

JULY  
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# TIP SHEET

## on Sensitive Reporting on GBV

*Let's Talk:  
Language, Law, and  
Gender Based  
Violence  
Part 1*

### The Power of the Media

To 'inform, educate, guide and entertain.' These are often said to be the main functions of journalism. How does this translate into reporting on gender-based violence (GBV)?

Responsible media reporting is vital in shaping people's understanding of violence against women and challenging its place in our society.

The media can foster a change in public opinion and behavior. Several reports on violence against women and girls (VAWG) have succeeded in changing attitudes and driving major legislative and social changes.

Journalists can help to broaden the public understanding of key issues on GBV/VAWG.

### Raise awareness on GBV, VAWG and related issues.

**EDUCATE ON THE IMPACTS ON SURVIVORS:** Underscore the impact that harassment, assault or rape has on the victim, both in the short and long term, in terms of physical (injuries, trauma, unwanted pregnancy, insomnia and other health problems), psychological (insecurity, low self-esteem, depression), social (difficult family relationships and friendships, dropping out of education) or economic (inability to work) issues.

**PROVIDE PRACTICAL AND USEFUL INFORMATION:** Remind people, for example, of available police and state-run services as well as services provided by NGOs for survivors of GBV. Provide the corresponding telephone numbers. Educate persons about their rights, protections and redress under the law.

#### **REMEMBER:**

#### **WHAT YOU SAY MATTERS!**

Insensitive reporting has lasting traumatic impacts on victims/survivors and their families.

With every story on VAWG, there is an opportunity to stop it from happening again.

Every article on fatal domestic abuse is an opportunity to help prevent future deaths.

### Take a survivor-centered approach to reporting.

#### Prioritise the needs, interests and dignity of survivors.

Protect survivors' identities and dignity, recognise their agency, and seek to convey their experiences, and perspectives. When writing about sexual violence, this means explaining the context and the lasting repercussions of GBV on survivors.

The wellbeing and rights of survivors of gender-based violence comes before the right of the public to know about atrocities.

When interviewing survivors of GBV, remember that they are sacrificing a lot (emotionally and sometimes, their status and safety) by sharing their stories. It is important to understand how interviewing a survivor can re-trigger trauma by causing flashbacks and other symptoms.

Be careful not to make survivors doubly victimized: once because of the violence they have suffered and again because of coverage that is discriminatory, degrading or accusatory towards the victim/survivor. Address victims'/survivors' quest for justice and redress, and give them a voice when possible and if they wish to speak out.

Gain informed consent, respect how survivors of violence want to discuss their experiences, and learn about trauma-safe interviewing techniques.

#### **SCOOP OF THE DAY**

#### **OBJECTIVITY ≠ LACK OF EMPATHY**

The Code of Practice for Jamaican Journalists and Media Organisations states that:

- ❖ Journalists have an obligation to perform their professional duties with intelligence, **OBJECTIVITY**, accuracy and fairness.
- ❖ Journalists shall show respect for grief and trauma resulting from violent crime, accident or tragedy and must act with **EMPATHY** and discretion when carrying out enquiries.

VAWG is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality in societies across the world. According to **The National Strategic Action Plan to Eliminate Gender-Based Violence in Jamaica (2016-2026)**, the root causes of GBV in Jamaica include unequal power relations between men and women sustained by cultural ideas of male superiority and dominance and women's subordination. It is reflective of a wider global problem of structural gender inequality, discrimination and misogyny. This often fuels attitudes and norms that tacitly accept male violence and blame women and girls for violent crimes perpetrated against them. These norms are sometimes reflected in the language of the media worldwide.

#### **What does this mean for 'objectivity' in terms of covering GBV/VAWG?**

In an unequal society, giving equal weight to all perspectives does not produce a balanced, neutral or 'objective' story. In fact, it risks giving prominence to voices who hold the most power (rather than the victim/survivor) and to dominant perspectives which reinforce the very norms which legitimise violence. There is more at stake than showing a difference of opinions.

Empathy can be a tool in objective reporting on GBV/VAWG. In its classical sense objectivity means not taking any one position. However, consider a story that indulges a perpetrator's viewpoint and includes suggestions that the victim should have left sooner to avoid being abused or murdered. This kind of narrative only reproduces the gender-biased cultural and social norms and attitudes already prevalent in society. So, while the reporter may consider themselves to be removed or detached from the story, the story itself is not balanced or free of biases.

#### **Strong Objectivity**

"Strong objectivity" is a concept articulated by American epistemologist, Sandra Harding. It recognises, in part, that all content produced is socially situated and not truly value-free or neutral. Making the choice to centre the experiences of the most marginalized in society, from their perspectives, can actually strengthen objectivity.

"Journalism is not stenography. We don't simply say, '... said this. ... said this.' That should not be our role. Our role should actually be at getting at the truth and providing context and analysis so people understand what this means."

*Nikole Hannah-Jones,  
Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter  
covering racial injustice for The  
New York Times Magazine*

# Violence is not something that ‘just happens’ to women.

Crimes always have both a victim/survivor and a perpetrator.

