

# REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## A DART CENTRE EUROPE TIP SHEET

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**Reporting on sexual violence demands special care and increased ethical sensitivity. It requires specialised interviewing skills, understanding of the law, and basic awareness about the psychological impact of trauma.**

Sexual violence could be physical or psychological and perpetrated against men, women or children of any age. It includes rape, which is known to be one of the most deeply traumatic experiences any human being can undergo. Talking about such an event is usually associated with very high levels of distress – during re-telling survivors may even re-experience some of the same emotions they felt at the time of being attacked. Consequently, journalists need to take special care, if they are to avoid compounding their interviewees' distress. Sexual violence has broader effects too: the impact can ripple out to those involved tangentially, such as family members and loved ones or even witnesses to the act. When used as a weapon of war, how a whole community relates to itself or neighbouring groups can be profoundly altered.

### PREPARATION AND APPROACH

**Brief yourself thoroughly on the likely impacts and causes of sexual violence.** Research local conditions and circumstances. But once you have done your research, leave it at the door. It doesn't matter how much knowledge you have on the topic, you can never predict how a particular individual experienced the events that happened to them.

**Get the language right.** Rape or assault is not "sex". A pattern of abuse is not an "affair". Rape or sexual assault is in no way associated with normal sexual activity; trafficking in women is not to be confused with prostitution. People who have suffered sexual violence may not wish to be described as a "victim" unless they choose the word themselves. Many prefer the word "survivor".

**Respect a potential interviewee's right to say no.** Nobody should ever be forced to talk in detail about an event as traumatic as rape. Not everybody is in the right place to speak.

- If there is a local expert or a support organisation involved in the case, consider asking them if speaking to the media is likely to make things worse.
- However sensitive a male interviewer is, in the majority of cases a female victim is likely to feel safer when interviewed by an other woman; if that is not possible, a female colleague should be on hand.
- Be fair and realistic. Don't coerce, cajole, trick or offer remuneration, and don't suggest that giving an interview will bring more aid / military intervention.

**Ask yourself whether approaching someone risks compromising his or her safety and privacy.** In some societies, just being suspected of having been raped, can lead to humiliation, being ostracised, and even to further violence. Tread carefully and think about how and where you meet a potential source.

- Identify yourself clearly and never pretend not to be a journalist. Explaining the type of story you're planning to write is likely to help build trust between you and the interviewee and result in better work.

### DURING THE INTERVIEW

**Set good ground rules.** Violent and abusive acts take control and power away from people, and so it is important to create a sense of safety during the interview. Try involving the interviewee in the decision-making: ask them if they can recommend a safe location and time.

- If you are using a translator, brief them on the fundamentals described here. Broadcast journalists should consider recording the interview in the interviewee's own language and keeping the crew to a minimum.
- Let your interviewee know at the outset how much time it is likely to take. Cutting somebody short while they describing a traumatic experience without prior warning can cause deep hurt.

**The secret to good interviewing is active, non-judgmental listening.** That sounds simple, but it is a skill that requires time and effort to develop.

**Don't underestimate how your own reactions to traumatic detail can influence the conversation.** If you are finding the material challenging, acknowledge that silently to yourself, and bring your focus back to what is being said. Usually just trying to listen a little harder, and observing the other's facial expressions, body language, etc, helps. (The time to process the personal impact on the journalist is after the interview.)

**Sexual violence is associated with high degrees of self-blame, guilt and shame.** For this reason, avoid any language that might imply the interviewee is responsible in some way. Be careful of asking "why" questions - they are favoured by interrogators.

**Don't be surprised if accounts only make partial sense.** Frequently survivors of sexual violence 'shut down' emotionally: their recall may become fragmentary, and in some cases they may even block out an event entirely. Incomplete and contradictory accounts are not prima facie evidence of deception, but rather of the struggle interviewees may experience in making sense of what happened to them.

**Never say you know how they feel – you don't.** Instead, you could say, "I appreciate how difficult this is for you".

**End the interview well.** After you have addressed the issues you need for your report, ask them if they would like to add anything else. And most importantly, make sure you bring the conversation back into the here and now and to the discussion of things that the interviewee finds safe.

**Make yourself available for contact after your report is published or broadcast.** If you say you'll let them have a copy or a recording of what you write/broadcast, keep that promise.

## WRITING IT UP

**Again, think about the language.** Sexual violence is both deeply personal and something that has wider public policy implications.

- When describing an assault, try to strike a balance when deciding how much graphic detail to include. Too much can be gratuitous; too little can weaken the survivor's case.
- During conflict, rape by combatants is a war crime. Describing it as an unfortunate but predictable aspect of war is not acceptable.

**Anticipate the impact of publication.** Journalists have a responsibility to do everything they can to avoid exposing the interviewee to further abuse or undermining their standing in the community.

- Consider letting survivors read portions of your story before publication, as it can lessen the impact of public exposure and help catch factual errors. After reading - and seeing evidence of your intentions - they may decide to share more of their story with you.
- Tell the whole story. Sometimes media identify specific incidents and focus on the tragic aspects of it, but reporters do well to understand that abuse might be part of a long-standing social problem, armed conflict, or part of a community history. Finding out how individuals and communities have coped with the trauma of sexual violence in the longer term may add helpful insight.
- If appropriate, direct the interviewee, viewers or readers to relevant resources and information about sexual violence. Links to these can be found on the Dart Centre website.

**Re-check whether you risk compromising a source's anonymity.** In the final report, have you left clues that might inadvertently identify the individual? Job, age and location may allow for jigsaw identification. Faces or clothes may need to be obscured in photographs or film.