

COVERINGCRSV.ORG

REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

Available in
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and Arabic**



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ABOUT

Few journalistic challenges carry a greater weight of responsibility than interviewing survivors of sexual violence that occur in conflict. When rape is used in war, it has a devastating impact on individuals and their communities.

Responsible journalism can bring attention and insight to crimes that people have difficulty finding adequate words for. Careless reporting, however, can make things worse by adding to distress and exposing survivors to further danger. These guidelines are written by journalists and filmmakers who regularly work on CRSV related issues. They emerge from a recognition that as a collective enterprise journalism needs to do more to define and share best practice. The goal is to achieve more accurate and insightful reporting, while reducing the risk of further harm to those brave enough to tell their stories.

WHY THIS?

These guidelines have emerged out of a series of conversations between experienced journalists and filmmakers who have worked regularly on stories that deal with sexual violence and torture in countries afflicted by conflict.

Everyone doing this work has the best of intentions. But at some stage all of us have asked ourselves whether our engagement risks doing further harm to the people whose stories we are trying to tell.

Members of the media are often the first to interview survivors of sexual violence in conflict situations, but rarely get any training or support.

Hence there's a need for this resource. The guidelines boil the issues down to eight key skill areas – which we believe that any journalist or filmmaker working on CRSV needs to understand. These eight propositions are designed to be read both in depth and in a format that allows quick revision and sharing with colleagues. They are intended to be practical and responsive to realities on the ground.

While these were written by media workers for media workers, they come out of a broader series of conversations. In creating these materials, we consulted survivors of CRSV (some of whom are activists and all of whom are experts), trauma clinicians, social workers and lawyers, as well as photographers, filmmakers, journalists and editors.

This is a complex area. These guidelines don't cover every situation a media worker will face – and inevitably not everyone will agree with all our recommendations.

Nevertheless, we have tried hard to balance two truths. The first is that unless these acts of violence are documented, there is no chance they will stop. And the second is that when it comes to sexual violence every survivor owns their own story – it does not belong to us.



WHAT NEXT?

We created these guidelines to spark conversation and generate awareness: they are made to share. Please distribute to anyone who may benefit from them.

We invite your feedback and look forward to future dialogue.

If you are interested in finding out more about the work of the Dart Centre, please sign up for our mailing list [here](#).

CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This resource was produced by [Dart Centre Europe](#), a network and resource for journalists and filmmakers who cover trauma and violence, and so the first credit has to go to everyone who has contributed to the Centre's discussions over the years. The core organising and writing team was made up of [Gavin Rees](#), [Samira Shackle](#), [Stephen Jukes](#), [Juliana Ruhfus](#), [Leslie Thomas](#) and [Christina Lamb](#).

Thanks too to everyone who took part in our direct consultations.



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Dart Centre Europe

Charity registration number in England & Wales: 1172731

Please do get in touch. We welcome feedback. covering.crsv@dartcentre.org

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#1.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

AM I
SUFFICIENTLY
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#1.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

AM I SUFFICIENTLY PREPARED FOR THIS?

Talking to the media about sexual violence in a conflict zone is high risk for any survivor. These guidelines will give you a better idea of what is at stake.

Reporting on CRSV ranks among the most challenging work a journalist is ever likely to take on – and it requires careful thought. Before setting out, make sure you research the following dimensions:

- **What CRSV is and how rape and other forms of sexual violence impact individuals and their communities.**
- **How to interview survivors in a trauma-informed, sensitive way.**
- **The power politics and broader security picture in the local area, gender dynamics and cultural attitudes about sexual violence.**
- **The visual choices you might need to make. Will you photograph or film people? How and where will you do it? Will they be anonymised?**
- **Your own level of psychological preparedness and why that matters.**

We have called this guide *Reporting on Sexual Violence in Conflict* but throughout this text we use the standard acronym CRSV, which stands for conflict-related sexual violence.

CRSV refers to acts of sexual violence: for example, rape, forced prostitution, forced marriage enforced sterilisation, and other similar crimes which can be linked to conflict. These crimes are usually committed in the pursuit of premeditated military or political goals and thus fall under the legal categories of genocide and war crimes, but incidents can also be more opportunistic. CRSV is far more widespread than the phrase 'rape in war' alone would suggest. The term also applies to unstable situations in which insurgents, paramilitaries or state forces use sexual abuse as a tool for subjugating local populations and incentivising combatants. It happens to men as well as to women and children.

These crimes have a devastating impact for survivors and their communities, not least because CRSV can sever social connections, leaving people shunned and isolated from family, friends and neighbours who would have otherwise provided support and aided recovery. It also has intergenerational consequences for the children born after rape and can lead to persistent stigma and further violence.

Our role as journalists and filmmakers

Members of the media are often the first to interview survivors and often do so at great personal risk, bringing attention to issues that demand wider public action. No journalist doing this work wants to cause harm to their sources, but the potential is nevertheless always clearly there. Even with the best intentions, mistakes in interviewing and reporting can leave survivors feeling invalidated and exploited and can expose sources and their families to shame and even, in some cases, to violent repercussions.

In 2018, a report was published which did a rare thing: it asked CRSV survivors in a conflict-zone what their

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experiences of being interviewed by the media had been like. The answers were sobering. Eighty-five percent had experienced reporting practices which contravened two existing best practice guidelines for journalists, one published by the Dart Centre, the other by a UN organisation working for the protection of survivors.^[a] The issues identified in the report included:

Clear violations in the form of quid pro quo promises of money or aid, disclosure of identity without consent, or pressure to reveal details of their experiences of rape and sexual assault...asking deeply personal and intimate questions to women about the attacks, or journalists' suggesting they were in a position to help the Yazidi community by publishing the women's stories.^[b]

Hostile environment training – preparing journalists to keep safe in high-risk situations – is now the norm, but most reporters still receive no appropriate training and very little guidance in working with trauma survivors.

So, what does good preparation look like?

On any reporting trip, particularly one to a high-risk area, time is at a premium, so it's worth thinking about these things in advance when you have the space to do so. Preparation comes in two main forms, and both are crucial:

1. The kind you need to do before heading out of the door for a specific assignment. This includes local research, risk assessments, and so forth.
2. A longer-term commitment to deepening craft skills. This comes from training, a dedication to understanding the issues and a give-and-take openness to sharing insights with other colleagues.

Assignment-specific preparation

You are already likely to be in the habit of conducting risk assessments for the safety of yourself and your team. (If you are not, see the resource box below.) At the same time, when covering CRSV, you also need to consider how your reporting plan might affect the physical and psychological safety of any sources you are working with.

Questions to ask:

- Have you researched local power dynamics and the security situation on the ground to the extent that you can make good decisions not only about your own safety, but also about the safety of those you interview? [See [#2](#).]
- Who will be facilitating your interviews with survivors? Will it be a fixer, an NGO or local power-brokers? Is there any danger that consent may not be entirely voluntary? [See [#2](#) and [#3](#).]
- Do you understand the cultural and religious context – including local attitudes to CRSV, gender-based discrimination and power imbalances within families – well enough to understand the risks contributors may be taking? [See [#2](#).]
- Are you aware of the local laws in the area and any implications disclosure may have for the safety of sources and their ability to seek further judicial redress should they seek do so? (In some jurisdictions, just being a victim of rape can bring prosecution for adultery.)
- What about your own psychological preparedness? Are you in a good place personally to take on this work right now? [See [#6](#).]

[a] These are [this Dart Centre guide](#) first published in 2011, and a series of guidelines published by a coalition of nongovernmental organisations, the Global Protection Cluster, on [reporting on gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts](#).

[b] Johanna E. Foster and Sherizaan Minwalla, 'Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on Isis Sexual Violence,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 67 (2018): 53–64.