Sensitive reporting on GBV/VAWG means being careful to avoid common writing pitfalls. Consider the following:

### Avoid minimising facts

In the headline “Woman falls down the stairs to her death,” the word ‘fall’ should not be used when the woman has been verifiably pushed by their partner. Using the word ‘fall’ obscures the violence and even leaves it open to interpretation that it may have even been accidental.

The headline “Woman pushed down a flight of stairs to her death” invisibilises the fact that there is a clear perpetrator and victim. Instead make the assailant the subject of the sentence and verb: “Man pushed partner down stairs, killing her.”

### Avoid concealing who bears responsibility

Using headlines such as “Couple found dead” or “Two shot dead” to report on a murder-suicide puts the victim and murderer on an equal footing.

### Avoid language suggesting that the victim/survivor is equally at fault.

Placing blame on the relationship dynamics between the victim/survivor and abuser, rather than on the abuser, suggests that both people are at fault.

### Avoid trivialising gender-based crimes

Terms like “marital/domestic dispute” or “family drama” connote that violence in the home is a private, family problem – rather than a subject of national concern and a crime as serious as any other.

Depending on the particular situation, more accurate terms would be “homicide” (if the victim is murdered), “intimate partner violence,” “domestic violence” or “domestic abuse.”

While in Jamaican law, sexual abuse of underage persons is referred to as “having sex with a minor,” this language does not adequately convey to the public the injustice of the crime. While using the legal term is not inaccurate, reporting should also include language such as “sexual violence/abuse” which sends a clearer message that sexual contact with a child is always abuse.

### Avoid sensationalising stories of GBV.

Phrases like ‘sex scandal’ makes crimes of sexual violence sound consensual; it both minimises and sensationalises the crime. The Code of Practice for Jamaican Journalists and Media Organisations states that “The media should take care to avoid sensational reporting of violent crime.”

## **REMEMBER:**

Violence against women and girls is **NEVER** the victim’s/survivor’s fault.

### Avoid justifying the crime or making excuses for the perpetrator.

While job losses, financial pressures, poverty, alcohol, grief, and divorce may be risk factors for family violence, they are **NEVER** causes or justifications for violence against women. Citing these factors as reasons for the perpetrator’s actions, minimises the crime and the victim’s/survivor’s experience.

Abusive men and their own choices are responsible. Abusers’ choices are rooted in the prevalent ideas of women’s subordinate role and status relative to men, the associated imbalance of power between men and women (which is sustained by structures such as the family and institutions in wider society) and the resulting normalisation of violence against women.

## **TIP:**

Focus on **SOLUTIONS, PREVENTION** and **ACCOUNTABILITY** regardless of the immediate circumstances leading to the acts of violence.

### Put Stories into Context

GBV/VAWG is a prevalent issue and urgent crisis globally and nationally. It affects millions of lives, violates a wide range of human rights standards, and hinders sustainable development. It is rooted in structural gender inequality. Use statistics and other data to illuminate the wider context of GBV – its root causes, impacts, interventions and solutions.

### Ask the experts

Testimonies from relatives/friends of a victim/survivor or perpetrator are often biased. Also speak to key persons who can provide informed context. Reach out to professionals in health, psychology, law, as well as women’s rights advocacy groups, gender studies scholars, GBV service providers and researchers for their comments on the issue or story being reported.

## **REMEMBER:**

Always send a clear message against **GBV/VAWG**. Even if an article is part of a series, it should be guided by a survivor-centred approach and be able to stand alone as a sensitive piece of reporting.

## **TIPS:**

### **Alternative Terms & Phrases**

*(for more sensitive framing of gender-based violence or family violence)*

✗ Sexual relationship/sexual intercourse	✓ Sexual assault/sexual violence, or rape (where appropriate)
✗ The alleged victim (this seems to question the victim’s/survivor’s word)	✓ The reported victim
✗ Abusive relationship	✓ Abusive partner
✗ Underage lover	✓ Abused child

## **Before writing your story, consider:**

1. What is the purpose of this story?
2. What will I use my allotted word count to give prominence to?
3. Does this story illuminate a larger public policy problem or social issue, or is it merely recounting violent details?
4. Will this story help the public better understand the impact of GBV on survivors, their families and communities?
5. Does this story help survivors?

## Resources

The following resources were used in the creation of this tip sheet and are recommended for further reading:

- ❖ [Reporting on Violence against Women and Girls. A Handbook for Journalists. \(UNESCO 2019\).](#)
- ❖ [Media Guidelines on Violence Against Women. \(Zero Tolerance 2019\).](#)
- ❖ [Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide for Covering Gender-Based Violence \(Center for Women’s Global Leadership 2021\).](#)
- ❖ [Who Makes the News? The 6th Global Media Monitoring Project \(GMMP 2021\).](#)
- ❖ [Gender-based Violence, Media, Communications \(UNICEF Helpdesk. Gender-based Violence in Emergencies. 2018\).](#)