



POCKET GUIDE FOR MEDIA PRACTITIONERS: ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND REPORTING ON SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

*A Practical Tool for Media
Practitioners in Iraq and the
Kurdistan Region*



*This product was developed by SEED Foundation in consultation with the Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence (JiG), to reflect the core principles highlighted in *Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide for Covering Gender-based Violence*, published by the Center for Women's Global Leadership, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey in 2021.*

PURPOSE

This is a tool designed to support media practitioners, including journalists, photographers, and editors, working in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), who report on women and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). It contains key guidance on how to ethically engage with women and those most vulnerable to, or at-risk of, GBV.

While reporting on issues of GBV and “honor” related killings is essential, ethical and safe reporting is needed to ensure the safety and security of survivors, and to stop the proliferation of negative and harmful rhetoric and stereotypes that normalize impunity for perpetrators.

This guide contains best practices on ethical journalism which can be applied in all areas of a media practitioners's work. However, it is particularly pertinent when reporting on GBV, for which a specific duty of care to ensure the safety of survivors applies. Dignifying coverage of their stories is critical, and avoiding their re-traumatization is paramount. This pocket guide aims to equip media practitioners with the skills to ethically, responsibly, and safely interview, research, engage with, and report on women and survivors of GBV, and to refer individuals that are experiencing or are at risk of GBV to appropriate service providers.

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OBTAINING THE INFORMED
CONSENT OF SURVIVORS OF
GBV AND THOSE AT-RISK

These rules apply to survivors of GBV, traumatized individuals and those whose safety and security may be at risk.

NB. It is important to note that public figures who are accustomed to media interactions are expected to be knowledgeable about the implications and risks of media engagement. Therefore, it may not be necessary to obtain consent, except in cases when reporting on violence or abuse perpetrated against them.

Informed consent means that any individuals sharing their story or image with a media practitioner understands:

- Why their stories/pictures are being documented (e.g. the purpose or framing of the story, what the story is about)
- When the story/picture will be published
- How the story/picture might be used
- Who the intended audience is (e.g. local, national, international) and in which language/s
- How it will be accessed (e.g. online, printed, social media...)
- What information will be included

Survivors can dictate their required level of anonymity and refuse to give any identifying information.

If there are any risks associated with sharing someone's story or image, these **risks should be thoroughly explained**. Only with this comprehensive explanation can a survivor agree or disagree to share their stories or images with a media practitioner.

Informed consent can only be given by survivors directly, and they can take it back or change their mind. A family member or member of the community should not speak on their behalf.

Informed consent is continuous:

- Survivors can refuse to answer any question.
- Survivors can stop the interview/video/photo session at any time, without providing an explanation.
- If survivors change their minds., the content should not be published. The media practitioner should explain to the survivor that consent can be revoked up until the
- Media practitioners should ensure that they maintain an open line of communication with featured survivors, in the event that a survivor decides to retract consent after publication of the story or image.
- Media practitioners should explain that, while they can remove original content syndicated, copied, or shared cannot always be removed, and is out of their control.

These precautions apply for survivors of GBV and those at-risk, whose safety and security might be jeopardized should their identifiable information be revealed.

For **minors**, media practitioners should obtain their **assent** (agreement), **AND** the informed consent of their **parents or guardians**. No interview of children can be taken without these two requirements. **It is not recommended to interview child survivors of violence at all**. If interviewing children, **NEVER photograph, video record, or give their real names** as this could have lasting repercussions. Likewise, informed consent cannot be given by those unable to understand the repercussions of sharing their stories, and interviews with such individuals should not take place.

Interviews, images, and videos of parents or guardians of vulnerable children should similarly not include information which may allow them or their children to be located or otherwise identified.



- Have a written consent form/s, in the appropriate language, printed and ready for interviewees to sign, and provide them with a copy. If an interviewee has low or no literacy, be prepared to explain the form and collect a fingerprint, or audio/video recorded consent in place of their signature.
- Provide interviewees with contact information so that they can reach out in the event that they have questions or change their mind and wish to retract their consent. Providing contact details will allow survivors to follow up in this way.
- Take the contact information of interviewees to share the sections of the story that feature survivors before publishing it or once published. This does NOT apply to those who are not survivors or at risk of violence.
- Media practitioners should not abuse this contact information or harass survivors.

EXAMPLE: INTERVIEW, PHOTO, AND VIDEO CONSENT FORM

To be signed by a parent or guardian if the participant is under 18 years old.

To be read aloud to the potential interviewee in her/his primary language.

The agency/organization will not interview you, or take any photos or videos of you, without your consent.

