

# USE THE RIGHT WORDS

MEDIA  
REPORTING  
ON SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE IN  
CANADA

POSSIBILITY  
SEEDS

COURAGETOACT.CA  
#IHaveTheCourageToAct



# Land Acknowledgement

This work is taking place on and across the traditional territories of many Indigenous nations. We recognize that gender-based violence is one form of violence caused by colonization that is still used today to marginalize and dispossess Indigenous Peoples from their lands and waters. We must centre this truth in our work to address gender-based violence on campuses and in our communities. We commit to continuing to learn and take an anti-colonial inclusive approach in all our work. One way we are honouring this responsibility is by actively incorporating the [Calls for Justice within Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).

## Dedication

To Kiyan, Damian and all children; we do this so you have a better world to flourish.

## About Possibility Seeds

Possibility Seeds, a social change consultancy dedicated to gender justice, equity, and inclusion. We believe safe, equitable workplaces, organizations and institutions are possible. Learn more about our work at [www.possibilityseeds.ca](http://www.possibilityseeds.ca). Possibility Seeds leads [Courage to Act](#), a national initiative to address and prevent gender-based violence at Canadian post-secondary institutions.

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Women and Gender  
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des genres Canada



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We hope this document will be a valuable resource to those seeking to address and prevent gender-based violence. As this is an evolving document, it may not capture the full complexity of the subject matter. The information provided does not constitute legal advice and is not intended to be prescriptive. It should be considered a supplement to existing expertise, experience, and credentials, not a replacement for them.

We encourage readers to seek out training, education, and professional development opportunities in relevant areas to enhance their knowledge and sustained engagement with this work.





The *Use the Right Words* guides are built on femifesto's **2015 Use the Right Words Sexual Violence Reporting Guide** by authors Sasha Elford, Farrah Khan, and Shannon Giannitsopoulou

**About femifesto:** femifesto was a feminist grassroots collective dedicated to building consent culture through media literacy that started in 2011. The collective authored the 2015 Use the Right Words Sexual Violence Reporting Guide. Members included Farrah Khan, Sasha Elford, and Shannon Giannitsopoulou. A decade later, femifesto sunset the collective.

**About Shannon Giannitsopoulou:** Shannon is a social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioner. You can contact her at [shannon@anti-oppression.ca](mailto:shannon@anti-oppression.ca) for consultancy, speaking, or workshop inquiries. Read more at [www.anti-oppression.ca](http://www.anti-oppression.ca).

## Self-Care

This guide discusses coverage of sexual violence across Canadian media. We recognize this subject matter can take a toll on journalists through vicarious trauma or based on individual experiences. We encourage journalists to practice self-care and be attentive to their mental health. You will find resources in the [Self-Care for Survivors Speaking in the Media](#) section.



# Table of Contents

<b>Resources on Media Reporting</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The <i>Use the Right Words</i> Guides</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>A Note on Terminology</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>A Note to Journalists</b>	<b>12</b>
Trauma-Informed Journalism	13
<b>Gender-based Violence and Sexual Violence in Canada: The Facts</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Reporting on Sexual Violence</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>10 Recommendations on Interviewing Survivors of Sexual Assault</b>	<b>22</b>
Key Questions to Ask Survivors in an Interview	25
Can't Find a Survivor to Interview? Build Relationships and Foster Media Literacy	25
<b>Why Don't Survivors Report Sexual Violence in Canada?</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Sexual Assault Cases: Recanted, Unfounded, False</b>	<b>32</b>
Recanting Sexual Assault	32
Unfounded Sexual Assault	32
False Reports to the Police About Sexual Assault	33
<b>Identification: Survivor, Victim, or an Alternative?</b>	<b>35</b>
Victim	35
Survivor	35
Victim-Survivor	35
Alternative Language	36
<b>"What I Learned from Reporting on Sexual Violence" by Robyn Doolittle</b>	<b>37</b>
What Not to Do	37
Pre-Interview	38
The Interview and Writing	41
Fact-Checking	43
A Final Talk	44
<b>Self-Care For Survivors Speaking in the Media</b>	<b>46</b>
Before the Interview	46
During the Interview	48
After the Interview	48

<b>Why and When to Use a Content Note</b>	<b>50</b>
Content Note Examples	50
<b>Use of the term 'Allegedly'</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>What is Rape Culture?</b>	<b>52</b>
Rape Culture is Rooted in Colonization	53
Rape Culture Shapes Who is Seen As a Survivor	54
Rape Culture Shapes Who Is Seen As a Person Who Can Cause Harm	54
<b>What Rape Culture Looks Like</b>	<b>55</b>
Rape Culture Constructs and Enforces Gender	58
Rape culture reinforces the gender binary	58
Rape culture tells us that men can't control themselves	59
Rape culture constructs women and feminized people as passive or sexually-available	59
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Provincial, Territorial and National Resources</b>	<b>72</b>
Indigenous Resources	72
Alberta	72
British Columbia	73
Manitoba	73
New Brunswick	74
Newfoundland and Labrador	74
Northwest Territories	74
Nova Scotia	74
Nunavut	75
Ontario	75
Prince Edward Island	75
Québec	75
Saskatchewan	76
Yukon	76
National	76



## Resources on Media Reporting

The following organizations and resources informed our initial work on media reporting and sexual violence, and are the foundation upon which we built Use the Right Words:

- Canadian Judicial Council:  
[The Canadian Justice System and the Media](#)
- Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women:  
[Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage](#). The outline and format of the Chicago Taskforce's media toolkit served as one of the foundational resources for the original draft of femifesto's *Reporting on Sexual Assault: A Toolkit for Canadian Media*, released in December 2013.
- DART Center tipsheets: [Reporting on Sexual Violence](#) and [Reinvestigating Rape](#)
- Jessica Luther: [Gendered Violence Cases Challenge Sports Journalists To Consider And Reconsider Each Word They Write](#)
- Klinik Community Health Centre:  
[Trauma-informed: The Trauma Toolkit](#)
- Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault: [Media Resources](#)
- Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women: [The Media Hub](#)
- TransPride Canada: [Style Guide](#)
- Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses: [Femicide Report](#)
- The Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence (JiG) of the Center for Women's Global Leadership: [Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide for Covering Gender-Based Violence](#)
- Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, 2021: [#CallItFemicide: Understanding sex/gender-related killings of women and girls in Canada, 2020](#)
- Ipsos: [ONLINE HARM IN JOURNALISM: Research Report](#)
- The Canadian Women's Foundation: [The Facts about Gender-Based Violence](#)
- Informed Opinions: [Toxic Hush Action Kit](#)

- Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence: [Telling the Full Story: An Online Guide for Journalists Covering Domestic Violence](#)
- Know Your IX: [A Guide for Journalists](#)
- The National Network to End Domestic Violence: [Resources for Reporters, Editors, and Media Professionals](#)
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center: [Reporting on Sexual Violence](#)
- Ethical Journalism Network: [6-point guide to ethical reporting on domestic violence](#)
- Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence: [Reporting Sexual Assault: A Guide for Journalists](#)
- CDC: [Reporting on Sexual Violence](#)
- Nevada Network Against Domestic Violence: [Covering Domestic Violence: A Guide for Media Professionals](#)
- The DART Center for Journalism and Trauma: [Reporting on Sexual Violence](#)
- Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC): [Sharing Your Story: A guide for survivors of sexual violence](#)
- West Coast Leaf: [WE ARE HERE: Women's Experiences of the Barriers to Reporting Sexual Assault](#)
- The 519: [Media Guide](#)
- Zero Tolerance UK: [Media Guidelines on Violence Against Women](#)

"Rape is violence, not 'sex'. Reporting on sexual assault means finding not only the language but the context and sensitivity to communicate a trauma that is at once deeply personal and yet a matter of public policy; immediate and yet freighted with centuries of stigma, silence and suppression. Reporting on sexual violence requires special ethical sensitivity, interviewing skills, and knowledge about victims, perpetrators, law and psychology." - Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (2015).

## The *Use the Right Words* Guides

In 2010, I was featured in a national Canadian newspaper as “one to watch” about my work to advance gender equity. During the interview, my excitement quickly turned to dismay and discomfort when the journalist pressured me to expand in-depth on the personal reasons I was working to address sexual violence. All of sudden, a story to celebrate my accomplishments morphed into a story of what someone else had done to me as a child. I didn’t know how to advocate with the journalist, and I didn’t know the implications that disclosure would have. This experience propelled me to start thinking about ways media can tell stories about sexual violence with care.

**Journalists and their employers can direct and shape conversations about sexual violence, but few resources exist on how to communicate those stories empathetically and equitably.**

In 2011, femifesto recognized the enormous cultural value of closing that education gap and began work on the first *Use The Right Words* guide for journalists. Applying an intersectional lens, we researched how Canadian media outlets reported on sexual violence and sought feedback on this from diverse community stakeholders through surveys, interviews and focus groups. The feedback resulted in the creation of the 2015 *Use the Right Words: Media Reporting on Sexual Violence in Canada*. The guide has been used in journalism schools and media outlets across Canada. In addition, it has been translated into French and Turkish. It has, in part, inspired global projects, including the #GBVinMedia Toolkit in India.

Since the 2015 launch, we have witnessed a shift in the reporting of sexual violence. High-profile cases such as Jian Ghomeshi, Junior Hockey Canada, Jacob Hoggard, Harvey Weinstein, R. Kelly, Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell received unprecedented coverage.

This cultural shift was decades in the making and could not have taken place without continued grassroots activism, widespread campaigns, and movements like #MeToo (started by long-time Black feminist advocate Tarana Burke in 2006). Thanks to those collective efforts, there is an increasing awareness that survivors should not be blamed nor shamed when they choose to disclose or report incidents of sexual violence.



**Journalists have informed us that this guide has been vital in helping them navigate this difficult topic.**

In late 2019, femifesto sunsetted as a collective, and Possibility Seeds worked with some of the authors to revise and expand the original guide. We embarked on a three-year process with community stakeholders to create a suite of *Use the Right Words* guides for reporting on sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, including but not limited to intimate partner violence, economic abuse, technology-assisted violence, and coercive control. We are grateful for the guidance and feedback from an advisory committee of survivors, journalists, lawyers, researchers, and anti-gender-based violence advocates. These experts contributed to critical conversations on current approaches to reporting while providing key insights incorporated throughout this guide.

The *Use the Right Words* suite of guides provides language and frameworks to consider when reporting sexual violence, strategies for facilitating conversations and training with colleagues, and mentoring new journalists.

This specific *Use the Right Words* guide focuses on the issues inherent in reporting sexual violence, such as understanding rape culture, interviewing survivors, and content notes. It also includes an important article by award-winning journalist Robyn Doolittle. We hope this guide is valuable for journalists, media makers, community organizers, educators, and others who seek to support survivors through communication while shifting public discourse on consent.


Thank you for reading and working to make journalism better for everyone.

With care,



**Farrah Khan**

CEO, *Possibility Seeds*

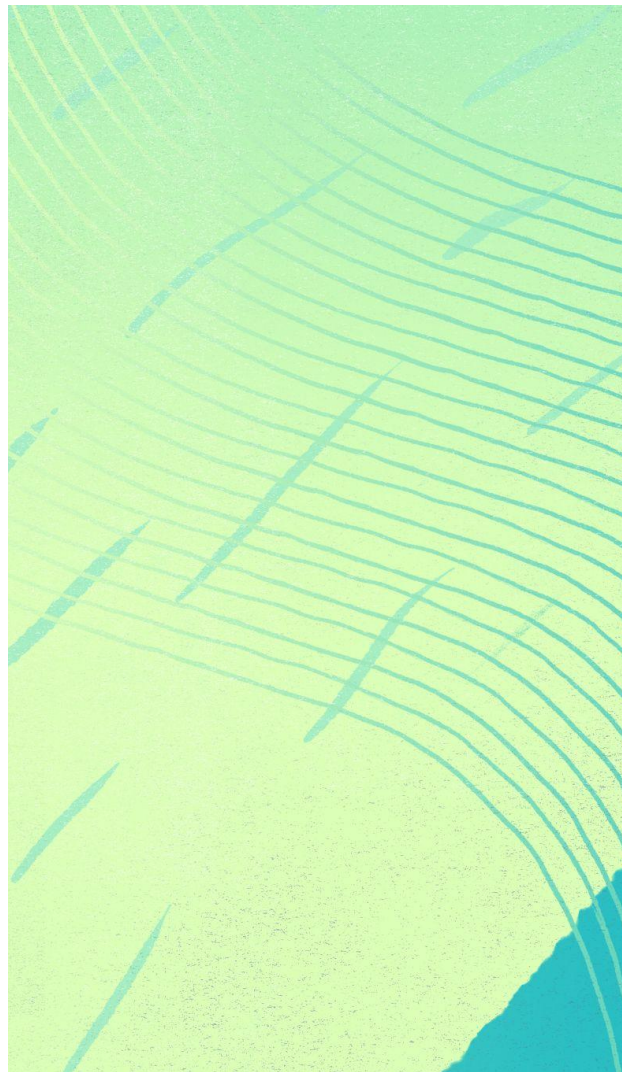


“I think I just want the media to name  
sexual violence when it occurs”  
- 2014 Use the Right Words survey respondent

## A Note on Terminology

**Sexual violence:** This term refers to abusive and violent behaviours including, but not limited to, rape, sexual harassment, molestation, unwanted sexual contact, stalking, and voyeurism. Sexual violence can be perpetrated in person (e.g. rape) and online through technology and social media (e.g. disseminating intimate images without consent) (CDC, 2021).

