

# GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS

ON GENDER AND GENDER-SENSITIVE REPORTING

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## PREFACE

Reporting on gender issues, especially on gender-based violence can often be a sensitive topic to tackle in the media, especially in the Middle-East and North Africa region. It does not only require the respect of specific ethical behavior while conducting interviews and producing content, it also needs to take into consideration the cultural and social dynamics and beliefs that are often gender biased.

Journalists who report on gender issues and gender-based violence face many challenges: first, the ethical duty to produce a gender-balanced content with all the challenges that come with it in the light of constantly changing human rights related theories and terminology; second, the unpredictable reaction of readers to the story. Many journalists who have reported on certain gender issues topics, especially very sensitive topics like circumcision, marital rape or LGBTIQ+ rights, in mainstream media organizations with a large base of conservative readers, faced an aggressive reaction from readers, have been threatened and accused of promoting ideas against the current cultural and social construct; and third, journalists who publish gender-balanced content with media organizations with an editorial line that respects all human rights and diversities, and whose initial goal is to push society towards positive change, do not always reach the audience that has an impact on public opinion and that can have a role in changing the social perception of certain topics.

Furthermore, journalists who report on gender issues can also be affected – often unconsciously - by the social, religious and cultural background of their surroundings, and end up recreating many stereotypes that are majorly reproduced unintentionally. Religious and social beliefs and common prejudices play an important role in creating the context of the story and its content.

This document serves as a technical set of guidelines to assist journalists who wish to report on gender issues in order to produce ethical and balanced content, avoid the reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices and make the voices of people who are being discriminated because of their gender identity or sexual orientation heard.

## ABREVIATIONS:

GBV: Gender-Based Violence

SGBV: Sexual and gender-based violence

LGBTIQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Intersex, Queer and other gender identities and sexual orientations

## TERMINOLOGY and FORMS OF SGBV:

*This list includes, but is not limited to all, terminology used when covering gender related stories and different forms of violence that are considered sexual and gender-based violence.*

<b>Gender</b>	Gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex (i.e., the state of being male, female, or an intersex variation), sex-based social structures (i.e., gender roles), or gender identity.
<b>Gender Identity</b>	Gender identity is a person's perception of having a particular gender, which may or may not correspond with their birth sex. For example, people may define their gender identity as men, women or non-binary.
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	A person's sexual orientation is a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted; for example, the fact of being heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.
<b>Gender Sensitive</b>	Gender sensitivity is the aim of understanding and taking account of the societal and cultural factors involved in gender-based exclusion and discrimination in the most diverse spheres of public and private life.

<b>Gender bias</b>	Gender bias is the inclination towards or prejudice against one gender or one gender identity.
<b>Gender balance</b>	Gender balance or gender equality is the state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making; and the state of valuing different behaviors, aspirations and needs equally, regardless of gender.
<b>Unconscious gender bias</b>	It is the term used to define the concept that individuals have preferences for objects and people at a subconscious level that unintentionally influence their behavior and decision making.
<b>Sexual and Gender-based violence</b>	It is any form of violence practiced against a person that is based on their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	It is the acronym of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer and other gender identities or sexual orientation that are included in the gender spectrum.
<b>Sex work</b>	Sex work is the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation. It includes activities of direct physical contact as well as indirect sexual stimulation. Sex work only refers to voluntary sexual transactions and does not include internationally acclaimed unethical or illegal acts such as human trafficking.
<b>Rape</b>	Rape is the term used for sexual assault. It is an unlawful sexual activity and usually sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against a person's will or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent because of mental illness, mental deficiency, intoxication, unconsciousness, or deception.

<b>Sexual harassment</b>	It is a behavior characterized by the making of unwelcome and inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances.
<b>Domestic violence</b>	It is a violent or aggressive behavior within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse or partner, a child or any other person living within the household of the abuser.
<b>Forced marriage</b>	It is a marriage in which one or more of the parties is married without their consent or against their will.
<b>Early marriage</b>	It is the marriage or union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years of age.
<b>Human trafficking</b>	Human trafficking is the trade of humans for the purpose of forced labour, sexual slavery, or commercial sexual exploitation for the trafficker or others.
<b>Female genital mutilation</b>	It is also known as female genital cutting and female circumcision, and it is the ritual cutting or removal of some or all of the external female genitalia.
<b>Gender-biased family laws</b>	They are the set of laws that create unbalance of rights between different genders. They include, but not limited to, marital, heritage or children custody laws. They are in practice mainly in religious societies and countries that follow religious laws.
<b>Victim blaming</b>	Victim blaming occurs when the victim of a crime or any wrongful act is held entirely or partially at fault for the harm that befell them. It is often considered a gender-based violence when it occurs against people who were subject of a sexual-related harm, such as rape or sexual harassment.