- Your consent is strictly voluntary. You can decide not to participate, skip questions, or stop the interview at any time.
- If you later decide to remove your consent, the agency/organization will stop using the content and delete it from its platforms. However, the agency/organization has no control over the reach of content that has already been posted or distributed by third parties.
- Declining consent will not impact your access to any NGO services.
- You will not receive any compensation or additional aid for agreeing to participate.
- Your real name will not be used.

1. Do you consent to participate in a verbal interview? Yes No

2. Do you consent to be audio-recorded? Yes No

3. Do you consent to be video-recorded? Yes No.

If yes, do you consent to be (select one): Identifiable Not identifiable

4. Do you consent to be photographed? Yes No.

If yes, do you consent to be (select one): Identifiable Not identifiable

5. Would you like a service provider to be present during the interview? Yes No

6. Do you want the interview/photo/video to be taken by a woman? Yes No

7. Do you consent that the materials will be used for :

- Social media and website
- Public reports and materials
- Sharing with the media

Interviewee's Name		The Agency / Organization	
Parent/Guardian's Name (for minors)		Staff Name and Title	
Signature/Fingerprint		Signature	
Date		Date	

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ENSURING THE SAFETY OF
SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE OR
THOSE AT-RISK

IN ASSESSING SAFETY RISKS, MEDIA PRACTITIONERS SHOULD CONSIDER:

Will the individual face any safety risks should their identity or location be revealed, including:

- Any form of violence, including by the authorities, their family/community/tribe (e.g. *political refugees, women at risk of femicide, survivors of human trafficking*)
- Stigma or discrimination if anyone learns about their story (e.g. *survivors of sexual violence, survivors of ISIS*)

If yes, **no personal information nor identifiable information of a survivor's story** (e.g. location, forms of violence, perpetrator), **nor any image containing identifiable information** should be shared (e.g. name of father, town, business, religion, profession, identifiable marks, or tattoos).

Does the survivor have any particular vulnerabilities which might be aggravated by the interview:

- Mental health and risk of retraumatization
- Risk of self-harm or harm to others

If yes, **do not interview the survivor.**

- Have you confirmed that the interviewee feels comfortable sharing their story?
- Do you have the name and contact information of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in the area in which they live, and who are equipped to provide them with information and support if needed?

If any sort of discomfort is observed in the interviewee's language or body language, or it appears that the interviewee does not want to talk even though they have given their consent, or the interviewee is in immediate need of professional support, **you should stop the interview.**

In Iraq and the KRI, women who speak to the media may become at risk of violence, including:

- Cyber-violence
- Harassment
- “Honor”-related violence
- Stigmatization and social isolation

Moreover, survivors of violence, including domestic violence, can increase the risk of further violence, retaliation by the perpetrator, or murder if any identifying information is shared by the media.

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“Protecting the identity of victims, survivors, and their families is crucial in cases where exposure could put them at risk of retaliation, stigma, and intense media scrutiny. Exposing identities shouldn’t be done without meaningful consent. Protecting the safety and privacy of victims should outweigh the need to enhance a story by making its sources public... Disclosing excessive details about sexual violence does not contribute to achieving justice for the victims; instead, it may compromise their dignity and recovery. These outlets are not helping the victims and survivors; instead they are conveying sensational graphic details for profit.”

Sherizaan Minwalla, Human Rights Lawyer, for Women’s Media Center in 2024.

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CONDUCTING ETHICAL
INTERVIEWS WITH SURVIVORS
OF GBV

Key Principles:

- **No judgment:** never express or show any form of judgment about the interviewee's story, actions, or reactions.
- **Respect for privacy and agency:** if the interviewee feels uncomfortable sharing part of their story or does not want to share specific details, do not push them.
- **Do no harm:** conduct the interview in a way which avoids retraumatizing the interviewee or causing further harm. Asking survivors to discuss unnecessary details is unwarranted, as it puts survivors at risk of retraumatization.¹
- **Care and sensitivity:** if the interviewee starts to show signs of discomfort, distress, or overwhelm, take a break or stop the interview completely.
- **Empathy, patience, and compassion:** always show patience, empathy, compassion, and understanding for the interviewee's individual experience and story.
- **Culturally responsive:** understand and take into account potential cultural differences and contexts, and conduct an interview that is adapted accordingly.

Interviews should be conducted:

- In the **language of the interviewee** or with an interpreter who is trained in conducting ethical interviews.
- By someone of the **same gender** as the interviewee.
- In a **private room** which respects the interviewee's right to confidentiality.

When speaking to adult survivors of violence, children of all ages should never be present in the room to avoid traumatization

Make sure the survivor is not being coerced into agreeing to the interview. Make sure no one is being paid to agree to being interviewed.

