

COVID-19

REPORTING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES

A COMPANION GUIDE TO
A JOURNALIST'S HANDBOOK
SECOND EDITION



"After the lockdown was announced, I honestly did not know if I would survive till the end. I was not afraid of the virus; I was afraid of being locked in with the men of my family and to endure the same abuse without the chance of escape."

— JANA, adolescent girl from Jordan

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Journalism is among the most powerful tools for social justice, particularly in the global fight against gender-based violence. Journalists have the power to amplify the voices of women and girls, to shed light on the forms of violence that target them, and to help communities worldwide address the harmful social norms that underpin gender-inequality and gender-based violence.

— NATALIA KANEM, UNFPA Executive Director

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A COMPANION GUIDE TO
**REPORTING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS**

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If we cannot trust journalists to tell our stories with conscience, what hope do we have? They are supposed to be speaking up for us when we cannot do it ourselves.

— BATOUL, a survivor of domestic violence living in Domiz 1 camp, Iraq

Covering gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most difficult tasks a journalist is likely to face throughout their career, particularly during a public health crisis.

OVERVIEW

During a pandemic, lockdowns, curfews and other restrictions on movement are deemed necessary preventative health measures that can save millions of lives. For women and girls, they can also be sources of increased risk of violence and death.

“After the lockdown was announced, I honestly did not know if I would survive,” explains Jana, an adolescent girl living in Jordan.

For Jana, her worst fear was not contracting COVID-19; it was being forced to stay at home for extended periods of time – a place where she has, for years, been subjected to frequent bouts of family violence at the hands of the men in her family.

During pandemics, lockdowns, curfews and other restrictions on movement are deemed necessary preventative health measures that can save millions of lives. For women and girls, however, they are also sources of increased risk of violence and death. Organisations working to combat gender-based violence (GBV) worldwide have issued an unsettling amount of reports showing that more GBV is occurring against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ These reports have underscored the fact that many of the measures deemed necessary for controlling a viral outbreak are not only exacerbating GBV-related risks but also significantly limiting the ability of survivors to shield themselves from their abusers, all the while limiting or severing their access to life-saving support. This has been documented repeatedly during previous epidemics throughout the globe, during which women were also observed to take on additional physical, psychological and time burdens as caregivers.²

Meanwhile, media coverage on the fundamental relationships between public health crises, gender equality, and violence against women and girls remains fairly sporadic around the world, including in the Arab States region. With public attention and the bulk of reporting focused on the health crisis itself, and given the added restrictions on movement that also make it increasingly difficult for journalists to perform their duties, it becomes much more likely for these issues to fall on the side-lines. However, for journalists who report on social justice and human rights, raising public awareness on the mounting challenges facing women and girls during this pandemic becomes increasingly crucial, especially as a crisis of this magnitude can often reveal many of the underlying inequalities within a community. More importantly, journalists need to exercise additional care when attempting to report on these issues in order to avoid causing irrevocable harm to survivors, most of whom have no recourse during a pandemic to seek additional protection or help.

Note: This document was developed as a companion guide to UNFPA’s comprehensive publication on the subject, [Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: A Journalist’s Handbook](#), published by the Arab States Humanitarian Hub on March 8, 2020.

1. GBV IMS, [Identifying & Mitigating Gender-based Violence Risks within the COVID-19 Response](#), 6 April 2020.
2. Ibid.

3. Bonita Meyersfeld, [Domestic violence is the ‘other’ pandemic we must fight](#), Al Jazeera, 25 April 2020.

Sexual violence is an epidemic that thrives in times of conflict and during emergencies, once the rule of law and criminal justice systems collapse and, far too often, rape is wielded as a weapon of war.

— NATALIA KANEM, UNFPA Executive Director

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COVID-19

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the inherent and systemic gender inequalities that underlie our communities. These inequalities determine how the pandemic and its resultant response measures impacts women and girls.

While it is often said that viral pandemics “do not discriminate,” they nonetheless exacerbate existing inequalities, often to substantial extents. In the case of women and girls who already grapple with inequalities in fundamental rights, duties and responsibilities, pandemics and their resultant safety measures introduce an array of challenges that are uniquely the result of systemic gender inequalities and discrimination.

“...gender roles influence where men and women spend their time, and the infectious agents they come into contact with, as well as the nature of exposure, its frequency and its intensity.”⁶

— World Health Organization

Women, for instance, are actually more likely to contract the new coronavirus than men, simply because they make up the majority of healthcare workers — up to 70 percent, according to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO)⁴, and up to 90 percent in China’s Hubei province, where the COVID-19 outbreak originated.⁵

Analyses of past pandemics have also shown that gender significantly influences both patterns of exposure to infectious agents and the treatment of infectious disease. As a 2007 report by WHO found, “gender roles influence where men and women spend their time, and the infectious agents they come into contact with, as well as the nature of exposure, its frequency and its intensity.”⁶

“Women are actually more likely to contract the new coronavirus than men, simply because they make up the majority of healthcare workers.”

