

# Ethical Guidelines for Journalists

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# Key Ethical Principles for Journalists

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## Introduction

These guidelines are adapted from the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics<sup>1</sup>, the Ethics Guidelines from the Canadian Association of Journalists<sup>2</sup> and a draft Journalism Code of Ethics from NAI in Afghanistan. This document is not a set of rules but rather a guide that encourages all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of their medium.

This document has been developed by the UN Communications Group in Afghanistan in 2016 as a resource for journalists to support them in ethical reporting.

## Seek Truth and Report It

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

### *Journalists should:*

- Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
- Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.
- Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.
- Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.
- Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- Avoid undercover or other secret methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless and marginalized.
- Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find unacceptable.

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<sup>1</sup> Society of Professional Journalists (2014) "SPJ Code of Ethics". Available at: <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Association of Journalists (2011) "Ethics Guidelines". Available at: <http://www.caj.ca/ethics-guidelines/>

- Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- Provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate.
- Never distort contents of news, photos or videos
- Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear and who are more marginalized.
- Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.
- Distinguish news from advocacy; do not get involved, directly or indirectly, in advocacy activities that harm professional integrity and credibility.
- Never plagiarize. Always attribute.

## Minimize Harm

Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

### ***Journalists should:***

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with children or adolescents, survivors of gender-based violence, other vulnerable groups and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent.
- Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.
- Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.
- Avoid discrimination and stereotyping by ethnicity, language, region, race, gender, disability, etc. in the process of obtaining, processing and publishing/broadcasting facts and events.
- Avoid photographing, filming and interviewing children (under 18) without the permission of the parents or legal guardians.
- If reporting news concerning survivors of violence, avoid publishing/broadcasting anything that compromises the dignity or material and spiritual interests of the survivor.

## Act Independently

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

### ***Journalists should:***

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.
- Avoid participating in any activity that may tarnish their professional integrity and credibility
- Not submit to direct or indirect pressures by government authorities, non-governmental individuals and influential groups to publish or not publish, to broadcast or not broadcast, facts according to the desire of others. Be courageous but vigilant about personal security.

## Be Accountable and Transparent

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

### ***Journalists should:***

- Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.
- Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.
- Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.
- Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.
- Abide by the same high standards they expect of others.
- Always mention the source in the event of publishing and broadcasting products made by others.
- Avoid insulting, accusing, defaming, degrading and abusing others in media products

## Principles for Reporting on Children<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> UNICEF. "Principles for ethical reporting on children" Available at:  
[http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media\\_1482.html](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media_1482.html)

Reporting on children and young people has its special challenges. In some instances the act of reporting on children places them or other children at risk of retribution or stigmatization. These guidelines are meant to support the best intentions of ethical reporters: serving the public interest without compromising the rights of children.

1. The dignity and rights of every child are to be respected in every circumstance.
2. In interviewing and reporting on children, special attention is needed to ensure each child's right to privacy and confidentiality, to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution, including the potential of harm and retribution.
3. The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights.
4. When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child's right to have their views taken into account are to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
5. Those closest to the child's situation and best able to assess it are to be consulted about the political, social and cultural ramifications of any reportage.
6. Do not publish a story or an image which might put the child, siblings or peers at risk even when identities are changed, obscured or not used.

## **A responsible journalist knows that her/his stories matter**

*While reporting on children:*

- She/he respects the dignity and right of every child in every circumstance
- She/he avoids publication of images that are damaging to children
- She/he obtains consent through written permission from his/her guardian for all interviews, video or documentary photographs
- She/he uses fair, open and straightforward methods for obtaining video/photographs and always with the knowledge and consent of children/guardian
- She/he guards against identifying children visually or otherwise, unless it is in the public interest
- She/he considers carefully the consequences of publication or broadcast of any material concerning children

## **Principles for Reporting on Gender-based Violence<sup>4</sup>**

Gender-based Violence (GBV) is a complicated and sensitive subject involving the use of terms such as 'rape', 'sexual abuse', 'child marriage', 'sex trafficking', 'sexual exploitation', 'emotional violence', 'domestic violence' and 'harassment,' to name a few. All of these terms immediately provoke strong feelings.

Reporting on GBV means discussing issues that are often considered 'taboo,' and talking publicly about intimate and distressing matters. This can be particularly challenging in countries where tradition and religion play an important role in everyday life.

