

Responsible representation and reporting of violence against women and violence against children

GUIDELINES FOR MEDIA PROFESSIONALS



PURPOSE

These guidelines are intended to promote best practices for responsible, ethical and safe representation and reporting of violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) by media practitioners.

While the causes, risk factors, prevalence, patterns and consequences of violence against women and violence against children may differ, many of the considerations for ethically, safely and effectively communicating these issues are crosscutting.

This guidance was developed by UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia region as an output of a joint working group to enhance and prioritise messaging and communications on violence against women and violence against children amid and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.





OVERVIEW

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹

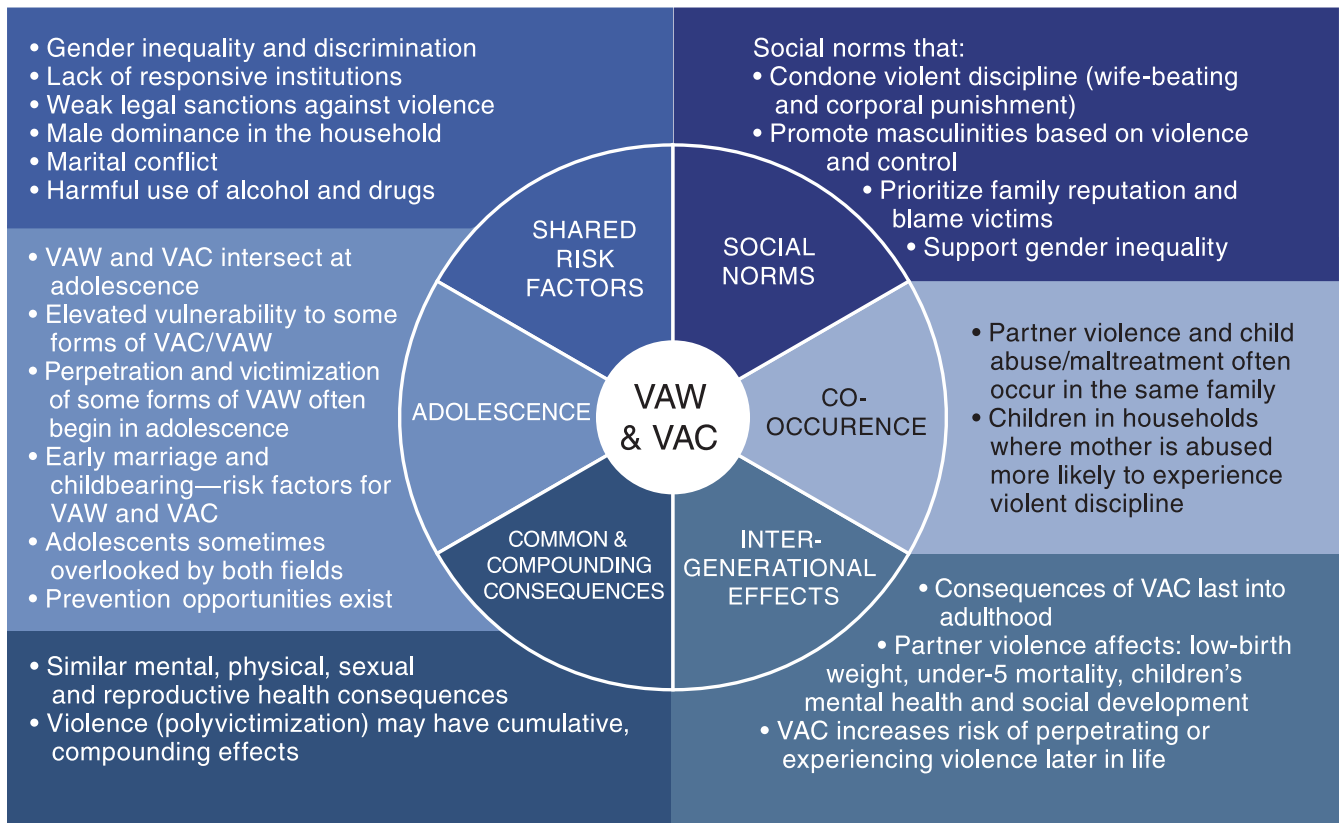
Violence against children is defined as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. It is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child, by an individual or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity.²

