

Editorial guidelines for gender and conflict sensitive journalism

What is gender and conflict-sensitive journalism?

The media plays an important role in de-escalating conflicts and deconstructing patriarchal attitudes and social prejudices about women's ability to engage and participate in decision-making and peacebuilding. Therefore, it is necessary to have a balanced and fair media content that is gender and conflict sensitive as it relates to the depiction of women, their rights, and their issues through the various forms of conflict coverage. It is also important for the media to host different perspectives on how to achieve social justice and sustainable peace including the views and visions of men and women politicians, experts in the field, and representatives from historically marginalized populations, as each of these groups is concerned and may have a differentiated take on the prospects of the peace processes and political solutions.

Gender and conflict sensitive journalism seeks to challenge gender stereotypes and prejudices. By questioning what is newsworthy, it widens its scope and focuses on issues of importance for both men and women and those from historically marginalized groups and it seeks to include a wide variety of voices and perspectives. It allows for people to self-identify and chose their own narratives in the media. Gender and conflict-sensitive journalists do not settle for merely reporting on events but seek to explain root causes and explore potential solutions of conflicts. This is why gender and conflict-sensitive journalism has the potential to become transformational for a given society.

Due to the disproportionate use of sexualized and gender-based violence in armed conflict, gender and conflict sensitive journalism naturally pays attention to these crimes, but while doing so, making sure that survivors are treated with respect and dignity in both the interview situation and in the reporting and after publication or emission. Conflict-sensitive reporting is always carried out with an aim of explaining and seeking a way forward rather than fuelling conflict and injustice.

These guidelines for gender and conflict sensitive reporting are a compilation of the editorial guidelines that were produced by IMS' partners Consejo de Redaccion in Colombia, Myanmar Journalists Institute in Myanmar and Syrian Female Journalists Network in Syria. In each of the three contexts, wide consultations were held with journalists, editors and women's and LGBTQ+ organisations for the development of comprehensive editorial guidelines on gender and conflict-sensitive journalism. Despite the socio-political differences, these are the guidelines that were identified as crucial in all three of the countries. The fact that a common core of recommendations were shared in such different political situations speaks to the common challenges women face in the context of armed conflict.

Guideline 1: Ensure gender-balanced media coverage of conflict, peace and security issues

There is a lack of women sources on war, peace and security issues in the media. When women are included, it is often as victims of the conflict, and more rarely as experts or peace builders. Often, it's argued that "there are no women experts in the field", which is very rarely true. Conflict and gender-sensitive journalism makes space for women and amplifies their voices in line with the striving of UNSCR 1325 to have women participating in all steps of peace building.

Gender-balanced media coverage can be ensured through:

- Regular monitoring the number of men, women and non-binary people that are visible in the news and opinion spaces, including as experts or decision-makers. Monitoring should not only include number of people of different genders, but also the timing, length and sections of the content they are included in.
- Construction and use of databases of women experts on various topics related to conflict, peace and security issues, as an effective way of debunking the myth of lack of women and providing fast and easy access to women experts when needed.
- When possible, consultation of women's civil society organizations when reporting on conflict, peace and security. Not only do they often have expertise on the matter, but they often also have close ties to the communities they serve and can assist in both identifying sources and assist in creating trust and confidence in the media.

Guideline 2: Diversify voices in the news coverage

"Gender" should not be understood as an excluding term to refer to women. Neither should it assume that all women share the same experience or opinions. On the contrary, gender and conflict sensitive journalism understands this term as a relationship that includes men, women, boys and girls and non-binary people and recognize the intersecting identity that affect them.

For example, sexualized violence against men in conflict has been largely hidden or ignored, as has conflict related gender-based violence against gay and trans men. Women who are members of ethnic, racial, religious or indigenous communities often experience violence both as women and as members of these groups.

Diversified media coverage can be ensured through:

- Actively seeking out sources among minorities and historically marginalized groups, even on topics that are not specifically on them.
- Considering the disparate impact of conflict and peace processes on various social groups when writing news stories and when researching the causes and roots of any issue, so that the focus is on the areas and groups most affected.
- Emphasizing proposals, ideas, and recommendations of marginalized groups for conflict resolution.