Journalists have an important role to play in ensuring that women have a voice in the media. In doing so, those guilty of GBV can be brought to justice; journalists can help play a role in improving services for survivors; and they can contribute towards its prevention by encouraging a 'zero tolerance' attitude to violence against women and all forms of gender-based violence, whether experienced by women, girls, boys or men.

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<sup>4</sup> UNFPA (2015) "Reporting on Gender-based Violence in the Syria Crisis – A Journalist's Handbook". Available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20Journalsits%27s%20Handbook%20Small%5B6%5D.pdf>

## **Accuracy**

Getting your facts right should be at the core of all journalism, and this is true of covering GBV as well. Whilst your interviews should be sensitive, you should also ensure that your reporting is factually correct. You should be specific when mentioning crimes, and not attempt to report on criminal proceedings unless you understand the legal processes involved. Some reporters try and use euphemistic language (e.g., ‘had his way with her’) rather than accurate language (e.g., ‘he raped her’). This leads to misleading reports.

## **Fairness**

You should always be fair with people you interview, and when speaking to people who have experienced GBV, you have an extra duty of care to protect potentially vulnerable sources. In this context, the concept of ‘informed consent’ is particularly important: this means that the person you interview should be made fully aware of the consequences of appearing in the media. Many GBV survivors who have spoken ‘on the record’ have later faced a range of problems resulting from being identified, including attacks and community rejection. For your interview to be fair, you need to inform your interviewee of these potential risks.

## **Impartiality**

It is not the job of a responsible reporter to judge or discriminate. It is particularly important to ensure that you do not mention details that can be interpreted as implying blame towards the GBV survivor. If you mention the clothes worn at the time of an attack, for example, or other aspects of a survivor’s appearance, this can be seen to imply judgment of them. This can be particularly true of features: some journalists may attempt to add detail and ‘colour,’ which can unintentionally focus the onus of blame away from the perpetrator.

## **Duty to Inform**

When reporting on GBV, it is important to distinguish between what is ‘in the public interest’ and what is ‘of interest to the public.’ Some GBV stories feature high-profile figures and contain lots of personal detail: this tends to treat the subject in a sensationalist way, with no useful information given for GBV survivors.

## **Respecting Privacy**

Principled, ethical journalism means respecting the privacy of both GBV survivors and bereaved families. You should also be wary of ‘jigsaw identification’ when granting anonymity. This happens where audiences piece together details - such as location, age, clothing, or family members - even though you don’t name a survivor, or show their face.



## Guidelines for Photography

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### Informed Consent

Photographers must ideally obtain informed written or videotaped consent of individuals to be photographed or filmed whenever this is considered necessary (see Table 1). Informed consent means that the individual **understands and agrees** with the taking of the photograph, as well as with its purpose and the planned use (including its publication). The consent must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the individual is not coerced in any way<sup>5</sup>.

Consent forms should be filled out and signed (or verbal consent recorded) before starting photographing or filming any subjects. If a child or adolescent is photographed or filmed, then written or videotaped verbal consent should be obtained from the parent or guardian. Filming or photographing women in Afghanistan is a particularly sensitive issue and informed consent is absolutely crucial.

Photographers must avoid promising limited use of the photographs or videos. If they sense any reluctance, confusion, fear or anger, they should refrain from taking the photographs or videos. Photographers must comply with local laws, traditions or restrictions in taking images.

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<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) (2015) "Guidance on obtaining consent for photographs, videos and interviews". (Unpublished).

**Table 1. Consent and permission requirements in connection with photographs and/or videos<sup>6</sup>**

Consent not required	Written consent or recorded verbal consent required		
General	General	Particular care required	Extreme care required
<p>Non-recognizable individuals in public (faces and all other identifying features are obscured), except as otherwise provided in this table</p> <p>Public figures in public (e.g. celebrities, government officials in events, conferences or launches)</p> <p>Crowds in public not depicting identifiable individuals (e.g. an audience at an outdoor concert)</p>	<p>All recognizable individuals, in all settings, where there is or may be an expectation of privacy</p>	<p>Photographs of children and adolescents (consent is required from parent or guardian)</p> <p>Recognizable individuals in any setting where <b>personal, private or clinical information</b> is exposed in the photograph or film or documented in the corresponding text (e.g. patients or health workers)</p> <p>If photographs are to be taken in a building or facility that is not open to the public (e.g. a hospital, a health centre or a school), written permission is required from the owner, director or manager in order to access the building and take photographs or film</p>	<p>Extreme care is required in the following contexts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clinical status that may carry a stigma (e.g. HIV-positive, AIDS or sexually transmitted infections, a history of pregnancy termination, tuberculosis);</li> <li>• sex work, sexual orientation, alcohol and drug use;</li> <li>• survivors of gender-based violence</li> </ul> <p>All images of the above-mentioned subjects should preferably be photographed in a manner in which the subjects are not recognizable</p>

