

**USE THE  
RIGHT WORDS  
CHECKLIST FOR  
REPORTING ON  
SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE**

# 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](#).

## 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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## **femifesto's 2015 *Use the Right Words Sexual Violence Reporting Guide* 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.

## **Self-Care**

The following checklist discusses coverage of sexual violence across Canadian media. We recognize this subject matter can take a toll on journalists through vicarious trauma and/or individual experiences of harm. We encourage journalists to practice self-care and protect your mental health.

## **Using the Checklist**

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

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## Key Terms

**Sexual violence:** Any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality. It can be any non-consensual sexual act or attempt, or advances performed on an individual without their consent in any setting, including, but not limited to, home and work. Sexual violence is a continuum of interrelated sexual harms that range from subtle (e.g. rape jokes, catcalling) to overt (e.g. sexual harassment, sexual denigration, unwanted sexual contact, sexual assault or sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, sexual trafficking, etc.) (SIECCAN, 2023).

**Sexual assault:** “Sexual assault is any sexual contact that happens without the consent of both people. It can range from unwanted sexual touching to forced sexual intercourse. It can occur anywhere - in your home, at a community facility like a recreational centre or in public places. It can occur even when people know each other or are married or dating. Sexual assault occurs when someone did not consent to the sexual activity” (Privacy & Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, 2020).

**Consent:** Canada's *Criminal Code* (s. 273.1(1), 1985) defines consent as “the voluntary agreement to engage in the sexual activity in question.” It must be given without coercion, force, or threats and must involve active communication and a mutual understanding of the activity. Consent can be withdrawn at any time and is communicated through words or actions. Silence, passivity, prior sexual activity, and the existence of a prior or current relationship cannot be regarded as presumptions of consent (Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund, n.d.). Consent cannot be given if an individual is incapacitated (drugs, alcohol, exhaustion, etc.) or if one party is in a position of trust, power, or authority. In Canada, the legal age of consent is 16.

## Use the Right Language

### Avoid

Language that fails to acknowledge or explicitly label the act as a form of sexual violence, i.e. non-consensual sex; coerced; unwanted sexual activity; fondled; caressed.

**Example:** The word 'sex' can imply consent. Without consent, sexual contact is legally defined as sexual assault or sexual harassment. There are many examples of the word 'sex' being used instead of sexual assault in media stories, especially headlines.

In a 2019 article in the *Brantford Expositor*, a story was published about a conviction in a sexual assault case ran with the headline "Jail for sex without consent" (Gamble, 2019).

In 2022, *CBC Ottawa* story ran a story with the headline, "Resigned Ottawa police officer had sex with distressed teen who had been in his charge that night." When advocates raised their concern on Twitter, it was changed to "Sex assault charge withdrawn against Ottawa police officer, pleads guilty to breach of trust" (CBC News Ottawa, 2022).

In 2022, the *Vancouver Sun* ran an article titled "B.C. woman felt 'very violated' by alleged non-consensual sex with former Canuck Jake Virtanen" (Fraser, 2022).

### Consider

Using specific language makes it easier for readers to understand that sexual assault is a serious issue with profound impacts. This can help people learn more about what sexual assault is, what it looks like, and its effects on survivors and communities. Additionally, it can aid in reducing victim-blaming attitudes and increasing awareness of the gravity and complexity of sexual assault.

**Example:** Use terms such as sexual violence, sexual assault, oral rape, etc. The *Detriot Free Press*, in a story about former Vancouver Canuck Reid Boucher pleading guilty to sexually assaulting a 12-year-old girl, used the term "oral sexual assault" (Moran, 2022, para. 8) while other media outlets used "oral sex".

**Note:** When criminal charges have been laid, journalists have to report using legal terms such as sexual assault. The fact that rape is not an accepted legal term in Canada must always be kept in mind.



Recognizing that sexual violence occurs on a continuum rather than in a hierarchy, the term "sexual assault" was fought for to be used in the legal system by advocates.

**Note:** In 1983, the Canadian government made significant changes to the Criminal Code, including broadening the range of sexual offences and replacing phrases like "rape" and "indecent assault" with the overarching term "sexual assault."

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## Avoid

Language that minimizes the impacts of sexual violence. Avoid making assumptions or passing judgements on how a survivor communicates or responds to what they were subjected to. They are the experts in their own life and choose how to respond and heal.

