

# GUIDELINES FOR GENDER-SENSITIVE JOURNALISM



“Ending violence against  
women and promoting gender  
equality in Armenia” Project

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# Guidelines for gender-sensitive journalism

**Monica Ellena**

Gender and media expert, Council of Europe international consultant

**Ani Kojoyan**

Gender specialist, Council of Europe national consultant

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**Cover and layout:**

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## Introduction

**T**he media has enormous influence in shaping our thoughts and actions, reflecting and influencing societal structures and systems. Television, radio, newspapers, social media shape public opinions, perceptions, and beliefs, moulding the way individuals view the world and, as a result, act in society.

■ The role of the media is to accurately mirror societies. Adopting a gender lens enables reporters to reflect the world in its nuances and diversity, hence tearing down stereotypes. Journalists can help to change attitudes by portraying women and men as equally valued and diverse, rather than re-enforcing harmful gender-based stereotypes.

■ Gender-sensitive reporting is particularly relevant today in the face of three challenges: sexual and gender-based violence against women, forced displacement and disinformation.

■ Sexual and gender-based violence against women (SGBV), including domestic violence, is a violation of women's human rights. Media coverage of sexual and gender-based violence against women has the potential either worsen the problem or to ameliorate it. Done poorly, media coverage can normalise and trivialise such violence; done well, it can increase society's awareness of SGBV, highlight its link to gender equality and human rights, and contribute to its prevention and punishment.

■ Similar dynamics surround forced displacement, and in particular media coverage of refugee women. Too often, news coverage of armed conflicts is largely men-dominated. Men are asked to explain and interpret the conflict in many different roles: as combatants, warlords, experts, and politicians. Yet conflict has different impacts on civilian women, men, girls and boys, potentially exacerbating gender inequality. Gendered data gaps make women and girls more "invisible". By reporting accurately and fairly on that range of challenges encountered by refugees and their efforts to address them, the media can make a positive contribution to improving their plight.

■ Fuelled by the rise of social media, disinformation spreads false or misleading content with the intention to deceive or secure economic, social, and political gain, and which can cause public harm. Evidence

shows that women and girls are disproportionately targeted: gendered disinformation takes that a step further by weaponising gender stereotypes and using misogynistic narratives to confuse, discredit or diminish public figures or perspectives (Vogt et al., 2003).

These guidelines are developed in the frame of the Council of Europe project "Ending violence against women and promoting gender equality in Armenia" (2022-2023). Also, the guidelines build on reporting standards for journalists developed by the Council of Europe (Balabanova and Kojoyan, 2020) within the project "Path towards Armenia's Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence" (2019-2022), expanding them to integrate how to cover refugee women and girls.



### ***Specifically, this guide aims to:***

- ▶ Increase understanding of the role of the media in contributing to gender equality and tackling gender stereotypes;
- ▶ Enable journalists, editors, and media professionals to use gender-inclusive language and images and avoid sexist representation of women and men;
- ▶ Promote positive representation of conflict-affected communities, in particular women refugees; and
- ▶ Highlight the rise and the risks of gendered disinformation and detail appropriate techniques to confront it.

# Key terminology

**Gender: the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.**

■ **Gender stereotype:** a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by women and men. A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives.

■ **Gender-based violence in emergencies:** in emergencies, such as conflict or natural disasters, the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse is heightened, particularly for women and girls; national systems and community and social support networks may weaken. Preexisting gender inequalities may be exacerbated: women and adolescent girls are often at particular risk of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, forced or early marriage, denial of resources and harmful traditional practices. Men and boys may also be survivors and the emergency environment may mean that perpetrators are not held accountable. (UNFPA, 2015)

■ **Gender equality:** the concept that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realising their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play: it is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community and society.

■ **Gendered disinformation:** a subset of misogynistic abuse and violence against women that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives, often with some degree of coordination, to deter women from participating in the public sphere.

■ **Gender-inclusive (or neutral) language:** the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language and gender-fair language. The purpose of gender-neutral language is to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or social gender is the norm. Using gender-fair and inclusive language also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change and contributes to achieving gender equality.

■ **Masculinities / Femininities:** Socio-cultural categories used in everyday language that refer to certain behaviours and practices recognized within a culture as being "feminine" or "masculine," regardless of which biological sex expresses them. These concepts are learned and do not describe sexual orientation or biological essence. They change with culture, religion, class, over time and with individuals and other factors. The values placed on femininities and masculinities vary with culture also. Any person may engage in forms of femininity and masculinity. For example, a man can engage in what are often stereotyped as "feminine" activities, such as caring for a sick parent or staying home to raise children.

**Sex: biological characteristics identified at birth.**

■ **Sexism:** Any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice or behaviour based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline, with the purpose or effect of: i. violating the inherent dignity or rights of a person or a group of persons; or ii. resulting in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic harm or suffering to a person or a group of persons; or iii. creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment; or iv. constituting a barrier to the autonomy and full realisation of human rights by a person or a group of persons; or v. maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes. (Council of Europe, 2019).

■ **Sexist language:** language which excludes one sex or the other, or which suggests that one sex is superior to the other. Sexist language is used both by men and by women.

■ **Stereotypes:** generalised beliefs about a particular group or category of people. They are often overgeneralised and inaccurate, reflecting the expectation that people might have about a person of a particular group. They are widely held and are transmitted and perpetuated by the society's structure: family, school, church, and/or the media.

Gender sensitive reporting:

*what and why?*



**G**ender-sensitive reporting means equal representation of women and men in print, online and broadcasting media, and ensuring that women and men are represented in a non-stereotyped, non-discriminatory, and non-sexist manner. It goes beyond the question of *how many* women

are represented to examine *how* women are represented. It recognises and highlights the social and professional achievements, careers, interests and roles of women and men equally.

As the media frames discussions in ways that can sway public opinion, it holds power over our understanding of gender, including norms, roles and stereotypes. Gender norms, or societal expectations and standards that determine how individuals should behave and fulfil specific roles based on their perceived gender, play a crucial role in the distribution of power within society.

Most journalism tends to be insensitive to gender issues, and the world seen in the news media reinforces stereotypes about masculinity and femininity. Women constitute more than half of the global population, yet women are only the subject of approximately a quarter of all reporting, while their stories often reflect strong gender stereotypes (Macharia, ed, 2020). In the media at large, women are often used as an instrument to meet the “male demand”, as seen in the regular commodification of women in advertising.

Gender-insensitive journalism occurs when media reporting perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces biases, or marginalises certain genders. It includes the following:

▶ **Gender stereotyping:** Articles that depict women as solely caregivers or men as only breadwinners perpetuate traditional gender roles and ignore the diversity of experiences within each gender.

