GUYANA MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING ON INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

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University of Guyana
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1. INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

The World Health Organization defines interpersonal violence as “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”.

Interpersonal violence therefore included; threatening or abusive language, various forms of stalking and threats including use of technology, physical violence, psychological and emotional abuse, murder, economic and other privations. Harassing someone to harm themselves is also noted in this definition.

2. NEED FOR GUIDELINES

The Media play a crucial role in disseminating reliable information on matters of public importance. However, the Media may sometimes demonstrate a tendency to offer their audiences inadequate or distorted representations of the extent and nature of a crime especially relating to interpersonal violence. The impact that reporting may have on community understanding, attitudes and behaviours can be positive or negative. Media Guidelines are therefore needed to encourage accurate, sensitive and responsible coverage of Interpersonal Violence (which is also referred to as Domestic Violence).

In July 2019, Media practitioners in Guyana expressed the need for reporting Guidelines on Interpersonal Violence at a Domestic Violence Act Workshop facilitated by the University of Guyana. These Guidelines are a response to the call from the Media.

The Media in Guyana are committed to self-regulation. Guidelines provide an opportunity to further educate the Media (journalists, owners, editors, producers, broadcasters, bloggers, videographers and photographers) on practicing responsible journalism. Guidelines therefore do not seek to impose external regulations on the Media but to support their self-regulation by providing a framework for informing their choices to support their practice.
3. IMPACT OF GUIDELINES
Though there are few studies on the impact of Media Guidelines, the ones that do exist point to some important positive impacts.
1. A 30% reduction in the use of the term “domestic violence” to describe instances of intimate partner homicide.
2. A decline in the use of bystander and others as credible informants.
3. An increase in news arenas with help information.
It has been noted that while the impacts recorded cannot be attributed to implementation of guideline alone, “the entire process of developing and disseminating of a handbook served as the catalyst to facilitate ongoing discussions between domestic violence advocates and Media representatives to promote positive change”.

4. NATIONAL CONTEXT
According to research, incidence of domestic violence by an intimate or previous intimate partner in Guyana increased from 74.8% in 2011 to 89% in 2017. Reports of violence experienced by females accounted for more than 80% of all victims. Initial analysis suggests a regionally disproportionate incidence pattern with the highest records from Regions Three (Essequibo Islands-West Demerara), Four (Demerara-Mahaica), and Six (East Berbice-Corentyne). This is however to be corroborated and understood in the context of living, communication and reporting conditions in the other far flung areas of Guyana.
M Murders of females or femicide in Guyana by an intimate partner or family member between 2012 and 2018 also seemed to have increased with a rise in murder-suicides. There also appears to be a possible Werther effect happening in Guyana with at least 2 incidents appearing to occur in quick succession under similar circumstances within a 3 weeks span. Note: the term "Werther effect" is used as a synonym for media induced simulated effects of suicidal behavior. This requires in-depth analysis at a future stage.”While femicide continues to grab national attention for the heinous nature of the crimes, the number of infanticides (infant homicides), deaths, injuries along with the effects of continuous abuse in private settings experienced by women, children, youth, the elderly and men are now being felt by everyone. Links to youth violence, dating violence, sexual violence, violent crime and interpersonal violence experienced directly are well established in the literature”. In Guyana the complexity of varying-cultural and geographic context also complicates a response.

5. THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA
The media therefore specifically, are invested with a burden of responsibility to present information and reports on interpersonal violence and crimes in Guyana for:
1. Public information and education;
2. Prevention;
3. Advocacy for resources to be allocated in support of understanding, mitigating the problem and supporting those individuals and organizations who work in the area to provide solutions;
4. Supporting the healing and safety of those directly involved;
5. Building of trust between Media and masses.