**Survivor:** *Use the Right Words* uses the term “survivor” when referring to people subjected to sexual violence. While there is an ongoing debate over the use of the terms “victim” or “survivor” (Setia & An, 2021), we believe every individual should have the opportunity to ask to be identified by the language of their choice.



## A Note to Journalists

**We understand that the Journalism Industry has undergone a massive transformation over the last several decades and continues to evolve.**

We also recognize that many players create, edit, and publish every story (online, social media, blogs, video, print, podcasts, and radio). Even if a journalist strives to use language and frameworks supportive of survivors, the final product may be out of their control. While journalists were not traditionally charged with writing headlines, we know that increasing numbers make every effort to do so, particularly with legally or personally sensitive stories. However, editors may make changes without the reporter's knowledge or consent. Social media account managers typically write their own captions when sharing material online (e.g. TikTok and Twitter), and photographers typically provide their own captions for photos set to run with a story.

"When there's [cases like] Jian Ghomeshi or Bill Cosby, they are talked about a lot, but after a while [discussions] die down... It should be a continued conversation... Even if you are not a survivor or perpetrator of sexual assault, the conversation is about everybody, and that's what's missing." - Lia Valentis

This potential for unintentional harm is why media organizations should be well-versed in practices that do not shame or blame survivors. It is also crucial that the entire team discuss how each story will be presented and disseminated and that those decisions are set in stone. Putting these safeguards in place becomes less certain and more complex for freelance and contract journalists who have less direct contact with staff or can review edits in real-time. When possible, freelancers should ask what the organization's policy is around using specific language and whether some form of mutual agreement on what language will be used can be agreed on before publication.





## Trauma-Informed Journalism

Trauma is when individuals and/or communities experience, witness, or learn of profound events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury to the integrity of self or others. It can be intergenerational, historical, complex, acute, vicarious, chronic, and community-based.

**Trauma can be a result of multiple factors, such as:**

- Oppression (racism, ableism, poverty, transphobia, heterosexism etc.)
- Involvement in an accident
- Witnessing or being a part of physical or verbal violence
- Intergenerational, ancestral or historical trauma
- Family violence (witnessing or being harmed)
- Suicide of a community member
- Severe injury
- Sudden death (by accident, murder or natural causes)
- Natural disasters
- War
- Colonialism

**“Trauma-informed journalism means understanding what a trauma survivor is experiencing before you show up at their door and understanding how your actions [as a journalist] will impact them after you pack up and leave” - Tamara Cherry**

Trauma-informed journalism is grounded in the awareness and understanding that trauma impacts people’s lives in multiple ways, including structurally, culturally, and historically. A trauma-informed journalist sensitively integrates an understanding of the impacts of trauma into reporting while recognizing that trauma impacts survivors, their community, and even the journalist reporting on the story. Being trauma-informed also includes acknowledging how marginalized communities are disproportionately targeted for sexual violence and gender-based violence.

Trauma-informed journalists work, wherever possible, to limit further harm to all parties through thoughtful, compassionate and accurate reporting.

This approach allows us to respond with compassion and sensitivity, preventing survivors' further re-traumatization. This could mean moving away from asking survivors, "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?" (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010). It also means recognition in reporting the humanity of survivors and writing about them as multi-faceted individuals who should never be solely defined by what someone subjected them to.

**"A healing-centred approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond "what happened to you" to "what's right with you" and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events"**  
– Dr. Shawn Ginwright

**Trauma-Informed Journalism:** "What happened to you? How has the harm impacted you?"

**Anti-Oppressive Journalism:** "What happened to you? What harm has your community (or communities) been subjected to, historically and currently?"

**Healing-Informed Journalism:** "What happened to you? How are you and your community healing?"

**A trauma-informed journalist builds trusting and transparent relationships with sources and works to report on events from a strengths-based perspective without the inclusion of salacious details.**

In practice, a trauma-informed journalism approach can help mitigate harm in the following ways:

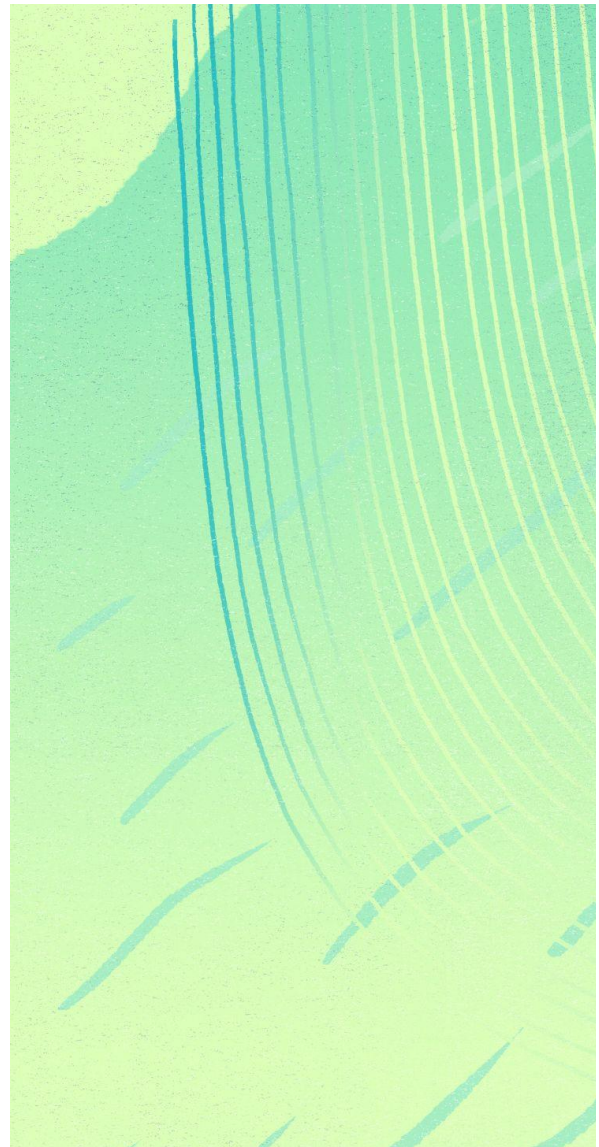
1. Reduce further distress in retelling these stories for survivors and their communities;
2. Reduce the impacts of trauma exposure on the journalist reporting the story; and
3. Reduce the impacts of trauma exposure to an audience that will engage with the content.

*Use the Right Words* tools are meant to provide journalists with methods to reduce harm when reporting on sexual violence and gender-based violence. Viewing journalism through a trauma-informed lens protects those involved in the story and the integrity of the work. Working from a trauma-informed framework means considering the human at the heart of the story, the comfort, safety, and empowerment of everyone involved.

"It's also about creating safe and predictable spaces. It's about forgetting all the rules that we usually abide by when we're interviewing school board officials and politicians and recognizing that when it comes to trauma, we need to be treating our interview subjects differently" (Miller, 2022, para. 6).

"I would love to see sites with [sexual assault] reports protect the people speaking out, watch the comments [section] for threats, and keep an eye on their Twitter. A lot of sites throw on an article and walk away; meanwhile, the person the article is about, or the writer, is left to deal with horrible threats." - Anne Thériault

**Trauma-informed journalism means prioritizing the consent and safety of each interviewee.** It also requires ensuring all parties understand the journalistic process from the first point of contact with an interviewee to the publication of an article. Throughout the guide, we provide tips on how to apply a trauma-informed framework, from interviewing survivors and understanding rape culture to using language that does not demean survivors. These skills cannot be learned overnight but through a lifelong commitment to research, reflection, and learning from and building with people affected by sexual violence.





# Gender-based Violence and Sexual Violence in Canada: The Facts

**The statistics on sexual and gender-based violence in Canada are startling and lay bare the severity and prevalence of the problem.** It is important to note that data is

often collected within limited binary categories (e.g. gender and race) and rarely disaggregated. As a result, very few statistics accurately capture the realities of Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people.

- In 2020, 160 women and girls were murdered, compared to 118 in 2019. One in five women killed in Canada in 2020 was First Nation, Métis, or Inuit ([Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, 2020](#)).
- Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is murdered by her spousal partner ([Statistics Canada, 2019](#)).
- Roughly 4 out of 10 women (44 per cent) have experienced some form of intimate partner violence, such as psychological, physical, or sexual ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)).
- Two-thirds (64 per cent) of people in Canada know a woman who has experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse ([Canadian Women's Foundation, 2021](#)).
- Girls and young women in the North experience violent crime at a rate four times higher than Canada's overall population. The violence is also more likely to be severe and result in physical injury ([Conroy, 2021; Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, 2021](#)).
- Indigenous women and girls are 12 times more likely to be murdered or go missing than other women in Canada and 16 times more likely than white women ([National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019](#)).
- Approximately 4.7 million women, 32 per cent of girls and women 15 years of age and up, report having been subjected to sexual assault at least once since the age of 15. This is compared to 13 per cent of men ([Statistics Canada, 2019](#)).
- Women are also more likely to experience elder abuse at the hands of a family member and account for 58 per cent of senior survivors of

family violence ([Statistics Canada, 2019](#)).

- On any night in Canada, 3,491 women and their 2,724 children sleep in shelters of all kinds. Out of the 4,476 women and 3,493 children staying in shelters on the snapshot date of April 16, 2014, 78 per cent were there primarily because of abuse ([Beattie & Hutchins, 2014](#)).
- On the snapshot date of April 16, 2014, 338 women and 201 accompanying children were turned away from shelters in Canada, the most common reason being that the shelter was full ([Beattie & Hutchins, 2014](#)).
- Approximately 37.4 per cent of unhoused young women and 41.3 per cent of trans and gender non-binary unhoused youth have been subjected to sexual assault compared to 8.2 per cent of unhoused young men ([Schwan, Versteegh, Perri, Caplan, Baig, Dej, Jenkinson, Brais, Eiboff, & Chalestari 2020](#)).
- The Trans PULSE Canada project found that 72 per cent of racialized trans and non-binary survey respondents had experienced verbal harassment in the past five years, 45 per cent had been harassed at work

or school, and 73 per cent expressed worry about being stopped or harassed by police or security ([Trans PULSE Canada, 2019](#)).

- One-third of gays (34 per cent) and two in five lesbians (40 per cent) have experienced some form of discrimination during their professional lives ([Angus Reid, 2011](#)).
- Approximately 90 per cent of transgender and gender non-conforming employees report experiencing workplace harassment and/or violence stemming from their identity and expression ([Catalyst, 2015](#)).
- One in three (32 per cent) women and one in eight (13 per cent) men have been subjected to unwanted sexual behaviour in public, the most common types of behaviour being unwanted sexual attention, unwanted physical contact, and unwanted comments about their sex or gender. For both men and women, age and sexual orientation were significant factors. More specifically, being younger and of a sexual orientation other than heterosexual was associated with much higher odds ([Cotter & Savage, 2019](#)).

- Trans people are more likely to have been subjected to violence since the age of 15 and more likely to experience inappropriate behaviours – including inappropriate sexual jokes, unwanted physical contact, unwanted sexual attention, and invalidation of

their gender identity – in public, online, and at work than cisgender people ([laffray, 2020](#)). Three out of five transgender women have reported being subjected to intimate partner violence since age 16 ([Trans PULSE Canada Survey, 2019](#)).

“We shaped this conversation around the concept that there is a patriarchy out there, a single patriarchy without a face that’s oppressing all women the same way, that’s attacking all people the same way. That’s simply not true. We experience patriarchy in different ways according to our social location” - Kai Cheng Thom

# The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Reporting on Sexual Violence

**“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives”  
- Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider**

## **Sexual assault is not a single issue.**

Any reporting on sexual violence must recognize how social location, including, but not limited to, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship status, impacts how people are targeted for, heal from and access justice for experiences of sexual and gender-based violence. It is intertwined with oppressive systems in our society, such as colonialism, racism, classism, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, and other forms of systemic oppression. These can exist in isolation or simultaneously. An intersectional approach to reporting means recognizing that “patterns of subordination intersect” and directly impact people’s exposure to and experiences of violence (Crenshaw, 2006, p. 10). This allows for a more complex and contextual understanding that addresses the reality of people’s “multi-issue” lives.