▶ **Language bias:** The use of language that reinforces gender norms or excludes certain genders can be insensitive. For example, using “he” as a default pronoun for “manager” or “she” as a default pronoun for “secretary” or job titles like “businessman” instead of the gender-neutral “businessperson.” By casting the male as the generic norm it fuels omission and invisibility of women.

▶ **Under-representation:** When media coverage consistently features one gender over others, it reinforces the idea that certain voices

and perspectives are more valuable or relevant than others. This can lead to the marginalisation of women, non-binary individuals, and other gender minorities.

▶ **Sensationalising gender-based violence:** Sensationalised reporting of gender-based violence can be not only insensitive but harmful, focusing on graphic details or victim-blaming narratives rather than addressing the root causes or supporting victims/survivors in a respectful manner.

In contrast, gender-sensitive reporting shuns stereotypes that limit and trivialise women and men to present an accurate portrait of the world and its possibilities. Although it is challenging to resist the pervasive, casual stereotypes that see women as child carers or sexual objects, it is critical for journalism to produce complete and diverse coverage that accurately mirrors our societies. Stereotypes reflect a mental block not only in terms of what society may expect from women and men, but also – more seriously – in terms of what women and men may expect from themselves. It is thus critical to combat gender biases and promote a more equitable representation of women and men.

### Gender-sensitive reporting

▶ **Promotes equality and fairness:** By ensuring balanced representation and avoiding stereotypes, gender-sensitive reporting helps promote gender equality. It challenges discriminatory norms and practices, leading to a more fair and just society.

▶ **Ensures accurate representation:** It provides a more accurate and comprehensive picture of society. Including diverse voices and perspectives ensures that the media reflects the experiences and contributions of all genders, not just the dominant or traditionally powerful ones.

▶ **Challenges stereotypes:** By avoiding and challenging stereotypes, gender-sensitive reporting helps dismantle harmful gender norms. This contributes to breaking down barriers that limit opportunities for individuals based on their gender. Women are surgeons, football players and police officers; they serve in the army, they drive buses, they work in mines and they travel in space as astronauts. Similarly, men can teach in kindergarten, they



are nurses in hospitals and look after their children. Challenging stereotypes in media means portraying men and women in these professions, mirroring what already exists in society and providing role models to boys and girls

► **Empowers marginalised groups:** Giving visibility to issues that disproportionately affect women and other marginalised genders can empower these groups by highlighting their struggles and successes. This can inspire action and bring about change. Women from minority groups are less represented in public life and even less covered in the media: bringing their role and work to the limelight ensures an accurate representation of the society.

► **Educates:** Media has a powerful role in shaping public opinion and societal norms. Gender-sensitive reporting educates audiences about gender issues, raising awareness and fostering understanding and empathy. It also ensures a more rigorous mirroring of the society.

► **Is responsible:** Gender-sensitive reporting aligns with the ethical journalism’s principles of fairness, accuracy, and accountability by striving to present news in a way that is free from bias and prejudice.

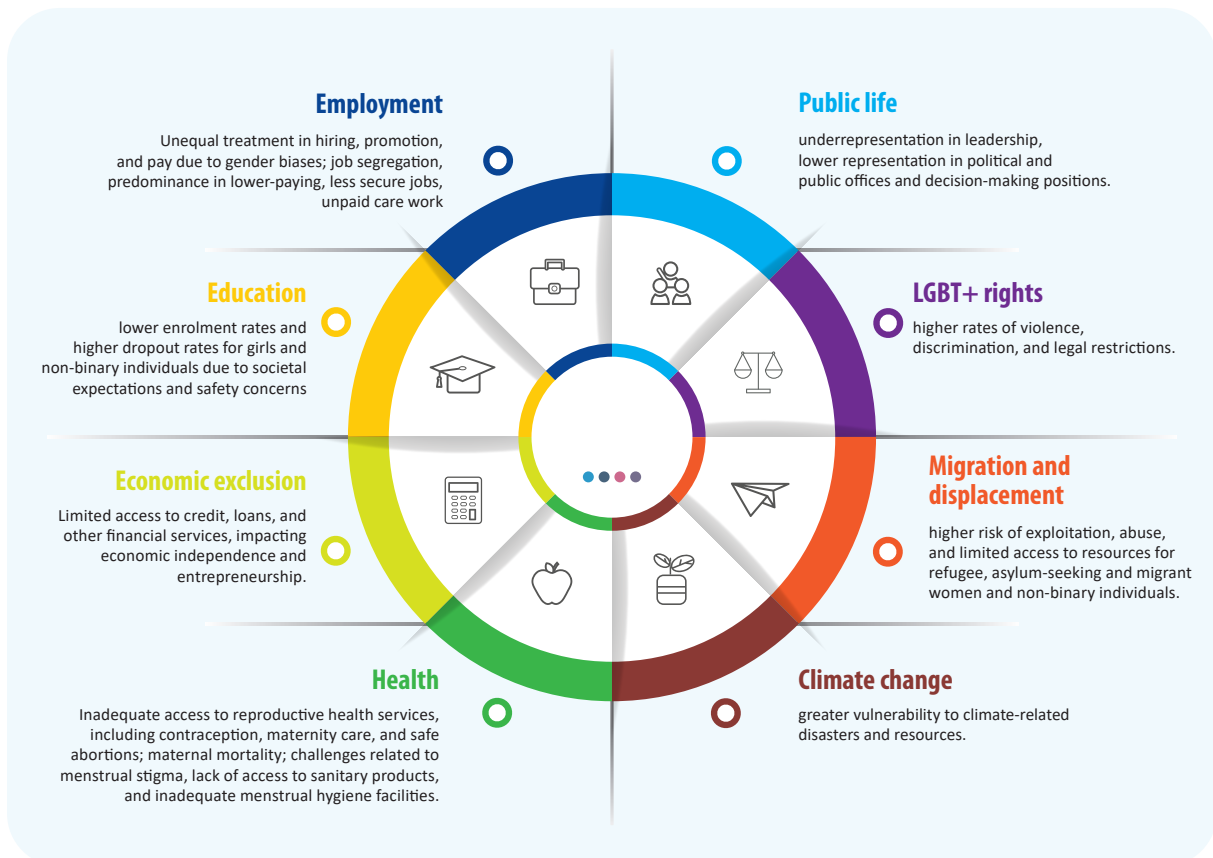
► **Promotes positive social change:** Highlighting gender-based injustices and advocating for gender equality can drive social change. Reporting on gender issues can influence policy, inspire activism, and lead to societal reforms.

