

Work with Media to Get the Story Right on Gender-Based Violence

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Media play a powerful role in sharing information that can perpetuate or challenge harmful narratives around gender-based violence (GBV). These narratives can impact societal and public responses to GBV, perception and treatment of survivors, and advocacy efforts.

GBV advocates – including organization leaders, frontline anti-violence workers, activists, and survivors – play a critical role in supporting journalists in getting the story right. Their expertise on and/or lived experience with the realities of GBV helps reporters tell more accurate and nuanced stories. As well, GBV advocates are uniquely positioned to share information from an anti-oppressive, survivor-centred, and intersectional lens.

This Backgrounder offers tips and strategies for GBV advocates to use when navigating media interviews and requests for information. Meaningful engagement between GBV advocates and media professionals improves GBV media coverage and helps everyone better understand the issues and solutions.

Work with journalists to get the story right and encourage policy and social change!



This resource is a collaboration between the Learning Network and Informed Opinions.

Informed Opinions is a charitable social enterprise that works to amplify the voices of women and gender-diverse people in news media for a more democratic Canada. They:

- Train and motivate experts across sectors and fields to make their ideas more accessible to a broader audience.
- Make qualified diverse sources easier for journalists to find through an online expert database.
- Should you be profiled? Learn more, sign up here!
- Conduct research to document the progress being made in Canada regarding representative news media reporting.

**INFORMED
OPINIONS**

Understand the Journalists' Context

When engaging with journalists, it is helpful to understand their contexts and goals.

Journalists succeed when their editor or news director deems their story front-page or top-of-the-hour material; when their reporting gets lots of views, generates public engagement, or goes viral; and when their reporting is deemed award-worthy.

Journalists are looking to write or record a story that will engage readers, listeners, and viewers. The elements likely to elicit engagement often include:

- **Human interest:** people facing challenging circumstances.
- **Conflict and/or controversy:** an event or experience that's emotionally-arresting.
- **The genuinely "new":** unknown information, new research, an unexpected angle.
- **Solutions:** clear recommendations about what needs to be done and by whom.

Like GBV advocates, journalists often want to shine a light on injustices and make people's lives better.



Engage Journalists When They Reach Out

1. Reply as soon as possible, even if it's to say you're not available right now but could be in 2 hours.

- Not replying means you lose the opportunity to share your knowledge and expertise.
- Sometimes due to the nature of anti-violence work, you may be over capacity and/or not able to speak on a retraumatizing issue.

Let journalists know if this opportunity does not work for you. If you can, offer alternative names and contact information for individuals who could take your place.

- If the subject is truly beyond your expertise, amplify diverse voices on the issue.



2. Do your research on the journalist and publication or program.

- Search some of their recent articles or shows on similar topics, their social media, etc. to see if their work on the issue aligns with your values and ethics.

3. Appeal to their desire to help and get the story right. Say things like:

- *"I know you want to get this right..."*
- *"I know you can appreciate the sensitivities and nuances involved..."*
- *"Just as it's important to you, it's also important to me to avoid re-traumatizing the people affected..."*
- *"Repeating the details of a violent act of gender-based violence alone is not in the public interest; how can we work together to report on this issue as a whole?"*

4. Encourage them to read key resources on GBV and trauma-informed reporting such as the:

- [From Tools of the Trade](#) chapter in [Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence](#)
- [Use the Rights Words: Media Reporting on Sexual Violence in Canada Guide](#)
- [Responsible Media Reporting of Gender-Based Violence and Gendered Issues Guide for Journalists](#)
- [Responsible Reporting: Resources for Journalists About Sex Work and Trafficking](#)

5. Ask journalists to:

- Accommodate your needs, such as language interpretation, safe and accessible space, extra time, and lighting arrangements.
- Send their questions in advance so you have time to prepare (they're trained not to do this, but given the sensitivities involved, if you ask, and offer context, some will).
- Honour your cultural protocols.



Consider the Medium

The nature of the medium being used – written, audio, audio-visual – raises other issues worth considering in advance of the interview. Below we offer some considerations based on the medium that you may find helpful. We do so in recognition that there are diverse, valid ways of communicating in line with personal identities and communities.

Written interviews including print and online:

- Pay attention to how the interviewer paraphrases you. Correct them if necessary.
- Take time to clarify or elaborate on points that are complex or that you think you may not have been clear about. Offer to follow-up with additional information if you think it is useful.