VAW and VAC can involve physical, psychological and mental harm inflicted on women and children for a myriad of reasons including gender norms, attitudes, power imbalances, patriarchy, harmful masculinities and social, physical, economic and political differences. In such incidents of violence, the perpetrator takes advantage of historic or current prevailing circumstances to exploit or exert dominance. VAW and VAC impact women’s and children’s quality of life and are exhibited in varying forms. VAW and VAC transcend rural or urban settings – and can be experienced throughout the lifecycle and across all social groups (including wealth quintiles, and religious and ethnic backgrounds).

¹ United Nations. Declaration on the elimination of violence against women. New York: UN, 1993.

² The UN Study on Violence Against Children (2006) – adapted from Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and WHO World Report on Violence and Health (2002)

FIGURE 1: INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN VAW AND VAC (GUEDES ET AL. 2016)³



The lockdowns in response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have exacerbated incidents of VAW and VAC across the globe. Many women’s and children’s helplines are also reporting a significant increase in the number of calls with many anxious about the ongoing situation. So, it is important to ensure these issues receive appropriate and accurate media coverage to support survivors and deter further acts of violence and exploitation.

Accurate and sensitive media coverage can help VAW/VAC survivors, at-risk individuals and their communities find available resources and services that can provide help. It can also help spotlight and address underlying harmful social/gender norms and practices that enable and cause VAW/VAC.

³ Guedes, A., S. Bott, C. Garcia-Moreno, and M. Colombini, 'Bridging the gaps: A global review of intersections of violence against women and violence against children', Global Health Action, vol 9, no. 31516, 2016.



ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGING WITH SURVIVORS

- The interviewee should understand how the information is used and the method in which it will be published, as well as the risks involved and potential outcomes, and their rights to refuse engagement. Survivors who speak out are often at greater risk of further harm or retribution, so ensure explicit consent before interviewing/interacting with an individual/group. Adults should provide informed consent for themselves or children under the age of 18 for whom they are designated guardians.
- Treat the persons being interviewed with respect, value their views and refrain from trying to influence them. Avoid sharing or publishing specifics of an incident that could lead to easier identification of the survivors and violate their privacy.
- Survivors of violence may present symptoms of post-traumatic stress in recounting circumstances of their abuse. Allow subjects to interact with you as they deem comfortable. Avoid pressing them to provide information. The interaction should stop if the subject feels uncomfortable or does not wish to continue.
- It is useful to research and make available referrals to accessible local support services, and be able to provide survivors with information about referral services and prevention programmes. (See sources of referral services for gender-based violence survivors in the appendices.)
- Place special attention when communicating with survivors to protect their privacy. Closely guard your history of interaction with the interviewee, including call histories, messages and other written documentation reflecting your meeting.
- Provide the option of being interviewed by someone of the same gender, if possible. And keep the media team, including the interviewer, photographer or videographer, as small as possible to enhance the survivor's comfort and for confidentiality reasons.
- A violence against women or violence against children service provider should be involved at the outset and throughout communications activities which engage survivors of violence. This will help protect their rights and well-being, including making referrals to other support services if desired by the survivor and addressing any other needs or issues that may arise. Ideally no interview with a child about abuse should occur without the presence of a social welfare officer or other professional who is supporting the welfare of the child.
- It is essential that communications on violence against women and violence against children improve the situation rather than cause further harm, such as re-traumatising survivors or confusing those who urgently need help. This principle is known as 'do no harm.'