► **Broadens perspectives:** Diverse representation in media helps to broaden the audience’s perspectives, encouraging them to think critically about gender issues and to question their own beliefs and assumptions.

Overall, gender-sensitive reporting is crucial for creating a more inclusive, fair, and informed society. It not only enhances the quality of journalism but also contributes significantly to the broader goals of social justice and equality.

### Gender-sensitive angles on common stories

The range of media stories that can be illuminated through a gender lens is enormous. Here are a number of suggestions on common media topics:



## Words matter: gender and sex

■ The terms “gender” and “sex” are often used interchangeably but they refer to different concepts.

■ Sex refers to the biological characteristics differentiating male and female bodies. Key differences exist between typical male and female hormone levels, genetics and genitalia. Male and female biological sex characteristics are consistent across all cultures and societies.

■ Gender, in contrast, is not biologically determined, but constructed by society and individuals. It refers to the roles, behaviours, activities that a given society considers appropriate for men, women, and other gender identities as well as the attitudes, feelings and behaviours that a culture associates with a person’s biological sex.

■ Yet, the positions of men and women, and the expectations about what is masculine and feminine depend on social and cultural contexts and are not set in stone. This means that perceptions of gender are constantly evolving, and can differ significantly between cultures, countries and generations.

■ For example, in many societies women are expected to perform housework and child-rearing duties while men face greater pressures to earn an income to provide for a family, while the reverse is frowned upon. Women may be seen as sensitive and caring while men are perceived as strong. Women can be kindergarten teachers, but men cannot. However, often a society’s expectations clash with reality. In countries with significant labour migration like Armenia, many women are engaged in physically demanding agricultural work while their spouses are working abroad, showing how societies can move beyond the gender norms that shape them.

■ This distinction is crucial for discussions around gender equality, rights, and inclusivity and the media can play a significant role in educating people about it. By addressing gender relations and the power dynamics behind them, we can better understand individuals’ access to and distribution of resources and their ability to make decisions and participate in public life.

## Stereotypes and inner bias

■ Stereotypes are widely held but oversimplified and generalised beliefs or ideas about a particular group of people. These beliefs often do not accurately reflect reality and can lead to unfair assumptions and judgments. Gender stereotypes – popularly held beliefs about the different capabilities of women and men – lie at the root of gender inequality.

■ Inner bias, or implicit bias, refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions unconsciously. Unlike explicit bias, which is deliberate and conscious, implicit bias operates outside of conscious awareness and can influence behaviour without intentional control. Implicit biases are automatic and often operate without an individual’s awareness. Everyone has them as they stem from cultural conditioning, media influence, and personal experiences. These biases can affect how we interact with others, the decisions we make, and the judgments we form.

■ In terms of gender, stereotypes often inform attitudes towards men and women and what they can achieve in life. Inner biases based on these stereotypes then lead to decision-making about gender roles that limit gender equality.

■ Inner gender bias mean that girls are discouraged to play sports traditionally associated with boys, like football, rugby or boxing, or to take up subjects like math and science in the belief that they excel more in arts and humanities. In a work environments women can be overlooked for leadership roles because of the unconscious belief that men are more authoritative and decisive and hiring managers assume that a woman of childbearing age is less committed to her career because she might prioritise family responsibilities, leading to a bias against hiring or promoting her.

## Getting practical: do's and don'ts

■ **Use inclusive language:** Using language that is free from bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. It avoids sexist language and ensures that both men and women are represented fairly. Use gender-neutral language, without stating the gender, whenever possible. Professions provide particular relevant examples: "police officer" instead of "policeman"; "chairperson" instead of "chairman"; "bartender" instead of "barman"; "soldier" instead of "serviceman". Also, use "humankind" instead of "mankind".

■ **Ensure balanced representation.** Ensuring equal representation of men and women in news stories, including as sources, experts, and subjects. Seek out diverse sources and voices to provide a more comprehensive perspective on issues, including women, men, transgender individuals, and non-binary people in interviews and stories.



TIP: Highlight women's achievements and contributions in various fields to ensure balance. For example, interviewing women researchers when covering vaccines, women astronauts when reporting on new space missions or women IT specialists when newscasting the development of artificial intelligence.

■ **Avoid stereotypes.** This means challenging traditional gender roles and representations and providing diverse and realistic portrayals of all genders. For example, instead of assuming that only women are caregivers or only men are breadwinners, reporters should portray a more diverse range of roles and responsibilities.



TIP: Be aware of, and counteract, your own biases. Journalists are individuals with their own experiences, world views, and implicit biases. Being aware of your own gender biases is the first step towards counteracting their influence on your reporting. For example, when covering the construction of a large-scale infrastructure, interview a woman engineer. If reporting about a football tournament, consult a women referee. By bringing these professionals to the fore, reporters accurately mirror society and contribute to challenging stereotypes.

■ **Be sensitive to gender issues.** Being aware of and addressing issues that disproportionately affect one gender, such as violence against women, gender pay gaps, and reproductive rights. This also includes understanding the social, economic, and political contexts that affect different genders differently

■ **Avoid sensationalising gender-based violence.** When reporting on issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, or harassment, journalists should avoid victim-blaming, sensationalising the issue and providing morbid accounts of the violence. Provide resources for support and emphasise the importance of holding perpetrators accountable.



TIP: Use clear wording that does not blame the survivor/victim, but rather emphasises the responsibility of the perpetrator, who is always and solely responsible for violence. Avoid any language that either indirectly or directly questions the victim's behaviour that could have "incited the perpetrator." Avoid words that could justify the act ("Man killed his wife; he loved her too much") or associate the violence with the survivor's behaviour ("The alleged victim of rape drank at least four shots of vodka") clothing ("Her dress was too sexy: man hit partner in the street"; "Woman wearing red high heeled shoes found dead"), change of partners or any other personal characteristic.



■ **Challenge gender norms.** Report on initiatives, individuals, and organisations challenging gender norms and working towards gender equality. Highlighting positive examples of change can inspire others and contribute to shifting societal attitudes.

■ **Advocate for the rights and empowerment of marginalised genders.** This might involve investigative reporting on gender-based injustices and discrimination, ranging from pay gaps, inequality in sport, etc.

■ **Provide context.** Include the broader gender implications of a story, rather than presenting events or issues in isolation. This helps the audience understand the systemic nature of gender inequality.

