

Writing about violence against women isn't an easy assignment. No matter what you say, someone is going to be unhappy with you and newsrooms tend to only want to see stories that depict something sensational or controversial. However, with such a high prevalence of violence against women in our society, the staggering numbers of people & families it affects, and the rippling effects on health, economy, crime, and youth issues, our media can play a powerful role in bringing this pressing social issue to the forefront of the discourse. Finding a balance of how to report sensitively, yet honestly, factually, and from an informed perspective can be a challenge, but there are steps you can take to ensure that what reaches the public is the most realistic representation of the issue, as we experience it.

Bring gender back into the equation.

We're often tempted when covering issues of violence against women to attempt to "remain neutral", which can, in turn, lead to trying to inject a balance that isn't there. It is a fact that violence against women is almost always male violence, and that women are at far higher threat of injury & death by men they know than by strangers or other women. The reverse is not true, in that men are also most likely to be victims of violence at the hands of other men. Thus, the facts show us that the societal problem is predominantly one of **male** violence, and yet the media and the public tend to reject naming that. For example: when I say, "women get raped" in a public education talk, the audience nods and agrees. When I say, "women get raped by men", a portion of the audience gets uncomfortable, or even adversarial. Both sentences are the same, one just offers more facts, and paints a more realistic picture, but naming the truth is discouraged and often criticized. In media, we see the same reluctance to name the facts, which are that this **is** a gendered issue. Through that reluctance, reporting often ends up presenting a slanted or misleading impression of what the realities of the problem really are. Using gender-neutral terms or statistics in order to present an image of "fairness" ends up not being fair to the facts of the issue at all. Gender can be reintroduced into the discourse by including quotes & statistics that reflect the disproportionate threat women face from men in their lives, or simply by using language that reflects it, such as "male violence against women" instead of the non-gendered "violence against women". Always remember that reporting the truth is not biased.

Consider the impression your story leaves, and the amount of space you give it

It's unavoidable that the job of media is not only to inform the public, but also to sell newspapers, ad spots, etc. This means that the more sensational and controversial stories will always have a place, as we all know they bring in the viewers, readers, listeners. However, placing undo emphasis can create a public perception that events are commonplace, when they are, in fact, exceptions. Why, for example, do stories about women accused of fabricating sexual assault get broader, more impassioned coverage, than those about women being sexually assaulted? We know that false reporting statistics for sexual assault hover at about the same mark as other crimes, but we don't see headline stories about false break & enter reports designed to collect insurance dollars. We know that thousands of sexual assaults happen every year, but we don't see

thousands of stories about them. Although the public may consume stories which create the impression that women are frequently liars, or that violence is somehow an ‘equal opportunity’ problem, the media emphasis on those aberrations creates a public perception which is false, meaning our media is not accurately reflecting our reality. Because the stories tend to generate outrage and thus pull in viewers/readers we cannot expect the media to stop reporting them, but balance must be injected into the issue in order that people receive an accurate depiction of the facts in this crime. This can be done by always including the real stats for the number of sexual assaults every year vs. false accusations in the stories. It can also be done by quoting experts in the sexual assault field on the prevalence of the crime and the exceptional nature of false reports. Thus the public is made aware that an event happened, but is not left with the belief that such events are commonplace, or an accurate indicator of a societal norm.

Painting an accurate portrait of the realities in VAW coverage helps media to **avoid playing into the backlash**. There has been enormous resistance to women naming the realities of their experience of violence in our communities, and media can fall victim to giving it a voice. Calling organizations who bring attention to the problem “special interest groups” when women constitute half the population (hardly a “special interest”), lambasting requests for attention to stereotypical or harmful language as “political correctness”, unnecessarily mentioning sexual preference when describing a female in the news or a woman’s organization, as though sexuality in some way diminishes credibility – all of these are examples of ways media can perpetuate backlash against speaking out about violence against women. The journalists desire to show both sides of a story can sometimes lead media into searching out contradictory voices, and giving equal forum to marginal groups or individuals who are willing to make inflammatory or controversial statements on camera. Although this may make good t.v. or copy, it can also greatly misrepresent an issue, and the opposing sides. Good research will almost always circumvent that problem and avoid giving credence to statements, statistics or theories that have already been discredited, or are not reflective of any but a statistically insignificant group of non-representative parties.