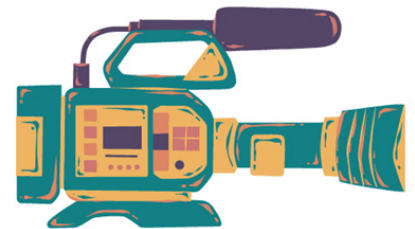
Audio interviews including radio and podcast:

- Try to relax and be yourself! Aim for a conversational style and smile at the interviewer when they introduce you. Warmth and personality translate through your voice.
- Notes are an option but confine them to short phrases and stats on a single page, so you are not hunting for details, rustling paper, or trying to read full sentences. Mind maps can also help.



Audio-visual interviews including TV and recorded video:

- TV gives you three means of communicating: what you say (content), how you say it (tone), and what people see (your facial expressions, body language, clothing, and jewelry), so:
 - Sit upright, project energy, and maintain open body language.
 - Use simple hand gestures if they come naturally to you.
 - Dress in a way that makes you feel confident and authoritative.



If online (e.g., Zoom):

- Declutter or blur your background to avoid visual distractions.
- Ensure your face is well-lit.
- Center yourself in the frame so there is only a little bit of space above your head.
- Look at your webcam or computer camera to give viewers the feeling that you are speaking to them.
- Avoid reading your notes when possible as you may appear disengaged and less credible.

If in-studio:

- Maintain eye contact with the interviewer.
- Wear clothes that you would feel comfortable in when being filmed from a variety of angles and sitting positions.
- Avoid wearing solid white or black tops as they tend to wash out your face under bright lights.
- If the TV station provides make-up to compensate for the bright lights, take advantage of it but keep it natural to you and what you wear.

Use Accessible Language to Share Important Messages

1. Employ concrete language and everyday words.

- These help people picture the impact or solutions and are more effective than specialized, conceptual language or acronyms that won't be easily understood by a broad audience.
- If a reporter must work to figure out what you mean because your vocabulary is unfamiliar, they may get it wrong or remove it altogether. If journalists can easily picture the impact or solutions you're proposing, you're more likely to be quoted verbatim.



2. Speak to a general audience beyond your field.

- At times we are surrounded by those who agree with us, so we are “preaching to the choir.” In comparison, news media offer the opportunity to engage with people who aren't familiar with these issues and need to hear your message. Connect with people outside of GBV work to better understand their viewpoints and beliefs. Doing so helps you gear your messages to their understandings and concerns.

3. Share specifics as opposed to generalities.

- Being specific is powerful. Statements such as “wait times are longer than ever” don't resonate with individuals who don't know how long wait times used to be or how they impact those affected. Instead, you could say: *“Many survivors are now waiting X weeks to access help; this puts them and their children at risk for further violence and the impacts of that violence.”*

4. Avoid starting sentences with a subordinate clause.

- Beginning a sentence “While”, “Since”, and “Although” makes it longer and harder to follow, especially if people are hearing, rather than reading information.
- For instance, replace *“While demand for sexual violence services skyrocketed since #MeToo and COVID, funding to organizations supporting survivors has not kept pace, making wait times longer than ever”* with *“Demand for services has tripled since #MeToo and COVID -- and so have wait times.”*



5. Set up the problem in vivid terms people can picture.

- Describe what kind of change is needed, why the current approach isn't working, and how devastating this situation is.
- For instance, avoid statements such as *"This systemic issue requires stable research funding and a legislative response"* and replace with *"Let me give you a concrete example..."*
- If you think it is important to share an unfamiliar term, define it and/or give a concrete example.
 - *"It sounds to me like this was a femicide. A femicide is when..."*

6. Use organizational strategies to frame your response to increase audience attentiveness and retention. For instance, offer:

- **Numbered points:** *"There are 3 things people need to understand: 1. This is not a women's issue so changing women's behaviour can't solve it; 2..."*
- **Perception vs reality:** *"We need to challenge the myths about gender-based violence reinforced in popular culture with facts. The truth is that..."*
- **Problem and solution:** *"Focus on his choice to abuse, not that she stayed..."*
- **Policy and impact:** *"If we did x instead of y, we could better empower women..."*

7. Don't let perfection be the enemy of good! You're adding value. Give yourself grace even if the message didn't come out exactly as you wanted.



Assert Your Needs and Expertise

1. Ask producers or reporters for more information.

- *“What’s your focus? Who is your audience?”*
- *“What context are you hoping I’ll provide?”*
- *“Will it be live or taped?”*
- *“How long is the story/segment?”*
- *“Will there be other guests? Are you capturing diverse voices?”*
- *“What do you hope are positive impacts or outcomes of this story?”*
- *“Are you recognizing the role of anti-Black racism in what happened?”*

2. Have an agenda with key points.

- Decide in advance what you want the take-away to be (these must be relevant to the particular news story), and then frontload your responses with these key points.