■ **Include diverse perspectives.** Including voices and perspectives from a variety of genders, particularly those who are often underrepresented or marginalised in mainstream media. Feature stories that explore diverse experiences of gender identity and expression. This could include profiles of transgender individuals, discussions of non-binary identities, or coverage of LGBT+ rights issues.

■ **Consult gender experts.** Seek input from gender experts or organisations working on gender equality issues when covering stories with gender dimensions. This can help ensure accuracy and sensitivity in reporting.

■ **Data and research.** Utilise data and research that disaggregate information by gender to provide a more nuanced understanding of social, economic, and political issues. Analyse how gender intersects with various aspects of society and highlight disparities where they exist.

■ **Sensitive reporting on transgender issues.** When reporting on transgender individuals, respect their chosen name and pronouns. Avoid focusing solely on their transition process and instead focus on their achievements, challenges, and contributions to society.

## Ethical reporting

■ Journalistic ethics are the principles that guide how journalists, editors, and others working in the media can behave with integrity. Ethical journalism enables societies to exchange information in ways that are accurate, fair and thorough. Adherence to the key tenets of ethical journalism is essential for the media's ability to maintain credibility and the public's trust.

■ **Accuracy and truthfulness.** Journalists should ensure that all information is accurate, verified, and presented truthfully, and promptly correct any errors or inaccuracies to maintain credibility.

■ **Fairness and impartiality.** Journalists should be balanced, presenting all relevant sides of a story without bias and avoid conflicts of interest.

■ **Accountability.** Journalists should take responsibility for their work and be prepared to explain and justify their actions. They should also be transparent about the sources and methods used to gather information.

■ **Minimising harm.** Journalists should be considerate of the impact of reporting on individuals and communities, and respect the privacy of individuals, especially in cases involving vulnerable or grieving people.

■ **Independence.** Journalists should maintain independence from those being covered, including political, commercial, and special interests. They should also ensure that editorial decisions are not influenced by outside interests or pressures.

■ **Humanity and respect.** Journalists should treat all subjects with respect and dignity. They should avoid perpetuating stereotypes and ensure diverse perspectives are represented.

■ **Transparency in sourcing.** Journalists should attribute information to reliable sources and make clear when information cannot be independently verified. They should also protect the identity of confidential sources to ensure their safety and trust.

■ **Honesty.** Journalists should avoid plagiarism and always give credit to original sources. They should never manipulate images, audio, or video to mislead the audience.

# Reporting on sexual and *gender-based violence*



**R**eporting on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) requires sensitivity, accuracy, and a deep understanding of the complexities involved. Journalists have a crucial role in shaping public perception and influencing policy changes, which underlines the importance of adhering to ethical standards and best practices. Here are key guidelines for journalists reporting on SGBV:

## Ethical considerations

### Confidentiality and anonymity

- ▶ Protect the identity of survivors: Use pseudonyms and avoid disclosing details that could lead to the identification of survivors
- ▶ Obtain informed consent: Ensure that survivors understand how their information will be used and give explicit consent for their stories to be shared

### Sensitivity and respect

- ▶ Respect the dignity of survivors: Avoid sensationalising the story or focusing on graphic details of the violence
- ▶ Use trauma-informed approaches<sup>1</sup>: Be mindful of the psychological impact that recounting their experiences may have on survivors. Provide them with support resources if needed.

### Avoid victim-blaming

- ▶ Language matters: Use language that does not blame the survivor for the violence they experienced. Focus on the perpetrator's actions rather than the survivor's behaviour.
- ▶ Contextualise the violence: Highlight the broader social and systemic issues that contribute to SGBV.

■ Critically, journalists must avoid minimising the attacks, playing them down, or justifying the perpetrator's actions. An analysis of Armenian media shows reports of cases where the victim was beaten

1. Trauma-informed journalism involves reporting stories with an understanding of trauma and its impact on victims, in a way that is sensitive to the psychological and emotional needs of those affected. See Appendix 2.

“because of”: this simple word condones it and legitimises the violence, contributing to narratives that validate it. Similarly, detailing the violence that allows identifying the victim has the double result of degrading the woman's dignity and enabling her identification.

## Responsible reporting

- **Verify facts:** Ensure all information is accurate and corroborated by multiple reliable sources.
- **Understand the legal context:** Be aware of the legal definitions and implications of SGBV in the region you are reporting from.
- **Broaden the narrative:** Cover various aspects of SGBV, including prevention, support services, legal responses, and survivor stories.
- **Diverse perspectives:** Highlight voices from different genders, ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds to provide a holistic view of the issue.
- **Feature support services:** Provide information on local and national organisations that offer help to survivors.
- **Showcase prevention efforts:** Report on initiatives and programs aimed at preventing SGBV and promoting gender equality.

## How to interview

### Build trust

- ▶ Create a safe environment: Conduct interviews in a safe and private setting where the survivor feels comfortable.
- ▶ Be patient and compassionate: Allow survivors to share their stories at their own pace without pressure.

### Use open-ended questions

- ▶ Encourage detailed responses: Ask questions that allow survivors to express their experiences and feelings fully; avoid leading questions and “yes - no” questions
- ▶ Listen actively: Show empathy and understanding through active listening

### **Provide follow-up**

- ▶ Offer support information: Provide contacts for counselling and support services.
- ▶ Check back: If appropriate, follow up with survivors to ensure their well-being and address any concerns they may have about the story.

### **Legal and safety considerations**

#### **Understand legal restrictions**

- ▶ Know the laws: Be aware of any legal restrictions regarding the reporting of SGBV cases, including those related to ongoing investigations or court proceedings.
- ▶ Respect gag orders<sup>2</sup>: Adhere to any court-imposed restrictions on information dissemination.

### **Prioritise safety**

- ▶ Ensure safety of sources: Take measures to protect the physical and emotional safety of survivors and other sources.
  - ▶ Be mindful of repercussions: Consider the potential consequences of publishing certain details, especially in communities where SGBV is highly stigmatised.
- Journalists play a vital role in raising awareness and driving change on issues of sexual and gender-based violence. By adhering to ethical standards, practising sensitivity, and reporting comprehensively and accurately, journalists can contribute to a more informed and compassionate society. This approach not only respects and protects survivors but also educates the public and supports efforts to combat SGBV.

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<sup>2</sup> A gag order refers to when a judge prohibits attorneys, parties or witnesses in a pending lawsuit or criminal proceeding to talk about the case to the public and/or the media.

# Reporting on conflict-affected communities

*a gendered approach*





Conflict affects men, women, girls and boys in different ways, highlighting the importance of covering conflict-affected communities through a gendered lens. This involves respecting the key standards of journalistic professionalism which impartially presents verified information in a fair and balanced context, giving voice to marginalised actors, and shunning gender stereotypes.