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) (2015) "Guidance on obtaining consent for photographs, videos and interviews". Geneva, Switzerland. (Unpublished).

## Photographing vulnerable individuals

When taking photographs or videos of persons whose clinical status or social situation may carry a stigma (such as people living with HIV, sex workers, drug users, prostitutes, survivors of sexual violence or other sexual exploitation), and more generally persons at risk of reprisal, violence or rejection in their communities if their identity or personal information about them is exposed, photographers must avoid revealing the identities of the subjects in the photographs or video. Any information collected concerning the identities of vulnerable individuals should be treated as confidential. Whenever possible, subjects should be photographed in such a way that they are not recognizable.

Special care must be taken during times of crisis, to avoid exploiting an individual's vulnerability when he or she is suffering from trauma or grief.

## Composing photographs so that subjects cannot be identified

An alternative approach to avoid revealing a subject's identity, is to compose photos in such a way that subjects cannot be identified. For example, photographs of health workers attending to patients should be taken from an angle in which neither the face nor other unique characteristics of the patients can be seen. Likewise, photographs of child workers should be taken from behind to illustrate what they are doing, but without revealing their identity.

## Special guidelines on photographing children

### Photographing or filming children and adolescents

All efforts should be made to photograph or film children in an age-appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. The best interest of the child must always be paramount, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights.

Before photographing or filming a child below the legal age of consent, written or videotaped verbal consent should be obtained from the parent(s) or guardian(s).

Before photographing or filming a child, the purpose of the photograph or video and how it will be used should also be explained to the child, as well as to his or her parent(s) or guardian(s). To the extent possible, children must participate in decisions affecting them.

Attention should be paid to where and how children are photographed or filmed. They should always be adequately clothed and not indecently exposed. Care should be taken to ensure children's comfort and consider the effects of surroundings on the child during the photographing or filming<sup>7</sup>.

### Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents

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<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization (WHO) (2015) "Guidance on obtaining consent for photographs, videos and interviews". Geneva, Switzerland. (Unpublished).

The need to protect the visual identity of sexually abused children is more broadly understood than that relating to other kinds of abuse. However, many media still commonly reveal the faces and names of sexually abused children.<sup>8</sup>

A critical question to help discussion is: If your child were sexually abused, would you permit her/his identity to be revealed with this information? For the vast majority, the answer is no. Publishing the identities of sexual abuse survivors exposes an intimate suffering, often deepening the sense of powerlessness and humiliation caused by the original abuse. In many communities, it also results in victims being stigmatized and may even increase their risk of future violations.

Still, effectively denouncing sexual exploitation requires documentation of its pervasiveness. Cultural taboos against publicizing sexual abuse increase the risks for potential victims and give them little recourse when it happens. Many professional photographers who respect these needs and who work to secure children's confidence, and ensure their privacy, have demonstrated how imagery that fully protects identities can also be powerful and convincing.

Often, these children participate in the act of protection: turning away from the camera or covering their faces. The result, far from being banal or evasive, tends to underscore their need for protection while also preserving their dignity. Visual treatments, combined with name changes and the real stories of the children - highly credible in their details and social circumstances - dramatically testify to their condition, without being exploitative. Note that the use of black bands across the eyes, or pixelation of a child's face, is NOT recommended, as these techniques tend to 'criminalize' or depersonalize subjects, in addition to ruining the impact of the photograph.

### **Protecting Children at Risk**

Special protection is required in documenting issues that are controversial and culturally sensitive. These include child labour, sexual exploitation, gender-based violence or discrimination, recruitment of child soldiers, trauma, and the stigmatizing impact of these and other issues, such as HIV/AIDS.<sup>9</sup>

Advocating against human rights abuses can put individual children or women at risk of reprisals, including additional physical or psychological harm and life-long stigmatization or rejection by their communities. These risks require that both the taking of images of children and women in high-risk situations, and the subsequent use of those images, respect the subject's rights to privacy, to participate in decisions affecting them, and to protection.