3. Limit the amount of time you are available.

- The more time you spend during the interview and the more choice the journalist has about which quotes to use, the less likely they are to include the messages you think are key.

4. Let them know you are recording the conversation to become better at media engagement.

- This tells reporters that you have a record of what you said and subtly reinforces the need for them to quote you responsibly.
- Listening to the recording after will also help you to become clearer and more concise.

5. Reinforce your deep knowledge and appeal to their sense of responsibility to encourage them to reflect your insights.

- *“In the x years I’ve been doing this work, I’ve often seen news reports that reinforce rape myths rather than advance public understanding. I know you don’t want to do that.”*

6. Offer to review images and/or share images that respect confidentiality and dignity if you have them and can share them.



7. Respectfully challenge the framing or language if it's not appropriate.

- If the journalist is using language that you consider offensive or inaccurate, take a moment to share your learning about language:
 - *"It's important that we recognize the agency of people with disabilities and avoid terms like wheelchair-bound. In this case, say 'the woman who uses a wheelchair...'"*
 - *"The victim's name was Aaliyah and she was an artist..."*
- If a question is unhelpful or irresponsible, offer alternatives:
 - *"The question seems to imply a particular response but that would be misleading. A more helpful way to frame this issue is..."*
 - *"It sounds like your story is veering in a direction that's going to somehow blame the survivor, and I don't think you want to do that..."*

8. Bridge away from irrelevant questions or statements you don't support.

- *"Our experience offers a more useful frame..."*
- *"The research actually shows..."*
- *"What's most important for people to understand is..."*
- *"The more relevant question to ask is..."*

9. Establish safety needs post-media engagement and engage in self-care if you experience online abuse.

- Set social media accounts to private.
- Only allow people you follow to comment.
- Turn off comments altogether.
- Mute or block accounts.
- Use pseudonyms when necessary and desired.

10. Go back to the journalist if their published or broadcast reporting is inaccurate and should be revised.

- Start by emphasizing that you know they want their story to be accurate.
- Respectfully explain what the problem is and offer alternative wording.
- Understand that a written story can be easily updated, but they may not be inclined to edit an audio or audio-visual story and may just take it off the air instead.



Strategies to Become Better at Speaking in Soundbites

Most journalists are operating under time and space constraints. Depending on the nature of the medium or the style of the publication or program, they may be expected to deliver a story that's under 90 seconds or fewer than 600 words.

In advance of your interview, consider how you can deliver the greatest impact in the shortest length. Aim for a one-line sentence that will help readers or listeners immediately grasp your idea and continue to quote or paraphrase your perspective.

Utilize creative and responsible descriptions that engage, such as:

1. Analogies

“Feminism is like water. It’s everywhere but it takes the shape of the container into which it is poured.”
– **Kamla Bhasin**

2. Rhetorical questions

“If I have to feel thankful about an accessible bathroom, when am I ever gonna be equal in the community?”
– **Judith Huemann**

3. Dramatic contrast

“I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.”
– **Mary Shelley**

4. A challenge to expectations

“It is safer to be racist, homophobic, transphobic, or sexist online than it is to be Black, Indigenous, trans, gay or a woman online.”
– **Marni Panas**

5. Humour

“I’m a feminist. I’ve been a female for a long time now. It’d be stupid not to be on my own side.”
– **Maya Angelou**

6. Calls to action

“Individuals have a role in these things as well. They can either support the status quo or resist it.”
– **Knowledge Keeper Leslie Spillett**

Additional Resources to Further Strengthen Your Media Engagement

- **Informed Opinions Learning Hub**
This Hub is packed with resources to help you write better op eds, perform more effectively in media interviews, and become a more compelling and persuasive speaker.
- **Partnering with Media for Change: Disrupting Harmful Narratives on Gender Based Violence**
– Learning Network and Knowledge Hub Webinar
 - In this Webinar recording, panelists explore how GBV is commonly represented in Canadian media, including myths around GBV and femicide, and how the GBV sector can collaborate with media to improve GBV media coverage.



Citation

Graydon, S., Lalonde, D., & Tabibi, J. (2023). Work With Media to Get the Story Right on Gender-Based Violence. *Learning Network Backgrounder*. London, Ontario: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children.

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