■ Women and girls refugees face specific challenges related to their gender. These include:

- ▶ Adaptation to a new environment. Building a new life in a new environment can be hard for multiple reasons, ranging from language and culture to the loss of their social networks they may have lost. Adjusting to new ways of doing things can make ostensibly simple things very difficult.
- ▶ Access to and participation in education and the labour market. School-aged refugees may struggle to access education, given the changes in language, educational system, and the lack of friends. Refugee women may encounter barriers in terms of language, recognition of their qualifications and experience. Both groups may face discrimination and harassment from the majority population.
- ▶ Lack of financial resources. Women struggle to find jobs due to gender norms and breadwinning responsibilities, lack of skills and experiences, and caregiving responsibilities in the households. Girls prefer not to continue their education most often because they wish to start earning income and support their families.
- ▶ Legal obstacles and documentation. Women may face difficulties in obtaining legal documentation, such as identification papers, work permits, or asylum status, especially if they have fled without male relatives who traditionally hold these documents. This can impede their access to services and legal protection.
- ▶ Feelings of isolation and loneliness. Subject to different upbringings and gender roles ascribed by their communities, refugee adolescent girls may find it hard to develop friendships. Older refugees who have lost their old support networks may struggle to develop new ones, often not spending any time with the host population.

- ▶ Sense of guilt. Many refugees may feel guilty for having escaped situations in which family members, friends and others in their community may have died. They may feel guilt for separation from loved ones, particularly those left behind.

■ At the same time, all too often the media reports on refugee women as victims, without acknowledging the resilience and determination that have led to their survival.

### Reporting about refugee women and girls

■ Appropriate journalistic coverage of women refugees involves providing a nuanced and respectful portrayal of their experiences, challenges, while also highlighting their agency, resilience, and contributions to the hosting communities.

■ **Humanising stories:** Share individual stories of refugee women to humanise their experiences and highlight their resilience in the face of adversity. By focusing on personal narratives, journalists can provide a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and the strength they demonstrate.

■ **Intersectional analysis:** Recognise the intersectionality of gender with other identities such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and socioeconomic status. Explore how these intersecting factors shape women refugees' experiences and access to resources.

■ **Challenges and vulnerabilities:** Report on the unique challenges and vulnerabilities faced by refugee women, including gender-based violence, access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Shedding light on these issues can contribute to advocacy and support efforts.

■ **Leadership and agency:** Feature refugee women who are leaders within their communities or who are advocating for change. Amplifying their voices and agency helps challenge stereotypes and fosters a more accurate understanding of their contributions.

■ **Cultural sensitivity:** Approach reporting with cultural sensitivity and avoid perpetuating stereotypes or stigmatising narratives about refugee women. Take care to accurately represent their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities.

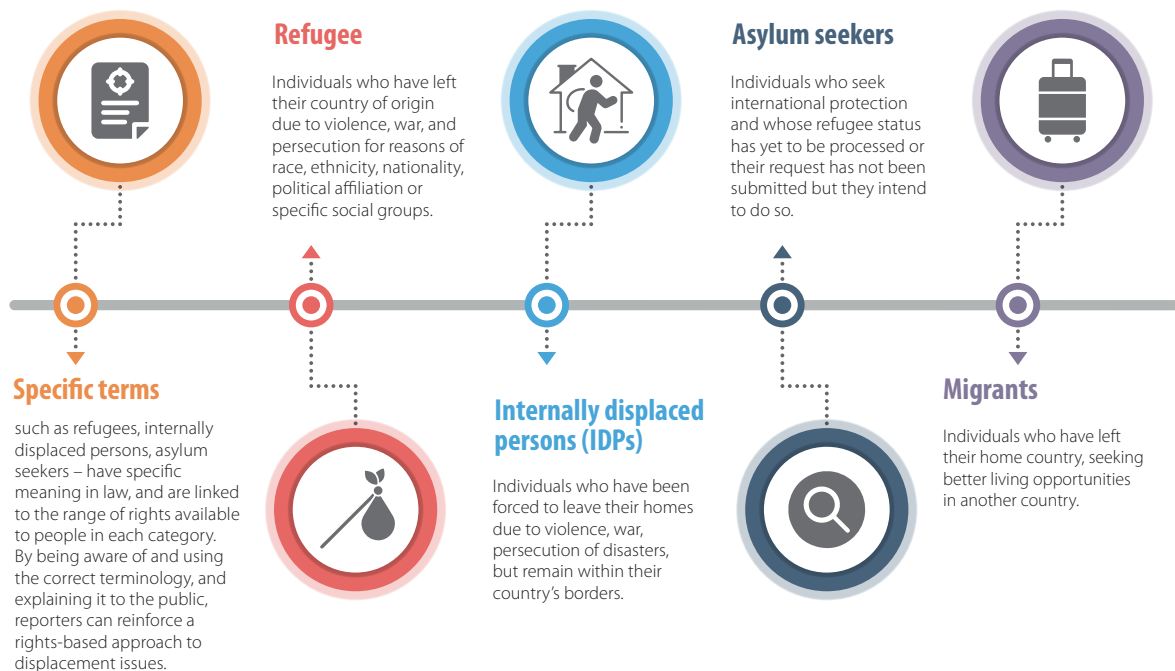
■ **Access to services:** Investigate the availability and accessibility of essential services for refugee women, such as healthcare, education, and legal assistance. Highlight both gaps in services and successful interventions to address these gaps.

■ **Family and community dynamics:** Explore how family and community dynamics impact women refugees' experiences and decision-making processes. This includes examining issues such as family separation, caregiving responsibilities, and social support networks.

■ **Policy analysis:** Provide analysis of policies and practices related to refugee protection and assistance, particularly those that have gender-specific implications. This includes asylum policies, refugee resettlement programs, and humanitarian aid distribution.

■ **Collaboration with local voices:** Work collaboratively with local journalists and community organisations to ensure that reporting accurately reflects the perspectives and priorities of women refugees themselves. Centring their voices in the storytelling process is essential for authenticity and accuracy.

■ **Empowerment narratives:** Highlight initiatives and organisations that empower women refugees, such as education programs, vocational training, or community support networks. These stories showcase resilience and agency, countering narratives of victimhood.



## How to interview refugee women and girls

Interviewing women and girls refugees requires a sensitive and respectful approach to ensure their safety, dignity, and well-being. Here are detailed guidelines to help journalists conduct such interviews ethically and effectively:

### Preparation

#### Research the background

- ▶ Understand the context of the refugee crisis they are part of, including the political, social, and economic factors.
- ▶ Familiarise yourself with the specific challenges faced by women refugees, such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and access to resources.