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Routine readiness

Some other types of preparation require a longer run-in and are best put in place well before a specific assignment. Ideally, you will be able to take part in relevant training, but if not, other routes such as self-education or effective mentoring from knowledgeable colleagues can make all the difference.

Ask yourself:

- Do you have an effective digital security plan for protecting the anonymity of sources and securing rushes? [See resource box [#2](#).]
- Have you researched strategies for interviewing traumatised people who are victims of sexual violence? There are specific considerations here that you should know about. [See [#4](#) and [#5](#).]
- Do you understand the idea of meaningful consent, and have you thought about how to approach it? [See [#3](#).]
- If you're filming or taking photographs, have you thought about how to handle anonymity, and how to make survivors feel comfortable? [See [#8](#).]

Considerations for editors

During the consultation process for these guidelines, everyone we talked to – editors and reporters alike, both in CRSV-affected countries and those living outside them – highlighted the role that editors and film commissioners have in safeguarding sources. Journalists on the ground do not work in a vacuum: they are accountable to publications or broadcasters.

The disconnect between the desk and the field can, however, be a major problem. In the best case scenario, the newsroom's distance from events can mean more dispassionate judgement on a story. But it can also mean less understanding of the context and the potential for harm to survivors. Sometimes there is pressure on journalists in the field to get the story at all costs.

Equally, editors do not have full oversight of what is happening on the ground. Journalists and filmmakers are usually operating under enormous pressure and may have travelled a long distance at great personal risk; a freelancer may even have spent their own money to get to a conflict zone. Under these conditions, corners can get cut: interviews may be overly extractive, properly informed consent may not be obtained, or sufficient steps may not be taken to protect survivors' anonymity.

Better communication can help avert many of these dangers. Reporters need to feel that they can share ethical concerns with their editors, and that they will not be penalised for putting the physical and emotional safety of vulnerable survivors ahead of a publication's objective in getting a story.

We will be exploring these issues in greater depth throughout the guide. But here is a short checklist for editors assigning journalists to a CRSV-related story:

- Have you discussed the ground rules reporters are expected to follow when working with vulnerable survivors?
- Have you made a game plan for the visual choices that may be necessary for protecting the identity and dignity of sources? This isn't easy to decide in the moment.
- Is this the right assignment for this journalist right now? Is there a risk of overload from covering too many traumatic assignments in a row?
- Does the journalist know they can discuss any ethical issues with you?

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- Has the reporter consulted something like this resource?
- And finally, have you considered providing appropriate training in interviewing trauma survivors? Unfortunately, this is not something that is usually included in hostile environment training. You can find out more about what your organisation can do to support and protect journalists working on trauma-related assignments in this guide from [Dart Centre Asia Pacific](#).

Sections #7 and **#8** discuss issues concerned with publication and broadcast in more detail.

Additional resources: overview

First, we encourage everyone to read the draft [Murad Code](#). This is an initiative that distils minimum best-practice principles for anybody who has direct contact with CRSV survivors – be they a journalist, lawyer, criminal investigator, policy-maker, or an NGO advocate. It is the product of in-depth consultation with survivor groups as well as professional bodies.

The Dart Centre has a section of its website devoted to [covering sexual violence](#). There, you can also find this [Dart Centre Europe](#) tip sheet that offers a compressed overview.

Resources for risk assessment and planning are included in section [#2](#).

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#2.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

SHOULD WE BE
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#2.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

SHOULD WE BE INTERVIEWING THIS PERSON, AT THIS TIME, AND IN THIS PLACE?

Assessing the safety of the source is the responsibility of journalists at all levels – the reporter on the ground, the editor in the newsroom, and colleagues chasing the same story.

When covering CRSV, journalists need to carry out a risk assessment on the safety of their sources, just as they do for themselves. Core questions on due care include:

- **Do I have enough time to conduct this interview properly? These conversations should not be rushed. If not, how might I be able to do things differently to avoid causing any harm?**
- **Is this environment safe? Who is in the room and who should not be in it? Do I understand the power dynamics sufficiently well to be able to assess the potential consequences for my source? Is there any sense of coercion?**
- **Is this person the right person to talk to? Is she, he or they emotionally stable enough at this point in time for this conversation? And if not, who might be?**

You may have travelled a long way at great personal risk, but sometimes the ethics of the situation may necessitate a new plan. Editors as well as people in the field need to take responsibility for this – would a conversation be helpful?

Do I have enough time to do this?

Journalists operate under intense time pressure. But to interview a survivor of CRSV in a trauma-sensitive way, you need to allow adequate time.

- You must have time to sit down properly with the survivor.
- If you don't have enough time, can you replan your day?
- Can you do the interview differently – say, by asking factual questions rather than rushing the survivor into recounting details of a traumatic experience?
- Should you be talking to a reliable source who was not themselves directly attacked?

This kind of planning might involve people other than you and the survivor. If the interview is being organised through an intermediary like an NGO or a group of local elders, talk to the organiser about how much time you'll have so that you can plan your approach accordingly.

You should, of course, involve the survivor in this planning as much as possible. If your own timetable is flexible, ask them beforehand if there's a particularly good time to speak, when they're likely to have the most energy for a conversation that might be draining. Giving flexibility back to the source is a simple but powerful way of making them feel like they have some control over sharing their story.

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Is this a safe place for an interview?

You are probably used to thinking about the physical safety of the areas in which you're working. But when it comes to interviewing a survivor, you should take this thinking further. Start by asking yourself some simple questions such as who is in the room and why:

- Are there community elders, authority figures or people with guns?
- Are there people who are part of networks connected to perpetrators?
- Is there anybody who just doesn't need to be there?

Even if the perpetrators of violence are not in the room, are they still living in the community, and could they hear about the interview? How discreet is the venue, and what can you do to avoid further stigmatisation of survivors by their community, family members and so on?

Do not take people back to places where things happened unless you really know what you are doing. Spatial and visual reminders can trigger intense trauma reactions.

Although it can be difficult to mediate this kind of situation, remember that you're in control of the interview, and if it appears to be coerced, or to carry a risk of placing the survivor in danger, you should not go ahead with it. Editors have a role to play here too, as pressure from the newsroom can be weighing on a journalist's mind when faced with an ethical challenge.

There may also be people present whom you have brought with you:

- If you are a broadcaster, can you keep your crew to the minimum needed?
- If you are working with a photographer, can they take the photographs separately or after the interview, so that the survivor isn't being photographed at the same time as they're speaking about traumatic events?
- If you're working with a translator, are they the right person for the job? Do they understand the issues and have they been briefed in trauma aware interviewing?
- Does the survivor feel comfortable talking with people of the opposite sex in the room? It isn't necessarily a requirement that women interview women, or men interview men, but this is a consideration.
- If possible, ask the survivor what would make them comfortable. Is there anyone they want to have there, such as a relative or trusted friend? If you're interviewing a minor, their guardian should **always** be present. (Interviewing children and young people about sexual violence requires specific skills and additional due diligence. Ask yourself if this is really something you should be doing.)

Is this the right person to interview?

Ask these simple questions:

- Do you need this interview? Does it add anything, or do you have enough material already?
- Is the subject in a position to understand what is being asked of them?
- Are there any hidden expectations? Are they expecting results to come from engaging with you which are not realistic?

Often, in conflict or post-conflict contexts, NGOs working on the ground are the point of access for journalists, and they may be the ones arranging for you to speak to survivors of sexual violence. You may find yourself in a situation in which the NGO is putting the same person or small group of people through a busy schedule of interviews with journalists. Retelling the story again and again in a short space of time can be very distressing for someone who has experienced trauma. It can also have legal repercussions for the survivor. If different interviews they have given slightly contradict each other, it could potentially undermine their chances of seeking legal redress later [see the box in **#3**].

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Given the time pressure journalists are under, it is easy just to go along with what NGOs recommend. But it's worth having a conversation about the demands being placed on any survivors you are interviewing. That can be as simple as asking how many times they have been interviewed. And think creatively – if you're travelling in a group of journalists, is it possible to pool parts of your research so that the survivor only has to share their story once?

