

Reporting on Gender-Based Violence A Guide for Journalists

Nearly one in four women around the world experiences sexual violence during her lifetime, according to the World Health Organization. Up to a third of all women have been physically assaulted by an intimate male partner. Survivors of gender-based violence often underreport their experiences because of social stigma, fears about their safety, and lack of appropriate response from institutions meant to protect them.

The Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch values the important role journalists play in publicizing gender-based violence. Sensitive and informed media coverage of gender-based violence is critical for raising public awareness and political accountability.

Journalists have often asked our advice about how to cover these abuses in an ethical way without further traumatizing the survivors. This factsheet provides basic information to journalists about important safety and confidentiality guidelines to follow when investigating and writing about gender-based violence.

What is gender-based violence?

- Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person on the basis of gender or sex. While both males and females are subject to gender-based violence, women and girls are the main victims. Gender-based violence can include sexual violence, domestic violence, emotional and psychological abuse, forced prostitution, trafficking for forced labor or prostitution, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, harmful traditional practices (e.g. female genital mutilation and forced marriage), and discriminatory practices based on gender.
- Domestic violence, also called “intimate partner abuse,” “battering,” or “wife-beating,” refers to physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse that takes place in the context of an intimate relationship, including marriage. Domestic violence is one of the most common forms of gender-based violence and is often characterized by long-term patterns of abusive behavior and control.
- Sexual exploitation is any abuse that takes place when a perpetrator exploits a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes; this includes profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.

For more information, see:

http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/wrvh1/en/

World Health Organization, World Report on Violence and Health, 2002.

http://www.rhrc.org/resources/gbv/gl_sgbv03.html

UNHCR, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees, and Internally Displaced Persons, Guidelines for Prevention and Response, 2003.

<http://www.hrw.org/women>

Women's Rights Division, Human Rights Watch

THE CONFIDENTIALITY, SAFETY, AND WELL-BEING OF SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE MUST BE THE TOP PRIORITY AT ALL TIMES.

Confidentiality and Safety

- DO NOT publish or broadcast names or any identifying information about victims. Use pseudonyms instead.
- DO conduct interviews in a secure and private setting.
- DO take extra precautions to ensure the confidentiality and safety of the interviewee when requesting, conducting or following up on an interview. Otherwise, women and girls may risk social stigma and further violence. For example:
 - A perpetrator of violence, including an abusive husband or boyfriend, may retaliate against a woman or girl for talking to a journalist.
 - In cases of “honor” crimes, relatives may abuse or kill female family members who are perceived to have brought “dishonor” to the family, often for suspected sexual activity outside marriage, including rape.

Consent

- DO get the informed consent of survivors prior to the interview.
- DO ensure that interviewees understand they have the right to refuse to answer any questions and to end the interview at any time.
- DO confirm that survivors understand how you will use and disseminate the information they provide.
- DO provide your contact information in a written form so they can contact you afterward.

Interviewing survivors of gender-based violence

- DO take extra precautions if you must interview children. When possible, consult first with trusted family members or service providers, such as healthcare workers or counselors. For the safety reasons cited above, do not speak to family members or others if it may lead to retaliation.
- DO try to ensure that female survivors are interviewed by women. Use discretion, depending on the situation, and respect the survivor’s preferences.
- DO have information about local support services available for survivors who wish to seek help. Such support services include rape crisis centers and women’s shelters.
- DO remain aware that interviews can retraumatize the victim. Talk to a local women’s shelter or organization to learn about proper interviewing techniques..

Evaluating response to gender-based violence

- DO ask whether the survivor needed and was able to obtain appropriate medical help and psychological services, including emergency contraceptives, post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV transmission, and counseling.
- DO ask about the survivor’s interactions with the criminal justice system, including the police, lawyers, and the courts.
- DO include information about the larger context of legal, economic, and social discrimination that perpetuates acts of gender-based violence.

Gender-Based Violence in Refugee Camps

Risks

- Refugee women and girls may have fled sexual violence in situations of armed conflict or encountered violence while traveling to safety.
- Domestic violence may be particularly acute in refugee settings because of disruptions in family and community structures, limited resources, and frustration in protracted refugee situations.
- Unsafe physical surroundings, separation from families, and patriarchal governing structures often heighten women and girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence in refugee camps.
- Scarce resources, unequal access to humanitarian aid, and male-dominated camp leadership may place refugee women and girls at risk for sexual exploitation by aid workers and local officials.
- Restrictive laws in the host country, and lack of access to the criminal justice system and legal representation, may affect refugee women and girls' ability to find redress for violence.

Standards

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has developed a number of guidelines and manuals to ensure the protection of refugees, internally displaced people, and returnees. These may be found at <http://www.unhcr.ch>. Among the most important guidelines for the protection of refugee women and children are:

- 2003 *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Against Refugees, Returnees, and Internally-Displaced Persons: Guidelines for Prevention and Response*.
- 1994 *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care*
- 1991 *Guidelines for the Protection of Refugee Women*
- The UNHCR Code of Conduct for Employees

Measures That Can Ensure Women's Rights and Safety in Refugee Camps

- The degree of women's participation and leadership in all aspects of camp design, security, and management.
- Recruitment and retention of trained female protection officers, police officers, and aid workers, including teachers and food distribution officials.
- Coordinated programs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, involving legal, medical, psycho-social, and community awareness measures.
- Individual registration documents and independent and equal access to all humanitarian aid.
- Equal and full access to educational and employment opportunities.