

# CHECKLIST WHEN REPORTING ON SEXUAL ASSAULT: FRAMEWORKS & IMAGERY

femifesto conducted a scan of Canadian media stories on sexual assault from 2010 to 2015. The scan provided us with clear examples of promising practices for reporting on sexual violence. These tips for the all forms of media including but not limited to headlines, interviews, article content, imagery, and social media posts.

## Frameworks



## DO

**DO** Recognize the unique life experiences of each survivor. If applicable, include details of their personal and communal strength.

## DON'T

**DON'T** Play into the “tragic victim” stereotype or rescue narratives.

e.g. Emphasizing that the survivor’s had a tragedy in their life rather than their courage or resilience.



**DO** Ensure that survivors and anti-sexual assault advocates, especially those from marginalized communities, are afforded space to speak about the issue.

If you don't have access to the survivor's side of the story, speak to violence against women experts, and rely on police and court documents, to keep the story balanced.

**DON'T** Focus solely on police, legal, and perpetrators' voices when reporting on sexual assault.

**DO** Depict sexual assault as a serious crime.

**DO** Ensure that every detail you include about the assault serves to honour the survivor's story or to contextualize sexual assault in broader culture. If a graphic detail does neither of these it doesn't need to be in the story.

**DON'T** Sensationalize sexual assault or depict it in a gratuitous or voyeuristic way.<sup>1,2</sup>

e.g. Using words such as "sex scandal," "controversy," or including salacious details.

**DO** Focus on why it is an act of sexual assault and what the circumstances were that led to the person who was sexually assaulted accessing justice or supports.

Contextualize sexual assault as part of the larger problem of sexual violence and gender-based violence.

**DON'T** Focus the discussion on a survivor's clothing, addictions, employment, marital status, sexuality, past relationships, or involvement in the sex trade industry.<sup>3,4</sup>

This can imply that responsibility lies with the survivor for making poor decisions or that they were "asking for it."

**DO** Include biographical details about the perpetrator. Ensure if you do, they do not feed into suggesting their innocence.

**DON'T** Exonerate or dismiss the violence of perpetrators by focusing on facts that make them appear to be "unlikely" rapists.

Unnecessary emphasis on a perpetrator's community standing, race, religion, mental health struggles, class position, employment, etc. may suggest a bias towards their innocence.

e.g. Describing the perpetrator as an "upstanding citizen" who volunteers in the community.



<p><b>DO</b> Recognize that perpetrators may hold a position of power over the person that they sexually assaulted.</p> <p>This could be social power (such as the power that comes with being male, white, middle-class, etc.) OR power specific to the relationship between the perpetrator and survivor (e.g. student/teacher, employee/employer, etc.).</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Suggest that a report of sexual assault between individuals of differing positions of power is an attempt to tarnish a public figure or a stunt of a “jilted ex-girlfriend.”</p>
<p><b>DO</b> Focus on the harm done to the survivor.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>Sexual assault has long-term financial, social, economic, physical, and spiritual impacts.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Focus entirely on community or family reactions, which often focus on exonerating or sympathizing with the perpetrator.</p> <p><b>DON'T</b> Solely emphasize the impact on the perpetrator and their community’s reputation</p>
<p><b>DO</b> Contextualize sexual assault as a result of systems, oppression, and attitudes that exists in all communities and cultures.</p> <p>One of the important principles on which the Canadian criminal legal system is based is the presumption of innocence until guilt is proven, and that the past few decades has seen a significant number of convictions overturned, often when the accused is a member of a marginalized community.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Use a survivor or perpetrator’s social location (i.e. ethnic background, religion) as a rationale for sexual violence.</p> <p>e.g. Suggesting newcomers to Canada who commit sexual violence do not know any better, that it’s a part of their ‘culture’ or that that sexual violence is an “imported” problem.<sup>6</sup></p>
<p><b>DO</b> Consider how oppression and inequality make people in marginalized communities more vulnerable to sexual violence and poses challenges to their accessing supports.<sup>7</sup></p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Assume all survivors are the same.<sup>8</sup></p> <p><b>DON'T</b> Suggest that people in marginalized communities are themselves to blame for experiencing disproportionately high levels of sexual violence.</p>
<p><b>DO</b> Take sexual violence that is enacted online, such as threats and harassment seriously.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Dilute or downplay sexual violence online by identifying “bullying” or “cyberbullying” as the sole problem<sup>9,10</sup></p> <p>When “bullying” or “cyberbullying” become the focus of discussions, other factors such as racism, sexism, transphobia, as well as the context of sexual violence, are left out of the picture.</p>