In 2019, speaking to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Skye Wheeler of Human Rights Watch reflected on unethical journalistic and research practices with survivors of sexual violence in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh:

“Without a doubt,” he said, “we can look back and say things did not go well. People were re-interviewed too many times.”^[a]

A key consideration – which can be hard to judge – is whether someone is feeling psychologically secure enough to give an interview. If, for example, someone is experiencing particularly elevated levels of distress in the aftermath of a traumatic incident, they may not be. Don't forget that CRSV rarely happens in isolation – a survivor may have recently experienced other kinds of violence, lost family members or been displaced.

It can be daunting to think about assessing the emotional and physical safety of your source, as well as your own. The solution is often to involve people more fully in deciding what the interview will be like and to give them some control over how it takes place. Many of these issues overlap with the question of consent – more on that in section **#3**.

Stigma and how reporting can go wrong

Ask yourself whether approaching someone risks compromising their safety and privacy. In some societies, just being suspected of having been raped, can lead to humiliation, ostracisation and even further violence.

Here is an example drawn from Iraq of how things can go wrong when journalists are not fully briefed on the context.

Johanna Foster and Sherizaan Minwalla explored through a series of 26 interviews Yazidi women's perceptions of the nature and impact of media reporting on women and girls who survived captivity, rape, and trafficking by ISIS. They set out their findings in a 2018 research paper. Here are some key extracts:

Like many women around the world, Yazidi women are faced with the familiar gendered dilemma of being asked to put the needs of the community before their own.

Specifically, they were faced with the decision to sacrifice by giving up their traumatic stories to the world, despite the personal physical, reputational, and emotional risks. Indeed, Yazidi women were directly encouraged to do so by Yazidi men despite any real evidence...[of] assurances that they would not be stigmatized for losing their honour or treated poorly or rejected by their families and community, particularly over time.

One of the Yazidi women interviewed said:

“At the beginning, when I returned [from ISIS], a committee came with a recorder and said we will register your story and I said ‘no’ so they went to my brother-in-law and told him, ‘she’s not talking to us.’”

Adding further layers of coercion, Yazidi women lived in camps in which they relied on, and felt indebted or obligated to please humanitarian service providers, camp staff, and journalists all of whom exerted additional pressure on survivors to tell their stories.

Journalistic coverage of the story increased the likelihood of stigmatisation when stories ran with sensationalist headlines such as, “Yazidi woman held as sex slave for three months by ISIS and gang raped speaks out about hideous suffering”; “ISIS sells sex slave girls for ‘as little as a pack of cigarettes’” and “Yazidi women undergo operations to ‘restore virginity’ after being raped by Daesh”.^[b]

[a] See: <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/rohingya-interviews.php>

[b] Johanna E. Foster and Sherizaan Minwalla, ‘Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on Isis Sexual Violence,’ *Women's Studies International Forum* 67 (2018): 53–64.

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Additional resources: safety

There are various guides on keeping safe on hazardous assignments published by media support and protection organisations. We would recommend starting with overviews provided by **CPJ** (The Committee to Protect Journalists), the ACOS Alliance (A Culture of Safety) and the **Rory Peck Trust** (tailored to freelancers), but there are many other relevant resources. (The same organisations may also be able to advise on accessing training and other kinds of support.)

Safe and Secure from Doc Society is designed for filmmakers. In addition to providing tips on physical safety, it offers invaluable advice that will be useful for any journalist on protecting both team members and contributors from legal and digital security threats – two crucial aspects that are often overlooked. The Global Investigative Journalism network also offers this **detailed resource page**.

And if you are an editor or manager, be sure to check out the ACOS's **safety assessment tool for news organisations** and the Dart Centre's guide to **working with freelancers exposed to trauma**. Frank Smyth from CPJ has written **this overview** which discusses risks to journalists when covering CRSV.

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#3.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

DOES MY
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THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

DOES MY INTERVIEWEE FULLY UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY ARE SIGNING UP FOR?

It is not enough for somebody to say yes to having their words used or their picture taken. Consent is not meaningful unless it is fully informed.

Just because someone agrees to speak or have their image captured doesn't mean that they really know what that involves. It is not enough to tell someone what you want to do. Go the extra distance in making sure they understand the risks and have genuine choices. In particular, they should know:

- **How the interviewing or filming process will work.**
- **Which events and aspects of those events you are planning to discuss.**
- **Who will be able to see the material and for how long it will be available.**

Obtaining consent is an opportunity and not a hurdle that needs overcoming. If your source knows the risks and is fully on board, you will get a stronger interview.

The standard journalistic template for obtaining an interviewee's consent stems from situations where reporters are interviewing public figures. These are often powerful people who understand the set rules in a game that they are accustomed to. The primary focus is on securing access and getting the politician or businessperson to say as much as possible, preferably on the record with their name clearly attached.

That model is clearly inappropriate when working with vulnerable contributors, as the balance of power between source and journalist is reversed. Moreover, the first presumption in CRSV situations has to be the protection of a source's anonymity. This means laying aside any expectation that a survivor has a duty to speak to the public.

On one level this is obvious. Every journalist does (or should) know this. On another level, the legacy of the political model is deeply ingrained and can still ensnare journalists. If you are reporting on CRSV, you may need to pause and make sure you are starting from a different place that can be termed *meaningful consent*:

- 1.** First, set aside the idea that informed consent is primarily about securing access and getting someone to agree to an interview. It is not. It is about exploring how one might build a more secure basis for an interaction that comes with high risks. If someone changes their mind and it becomes clear that they don't want to speak, then take that as a good result. Just like in an audition, it means that they are not right for this role.
- 2.** Second, obtaining consent is not a one-time action, a quasi-legal formality that happens just at the beginning of a conversation. It is a continuing process, a negotiation where the right to report on particular details – or even on the whole conversation – may be revisited more than once.

Never pressure or manipulate someone into speaking about something as intimate as sexual violence. It has to be a free and genuinely informed choice.

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Who can give consent?

The only person who can give consent is your subject. If the individual is a minor or somebody who is in some way not in a position to make a fully informed judgement, you may need *additional* consent from somebody who is a parent or a guardian.

But in any situation, **if you don't have meaningful consent from your interviewee – you just don't have consent.** The word of a relative, someone's lawyer, a fixer, or an intermediary from an NGO that it is OK to do an interview does not constitute consent. The negotiation has to be with the source directly.

If you're working with a translator, you need to make sure that the conversation they are having with the source is the one you think you are actually having. This, as the journalist Jina Moore describes, can be troublesome. It may take extra steps. You may need to tell your translator:

"I'm sorry to repeat myself, but I want to make sure my purpose is clear: Here's who I am. Here's what I'm doing..." And when the translator says, "I already asked her that," you say, "I appreciate that, but the rules of my job require that I ask her, directly, myself. So, if you don't mind interpreting what I'm saying so that we can confirm this one more time..."^[a]

The power dynamics may be opaque and survivors may be under pressure to speak when it is not in their best interests. As a journalist, you have a duty to dig down into all the potential dimensions of vulnerability before assuming that someone is able to exercise a genuine choice in giving consent.

A potential interviewee who is in the immediate aftermath of an attack (certainly minutes and hours, and maybe days) is likely to be in no position to give meaningful consent. There may be a way of reporting what has happened using background information, if it is done in a way you are certain will not lead to the identification of any individual survivor. But be clear that somebody in such a situation is not in a position to make a decision about whether or not to waive their right to anonymity. That will require more distance from the attack.

Working with translators

If you are working in an area that you are not based in, your relationship with local journalists and interpreters who can speak the language and know the lie of the land is crucial. But you can't assume that they are trauma aware.

