



## Gender-Transformative Reporting on Violence Against Women and Girls

*This resource is for media professionals and is designed to facilitate and inspire gender-transformative reporting approaches that contribute to the primary prevention of violence against women and girls in the Canadian context.*

Communicating Equality for Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a Canadian initiative to address root causes by focusing on primary prevention. Worldwide, one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at least once in their life [1]. In Canada, more than 50% of women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 [2]. This project links expertise in media and communication, gender-transformative thinking and violence prevention to highlight and address the drivers of VAWG and translate them into effective Canada-specific messages and actions for public consumption.

### THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Violence against women and girls remains one of the biggest issues of our time. It is a national crisis of epidemic scale. One woman or girl is murdered every 48 hours in Canada [3]. Disproportionate rates of violence are experienced by Indigenous women and girls [4]. Most victims of intimate partner violence are women [5].

The media play a significant role in shaping public opinion and hold significant power over what and how communities find out about news and current events. As such, accurate and respectful reporting is critical. Accuracy and respect are centered and upheld when the media expose the underlying social drivers of violence against women and girls, and champion the belief that violence against women and girls is never acceptable or excusable.

Further, the media can assist in creating gender-transformative approaches to violence against women and girls that expose and rectify underlying drivers and works to improve gender equality. This type of reporting draws on addressing the drivers of violence against women and girls, engaging men and boys, and highlighting institutional inequities that affect women.

However, negative impacts can unintentionally occur when media reinforce inaccurate narratives and stereotypes about the drivers of violence against women and girls. Or, when they fail to present these incidents as part of a pattern and a significant public health and social issue. Such approaches can cause further harm to those directly affected by the violence and reinforce the factors that cause gendered violence in the first place.

This resource offers several suggestions for developing accurate and respectful reporting on violence against women and girls which can be gender-transformative and contribute to its prevention.

## **WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING SOCIAL DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS?**

Violence against women and girls is rooted in gender inequality. A large body of research has identified the most important drivers of violence against women as [6]:

- condoning of violence against women and girls
- men's control over decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotypes and dominant forms of masculinities
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasize aggression, dominance and control

Further, other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, classicism, and heteronormativity interact with these drivers, increasing a woman or girls' risk of experiencing violence by a boy or man [6].

Have you considered reporting on the links between violence against women and girls and the underlying social drivers of this violence, such as gender inequality, sexism, rigid stereotyping, and harmful cultures of masculinity?

## THE NEED FOR GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE REPORTING

Media reports on violence against women and girls could help to transform the harmful gender norms, beliefs and systems that drive this violence. For example, asking women to protect themselves from sexual assault by not going out alone at night may decrease risk, but it misplaces responsibility and does not address the source of the problem, nor change attitudes of perpetrators or bystanders. It is important not to ignore, exploit or merely accommodate gender stereotypes, beliefs, norms and systems, but rather aim to challenge and transform them in pursuit of gender equality [7].

The reporting recommendations offered below are gender-transformative which means they are aimed at transforming the drivers of violence against women and girls and improving gender equality at the same time.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE REPORTING ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

## 1. Expose the **underlying social drivers** of violence against women and girls.

Use language and framing that helps the audience understand that, globally, most violence against women and girls is driven by gender inequality, including drivers such as the widespread condoning of violence against women and girls, rigid gender stereotyping, limits to women’s independence in private and public life, and cultures of masculinity that emphasize aggression, dominance and control [6, 8].

Reporting Shift	
<p><b>From:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Using language and framing that blames victims and perpetuates harmful tropes and stereotypes [9].</li><li>• Describing or emphasizing a perpetrator’s alcohol or drug use, mental illness, stress, finances, culture, or the ‘burden’ of caring for a woman with a disability. This does not align with the global research on the drivers of violence against women and girls. While these factors may increase the frequency and intensity of the violence, they do not drive it [6, 8].</li></ul>	<p><b>To:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bringing attention to the gendered drivers of this violence such as the harmful cultures of masculinity that emphasize men’s entitlement to women’s bodies.</li><li>• Shifting the focus from women’s behaviours to the perpetrators’ choices of violence and abuse.</li><li>• Championing the belief that violence against women and girls is never acceptable or excusable. The condoning of violence against women and girls across all levels of society has been identified as one of its key drivers. Respectful and accurate reporting of violence against women and girls needs to reinforce that it is rooted in gender inequality, and not tolerated in our communities [8].</li></ul>

## 2. Link violence against women and girls to other forms of **oppression and discrimination**.

Women who face multiple forms of discrimination and oppression experience unique vulnerabilities to violence [4, 8]. Reporters can highlight the connections between gendered violence and other forms of systemic and structural oppression such as racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, ageism, classicism, and heteronormativity.

What opportunities are there to report proactively on the root causes and intersecting factors surrounding violence against women and girls (e.g., gender inequality, colonialism, racism, ableism, ageism, etc.)?

### Reporting Shift

#### From:

- Simply identifying people by their race, ethnicity or other status. This can reinforce harmful myths about the causes of violence [8].
- Reporting that ignores systems of power and privilege, such as patriarchy and white supremacy, making invisible the experiences of Indigenous, Black, and disabled women.
- Reporting that reinforces structural hierarchies by differentiating between 'types' of victims (where some victims matter more than others), based on their race, age, ability, socioeconomic status, etc. [9].

#### To:

- Highlighting and bringing attention to the impacts of racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, ageism, and other forms of oppression that enable violence against marginalized women and girls. For example, [this article](#) published in The Globe & Mail showcases the impact of misogyny, racism, and colonialism on violence against Indigenous women and exposes the stereotyping and victim-blaming that the women experienced (ex. their testimony as "unreliable") within the criminal justice system.
- Bringing in experts on violence against women and girls and women's rights can help with contextualizing these complex issues and intersections [8, 10, 11].