### **When to protect visual identities:**

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<sup>8</sup> UNICEF. "Photography Guidelines: Denouncing Sexual Exploitation". Available at: <http://photos.unicef.org/guidelines-childrights-denounce-exploitation>

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF. "Photography Guidelines: Protect Children at Risk". Available at: <http://photos.unicef.org/guidelines-childrights-protect-children>

In instances where publication of an image may put a child or woman at risk even if the name is changed or omitted, it is advisable not to publish the image at all. Children should not be identified, either visually or by name, if they are:

- victims, or perpetrators, of sexual exploitation
- HIV positive;
- charged or convicted of a crime;
- current or former combatants, IF being so identified puts them at risk of future reprisals.

However, there are instances where risks exist to use of a particular image, but arguments for publishing it are valid. This is the case, for example, with child advocates who have chosen to take a public stance on a potentially high-risk subject, either in their community or in national/international fora. In such instances, the child's right to expression and participation in issues affecting her/him must be respected.

## Annex: Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Journalists

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Below is a collection of questions and ethical dilemmas Afghan journalists have faced or are likely to face while reporting on sensitive issues. These questions and issues collected from professional journalists further illustrate some of the complexities involved in ethical reporting.

The provided “things to consider” are only indicative and can be used as a basis for discussion for example in journalist workshops and trainings.

### Situation:

“How can we obtain the consent of the parents for interviewing their children who are working (child labour)? Often we do not have much time and are not well equipped but we have to prepare our reports in a few hours.”

### Things to consider:

- Take the time to explain to the parents how you would keep the identity of the child and family confidential
- Be honest and remove the parts which would endanger the child or affect the child’s future.
- Use a different name for the child and never reveal the address/village/district of the interviewed child. If it’s an interview for radio or for print media, do not provide any information about their work place to avoid any possible threat or danger.
- In case you need pictures, follow the instructions on photography of children. While taking pictures of children who are working, make sure their face is not recognizable. Their identity should not be recognizable.

### Situation

“Sometimes when we inform parents and ask for consent and permission, they think their children would be in trouble and will not allow us to interview their children. Therefore, how would we be able to persuade the parents?”

### Things to consider:

- Parents/caretakers should be given enough information about the purpose of the interview and why you want to take their child’s photos and talk to the child.
- You should explain to them how the interview will be conducted, what you would ask, what information you need and how long it would take.

- They have the right to say no and you need informed consent before starting to take photos or interview the child. You need to make sure that interviewing a child/broadcasting the interview will not put his/her life at risk.
- You can tell the parents that the child's name could be changed if they wish. The child can be photographed so that s/he cannot not be identified.

**Situation:**

**“Many children are not able to talk or are stressed and not confident enough when interviewed. We have to give them instructions about what to say in most cases. We were taught in a training programme not to make the child say what we want. If we do not do that, many children are not able to give an interview. What is the solution in these cases?”**

**Things to consider:**

- You should not tell children what to say or what you would like them to say just so you get the best story or quote.
- The child's freedom of expression should be protected. When a child is talking in a group interview for example, the reporters should not interrupt him or her. Make your equipment accessible to children so that their stress and tension is released.
- Talk to children with their own language and explain to them what you are doing throughout the whole process. It is of utmost importance to allocate more time when interviewing children.
- To avoid putting them under stress, try to make them understand that this is not a test, nobody is judging them and there are no right or wrong answers.
- Do no harm to any child; avoid questions, attitudes or comments that are judgmental, insensitive to cultural values, that place a child in danger or expose a child to humiliation, or that reactivate a child's pain and grief from traumatic events.

**Situation:**

**“In some cases, parents of a child who was victim of child abuse and violence insist that we should film the child and publish her/his picture. What should we do in such cases?”**

**Things to consider:**

- In spite of the parents' insistence, you should always change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child who is identified as a victim of violence, sexual abuse or exploitation.
- Do not further stigmatise any child; avoid categorisations or descriptions that expose a child to negative reprisals - including additional physical or psychological harm, or to lifelong abuse, discrimination or rejection by their local communities.