Guideline 3: Avoid gender stereotypes

The media plays a significant role in shaping norms and ideas on the roles of men and women and non-binary people. In a conflict context, gender stereotypes typically entail depicting men as strong, brave, and self-sacrificing, and women as helpless victims, mothers of future soldiers and committed caregivers. This creates a wrongful image of the reality and hinders effective conflict resolution.

Gender and conflict-sensitive journalism not only avoids reproducing gender stereotypes but also actively challenges them.

Media coverage free from gender stereotypes can be ensured through:

- Paying close attention to explicit as well as benevolent stereotypes, biases, or interpretations of women and men's characteristics and their roles in society and avoid or challenge them in the reporting.
- Seeking a variation of men and women sources in different roles and capacity, such as women as defenders and men as victims. Gender stereotypes in the media are often reproduced by an exaggerated focus on men or women in the roles where they are over-represented.
- When writing about women and LGBTQ+ people who have suffered violence in conflicts, it is critical to portray them as survivors and not just victims. Conflict gender-sensitive journalism must escape the trap of portraying women and LGBTQ+ people as passive stakeholders and, rather, show their agency as rights-holders and their capacity to process or even overcome their victimization. A conflict and gender-sensitive story never ends in the victimization of women, without giving them space to reflect on the violence and begin or strengthen their empowerment.
- When reporting on women and LGBTQ+ people in armed conflict, it is not necessary to report their age, marital or family status, or detail their personal lives if it does not provide a relevant element to understand the story. Their physical appearance should not be emphasized and, many times, not even mentioned. Motherhood should not be the only defining characteristic of women and not all women and LGBTQ+ survivors are poor and displaced.

Guideline 4: Use gender-sensitive, inclusive language

The words, expressions, and images chosen in the media can contribute to hate and inequality and fuel conflicts. Gender and conflict sensitive journalism uses inclusive and non-discriminatory language, rejects warmongering expressions in reporting situations, is particularly careful to avoid using popular sayings that show sexist and racist attitudes, discards hate speech, and never resorts to inflammatory words.

Inclusive language is ensured through:

- Abstain from using "he" as a generic pronoun. To ensure gender inclusion one could use "he/she", "they", or alter the text to remove the need for pronouns. In language where this is applicable, do not use the masculine plural to denote a group that also contains women, as this excludes women and belittles women and their contributions.
- Avoid using "man" or "mankind" when referring to a profession or humans/persons in general. Avoid, for example, expressions such as man-made, police man and say instead human made, police personnel etc.
- Use the right terms and expression, when talking about violence, to avoid ambiguity and an apologetic tone that may justify violence or remove the responsibility from the perpetrator. Write, for example, the correct term "forced marriage of minors" instead of the apologetic "early marriage", write "he raped her" instead of less severe crimes such as "he assaulted her" or euphemisms such as "he deceived her" and write "the (alleged) rapist" instead of "the husband", or "the father" when the focus of the story is the crime.
- When necessary to refer to a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, use the terms preferred by the person in question and do not hesitate to ask respectfully. The same applies to the pronoun of a person (he/him, she/her or they/them). Where this is impossible, the most widely accepted terms are lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans, while all sensationalist or derogative terms and descriptions should be avoided.

Gender-sensitive *images* can be achieved by:

- Avoiding images that perpetuate the imbalance of women between genders or reproduce gender stereotypes. Be mindful of the angle of the photo, not to create a scenario of looking down on women by having the camera higher than her head, and of images that shows men as active and powerful and women as passive and weak.
- Paying special attention to the LGBTQ+ population, avoiding the publication of sensationalist photographs that reinforce discriminatory attitudes.

Guideline 5: Pay attention to gender-related topics

Gender and conflict-sensitive journalism pays specific attention to gender issues related to conflict and peace processes, such as conflict-related gender-based violence, women's rights, women's agency as peace builders, in addition to in-depth coverage of issues of gender equality/inequality with a critical and analytical view.

Enhanced inclusion of gender-related topics can be ensured through:

- Questioning and re-evaluating what is newsworthy and for whom. Not rarely do topics have differing degrees of importance to men, women and non-binary people as well as members of historically marginalized groups. Gender and conflict-sensitive media make sure that stories of marginalized groups get a fair share of visibility/reach in coverage.
- Engaging in a dialogue with different community representatives on what issues are important to them.
- Recalling that the UNSCR 1325 is legally binding to all UN member states, and the media should use its scrutinizing role to hold decision makers accountable for its implementation, by highlighting the role of women in conflict resolution and lack of women in peace processes.