You need to make sure that whoever is translating understands that:

- The subject matter may be emotionally challenging.
- They should not pressurise sources or offer inducements for them to speak.
- They should use informed consent and trauma-sensitive interviewing approaches. (Show them resources from this guide)
- They must not push into distress or probe for gratuitous detail.

You should plan in detail how are you going to conduct interviews as far ahead of time as you can, even to the extent of practising what you are going to do. Have a thorough conversation about risks and local cultural norms. Ask your guide too for feedback on how you are doing, and whether they are finding translating for you difficult. The more trust in your relationship, the better. You should also check in on how they are doing personally and whether there is any potential danger to themselves or their families.

[a] In Moore's article: [Five ideas on Meaningful Consent in Trauma Journalism](#)

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What makes consent meaningful?

Just because somebody agrees to speak, that doesn't mean that they fully understand what it entails.

They may be unclear about the process, what you are going to ask them and how painful that might be, and what is going to happen with their contribution. The idea is to avoid surprises, anything that could cause harm further down the track. Check that both you and your interviewee are clear about the following:

- What the purpose of the conversation is.
- Who will be involved.
- Whether there are any 'no-go areas' that they would rather not talk about.
- Who will see the report (and its potential accessibility via the internet anywhere in the world).
- If it is a film, how long it will be available for and how it will be distributed.
- How their anonymity will be protected.
- Whether there is a possibility they will be singled out for online abuse.



If you're using images, it is good practice to involve the interviewee in the visual decision-making and show them what the world will see of their lives and the community they are living in. Journalists reporting on the rape of Yazidi women by ISIS thought they were guaranteeing the anonymity of the women by photographing them with their faces covered. But the women themselves could clearly identify each other from their eyes and from their highly distinctive individual scarves. [See [#8](#).]

Deeper, less-obvious levels of due diligence may be required – if, for example, any of these potential elephants in the room have not been clarified:

- Will the film or final report contain the voices of perpetrators, or of groups that support them? Finding this out after the fact can be deeply destabilising. A survivor may have great difficulty in understanding the 'right to reply' principle and how anybody could give their abusers the benefit of any kind of conversation. It is best to explain this early on.
- Are there hidden expectations that you have not addressed? Does your interviewee believe that speaking to you will bring direct assistance to the community? Or do they have expectations of you for continuing psychological support or friendship that you are in no position to meet? [See [#6](#) for more on this.]
- Journalists rarely think about the legal ramifications of their conversations with CRSV survivors. If your source is intent upon seeking justice in the courts, then talking to journalists could undermine their case. You should also know that all your records and rushes may be deemed to be discoverable evidence.

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The judicial process and the danger of multiple accounts

The legal process in seeking justice for victims of violence can sometimes be compromised by multiple interviews. The Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya Lima explains as follows:

It is one of the biggest problems we have in cases of sexual violence.

In Colombia, the law says that the victim is not obliged to give her testimony about the events more than once. But almost all the victims are forced to give more than four versions and this obviously leads to inconsistency of the stories, which often leads to the deterioration of the judicial processes, a fact that is further aggravated when the victim has given her testimony to the media.

Unfortunately, journalists rely on the inconsistencies of the testimonies to try to put together 'a real one', but what this ends up generating is the closure of the processes.

Likewise, the account of a criminal act of sexual violence, without a trial, leads to the presentation of defence arguments to the perpetrators, who in many cases base their evidence on the 'inconsistencies' that the victims have had in the middle of an interview for a media outlet. Judges never take into account the circumstances of the manner, time, and place in which a victim's testimony is given in front of a camera. And it is clear that the effect on the story is different in an interview with a journalist than with a psychologist or health professional.

Jineth Bedoya Lima, who contributed to our research, was twice abducted in Colombia in May 2000 and August 2003. In 2001, she was awarded the Courage in Journalism Award of the **International Women's Media Foundation**. She also won the Golden Pen of Freedom award from the **World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers** in 2020.

Additional resources: consent

Jina Moore, an American journalist based in East Africa contributed to this consultation. She explores consent issues in more detail in these two useful articles: **[The Pornography Trap](#)** in Columbia Journalism Review and **[Five Ideas on Meaningful Consent in Trauma Journalism](#)**.

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#4.

THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

**ALLOW
SURVIVORS TO
SPEAK IN THEIR
OWN WAY AND IN
THEIR OWN TIME**

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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

ALLOW SURVIVORS TO SPEAK IN THEIR OWN WAY AND IN THEIR OWN TIME

During sexual violence, people are treated by perpetrators as objects – not as individuals who have any control over what happens to them. Can you reverse that dynamic and give interviewees a say in how they will tell their story?

The need to treat vulnerable people with consideration, respect and dignity should be obvious. But what does that involve in practical terms?

As a journalist interviewing a survivor, you are in a power position – even if it may not feel like it. Trust and emotional safety are going to be issues. It is important, then, that you don't do anything that might echo the original abuse, even in a small way, such as rushing them or pushing for a response. This can be easy to lose sight of when you're on a deadline in a hazardous location.

Prioritise planning enough time for the conversation and make sure that your interviewee knows that:

- **There is no need to answer any questions that feel uncomfortable.**
- **It is OK to stop at any time.**
- **You won't publish any details that they ask you not to.**

See your interviewee as a person first – and only secondly as a source of material for a story.

Media interviews can cause harm to survivors if they are exploitative or carried out unsafely. This section discusses the basics of trauma-appropriate interviewing; the next [[#5](#)] looks in more detail at specific trauma reactions and the challenges they can pose when working with survivors.

Journalists often understandably worry that just talking about harrowing, painful experiences such as sexual violence or torture may inevitably harm an interviewee. They may fear that they are bringing up things again that best remain unsaid. Or they may equate the distress that someone experiences in telling their story with causing fresh harm.

Most trauma experts who work with sexual abuse survivors don't think that the talking itself is really where the significant dangers lie. It is more to do with how safe the interviewee feels during the conversation, how much control they have over what is talked about, and also how their story is published afterward [see [#7](#) and [#8](#)]. Harm is likely to arise when people feel judged or not listened to, or feel they are being used for an ulterior purpose, such as being mined for a quick sound bite. In trauma interviews, trust is a delicate, easily damaged thing.

There are exceptions to the idea that talking itself is consequence free. For example, if somebody has experienced something intensely traumatic in the past that they have sealed off and not examined before, such as child sexual abuse, then *talking itself* can be destabilising and can carry different risks. In general, be careful about surprising people with unexpected information.

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How to make the process more collaborative, less extractive

People experience sexual trauma as a fundamental loss of control – something which happened to them that they were powerless to prevent. One way to counter this is to give away some of the control you might normally exercise as a journalist and to involve your interviewee in decisions about the process. Even small choices can make a big difference.

Before getting into any detail in a conversation, you should:

- Acknowledge that speaking is likely to be difficult.
- Involve them fully in the decision of where they would like to be interviewed.
- Ask what time of day would suit them best – when they would be likely to have the most energy for the conversation and for how long they would like to talk for?
- Ask if there is anybody that they would like to be with them in the room, such as a friend or relative.
- Ask them if there is anything that they would rather not speak about.
- Reassure them that they don't have to answer anything that makes them uncomfortable.

It is good practice to ask people before you get into the conversation how you as the interviewer will recognise when they might have had enough of talking and need a break. People may get lost in the thickets of telling their story. And besides, most of us experience a strong subconscious desire to carry on to please someone who is asking questions. They may not be very good at signalling when they are tired or when the conversation has entered territory that feels uncomfortable and is getting to be too much. Raising this before the interview gets going – and perhaps agreeing on a specific signal – makes suggesting breaks or changing tracks to a safer topic more natural and less disruptive.

Agreeing on the words to use

Section **#7** talks more about language choices at publication. During the interview itself, make sure that you are using words your interviewee is comfortable with. Local idioms may or may not be helpful here. There are some clear rules. For example, it is never appropriate to describe a perpetrator as someone's lover.