Before the interview:

- Evaluate safety and security risks.
- Accommodate interviewees' preferences and needs to determine the time, location, and who else will be present.
- Seek advice from NGOs, service providers, or community leaders on how to best approach survivors based on their safety risk assessment.
- Learn about how trauma impacts people and what could be deemed a triggering setting, question, or language.
- Tell survivors what sort of questions will be asked, and ask them if there are any areas of their stories they prefer not to speak about. Respect their decisions on this.

¹ Sherizaan Minwalla, Johanna E. Foster & Sarah McGrail (2022) Genocide, rape, and careless disregard: media ethics and the problematic reporting on Yazidi survivors of ISIS captivity, *Feminist Media Studies*, available [here](#).

During the interview:

- Have an open and honest conversation about consent. Make sure no one, including the interviewer, is pressuring the interviewee to take part.
- Remind interviewees that their safety and well-being is the top priority.
- Remind them that they can revoke their consent at any point before publication.
- Let interviewees know what angle/type of story is being produced, where it will be published, who will be able to access it, and if it will include videos, photos, or audio.
- Start the interview with non-invasive, open questions.
- Ask interviewees how they would like to be introduced to readers/viewers.
- Do not rush the interview. Allow time for breaks, silences, and “detours.”
- When interviewing survivors of violence and those at-risk, have a trauma-trained specialist in the room during the interview if possible, or a person trusted by them (at their request).
- Give survivors and those at-risk opportunities to guide the interview by asking questions such as “What would you like people to know about your experience?” or “Is there anything you would like to add?”
- Avoid questions implying that:
 - The survivor may share the blame for the harm done
 - The veracity of their statements or the reliability of their memory is in question
- Avoid interruptions, negative assumptions, or judgmental comments. An interview is not an interrogation!
- Respect boundaries and confidentiality.
- When asking questions, go beyond trauma and trauma-related questions, and ask questions oriented towards finding solutions. Consider asking questions like² :
 - What was life like before the conflict/violence
 - What are their current needs
 - What are their hopes
 - What should be done to ...

After the interview:

- If needed, inform survivors of violence and those at-risk of local resources, such as help lines, direct service agencies, or humanitarian organizations that may be able to support them.
- When possible, give interviewees the opportunity to see the results of their interview.
- If an interviewee revokes consent, do not publish. Remember, it may harm them to do so. Retributive attacks from perpetrators are common after a survivor has spoken out. Be aware of this.

² Sherizaan Minwalla, Johanna E. Foster & Sarah McGrail (2022) Genocide, rape, and careless disregard: media ethics and the problematic reporting on Yazidi survivors of ISIS captivity, *Feminist Media Studies*, available [here](#).



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“When journalists go to conflict zones to report on sexual violence, under international media protocols they have an obligation to conduct ethical interviews. This includes taking into consideration the level of trauma the victim has suffered and what impact the interview will have. Applying ethical guidelines would go a long way towards preventing re-victimization and re-traumatization.”

Sherizaan Minwalla for [the Daily Beast](#) in 2015.

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ETHICAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND
VIDEOGRAPHY

From selecting sources to conducting interviews, to choosing photos and graphics, to laying out the news and writing headlines, it is important to center the interviewee's experience and respect their wishes, fears, and dreams at each stage of the process.

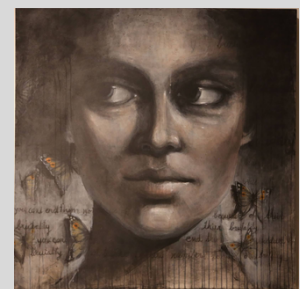
The safety of every individual should remain at the forefront, particularly when interviewing or photographing survivors of violence and those at-risk. Those selecting photos and graphics should be aware of applicable laws in the region or country where they are publishing and make choices that will respect each individual's right to safety and privacy.

Every survivor of violence will have different fears, and media practitioners have an ethical obligation to honor the trust of survivors, find creative solutions to assuage their fears, and protect them, if possible, from further trauma.

To respect anonymity in photography means to avoid including any identifying information, such as scars, tattoos, clothing, and location, which could put someone at risk of stigma or violence if recognized. It also means ensuring that photo captions do not reveal identifiable information. Consider using alternatives to pictures, such as graphics or paintings.



- Show interviewees their pictures or videos to ensure everyone featured is comfortable with them.
- Do not publish graphic images of bruises, body parts, corpses, or other dehumanizing images of women and girls, or male survivors of violence. These images are sensationalist and aim to entertain and shock, not inform.
- Try to take pictures that do not show faces or identifying features but are still humanizing.
- Any use of images should present the subject in a way that upholds their dignity.
- Do not take pictures of children in vulnerable or deplorable conditions.
- Use images to illustrate a general situation, and not the actual incident.
- A story of GBV should not be illustrated by an unrelated image or unrelated people.
- If no appropriate photo can be found, consider using alternative visual media, including paintings or digital art, as long as it too does not reveal identifiable information.