Guideline 6: De-normalize conflict related gender-based violence

Sexualized violence in conflicts should not be presented as part of the inevitable dynamics of war. It is often a practice of one or more parties to the conflict that commanders may not have explicitly ordered but which they condone or promote, because it has strategic value both as an instrument of terror and control and as a denial of the feminine. Attacks by armed stakeholders against women and LGBTQ+ people can be understood as a means of imposing the masculine over the feminine.

Conflict and gender-sensitive journalism contributes to the de-normalization of conflict-related gender-based violence by:

- Describing the sexist contexts, patterns, practices, decisions and attitudes of the party or parties involved and their response and investigation - or lack thereof - of allegations of sexual violence.
- Placing the survivors rather than perpetrators at the center of the story.
- Putting conflict-related gender-based violence in a historical and legal context that emphasizes the violence as a crime against the victim and against humanity.

Guideline 7: Engage in survivor-centred and rights-based reporting

Conflict and gender-sensitive journalists do more than simply report stories of violence; they also report on available resources and routes to obtain help and ask sources and survivors to propose

solutions. Many victims lack both psychosocial support and legal aid, but in the best practices, the encounter with a gender and conflict-sensitive journalism becomes both healing and empowering. Sharing the story of conflict-related gender-based violence in a gender and conflict-sensitive way also contributes to affecting the attitudes to such violence and the restoration of people affected.

A survivor-centred and rights-based reporting is ensured by:

- Avoid victim blaming and unnecessary focus on the whereabouts of the survivor; focus instead on the actions of the perpetrator. Use of active voice rather than passive voice when reporting acts of sexualized and gender-based violence. Don't write "she was raped", but "he raped her". The use of the passive voice to describe incidents of gender-based violence, especially sexualized violence, erases the perpetrator's responsibility and reinforces harmful myths regarding the victim's responsibility. Gender and conflict-sensitive journalism strives to break these myths down and never puts the responsibility on the survivor.
- Avoid re-traumatization. Re-victimization means making people relive trauma. Gender and conflict sensitive journalists avoid this by being empathetic listeners, focusing on survivors' voices and wishes and moving at their pace. They spend as much time as it is needed with the survivor, do not pressure them to talk and avoid seeking unnecessary descriptions, for example, of graphic details on experiences of sexualized violence. Gender and conflict-sensitive journalism is time-consuming.
- When it comes to publishing photographs, gender and conflict sensitive journalists prefer images of resistance and resilience over those that show victims crying, beaten, or physically abused. Images of women screaming or crying should be included only if absolutely necessary to tell a story (during an interview, for example, which cannot be edited out).

Guideline 8: Safety first

Speaking to the media can put women human rights defenders, LGBTIQ+ persons and survivors of gender-based violence, as well as their families, at risk for both violence and social stigmatization. Gender and conflict -ensitive journalists keep the safety of the source as top priority and seek to minimize these risks and follow them up after the publication of news pieces.

The safety of sources can be increased by:

- Taking the time to explain possible negative and positive outcomes and reconfirming the informed consent of the sources throughout the period required to finalize interview(s) or coverage, as many survivors of sexualized and gender-based violence may have difficulty anticipating or understanding the possible consequences of telling their stories. Gender and conflict- sensitive journalists are ready to accept that consent may be suddenly withdrawn.
- Preferring to keep the anonymity of survivors of sexualized and gender-based violence, even if they consent to reveal their identity. The reason is that many survivors are traumatized and might reason that they have nothing left to lose, while a media story can contribute to the stigmatization of them and their families long after publishing. Discuss in extensive detail risks and benefits of the publication of the real name of the survivor,, omit personal details and don't take photos which might make her or him recognizable.
- For LGBTQ+persons, avoid revealing their sexual orientation and gender identity if not relevant to the story and only upon their informed consent. Be aware that even other details such as symbols or the location, for example if it is a place frequently visited by LGBTQ+ people, might unintentionally "out" LGBTQ+ people.
- Most importantly, gender and conflict-sensitive journalists recognize that sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice a story to protect the interests of survivors.