Most people who have suffered sexual violence describe themselves as 'survivors'; but some might feel that 'victim' is a more accurate word and others might want to avoid both. If you have any doubts about what words to use, check with your interviewee and ask what they would prefer. In general, it is always important to respect how people self-identify.

The power of listening

When people believe they are being heard, they feel more secure and are then able to gather their thoughts more effectively. Knowing how to listen well is probably the single most important skill that a journalist needs to bring to a conversation with a trauma survivor. It involves giving space to one's subject and asking simple, relatively open questions, which give people some choice about how they want to reply but not so much choice that the choices become overwhelming.

Remember that, as discussed in section **#2**, checking consent is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. You might want to preface the question with a quick, "Is it OK to ask about ... (a specific topic or event)?" Then allow people to respond freely.

Katy Robjant, who works with CRSV survivors in the DRC and other places, has this specific advice for journalists:

Rather than asking open-ended questions about general events, establish with your interviewee that there is something specific you hope to speak about. Then ask them to tell you as much as they can about that

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event or topic. After they've given you all the information they feel comfortable sharing, it becomes your job to extract the salient parts. This is one way to avoid forcing your interviewee to talk about details they don't want to share or think about.^[a]

Pointers for effective listening include:

- Allowing for silences and giving people space to collect their thoughts.
- Using verbal or, if you're recording, nonverbal markers to show that you are still with them.
- Checking back to make sure you have understood key points.
- Knowing how to sit with your own discomfort and not allowing it to take the focus away from your interviewee.

Try to avoid:

- Finishing people's sentences for them or cutting across their chain of thought abruptly (unless they get lost in a memory – see section **#5**).
- Giving any impression of judgement – for example, pulling a horrified face when somebody relates something that may well be horrifying (expressing concern or how sorry you are is fine.)
- Any probing of graphic or physical details.
- Telling people that you know how they feel (people are unlikely to believe you do).

You should also be cautious about telling people that you have had similar experiences or going into autobiographical detail. In some situations, this can build trust and develop the conversation; in others, it can take the focus away from the interviewee and leave them feeling that you're minimising or sidelining their experience. (The need to maintain healthy boundaries is discussed more in section **#6**.)

Managing the time and ending well

The title of this section, *Allowing Survivors the space to Speak in their own Way and in their own Time* does not mean, however, that you should be entirely passive in shaping the time. When people are vulnerable, they benefit from the conversation having some guiderails. And as mentioned above, you need to be watching their energy levels. (If you are in the area for a time you can always offer to come back and pick up on the conversation later.)

Some clinicians talk about the *rule of three thirds*. Ideally the first third of the conversation should focus on a time and experiences in which the interviewee felt relatively safe; the middle section, on the most difficult material, for example the traumatic events themselves; and the last section, on the present and the future – anything which helps the survivor bridge back into the here and now. You don't want to be leaving someone at the end of an interview still fully immersed in the worst of what happened to them.

Try to end on a positive note, but don't force it and pretend things are better than they are. You can ask people what they have found helpful in dealing with this and what they would recommend to others. It is not always easy to find a solid endpoint. At the very least, you can always ask people what they will be doing for the rest of the day. Remember, of course, to thank people, and keep any promises you make in terms of future contact, sending information about the piece, and so forth.

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[a] See <https://dartcentre.org/resources/reporting-refugees-tips-covering-crisis>

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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

**UNDERSTAND
TRAUMA'S
CONTINUING
IMPACT ON
MEMORY AND
FEELINGS OF
SAFETY**



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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

UNDERSTAND TRAUMA'S CONTINUING IMPACT ON MEMORY AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY

Some basic knowledge about trauma responses can help you navigate challenging interview situations and avoid consequential reporting errors.

People are likely to become upset when revisiting harrowing events. Distress in itself does not mean people are not in a good place to speak. But certain reactions may well indicate that people are no longer feeling safe in the conversation. They may dissociate, look for the door, or experience physical reactions similar to those that they had at the time of the attack.

Trauma is a complex *bio-psycho-social* experience; distress is never just one thing – it is a mix of different components. As a media professional you don't need to master the brain science but some basic, introductory insight can help you make better judgements about:

- **How your interviewee is doing and when they might need a break from talking.**
- **How to avoid questioning styles that make you sound like an interrogator and add fuel to difficult emotions such as guilt and shame.**
- **How far you can reasonably rely on the accuracy of somebody's memory of a traumatic event and why you should not push into a gap in their recall.**

Rape is one of the most intensely traumatic experiences any human being can undergo. There are many reasons why survivors may have difficulty finding words for their experiences. Shame and fear of how others react can be big factors in closing down people's ability to talk. And talking about trauma can bring up intense feelings which people can find too painful and exhausting to talk about. Sometimes silence is the best response.

But often the words for things can be hard for a different reason connected to how human memory functions in traumatic situations.

When we are under attack we go into survival mode. Memories are still registered – often in vivid detail – but the brain doesn't necessarily filter and file them away according to the same ordering principles it usually deploys (instead, it is prioritising more fundamental survival systems). It is common for people who have been sexually assaulted to have issues with fragmented and disorganised memory. There may be gaps or inconsistencies in the chronology that they have trouble making sense of. Some things may come back with exceptional force; others may be blanked out or not even laid down in memory in the first place.^[a]

[a] For a useful introduction to the impact of trauma on memory in sexual assault survivors see: G. Smith and S. Heke, 'From Report to Court: Psychology, Trauma and the Law' (2010), available [here](#).

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In practical terms for you as a journalist, this means:

- You shouldn't expect a survivor to give you a perfectly coherent or logical account of what happened. Inconsistency is not evidence of any intent to deceive.
- It is not fair to expect your source to clear up any discrepancies themselves – as they may simply may not be able to. If a precise chronology is important, look for other ways of verifying events.
- Circling back and asking a simple clarifying question is usually fine if done lightly. But if you come across a gap or obstacle in someone's memory, do not push into it and dig for information. That may bring something flooding back in a way that is overpowering [see the box below].
- Other people you are working with – for example, editors and fact-checkers – need to be aware of these restrictions too.

Responding to distress

Distress doesn't necessarily show in the way we would expect it to. You may come across people who appear to be unemotional and talk about the most terrible things in a flat, even tone, or others who release tension by laughing in places that feel odd or out of sync to you. These are all natural, well-documented reactions that individuals have in the aftermath of trauma. Treat each person you meet with openness and be careful not to suggest that you think there is a right way of responding.

When people talk about the past, they may re-experience elements of the same emotions and physical sensations that they had during the time (or times) they were attacked. This can be mild and barely noticeable or severe enough to push people beyond their capacity to tolerate those feelings anymore.

If somebody does have a strong reaction – for instance, they become highly agitated, start crying etc – slow things down in your own head before rushing to do anything. Hastily switching off the camera or breaking off the interview can inadvertently shame somebody by implying that they are wrong to have such feelings. Be careful about using physical touch: that can be threatening and destabilising, especially if unexpected. Instead, you can:

- Model calm.
- Say how sorry you are that this happened to them.
- Remind people that they are safe here in the room with you – that it is not happening now
- Ask them what might help them at this moment. Would they like a break from the interview? What do they usually do when they feel like this?

When someone gets lost in a memory

Dissociation is a common survival reaction that switches on during sexual violence. When a situation is overwhelming and there is no realistic way of escape, the brain may make a sudden automatic call to shut things down and allow the mind to separate out as if the attack were not really happening.

Re-telling an experience can cue people back into a sense that the violence is taking place all over again. It is not always easy to tell when someone is feeling unsafe and on the verge of dissociating. But people may start to:

- Zone out, look sleepy, or stop answering questions.
- Complain of feeling hot or break out in a sudden sweat.
- Complain of headaches or physical pain.
- Scan the room for a way out.