**Example:** The individual was physically unharmed; not seriously injured; their injuries were not life-threatening; [the victim] didn't appear visibly upset.

## Consider

Providing context on both the short- and long-term impacts sexual violence can have on survivors, regardless of physical injury. Seek expert comments and

statistics. When possible, incorporate support resources for survivors. Address the impact, including, and not limited to, financial, physical, psychological, spiritual, and/or emotional issues.

Be trauma-informed by researching the significant and long-lasting impacts of sexual violence in order to recognize signs and symptoms of trauma, such as memory loss, inability to concentrate, and panic attacks.

**Example:** 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).

## Avoid

Language that perpetuates rape myths by implying that the survivor is responsible.

**Example:** Describing a complainant or survivor as intoxicated, wearing provocative clothing, being flirtatious, or that they should have known that [insert location] is a dangerous street/place/bar; the incident should serve as a reminder to use the buddy system when at a bar or in a public space; chose not to seek medical attention; initially did not report the sexual assault to the police.

In 2021, a *TSN* journalist interviewed Kyle Beach, a former professional hockey player, about coming forward as the "John Doe" in the Chicago Blackhawks sexual assault story. The journalist asked, "I wonder if that player is watching now, what your message is to him" (*TSN.ca* Staff, 2021). This question sparked Kyle Beach to share his sorrow that further people were harmed that he could have done more to protect. Afterwards, the journalist did not affirm that it was not his fault, and *TSN* used the clip repeatedly without giving that context. To prevent entrenching victim blaming, the journalist could have phrased the question, "We know the responsibility for sexual

violence is on the person who committed it, not you or any of the other victims. What impact did it have on you, knowing he harmed other people?"

## Consider

Demonstrating an understanding that sexual violence is about power and control by using language that places accountability on the person who has caused harm.

**Example:** Depicting the survivor as seeking justice or support, not revenge.

**Example:** He sexually assaulted her; they abused their power/trust/authority to commit a sexual assault.

Always be mindful when presenting physical characteristics or behaviours of their relevance to the story or whether they could imply responsibility for the sexual assault.

**Note:** Victim blaming perpetuates a culture that condones and justifies gender-based violence. It 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 who.

## Avoid

Relying heavily on inconsistencies in court, thus suggesting that the survivor is an unreliable witness.

**Example:** They couldn't remember all of the facts; were foggy regarding timelines; could not provide police with a full description; admitted to blacking out.

## Consider

Incorporating trauma-informed research and expert opinion on the impacts of trauma and trauma's impact on memory.

**Example:** Traumatic memories may be stored differently in the brain and can lead to changes in memory. Survivors might not remember precise details of what occurred but experience sporadic memories that come in flashbacks (Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, 2013).

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## Avoid

Suggesting that it is unclear whether a sexual assault has occurred by insinuating that there can be blurred lines between consensual sexual acts and sexual assault.

**Example:** They didn't scream or fight back; they did not leave the relationship; they said they were not physically resisting. Language can also be used to minimize the person who caused harm's actions, suggesting they were unaware that their actions were a crime, calling it a "misunderstanding" or "lapse in judgment."

## Consider

Using language that makes it clear that people who cause harm know that what they are doing is illegal and that sexual violence is an intentional act of harm.

**Note:** Conveying the impacts of trauma, specifically how survivors react to harm, i.e. the most common physiological response to sexual violence is freeze. It is one of the three most common responses to the threat, referred to as the "fight, flight, or freeze" response (Klinik Community Health Centre, 2013).

In the context of sexual violence, the freeze response can occur when a survivor feels overwhelmed or unable to escape the situation. They may feel immobilized, unable to move, speak, or

fight. This response is not a conscious choice or a sign of weakness but rather a natural and automatic response to a traumatic situation. The freeze response

can be seen as a form of resistance, as the survivor's body and mind are doing what they can to protect themselves in a traumatic situation.

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## Avoid

Highlighting characteristics to portray the person who has caused harm is an 'unlikely perpetrator' of sexual violence, i.e. an upstanding doctor/lawyer/teacher, talented/accomplished athlete, or student. This was exemplified in the Brock Turner sexual assault trial, where multiple media outlets consistently called him the Stanford swimmer.

**Example:** In 2018, Bruce McArthur, a cisgender, white male landscaper, was arrested and charged with the murders of eight men, many of whom were racialized and part of the queer community. The media coverage of the case initially downplayed the significance of the victims' identities and histories, instead focusing on McArthur's apparent normalcy and community involvement. This framing reinforced harmful stereotypes about racialized LGBTQ+ men as disposable and unworthy of protection.