#### Establish trust

- ▶ Work with trusted intermediaries, such as local NGOs or community leaders, who can facilitate introductions and vouch for your intentions.

#### Cultural sensitivity

- ▶ Be aware of cultural norms and practices that may affect communication and comfort levels.
- ▶ Learn basic phrases in the refugee's language if possible or arrange for a woman interpreter.

## Conducting the Interview

### Creating a safe environment

- ▶ Choose a private and safe location for the interview where the refugee feels secure and comfortable.
- ▶ Ensure confidentiality by making it clear that their identity will be protected and their personal information will not be disclosed without their consent.

### Building rapport

- ▶ Spend some time building rapport before starting the formal interview. Engage in casual conversation to make the interviewee feel at ease.

- ▶ Explain the purpose of the interview, how the information will be used, and obtain informed consent.

### Using trauma-informed approaches

- ▶ Be patient and give the interviewee control over the pace of the interview.
- ▶ Avoid pressing for details that may be traumatic to recall. If they become distressed, offer to take a break or stop the interview if necessary.

## Obtain informed consent

- ▶ Make sure the individual understands any potential risks or benefits of their participation. Risks could include public exposure, backlash, or personal discomfort, while benefits might include raising awareness or influencing public opinion.
- ▶ Ensure voluntary participation and obtain explicit consent, ideally in writing or through a recording.
- ▶ Give the individual your contact information or that of your editor, in case they have further questions or concerns after the interview.
- ▶ After the interview, provide a follow-up to confirm their continued consent, especially if there have been significant changes in the direction or scope of the story.

## Asking questions

### Open-ended questions

- ▶ Use open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to share their story in their own words. Examples include: "Can you tell me about your journey to this place?" or "What has been the most challenging part of your experience?"
- ▶ Follow up with gentle prompts if needed, such as "Can you tell me more about that?"





### ■ **Active listening**

- ▶ Show empathy and understanding through active listening. Nodding, maintaining eye contact, and verbal affirmations can help the interviewee feel heard and respected.
- ▶ Reflect back what you've heard to ensure understanding and show that you value their story.

### ■ **Non-pressuring**

- ▶ Respect their right to not answer any questions they are uncomfortable with.
- ▶ Avoid re-traumatizing questions that focus on graphic details of violence or trauma.

### ■ **Cultural and personal boundaries**

- ▶ Be mindful of cultural norms regarding gender interactions and physical contact among refugees.
- ▶ Allow the interviewee to set boundaries regarding what they are comfortable discussing.

## After the interview

### ■ **Provide support information**

- ▶ Offer information about local support services, such as counselling, legal aid, or community organisations that can assist them.

- ▶ Ensure they know how to reach out if they have any concerns or need further assistance after the interview.

### ■ **Follow-up**

- ▶ If appropriate and agreed upon, follow up to provide updates on how their story will be used and to check on their well-being.
- ▶ Ensure that they are comfortable with any follow-up interviews or additional information requests.

## Ethical reporting

### ■ **Anonymity and confidentiality**

- ▶ Use pseudonyms and avoid using identifiable information unless the interviewee gives explicit permission.
- ▶ Be transparent about how their story will be shared and who the potential audience will be.

### ■ **Balanced representation**

- ▶ Strive to portray their stories with dignity, focusing on their resilience and strength as well as the challenges they face.
- ▶ Include context about the broader issues affecting refugees to provide a comprehensive understanding of their situation.

Gendered

*disinformation*



**G**endered disinformation is the toxic result of disinformation and gender stereotypes.

■ **Disinformation** is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic, social, and political gain, and which can cause public harm. It is different to problematic journalism, which includes ongoing (and uncorrected) errors that arise from poor research or sloppy verification, sensationalising that exaggerates for effect, and hyper-partisan selection of facts at the expense of fairness.

■ Disinformation is an old technique. The Internet, in particular social media platforms, however, are fertile soil for its dissemination on an impressive scale and a speed: algorithms incentivise and amplify inflammatory content and deep-rooted gender stereotypes to keep women and other gender individuals at bay.

- ▶ Bloggers, Instagram ‘influencers’ and YouTube stars promote products and politicians without disclosing that they are paid to do so.
- ▶ Covert payments made to commentators (often with false identities) who seek to affirm, discredit or intimidate in online fora.
- ▶ Digitally fuelled disinformation, in contexts of polarisation, risks eclipsing the role of journalism.

■ The major risks of disinformation are twofold. First, the public may come to disbelieve all content, including journalism. In this context, they may instead believe content endorsed by their social networks, which corresponds with their hearts, and leave out their heads. Secondly, there is a risk that governments may try to impose unjustifiable regulation of the media.

■ In many parts of the world, trust in media and journalism was fragile and weakening long before the advent of social media. However, the sheer volume and reach of disinformation and misinformation, dressed up as news and distributed via social media, has inflicted a contagion that threatens further reputational damage to journalism.

■ In the high-speed information free-for-all on social media platforms and the internet, everyone can be a publisher. As a result, citizens struggle to discern what is true and what is false, leading to cynicism and distrust. Extreme views, conspiracy theories and populism flourish and once-accepted truths and institutions are questioned. In this world, newsrooms battle to claim

and perform their historic role as gatekeepers whose product can help to establish the truth.

■ Research shows that women and girls are disproportionately targeted by online violence, smear campaigns, abuse and harassment.

■ **Gendered disinformation** consists of false information or manipulation of real information to mislead, confuse, discredit and diminish. It weaponises gender stereotypes and uses misogynistic narratives by casting doubts on women’s abilities, loyalty or morality. It largely targets specific, high-profile women, such as politicians, journalists, and activists, in an effort to discredit, intimidate and or silence them (Raistrick and Ellena, 2024).

■ Gendered disinformation is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purpose of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. Its malign intent is often part of a broader political strategy to consolidate power.

- ▶ Posting fake sexualised information, images/videos that violate what is considered socially acceptable behaviour for women or men
- ▶ Posting doctored images, videos, memes to discredit and ridicule
- ▶ Disseminating false claims to protect traditional “family values”, combining narratives about religion, race or immigration
- ▶ Circulating allegations about their mental health, competencies, good faith, and morality

■ Gendered disinformation can take many forms, including:

■ Orchestrated smear campaigns have a chilling effect on the targeted individuals and can cause a domino effect, discouraging other women from becoming more politically active and being vocal about their opinions. As such, it effectively undermines democracy and participation in public life. (Di Meco, 2023).