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Katy Robjant, a clinical psychologist who works with refugees and CRSV survivors in the DRC and elsewhere offers this advice to journalists on what to do if this happens:

Keep your actions predictable...It's always best to ask permission or let the person know what you're going to do next...The best thing to do is to quickly try to reorient them. Keep talking. Ask things about the here and now, such as, "Can you tell me where you are? Can you describe what the room looks like?" Those kinds of questions will be more helpful than general questions like, "Are you OK?"^[b]

Shame and believability

It is important to understand how easy it is for strong feelings of shame and guilt to emerge in a conversation about sexual violence. This may happen suddenly and appear out of proportion to what is being discussed at any one moment. It is not unusual for people to blame themselves for things that happened to them and that could not possibly be their fault.

And this is not just about the psychology of sexual assault – rape survivors often have to contend with family and community members not believing them, minimising their experience, or accusing them of being to blame in some way.

So be very careful to avoid using any language that might imply either that you don't believe the interviewee or that they are responsible in any way for what happened to them. For this reason, "why" questions can be risky. Interrogators favour them because they are hard to answer and imply guilt. For example, asking someone, "Why were you there at that time?" makes it sound like they shouldn't have been there in the first place.

Questions that seek information about feelings, such as "How did you feel when...?" are also best avoided as they can revive and add fuel to complicated, volatile emotions.

And as discussed previously, take care to avoid asking probing questions that dwell on intimate or physical details of what happened.

If a survivor is convinced of something that you know not to be true or you disagree with and you feel like challenging them, ask yourself if you are really the right person to do so and what purpose that would serve. Sometimes people hold onto certain beliefs as a defence against aspects of an experience that feel too overwhelming to acknowledge.

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[b] See <https://dartcenter.org/resources/reporting-refugees-tips-covering-crisis>.

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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

**UNDERSTAND
HOW YOUR
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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING**UNDERSTAND
HOW YOUR
OWN
EMOTIONAL
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IS PART OF
THIS TOO****#6.**

Exposure to brutality can exert an emotional toll on media professionals. Self-care is a duty that you owe to yourself – and to your sources.

Covering CRSV is emotionally draining work, which carries personal risks for media professionals often already working in dangerous and unstable environments. You may be inclined to discount your own distress because its scale feels irrelevant compared to what survivors are going through. Nevertheless, be aware that those fractional impacts can add up over time and start to become something more problematic, with potential implications for how you relate to colleagues as well as survivors.

Being pulled into making a vulnerable source undeliverable promises of future emotional or practical support is one example of what can happen when a journalist or filmmaker is becoming overwhelmed with the material. Talk issues through with others, follow a deliberate self-care strategy and be clear about what you can and cannot do in terms of helping others.

Audre Lourde, a Black American civil rights campaigner, once wrote:

Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation...

Covering CRSV involves confronting some of the most disturbing things that human beings can do to others. Journalists don't tend to spend much time discussing the importance of self-care and trauma awareness, although it is a key theme for clinicians and others working with trauma.

Make no mistake – journalists and filmmakers who elect to cover these stories tend to be motivated and highly resilient individuals. But this line of work nevertheless carries elevated risks for burnout, depression, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress.^[a] Even where the impacts are less severe, the difficulty we may have in digesting the traumatic content of the work can have a knock-on effect on already vulnerable sources.

Empathy as a two-way bridge

The ability to connect empathically with others and to gauge where they are emotionally is an essential quality of being an effective interviewer. It is through empathy that we create spaces in which people feel understood and safe enough to share their experiences. It is also how we understand what matters in a story – through trying to see things from someone else's shoes.

[a] A research breakdown can be found at <https://dartcenter.org/content/covering-trauma-impact-on-journalists>.

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Empathy opens up a two-way connection between interviewer and interviewee, creating a path for things to flow back and forth across the bridge. As an interviewer, you might find yourself at times taking on other people's feelings without being fully conscious of what is happening. Strong emotions like shame, helplessness and fear can all be contagious in ways that can be subtle and hard to track. It is not unusual for journalists to feel suddenly down on themselves after a harrowing interview.

Similarly, hearing or reading repeated testimony of how people are attacked or tortured can cause intrusive thoughts and images to come into one's head at unexpected times. These effects are usually short term and relatively mild and to some extent they come with the territory – but they can have mental health consequences if they build up over time and become entrenched. This phenomenon is called *vicarious* or *secondary traumatisation* and it sits alongside potential impacts from directly experiencing or witnessing violence.

Being pulled into other people's distress

There is a theory that journalists should never become emotionally involved. While that is an interesting idea, it is not how things work. It is quite likely that at some stage you will feel a strong sense of a concern and a desire to help. If that happens, it is vital that you be clear about your limits as a journalist and what you can and cannot do in terms of offering support. Boundaries can blur in unhelpful ways:

- You may feel a pull towards a less professional, more friendlike orientation. The desire to help is understandable but it is also unrealistic if you are not in a position to fulfil that role. The danger lies in building up false hopes of continuing emotional and material support which one lacks the capacity to deliver. Remember, it is easy to build up people's hopes inadvertently: with trauma, strong feelings like attachment and betrayal run just under the surface. It is perfectly possible to be fully human and act ethically without behaving as a friend.
- You may have your own experience of sexual violence. This can give you valuable insight but it can also put you in a place where your experiences get entangled with those of your source, leading you to lose sight of the other as a distinct, unique individual.
- You may fall into the trap of wanting to believe that the interview is bound to be a therapeutic, cathartic, or empowering experience for your interviewee in some way. It is true that survivors often do find solace in speaking, and it can help people make order out of a confusing and painful experience. But there is no way you can guarantee this as a media professional. In the aid community, this gets called the *saviour complex*, and it can be deeply problematic.

Difficulty in digesting one's personal reactions can take interviews off track in other ways. For example, if we become frustrated with people for not doing more to help themselves, or if we start to rank other people's suffering with only the most extreme being seen as attention-worthy.

What to do about all this?

The solution is not to give up on empathy or a sense of mission. Artificially stifling one's personal responses is not going to help. And besides, both are themselves components of resilience. Instead, think of empathy as being like a muscle that benefits from strategic resting. Time away from the work brings perspective, as well as the space to recharge and disentangle oneself from harrowing material. Reconnecting with the more positive dimensions of life is vital. Here are some things that can help:

- **Build activities into the day that allow you to distance yourself from harrowing material** (and anything that reminds you of work in general). An immersive hobby, reading a book or anything that takes your head out of the topic are all good choices. Mindfulness is another option that works for many.
- **Schedule regular breaks and rest periods.** We can digest distressing material much more effectively when we are not tired.
- **Keep the body in balance.** Exercise, stretching, breathing exercises, adequate sleep and proper nutrition are all effective ways of releasing the tightening, ratcheting effect of accumulating stress.

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- **Talk through troubling issues with a colleague, mentor or friend.** Sometimes it is hard to see things clearly without a sounding board. If you are the colleague someone reaches out to, be a good listener rather than rushing to solve their dilemma before they have had a chance to explore it. Journaling and personal writing can also help.
- **Make contact with nature.** Many people find this particularly helpful.
- **Take a positive lessons-learned attitude to mistakes.** If things go wrong, commit to learning from accidents and poor decisions rather than repeating them.

Much of the above is about forming protective habits and not abandoning them when stresses build up. Even when you're in the field and working unpredictable hours, you can achieve some variety in your routine. Research shows that social support is probably the biggest single contributory factor to resilience.^[a] Be wary of too much isolation and any kind of excessive self-medication, be that through substances or overwork. **Balance is key.**

Managing transitions

Whether you are a local journalist or a foreigner flying in and out of a country, you may well feel that the disparity between the relative privilege of your life and the situations in which others are living makes transitions particularly difficult.