## REPORTING ON VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS

When reporting on violence against Indigenous women and girls, it is vital to understand the broader impacts of colonization, including racism, sexism, dispossession, intergenerational trauma, forced child removal and entrenched poverty. This legacy prevents Indigenous women and girls from safely seeking help, reporting experiences of violence, and accessing supportive services [8, 12]. Indigenous women and girls often do not receive equal treatment from authorities in Canada and a history of state-sanctioned violence means many women may distrust government agencies or fear the involvement of child protection services. There is also a long history of misrepresentation of Indigenous people in the media, with dominant discourses often painting a negative picture of Indigenous communities and culture.

Gender-transformative reporting avoids perpetuating negative stereotypes that frame Indigeneity as a cause or contributor of violence. Instead, reporters can link violence against Indigenous women and girls to the national issue of [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#), and global problem of colonialism and violence against women.

Using a strengths-based approach to portray Indigenous women, girls and communities can also go a long way to counteracting the history of misrepresentation. Consider highlighting community solutions that focus on the drivers of violence against women and girls, as well as Indigenous-led approaches to preventing gendered violence. For example, see [Inuit Women taking the lead in family violence prevention](#) through community-driven programming.

### 3. Showcase violence against women and girls as an important and urgent **public health issue**.

Violence against women and girls is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights [13]. Violence against women and girls affects the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities connected to victims, survivors and perpetrators. This kind of violence increases women's risk of experiencing compounding health issues, for example: injuries (including traumatic brain injuries); self-harm; depression; post-traumatic stress disorder and other anxiety disorders and trauma responses; unwanted pregnancies; pregnancy complications; substance use problems; and sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV [13, 14]. It can also result in **femicide**.

The pervasive evidence of widespread violence against women and girls illustrates that this public health issue and human rights violation affects all corners of our society. But violence against women and girls, including femicide, are often decontextualized and portrayed as individual incidents, not social patterns [15]. Gender-transformative reporting has an opportunity to contextualize violence against women and girls, highlight the root causes and underlying drivers, and the society-wide impacts on individuals, families, communities and beyond.

#### Reporting Shift

##### From:

- Developing single-event stories that do not integrate information on the prevalence of the issue and/or the larger social context in which violence occurs.

##### To:

- Incorporate broader contextual information into single-event stories that showcases the magnitude and prevalence of the issue [16].
- When using statistics, remind readers that they are the tip of the iceberg [10] as violence against women and girls is vastly underreported [8].
- Highlight prevention approaches that address the underlying drivers of violence against women and girls as well as initiatives that support survivors.
- Incorporate issues of sexism, racism and class that might affect the story.

#### 4. Think critically about **representation** in media stories.

It is important to promote respectful media representations of women and girls, including representation of their bodies and sexuality, in all stories, not only in reporting focused on violence against women and girls. Further, well-rounded media representations of men, women and gender diverse individuals can disrupt harmful gender stereotypes [17].

Reporting Shift	
<b>From:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Amplifying, reinforcing, normalizing and failing to question ideas about masculinity and male peer relationships that emphasize aggression, dominance and control. This promotes social norms, community attitudes and individual beliefs that drive violence against women and girls.</li></ul>	<b>To:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Balancing the representation of subjects and sources. Research has shown that women are less likely to be included as sources in media reporting. A more balanced representation of diverse women as subjects and sources can play a role in addressing gender inequality in public and private life [17].</li></ul>

## Conclusion

This resource emphasizes the importance of exposing the underlying social drivers of violence against women and girls in media reports. Inaccurate or partial accounts that omit the drivers of violence can reinforce myths and stereotypes and impede the development of effective actions to address this widespread problem.

However, gender-transformative reporting that focuses on the drivers of violence against women and girls could help change the culture, attitudes and practices that perpetuate it.

The team at the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health hope you find the ideas in this resource helpful. Please [contact us](#) if you have questions or comments.

Which of these recommendations can you follow in your role or setting? Do you have other reporting recommendations that would contribute to the prevention of violence against women and girls?



## RESOURCES

For more information, check out these selected sources with experts and statistics on violence against women and girls in Canada and additional reporting frameworks and standards developed in Canada and around the world.

### Selected sources of experts and statistics in Canada

#### Experts

- [Informed Opinions Expert Database](#)

#### Statistics & background evidence

- [Statistics Canada](#)
- [Women and Gender Equality Canada](#)
- [Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability](#)
- [Communicating Equality](#)
- [Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children](#), Western University
- Battered Women's Support Services: [Gender Equity Learning + Knowledge Exchange & Facts](#)

### Frameworks & standards for reporting on violence against women & girls

#### Canada

- Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women, [The Media Hub](#) (n.d.)
- Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Housing, [Femicide Reporting Recommendations](#) (2021)
- femifesto, [Use the right words: Media reporting on sexual violence in Canada](#) (2015)
- Communicating Equality, [Media and Messaging](#) (2023)

#### International

- Brown et al., [Media Changing the Story: Media Guidelines for the Reporting of Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence in the Northern Territory](#) (2021)
- UN Women, [The Big Conversation: Handbook to Address Violence against Women in and through the Media](#) (2019)
- UN Women, [Guidelines for Gender and Conflict-Sensitive Reporting](#) (2019)
- Our Watch, [How to report on violence against women and their children](#) (2019 National Edition)

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The logo consists of two overlapping speech bubble shapes. The top one is orange and the bottom one is purple. To the right of these shapes, the words "Communicating" and "Equality" are stacked vertically in a blue, sans-serif font.

# Communicating Equality

Visit **Communicating Equality** to learn more or to share your ideas: [communicatingequality.ca](https://communicatingequality.ca)

This resource is part of the Communicating Equality Toolkit.

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