# GUIDELINES FOR A GENDER BALANCED REPORTING

## AVOID JUDGEMENTAL LANGUAGE:

There are many terms that are often used in the society or sometimes in the media that can be degrading to survivors of SGBV, even though they are majorly used. To produce a gender-balanced content, always make sure that the terms you are using are accepted by international human rights standards. Human rights advocates and organizations have created alternatives to all degrading terms that have a negative connotation.

For example, below is a short list of alternative terms you can use:

<b>Sex worker</b>	instead of	<b>Prostitute</b>
<b>Sex work</b>	instead of	<b>Prostitution</b>
<b>Survivor</b>	instead of	<b>victim</b>
<b>Drug user</b>	instead of	<b>Addict</b>

## BE NEUTRAL BUT FAIR:

Although a journalist's role is to provide a quasi-neutral content and distance themselves from the source or the subject of their story, it is not always crucial to highlight both sides of the story. For example, if the story is about domestic violence and features the event of a woman beaten up by her husband, interviewing the husband can often give him a space to justify the violence, whereas the story should be focused on the fact that a domestic violence is a crime like any other physical violence, debunking the legitimacy of honor crimes, aggressions based on honor theories and other arguments usually presented in such cases.

## BE ACCURATE:

With the fast pace of news we receive every day, many journalists try to race social media platforms in delivering the story. This results in jumping to conclusions and sometimes publishing inaccurate content. When the story is related to a gender-based violence incident, publishing inaccurate information does not only have a negative effect on the journalists themselves, but can have serious and harmful consequences on the survivors of the GBV.

## **ASSESS YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL READINESS TO REPORT ON CERTAIN TOPICS:**

There is no shame in not being able to report on certain topics. Certain stories, that are mainly assigned to us by our editors, can be either triggering for us, or might be related to a subject that we find difficulty understanding or tolerating. If we report on a topic that we feel we are not ready for, our story and objectivity might be compromised, and this will have a negative impact on the process of writing the story and the desired outcomes. This can increase the amount of pressure put on us on a professional and personal level. It could also lead, in some cases, to causing involuntary harm. Therefore, not taking in charge a story that we feel we are not ready for is sometimes in our best interest and the best interest of the community or people we are writing about.

## **DON'T ASSUME, ASK (OR DON'T ASK):**

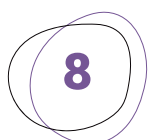
We sometimes tend to assume facts based on our biased knowledge of a certain topic, or by social stereotypes that we know and assume are true. Assuming facts can harm the story and the person we are interviewing. For example, assuming that all gay men have been subject to sexual abuse; or assuming that all lesbian women have a distorted father figure. When we are interviewing people for a gender-related story, there is nothing wrong in asking without assuming or judging. We should always refer to the person's story to draw the line of events; and sometimes use indirect questions to avoid being rude or asking triggering questions.

## **DON'T QUESTION OR BLAME THE SURVIVOR/VICTIM:**

Victim-blaming is another form of violence. It is often the result of the journalist's critical mind that always questions facts, but it can also be caused by social and cultural prejudices and stereotypes that a person can have. Questioning the facts that a survivor is offering is degrading and sometimes very harmful to the survivor who decided to speak about the violence they have been subject to regardless of the difficult mental or emotional situation they might be in and the stressful feeling that telling their story can trigger, and often breaks the trust between the survivor and the journalist.

## **IF YOU ARE CONFUSED ABOUT A PERSON'S GENDER OR HOW TO ADDRESS THEM, ASK:**

It is quite normal for us to get confused about a person's gender if their gender expression does not follow the social stereotypes we are used to; and we tend more likely to think that asking them would be embarrassing or offending. However, there is nothing wrong in asking the person directly about how they wish to be addressed, what is their preferred name or pronoun. In fact, it is essential to do so to avoid tension or sometimes harm during the interview.





## **RESPECT A PERSON'S CHOSEN PRONOUN AND/OR NAME:**

Once we ask what a person's preferred pronoun and/or name, we should use it all the time. Some journalists, for example, tend to use a trans\* person's dead name and not their chosen name and this is unethical. Similarly, we tend to misgender people by using a pronoun they do not use. It is essential to respect a person's choice with their chosen pronouns and names.