Among media professionals working on this topic, feelings of powerless (for not being able to do more to bring an end to suffering) and guilt (for being able to return home) are common. There are no easy answers to these dilemmas but you can benefit from working through them. Perhaps ask yourself this question: "Does being hard on myself for things I can't control help my sources or create work that is more relevant?" It is hard to be compassionate to others, without also being compassionate to oneself. The bleaker the topic, the more vital it is to push back and work on finding small positive things that reaffirm you. Again, talking to people who understand these issues can help.

Additional resources: self-care

The Dart Centre has a detailed guide on working with **traumatic imagery**. See too this compressed tip sheet on handling **harrowing testimony during immersive investigations** and **this discussion** on self-care between journalists and filmmakers who worked on child sexual abuse stories. As referenced in section **#1**, managers can refer to **this guide**. This **section of the website** looks at organisational issues in more detail, including the role of peer support.

Let's Talk: Personal Boundaries, Safety and Women in Journalism offers advice for female journalists on handling sexual harassment. **This tip sheet** produced by the Dart Centre for Reporters sans Frontières offers specific self-care advice for journalists working in conflict zones. Finally, because stories about sexual violence are often a magnet for trolls and other malign actors online, here are some ideas on **digital self-defence**.

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[a] See S. M. Southwick and D. S. Charney, Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially chapters 4, 6 and 7.

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TELLING THE STORY

**REMEMBER:
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TELLING THE STORY

REMEMBER: SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS NEVER THE ONLY DIMENSION TO THE STORY

Too narrow a focus on just the brutality of events can hurt your sources and the journalism. Be attentive to the fuller context.

Faced with such horrors as mass rape in war or sexual exploitation, it may feel natural to put all the focus on the sexual violence and the harm it causes. But failure to bring in wider contexts can impoverish your reporting, push away audiences and marginalise survivors. Be sure to broaden the story in the following ways:

- **Give a rounded account of survivors' lives. Be careful not to predict ruination or reduce people to the worst things that happened to them. It can complicate their recovery.**
- **Consider that there may be other crimes beyond rape. Survivors may lose loved ones and their homes and be forcibly displaced. These things matter to people as well.**
- **Avoid excessive focus on details that might sexualise or sensationalise the story and potentially limit public sympathy for survivors.**
- **Help your audience see paths to potential solutions by doing justice to the full political and social context.**

We often overlook how far our work can feedback into survivors' lives and even have a bearing on how they recover.

CRSV is associated with high levels of psychological as well as physical injury. The aftermath of sexual trauma typically brings with it strong feelings of disconnection, in which people feel separated from themselves – the person they were before it all happened – and from others. The potential for CRSV to sever connections with the wider community can leave survivors isolated and with reduced opportunities for support.

Recovery, on the other hand, looks in large part like the reverse of this. It happens through reconnection, when people believe that it is once more possible for others to care for them and hold them in regard.

As media workers, it is not our role to heal individuals – and it would be both unwise and patronising to assume that our work will empower survivors in a directly personal way – but we do need to take care that we are not inadvertently adding to those forces of disconnection. Jina Moore, an American journalist who works in East Africa, puts it like this:

We should make sure that there is nothing in the story we will publish – in days, in months, in a year – that surprises, embarrasses, shames or endangers them...We repeat the details of a trauma story with the survivor in order to make sure that they understand what the world will know about them.^[a]

The messages we send out to audiences also play a crucial role here. Everywhere discussion of sexual trauma is freighted with myths, stigma and unhelpful stereotypes. We can either entrench or debunk these – journalists and filmmakers are not neutral bystanders in this.

This is why having a fuller handle on the political, economic, and cultural context of the conflict is vital.

[a] In Jina Moore's article: [The Pornography Trap](#).

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The danger of getting lost in one corner of the story

CRSV comes in different forms, but its most arresting feature is usually its sheer brutality. As a filmmaker or journalist working on this topic, you may well experience a strong and entirely understandable desire to shock audiences with the worst of what you have heard – in the hope that this will wake them up.

But the danger here is that this may achieve the reverse. Too much focus on the horror and detail of sexual violence can compel audiences to switch off and disengage in ways that may even reduce sympathy toward people affected by CRSV. If you don't provide enough substantive information, audiences won't understand the nature of these crimes and what is at stake.

For Stephanie Kariuki, working on a podcast for Vice which explored sexual violence in Egypt and the government's complex role in its persistence, these decisions require careful balancing:

There was a lot of back and forth with how detailed do we want to get here? Why are we giving details, are they really necessary? In the case of one woman, the medical examiners placed her in several positions which mirrored the original abuse and examined her vagina repeatedly while she was naked. The final audio we used is explicit. But the reason that we go into as much detail as we do is because this examination that she goes through is emblematic of what the state was doing to women for decades at this point.^[b]

Indeed, effective writing about trauma requires an appreciation of how to balance out a range of issues that stand in tension to each other. For example:

- **How much is it about the harm, helplessness, and loss of control that CRSV brings into people's lives? How much is it about resistance and recovery – what it took, and continues to take, to survive?**

However grim and bleak a situation looks, survivors do have positive things going on in their lives. Reflecting just horror and pure powerlessness back onto people is neither accurate nor helpful.

- **How much is it about someone's individual personal experience and how much about the broader context – especially the political and social situation?**

If you don't provide enough focus on the wider context, a piece risks becoming a human-interest story of a bizarre and troubling kind – one that lacks any real purpose and offers audiences little understanding of what is happening or where solutions might lie. CRSV doesn't happen in a vacuum – as a topic 'rape in war' is not intelligible without reference to the forces that are driving the conflict.

But paying too little attention to individuals and their personal circumstances can also be disrespectful, as it may give the impression that someone was only included to illustrate a particular statistic.

Negotiating competing tensions

Each case will require a different series of balancing measures. Keeping clear sight of this is often complicated by the way that violence can have a mesmerising impact and drag us into a place where the rest seems irrelevant. Threatening, traumatic content tends to promote binary thinking: it is very easy to get stuck on details or limited angles.

Here is a short checklist to consider when you are writing up or in the edit:

- Does this stray too far into graphic description of a physical or intimate nature?
- Are there references to someone's body, appearance, clothing and so on, which run a risk of sexualising the description (and even inadvertently endorsing motivations for abuse)?
- Does my narrative predict the future ruination of an individual or a community? However bleak things look, it is inaccurate and prejudicial to imply that recovery is impossible. (If you are having difficulty in seeing anything beyond the darkness, ask yourself who this person is beyond the abuse. Where do they get courage and support from?)

[b] Kariuki took part in our research for this.

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- Alternately, am I veering too far in the opposite direction and injecting a tone of false optimism in a bid to artificially lighten a desperate situation? Apart from the obvious problem with accuracy, journalism that exaggerates empowerment can alienate those who don't recognise their circumstances in the description.
- If my piece includes the voices of both perpetrators and survivors, is there anything in my treatment of the narrative that centres abusers' perspectives or inflates their power? (Getting this right is complex. Separating these voices out into separate reports may be more straightforward.)
- Does my account focus on rape to the exclusion of other traumas people experience in conflict? People may have seen their relatives killed and lost their homes and livelihoods. They may be refugees struggling to build new lives. All these things matter to people, and survivors may not understand a journalist's preoccupation with just one dimension of their losses.

Packaging the story: notes for editors

The way that a story is packaged – the headline, photo-captions, the stills used to promote a film, the summary, the way it is presented on social media – can have a huge impact on how the story is perceived and the effect it has on the people who feature in it.

One clear danger is sexualising the story – making it sensational in a way that traduces the real context. In sexual violence, sex may happen – but these stories are not in any way about normal sexual activity.

Terms like 'sex slaves' are voyeuristic and risk turning abuse into entertainment; expressions such as 'child brides' are better described as 'abduction and sexual abuse of a minor'; someone who has been forced into prostitution is not a 'girlfriend'.

