10 ESSENTIAL TIPS ON INTERVIEWING SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Interviews can provide a much needed space for survivors to share their story. The following is a list of 10 essential tips for conducting a safe, responsible, and respectful interview:

1. **Connect:** Ensure you have support and crisis line numbers on hand for the person who experienced sexual violence to connect with throughout the interview process. You can refer to the resources provided in the guide on pages 46-47. Acknowledge that survivors may have complex responses to being interviewed. For example, they may be happy to have contributed to raising awareness on the issue, but may also be struggling with memories or emotions that may have been triggered by discussing it. Recognize that survivors may not be able to predict how they will feel after an interview takes place, or after an interview has aired or been published.

2. **Reflect:** Societal attitudes and stigma can result in survivors feeling silenced. Keep in mind that retelling a traumatic story is never easy and sexual violence is a highly sensitive topic. Have compassion during the interview; do not shame or blame the survivor for the violence that was perpetrated against them. Before asking difficult questions, have an open conversation with the interviewee about what information you feel you need.

3. **Check Your Assumptions:** Before an interview, it’s important to become informed about the impact that the trauma of sexual violence has on survivors. How do you know what you know about sexual assault? Do not approach the interview with negative assumptions about an interviewee who may be healing from trauma (e.g. that they’re making it up, want attention, or should be over it already). “Recovering from trauma is a process and takes time.” Memory loss, inability to concentrate, and panic attacks are common symptoms of trauma and they may arise during the interview. See Klinic Community Health Centre’s *Trauma-informed: The Trauma Toolkit* for more information.

“Survivors should have the right to say if their experience gets published. [The] opportunity and right to tell their side of the story in THEIR OWN WORDS, with support from response based language - so that they don’t continue to internalize their actions as reasons that they were assaulted.”

YWCA of Banff Programs and Services response to femifesto survey

According to 2007 police-reported data, 97% of persons accused of sexual offences were male, higher than the representation of males among persons accused of all other types of violent crime (78%).

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4. **No Two Survivors Are the Same:** How people experience, heal from and address sexual violence is shaped by age, gender, race, ability, class, and other social locations. The interview is an opportunity to understand different forms of resiliency and the story should honour each survivor’s experience (e.g. don’t assume that reporting to the police is every survivor’s vision of justice). A survivor might be incredibly sad during the interview or appear calm or flat during an interview. There is no right or wrong way to act when telling one’s story of sexual violence.

5. **Respect Survivors’ Boundaries:** Respect the right of survivors to choose how and when they will tell their story. Prepare the interviewee by doing a no pressure pre-interview or having a short conversation. This can provide an interviewee with questions that will be very similar to the ones they will be asked in the interview and be an opportunity to identify their boundaries. If possible, provide questions well in advance of the interview. If a survivor shares that they are uncomfortable with a question, don’t ask it or probe for more information. Sometimes this may not be feasible with deadlines, etc. In such cases, if possible, the interviewee could provide you with topics and personal details they would like to either avoid or focus on (e.g. is it okay to mention their queer identity?). Also having been subjected to sexual violence is not the sole identity of a survivor: do not add in questions about sexual assault when the interviewee is engaging in the interview under a different pretense (e.g. about a business they own).

6. **Identification:** Ask how the interviewee would like to be identified (e.g. person who experienced violence, survivor, victim? Would they like to be identified by name, pseudonym, or remain anonymous?). Recognize that there are real personal costs to being public about sexual violence and so anonymity may feel safest to some interviewees. What words do they use to describe the violence they experienced (e.g. “rape,” “sexual assault”)? Communicate to other newsroom staff members about the language being used and why it’s important not to change it.

“Survivors are in the best position to narrate their understanding of sexual violence. We need to listen to them with open hearts and without assumptions and without stereotypes.”
Anonymous femifesto survey respondent

There were about 677,000 incidents of sexual assault in 2009 according to the GSS. Since most sexual assaults go unreported, police-reported sexual assault counts are considerably lower: 21,000 sexual assaults were reported by police in the same year.
7. **Informed Consent:** Make sure the survivor is aware of exactly where, when, and in what formats the story will be published. This includes what brands or media outlets will have rights to publish the story. Let them know who else will be interviewed (e.g. will the perpetrator be featured as well?) This will allow for them to make an informed decision on whether they want to be interviewed and what support systems they might need. If you plan to take pictures or video, check in with them and ask for permission before the interview. If in the future you plan to use the survivor’s story in any context other than what they have agreed to, ask for their permission first.