Language that feeds into racist and xenophobic notions of rape culture as to

who is more likely to be held responsible for sexual violence.

## Consider

Employing intentional language that acknowledges sexual violence and rape culture as shaped by power within and between communities and social structures that exist historically and persist today. Make it clear that people who cause harm come from all racial, cultural, and educational backgrounds (Southern Connecticut State University, 2022). Report on all instances of sexual violence/sexual assault. Be mindful of your own biases and which cases you view as 'newsworthy' (Gilchrist, 2010).

**Note:** It's important for media outlets to review what stories they tell and amplify and what stories they choose not to. Which communities are commonly seen as causing harm? Which communities are seen as "worthy" victims?

## Avoid

Not asking how the person reporting harm would like to be addressed,

including but not limited to chosen name, pronouns, pronunciation, and spelling.

**Example:** Deadnaming (the name that a transgender person previously used but no longer goes by) or using incorrect pronouns, even if this is what someone was known as during the abuse.

### Consider

Asking how an interviewee would like to be identified: as a person who was subjected to 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 were subjected to rape, sexual assault, or

attack? In the pre-interview, talk to the interviewee about what language they prefer.

**Example:** Make sure to confirm the interviewee's pronouns and gender identity. If you cannot do so, defer to gender-neutral language, such as person. Learn more from the [519 Media Guide](#).

**Note:** Some people who knew/know the survivor, including family members, may misgender and/or deadname them. It's important that a journalist honours the survivor's wishes of how they like to be named, and not anyone else's.

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### Avoid

Only including the social location of a survivor or person who caused harm when they are from marginalized communities (i.e. only stating the race of a survivor or person who caused harm if they are not white). This perpetuates the idea that whiteness is the default or norm.

### Consider

Being consistent about what you include about identity when writing about sexual violence.

**Example:** If you are going to include the cultural background of one survivor, include those details about other survivors and the person who caused harm as well.

## Avoid

Language that implies shame or suspicion of a survivor, witness, or community member when sharing their perspective. This can be seen in the overuse of the word “alleged” or “claimed” beyond legal requirements.

**Example:** Saying that the survivor seemed embarrassed/humiliated/ashamed; reluctant to describe their relationship; claimed to have been abused; had no evidence to prove the assault occurred.

**Note:** Using words like “confess” or “admits” to describe a survivor disclosing or reporting their story can subtly frame sexual assault as a salacious or consensual act. “Claim,” when used to excess, can imply embellishment or unreliability.

## Consider

Using language that varies when describing a sexual assault trial, including “said,” “according to,” or “reports,” and attributing the word to a specific speaker (Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women, n.d.).

**Example:** She shared/reported that he had sexually assaulted/raped her.

Rather than presuming when to use the word “alleged,” seek legal advice on when it is required. Alternatively, when reporting after criminal charges have been laid, you can use language such as: “<name>, who has been charged with the sexual assault of <name>.”

## Use the Right Frameworks

### Avoid

Framing sexual violence as something that impacts all survivors equally, without noting that historically and currently marginalized communities are more likely to be subjected to sexual violence.

**Example:** One-way rape culture operates is by framing Black, Indigenous, and racialized survivors as inherently less innocent when compared to white survivors. This is demonstrated in how Black girls and young women are sometimes depicted as not needing protection and as being sexually promiscuous and, thereby unrapeable.

It is also shown in how Indigenous girls and women are depicted in the media. For instance, the coverage of the 2014 murder of Tina Fontaine, an Indigenous girl from the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba, was uninformed and irresponsible. The *Hamilton Spectator* ran the headline, “Court hears dead girl had drugs in her system” (Hamilton Spectator, 2018) on January 30, 2018. Later, they changed it to “Court hears Tina Fontaine had drugs in her system.”

The *Hamilton Spectator* referred to her only as a “dead girl” in a headline and focused on what she did before her murder rather than placing responsibility where it belongs - on the person who murdered her.

**Example:** When reporting on cases whereby people involved in the sex work industry are subjected to sexual violence/sexual assault, suggesting that sexual victimization comes with the nature of the job/should be expected (Grant, 2014).