ARTIST: AVA NADIR

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SURVIVOR-CENTERED STORYTELLING

Before writing a story on GBV, media practitioners should ask themselves:

- Does this article help raise awareness and build knowledge about the situation of survivors of violence and those at-risk?
- Does this story amplify survivors' voices or demands?
- Does the article provide resources and information on how survivors and their families can get support?
- Does this story propose solutions to the issues faced by survivors of GBV?
- Does this story address the root causes of GBV and give context about the need for justice?
- Does it encourage and compel stakeholders and the public to take action?
- Does it help start conversations about social and cultural norms, behaviors, and ideas that impact society?

Select placement, terminology, and headlines:

Headlines, teasers, and subheadings should center survivors, avoid victim-blaming, avoid glamorizing the perpetrator or exonerating them, and avoid sensationalism.

Writing or editing the story:

- Make sure to protect survivors' anonymity and do not share identifying information (respect their choices and agency).
- Portray survivors in a humanizing way. Survivors should be at the center of the story. Stories should not focus solely on violence and trauma.
- Underline solutions, positive news, and positive changes.
- Avoid sensationalism and define a clear purpose for all stories. Stories on cases of GBV should always have a broader purpose than simply recounting the details of violence.
- Ensure the story underlines the root causes of violence. Explain the context (e.g. hatred of women, misogyny, patriarchy, weak justice systems, social inequality), and the lasting repercussions of violence (e.g. worse health, trauma, injustice, inequality, lower life expectancy, lower achievement).
- Choose words carefully. Media practitioners should:
 - Avoid words used by perpetrators, as well as dehumanizing or degrading words.
 - Ensure words do not put the blame on the survivor.
 - Never use racist, stigmatizing, stereotypical, or derogatory language.
 - Avoid using sensationalist terms when talking about the survivor or the crime.

- Check with experts. Some subjects are particularly technical or sensitive. Do not hesitate to ask for feedback or input from experts.
- Consider follow up stories, such as survivors seeking justice, a perpetrator’s trial, patterns of violence, efforts to address them, and new laws or policies. If there are no new laws or trials, or information is scant, write an article questioning why this is the case, and follow-up with authorities about their lack of follow through.
- In cases where survivors are still at-risk, monitor the possible impact of stories and if any risk arises for featured survivors, have the story removed from publication/circulation.



DO SAY	DO NOT SAY
SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL SLAVERY	SEX SLAVES
EX-HUSBAND BREAKS INTO A WOMAN’S HOME TO KILL HER	WOMAN DIES AT HANDS OF HEARTBROKEN LOVER
MAN WITH A HISTORY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MURDERS HIS WIFE	WOMEN ACCUSED OF SHAMEFUL BEHAVIOR, GETS INTO FATAL DISPUTE WITH HER HUSBAND
A 14 YEAR OLD CHILD/GIRL WAS RAPED BY HER UNCLE	TEEN/YOUNG WOMAN FORCED TO HAVE SEX BY HER UNCLE

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REFERRING SURVIVORS AND
THOSE AT-RISK

Media practitioners should always be equipped to provide survivors with the contact information of emergency services.

FEDERAL IRAQ:

- Police (24/7): **104**



KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ:

- DCVAW GBV hotline (24/7): **119**
- Police number (24/7): **104**

Before interviewing a survivor of GBV or someone at-risk, look for the name and contact information of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating in the area in which they live, who are equipped to provide them with information and support if needed.

In case you witness a minor become a victim of violence, inform the authorities immediately, particularly in cases of sexual violence. If you witness adults become victims of violence, do not inform the authorities without consent, except if there is a risk of death.

To refer an individual experiencing GBV to SEED Foundation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq:



0751 741 6391 / 0776 0944 576



referrals@seedkurdistan.org



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOURNALISTS DOCUMENTING GBV

from Human Rights Lawyer, Sherizaan Minwalla and
Professor, Johanna E. Foster

- 01** Prioritize the **wellbeing, needs, and interests of survivors** in all interactions and reporting.
- 02** Follow **trauma-informed guidelines when interviewing** survivors and publishing their stories.
- 03** Treat survivors **with dignity and respect** throughout the process.
- 04** Ensure **consent is fully informed**; if it is not informed, it cannot be considered true consent.
- 05** Discuss the **risks of exposing survivors' identities** before proceeding with interviews or publications.
- 06** **Avoid interviewing child survivors of sexual violence** to protect their well-being and avoid re-traumatization.
- 07** Do not probe into details of GBV unnecessarily; **respect the survivor's comfort and boundaries**.
- 08** **Report on survivors holistically**, recognizing that they are more than their trauma.
- 09** Consult with local experts on gender-based violence to **ensure culturally sensitive and appropriate approaches**.

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