6. GUIDING PRINCIPLES
Media in the interest of the public good are expected to report with consideration to 5 main guiding principles, which can be easily remembered as “BAMSI”.
These are:
1. Balance and fairness
2. Accountability and factuality
3. Minimization of harm
4. Sensitivity to cultural and group issues
5. Integrity and ethics.
These core principles form the basis for the Guyanese Media Guidelines on Reporting Interpersonal Violence, commonly called Domestic Violence.
6. EMPIRICAL CONTEXT FOR GUIDELINES

International: Apart from the local context and experience, the following Guidelines respond to media guidelines across the world.

Codes around the World: These guidelines attempt to correct several tendencies that were noted based on the analysis of 11 codes around the world and stories published in Guyana.

Guyana Specific: Textual and cultural analysis from local press stories on the matter in Guyana have also informed these guidelines.

Legal Obligations: Further, legal provisions in Guyana are considered since Media must be aware that reporting on violence can rise to the level of a criminal conduct which is punishable under Guyana law if reporting does not follow the ethical consideration of the victim’s vulnerabilities.

c) Careless Framing and Use of Language: Framing, which is the selection and selective arrangement of factual and contextual information around a fact, event or incident, affects attributions of responsibility and social judgement. For instance, when reports indicate something like “the cell phone with messages from a lover was found at the scene of the crime of passion” can create in the public imagination possible judgement that (1) the woman was a cheater and deserved to be punished (2) the perpetrator was justified into “flying into a passion upon being cheated upon and may not have intended to kill the person because it was a ‘crime of passion’”. Technically, no journalist should be coming to “judgement” about the cause of a murder or wounding for this is the purview of the court.

d) Unintentional Perversion of Justice: Initial characterization in the media can compromise a legal case and unintentionally rob the victim and their families of justice. The secondary consequence is that it could also undermine the case for the prosecutor and the perpetrator can go free to repeat the same behavior upon unsuspecting others. Of course, these reports can also impact legal cases in other ways, such as witness accounts that can cause false verdicts to be returned. Journalists should be aware of and manage the risk of potential liability damages under defamation laws. They should also be aware of the way to enter and leave a crime scene since this could help to contaminate the scene and evidence. Evidence should never be touched, removed or even mentioned in public.

e) Forgetting Rights of Victims and Survivors: Another area which appears not to be considered often enough are the rights of the victim and their families (whether they were murdered or survived). In Guyana, increasingly murders of women take place in the presence of their children and other close family members. Even when the close family do not actually witness the murders they are often, like the police, medical personnel and journalists, amongst the first on the scene which is often gruesome. The trauma and stress of these situations have both short-term and long-term debilitating effects on all first responders and witnesses, but their effects can be varied in their severity. Media should take special care not to exploit these temporary vulnerabilities.

f) Careless Imaging: The dignity and rights of representation, accuracy, fairness, justice and minimization of any further harm are to be upheld. Importantly, videos, photographs and images which speak volumes more than written and spoken word and which leave indelible memories for people who see them should be taken, edited and published with specific diligence and respectful care.

g) Unsubstantiated First Accounts: Bystander and witness accounts taken in these circumstances of shock and trauma should be carefully considered. In Guyana, where living arrangements in some communities tend to be close and almost communal the comments and accounts of neighbors find their way into news stories as “factual”, “Insider” “accounts” of these crimes. These accounts often do not cater for any underlying motives, context, and relationships can be prejudicial to the facts as well as personal “outsider” nature of them then become the “official public record” of the attack.
h) Appeals to the Sense and not to Reason and Logic: Many stories on interpersonal violence or homicides tend to move towards Sensationalism. That is, they appeal to the drama and emotions elicited by extremes so that the severity, novelty and immediate context are played up as against pervasive incidents and extensive patterns which speak to a wider social context.

i) Lack of Pro-Social and Helping Information: While being factual and calling these crimes for what they really are, media need to also be aware of balance and the possibilities of healing, and rehabilitation. Therefore, certain types of helping information can be included in stories about interpersonal violence. Help for victims, their children and family as well as for re-habilitation of perpetrators of violence should be included. However, in consideration of the particular aspects of the behaviour of some perpetrators, utmost care has to be exercised in maintaining safety and protection of locations identities and other sensitive information in the first instance of survivors, children, case workers and others providing shelter and care.

