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Please consider only printing the greyscale article pages

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TELLING THE STORY

REMEMBER:
SEXUAL
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IS NEVER
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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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