Examine your own biases, the concepts & the language you bring to the issue

Most of the worst examples of reporting in violence against women stories are committed through subtle use of language, injected into what are supposed to be balanced reports. Examples of this are:

In a story about a potentially false sexual assault accusation:

“Despite her allegations, Heatherington's lawyer confirmed her client has not taken steps to hunt down or prosecute her alleged attacker.” The line implies that, were the allegations true, the woman **would** be in the process of “hunting down” the criminal. This not only creates a ludicrous expectation of assaulted women in order to be credible that we would foist on no other crime victim, but it also clearly indicates the scepticism of the reporter. The line is not linked to any other fact in the piece and seems to have been added to the story as an afterthought.

In a story about murdered women in British Columbia:

“The new search site (...) is a thin band of wetlands and ground cover beside the shoulder of the Lougheed Highway near Mission, B.C. (...) It's also a half-hour drive from the property of Mr. Pickton. Most of the missing and dead women were drug-addicted prostitutes from Vancouver's seamy Downtown Eastside. Until Sunday, the massive murder probe had been largely confined to Mr. Pickton's sprawling, run-down property.....”

The underlined sentence bears no relationship to the lines preceding or following it, which concern geographic locations. It states something irrelevant to the focus of the story (that being that a new search site had been located), and describes the victims as ‘drug-addicted prostitutes’. Leaving aside the question of why the victim’s personal lives matter at all in this piece, or why they were mentioned utterly out of context, the same point would carry far less implied stigma by describing them as ‘impoverished women’ or something similar. An obvious objection here could be, “but it’s a fact, most of them **were** drug addicted prostitutes”. And yet, consider what facts we find it important to include. It may also be a fact that many of the women were mothers. Many could be vegetarians, for all we know. Would we consider it relevant to include “most of the victims were vegetarian mothers”? If not, why would their drug habits be considered any more important than their eating habits? Regardless of these things, the women are murdered victims of violence. It is important for reporters to ask themselves **why** something is being mentioned in a story about violence against women, as we so often find news items subtly implying blame for the victim. Perceptions and societal attitudes are created and reinforced by what you consider important to include.

Consult your local experts

Who you consult for quotes in your story has a large impact on the tone and accuracy that story will have. You want sources who are in contact with the intricacies of the issue, on a grassroots, community basis, as their experiences are most reflective of the day-to-day reality of the viewing/reading public. Most communities have agencies working solely with violence against women, particularly sexual assault centres and battered women’s shelters. These frontline workers are well equipped to give you information about statistics, barriers, policing problems, social safety net gaps, political & policy impacts, and economic considerations. They also bring this information from a realistic, hands-on perspective, as they are the ones who actually **talk** and **work** every day with the “victims” and issues you are reporting on. It is sometimes suggested that such agencies may bring a bias and this, again, raises questions about the assumptions we bring to the issue of violence against women. When reporting on a lunar eclipse, we don’t suggest that the astronomer brings bias, based on the fact that s/he works with the issue for a living, and yet we do with the frontline workers in the field of women’s issues. Both individuals have an interest in raising public awareness about their chosen field, but while one is accorded **more** expertise based on that interest, the other is sometimes depicted as having **less**.

