

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*
Update: 3rd December 2019.

STYLE GUIDE

Terminology to be used while reporting on LGBT community issues

- Use: “Transgender people” or “a transgender person” not “transgenders” or “a transgender”

Transgender should be used as an adjective not as a noun. Do not say, “Seema is a transgender” or “the parade included many transgenders”. Instead say, “Seema is a transgender person” or “the parade included many transgender people.”

- Use: “Transition” not “sex change, pre-operative” or “post-operative”

While the terms “pre-” and “post-”operative are current within the transsexual community who are exploring, considering or opting for surgical intervention, trans persons should not be categorized as “pre-” and “post-” surgery as that conveys the idea that one can truly change one’s sex only after surgery, which is not the case.

- Use: “intersex person”, not “Hermaphrodite”

The word hermaphrodite is an outdated, stigmatising and misleading term usually used to sensationalise intersex people.

- Use a transgender person’s chosen name

Often transgender people cannot afford or access a legal name change. They should be afforded the same respect for their chosen name as anyone else who lives by a name other than their birth name (like actors or writers)

- Ask transgender people which pronoun they would like to use

A person who identifies as a certain gender, whether or not he or she has taken hormones or had surgery should be referred to using the pronouns appropriate for that gender. If it is not possible to ask their preference directly, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person’s appearance and gender expression. For example, if the person wears a sari and uses the name “Rani”, use feminine pronouns.

It is inappropriate to put quotation marks around either the transgender person’s chosen name or the pronoun that reflects their gender identity.

Source: Laxmi Murthy, *Women, Men and the Emerging Other*, pg. no. 50, “Missing Half the Story”, Kalpana Sharma (ed), Zubaan, Delhi 2010

STYLE GUIDE

Time for a Gender Break

Below are a few guidelines that a marketing or advertising professional could run through before conceiving brand communication that is sensitive to men, women and transgender people.

1. You are ready to put something out in the market. Pause. Ask yourself:
 - Is the woman being stereotyped or is she being given equal importance as the man?
 - Have you shown a woman as equally competent in various different spaces that you are portraying, be it home, office or in the community in general?
2. Try and avoid inappropriate imagery and language that has the danger of reinforcing the stereotypes of women and that could limit their participation in the decision-making process.
3. Use language that is non-offensive - what a woman is called, how she is called out to and how she is spoken to.
4. When you portray a diverse range of men and women, make sure it is equal and fair in terms of appearance, age, activity and background.
5. Let us depict Indian families of all kinds- one daughter, two daughters, one son and one daughter and two sons. In today's day and age it's time we break the age-old, regressive "boys complete the family" thought.
6. Let us portray equal and democratic families where household responsibilities are shared and not gendered. Men working in the kitchen, women in charge at the office, girls shown as outdoorsy or studying, boys helping with domestic chores are some examples.
7. Let us avoid glorifying eve teasing and ogling as fun acts. If unavoidable, balance the portrayal by building a message condemning the act.
8. Avoid showing women as damsels in distress and in need of a male to protect them.
9. Avoid objectifying women with inappropriate and exploitative sexual imagery.
10. The burden of wedding expenses is one of the main reasons why people do not want daughters. And our portrayal of large, lavish weddings and the gifting being done by the bride's family do nothing to change the situation. It's time we challenge that thinking by changing what we put out there.
11. There is always the temptation to project widows and single women as helpless and vulnerable, deserving of pity and in need of help. Let us, for most times, create and conceive communication that shows women in charge, in a powerful position, in roles that society is not used to seeing them portrayed.

STYLE GUIDE

Media reporting on and portraying gender biased sex selection and safe abortion issues: guidelines for media

The Ipsas-Population First media style guide is a tool to assist those reporting on or portraying gender biased sex selection (with specific focus on pre-birth) and abortion issues in the media. These are intended to assist media to address issues of gender biased sex selection without undermining the right of women to access safe abortion services.

Sensitive, informed and balanced representation of gender biased sex selection and abortion can help to:

- Address the deep rooted gender violence and discrimination;
- Ensure women's access to safe abortion services; and
- Normalize abortion within reproductive health

Terminology

A key step to effective portrayal of the issue is in selecting appropriate terminology. Using simple and focused terminology to indicate abortion and/or pre-birth sex selection would prevent conflating abortion and pre-birth sex selection, and discourage establishing the belief that abortion is illegal. Using highly charged words such as "feticide" or "murder" generate emotions that position women against her pregnancy or fetus, rather than promoting clarity. It is important that the language chosen to present the issue of gender biased sex selection does not negatively impact women's access to safe abortion services.

Terms to be avoided

- **Female Feticide** – This term has a negative connotation and makes it sound like murder. Very often this gets written as only feticide which stigmatizes abortion.
- **Sex selective abortion** – Connects sex determination to abortion and very often leads to the interpretation that all abortions are for sex selection which is not true.
- **Murder/Killing** – These are strong terms that convey a very negative emotion. This also leads to personification of the fetus and is not very effective communication from the perspective of reproductive rights.
- **Unborn child** – This phrase also leads to personification of the fetus and is not the recommended terminology from a rights perspective.

Terms like unborn child should not be used to denote a fetus as it projects abortion as the killing of a child. For the same reason, using words like feticide, murder or killing as synonyms of abortion give the impression that abortion is a criminal act, which it is not.