## **DO NOT DEAL WITH SGBV STORIES AS A SCOOP:**

Trying to increase our viewership or readership should not allow us to deal with SGBV stories as a scoop, even if we are sometimes pressured by the editorial management to take certain stories from an angle that insures more readership, we should not compromise our ethics and values. It is our duty to report on human rights stories with a very accurate and respectful manners without compromising the well-being or security of our guests or sources.

## **CONSULT EXPERTS:**

It is not only important to interview experts on certain topics, especially when they are human rights-related, it is equally important to know who are the experts we are interviewing. The standards to choose the right expert to interview can easily be defined by international human rights standards. The best experts to interview are those who respect the values set by international laws.

## **TAKE PERMISSIONS AND RESPECT PRIVACIES:**

Avoid arriving at a person's doorstep with a camera set on recording mode. Always take permission before filming, recording the voice or taking the picture of a person. Also, taking permission has many layers. It is not only related to taking the consent of a person to record their voice or taking them on camera. It is also about taking permission to ask certain questions. Some questions we might ask can be triggering to the interviewee and might lead to the guest losing their trust or interest in answering our questions. For example, if we were to ask questions about their history with domestic violence, we should ask an introductory question to inform the person that we might ask a triggering question and take their consent before asking. We should also always verbally give the interviewee the choice of not answering a certain question if they are not comfortable answering it. Also, it is very important to respect a person's privacy, whether it was the privacy of their household, their physical space, their bodies or their psychological situation.

## **TAKE POWER DYNAMICS INTO CONSIDERATION:**

A journalist must maintain objectivity. Therefore, as journalists, we have a duty to take different opinions about consideration to portray the different sides and angles of a story. However, taking contradictory opinions is not always a best practice if we don't take power dynamics into consideration. When we interview story subjects or sources, it is important to choose guests who have same social or political power. For example, if we are reporting on domestic violence, we should take power dynamics into consideration, and not interview an abused woman and an abuser as if they are equal. We should take into consideration the social and legal limitations of rights when choosing our guests.

## **GIVE EQUAL SPACE (when relevant):**

Whether we are reporting for a newspaper/online platform or on television, it is always important to focus on how much space we are giving to every guest. Journalists or television show hosts tend to give more space to guests who are more expressive about their opinions or those who might express controversial opinions that attract more readership or viewership, or guests who have the public opinion on their side. This does not always fall for the best outcome of the story. Sometimes, certain guests are more used to being interviewed, and are more comfortable talking to journalists than others. This can depend on the guest's readiness to talk to the media, or on their social status. For example, a religious authority will often be more comfortable taking to the media than a woman who survived domestic violence; hence, the religious authority will be more at ease speaking, and will unconsciously be given more space. We should always be careful to give all guests equal spaces to express themselves, and this can be translated technically with an equal count of words (for written content) or an equal time (for audio-visual content).

## **DO WHAT IS IN THE PERSON'S BEST INTEREST:**

Respect the well-being of a person, and never use their anger or their pain to compromise their safety (like revealing their real identity or showing their face in a photo when they decide to do so out of anger or desperation, even if they consent to it). Sometimes, we are responsible to take into consideration the aftermath of our source's decision, especially if they were vulnerable or uninformed about the outcomes of their decisions. First, we need to make sure that we explain to interviewees all possible outcomes for their decisions, and if they insist, offer to provide them with any help we (legal, social, physical or psychological).

## **DON'T PAY FOR INTERVIEWS:**

Sometimes the survivors we choose to be the focus of the story are in a bad financial situation. They can be refugees with no financial income or sex workers who have financial difficulties, for example. However, a journalist should not pay for an interview. Paying the survivor for a story changes the dynamics and the incentive of the interview, and negatively impacts the content.

## **AVOID FEATURING CHILDREN:**

Children's pictures or identities should not be revealed in our stories when we are reporting about children in a situation of distress. To protect children, we should avoid using their pictures, real names, residency address, social situations or any detail through which they can be identified. In certain cases, when the story is about children, we can take certain parts of children bodies on camera (like hands or feet), and this has to follow the consent of their parents or legal tutor. In other cases, when we are reporting a positive event (a school's play, a children playground, a birthday or performance), we can feature children, but parental consent is always a must to do so.

## **PROTECT YOUR DATA:**

When you produce SGBV related stories, you often interview survivors and people at risk or collect a list of names of survivors for your story. Sometimes, when the interviews are being recorded or filmed, the voice or face of the survivor can be easily identified. Even if you are changing the voice or covering the face of the survivor in the final product, the original recordings and footages need to be securely stored to avoid any risk sources can be put in if these documents were leaked. It goes the same for any list of names that you might have created for your story. Encrypt your files and use secure servers to archive them. Ask for the help of digital security experts when needed.