**“We need to be careful about how this conversation is racialized. If it's mainly white women's bodies we're protecting, we've seen how that plays out in communities of colour with men of colour being profiled and criminalized and the rapes of women of colour being seen as low priority or somehow not as egregious.” - Una Lee**

While some media are guiding new conversations on sexual violence, many marginalized communities remain shut out. During our decade of research, we encountered few examples of reporting on Indigenous women as survivors. The stories we did find often perpetuated negative stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples. This was exemplified in some of the reporting on the 2014 murder of Tina Fontaine, a 15-year-old Indigenous girl from the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba, Canada. Tina Fontaine deserved care when she was alive and



also in her death. Sadly, this was not the case in much of the reporting about her. One news outlet, the *Hamilton Spectator*, ran the headline, "Court hears that dead girl had drugs in her system," on January 30, 2018. The paper dehumanized her by not even affording her the dignity of her name. Furthermore, it focused on what she was doing before her murder rather than placing responsibility squarely where it belongs - on the person who murdered her.

Tina Fontaine's death sparked outrage and renewed calls for action to address the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) in Canada. This eventually led to a national inquiry into MMIWG in Canada, which was launched in 2016 and concluded in 2019. The inquiry's final report found that the disproportionate rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada constitute genocide, and made 231 calls for justice to address the issue. The report also highlighted the need for systemic change in areas such as child welfare, policing, and justice.

**Call to Action 6.1 in [Reclaiming Power and Place: The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#) is listed as follows:**

*We call upon all media, news corporations and outlets, and, in particular, government-funded corporations and outlets; media unions, associations, and guilds; academic institutions teaching journalism or media courses; governments that fund such corporations, outlets, and academic institutions; and journalists, reporters, bloggers, film producers, writers, musicians, music producers, and, more generally, people working in the entertainment industry to take decolonizing approaches to their work and publications in order to educate all Canadians about Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. More specifically, this includes the following:*

*i) Ensure authentic and appropriate representation of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, inclusive of diverse Indigenous cultural backgrounds, in order to address negative and discriminatory stereotypes.*

*ii) Support Indigenous people sharing their stories from their perspectives, free of bias, discrimination, and false assumptions, and in a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive way.*



*iii) Increase the number of Indigenous people in broadcasting, television, and radio, and in journalist, reporter, producer, and executive positions in the entertainment industry, including, and not limited to, by:*

- *providing educational and training opportunities aimed at Indigenous inclusion; and*
- *providing scholarships and grants aimed at Indigenous inclusion in media, film, and music industry-related fields of study.*

*iv) Take proactive steps to break down the stereotypes that hypersexualize and demean Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people, and to end practices that perpetuate myths that Indigenous women are more sexually available and “less worthy” than non-Indigenous women because of their race or background*

Aubrianna Snow (Mi'kmaq) has created a *Use the Right Words* guide on best practices for reporting on missing and murdered Indigenous Peoples that will be released in Summer 2023. The resource includes the expertise of various subject matter experts to provide insight into reporting these important and sensitive stories in a trauma-informed way.

We found a similar lack of media attention when it came to the rates of sexual violence faced by many

marginalized communities, including, but not limited to, Black and racialized women, people with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIAP+ (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and pansexual), newcomers, sex workers, criminalized people, and people with precarious immigration status.

**“The media needs to spend more time making sure a victim's class and race aren't entering - even subconsciously - into decisions about whether or not to report a case.”**  
- Jarrah Hodge

**Media outlets can inform the public's understanding of which kinds of violence matter or merit closer attention, whose bodies need greater protections, and what makes a survivor worthy of compassion and justice.** The common element of sexual violence is the use of power and control. Still, it is crucial to understand how systemic oppression — caused and controlled through government policy — contributes to higher rates of sexual violence in marginalized communities.



# 10 Recommendations on Interviewing Survivors of Sexual Assault

"Survivors should have the right to say if their experience gets published. [The] opportunity and right to tell their side of the story in THEIR OWN WORDS, with support from response-based language - so that they don't continue to internalize their actions as reasons that they were assaulted." - YWCA of Banff Programs and Services

"Survivors are in the best position to narrate their understanding of sexual violence. We need to listen to them with open hearts and without assumptions and stereotypes." - 2014 Use the Right Words survey respondent

Interviews can offer an opportunity for in-depth conversations and provide a much-needed space for survivors to share their stories publicly, often for the first time.

However, the voices and experiences of survivors have often been devalued, misinterpreted, tokenized or omitted in the media. Media can change this through trauma-informed journalism, specifically how they interview survivors. Below are recommendations for conducting interviews with that framework in mind:

**1. Respect boundaries:** Offer your source an off-record pre-interview so you can outline what the conversation will entail. This allows the interviewee to mentally and emotionally prepare, ask questions, and identify boundaries. Ask if they are OK with the conversation happening on the requested date and why or why not. If they are uncomfortable with a question, pause, check in with them, and reflect on whether that detail is pertinent to the story. Be prepared to switch directions. Journalists often work to tight deadlines, and taking this time before you start a formal interview can improve the odds of a positive outcome for all involved.

**2. Acknowledge feelings:** Survivors may have complex responses to being interviewed. They may want to speak with you to advocate and raise awareness but struggle with difficult memories and



emotions. Recognize they may not be able to anticipate how they will feel or react during an interview or after it has been aired or published.

**3. Reflect:** Retelling a traumatic story is never easy; stigma and fear of negative repercussions is one factor that leads to survivors being silenced. Take care not to use language that could inadvertently ascribe blame. It is equally important to be open and honest about what you need to tell a fair and accurate story. You can read more tips about this in [What I Learned from Reporting on Sexual Violence](#).

**4. Be trauma-informed:** Research the significant and long-lasting impacts of sexual violence to recognize signs and symptoms of trauma, such as memory loss, inability to concentrate, and panic attacks. Think through how you may need or want to respond. The Klinik Community Health Centre's [Trauma-informed: The Trauma Toolkit](#) is an excellent resource.

"Recovering from trauma is a process and takes time" (Klinik Community Health Centre, 2015, p. 112).

**5. Recognize that no two survivors are the same:** How people experience, heal from, access support, and address sexual violence is shaped by, but not limited to,

age, gender, race, sex, ability, geographic location, and class. Those same factors influence but do not necessarily dictate resiliency. Every interview is a chance to examine the different impacts these intersections can have on each individual. For example, reporting to the police is not everybody's vision of justice (Klinik Community Health Centre, 2015; Luther, 2014). Understand that how people respond to being interviewed will vary widely and may be unexpected. They may appear sad, calm, flat, expressionless, or laughing. Consider how describing those physical behaviours could raise doubts about their credibility or the severity of what happened.

**6. Ask, do not assume:** Ask how they would like to be identified: a person who experienced violence, a survivor, or a victim? Would they like to use their full name, a pseudonym, or initials? What term do they use to describe what they experienced? Rape, sexual assault, attack? While these questions are important, explain that a more neutral term such as "complainant" may be required.

They may ask to include details about their faith, sexuality, gender, or physical ability. Ask why, as they may wish to provide context or shed light on a specific issue, and if so, how would they want that information presented? Going public



about sexual violence can come with real personal costs, so anonymity may feel safest to some (Luther, 2014).

Provided that any legal concerns have been resolved, talk to your colleagues about how that specific language was chosen and why it should not be changed (WITNESS, 2013). This conversation should include the social media team, photographers, video editors, or any staff member who could change headlines, sub-heads, or cutlines and should come with the clear endorsement of a senior editor.

**7. Ensure informed consent:** Explain where, when, and in what formats the story could appear. Let them know that it could be posted across multiple platforms and whether online comments will be moderated/disabled or enabled. Where appropriate, share who else you plan to speak with, if the respondent will be included, and in what context. Let them know if they will have an opportunity to debrief their interview immediately after to clarify anything or identify any parts that they would like removed altogether. Also, let them know the period until which they can withdraw their interview. This allows them to make an informed decision before participating and consider what support systems they might need. Consider and discuss options for taking

pictures or videos (WITNESS, 2013).

Explain that in future, you may use elements of the survivor's story in another context, such as a panel discussion or interview, and check in with them first. Let them know that follow-up stories, such as an ongoing court case, may be inevitable, and talk through what they are most comfortable with. Ask if they would like to be notified in advance.

**8. Be clear about format and safety:** If the story is for broadcast and the interviewee wishes to remain anonymous, explain voices can be altered and faces blurred, but the final say is typically up to a senior editor. If anonymity is agreed on, caution them that there is always a risk of being identified. You can read more in [What I Learned from Reporting on Sexual Violence](#).

**9. Create a safer space for the interview:** Make every attempt to interview in a space pre-approved by the survivor (WITNESS, 2013). Block off time to talk about the interview process, let them ask questions, and gather what you need to tell the story. Build in time for breaks. Let them know they can bring a support person. Let them know that some of the questions can be distressing. Take a few minutes to explain why. For example: "I am going to ask you how this changed your life because I want people

to understand the short- and long-term effects of sexual violence.” Understand that they may need to pause or decide not to continue. If the interview is broadcast live, check if a delay is possible in case they need a break.

**10. Follow-up with the survivor:** Allocate time at the end for a follow-up conversation with the survivor to get their perspective on the process (WITNESS, 2013). Before sending a story to an editor, review what you spoke about. This ensures accuracy and fair representation and allows them to ask if they want something altered or removed. Great interviews can flow like a casual conversation, and they may reveal a detail they perceived as being in confidence or regret in hindsight. This can be for personal or legal reasons and protects both of you.

## Key Questions to Ask Survivors in an Interview

“A list of standard, non-invasive starter questions would be great. It would be helpful to have a starting point that you could tailor to the particular case.” – 2014 Use the Right Words survey respondent

- What do you think is essential for people to know or take away from your story?
- How has this experience impacted you? In what ways specifically?
- What does justice look like for you?
- What does healing look like for you?
- Have or will you engage with the police? Why or why not?
- What would you want bystanders to know?
- What services/resources/people helped you?
- Were there any barriers to you coming forward?
- What do you think would make it safer for survivors to come forward?
- Is there anything I haven't asked that our readers/audience should know?

## Can't Find a Survivor to Interview? Build Relationships and Foster Media Literacy

In our interviews with gender-based violence organizations and sexual assault support centers, many shared that they would receive a call from a journalist requesting to speak with a survivor the same day — often within a few hours.

This request is frequently turned down due to an inability to find a survivor who feels safe and ready to speak on short notice. The following list includes strategies to address this for journalists:

**1. Foster relationships with organizations:** Connect and build meaningful, long-lasting relationships with sexual assault centres and violence prevention organizations in your community. This allows you to build rapport and trust as well as increases the chances of connecting with a survivor for future stories. Some organizations will have survivors prepped to speak with the media. How these interviews are handled and the final product presented by media outlets is one way to build trust.

**2. Offer information:** Ask if you can set up informal meetings with staff, survivors, and frontline workers to discuss the process of reporting on a story and learn more about their organization. This will increase your understanding of the subject and demonstrates that you, and your media outlet, are invested in responsible coverage.

**3. Create a contact list:** Take the time to build connections means access to frontline workers, researchers, and counsellors. They can provide context and strengthen your story, even on short

notice. For example, having authoritative voices confirm the prevalence of sexual violence or provide context on intersectional oppression.

Some experts may have disclosed their experience with sexual violence in previous interviews and may expect you to find those details as part of your research. However, if you have contacted them for general context, don't assume they will be willing to include those details in the conversation. They may raise the subject, but if not, and you think it could be pertinent to the story, ask if they are comfortable discussing it. If not, stick to the subject matter at hand.

**4. Respect the boundaries of survivors who work in the field of sexual violence support and prevention:** Some experts may have previously disclosed that they had been subjected to sexual violence. However, if you have contacted them for general context, don't assume they will be willing to include those details in the conversation. They may raise the subject, but if not, and you think it could be pertinent to the story, ask if they are comfortable discussing it. If not, stick to the subject matter at hand.

# Why Don't Survivors Report Sexual Violence in Canada?

“Physical and emotional recovery are separate from the legal process. It is not the responsibility of survivors to report in order for society to be safe. Victims should NOT be made to feel guilty for not reporting.” - Melody McGregor

“Why didn't you report?” is a common question asked of survivors and suggests that if they didn't report the violence, it must not have been serious enough to merit a formal report. In Canada, only six per cent of sexual assaults are reported to police, making it the most underreported crime measured in the General Social Survey on Victimization (Cotter, 2019). Of all sexual assaults reported to the police, only 6.5 per cent end with a conviction (Rotenberg, 2017).