Appropriate terms

- **Safe abortion** – Termination of pregnancy by a skilled person at a place having all the required medical equipment and that is recognized by government to carry out abortions.
- **Medical termination of pregnancy** – This is the term used for induced abortion performed by surgical or medical method, for conditions specified under the MTP Act.
- **Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques** – This refers to methods used to determine/identify the sex of the fetus. Pre-conception sex determination can be done in both pre and

post-implantation of the embryo. In pre-implantation stage, sperm of desired sex are separated using various lab techniques and used for fertilization with the egg. In vitro- fertilization is also a popular method for bearing child of a desired sex as the gender selection success rates are high for this technique. The use of ultrasound technology has become most common mode of sex determination in the post-implantation stage. The law does not allow for determination and disclosure of sex of the fetus. However, care may be taken to not position ultrasonography as a negative technology since it plays a very vital role in diagnostics especially identification of pregnancy related complications.

- **Pre-birth sex determination** – Pre-birth sex determination is any act of determining/identifying the sex of the fetus both pre-conception as well as pre-natal using any method, scientific or unscientific.
- **Gender biased sex selection** – This phrase positions the social dimension of sex selection and refers to any act of discriminating against the girl child even before she is born and includes pre-conception and pre-natal sex selection.

Reporting Tips

Abortion

- **Positioning abortion** – Awareness about legality of abortion among men and women in India is very low. This is further complicated with the stigma around talking about abortion. It is therefore important that stories on maternal health, maternal mortality or even declining child sex ratio should clearly highlight that abortion is legal in India for a broad range of conditions, while gender biased sex selection is illegal under any circumstances. Furthermore, when performed by a trained and certified provider, abortion is a safe medical procedure.
- **De-linking abortion with morality** – A women and her partner may decide to terminate a pregnancy for a variety of reasons. Abortion does not directly signify immorality and making such correlations further stigmatizes abortion and women seeking abortion, reinforcing the belief that abortion is illegal and driving women to unsafe abortion providers.

Gender Biased Sex Selection

It is advisable to avoid use of explicit technical details of how and where the sex determination tests are done and how the results are communicated. Such information may make more couples with son preference seek such illegal services. The story could highlight what is illegal in India as per the PCPNDT Act.

The focus of the communication should be on why girls are not welcome in some Indian families due to deep seated gender biases and patriarchal values. It is important to frame gender biased sex selection in the context of son-preference, gender discrimination and gender based violence. Also explore links to value of the girl child and women and the resultant aversion to girl child in India.

Avoid Blaming Women

Often while reporting on abortion, pre-birth sex selection, infanticide and/or abandonment of newborns, the focus is on the woman or the mother-in-law. Son preference is driven by strong social or family pressure, in which men and women both have a role to play.

STYLE GUIDE CONTINUED

Promote Public Understanding of Why Women Need Abortion

Studies show that even if every man and woman has access to contraception, there may still be a need for abortion. Approximately 33 million contraceptive users experience unintended pregnancies each year (WHO, 2012). Most women in India do not have the decision

making power to determine their sexual and reproductive choices and have limited access to contraceptives as well as other health services. To ensure that women are in better control of their reproductive lives, access to both contraceptives as well as safe abortion services should be ensured.

Myth/Misconception	Reality
Abortion is illegal and a crime	Abortion is legal in India when the pregnancy is due to a rape, is likely to be a threat to the life of the woman or the child and when the pregnancy is due to failure of contraception
Abortions are more unsafe than pregnancy	Abortion is a safe medical procedure if the pregnancy is terminated under the supervision of a trained service provider.
Second trimester abortions are illegal	According to MTP Act, abortions are legal till 20 weeks. However, as per the MTP Act, a termination that exceeds 12 weeks but is less than 20 weeks of gestation can be performed by a registered medical practitioner as defined by the law and requires the opinion of two RMPs.
All abortions are sex selective abortions	2-4 % of abortions in India are estimated to be sex selective abortions (Jha et.al 2011). Data showing increase in abortions in a particular period/area should not be interpreted as an increase in sex selective abortions.
Abortion services are accessed only by women who have illegitimate pregnancies	Review of reports shows that majority of abortions are sought by married women in India
Abortion and I-pills are the same	Medical abortion drugs are to terminate a confirmed unwanted pregnancy whereas emergency contraceptive pills are to prevent conception from taking place.

Framing Headlines

One often finds that even the most sensitive articles are given headlines which are sensational or shocking. It is important to ensure that the headline reflects the content of the article. Misleading and sensational headings result in diluting the positive messages being conveyed in the article. Headlines being prominent and eye catching have greater recall value and there is a possibility that the readers may read just the headline and make their own judgments about the issue. Avoid headlines which blame the woman e.g. a blot on Motherhood or criminalize the act of abortion e.g. murder of the unborn child or pass a moral judgment e.g. projecting women opting for abortion as immoral or sinners. Positive headlines would help promote positive perceptions about abortion and reduce the stigma associated with it.

Misleading and sensational headings diluting the positive messages

Graphics

As important as language are the visuals that accompany stories about abortion. Avoid the use of dramatic photographs or images, such as full-term pregnant bellies or graphic photos of bloody, mutilated (and supposedly aborted) fetuses. These equate abortion with gruesome killing, generating a level of negative emotion, rather than clarifying a delicate issue.



Media Questions

For any queries and clarifications, please contact: Population First & Ipsas