TIP: Attacks can be related to specific events (e.g. elections, an activist campaign, an investigation) or broader instances (e.g. political opposition, discussion over reproductive rights). Social media posts, interviews, videos, memes describe women as:



Repeated over and over these terms are drops that turn into an ocean at crucial times, particularly during elections or key legislative decisions, including the ratification of critical convention over women’s rights, to belittle individuals in the eye of the audience.

Armenia is particularly vulnerable to Russian-backed propaganda and propped up by conservative forces. The meaning of the term “gender” has been distorted by ultra-nationalist groups and used to manipulate people around the idea that those fighting for equality were destroying the fabric of Armenian society. Under pressure, authorities have removed the term from legal documents, partly giving in to narratives against so-called “gender ideology”. This has hindered the legislative framework to protect the rights of women and vulnerable groups and the proper implementation of international treaties. (Jilozian, 2017)

Attacks on women and LGBT+ politicians are more frequent and more organised than those against their male counterparts; they often focus on them as women, rather than their political positions and programmes - campaigns centre on their personal life or their appearance. They are also intersectional (across different discrimination grounds such as age, gender, race, disability, etc).

Examples of gendered disinformation campaigns include:

## Republic of Armenia

Journalist and environmental activist Tehmine Yenokyan has been the mark of defamatory attacks, persecution and court proceedings - in particular Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP suit) - due to her efforts to highlight the environmental harms of mining activities (Council of Europe 2023). Similarly, smear campaigns targeted Lara Aharonian, a women’s rights activist and co-founder of the Women’s Resource Center in Armenia, aimed at discrediting her and tarnishing her reputation. These campaigns have included false accusations of promoting “un-Armenian” values and being an agent of foreign powers.

Zaruhi Batoyan, an advocate of disabilities’ rights and a former minister, has been attacked when she openly spoke about people with disabilities and the sexuality challenges they face.

## Romania

Romanian investigative journalist Emilia Şercan specialised in uncovering cases of plagiarism perpetrated by the political elite, has been the target of a smear campaign with intimate photos of her shared on various websites, of threatening email and social media messages.

## Republic of Moldova

During the presidential elections in 2020, candidate Maia Sandu faced online criticism from conservative forces for not being married and not having children. Her critics did not focus on her political programme rather claiming that she could represent Moldovan society where the family is central. Sandu won the vote.

## Italy

Former speaker of Parliament Laura Boldrini was put under permanent police escort after receiving bullets sent via mail, threats of gang rape on social media for her pro-migration and gender equality stance as well as vilifying attacks by political opponents.

## How to respond

When encountering gendered disinformation, journalists can't simply rely on "catch-up corrections" of mistakes. Specific measures to confront it include:

- ▶ Adopt gender-sensitive reporting techniques
- ▶ Be transparent by showing sources, being accountable, and allowing criticism
- ▶ Covering the story by detecting and bringing to light new cases and forms of disinformation
- ▶ Make gendered disinformation "the" story. Investigate and report on specific campaigns in a critical manner, interviewing the victims (if they have gone public), experts in disinformation and gender to provide analysis and context.
- ▶ Engage audiences in news literacy. In an age of social media, journalists can play a role in encouraging critical attitudes towards information and curating authoritative and reliable content, helping users to find good content wherever it is.

## Mainstreaming a gender perspective in media organisations

Journalists do not operate in a vacuum, they are part of organisations, which also have the responsibility of integrating gender-sensitive approaches and ethical reporting in their own practices, in terms of both their editorial decisions and employment policy.

Mainstreaming as well as training and capacity building on gender- and age-sensitive reporting across the media outlet is crucial. Ideally, such training should be carried out on an annual basis so that journalists, assignment editors and editors understand their sphere of influence when it comes to gender issues.

Such training should move beyond 'awareness-raising' approaches and discuss how to overcome barriers to action. It should explore strategies for incentivising the uptake of and adherence to core guidelines and standards on gender-sensitive reporting, ensuring broad buy-in across the agency/organisation.

Such training should include examples of gender-sensitive reporting to clearly establish a horizon of good practice for practitioners to aspire to.

The following questions will help media organisations to identify their needs:

- ▶ Does your media organisation have any editorial policy or guidelines concerning gender-sensitive reporting, including the coverage of sexual and gender-based violence, conflict-affected communities and gendered disinformation?
- ▶ Do the internal editorial guidelines include glossaries when covering these topics?
- ▶ Does your organisation have a diversity policy as part of its employment policy?
- ▶ Does your media organisation employ journalists from diverse backgrounds (e.g. race, gender, religious and ethnic minorities?)
- ▶ Does your organisation provide specific training focusing on ethical reporting, data journalism, safety, and legislation?



## **Appendix 1. Quick checklist for reporters**

### **Images and photos**

- ▶ Do visual images contribute to the content of the news? Or are they simply placed to appeal to the eye?
- ▶ Is one gender dominant in the images?
- ▶ Have images that reinforce gender stereotypes been avoided?
- ▶ Was the use of violent images avoided?
- ▶ Were low angle-detail shots avoided?

### **Ensure a diverse range of sources in news reports**

- ▶ How many sources are government and corporate officials?
- ▶ How many belong to the progressive, public interest groups?
- ▶ How many sources are women?
- ▶ How many sources are from minority groups?

### **From whose point of view is the news reported?**

- ▶ Whose interest does the report serve?
- ▶ Does this interest coincide with that of the government?
- ▶ Does it coincide with that of the corporate world?
- ▶ Is the report in the public's interest? Which public?

### **Provide context**

- ▶ Has the story been put in context that would allow the public can form its own opinions?
- ▶ Is the context reported in a nuanced and balanced way?

### Content and Language

- ▶ Does the news story avoid gender stereotypes?
- ▶ Does the news story include an equal number of men and women participating in interviews?
- ▶ Does the news story include women as experts?
- ▶ Does the news story implicitly or explicitly emphasise gender equality or inequality?
- ▶ Is the news story free from stereotypical, discriminatory, biased and sexist language? Does the story avoid sexist terms such as “female MP”, “female driver”, “female athlete”?
- ▶ Does the news story contain any judgmental emphasis in questions about women (such as “unexpected success”)?

■ Trauma-informed journalism is about reporting on near-death experience in a way that is sensitive to the psychological and emotional needs of those affected.

■ During a war, after a murder, in the wake of a natural disaster or following sexual violence, there is a story to be told. The way journalists report on them has an impact on the survivors, who have often no privacy and are vulnerable to re-victimisation. Reporters may unintentionally or ruthlessly inflict additional harm or may themselves be overwhelmed.