Frontline workers can be a fountain of information, and usually make excellent sources, in that they are eager to respond to media, interested in developing long-term relationships with reporters, and usually have “behind the scenes” information which

would stun, surprise or outrage media consumers. Develop lines of communication with your local women's centres **before** the stories break, call and introduce yourself and tell them what types of stories you are interested in covering and what kind of information you're hoping to get from them. Once you have established this foundation, when a local or national issue does arise, most will respond to your call very quickly and be happy to give you what you need to produce an accurate and compelling piece on the issues. These agencies will also be likely to call you, in particular, when they know about 'behind the scenes' news items that the public would want to hear.

Use sensitivity in your search for the story

While asking journalists to develop sources in the VAW frontlines, it also must be noted that some who have attempted to do this have felt resistance from the very agencies we are encouraging you to speak to. This is due to the fact that media coverage of VAW issues has often had an exploitative quality and approach. VAW workers are often asked by journalists to "produce a victim" for them to speak to. While this makes sense from a reporting angle, it can be contradictory to women's interests from a sensitivity angle. Too often women's stories have been exploited by media and used for the gain of the reporting agency but with no gain to her. Often women find they are misquoted, misrepresented, or that their information was used to support a piece with a very different tone than what they were led to believe. As violence constitutes a huge and difficult personal trauma for women, these results can be devastating in their healing and recovery, and much time can now be spent trying to heal from media treatment, in addition to the originating violence. In response to this, some VAW workers have grown suspicious of journalists motives in requesting to speak with victims/survivors, and view their experience of putting survivors in touch with media as rarely of benefit to the woman herself. Media can change this dynamic by remembering that women's stories are personal & difficult, speaking about it publicly is even more so, and thus the interview process & published treatment requires great respect and care. This area of reporting is fraught with challenges, as the interests of the two parties often appear diametrically opposed. It is a journalist's job to probe for details – the more exact and/or revealing, the better – but it is a survivor's interest to protect that which is most painful, and speak to larger or broader concepts. Journalists **can** report on these stories in a way that's of benefit to both parties simply by employing sensitivity when speaking about, and to, survivors. The basic act of asking permission to ask a question gives a great deal of control back to the woman you're speaking to, and she is much more likely to feel comfortable responding, and leave an interview feeling respected. Accept her choice not to respond to certain things **without** pressing her – what to you is 'pressing', is 'pressure' to her, and contributes to her feeling of lack of choice. As choice is what is most often taken away from women who experience violence, her communications with media cannot replicate that and subsequently feel positive for her.

The same guidelines hold true when covering women's events, like vigils for women victims of violence. Again, a journalistic tenet clashes with women's interests, in that a good journalist keeps the cameras rolling in order to capture anything that happens, and approaches many people for comment. However, at a vigil, march or similar event, there are always women grieving and often women who still experience violence and

threat in their lives now. What, to you, might be snapping an innocuous photo could, to her, represent a life threat. Some women are in hiding from abusive men in their lives, and a published photo could target her location and increase her level of risk. Thus, in covering these stories, remember to ask permission before taking anyone's picture. If you approach a woman with a camera, leave the camera **off** until you say, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?". Never photograph or film children, and if you feel you simply must, ask permission from that child's mother first. These guidelines aren't arbitrary, they stem from very real violence women face and no one wants the result of a news story to be the creation of more trauma or violence. Women want the media at these events, they need the interest and awareness it brings, however they will feel resentful of that presence if it shows an ignorance of the risk women face, or exploits women's pain or grief.

This sensitivity will go a long way to overcoming our sometimes divergent interests in covering stories about violence against women. Once women and VAW workers see that your treatment of the issues and the women involved is sensitive and respectful, they will want to come to you, want to have you at their events, and feel more positive about supporting survivors in speaking to you. You, in turn, will get better stories, better coverage, and find more and more doors opening to you.