The legal system does not meet the needs of many survivors and is often not considered to be a safe or plausible option. Survivors have the right to decide what justice looks like for them. Reporting should explore why and how some survivors have inadequate options for justice.

Inequitable access to justice impacts rates of reporting. Many survivors do not have the necessary information, resources and mechanisms to report. An understanding of the intersecting barriers to reporting is key in both framing media reports of sexual assault in ways that are supportive

of survivors and creating a trauma-informed interview process. The following list outlines some of the many barriers to reporting.

**1. Shame and blame:** According to Statistics Canada, one in five women report being made to feel responsible for sexual victimization they were subjected to, most commonly by friends or family (Statistics Canada, 2018). Public or private failure to support or believe survivors when they disclose can deter others from coming forward. Due to rape culture's pervasiveness, many survivors do not feel the sexual violence enacted against them



was “that bad” or deserving of attention or justice. Also, people who do not fit the depiction of what is often viewed as a “credible” survivor (i.e. a white, able-bodied, cisgender woman) often receive even less support when disclosing.

**2. Effects of trauma:** Besides physical trauma, sexual violence survivors often suffer long-term psychological and emotional effects, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, shame, fear, and self-blame (RAINN, 2023). This can lead the survivor to blame themselves as a way to make sense of and take ownership of what happened. This misplaced and assumed responsibility could also prevent survivors from disclosing or reporting what happened to them and by whom.

**3. The myth of “stranger danger”:** More than half (52 per cent) of self-reported assaults are committed by someone known to the survivor (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Reporting when the assailant is someone you know is difficult; many of us have been taught from a young age that sexual violence is something to be ashamed of or kept secret. It can also come with harsh consequences; speaking out against a family member, partner, friend, community member, co-worker, employer, or anyone in your immediate

circle can result in increased violence, a loss of financial support, or being ostracized. This is especially challenging for marginalized survivors who might fear the loss of connection to the community or fear that they will not be believed due to existing stereotypes, i.e. a gay man not wanting to report sexual assault because of fear of further stigma directed at his community.

**4. Misinformation:** People affected by sexual violence may choose not to report based on misinformation (Benoit, Shumka, Phillips, Kennedy, & Belle-Isle, 2015). In 2022, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that extreme intoxication could be included in the defense strategy for violent crimes, including sexual violence. Misinformation that the ruling meant it could be legal to sexually assault someone if you were intoxicated spread across social media, especially TikTok. As a result, this deterred some survivors from reporting sexual violence (Fraser, 2022).

**5. Inequitable access to legal information:** Survivors may not be familiar with their legal rights or services available to them. In Canada, there is a lack of independent free legal advice and information services for survivors of sexual violence (Dalwood, 2023). While some provinces have these services, i.e.

Ontario's Independent Legal Advice Pilot Program, many provinces and territories do not have such programs.

There are also barriers to accessing legal information that is accurate, trauma-informed, culturally safe and accessible. Legal information may not be readily available in the survivor's first language (Pelley & Sasitharan, 2020) and legal resources that are unavailable in American Sign Language video format will not be accessible to some Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities. People living in rural and remote communities may also face barriers in reporting due to a lack of resources in their area or poor web access.

**6. Conviction rates:** The low conviction rate for sexual assault crimes may deter survivors from reporting, especially when high-profile cases result in acquittal, i.e. the Ghomeshi case. Research shows that only 0.3 percent (3 out of 1000) of sexual assaults in Canada result in a conviction (Johnson, 2012). The improbability, or the reality that a conviction is incredibly rare, is a significant deterrent to engaging in what will likely be a lengthy and, at times, traumatic legal process.

**7. Mistrust of the criminal legal system:** Many marginalized communities historically/currently have been harmed by the police and criminal legal system,

including, but not limited to, Black, Indigenous<sup>1</sup>, racialized, trans<sup>2</sup>, sex workers<sup>3</sup> and residents of low-income

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<sup>1</sup> As a direct result of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity, in Canada, Indigenous Peoples and Black people are incarcerated at disproportionate rates compared to the general population. In Canada, 7.2 per cent (Public Safety Canada, 2019) of inmates in federal institutions are Black, yet Black Canadians account for less than 4 per cent of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2019). Indigenous adults accounted for 31 per cent of admissions to provincial/territorial custody during 2018 and 2019 and 29 per cent of admissions to federal custody, while representing approximately 4.5 per cent of the Canadian adult population" (Statistics Canada, 2020, para. 30). This does not mean that Black and Indigenous Peoples are more likely to commit crimes, but more likely to be charged and convicted due to forms of systemic oppression within the criminal legal system.

<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that police enact discrimination, violence, and other types of abuse against trans communities (Angeles and Robertson 2020; Nuttbrock 2018; Scheim, Bauer, & Pyne, 2014). "98 percent of trans people report at least one experience of transphobia, and 24 percent report having been harassed by police" (Scheim, Bauer, & Pyne, 2014, p. 4). A survey conducted by Trans PULSE Canada found that 73% of racialized trans and non-binary respondents worry about being stopped or harassed by police (Chih, Wilson-Yang, Dhaliwal, Khatoon, Redman, Malone, Islam, & Persad, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> It is widely reported by sex workers, globally, that police engage in 'excessive use of physical force, forced removal and subsequent abandonment [to] outlying areas, and coerced sex to police in exchange for freedom from

communities. For some survivors, interacting with the police can feel and be unsafe. Also, marginalized communities might have witnessed or experienced the criminal legal system causing additional harm, making it hard for them to believe that the same system can provide justice in addressing the sexual violence enacted against them. For example, due to ongoing colonization and racism, Indigenous survivors are treated poorly by the justice system, even in death (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). This was exemplified in the case of Cindy Gladue, a Cree-Metis woman who was sexually assaulted and killed in 2011 (CBC News, 2016). Throughout the murder trial, Ms. Gladue was dehumanized and framed as somehow responsible for the violence that ended her life, minimizing the severity of the crimes committed against her.

Further, police mistrust is caused by sexual violence that is committed by the police themselves. According to the Annual Report of the Special

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detainment, fine, or arrest” (Benoit and Shumka, 2015, p. 13). In addition, “immigrant/migrant sex workers who work in indoor venues may be uniquely targeted by police due to immigration policies, racialized policing, and the conflation of trafficking and sex work” (McBride, Shannon, Bingham, Braschel, Strathdee, & Goldenberg, 2020, para. 1)

Investigations Unit (SIU) for 2020-2021, Ontario’s oversight policing agency, the second highest number of cases involving a police officer were sexual assault complaints (Ontario Special Investigation Unit, 2021).

**8. Fear of lack of evidence:** Survivors may not report because they do not believe there is enough sufficient evidence to lead to charges or a conviction. There can be a lot of misinformation about what is needed to make a report about sexual assault including survivors internalizing harmful questions by people in their lives who frame the violence as a “he said, she said” incident. As a result, survivors can be fearful of reporting. Even if they want to have forensic evidence collected, survivors could also have challenges accessing a hospital that has trained Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners who can administer a Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK) due to the broader healthcare crisis in Canada (Khan and Lyons, 2022, para. 9). It is important to note that a SAEK can only be administered up to 12 days after the assault, as the forensic evidence on the survivor’s body is no longer present (Toronto Police, n.d.).

**9. The court process:** Taking part in formal court proceedings can mean a survivor could be subjected to

victim-blaming through attacks on their character and narrative to convince a judge or jury that they are not credible. They may also be retraumatized as they will be required to retell what they were subjected to in explicit detail, often more than once. Additionally, it's important to note that the Crown Attorney is not there to represent survivors but to represent the Crown and act as a prosecutor in proceedings under the Criminal Code and various other statutes.

**10. Lack of resources:** Survivors may not have the resources (emotional, financial, mental etc.) to go through a legal process. While the criminal legal process is free, there are hidden costs, including counselling, legal support, childcare or missing school/work. In addition, there is a rise in survivors being criminalized or sued by respondents. This adds another layer of economic burden and fear for survivors. If violence occurred at the workplace, survivors might fear losing their job resulting in a loss of income and, in some cases, benefits such as counselling. The economic impact of sexual harassment in the workplace can have heightened consequences for survivors who have precarious immigration status and fear reporting an

employer can result in the loss of their work visa.

**11. Fear of legal retaliation:** Survivors may not come forward out of fear of legal repercussions. In the wake of the #MeToo viral awakening in 2017, defamation cases against survivors have become increasingly common (Hurry, 2022) and can result in enormous financial costs (Hurry, 2022). Civil court proceedings can be lengthy and traumatic, and losing the case may result in having to pay court fees and damages. This weaponization of defamation lawsuits against survivors “becomes used to litigate sexual assault claims in a manner that disadvantages survivors and inadvertently reinforces rape myths in the legal analysis” (Hurry, 2022, p. 82).

**“Not everyone necessarily wants to report to the police. And that’s not always ... part of their healing process. They might just need to focus on healing, and reporting [to the police] is difficult period ... I think it’s important to see other narratives of survival.”**  
- Chelby Daigle



# Sexual Assault Cases: Recanted, Unfounded, False

**In 2021, sexual assaults in Canada were at their highest reported rate in 25 years (Statistics Canada, 2022).** While very few reports of sexual assault are false (Government of Canada, 2021), cases sometimes do not result in charges or convictions because they are recanted or deemed unfounded.

## Recanting Sexual Assault

A survivor may recant their statement due to various factors, including, but not limited to, prolonged court processes, inadequate support in navigating the legal system, poverty, pressure from family or friends of the perpetrator, or fear of retaliation. This does not mean the violence did not occur, but rather that they do not feel they have the resources or support to move forward.

## Unfounded Sexual Assault

When police do not lay charges following a report of sexual assault, the case is often deemed “unfounded.” Where charges are laid, Crown prosecutors will review whether the facts and evidence present a reasonable prospect of conviction and if the prosecution is in the public interest. After this assessment, the Crown may decide to drop the charges. These cases are often coded by police as unfounded. It does not mean a sexual

assault did not occur, but the police and/or the Crown, using their legal discretion, decided not to pursue the case.

In 2017, *The Globe and Mail* published the findings of a 20-month investigation led by Robyn Doolittle, revealing that “one of every five sexual-assault allegations in Canada is dismissed as baseless and thus unfounded. The result is an unfounded national rate of 19.39 per cent - nearly twice as high as it is for physical assault (10.84 per cent), and dramatically higher than that of other types of crime” (Doolittle, 2017, para. 21).

The investigation found that while some jurisdictions documented single-digit unfounded rates, “police in 115 communities dismiss at least one-third of sex-assault complaints as unfounded” (Doolittle, 2017, para. 26).

Doolittle’s reporting also revealed how a lack of uniform training protocols resulted in significant gaps within the investigative

process. In many jurisdictions, complainants were not notified if their allegation had been “deemed unfounded.” Doolittle’s [2022 research](#) found that police dismissals of sexual assaults as “unfounded” had dropped by half since 2017.

In 2018, in the wake of *The Globe and Mail* investigation, Statistics Canada resumed collecting, analyzing, and disseminating unfounded criminal incidents after halting data collection for more than a decade (Statistics Canada, 2017). While this change marks a step forward, the percentage of unfounded cases demonstrates the continued need to push for change.

For example, according to the *CBC* article “P.E.I.’s ‘unfounded’ sexual assault cases highest in the country,” the most recent data from Statistics Canada shows “the rate for P.E.I. at 25 per cent for 2017, dropping to 12 per cent in 2018, but rebounding back to 25 per cent in 2019” (2021, para. 2). Continued advocacy in this area will ensure that the systems put in place to protect survivors are working as intended.

## False Reports to the Police About Sexual Assault

“What if she is lying?” is a common refrain when talking about sexual assault. Let’s discuss false sexual assault charges.

**Myth:** Many victims lie about being raped or give false reports.

**Fact:** Just 2 to 4 per cent of sexual assaults are falsely reported, the same rates as other violent crimes (Government of Canada, 2021). Less than 10 per cent of sexual assaults in 2020 were classified as unfounded (Moreau, 2021).

**“Sexual assault remains one of the most underreported crimes” (Cotter, 2019, para. 130).**

Throughout the 2010’s, there was an explosion of survivors sharing their stories publicly about individuals who have caused harm as well as the ways in which institutions have been complicit in fostering an environment of sexual violence. This was exemplified in Canada when the Twitter hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported went viral, with thousands of women sharing their stories. This hashtag was created by Canadian journalists Antonia Zerbisias and Sue Montgomery in support of the women who shared that they had been assaulted by former *CBC* radio host Jian

Ghomeshi. The conversation expanded globally with the 2017 viral #MeToo moment which built off the work of Tarana Burke's #MeToo Movement.