KEY POINTS FOR REPORTING ON OR CREATING AWARENESS AROUND VAW/VAC

- When developing stories, series or editorials about VAW/VAC issues, reinforce gender-based violence (GBV) guiding principles, including a survivor-centred approach.⁴
- Content should ideally provide calls-to-action, including information about locally available support services.
- Preferably, content should be produced in the languages of the target populations, and alternatives to text should be considered in low-literacy settings.
- Avoid sensationalising violence by depicting violent acts in detail, in all types of content (visual, audio and written). Instead, name the type of violence experienced, such as emotional abuse, and move on with the story.
- Avoid visual representations that portray survivors as victims. Instead, aim to show survivors as empowered people who decided to speak up. Visual representations can also show positive behaviour, and they should avoid reinforcing gender inequalities, biases and stereotypes about gender roles or violence, such as female subordination or that physical violence is the only serious form (equal consideration should be given to other serious forms of violence such as sexual, emotional and economic).
- Highlight the actions of the perpetrator in the description of the violence. Avoid making the perpetrator invisible. For example, avoid “xx women were victims of homicide.” Instead, highlight “xx women were killed by a partner.” Depictions of violence that make the perpetrator less visible reinforce problematic perceptions of women as “victims” of crimes that happen to them, as opposed holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.
- Avoid “victim-blaming” or suggesting that survivors are responsible for causing or provoking violence. Avoid depictions which pose questions or cast responsibility on the survivor for why the violence has occurred.
- Works should highlight that situations like COVID-19 can lead to an increase in VAW/VAC, but that it is never a cause or an excuse for violence.
- In discussing issues of VAW/VAC, it is important to keep in mind the drivers of gender-based violence: this includes inequitable gender norms, attitudes, power imbalances, patriarchy and harmful masculinities.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN INTERVIEWING CHILDREN

- In interviewing or interacting with a child below the age of 18 or taking their photos/videos, obtain permission from the child’s guardian, be they parents, teachers, school principals or other authorities.
- Ensure that interviews with children are done in presence of a guardian and in a private space. When interviewing a subject, provide the option of being interviewed by an interviewer of the same gender, if it makes the subject more comfortable.
- Avoid actions and behaviour that can seem intimidating or cause the child discomfort.
- Regularly check that the child is comfortable to continue with the communications engagement, and ensure the child understands they can opt out of the interview at any time.

⁴ A survivor-centred approach creates a supportive environment in which survivors’ rights and wishes are respected, their safety is ensured, and they are treated with dignity and respect. From The Interagency Minimum Standards for Gender Based Violence in Emergency Programming. See pp. xi for definitions of other GBV Guiding Principles and Approaches. Available from <https://www.unfpa.org/minimum-standards>



- Ensure that a social welfare officer or other professional who is supporting the welfare of the child is present when interviewing children about abuse.
- If during the course of an interaction with a child they disclose any information about abuse, whether recent or in the past, the information must be immediately referred to and checked by a social worker or social welfare officer if one is not present or otherwise involved to ensure the interaction does not cause the child distress. Media professionals are discouraged to intervene on their own and should act only if ordered by the social worker or social welfare officer.
- Be aware of local laws. Some countries have mandatory reporting requirements for disclosures of child abuse.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY OF SUBJECT

- While taking photos/videos, it is important to make sure the subject's identity is protected. Ensure that the subject is either facing away from the camera, or if they are facing the camera, blur their faces. Ensure that the photos do not show the subject in an uncomfortable or compromising position, and ask for informed, documented consent before taking their photos.
- Do not publish a story, image or video that might put individual children, their siblings or peers at risk, even when their identities are changed, obscured or not used.

OBJECTIVITY

- Avoid providing incentives to the subject to influence her/his response or other information they are expected to provide. Bribery in any form is unacceptable.
- Avoid stories with stereotypes, including openly sexist interpretations of the characteristics and roles of women and men in society. Avoid making gender-based assumptions, including in the depiction of traditional feminine/masculine characteristics or roles.
- Be sure not to discriminate in choosing subjects based on sex, age, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, educational background or physical and mental abilities. Be unbiased in your selection of subjects.
- Adopt an intersectional approach. All women are not discriminated against in the same way, while different groups of women (with different economic, social, political and cultural statuses) may face multiple forms of discrimination. A sound understanding of all the forms of discrimination faced by different groups of women in different contexts is valuable when covering these issues.