Here, Jineth Bedoya, who has written extensively on CRSV in Latin America, describes how patterns of sexual assault perpetrated by paramilitaries are masked behind inappropriate and out-dated language:

We have campaigned hard in the media to stop talking about 'crimes of passion' when journalists refer to rape or femicide.

Society still considers rape to be linked to the sexual provocation that a woman deliberately aims towards her victim. Hence the 'passion'.

But in reality, the provocation here is the very idea contained in this type of journalism that such crimes are committed in the name of 'love'.

In many trials I have heard men who rape, justifying themselves with this argument. They say that they sexually assaulted them, or killed them, because they 'loved' them.

Be aware too that the framing of rape as an inevitable consequence of war is a myth. Apart from being a punishable war crime, research shows that that it is not prevalent in all conflicts, even where irregular combatants are involved.^[c]

Consider whether your own internal style guide needs updating to reflect these matters. Wherever you can, include resources for support organisations and information that might be helpful for any sexual violence survivor reading or viewing the piece.

[c] Carlo Koos (2017) Sexual violence in armed conflicts: research progress and remaining gaps, Third World Quarterly, available [here](#).

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Additional resources

In **The Pornography Trap**, Jina Moore discussed the challenges of getting the language right. **This toolkit** from the Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women discusses the reporting of sexual violence in general and has a section that reflects on language choices.

This tip sheet from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center also covers all forms of sexual violence in the U.S. and is not dedicated to CRSV. Nevertheless, it illustrates the power of taking a statistical context-led approach.

On the Dart Centre's website, **Nina Berman** reflects on the importance of context and on making appropriate visual choices – all of which is covered in more detail in the next section.

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#8.

TELLING THE STORY

THE IMAGES DON'T FADE: BE CAREFUL WITH VISUAL CHOICES

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TELLING THE STORY

THE IMAGES DON'T FADE: BE CAREFUL WITH VISUAL CHOICES

Once images are out there, they can't be reeled back in. Universal access to the internet can put people in many kinds of danger.

When you're reporting on CRSV, the visual choices you make – whether in filmed footage or in photographs – are vitally important. Particularly now, in the digital age, images have an afterlife long beyond that of the story you're working on. It is crucial that survivors fully understand how they'll be presented visually and what the implications are. You should consider:

- **Is there strong justification for identifying survivors, or is it safer to start with anonymity?**
- **Have they given their meaningful consent to be photographed or filmed? Do they understand the reach of social media that may be seen in their communities?**
- **Is there anything in the image that could inadvertently reveal their identities?**
- **How can I involve them in image making so that they are comfortable with the final products?**
- **And the basic ethics check: would I be happy for myself or a family member to be filmed or photographed this way?**

"Let me be clear – images of conflict rape and rape survivors need to be made and widely seen. They just need to be made differently in ways that protect subjects, that respect context, that don't perpetuate cliched stereotypes, and aren't presented by media companies as some kind of magical elixirs for survivors."
Nina Berman^[a]

Images are a vital component of conflict reporting, including on CRSV, and can be a powerful means of connecting with readers. But there is also significant scope for harm to survivors, that goes beyond the risks of interviewing them.

Visual clichés are common – showing the survivor as isolated and brutalised, removed from their own environment, or focusing intensely on the physical. On some occasions, this can also tap into a long history of racist imagery that dates from colonialism and slavery. Visual literacy is a vital component of getting this right.

Moreover, images are shared easily in the digital age, on different devices and across platforms, meaning that survivors can be haunted by them even if they live in remote communities and for years to come. In the Balkans wars of the 1990s, there were cases in which women married without telling their husbands that they had been raped. Few had any idea that archival material might still be available online, decades later.

The digital age is also giving rise to more image-led stories, and the pressure on editors and photographers to produce the most shocking, attention-grabbing picture can be intense. This can result in images that fetishize the body of a survivor or identify them unnecessarily.

[a] Nina Berman is a documentary photographer who has covered conflicts in Bosnia and Afghanistan. A contributor to the research for this project, she has written on the ethics of photography in conflict and in peacetime and is a professor of journalism at Columbia University. For more, see: <https://dartcenter.org/resources/visual-choices-covering-sexual-violence-conflict-zones>

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As previously discussed in section #3 on consent, involving interviewees in decisions about how they will be portrayed is good practice. Journalists reporting on the rape of Yazidi women by ISIS thought they were guaranteeing the anonymity of the women by photographing them with their faces covered but in fact they were easily identifiable within their communities by their eyes and distinctive scarves.

Making more effective and ethical visual choices

While photojournalists are often operating with pressure from the desk to get the most impactful image, it is possible to make images of CRSV survivors that avoid harm to the subject and clichés even when time is tight. Here are some questions to ask yourself about the images you are taking:

- Could you start with the assumption that any images of survivors will be anonymous, and that they'll only be identified if there's a strong justification for doing so? Consider discussing this in detail with your editor before arriving at your destination.
- There are many powerful and creative ways of making images which don't identify survivors. It is best to think these through well ahead of time. Maybe keep a digital scrapbook of the many ways others have achieved this.
- Given that the story is about rape, be aware of how you are depicting the survivor's body. What part of the body are you drawing attention to and how can you avoid any perception of the person as a sexual object?
- Try to avoid visual clichés that suggest the person is lonely or destroyed. In some cases, extreme isolation may be the reality of the story, but usually people do have a broader context of support – and it is more accurate to reflect that.

If you are using digital techniques to mask identity, the original pixels need to be removed from the image, not just blurred and, of course, you should make sure that there is no metadata in a file that identifies location. It is also important to think about who might be around when images are being taken and why. Here are some points to consider:

- Would the subject like to have someone present with them or are there people around who shouldn't be watching? For documentary filmmakers, consider minimising the crew.
- After the images have been taken, consider showing them to the survivors to allow them to express whether they are happy with the way they have been captured.
- Make sure the survivors understand that images of them may be around for a very long time and that they can be shared across platforms, even in their own community.

Are there ways of not rushing the assignment? Could you discuss how the shoot will work in advance and explain how long it will take? Remember that children can never give consent to have their identity shared, regardless of whether an adult provides it.

Photojournalism and Editors

"I can see how a photographer might not have all these things going on in their head, but an editor, that's just shocking. I feel that for editors, there's more of a sense of responsibility about being visually literate in terms of historical context."

Nina Berman.^[a]

Photographers interact with survivors and make decisions about visual choices. But editors bear ultimate responsibility for what images are commissioned and chosen from a set of pictures before they reach the

[a] Nina Berman contributed to this project see also: <https://dartcenter.org/resources/visual-choices-covering-sexual-violence-conflict-zones>

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public. What might be appropriate for an inside page – where it has meaning and context – might have an altogether different impact if it stands alone on a cover or in an Instagram post.

With the benefit of expertise and time to think strategically away from the pressures of the field, editors should consider the visual language that a photograph may deliberately or inadvertently reference. There's a long history of images of enslaved people, for instance, that image-makers working in developing countries should avoid.

Photo editors might also have the power to make decisions about the afterlife of an image – its licensing and availability – as well as the way in which it is used on social media.

As an editor, you may be working with long-term colleagues or commissioning freelancers you've never met. Making time for a brief 10-minute conversation about boundaries, meaningful consent, and anonymity can make a huge difference. Here are some things to consider:

- Have you had a proper conversation with photographers around consent?
- Do survivors really need to be identified? What visual treatments would work for you while preserving anonymity?
- Captions are part of the story and, just like the images, they shouldn't fetishise or stigmatise the person.
- Can you give images of CRSV survivors a time limit? Can you make them objects for one-story use that don't get sold onto agencies?
- How are you using images on social media? Do you need to show a survivor's face or body on Instagram, for instance, or is there another way of promoting the story which does not leave an individual survivor carrying the whole weight of it?

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