Be cautious of "he just snapped" reporting

All too often, when stories about men harming or killing the women in their lives reach the news, we see the same picture of the man painted over and over. The picture is often created by the wording chosen to describe him – "desperate", "went over the edge", "just snapped", "reached a breaking point". All of these types of descriptions create an image of someone who "just couldn't take any more" and that image serves as an explanation for the violence to the media consumer. The impression left is one of a person pushed too far, who could no longer take whatever was being done **to** him, and thus reacted. The language itself creates the impression that the violent act is **reaction**, not choice, thereby alleviating some responsibility for the perpetrator, and hinting that some responsibility can be placed on the victim. Instead of presenting the story in a context of how widespread and common the problem of abusive men employing 'violence as control' is, and reinforcing that no break-up, insult or perceived infidelity can possibly justify the choice to harm or murder, the coverage instead creates a picture of **one** individual, acting in isolation, who had reason to commit the act he did. This removes the overwhelming prevalence of violence against women from its rightful context, and individualizes the problem instead. This then feeds a public perception of violence against women as the "exception", not the rule, even while the statistics are staggering. An example of this can be found in examining the coverage of the Montreal Massacre, when Marc Lepine stated outright that he was killing women because he believed women are taking privilege away from men. Many media outlets accused VAW workers who called attention to this of "injecting an agenda", even when it was the very agenda Lepine himself said he had, and echoed sentiments we hear daily in the media & our communities, even from non-violent males & "respectable" public figures. And yet, when no more obvious example could have existed to illustrate the resentment toward women that has built up in our country, many reporters chose to insist it not be presented in that rightful context. By continuing to

portray both small & large acts of violence against women as individualized, isolated occurrences, and by using language that reinforces the “lone nut” mythology, we continue to misrepresent the problem, and its scale.

Remember that violence occurs in a context and a continuum

Violence against women doesn't happen in a bubble, it is linked to numerous other social factors. Budget cuts, political announcements, taxation changes, immigration regulation, changes in the social safety net – all these current events may have implications for the levels of violence women experience. We tend to hear about the issue with stories about women being murdered, or, reported less frequently, sexually assaulted, but this is often the **only** context in which violence against women is discussed. Only by seeing the broad implications of social policy on the lives of women reflected in our media will society begin to form an awareness of the breadth of the problem. When reporting on seemingly disconnected issues ask yourself the question, “what kind of effects might this event have on the safety and autonomy of women?” Sometimes the answer may be “none” but, quite often, you may discover ramifications you would not have considered otherwise. Asking the question will also enable you to foresee social impacts likely to occur, and report on them before anyone else does, from a unique perspective. When, down the road, you are proved to be correct, your credibility, and viewer/readership will likely increase accordingly. A concrete example of this might be reporting provincial changes to legal aid, as recently occurred in British Columbia; an issue people do not tend to put together with violence against women. But we see that these changes have greatly limited women's access to legal representation, which has created a barrier to their being able to leave abusive partners, thus increasing their risk of violence or death. Here we see a domino effect of one measure disproportionately impacting the safety of thousands of endangered women, when the issue itself appeared gender neutral. A news outlet that could pick up on this quickly, and develop a human portrait of the ramifications, would have a compelling and original angle on a story that every media source is reporting. Not only does this benefit said outlet, but it also focuses the public's attention on the nuances of what might seem to be otherwise mundane news items.

By “thinking outside the box” on the day-to-day events of our lives, media can begin to **tell the stories we are not hearing**. The devil is in the details, as they say, and that is often the case with violence against women also. By way of example, with the aforementioned case of the BC serial murders, there is a story in the fact that the women are consistently identified as prostitutes and drug addicts. It opens the question of why it can be common knowledge that the level of violence against sex trade workers is staggering, and still society does not object. Is this because we deem some life less valuable than others? Further, when we know the statistics are outrageously high, and we know the men going to sex trade workers are our fathers, brothers, sons, friends, that then means that **these** are the people committing that violence. That's a scary thought for the public. And a good story. Bringing this issue into focus in challenging, thought-provoking ways for the media consumer helps to lift the one-dimensional and overly simplistic view we take on violence against women, a view that contributes to more and more daily risk for all women in Canada.