### Consider

Frameworks that recognize intersectionality, specifically how social location, including, but not limited to, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship status, impacts how people are targeted for sexual violence and how they connect to resources, heal from it and access justice. It also impacts whose stories are told in the media and how stories are told.

Marginalized communities, including, but not limited to, women with disabilities, Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, low-income, unhoused, bisexual, trans

and gender non-binary people, are disproportionately targeted for sexual violence historically and in the present day.

**Example:** Use language that also describes the prevalence of sexual violence and the root causes of oppressive systems, including, but not limited to, colonialism, racism, classism, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia. These can exist in isolation or simultaneously.

**Note:** Sexual violence is a tool of colonization, which continues today in Canada. 16 per cent of Indigenous people are subjected to sexual violence, compared to 6 per cent of

non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, due to ongoing colonization and racism, Indigenous people are commonly dismissed by the legal system (Department of Justice Canada, 2021).

**Example:** Include context on the criminalization of sex work, which imposes legal restrictions and limits the capacity of sex workers to perform their jobs safely. As a result of criminalization, sex workers find it more challenging to seek legal redress, report abuse or exploitation, obtain medical care, and bargain for better working conditions.

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## Avoid

Framing stories solely around legal outcomes, such as convictions or prison sentences, specifically in criminal legal cases.

## Consider

Recognizing that justice comes in many forms. Focus on survivors' needs and the

range of responses that can support their healing and well-being, i.e. sharing their story, art creation, and transformative justice. Put the healing and well-being of survivors ahead of sensationalism or clickbait. Describe the tools and services that are available to help survivors, such as peer support, advocacy, and counselling.



## Avoid

Framing stories of sexual violence as isolated incidents caused by individuals. This approach may focus on sensationalizing the details of the harm and the perpetrator's behaviour without examining the broader context in which sexual violence occurs.

**Example:** Focusing solely on the actions of a specific person who caused harm without exploring how their behaviour is linked to larger cultural attitudes about gender, sexuality, and power. This approach can perpetuate harmful stereotypes about sexual violence and reinforce the idea that the problem is caused by a few "bad apples" rather than larger systemic issues.

This was seen in much of the reporting on the Bruce McArthur case in 2018, which focused on the actions of McArthur as an individual without exploring the larger

issues of sexual and intimate partner violence in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. In addition, it could have been an opportunity to explore how systemic racism and homophobia enable violence against racialized immigrant and refugee men who have sex with men.

## Consider

Frameworks that centre on systemic change to address the root causes of sexual violence, including the need for transformative justice and community-based solutions that prioritize healing and accountability over punishment.

**Example:** Critically examine how power imbalances and oppressive systems contribute to sexual violence, including patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity

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## Avoid

Perpetuating myths regarding sexual violence, specifically the 'stranger danger' myth that survivors are more likely to be harmed by a stranger.

## Consider

Using language that challenges myths and accurately depicts the reality of sexual violence.

More than half (52 per cent) of self-reported assaults are committed by

someone known to the survivor  
(Government of Canada, 2019).

The 'stranger danger' myth also poses a  
barrier to reporting for survivors.

Reporting when the assailant is someone  
known to the survivor may 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 ostracization.

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### **Avoid**

Relying solely/primarily on the voices of  
law enforcement and officials when  
reporting on sexual violence.

### **Consider**

Centring the voices of survivors,  
advocates, service providers, experts,  
friends, and family of the survivor when  
reporting on sexual violence.

## Use The Right Imagery

### Avoid

Imagery that perpetuates myths and stereotypes regarding sexual violence and/or that emphasizes the actions of the survivor in ways that detract from and minimize the responsibility of the person who caused harm.

**Example:** A stock image of a survivor drinking, partying, or walking down a street alone at night; a shadowy stranger following a survivor home.

### Avoid

Imagery that is not case-related and may be biased toward the person who has caused harm.

**Example:** Their graduation or yearbook photo; an image of them and their family; an image of them performing on a sports team.

**Note:** Biased imagery of people who have caused harm is often informed by race, gender, and class. Imagery that frames the person who has caused harm in a positive light is utilized more often when white, middle-class men commit sexual

### Consider

Ensuring that the imagery used for the publication appropriately depicts sexual violence.

**Example:** An image of the location where the sexual violence occurred.

If possible, consult with survivors and advocates on using appropriate, trauma-informed imagery. Do not use an image of a survivor, a witness, or a support person without their consent.

