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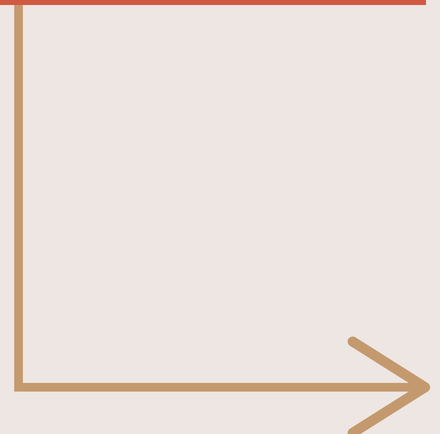
#2.

THREE FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS

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



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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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