Statistics Canada noted a 14 per cent increase in police-reported cases of sexual assault between 2016 and 2017 (Allen, 2018). This number varies across Canada. In 2021, the rate of police-reported sexual assault was the highest it had been since 1996.

Montreal police services saw a 22.9 per cent increase in sexual assault reports in 2017, and a hotline for reporting sexual assault received upwards of 460 calls between October 19 and November 6, 2017. Calgary Police Service saw an increase in sex crimes investigated from 296 in 2016 to 391 in 2017 (Hixt, 2018).

However, increased reporting rates have not resulted in higher rates of justice in the legal system for survivors, as both police services and support centres have reportedly struggled to keep up with caseloads and demands for services. The pandemic has also made things worse. In May 2022, the *CBC* reported that 81 per

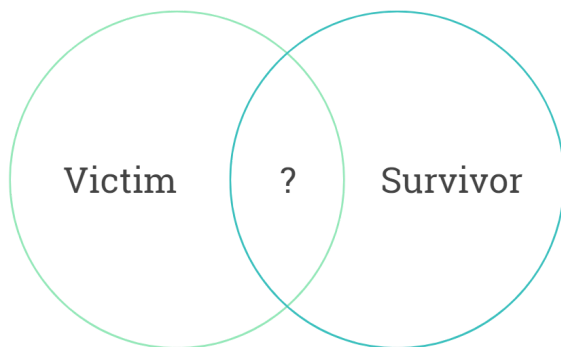
cent of sexual assault centres in Ontario reported increased demand prior to the start of the pandemic (Groleau, 2022). The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton reported a 14-month wait period for adult one-on-one counselling in early 2023 (Cummings & McEwan, 2023).

Despite these documented increases in disclosure, the most recent statistics on the number of cases reported to police sits at 6 per cent. This makes sexual assault the most underreported crime measure in the General Social Survey on Victimization (Cotter, 2021).

Underreporting can be attributed to several factors outlined on pages 26-30.

**"The risk women run by reporting, even anonymously, is so high – socially, economically, and emotionally. We need to challenge the idea that a good survivor reports and a bad survivor doesn't. Instead of criticizing survivors for whether or not they report, let's look at our system that only convicts a tiny percentage of reports." – Anne Thériault**

## Identification: Survivor, Victim, or an Alternative?



**People subjected to sexual violence should have the right to choose how they want to be referred in media stories.** While there is an ongoing debate over the use of the terms “victim” or “survivor” (Setia & An, 2021), in the end, every individual should have the opportunity to be identified by the language of their choice.

### Victim

The word “victim” conveys “a person to whom something bad has happened through no fault of their own” (Harding, 2020, para. 19). “Victim” is sometimes a preferred label as it can elicit “compassion and sympathy for [those] who have been raped” (Setia & An, 2021, p. 104). It can also refer to those who did not survive the violence enacted against them.

“Victim” has also been problematized, however, as it also “assigns restraining connotations like passivity or forgiveness”

(Setia & An, 2021, p. 104). Further, when used interchangeably as a noun, “victim” identifies a “person solely according to what someone did to them” (LearnRidge, 2023, para. 101) but fails to convey how they responded and eliminates any context associated with their identity. “In this way, it also plays into our ideas about what a victim looks like: passive, perfectly compliant with police and prosecutors’ demands, not angry, sexually pure (which isn’t just about personal history, it’s about race, class and other identities and what meanings are attached to them)” (Ephemerical, 2012, para. 8).

### Survivor

Some prefer the term “survivor,” as it can convey agency, strength, autonomy, and empowerment (Setia & An, 2021).

However, it has been critiqued as having a limiting effect, as “it describes a person according to their experiences of (and resistance to) violence, and nothing more: it is one-dimensional” (Ephemerical, 2012, para. 25).

### Victim-Survivor

Alternatively, some opt to use the amalgamated term “victim-survivor,” which aims to acknowledge “the reality of



vulnerability and triumph” as well as the intersectional experiences of the most marginalized communities who have “never been seen as victims in the eyes of culture, community, or the law” (Force, n.d., para. 4).

Due to the complex meanings of these terms and the nuanced reasons people choose them, taking a blanket approach to using “victim” with “survivor” can inadvertently cause harm. Rejecting the term “victim,” while not accounting for intersectional oppression and corresponding rates of increased violence faced by those who are most marginalized, can be harmful for people whom society expects to be more resilient because of their identities. This is especially true for Black women (Finoh & Sankofa, 2019).

Consider how each term could impact the person you are asking to share their story (see tips on interviews) and take the time to discuss the language they feel most accurately represents their experience.

## Alternative Language

Examples of alternative language you can use to avoid the victim/survivor dichotomy:

- “a person who was subjected to sexual violence,”
- “a person who was sexually assaulted,”
- “a person who survived sexual abuse,”
- “complainant” (applicable in court cases)

### Ottawa woman upset after encountering barriers when reporting sex assault in Quebec



Keara Dean says nobody seemed willing to help her 'in any way, shape or form'



Morgan Lowrie · The Canadian Press ·  
Posted: Dec 03, 2022 8:09 AM ET | Last Updated:  
December 3



*The woman in question is a survivor of violence, and framing her emotional state as "upset" diminishes the gravity of the experience.*

# “What I Learned from Reporting on Sexual Violence” by Robyn Doolittle

Robyn Doolittle is a reporter with the *Globe and Mail* who has reported extensively on sexual violence. What follows is her advice on the interview process:

In 2017, *The Globe and Mail* launched *Unfounded*, an investigative series that revealed police across Canada were disproportionately dismissing sexual assault allegations compared to other crimes. The numbers we uncovered were shocking — 1 in 5 cases was being tossed out as false or baseless. To better understand what was going wrong, I also investigated 54 specific cases, a process that had me interviewing complainants, witnesses, police, Crown attorneys, defence lawyers, nurses, counsellors, and sometimes accused persons.

Working on *Unfounded* changed me as a journalist.

I learned that reporting on sexual violence required a very different approach than what I was used to. Below, I'll unpack what I learned and hopefully you can avoid some of the mistakes I made in the early days of the project. *(I want to emphasize that I'm not a lawyer, so this should not be taken as legal advice!)*

I'll start with the interview I messed up because it's also the one that taught me the most.

## What Not to Do

I have never been able to tell the story of the very first complainant I interviewed, because she backed out the same day I met her — probably because of me.

After connecting with a woman I'll call “Sara,” we arranged a pre-interview. I always do this if possible. A pre-interview is a completely off-record discussion, where I can lay my cards on the table, answer any questions, and ideally, get a sense of the person's story to help prepare for the formal interview. I spoke with Sara and her support person over a video chat. Everything went well, and we set up an in-person, on-record interview for a few days later. That interview fell apart quickly.

So what happened?

**First, I was too familiar.** Because I felt we'd already established a rapport from the pre-interview, I assumed she felt comfortable and trusted me. I believed I could get straight

to the specifics. I was very direct with my questions, maybe even police-like. I wanted to do what writers are taught to do: to gather details and set a scene; to be able to transport readers back to a moment in time.

**So I asked Sara to start at the beginning of the day of the attack.** What did she have for breakfast? What was she wearing? How had she styled her hair? A ponytail? A messy bun? What did she say to her mother on the way out the door?

**Sara became visibly agitated and quiet.** At the time, I didn't understand what derailed the interview, but I did recognize it could not proceed. I asked if she wanted to take a break. She did. When she returned, she still looked off, so I suggested we try another time. She thought that was a good idea. We didn't speak again.


**Only much later did I appreciate just how traumatizing my approach had been.** I had prompted her to vividly return to that horrible day and had signalled that I wanted her to give a painfully detailed recounting of every moment before, during and after the attack. (And for no real reason, since I was most interested in what had happened after she went to the police.)

After interviewing trauma experts, front-line counsellors and speaking with more complainants, I realized where I had gone wrong. In assessing my failures with Sara, I developed a sort of roadmap for future interviews.

## Pre-Interview

- Ideally conduct pre-interviews on a different day than the formal interview
- Be clear about the process and set expectations
- Explain the role of a journalist
- Go through what it means to be on record and off record, anonymous and named
- Collect some preliminary information to help you prepare for the formal interview
- Let them know they can back out up until an agreed-upon point in time

**Do not assume people know how the media works.** A pre-interview is a chance for you to get to know each other, set expectations, and begin building trust.



For example, if it's a longer project, prepare them for the fact that a story may not run for months and that you'll need to speak several times before publication. It's always a good idea to warn people early on that you're interviewing many sources and that not every story can make the final piece. Be sure to emphasize that their contributions are still crucial and will inform your understanding of the issues.

**It's also important to explain that as a journalist your job is to thoroughly investigate their story.** That may include asking to read emails, text messages, police reports and medical records. You may want to interview their family and friends. Be clear that a journalist is supposed to be skeptical. Thoroughly verifying their version of events makes their story more credible. Failing to do so can cause serious harm.

The most tragic and notorious example was "A Rape on Campus," published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, in 2014. The story recounted a horrific gang rape at a frat party and allegations of serious inaction by the University of Virginia following the reported attack. But *Rolling Stone* was forced to retract the piece after other news outlets found that the complainant's version of events could not have taken place as reported.

It was a national scandal. The complainant was personally devastated — she maintains something happened — and dragged into a lawsuit.

The *Columbia Review of Journalism (CRJ)* conducted an investigation into how the magazine failed so dramatically. During that process, *Rolling Stone* acknowledged they did not properly verify the woman's story because they were worried about pressing her for sensitive details given the apparent trauma she experienced.

Of this, the CRJ said:

**"Because questioning a victim's account can be traumatic, counsellors have cautioned journalists to allow survivors some control over their own stories. This is good advice. Yet, it does survivors no good if reporters documenting their cases avoid rigorous practices of verification. That may only subject the victim to greater scrutiny and skepticism."**

Adding to the harm, the fallout fed into the myth that many women lie about rape.

**Thoroughly explaining your role as the reporter is perhaps the most important thing you can do.** That includes making sure interview subjects understand the difference

between an anonymous source and going on the record. Never assume that “regular” people know how this works.

**Different journalists have different rules. These are mine:** If a source is media savvy — a politician, business leader, a spokesperson — the conversation is on record unless otherwise stated. (If you have an existing source relationship with someone like this, it’s important to double-check if things are on record in every conversation.) When dealing with a regular person, I explicitly state, “okay we’re going on record now.”

**Off record:** nothing a person says can be used in any capacity.

**On background:** I can use what the person says to inform my reporting, and I can paraphrase the information. Still, it’s not attributable to any specific person — even anonymously — and I must protect the source’s identity.

**On record, not for attribution/anonymous:** All information is fair game to print, but the source must be kept confidential. For example: “said a Crown attorney with knowledge of events.” If someone requests anonymity, I always ask: “are you anonymous to Google or to your best friend?” A source may have recounted events to classmates years ago. Those classmates may recognize your complainant, even if their name isn’t included. You need to understand what their comfort level is to understand what can be included. If they’re primarily worried about, say, a future employer seeing their name in a Google search, but they don’t care if friends or coworkers are able to recognize them, that makes it easier.

Before anything is printed, go through the details you’ll be including to avoid inadvertently identifying them. One woman who took part in *Unfounded* agreed to a photo, provided it didn’t show her face or any revealing details. During the shoot, we realized she was wearing a distinct bracelet that friends would have recognized.

Typically an editor needs to approve anonymity. If that promise is made it is on the journalist to take all measures possible to do this, explain potential risks, as well as the pros and cons of making your identity public.

**On record and named:** All information is fair game to print and the person will be identified by name. Being fully named lends credibility to the story. It can also be very empowering for some complainants, I’ve found. Having a source on the record is the gold standard for a journalist.



With that said, it's also important for reporters to understand that being named can expose your source to online harassment, a forever loss of privacy, and in worst-case scenarios a lawsuit.

Anonymity means there will always be a layer of doubt around the story. And it can carry its own risks. I always caution sources, "I can be careful about what I write, but if you tell people you're talking to me or post about the series online, others may be able to piece things together."

With *Unfounded*, we found a balance. Some complainants were named. Some were identified by their first name only. Others with initials. Some were anonymous. In all cases, I was able to explain to readers that the *Globe* had reviewed official documents related to their complaint, including police reports, health records, emails and text messages. We included some sort of photo of almost everyone, including the anonymous complainants. All of this boosted the credibility of the reporting.

**Bottomline: make sure the complainant understands there are options and that each comes with pros and cons.**

Lastly, I let them know they can back out until an agreed-upon point, usually about a week before publication when the article is in editing. With sexual assault complainants and other vulnerable people, I think it's important that they maintain some control here.