LANGUAGE

- Use child-friendly, gender-responsive and gender-sensitive language that can be easily understood by the subject during interviews. Unless the subject has specified their gender and gender is relevant to the context, avoid the use of gender-specific pronouns such as “he” or “she.” To be inclusive, use the pronoun “they” in place of “he” or “she.”⁵
- Avoid the use of language that could stereotype, demean or offend ethnic groups or other communities. For groups that are under-represented or that have been made vulnerable due to historic/systemic discrimination or oppression, be sure to provide context about the status of the group as vulnerable or marginalized. Referring to a particular group as vulnerable or marginalized without providing context can indirectly reinforce stereotypes about the group being inherently vulnerable, as opposed to vulnerable or marginalized due to power dynamics and perceptions that exist in the larger society.

IN SUMMARY

These guidelines are meant to promote responsible, ethical and safe representation and reporting of violence against women and violence against children. These guidelines highlight basic, common-sense approaches that are too often ignored.

Real-life situations may be even more complex and sensitive than the circumstances presented here. Hence, it is hoped that these guidelines will help strengthen decision-making and the judgment used to ethically and appropriately represent in the media women and children’s experiences of violence.

The desired result will hopefully be better informed media practitioners, more empowering media messages, and a way of working with survivors which does no harm and benefits all.

⁵ Increasingly in many countries, intersex and transgender or gender-fluid individuals prefer to be referred to as “they” or “them” instead of “she” or “he.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- UNFPA webpage on gender-based violence: unfpa.org/gender-based-violence
- UNICEF webpage on violence against children: [unicef.org/end-violence](https://www.unicef.org/end-violence)
- UN Women webpage on violence against women: unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women
- Developing Key Messages for Communities on GBV & COVID-19 | Gender-Based Violence AoR Global Protection Cluster: https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-04/GBV_AoR_key_messages_Covid_%26GBV%281%29.pdf
- Media Guidelines for Reporting on Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Contexts | Global Protection Cluster: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5c3701d27.pdf>
- Reporting on Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: A Journalist's Handbook | UNFPA Arab States Regional Humanitarian Response Hub: <https://www.unfpa.org/reporting-gbv-humanitarian-settings>
- Media Guide for Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Ukraine | European Union, UNDP, UN Women: <http://www.un.org.ua/images/documents/4691/Media%20Guide%20for%20GBV%20reporting-ENGpdf.pdf>
- The Big Conversation: Handbook to Address Violence against Women in and through the Media | UNESCO, UN Women: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2019/thebigconversation-mediabook-compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=5819>
- Media coverage of gender-based violence - Handbook and Training of Trainers | UN Women: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/09/media-coverage-of-gender-based-violence---handbook-and-training-of-trainers#view>
- Tips for reporting on violence against women and their children (includes recommendations for informed consent) | Our Watch: <https://media.ourwatch.org.au/resource/tips-for-reporting-on-violence-against-women-and-their-children/>
- Conducting Safe, Effective and Ethical Interviews with Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence | WITNESS: library.witness.org/product/guide-to-interviewing-survivors-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence
- How to support survivors of gender-based violence when a GBV actor is not available in your area | GBV Guidelines Reference Group Joint Working Group: <https://gbvguidelines.org/en/pocketguide/>
- Safety planning for violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic | UN Women Asia and the Pacific: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/safety-planning-for-violence-against-women-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- How to test your communications | PIRC & ILGA-Europe: <https://publicinterest.org.uk/TestingGuide.pdf>
- United Nations Content Retention Schedules | United Nations Archives and Records Management Section: archives.un.org/content/retention-schedules
- United Nations Disposal of Records | United Nations Archives and Records Management Section: archives.un.org/content/dispose
- kNOwVAWdata: Asia-Pacific violence against women prevalence data hub | UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office: asiapacific.unfpa.org/knowvawdata

APPENDIX

SOURCES OF REFERRAL SERVICES FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

- List of national helplines in Asia and the Pacific: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/end-violence-against-women/shadow-pandemic-evaw-and-covid-response/list-of-helplines>
- List of global helplines: <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/need-help>
- Asian Network of Women's Shelters: <https://shelterasia.org/our-members>
- Global Network of Women's Shelters: <https://gnws.org>

