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**#1.**

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

**AM I  
SUFFICIENTLY  
PREPARED  
FOR THIS?**



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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.

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## 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.<sup>[a]</sup> 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.<sup>[b]</sup>*

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.

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## 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.

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## 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](#).]

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[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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