Of note: The woman in the *Rolling Stone* piece testified in court<sup>4</sup> that she felt she couldn't back out of the story once it got going, even though she was having reservations.

Discussing all of the above in a pre-interview gives a source time to think things through. It also allows you (the journalist) to assess if this person is ready for the scrutiny that comes with going public. Trauma and mental health issues can go hand and hand, and sharing what happened to them in a newspaper isn't the best decision for everyone, and that's okay. **They don't owe anyone their story.**

## The Interview and Writing

- Consider what details you really need
- Rely on official documentation as much as possible

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<sup>4</sup> ['Jackie' testifies: Rolling Stone story was 'what I believed to be true at the time'](#)

- The source will be nervous. Let them guide discussion
- Make sure you are educated on rape myths and stereotypes
- Check-in regularly. Offer breaks.
- Be aware that people sometimes share more than they actually want to be printed.
- Try to stick with neutral words to describe your source, such as “complainant”

**If you’re writing about sexual assault, you’re going to discuss traumatic details, but you can do this in a way that lets the complainant guide the discussion.** And in a way that isn’t gratuitous. So many stories about sexual assault spend paragraphs recounting horrific details that aren’t pertinent to the story. Unfounded dealt with sexual assault, but the focus was on how police handled the investigation. In the writing, I tried only to include details that were relevant to how the police handled the case. And whenever possible, I tried to rely on the interview the complainant gave the police.

This has three advantages:

1. If a journalist or the source makes even a tiny mistake in recounting their version of events, it could impact a future trial. (If the story they tell you is different from the story they told the police, that’s obviously a problem you need to investigate.
2. If you can refer to a legal document when detailing alleged criminal activity — and you report on it fairly and accurately — then you and they are more protected legally.
3. It saves them from having to exhaustingly repeat a traumatic event. I’m not saying you should skip anything important because it’s in an official document. Just know that the statement the source gave the police will go into a lot of detail, and you won’t need to belabour this line of questioning if it isn’t relevant to your story. (You can obtain this information by having them file a [freedom of information request](#)) In writing, only include what is necessary.

Expect the person to be nervous. They may feel shame because of the way that society has treated survivors. Make sure you understand the way that rape myths and stereotypes have historically blamed victims and excused those who have committed harm.

Once we go on the record I'll start with something like, "So what happened? Start where you're comfortable." I'll also check-in frequently: "Do you need a break?" "Are you feeling okay about this so far?"

**Be on the lookout for body language that signals you're veering into uncomfortable territory.** Be prepared to back off completely, and if that means having to find another source, so be it.

Another caution: most people will open up, even if they actually aren't ready to see it in print. Telling your story and speaking your truth is a powerful impulse. The hardest part, I've found, is that people won't always recognize that they're telling you something they don't want printed. For a moment, they may forget you are a journalist. This can also have implications for inadvertently identifying your source. This is why a fact-check is so vital.


When writing, I try to avoid the words "victim" and "survivor" unless the attack is undisputed (for example, if there is a verdict). The word "victim," means something happened, whereas "complainant" is more neutral. I also try to avoid the word "alleged," a term that I think can cast additional doubt in the context of a sexual assault story. You can get around this by saying "she said," or "they told police," or "reported a sexual assault." Sometimes it's unavoidable.

**The question to ask yourself is: Would I write "alleged break and enter"?**

## Fact-Checking

- Check the basics — spelling, numbers, dates — but also whether you're fully capturing their story as they see it.
- Make sure they understand what is and isn't going in the story
- Do any details inadvertently identify the source?
- No surprises on publication day!

I've always found it odd that journalists send long, detailed letters to people accused of wrongdoing — letters that outline exactly what will be printed and the allegations against them — but we often don't do this for our own sources. If time allows, I do a fact-check with everyone in a story.



I start by giving them a sense of what the final piece is going to say, briefly highlight what each leg of the story is about, check the basics (age, spelling, titles, dates) and verify that I've captured their overall story correctly.

It's not about reading back people's quotes (people will always want to reword quotes!), but properly representing what they're trying to communicate. I go through each paragraph and let them know what the takeaway is. In my experience, skipping a proper fact check is where most mistakes get made or why people feel misquoted. It's not that they didn't say the words in print; it's that they feel important information was left out and, therefore, their story was not accurately captured. Contrary to what many may believe, no journalist I know ever tries to misrepresent a source. It's a miscommunication.

**When a source is anonymous, it is especially important to talk through details that could inadvertently identify them.** For example: "So if we say the party was on this weekend at this intersection, would anyone know that's you? If we mention you work here, would that tip anyone off?" Don't assume the source is making these connections. Again, you're going to write the story in the way it needs to be written. This is not about getting approval per se, it's about making sure there are no surprises. If the source is adamant that something should not be included, consider if it's important to the balance of the story. If it is, then it has to stay, and maybe the story can't run; if it isn't, remove it.

Make sure you convey to a source how important it is to do the final fact check. I have had a situation where someone declined, and they were extremely upset as she thought much more of her story was going to be in the paper. Everything I wrote was correct, and I would not have changed anything, but I would have given her the option to back out if she felt uncomfortable. Talking through these things is good for everyone.

In daily stories, full fact checks are not always possible but I always try to ask the person if we can take 10 minutes at the end to go over the stuff that I thought was especially interesting. I'll also try to summarize what I think will be the takeaway from their interview and ask: "Does this accurately capture your position?"

## A Final Talk

- Be clear about when they can no longer back out
- Talk to them about locking down their social media

- Especially if a source is named, have a source consider what that will be like on publication day

Towards the end of a process, when we're at the stage where we've agreed there's no going back, I also ask them to think about what it's going to be like to have their story told. Are they going to post about it on social media? Because if so, that might identify them. I often connect with sources through social media. It's important to "unfriend" anonymous sources before publication because someone might go through your friend list and see their name. If you've publicly messaged the source on something like Twitter in the past, delete those tweets. It may be smart for a complainant to lock down their accounts.

Especially if a source is named, I talk to them about what that could mean and if they're prepared for it. Sexual assault survivors have told me that once their name is public, other survivors start reaching out. This can be wonderful and also draining. There are also, of course, internet trolls. With young complainants, I really push them to consider the impact of having their name online in a story about sexual assault forever. My goal isn't to scare or deter. It's to make sure they're ready.

**The good news is that the world is starting to understand the role that rape myths and stereotypes have played in the way we view complainants.** There is less stigma, but it's not entirely gone. For your sources, being in a story about sexual assault is not the same as being a complainant of another crime.

Reporting on sexual violence is especially difficult, but it's worth it. These stories can move both public perception and public policy and can return a measure of power to those who have felt stripped of their power.

But it's a challenging process. I know that this guide doesn't begin to cover everything. Consider it a starting point. I know I learn something new every time I write. And in that spirit, I have one more tip: After publication, check in with your sources. Ask how it's going. Ask how the reporting process went. What are their thoughts now that it's over? What was good, and what do they wish had been different? These check-ins are a great place for you to learn and for the source to feel respected at every stage.

Good luck, friends,

**Robyn DooLittle**



# Self-Care For Survivors Speaking in the Media

Having your voice heard through the media can be profound and empowering but also very challenging. Below are tips on establishing and maintaining boundaries while protecting your heart and mental health.

## Before the Interview

**Connect with a counsellor:** A counsellor can help you explore the impacts of sexual violence, process your feelings, and work through what you want to share publicly. You can also work together to create a care plan for speaking to the media and when a story is published.

**Consult with a lawyer:** If criminal charges have been laid or a publication ban may be put in place, speaking to a lawyer before connecting with the media can be helpful. This is for current or potential legal matters, including the possibility of you being sued by the person who caused harm for talking about the violence you were subjected to.

**Arrange for a support person:** This would be someone to come to the interview with you, not to speak on your behalf but to help you through the process. They could be from a sexual assault centre, a friend or a family member. You get to choose.

**Identification & safety:** If you want a conversation to be off the record, say so before discussing what happened. The term is often misunderstood and not something all journalists will provide retroactively. Think about how disclosing your identity could impact your life, both positively and negatively, and what you could do to prepare. If you want to remain anonymous, be careful about what you post online, it can link you to the story. It's also important to consider how you want to be identified: a survivor, victim, or person subjected to violence. If legal proceedings have been launched, a more neutral word such as "complainant" may be required. Before you go on the record, ask the reporter what would happen if you decide you do not want your story published and up until what point you can make that decision.

**Request media training:** Check in with local violence prevention agencies to see what resources and training they might provide or recommend. Media organizations sometimes also provide training opportunities - take one if you can.

**Logistics:** Ask where, when, and in what formats the story will appear (such as a newspaper being syndicated) and what to expect from the outlet's social media team. Ask if the journalist intends to speak with the person who caused the harm and when that conversation will occur so you can prepare if they or a legal representative contacts you. Lastly, request that they check in with you to ask if you would object to the interview being used in any other context, such as a panel or book. And ask if this does occur, could you be warned in advance?

**Format:** If the interview is for broadcast, know that voice alteration or facial blurring may be available if you wish to remain anonymous. For live interviews, ask if a delay is possible in case you need to take a break.

**Take notes:** For radio and television, a producer will typically be the one to contact you for a pre-interview. They will gather any details required to prepare the host and go over the general scope of what you will be asked. Take notes to think through what you want to share or themes you want to address.

**State your boundaries:** While most media organizations, as a rule, will not provide written questions before an interview, many journalists will be willing to talk through what to expect. Be clear about topics that make you uncomfortable or that you consider to be off-limits. Remember that you don't have to answer every question asked of you.

**Practice:** Do a trial run with someone you trust or in front of a mirror, or tape yourself if you want to hear what you sound like. Consider how you might respond if pressed on a topic you do not want to discuss. Examples: "This isn't something I feel comfortable talking about," or "I would prefer to focus on these issues."

**Make a self-care plan:** Work with a counsellor, advocate or close friend/family member to create an individual and community plan of what you need after the interview goes public. People will want to support you. Sometimes they don't know how, so giving them options that are actually important to you is helpful. Interviews can be scary and exhausting, but creating a plan to recharge and recover afterwards can help. Think through ways to center yourself beforehand and plan something to look forward to. Bring somebody you trust to support you during the interview or meet afterwards to unwind. It could mean asking someone you trust to read the article with you when it first comes out, planning a special day for yourself when the interview airs, or putting affirmations around your room that remind you why you chose to speak out. If being around people is not what you need, you

could sit in nature, eat ice cream, or have a video game marathon. You know what works best for you.

## During the Interview

**Pause:** Taking a slow breath is one way you can give yourself a moment to pause and think about how you want to respond. It's ok to ask the interviewer to repeat the question if anything is unclear or ask for a break. Again, with broadcast, this will be discussed before the interview.

**Repeat the question:** If you are having difficulty processing or responding to a question, restating what was asked, or asking for clarification, it can also give you those extra moments you need.

**Breathe:** Remember there is no rush, and your voice is important. If the interview is being recorded and you don't like how you answered a question, ask if you can try again. Remember, ground rules are typically discussed during off-the-record conversations.


**Have support present:** Arrange to have somebody you trust to come along to sit with you while you are being interviewed or meet up afterwards (see above note on self-care).

**Reframe:** If an interviewer asks you a question you do not feel is pertinent to the story, you can always reframe or deflect. Example: "While I understand why you are asking, that detail isn't something I'm comfortable discussing. I'd rather talk about my experience with the justice system" or, "I know details are an important part of a story but because my case is before the courts that's not something I can discuss."

**Ground yourself:** Design a ritual to help you feel present during the interview. Everybody's method of self-comfort is different and can range from eating a meal, holding an object that centres you (a stone, a piece of jewelry), drinking water, praying, meditating, stretching, or listening to music.

## After the Interview

**Respect what you've accomplished:** Recognize the huge step you are taking to own and share your story. No matter how the interview went, celebrate yourself! Remember to practice loving-kindness with yourself as you navigate feelings that can emerge.



**Make a plan for social media:** Sharing traumatic stories, no matter where we are in our healing, has an impact. Having a plan on how you will consume the media created or interact online is key. This could include letting your close friends know that the story is coming out, and you would appreciate them not tagging you on social media or asking further questions. You could set your social media accounts to private and ask someone you trust to monitor your messages. You could also draft a standard response if people contact you, i.e., “Thank you for reaching out. I am taking time for myself right now but so appreciate your care”. Remember, taking a break is okay; disconnection can be part of self-care.

**Advocate:** Ideally, a fact-checking conversation should prevent mistakes, but if one is included, immediately contact the reporter and ask to correct it (Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime, 2015). Know that most journalists fear mistakes and will be eager to resolve the problem. However, if it is not fixed, you can file a complaint with the organization’s public editor or ombudsman. If you are dissatisfied with the response, contact your local press council.

