GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE REPORTING

DO's & DONT's

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Guidebook to Reporting Gender-based Violence
Culled from Gender-Based Violence Reporting Handbook

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The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), formerly the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ), is a West African media innovation and development think (and do) tank. Founded in 2014 as a non-governmental organisation in Nigeria. The Centre has been a leader in investigative journalism, civic technology, open data, verification, safety of journalists, elections and freedom of information and expression. It has a presence in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and The Gambia.

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Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence directed at a person because of their gender. This can be physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, or financial. Gender-based violence (GBV) can also take the form of manipulation, denial, limited/no access to basic amenities, unfair cultural practices or gender norms, or discrimination of any kind on the basis of gender.

While every gender is susceptible to GBV, it is an embedded part of everyday life for Nigerian women and girls especially. It is a human rights issue that affects a majority of Nigerian women and girls and is rooted in inequality.

The media have a powerful agenda-setting role in society and thus can be important actors in advocating against GBV and all other forms of gender equality in society, but to do so, it is important that the media understand the ways to report GBV properly.

Reporting gender based violence is an extremely sensitive thing to do, and if not done properly can be counterproductive and dangerous. This is because the way GBV is reported determines how it is received by society. Media reports have the potential of shaping how society perceives or treats GBV as an issue, and if less-than-adequate these can escalate or perpetuate GBV in society. They can also reinforce the acceptance of GBV as normal.

The following is a simple collection of things a journalist should consider when reporting GBV and the pitfalls to avoid. These dos and don’ts are mostly for reporting active or criminal GBV cases, which are predominantly related to physical, sexual, psychological or financial violence. However the guide would also be useful to journalists when reporting other forms of GBV as well.
Be a good reporter

To report Gender-based violence (GBV) well, it is extremely important that the reporter adheres to the basic principles of journalism. Not following the ethics of journalism undermines the seriousness of GBV. Ensure that you check all the boxes of the ethics/principles of journalism.

Truth and accuracy: Check your facts to make sure that they are accurate, and ensure that any information that cannot be corroborated isn’t in your report.

Fairness and impartiality: Make sure that your report is objective and balanced; that all sides are accurately and fairly represented.

Accountability: Journalists have to hold themselves accountable in every report that they produce. Accountability is the mark of professionalism. As the watchdogs of society, journalists should themselves be accountable first, before they can hold others accountable.

Humanity: Do not harm others, and always be mindful of the impact of your reports, especially the use of language, images and information, and their effects on innocent people. Your report should not be the reason that harm occurs to others.

Independence: As a reporter, you are an independent voice that should not be compromised for any interest – political, financial or other wise.
Get the whole picture by investigating all the sides of a story: Those involving the perpetrator(s), witnesses, victim(s), law enforcement agents, as well as activists.

Research! Research Research!

Conduct proper background research on all cases of GBV you are working on, and know all the relevant laws: The African Charter On Human and People's Rights (1986), the Maputo Protocol, National Gender Policy, Criminal Code (1990), Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015), state laws on GBV, and all other laws, acts, bills or government policy statements on GBV.

Ensure that you have a very good understanding of gender and GBV, and all the issues around them. Be informed about GBV, what constitutes it, what are its effects, and consequences. Only then would you be able to do a good report on gender-based violence.
Do not focus on the victim, instead focus on the perpetrator:

When reporting GBV, understand that a crime is being reported about, and the narrative should be constructed as such. The focus of the report should be on the perpetrator of the crime and the crime committed, not the victim. Focusing on the victim could lead to undue sensationalism and allow society to judge the victim harshly, while giving the perpetrator of the crime an easier pass. The victim is not on trial, the perpetrator is. Your choice of focus and headline should reflect this, and not be trained on the wrong person – the victim.

Utilise the five Ws and One H of reporting but instead of What happened to Who, When, Where, Why and How, report Who did What, When, How and Why. This takes the attention and potential blaming and analysis away from the victim, and directs the attention rightfully on the crime committed and the person responsible for the crime.
Always prioritise safety and the rights of victims

Survivors of GBV have been through traumas; they relive these traumas when telling their stories or when their stories are being reported. Do not re-traumatise survivors in the way you ask them questions. Be extremely sensitive when interviewing them, as well as in the way you tell their stories.

Always get their consent first before an interview.

Do not give out information about victims that may be harmful to them or their loved ones.

Protect the dignity of survivors in the way you report their stories.

Do not splash their faces on the pages of newspapers or TV screens.
Do not blame the victim

Victim blaming is very common in media reports on GBV but it is really wrong and should be avoided. When a reporter understands that nobody deserves GBV, it would be easy to avoid this in a news report. This why it is important for reporters to be deliberate in avoiding victim blaming.