Meanwhile, women typically inherit additional caregiving responsibilities during health crises, even in progressive communities with higher gender-equality markers, which makes them even more susceptible to contracting the virus as it is most easily transmitted among family members with frequent physical contact. Even from an economic perspective, women may be more at risk of suffering the impact of the pandemic given that they make up a significant portion of part time and informal laborers, both of which are livelihood categories that are more likely to disappear during recessions.

“Even from an economic perspective, women may be more at risk of suffering the impact of the pandemic given that they make up a significant portion of part time and informal laborers.”

Most importantly, women and girls suffer the brunt of the impact with regards to GBV-related risks. Reports from various countries in the Arab States region continue to show that COVID-19 has fuelled a sharp rise in gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence. Reports and first-hand accounts from countries such as Jordan,

Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia — to name but a few — show an alarming pattern of growth in reports of violence against women, further underscoring the inherent inequalities that still exist even in countries with relative geopolitical stability.

“Reports from various countries in the Arab States region continue to show that COVID-19 has fuelled a sharp rise in gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence.”

These reports also demonstrate the critical role that journalism plays in bringing these stories to light, amplifying the voices of women and girls, and raising the awareness of the public and policymakers on fundamental inequalities that may be imperceptible on a day-to-day basis but become increasingly more apparent when socioeconomic systems are disrupted.

4. WHO, [Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 countries](#), March 2019.
5. Clare Wenham, Julia Smith, and Rosemary Morgan, [COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak](#), March 2020.
6. WHO, [Addressing sex and gender in epidemic-prone infectious diseases](#), 2007.
7. Jessica Bennet, [‘I Feel Like I Have Five Jobs’: Moms Navigate the Pandemic](#), published in the New York Times, March 2020.
8. International Labour Organization, [Women still less likely to be active in the labour market than men in most of the world](#), 2018.
9. Tamara Abueish, [Coronavirus: A Jordanian woman pleads for help as domestic abuse cases rise globally](#), Al Arabiyah English, April 2020.
11. AFP, [Locked in by virus, Iraq hit with new pandemic: domestic abuse](#), April 2020.
12. Timour Azhari, [Domestic abuse cases soar in Lebanon amid coronavirus lockdown](#), Al Jazeera, April 2020.
13. Mirna Abdulaal, [Egypt’s Hidden Pandemic: Domestic Violence On The Rise During COVID-19](#), May 2020.
14. Alessandra Bajec, [‘Violence is a virus’: Tunisia opens new women’s shelter as domestic abuse surges during lockdown](#), The New Arab, April 2020.

REPORTING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

DURING A PANDEMIC AND OTHER HEALTH CRISES

Even in pandemics, the principles of survivor-centred journalism still apply and arguably become more important, particularly given the inability of survivors to distance themselves from their abusers.

“This will definitely require more ingenuity on behalf of the journalist,” explains Joumana Haddad, a renowned Lebanese journalist, writer and women’s rights activist, on the potential for reporting on GBV during a pandemic like COVID-19. “Still, it is not only possible, but necessary work.”

When it comes to covering GBV during pandemics, the general principles outlined by numerous human rights organisations and actors still apply. All reporting should follow a survivor-centred approach that empowers survivors by putting them at the centre of the reporting process. Dealing with gender-based violence survivors in a survivor-centred manner involves prioritizing their best interests and applying the guiding principles of safety, confidentiality, respect and non-discrimination.

“All reporting should be follow a survivor-centred approach that empowers survivors by putting them at the centre of the reporting process.”

During pandemics like COVID-19, in which survivors have severely limited access to life-saving services, sharing their stories safely and responsibly becomes increasingly difficult. Even when remote services are available, the vast majority of women and girls who are experiencing gender-based violence lack the space, privacy or freedom of movement required to communicate safely. They may also have concerns for the safety of other family members, such as children or other female members of the household, which can further complicate their decision to speak to a journalist.

“Even when remote services are available, the vast majority of women and girls who are experiencing gender-based violence lack the space, privacy or freedom of movement required to communicate safely.”

As such, journalists need to exercise additional care when attempting to perform any investigative reporting, and to consistently refer to the numerous guidelines provided by humanitarian actors. The principles outlined in UNFPA’s *A Journalist’s Handbook* provide a solid framework in this regard, particularly with regards to approaching organizations that are specialized in dealing with GBV cases instead of attempting to contact survivors directly. Journalists also need to be mindful that public health measures such as lockdowns, curfews and quarantines make it much more difficult for survivors to evade retaliation if their identities become public, particularly if they choose to speak out on the violence they have experienced.