**Connect with support:** Consider setting up a debriefing session with a friend or counsellor after the interview and when the story is published as part of self-care.

**Give feedback:** Check in with the producer, writer, or journalist and ask if they would be receptive to feedback, both positive and negative. The majority, hopefully, would accept. If not, know you have made an effort to share your perspective.

## Why and When to Use a Content Note

**Content notes are statements used by media outlets to inform an audience that the material they are about to be presented with could be sensitive or distressing.** It is a part of building trauma-informed journalism.

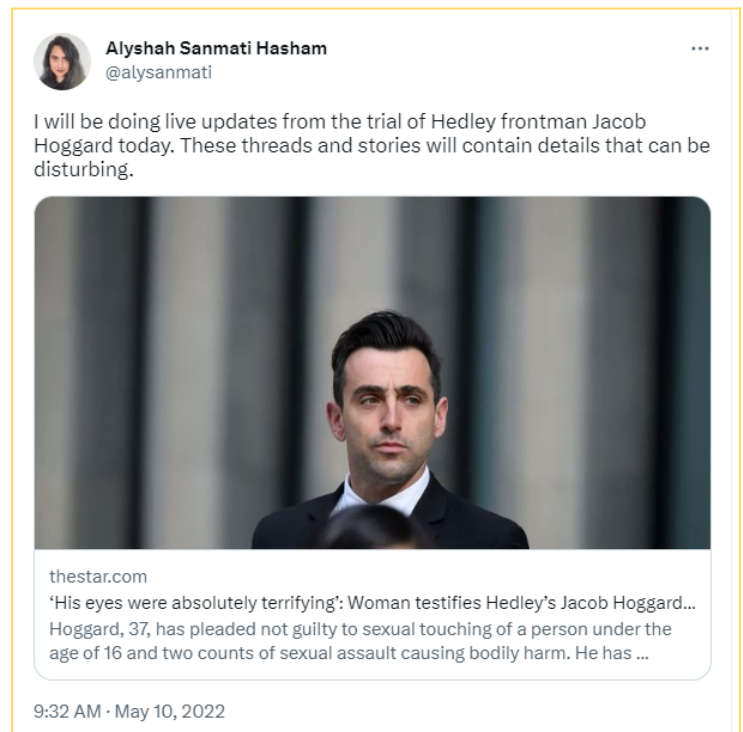
Content notes allow the media outlet's audience to determine whether they can engage with the content. It's easy to dismiss the use of content notes as unnecessary; however, they are an exercise in consent, providing an opportunity for the audience to decide what kind of media they want to consume. Content notes can be used before all types of material, including; text, images, social media, video, and audio clips.

### Content Note Examples

"If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual violence or abuse, you can call the Assaulted Women's Helpline at 416 863 0511 or 1 866 863 0511 or text #SAFE (#7233) on your Bell, Rogers, Fido or Telus mobile phone." Alyshah Sanmati Hasham, *Toronto Star* journalist, in a Twitter thread about live

updates from the May 2022 trial of Hedley frontman Jacob Hoggard. She also shared in her first tweet, "These threads and stories will contain details that can be disturbing" (Hasham, 2022).

**"If you have experienced sexual violence and are in need of crisis support, please call the RAINN Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)" (Singh, 2022, para. 21).**



(Hasham, 2022)



## Use of the term 'Allegedly'

A journalist may use the words “alleged” or “allegedly” for legal reasons. It is typically a requirement if a person is charged with a crime but not convicted.

However, it is important to avoid excessive or unnecessary use when the language is not legally required, as the terms “alleged” and “allegedly” can create doubt about the survivor’s experience or result in victim blaming (Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2013).

Substitute language such as “said,” “told,” or “reported” can carry equal weight and still frame the story from the survivor’s perspective. The term “reported” can also indicate that the case “is officially part of the justice system” (Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2013, p. 7).

*“She ‘said’...”*

*“they ‘told’ the police...”*

*“she ‘reported’ the sexual assault....”*

Tight deadlines and legal considerations can mean the term “alleged” is required, but journalists can take steps to limit its use outside of the appropriate context. For example: ‘allegations’ are made in courts, so when covering a trial, or other formal proceedings such as a human rights case, the term is appropriate.

*“In the complaint they ‘alleged’...”*

If you are using the terms “alleged” or “allegedly,” avoid labelling the victim as an “accuser,” as this term reinforces negative stereotypes (Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2015). Instead, use “victim/survivor.”

For more on responsible and accountable reporting, visit [The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#). The Dart Center provides recommendations on how to cover traumatic events and is a project of the Columbia Journalism School.



Jennifer M. Gómez, Ph.D.  
@JenniferMGomez1

While we're working for change, how about changing the language, [@thecrimson](#) :

Accuser: sounds like perpetrator  
Accused: sounds like victim

How about the good ole standards of:

alleged victim: sounds like alleged victim  
alleged perpetrator: sounds like alleged perpetrator



Center for Institutional Courage @CourageforAll · Mar 31  
Institutional betrayal at Harvard:

"'Harvard's primary concern is to avoid litigation, especially by faculty,' Subramanian wrote. 'This predisposes the institution to protect the rights of the accused over those of accusers.'"

[thecrimson.com/article/2023/3...](https://thecrimson.com/article/2023/3...)

(Gómez, 2023)



# What is Rape Culture?

**Rape culture refers to an environment in which sexual violence is ignored, normalized and/or excused**, often through the perpetuation of practices, attitudes, behaviours, and narratives where rape is the accepted and expected norm. It refers to the cultural norms, practices, and values that support and condone sexual assault, harassment, and coercion.

In a rape culture, the survivors of sexual violence are often blamed or shamed, while perpetrators are excused or even celebrated. Rape culture victim-blames trivializes sexual assault, objectifies survivors' bodies, and uses language and imagery that reinforces harmful stereotypes. We saw rape culture exemplified in the May 10th, 2023 *CNN Town Hall* with former US President Donald Trump where he was allowed to repeatedly insult the woman he sexually abuse despite a civil jury finding him liable that week for sexual abuse and defamation of her (McGreal & Pengelly, 2023, para. 5).

It's important to note that rape culture can affect anyone, regardless of gender, and is embedded in communities, institutions and environments, i.e. schools, workplaces, and even within families. Addressing and dismantling rape culture requires a collective effort to challenge harmful beliefs, systems and behaviours. It means not only supporting survivors of sexual violence but also

working with people that cause harm and institutions to transform meaningfully.

**Rape culture does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped by power dynamics within and between communities and social structures that exist historically and persist today.** As a result of oppressive systems, marginalized communities (historical and current) are more likely to be targeted for sexual violence, blamed for the violence they have been subjected to, and as well as face barriers to support services and justice.

## Rape Culture is Rooted in Colonization

"Sexual violence is just one manifestation of the continuum of violence wrought by settler colonialism. Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, trans and queer people have been resisting colonial rape culture for years, mourning our loved ones whose lives have been taken in a country in which their deaths are treated as unexceptional."  
- Dr. Sarah Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw Nation) in *Decolonizing the Roots of Rape Culture: reflections on consent, sexual violence and university campuses*.

The [settler rape of Indigenous Peoples](#) is part of the colonial project of Canada. Understanding the colonial roots of rape culture allows journalists to better understand the systemic underpinnings of sexual violence.

Indigenous women are killed at nearly seven times the rate of non-Indigenous women ([Statistics Canada, 2018](#)). More than six in 10 Indigenous women have been physically or sexually assaulted at some point since the age of 15, compared with more than four in 10 non-Indigenous women ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)). This is a direct result of colonization.

"When you are dealing with the issues that Indigenous women are dealing with, it's really hard to start that whole conversation about what even consent culture means within colonial Canada... You can't have a consent culture within a colonial system."  
- Leslie Spillett

### Death of aboriginal girl, 15, dumped in Red River renews calls for inquiry

CHINTA PUXLEY  
WINNIPEG  
THE CANADIAN PRESS  
PUBLISHED AUGUST 19, 2014



HAMILTON **THE SPECTATOR**



### Court hears dead girl had drugs in her system

CRIME

### Toxicologist testifies Tina Fontaine had drugs, alcohol in system when she died

By Staff • The Canadian Press  
Posted January 30, 2018 7:44 pm

### Even after death, Canada denies Tina Fontaine dignity



DENISE BALKISSOON >  
PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 1, 2018



## Rape Culture Shapes Who is Seen As a Survivor

Rape culture shapes who is seen as a “worthy” survivor of sexual violence. Survivors who do not fit into dominant narratives of victimhood - often constructed as white, cis, woman, virginal, heterosexual, and young - are met with suspicion and critique and face additional challenges accessing support.

Rape culture often portrays women and feminized people as passive and vulnerable, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes that can make it difficult for individuals who do not fit this narrow definition of victimhood to be believed or taken seriously.

Rape culture reinforces the idea that men should be strong and tough, leading to the belief that men cannot be survivors of sexual violence. This stereotype makes it incredibly challenging for male survivors to share with their community, let alone report the violence they were subjected to, for the fear that they will be disbelieved or stigmatized. Rape culture also creates a narrative that, for men, sex is a conquest, and they are always willing to engage in it. This can make it difficult for men to understand that they were subjected to sexual violence, as they may feel ashamed or confused about their

own bodily responses. This was exemplified in a *Toronto Star* article about a young man who was raped by four women in the club district. In the story columnist, Rosie DiManno said: “Of course, one man’s sexual assault is another man’s sexual fantasy come true” (April 9, 2013).

## Rape Culture Shapes Who is Seen As a Person Who Can Cause Harm

Rape culture not only constructs who is seen as a ‘worthy’ survivor but also who is assumed to be a person who can cause harm. Marginalized communities are often portrayed as innately dangerous and predatory by the state, institutions and the media to justify harmful laws, practices and protocols under the guise of “protecting women & girls.” This is seen in the [construction of Black men as sexual predators](#) to rationalize slavery, segregation and criminalization. This has had many devastating impacts, including the lynching and murder of Black men and boys like 14-year-old [Emmett Till](#). This starkly contrasts with how institutions, including the justice system and media, protect white men accused of sexual violence, e.g. [Brock Turner](#).

Another poignant example is how xenophobic stereotypes of immigrant

men as predatory were, and currently are, deployed to justify racist immigration policies (Mooten, 2021). For instance, during the 2015 Canadian federal election, Conservative MP Kellie Leitch proposed a "values test" for immigrants, including questions about sexual equality and respect for Canadian law (Zimonjic, 2017, para. 2).

Another example is bathroom bans. These harmful policies, laws and protocols are built on a fabricated narrative that trans people are sexual predators. Furthermore, bathroom bans create an unsafe environment for trans people by forcing them to use facilities that are not aligned with their gender. This can lead to harassment, discrimination, and violence, including sexual violence, particularly for trans women who may face increased risks of assault and harassment. A comprehensive study of over 12,000 LGBTQ+ youth in the American Journal of Pediatrics (Murchison, Agénor, Reisner, & Watson, 2019) found that transgender and gender non-binary youth are more likely to be subjected to sexual assault or harassment if they attend a school that does not permit them to use bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their general identity.

**"The number one issue is the constant repetition of the question, 'What can women do to avoid rape?' ... Why isn't the question, 'What can we as communities do to prevent men from raping?'"**  
- Audrey Batterham

**"I feel the instance of an assault is often met with two main responses: It's not that bad... or What did she do to deserve it?" - 2014 Use the Right Words survey respondent**





## What Rape Culture Looks Like



shows that depict stalkers as sexy (You) and sensationalize violence against women (Game of Thrones)

sexually explicit comments passed off as jokes

defining "manhood" as dominant and sexually aggressive, and "womanhood" as submissive and sexually passive

social media content that mocks survivors who disclose or testify

*Terry Crews and Amber Heard*

pressure on women to not appear "frigid"

intentionally ignoring or not using someone's correct pronouns

teaching women to avoid getting raped instead of teaching men not to rape (Horeck, Ringrose, & Mendes, 2021)

purity balls and chastity rings

slut shaming

assuming that men are always willing to have sex

refusing to take rape accusations seriously

constructing sexual violence as something that only is perpetuated by strangers



"What is news about sexual violence? It's an old saying: "When a dog bites a man, it isn't news. When a man bites a dog, it is." By its nature, news often emphasizes the unusual. In the case of rape, an assault by a stranger on a night is news primarily because it is so unusual. Other unusual, sensational cases involve serial rapes, kidnapping, and assaults of very young or very old people. Yet for people with little knowledge of the topic, the unusual becomes the norm."  
- Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2013, p. 14).

