed by clicking on the appropriate alphabet letter.

#### ***Women’s Human Rights***

Swiss Government in collaboration with the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Human Rights, the University of Bern, and the Berlin-based IT company Lucid.

<https://womenshumanrights.ch/>

This free app provides a comprehensive terminology database, including definitions of keywords related to gender-based violence with links to relevant UN documents.

***Violence Against Women Key Terminology***

UNFPA Asia and the Pacific (2016), 12 pages

<https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/violence-against-women-key-terminology-knowvawdata>

***Reporting on Gender-Based Violence: A Guide for Journalists***

Equal Press (2020)

[http://equalpress.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EP\\_Guidebook.pdf](http://equalpress.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EP_Guidebook.pdf)

Equal Press is a project of Mosaic, a Canadian NGO. The handbook includes an 11-page glossary (pp. 48–58) defining 34 terms.

**ISSUE-SPECIFIC GLOSSARIES*****Glossary of definitions of rape, femicide, and intimate partner violence***

European Institute for Gender Equality (2017), 48 pages

<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/glossary-definitions-rape-femicide-and-intimate-partner-violence>

***Glossary on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse***

United Nations. Prepared for the UN Special Coordinator on improving the UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse (2017), 20 pages

[https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5Bsecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5Bsecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English_0.pdf)

***A Database of UN Resolutions and Expert Guidance on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights***

Developed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Western Hemisphere Region, and the Sexual Rights Initiative (2021)

<https://www.unadvocacy.org/#/en/>

Each keyword (including under GBV) in this searchable database is linked to definitions in relevant UN documents.

### ***Cyber Violence and Hate Speech Online Against Women***

European Parliament (2018), 76 pages

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1ccedce6-c5ed-11e8-9424-01aa75ed71a1>

This study by Adriana van der Wilk includes a detailed glossary.

### ***Defining ‘Online Abuse’: A Glossary of Terms***

PEN America

<https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/>

## **SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY TERMS**

### ***NLGJA Stylebook***

National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (U.S.)

<https://www.nlgja.org/stylebook/> (15 pages)

Spanish edition: <https://www.nlgja.org/stylebook/espanol/> (10 pages)

### ***GLAAD Media Reference Guide***

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (U.S.) (2016) 40 pages

<https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD-Media-Reference-Guide-Tenth-Edition.pdf>

Includes an 11-page glossary

### ***A Guide to Gender Identity Terms***

National Public Radio (U.S.), 2021

<https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq>



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