From that perspective, precautions for safeguarding absolute anonymity become even more integral throughout the reporting process. This includes references to physical attributes, locations, geographical details, or other superfluous descriptions that may contribute to what is called “jigsaw identification,” where readers can piece together bits of information to identify survivors.

Reporting on gender-based violence during COVID-19 and other health crises does not have to rely on interviews with survivors. Given the variety of discussion angles available, journalists can easily

cover the topic in their publications by exploring potentially untapped angles to this vital topic, which requires additional creativity but can be fairly easily implemented.

“Reporting on gender-based violence during COVID-19 and other health crises does not have to rely on interviews with survivors.”

For example, journalists can focus on exploring the contributing factors that are leading to cases of domestic violence, such as specific cultural, legal or economic factors and practices that undermine the rights of women and girls. Journalists can also explore the economic fallout of health crises through a gender lens by highlighting the disproportionate risks faced by women and girls, including that of sexual exploitation and abuse. These angles of discussion are important for forming a comprehensive understanding of these issues, and they can be easily approached through features that rely on expert insights from GBV specialists, human rights groups, service providers and other GBV actors.

During the curfew period, I met many women who face violence at the hands of their husbands. It has clearly increased. One woman told me that she is consistently suffering from domestic abuse since her husband had lost his job. I also saw a wife being beaten in front of her children.

Each person reacts differently to GBV. It is important to be aware of the wide range of reactions to such traumatic events; some survivors choose to never speak about what happened to them.

I wanted to highlight how women, both on the frontlines and behind the scenes, are shaping the future of Syria and helping entire generations recover from the worst of the crisis.

— MILIA EIDMOUNI, Syrian journalist and co-founder of the Syrian Female Journalist Network

Media organisations need need to be vigilant when it comes to the mental health and well-being of journalists covering traumatic events.



A NOTE ON **MENTAL HEALTH**

Journalists must take additional care to safeguard their own mental well-being and to prevent trauma from impacting their reporting in any way. This requires preparation, transparent communication, and a generally healthy lifestyle.

Reporting on mass-scale crises carries inherent risks for survivors, but it can also have a pronounced mental toll on journalists themselves. In the process of covering mass-scale crises and interviewing those affected by them, the risk of traumatisation invariably increases. This is even more pronounced in the case of COVID-19; a crisis of global proportions and consequences that have presented new challenges for journalists who are attempting to cover its worst impacts.

In the process of covering mass-scale crises and interviewing those affected by them, the risk of traumatisation invariably increases.

Journalists who are experienced in covering GBV also know that the process can often be difficult and emotionally draining. Under “normal” circumstances, journalists would often assume the role of a witness; they observe events unfolding, document them and interview people affected by them. During a pandemic, however, a journalist pursues their duty as a witness but also at significant additional risk to their own life, often with the added pressures of working through lockdowns, curfews and the overarching risk of infection.

“During a pandemic, however, a journalist pursues their duty as a witness but also at significant additional risk to their own life.”

As such, journalists must take additional care to safeguard their own mental health and to prevent trauma from impacting their reporting in any way.

This includes preparing for interviews in advance, maintaining regular contact with supervisors and peers during excessively stressful times, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle that includes sufficient food, rest and sleep.

Journalists who cover crises and other potentially traumatising subjects are also encouraged to explore the wide range of resources available to them, either through their organisations or other sources of support, including seeking regular private or group counselling. Organisations also need to be vigilant when it comes to the mental health of journalists covering traumatic events.

“Journalists who cover crises and other potentially traumatising subjects are also encouraged to explore the wide range of resources available to them.”

According to the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, editors and supervisors “bear the responsibility to brief and educate teams and individuals before they’re sent on potentially traumatic stories; to support them during such assignments or projects; and to support them afterwards with practical and social support, and, where necessary, with expert trauma counselling.”¹⁵

15. The Dart Centre, [Trauma & Journalism: A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers](#), compiled and edited by Mark Brayne, 2007.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR JOURNALISTS

The following recommendations provide a general primer for journalists, teams, editors and supervisors on how to effectively report on GBV during pandemics like COVID-19. These recommendations complement the in-depth guidelines provided in the aforementioned Journalist's Handbook, which also incorporates numerous insights from leading journalists in the Arab States region. It is also recommended that a variety of credible sources are consulted throughout the editorial process when reporting on COVID-19 given the recent emergence of the outbreak and the regular updates incorporated into the guidelines issued on the subject.

FOR EDITORS & SUPERVISORS

Avoid interviewing survivors directly, even via virtual means.