## Rape Culture Constructs and Enforces Gender

**Gender binary:** The idea that you can only be a man or woman, that you must identify with one of these two genders throughout your life (the one you were assigned at birth) and that your behaviours and appearance must conform appropriately to that gender ([genderspectrum.org](http://genderspectrum.org), n.d.).

### Rape culture reinforces the gender binary

- Rape culture reinforces the gender binary and the expectations and

roles the binary creates for people based on their gender.

- Characteristics like dominance, aggression, and violence are depicted as inherently masculine traits.
- Passivity, submissiveness, and victimhood are seen as inherently feminine traits.

The imposition of the gender binary was also central to rape culture, colonialism, and the legacy of residential schools. As Dr. Sarah Hunt outlines in *Decolonizing the Roots of Rape Culture: reflections on consent, sexual violence and university campuses*: "The forced embodiment of colonial gender hierarchies at residential schools meant not only the suppression of Two-Spirit, non-binary ways of being in the world, but also the ways that men and women related to one another, and the spiritual, ceremonial and cultural significance of what it means to be 'man,' 'woman,' or 'Two-Spirit' within Indigenous cultural systems. Rape culture thrives when a power structure is imposed that divides the world into two groups, one of which gains its sense of being by asserting power over the other" (Hunt, 2016, p. 5). Acknowledging the colonial roots of rape culture (Hunt, 2016) through ethical reporting allows media professionals to more accurately and honestly convey the



lived realities of sexual violence. When speaking with survivors, asking how they want to be identified as misgendering them can, even inadvertently, harm them as an individual and perpetuate dangerous cultural beliefs.

**"The media has to act to recognize itself as education and education as always subjective. It is never objective, and the media is never objective ... We need not let journalists and editors off the hook [through] this idea that they're just reporting 'facts.'" - Margaret Alexander**

## **Rape culture tells us that men can't control themselves**

- The myth that "boys will be boys" suggests that boys and men cannot control themselves because they are inherently violent and cannot resist their sexual urges.
- Seeing men as naturally sexually aggressive assumes that they have no control over their choices.
- This leads to the assumption that rape and other forms of sexual violence are inevitable and that they are about sex rather than power and control.

## **Rape culture constructs women and feminized people as passive or sexually-available**

In rape culture, women and feminized people are constructed as passive. This contributes to problematic assumptions about consent, such as:

- the belief that "no means yes"
- that the absence of a no (i.e. silence) constitutes consent
- Other forms of violence that people are subjected to daily, such as unwanted sexual remarks or sexual touching, are ignored or downplayed. They come to be viewed as inevitable and even natural or flattering.

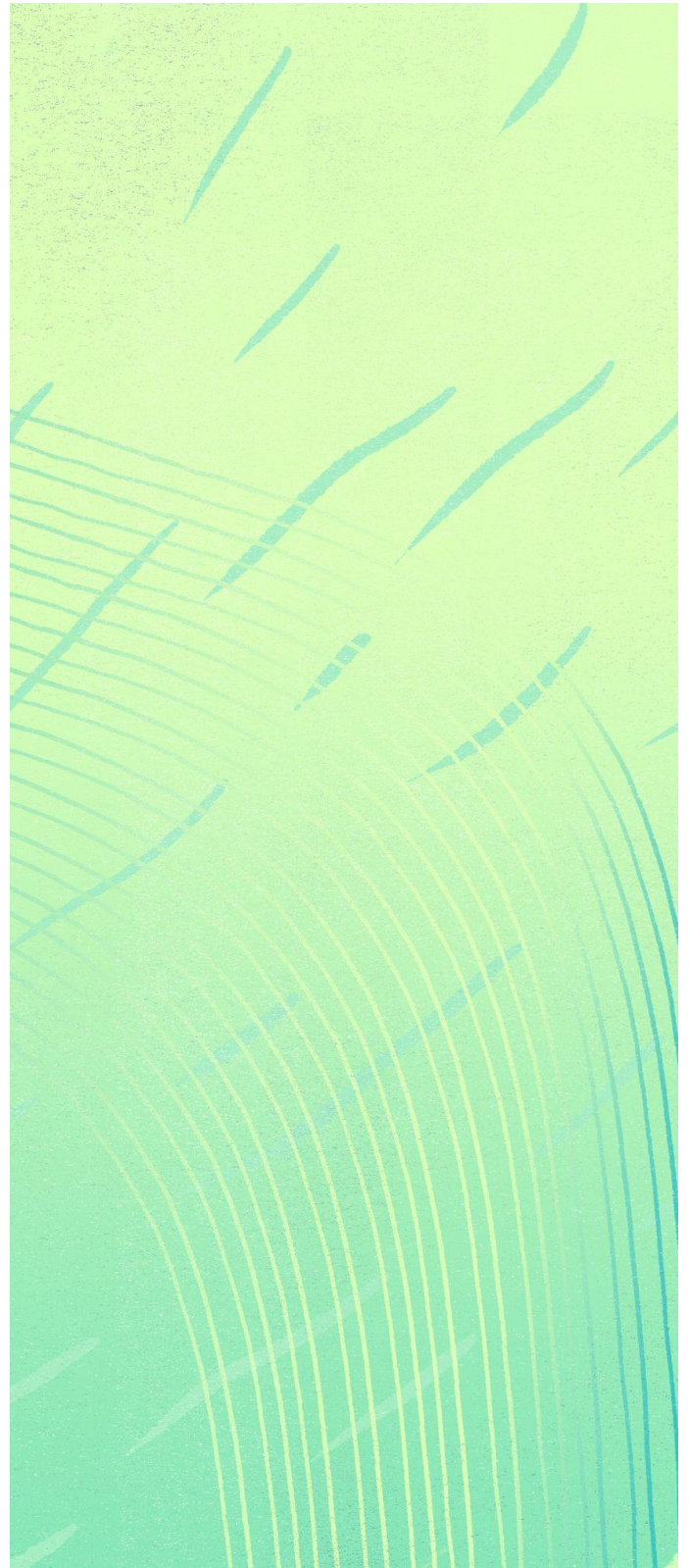
**"I would like to see sexual violence talked about in regards to all survivors: women survivors, male survivors, inmates, vulnerable/marginalized populations such as women of colour, same-sex and/or queer and/or trans relationships, women with disabilities, etc."**  
- Alisha R.





**"The media discussion of sexual violence in relation to Muslim women has to stop using negative generalizations about Muslim cultures, religious realities, and focus instead on the lived experience of Muslim women."  
- Kirstin S. Dane**

As a journalist, it is important to understand how rape culture is perpetuated through language and cultural practices, and how our internalized ideas uphold and reify this violence. By unpacking and addressing how rape culture is embedded in our understanding of sexual violence, you can better report on sexual violence ethically, with tact, care and compassion.





## Conclusion

Using the right words to report on sexual violence can mean the difference between telling an empowering and informative story and inadvertently causing additional trauma. We hope this guide provides a starting point for reporting in a trauma-and violence informed, and healing-centred way.

The *Use the Right Words* resources are not intended to be a definitive voice on how to report sexual violence. This conversation is ever-changing, and the voices of survivors and advocates should be centred in all media coverage. A number of valuable resources on this subject are included in the introduction. We urge journalists to prioritize continued learning on trauma-and violence-informed reporting and continue this important conversation with others, including journalism schools, newsrooms, and editors.

Media professionals are responsible for getting it right the first time, which is all the more essential when reporting on sexual and gender-based violence. We hope that this resource will inspire journalists and media professionals to be the change that is needed in the industry. One is long overdue.



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# Provincial, Territorial and National Resources

## Indigenous Resources

### National

- [The Assembly of First Nations \(AFN\) Women's Council](#)
- [Hope for Wellness Helpline](#)
- [National Association of Friendship Centres](#)
- [The Native Women's Association of Canada \(NWAC\)](#)
- [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#)

### British Columbia

- [List of Aboriginal Transition Houses and Family Violence Crisis Lines](#) from The Healing Journey
- [Eskasoni Mental Health Services/Crisis and Referral Center](#)

### Manitoba

- [Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc. \(Heart Medicine Lodge\)](#)

### Nunavut

- [Kamatsiaqtut Nunavut Helpline](#)
- [Nunavut Victim Services](#)

### Ontario

- [The Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto \(NWRCT\)](#)
- [Ontario Native Women's Association \(ONWA\)](#)
- [Talk4Healing](#)

## Alberta

- [Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services](#)
- [S.T.A.N.D. Against Sexual Assault](#)

- [Calgary Sexual Assault Response Team \(Sheldon M. Chumir Health Centre\)](#)
- [Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse](#)
- [Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton](#)
- [University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre](#) (provides service to non-students)
- [Southeastern Alberta Sexual Assault Response Committee](#)
- [Central Alberta Sexual Assault Support Centre](#)
- [Dragonfly Sexual Assault Services](#)
- [Pace Community Support Sexual Assault & Trauma Centre](#)
- [Association of Communities Against Abuse](#)

## British Columbia

- [Ending Violence Association of BC](#)
- [Government of BC Victim Services](#)
- [Women Against Violence Against Women \(WAVAW\)](#)
- [Vancouver Island Crisis Line](#)
- [Surrey Women's Centre Mobile Assault Response Team](#)
- [Kamloops Sexual Assault Counselling Centre](#)
- [Prince George Sexual Assault Centre](#)
- [Victoria Sexual Assault Centre](#)

## Manitoba

- [Ending Violence Across Manitoba](#)
- [Government of Manitoba Victim Services](#)
- [Government of Manitoba Family Services](#)
- [Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc. \(Heart Medicine Lodge\)](#)
- [Survivor's Hope Crisis Centre](#)

## New Brunswick

- [Directory of services for victims of abuse](#) from Public Legal Education and Information Services of New Brunswick (PLEIS-NB)
- [Sexual Violence New Brunswick](#)
- [Government of New Brunswick Victim Services](#)
- [Sexual Violence New Brunswick](#)
- [Boréal Child and Youth Expertise Centre](#)
- [South East Sexual Assault Centre](#)
- [L'Eclipse: Centre de Ressources pour les Victimes de Violences Sexuelles](#)

## Newfoundland and Labrador

- [Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre](#)
- [Government of Newfoundland Victim Services](#)

## Northwest Territories

- [Northwest Territories Status of Women Council](#)
- [Hospital-based 24-hour Crisis Line](#)
- [Family Violence Services for Women](#)
- [List of sexual assault services in Northwest Territories](#) from Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (CASAC)

## Nova Scotia

- [Nova Scotia Domestic Violence Resource Centre](#)
- [Legal advice for sexual assault survivors](#)
- [Eskasoni Mental Health Services/Crisis and Referral Center](#)
- [Halifax Regional Police Victim Services](#)
- [Avalon Sexual Assault Centre](#)

- [Pictou County Women's Resource and Sexual Assault Centre](#)
- [Antigonish Women's Resource Centre & Sexual Assault Services Association](#)
- [Colchester Sexual Assault Centre](#)

## Nunavut

- [Kamatsiaqtut Nunavut Helpline](#)
- [Nunavut Victim Services](#)

## Ontario

- [Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes \(AOcVF\)](#)
- [Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres](#)
- [Ontario Network of Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres](#)
- [Assaulted Women's Helpline](#)
- [Government of Ontario Victim Services](#)
- [Sexual Assault for Quinte & District](#)
- [Hope 24/7](#)
- [Toronto Rape Crisis Centre](#)

## Prince Edward Island

- [PEI Rape and Sexual Assault Centre](#)

## Québec

- [Government of Québec sexual assault resources](#)
- [Sexual Assault Centres Québec](#)
- [Centre pour les victimes d'agression sexuelle de Montréal](#)
- [Centre de prévention et d'intervention pour les victimes d'agression sexuelles de Laval](#)





## Saskatchewan

- [Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan](#)
- [Regina Sexual Assault Centre](#)
- [Saskatoon Sexual Assault & Information Centre](#)
- [West Central Crisis & Family Support Centre](#)
- [Lloydminster Sexual Assault Services](#)
- [Battlefords & Area Sexual Assault Centre](#)

## Yukon

- [Sexualized Assault Response Team](#)
- [Women's Transition Home](#)
- [Help and Hope for Families Society](#)
- [Dawson Women's Shelter](#)
- [List of sexual assault services in Yukon](#) from Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (CASAC)

## National

- [Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime](#)
- [List of Sexual Assault Centres, Crisis Lines, And Support Services from Ending Violence Association of Canada](#)
- [MMIW Support Line 1-844-413-6649](#). An independent, national, toll-free support call line is available to provide support for anyone who requires assistance. This line is available free of charge, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- [Resources for LGBTQ2S and non-binary survivors of violence](#) from Battered Women's Support Services (BWSS)
- [Trans Lifeline](#) provides trans peer support for our community that's been divested from police since day one. Run by and for trans people.