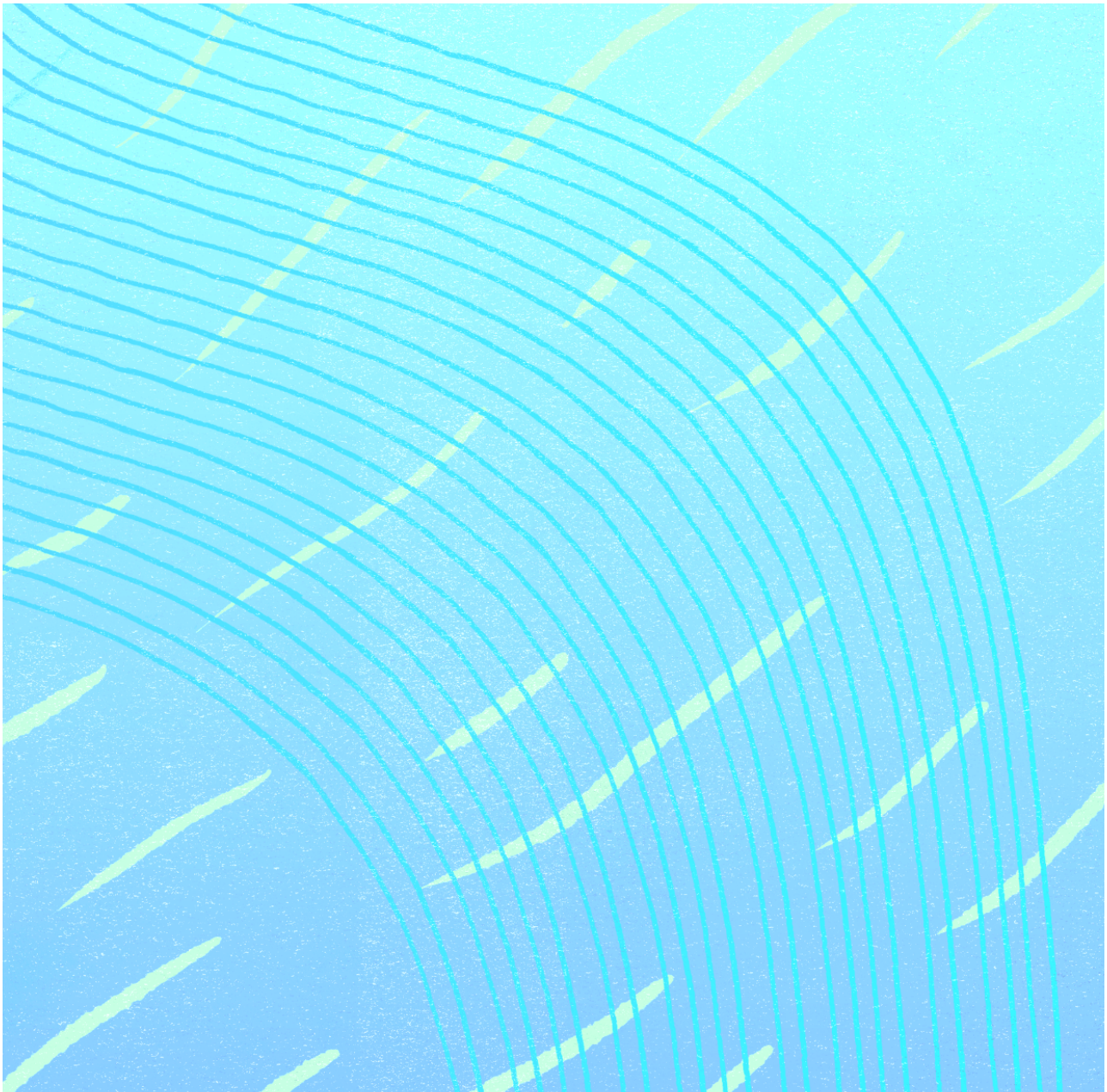
violence compared to racialized or marginalized men (O'Neil, 2016). For instance, for Black men, the image used is often a mugshot, whereas when a white man has caused harm, the image used is often a personal one (as opposed to a mugshot) in which they can be seen smiling (Tebagy, 2018).

### Consider

Only case-related imagery for all parties.

**Example:** An image of the person who has caused harm heading to court.

Be consistent with what imagery you use for people who cause harm during sexual assault trials. Question why you would use a mugshot for one person who caused harm but would not for another.



## Further Reading

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