#### **Situation:**

**“We were planning to prepare a story or feature on the increasing usage of smart phones and Internet in local areas of Afghanistan. We went to Parwan with the purpose of filming solar panels on the roof. A young local man was helping us in finding appropriate interviewees. He directed us to his own home where his family was also consuming solar power. Our cameraman accompanied him to the rooftop, where the solar panels were located, to film them. Since the home was higher than others around, our cameraman was seen by all neighbors. As the camera started rolling, an angry young man shouted at our cameraman from his door and asked to stop filming immediately. We were a little concerned but when the other person who was helping us told us not take his rude language seriously, our cameraman started filming. But a few minutes later, the angry man came out with a gun this time and was more angry and nervous. The man with his Kalashnikov was trying to fire at our car where we're standing but other people prevented him to do so. At the same time, the person who was helping us was more angry and was trying to attack his neighbors as he also came out with a gun. Finally, with intervention of mediators, the clash ended and we were able to leave the area. Without the help of the mediators, we would have been killed.”**

#### **Things to consider:**

- Inform the neighbours that you are planning on filming, explain to them why you are filming and get their permission and informed consent in advance
- Do not take it for granted that everyone is OK being filmed, even if someone in the community says everyone is fine with it
- In some instances it might be prudent to get written consent
- Do some background research and ask around about cultural sensitivities such as in this case

#### **Situation:**

**“Filming and interviewing children under 18 without the permission of the parents or legal guardians – this is a limitation for journalists; for example if a young 16-year-old guy is playing football or cricket or doing other social activities, in this case journalist has to find his/her guardians for consent? Would be better to specify that if there are political, security or other issues which will endanger the child’s life, in such case consent should be obtained from the parents.”**

#### **Things to consider:**

- As a general guidance, for all children (under 18 years of age), parental consent should be obtained before filming, interviewing and taking photographs
- If it is a group/social activity not specifying a certain child and it is about children going about their normal daily life, specific consent is not needed
- Always have the safety and best interest of the child in mind
- When in doubt whether a child is at risk or not, report on the general situation for children rather than on an individual child



**Situation:**

**“A child/adolescent who is sexually abused insists that he/she should be filmed and his/her story published but the parents of the victim do not want them to be filmed or published. What should be done?”**

**Things to consider:**

- If the child is interviewed, her/his identity should be protected
- You could discuss the purpose of the story with the parents, how it might help other victims in a similar situation and assure them that the child’s name/identity will not be revealed
- Ensure that no further harm is done to the child when conducting the interview
- If s/he is under 18, you must adhere to the parents’ wishes

**Situation**

**“Our colleague has been trying for the past few months to prepare a report on women’s life in the shelters in Kabul; until now, we have not been able to get permission from relevant authority even to discuss with us about this issue. What should be done in such a case?”**

**Things to consider:**

- Be creative, think of different ways of covering the issue. For example, you can interview a woman who has been in a shelter and can talk to you about her experience, find other experts on this topic, including UN agencies that support shelters
- Women’s shelters are a very sensitive issue in this country – you should avoid exposing any locations/staff of shelters
- Explain clearly to the relevant authorities why you are doing the story and what is the purpose of it

**Situation**

**“We wanted to prepare a report on girls who are married to old men (child/forced marriage), no men or girls were ready to be interviewed. How could we approach the issue?”**

**Things to consider:**

- Interview women who were married as children and talk to them, you can talk to relevant experts on the topic, you can for example discuss with religious leaders who are opposed to child and forced marriage
- Do not pressure anyone to give an interview if they feel uncomfortable and unwilling
- Adhere to the principle of “do no harm” and ensure that girls and women are not further traumatized or put at risk

## Situation

**“You are informed that a woman who has been badly beaten by her husband or some close family member has been brought to a nearby hospital. The woman is furious and traumatized, some women from her neighbourhood are with her, furious as well. The woman has torn clothes and she is bleeding, and she wants you to record what has happened to her and the women from her neighbourhood also would like to speak about the issue. What should be done in such a case?”**

### Things to consider:

- Do not put the woman more at risk
- Inform the woman and other women about the potential dangerous consequences of being exposed through a public interview, explain to them the risks
- If she is willing to tell her story, think about framing it within the wider context of GBV in Afghanistan. To make the story comprehensive and balanced, report on the situation overall around domestic violence, with expert inputs, reflecting on existing response by relevant authorities such as the UN
- Protect her identity to prevent reprisals and further harm