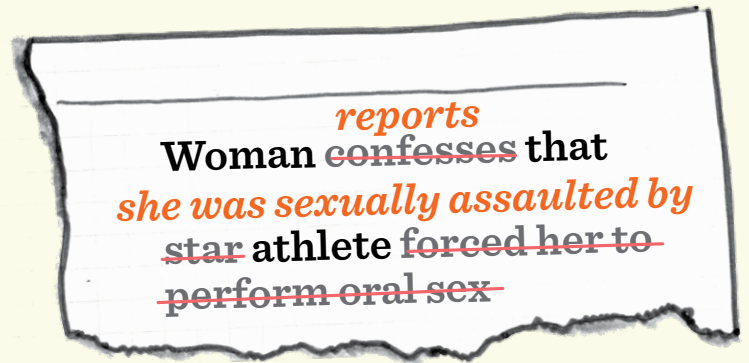


LANGUAGE CHECKLIST WHEN REPORTING ON SEXUAL ASSAULT

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.



Language

DO	DON'T
<p>DO Use “said,” “according to,” or “reports” and attribute the words to a specific speaker.¹</p> <p>Rather than presuming when to use the word “alleged,” seek advice on when it is legally required in specific contexts.</p> <p>Alternatively, when reporting after criminal charges have been laid, you can use language such as: “<name>, who has been charged with the sexual assault of OR who has been charged in relation to <name>”.</p>	<p>DON'T Overuse words like “alleged” or “claimed.”²</p> <p>Excessive use of these words can imply disbelief of the survivor on the part of the reporter.</p> <p>The language used depends on the context. Not using alleged in some contexts can have serious legal implications and could even leave a survivor open to being sued by an abuser. When in doubt, consult with a lawyer.</p>
<p>DO Use the descriptor that an interviewee prefers, such as “survivor,” or “person who experienced sexual assault.”³</p> <p>Many people may prefer the term “survivor” because it conveys agency and resilience.</p> <p>Others may prefer “person who has been subjected to sexual assault” because it doesn’t define an individual solely in relation to an experience of sexual violence.</p> <p>“Complainant” is another option if the survivor has filed legal charges.</p>	<p>DON'T Default to the descriptor “victim” unless this is the wording an interviewee prefers.</p> <p>Many people feel “victim” has negative connotations.</p>

DO Respect the survivor's autonomy by using language of their choice.

e.g. "sex work" versus "prostitution."

Using survivor's preferred gender pronouns.⁴
Ask the interviewee what gender pronouns they prefer (She? He? They?).

DON'T Refer to communities with language they don't use to describe themselves.

DO Use more neutral language like "shares," "says," or "tells" to describe a survivor telling their story.

DON'T Use phrases like "the survivor admits/confesses" to describe a report of sexual assault.⁵

This language implies responsibility or shame on behalf of the survivor. Words like "confesses" also subtly frame an assault story as a salacious sexual encounter.

DO Use language that places the accountability for rape or other forms of sexual assault with the perpetrator.⁶

e.g. "He raped her." (Understanding that for legal purposes, you may have to add the word "allegedly" when applicable.)

e.g. Alternatively, within the context of an ongoing criminal trial you can use "he's alleged to have raped her," or "the complainant says <name> raped her."

DON'T Describe sexual assault as belonging to the survivor (i.e. "her (the survivor's) rape")

Use phrases like "she was raped" or "a rape occurred" without identifying the role of the perpetrator.⁷

The connotation of "her assault" and "her rape" is that the rape belongs to the survivor and removes the perpetrator's accountability.

DO Use language that accurately conveys the gravity of sexual assault.

DON'T Downplay the violence of sexual assault, or suggest some forms of assault are more serious.

e.g.: "The survivor was unharmed."

"The survivor was not physically hurt."

DO Use words that make it clear that sexual assault is violent and non-consensual.⁸

e.g.: “...oral rape.”
“...sexual assault.”
“...was subjected to sexual assault.”

If there is a valid need to describe the specifics, ensure that they speak to the violent nature of the act, but avoid needlessly including salacious details of the assault.

e.g. “forced mouth onto [the survivor’s specific body part]”

DON'T Use euphemisms or gentle words to describe sexual violence.^{9,10}

Euphemisms: “engaging in” or “sex scandal”

Gentle language: “fondle” or “caress”,
“private parts”¹¹

DO Use language that conveys that sexual assault is not sex, it is violence.

e.g. “rape” or “sexual assault”

DON'T Use language that describes sexual violence as sex.

e.g. “oral sex”, “sexual activity,” “kissing,” “sex that was forced,” “non-consensual sex”

DO Make the perpetrator the subject of the sentence and assign the verb to them. This is also how police are encouraged to write their reports.¹¹

i.e. “The police report that the perpetrator forced the survivor to...”

DON'T Make the survivor the subject of the sentence and assign the verb to them.

e.g. “The victim performed fellatio against their will.”



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