j) Care and Protection for Journalists: Journalists, like other “witnesses” and first responders carry a personal mental and ethical burden in the course of their jobs which is not often included in guidelines. However, these burdens should be addressed because journalists as people can and often do struggle with the effects of stress, trauma, guilt, anger, deep sadness and personal pain as a response to their coverage of stories. Like others, their resilience will vary based on individual and contextual factors. There should always be a routine of mental health and personal care for journalists provided by their employers and or by those agencies whose work they help to advance.

Careful consideration should also be given to private and confidential information which could compromise their safety. Close collaboration with law enforcement and individual care as well as in-house security protocols at media houses should be developed, implemented and followed scrupulously.

k) Narrow Range of Competent Sources: Guidelines urging care, or regulations which prescribe what can be published in the best interest of victim and public safety can present journalists with limited options. It is therefore important for agencies involved in the prevention, mitigation and support services designate and disseminate information to the media persons who are qualified to speak to the issues. These would be such persons as community advocates, social workers or researchers.

8. THE GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are based on the extensive explanatory notes above but are deliberately designed to be brief and to fit on a single card which every journalist might be able to carry around in their wallets or pockets, or to post on a small space on their desks.

i. Use Appropriate Language: Any form of abuse or violence is wrong whether it is murder, homicide, rape or assault. Don’t minimize the crime of interpersonal violence, care however must be taken when reporting since allegations would need to be legally determined.

ii. Don’t Blame the Victim: Victims should not be perceived to have participated willingly because they did not resist, speak about an issue immediately or, failed to report it.

iii. Crime is determined by the perpetrator: A victim can be raped by someone they know and have intimate relations with as well as by someone they don’t know. The relationship between the victim and the alleged abuser does not determine whether an act is a crime or not.

iv. Be Conscious of Cultural Stereotypes: Interpersonal violence that appear to be “normalized” in some cultures does not deem it just and acceptable in our society.

v. Manage the Urge to Print What Is First Heard: Initial information received from various sources may not be credible or accurate. Explanation of an act should be minimized until pronounced by the relevant authorities.

vi. Publish Within Global and Patterned Context: Patterns of control and abuse are maintained over long periods and tend to escalate with time. Publish the warning signs.

vii. Avoid Sensationalism: Be careful not to report an incident in a manner that will provoke excitement, anxiety, fear, or unnecessary stimulus to the public.

viii. Avoid Salacious Information: Focus on context, prevention, support, education, protection, safety, and effects.

ix. Publish Resources and Self Care Information: Include information on care, protection and re-habilitation without compromising confidentiality.

x. Remember Legal Obligations: The laws of Guyana and other ethical standards of journalism should be observed.

xi. Be Sensitive When Interviewing: There is no need to publish personal information or to show victims, their families or witnesses in compromising positions or any state of distress. Consider care and protection of victims and their families at all times.
xii. Take Care with Videos and Images: Don’t include provocative and seductive photos which can convey a subliminal message that induces moral or legal judgement.

xiii. Focus on Personal Safety: Manage your well-being, safety and personal information. Ensure that safety protocols for fellow journalists, victims and others stakeholders are followed.

Future Work
In addition, the University of Guyana will work with the Media to facilitate an opening via online seminars to further review the guidelines as needed to meet merging challenges and opportunities. The University with support from UNICEF will also work with the Guyana Press Association to provide training and guidance as requested by Media entities to ensure that reporting do not deviate from the guidelines and to record whether or not there has been any impact on reporting.

9. RESOURCES

i. Ministry of Social Protection
ii. Help and Shelter
iii. Guyana Police Force
iv. Red Thread
v. Guyana Legal Aid
vi. Child Care Protection Agency
vii. Guyana Responsible Parenthood Association (GRPA)
Bibliography


CDC, Sexual Violence: A Media Guide.