Aside from the obvious risk of infection during a pandemic, direct interviews are strongly discouraged, including those done via the use of virtual means of communication, such as voice and video calls. Even outside the context of a health crisis, direct interviews place survivors in unnecessary harm, particularly when conducted outside of the presence of a qualified professional with experience dealing with gender-based violence. In addition to the risk of re-traumatisation, direct interviews carry other inherent risks, particularly as survivors face ever-growing risks of violence, restrictions on movement and retaliation due to increased levels of stress and anxiety within households.

Follow official safety guidelines and government measures at all times.

This includes adhering to lockdowns, curfews and other social distancing measures, and ensuring that interviews with specialists and other sources are also conducted within the confines of the law. Journalists are encouraged to rely on remote interviews as much as possible to stave off risks.

Approach humanitarian organisations who have the authority and expertise to

work with GBV cases, such as UNFPA or its partner NGOs.

These organisations are far better equipped to provide credible information on case histories, emerging trends, and other useful information, in addition to possessing a wider repository of resources and contacts to support your narrative. Including references to evidence-based sources, such as reports issued by health experts, international organisations, or academic institutions will go a long way toward reinforcing the credibility of your story. Refer to the "Approaching Organisations" section of A Journalist's Handbook for more information on this topic.

Consistently adopt a survivor-centred approach at all steps of the reporting process.

This includes consistently evaluating the risks posed to survivors by pursuing the story in the first place and, eventually, publishing the story in whole or in part.

Delve deeper in your reporting.

While coverage of individual cases is essential, this particular crisis presents an array of opportunities in terms of exploring the deeper connections between gender, human rights, social justice and other fundamental concepts that

are coming to light. Exploring past epidemics through a gender lens, incorporating viewpoints by experts, and including findings from past reports will always strengthen a story and allow readers to fully grasp the nuances of the subject.

Know what GBV services are available to survivors in case you need to refer someone.

However, do not attempt to intervene directly to help survivors, despite strong motivation. If you are aware that a person is in immediate or potential danger, refer them to the resources made available by specialised organisations, such as anonymous hotlines. If services are not available in your area, refer to this guide for additional solutions.

Be aware of stress and anxiety at all times.

If you feel anxious or vulnerable in any way, particularly given the inherent risks and pressures associated with this pandemic, take a step back from the reporting process, consult your supervisors, and seek professional help. Do not regard anxiety or stress as a sign of weakness or unprofessionalism; even the most seasoned war correspondents can be susceptible to trauma, particularly during unprecedented crises like pandemics, which impact each and every person on the planet.

Adopt a clear, progressive and evidence-based editorial policy, and name human rights and gender issues core components.

This is crucial to entrenching a culture of transparency and accountability within any organization focused on informing the public, offering a clear and concise framework to journalists and readers about the overall direction and values espoused by your organisation, in addition to the commitments you are making to your readers. Ensure that your editorial policy is made abundantly clear to your staff through regular awareness and training efforts, in addition to publishing it clearly on your various platforms to make it clear to your readers.

Ensure that journalists are trained and coached before assignments.

This may sound obvious, however many seasoned journalists lack experience when reporting on traumatic events, particularly during a pandemic, which carries additional and unprecedented risks. Trauma awareness briefings should be a core element of standard training and management, and journalists should be provided with the resources and tools needed to address any emotional fallout in the process.

Follow official safety guidelines and government measures at all times.

This includes adhering to lockdowns, curfews and other social distancing measures, and ensuring that interviews with specialists and other sources are also conducted within the confines of the law. Journalists are encouraged to rely on remote interviews as much as possible to stave off risks.

Consistently remind journalists that trauma is a normal human reaction and not a sign of weakness.

In addition to encouraging a healthier response to trauma, this may even inform their reporting and increase their awareness of the impact that trauma may have on survivors. More importantly, do not penalise journalists who exhibit distress by allowing it to be a determinant for the next assignment.

Encourage coverage on human rights and gender issues.

Do this even if it challenges your target audiences. The primary objective of journalism is to inform the public and ensure that all perspectives are covered. Editors and supervisors must embody this fundamental calling.

Discuss the reporting process and plan with journalists before assignments.

This will not only help journalists plan their reporting better, thereby reducing risks for both survivors and themselves, but it can also avoid potential pitfalls in the editorial process by establishing angles, potentially sensitive topics and other factors that may impede the process.

Demonstrate empathy throughout the editorial process.

Remind staff of the importance of self-care, including healthy eating, exercise and adequate sleep, all of which are conducive to better journalism. Moreover, by showing empathy to journalists during stressful and traumatic events, it will likely encourage them to extend the same to the survivors whose stories they are telling.

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