

How to sensitively report rape and sexual assault

What journalists write and broadcast in the media impacts the general public's understanding of rape and sexual assault. Therefore, it is crucial that the reportage be done in a manner that protects the identity of the survivor, gives out accurate facts, and treats the incident with sensitivity.

Choose your words carefully

- The use of 'survivor of sexual assault' is favoured over 'victim'.
- Don't make the act seem less grave by using 'had sex with' instead of 'raped', or 'fondled' instead of 'molested'.
- Don't lead the reader towards making assumptions about the survivor by using adjectives like 'pitiful' and 'helpless'.
- Get the facts of the case right—don't refer to the 'accused' as the 'convicted' or vice-versa. This could affect the case adversely.

Choose your writing style carefully

- Reporting on rape and sexual assault calls for the use of the active voice.
- Say that 'XYZ raped her' or 'XYZ assaulted her' instead of saying 'She was raped' or 'She was assaulted'.
- Shift the focus to the accused instead of the survivor.

Choose your tone carefully

- Do not speak to the survivor, her family or the general public in a moralizing tone.
- Do not use lines such as 'Women should only wear saris, says a city official' and 'Women should not go out after 8 pm, says a local politician' matter-of-factly. Views such as these must be questioned.
- Journalists should abstain from providing an opinion about the survivor based on where the incident took place (for e.g., a bar), what the survivor was wearing at the time, or what time of the day it was.

Choose the details you need to disclose

- The survivor's name, address and details about her family should never be disclosed.
- No indirect mention should be made that might reveal the identity of the survivor. The colour of her hair, the places she frequents, the area she lives in, the vehicle she rides, the number of siblings she has, whether she has a boyfriend or not—all of these are just a few examples and such details in a report are absolutely irrelevant and unnecessary.
- No details about the family of the accused should be shared if they are not relevant to the investigation.
- News channels must exercise sensitivity, discretion and sound judgment particularly in the following cases:
 - when disclosure of details of the sexual assault would only serve to re-traumatize the survivor;

- when details of the sexual assault are needed to be disclosed to secure a safe environment. (Source: *Guidelines on Reportage of Cases of Sexual Assault, News Broadcasters Association (NBA)*)

Choose and treat your sources with caution and quote them carefully

- Do not write a story from the perspective of a single source.
- When looking for quotes, speak only with those experts who are qualified to comment on the subject.
- Ask the police to substantiate the charges against the accused instead of quoting lines from a conversation with a police officer.
- Do not assume what your sources feel or would want to say. Do not carry lines such as ‘We can assume the police are in a tight spot’ or ‘It can be said the doctors need some more time to comment on the incident’.

Choose the focus of your story

- A few days after the incident, focus on the bigger picture with follow-up stories, though with due sensitivity.
- If an incident happens in the morning or the afternoon, comment on how sexual violence is not limited to a particular time instead of commenting on what the survivor or accused was doing at that time.
- If an incident happens in a public place, comment on increasing the safety of citizens in public places instead of commenting on what the survivor was doing there.
- Do not feed public fears and myths. Instead, provide the general public a lens with which it can see the larger picture and the seriousness of the crime.

Understand the need for confidentiality and privacy

- Disclosing only necessary details helps protect the survivor’s, witnesses’ and their family’s identity.
- Do not, under any circumstances, harass the survivor, witness or their families with repeated phone calls or visits to their homes without their consent.
- If a journalist discloses the identity of the survivor in any manner, he or she can be jailed for a period of 2 years and fined.
- The Press Council of India or News Broadcasters Association can also take action against the journalist.

Use of graphics, images

- Reports on sexual crimes are usually accompanied by images or graphics where a girl or woman is shown cowering and hiding in shame in a dark corner. Sensitise the editing desk, illustrator or art department to avoid this depiction, which further stigmatizes the woman while letting the perpetrator go scot free.

Source: *Satyamev Jayate website, Sameera Khan, News Broadcasters Association and Population First*
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