Do not portray survivors of GVB negatively in news reports: The way you report a GBV incident has tremendous impact on how the audience comprehends it. Do not make survivors targets of public scorn. Do not justify GBV in any way, otherwise the public will equally justify the GBV and support the perpetrator, thereby making the society unsafe for everyone. Focus on the crime, and it is not the job of the reporter to offer excuses for perpetrators. It doesn’t matter what the victim was wearing, the location and time of the incident, the relationship between the victim and perpetrator. A crime was committed, a person’s human rights was infringed upon.
Use human interest technique for reporting Gender Based Violence

Human interest reporting is a technique that puts people at the heart of the report by giving the audience something to relate to. Rather than straight news with facts and figures, human interest reporting invokes the emotions of the audience because they are able to relate to the issues involved on a personal level. The reporting lets them understand that the story could have been about them or any of their loved ones, because it humanises the incident in a relatable manner.

Gender-based violence GBV is a crime that can happen to anyone at any given time. The high rate of occurrence of GBV means that every single person is a potential victim. Human interest reporting allows journalists to give the public compelling facts about GBV, while also creating interest and empathy in the incident.

When writing a human interest report, tell the story using all your five senses: describe scenes in vivid details using sounds, smells, tastes and feelings. Create a vivid picture, using words that the audience can not only relate to but also empathise with.
Use the ecological model to report Gender Based Violence

Media reports on GBV focus on incidents of violence without bringing out the various societal issues that accumulate and link to GBV. The ecological model considers GBV as a multifaceted issue that involves several cultural, psychological and situational factors. Typically GBV occurs as a result of social inequalities, unfair policies, the low status of women and community attitudes. To be able to utilise this model of reporting, the reporter has to really understand GBV, as well as all the factors linking to it.

GBV is a social problem that doesn’t stand in isolation, several other factors build up to GBV. This means that the reporter should be aware that GBV is connected to other social concerns like inequality, poverty, and gender norms. A good report on GBV will bring out the root causes, statistics, and advancement over time, as well as proffer solutions. Reports on GBV should be well rounded and not limited to a specific episode.
Do not use Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are so prevalent in everyday language that very often reporters aren’t even aware when perpetuating these stereotypes in their reports. Gender stereotypes are generalised views or preconceptions about attributes or characteristics based on gender, or the roles that are or should be engaged in by men or women due to their gender.

Recognising gender stereotypes and avoiding them is not easy because they are a large part of our culture and socialisation, however to make good media reports on gender or GBV, it is important to unlearn these stereotypes. Some gender stereotypes are:

Women are natural nurturers; men are natural leaders, women don’t need equal pay because they are supported by their husbands, victims of intimate partner violence must have done something to deserve the anger from the men involved, assertive women are wicked while assertive men are normal, men who cry are weak, women are too emotional to undertake certain kinds of work, men aren’t emotionally equipped for certain kinds of jobs.

Gender stereotypes often lead to the acceptance of human rights violation. For example, women being considered as nurturers can lead to discrimination against their right to earn income or to financial abuse. Married women being regarded as the properties of men can result in the non-recognition of marital rape as a crime.

Do not use gender stereotypes when reporting on gender-based violence, as it occurs due to gender inequality. Perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes not only encourages GBV but also reduces the gravity of its associated incidents, while diverting the attention of the society from the serious crime(s) committed.
Do not leave the story uncompleted

You have done a report on gender-based violence that is great and a step in the right direction, however it is very important that you follow up on the report constantly to ensure that justice is ultimately achieved. Understand that the attention span of the public is very short and if you don’t keep them updated, they will lose interest in the report. Perpetrators of GBV benefit a lot from the lack of follow up in cases of gender-based violence.

Keep the public informed on all steps of the case. Follow the case at the level of law enforcement agencies, cover the activists working on the case – if any, and report on court proceedings.

Many cases of GBV are left unsolved because the public and law enforcement agents got bored or forgot about these cases. As the fourth estate of the realm, and the watchdog of society, the media has a duty keep working on updates on GBV until the case is finalised.
Take care of your mental health

Secondary trauma is very common among activists and reporters who cover GBV cases. This form of trauma can be acquired when an individual is exposed to people who have been traumatised themselves, and disturbing descriptions of traumatic events by a survivor, as well as through the frustrations of covering GBV cases, which can have mental health implications for journalists involved.

The symptoms of secondary trauma are not easy to spot but may include mood swings, irritability, lashing out, sadness, burnout, and lifestyle diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure or stroke occurring at a young age. It is important for journalists who cover GBV to be very conscious of their mental health and seek professional help when necessary.