8. **Format and Safety:** If the interview will be broadcast, ask the survivor if they want voice alteration or facial blurring effects so they remain unidentifiable. If the interview is being broadcast live, ask the interviewee if they would prefer a delay, in case they are triggered and need to take a break.

9. **Interview:** Schedule the interview in a safe space that is pre-approved by the survivor. Ensure there is enough time for the interview to be conducted at a pace that is not rushed. Take the time at the beginning of the interview to review your process with the interviewee. Offer opportunity the survivor to be accompanied by a support person, as some survivors may be triggered while sharing their story and need support from a counsellor or friend. In the course of the interview, you will most likely ask questions that are distressing. Taking a few minutes to explain why those difficult questions have to be asked. For example, you may say “I am going to ask you about how this violence changed your life. I am doing this because I want people to understand that the effects of sexual violence can impact every aspect of a person’s life.”

Depending on the source, the rate for sexual assaults committed against women is roughly 2.2 to 5.6 times higher than that of sexual assaults committed against men in Canada. According to the 2009 GSS, 7 in 10 incidents of self-reported sexual assault were committed against women.
10. **Follow Up:** Allocate time at the end for a follow-up conversation with the survivor on how the interview went. Before sending a story to an editor or sharing it with anyone else, make time for the survivor to review their comments. There may be something they feel uncomfortable with and want edited or removed. Provide a gentle reminder of resources available to them (e.g. crisis lines, phone numbers for accessible trauma counsellors) for support post interview.

For more information on responsible, accountable reporting, visit The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma’s website at http://dartcenter.org/. The Dart Center is a project of the Columbia Journalism School and their website includes information for journalists, educators, and researchers writing about traumatic events.

This is an ongoing conversation. Email info@femifesto.ca and let us know other ways survivors can be supported when being interviewed.

**What Are Examples of Questions to Ask Survivors in an Interview?**

1. What do you think is important for people to know?
2. How has this experience impacted you?
3. What services/resources/people helped you in your healing?
4. What were the barriers to you coming forward?
5. What suggestions do you have to make it safer for survivors to come forward?

“A list of standard, non-invasive starter questions would be great. It would be helpful to have a starting off point that you could then tailor to the particular case.”

Respondent to femifesto’s “Canadian Journalist Survey on Reporting on Sexual Assault”

Violence against women in rural communities is affected by their personal, financial, and geographical isolation, as well as community complicity and gossip, lack of transportation or anonymity, and anxieties about an abuser’s status: “One woman stated that other people’s employment was dependent on her husband, therefore they wouldn’t want to believe her. Another pointed out that her husband was highly placed in their church and she didn’t want him to be embarrassed before them.”
Can't Find a Survivor to Feature?

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND FOSTER MEDIA LITERACY

In our interviews with violence against women organizations, many shared a common situation of receiving a call from a journalist requesting to speak with a survivor that day—often within a few hours. This request is usually turned down due to an inability to quickly find a survivor who feels safe and ready to speak with the media. This can be addressed by:

1. **Building solid relationships:** Connect with sexual assault centres and violence against women organizations in your community prior to the need for an interviewee. This allows you to build trust with the organization as well as discuss the possibility of having a survivor on a show in the future.

2. **Offering training:** Your media outlet might want to offer media training to sexual assault centres that includes both survivors and frontline workers. This can help demystify speaking to the media, increase media literacy, and provide much needed media sources. It also demonstrates that your media outlet is working to improve the ways you cover sexual violence.

3. **Creating a list:** Have on roster a number of frontline workers, researchers, and counsellors who work in the sexual violence support field so they can provide their knowledge on the subject matter. Please note that these experts are being interviewed not for their personal histories of sexual violence but their knowledge of the subject matter. If they do not disclose that they wish to speak about a personal experience of sexual violence, then please do not ask that of them. Even if the expert has named that they were a survivor in another media story, they do not have to discuss this unless they offer to do so.

45.8% of respondents in a study of street-involved sex workers in Vancouver had been sexually assaulted by someone without a weapon. 40.7% had been sexually assaulted with a weapon.¹³
WORKS CITED


7. WITNESS. (2013).


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