<p><b>DO</b> Convey that sexual assault always has an impact on all survivors, whether financial, physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional.<sup>11</sup></p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Assume that members of some communities are less affected by sexual assault.</p> <p>e.g. people with disabilities, men who are sexually assaulted, people who are sexually assaulted while detained or incarcerated.</p>
<p><b>DO</b> Recognize that everyone has the right to be safe and access supports.</p> <p><b>DO</b> Recognize that sexual assault does not define a survivor's entire identity.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Suggest that there are "good" or "bad" survivors of sexual violence or individuals who "deserve" to be assaulted.</p> <p><b>DON'T</b> Imply the survivor is tarnished, ruined, or has "lost their innocence".</p>
<p><b>DO</b> Ensure that interviewees will move the conversation forward on rape culture or sexual violence.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Interrupt broadcast interviews about sexual violence by allowing texters or callers to voice their doubts or misgivings about the veracity of the survivor's account.</p> <p>This can derail an important conversation about sexual violence.</p>

## Imagery

DO	DON'T
<p><b>DO</b> Use imagery that appropriately illustrates the article.</p> <p>e.g. An exterior shot of a building at the university where the story took place.</p> <p>You can also check in with a survivor about using imagery of their choice.</p> <p>Use imagery that illustrates resilience.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Use stock imagery that emphasizes the actions of the survivor.</p> <p>e.g. Using photos of women drinking to illustrate a story on sexual assault suggests that women invite sexual assault by doing so.</p> <p><b>DON'T</b> Use stock photos that portray violence in a salacious way. Many people have experienced violence in their own lives and already know what it looks like; a reminder is not needed.</p> <p>e.g. A photo of a woman with two black eyes.</p>
<p><b>DO</b> Use images of survivors from diverse communities.</p>	<p><b>DON'T</b> Assume that survivors of sexual violence come from only one community.</p>

## WORKS CITED

1. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011).
2. Luther, J. (2014). Changing the Narrative. *Sports on Earth*. <http://www.sportsonearth.com/article/74027694/sports-media-needs-a-better-understanding-of-how-to-report-on-sexual-assault-cases#!Y3N5y>
3. McEwan, M. (2007). Dear Ladies: Please Stop Getting Yourselves Raped. *Shakesville*. <http://www.shakesville.com/2007/01/dear-ladies-please-stop-getting.html>
4. Schmitz, J. (2007). *It's not the empty street that causes rape*. <http://jupiter9.livejournal.com/27338.html>
5. Matson, E. (2013).
6. Kulwicki, C. (2010). Defense Attorney Claims Convicted Rapist “Didn’t Realize” the Severity of Rape. *The Curvature*. <http://thecurvature.com/2010/05/18/defense-attorney-claims-convicted-rapist-didnt-realize-the-severity-of-rape/>
7. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011).
8. Kulwicki, C. (2009). 13-Year-Old Girl Commits Suicide After Classmates Spread Nude Photos. *The Curvature*. <http://thecurvature.com/2009/12/02/13-year-old-girl-commits-suicide-after-classmates-spread-nude-photos/>
9. Shlayan, M. (2013). Rehtaeh Parsons was a victim of misogyny, not ‘bullying’. *Rabble.ca*. <http://rabble.ca/news/2013/05/rehtaeh-parsons-was-victim-misogyny-not-bullying>
10. Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women. (2012).
11. Wanjuki, W. (2013). College Rape: Does the Media Focus Only On White Survivors? *PolicyMic*. <http://www.policymic.com/articles/38363/college-rape-does-the-media-focus-only-on-white-survivors>

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

***Use the Right Words: Media Reporting on Sexual Violence*** is intended for use in Canada only and is not intended for use in the United States.