#### ■ Why it matters

■ Trauma-informed journalism recognises the profound impact that traumatic events can have on individuals and communities and helps to ensure that the process of reporting does not cause additional harm to those who have already experienced trauma. It also improves the quality of journalism by fostering trust and creating more nuanced, compassionate stories that better reflect the complexities of human experience.

#### ■ Before the interview

Research meticulously who the victims or survivors are and what they went through. Familiarise with how trauma works. Psychiatrists talk of three acts of trauma: the breaking phase, when it's new and fresh; the recovery

phase, where the victim comes to terms with what happened; and the acceptance phase, where healing may or may not occur.

■ Plan carefully the interviews. Be clear what it is you want out of them. How does this person's experience potentially fit into the larger narrative that you are exploring?

■ Draft the questions and where you want the conversation to go. It is key to make survivors feel safe, including by giving them a say on the location and who will be present. Even details like showing up on time are important to transmit a sense of trust.

■ Be aware of local norms. In some cultures, touching or making eye contact with victims can cause offence while some people may not want to hear or use the word “rape.” Male journalists should be careful about interviewing a raped woman in private.

### During the interview

■ Ask the people you are interviewing how they want to be identified — as a survivor or a victim, or even how they want their name to appear.

■ Avoid asking “How do you feel?”. It is the most used and least effective question, the one that survivors find consistently the most distressing. Better options include: “How are you now?” or “How did you experience that?” or “What do you think about...?”

■ Check whether it is fine to ask a tough question: then listen, do not talk too much.

■ Use active listening skills — appropriate eye contact and non-verbal signalling of interest and engagement. Most communication takes place through body language and tone of voice rather than through words.

■ Simple, open questions work best. Try to avoid questions that can be answered just ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Do not ask more than one question at a time.

■ Do not “over-empathise”. You are a reporter, not a rescuer: show empathy and understanding while keeping the professional boundaries clear.

■ Retriggering is likely. You can start with easy-to-answer, fact-based questions like how old they are but you can then tactfully acknowledge the difficulty and state that if questions that are too hard they can just tell you.

■ If survivors do not want to be identified and you are filming, use specific technique, for example behind against a strong light, or in shadows. Be careful with silhouettes of the face or from the side, or with digital blurring or mosaic techniques, as images can now often and quite easily be enhanced on computers.

### **After the interview**

■ Write or video edit with extra care and review. Using just a first name only a pseudonym is not enough to mask someone's identity: consider obscuring features such as job, age or village — and be careful not to leave identifiers in the report by mistake.

■ Frame and centre the story on the victim's or survivor's perspective: let them know about the reporting, editing and fact-checking process their piece may go through before going live.

■ Think carefully about the phrases and words you use. Does your language add to the public's understanding? Avoid superficial expressions like "The shocked community mourns the death ..." or "Villagers are still trying to come to terms with the tragedy..." They are superficial and obvious: instead, just describe what has happened and how people are responding.

### **Remember self-care**

■ It is important for journalists who cover traumatic events to keep an eye on their mental health. Rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is high among journalists covering traumatic events on a regular basis.

■ Psychologists suggest reporters to get some distance from the tough stories they're working on: having a self-care plan is as important as fact-checking. Journalists who do not take care of themselves are not able to be fully present for the survivors whose stories they're trying to tell.

### Appendix 3. Resources for refugee women and girls in Armenia

■ The State Migration Service of Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development of the Republic of Armenia is the state entity rendering all services in the field of migration, including those affecting people with refugee status and under international protection.

■ State agencies, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations within the framework of their competencies, provide assistance to refugees including accommodation support, financial help, legal aid, psychological support, social assistance, medical care, access to education and courses in Armenian language. Decrees and procedures are announced on the institutional website [https://migration.am/newly\\_recognized\\_refugees](https://migration.am/newly_recognized_refugees)

■ In October 2023, in the wake of the exodus of Armenian refugees from Karabakh, the government launched a primary needs registration platform <https://e-soc.am/> to assess the primary needs of the forcibly displaced population. Notably, the list of primary items includes essential goods intended for women and girls. Guidelines have been formulated for social workers to facilitate accurate and effective communication with beneficiaries, enabling the identification of their needs, issues, and potential risks during emergency or crisis situations. Additionally, an information guide has been developed for individuals forcibly displaced from Karabakh, containing comprehensive information about centres and organisations offering social support services.

■ Social and psychological assistance is mainly provided by non-governmental organizations. Specifically, for gender-based violence against women and girls, there are 10 state-authorized “against domestic violence” support centres across the country. Working closely with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, these centres offer psychological assistance, legal advice, and socio-economic support to victims and survivors of domestic violence, including refugee women and girls.

■ The state is not obliged to provide accommodation to a person recognised as a refugee. The Migration Service however has dormitories at its disposal and it can provide a room in one of them, if a free space is available. The relevant application should be submitted to the Migration Service. <https://migration.am/?lang=en>

■ Asylum-seekers and refugees are provided free legal aid free of charge in accordance with the Law of the Republic of Armenia “On Advocacy.”

■ The Office of the Public Defender provides free legal aid to vulnerable groups prescribed by the law. Asylum-seekers and refugees are included as a separate group entitled to free legal aid. The website, also available in English, details opening hours and relevant phone numbers [https://hpg.am/en\\_us](https://hpg.am/en_us) Legal counselling is also available at the Office of the Human Rights Defender, [https://www.ombuds.am/en\\_us](https://www.ombuds.am/en_us), and the Chamber of Advocates

■ <https://www.advocates.am/en/about-us/>. Information on both websites is also available in English.

■ The State Employment Agency offers consultations on professional orientation and information on provided services; free of charge assistance to find job and vocational trainings.

■ A list of non-state organisations providing employment assistance is available at <https://employment.am/en/index.html>

■ The United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR) maintains an up-to-date list of agencies and NGOs providing support to refugees. It is available at <https://help.unhcr.org/armenia/partners-and-contact-info/>

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The media has enormous influence in shaping our thoughts and actions, reflecting and influencing societal structures and systems. Television, radio, newspapers, social media shape public opinions, perceptions, and beliefs, moulding the way individuals view the world and, as a result, act in society.

The role of the media is to accurately mirror societies.

Adopting a gender lens enables reporters to reflect the world in its nuances and diversity, hence tearing down stereotypes. Journalists can help to change attitudes by portraying women and men as equally valued and diverse, rather than re-enforcing harmful gender-based stereotypes.

[www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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