

MEDIA TOOLKIT

**REPORTING ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN & GIRLS**

BENIN 2025

Photos and individuals depicted in this report are generally representative of violence against women through the media, and not connected to specific individuals, companies or nations in the report. Photos are mostly gotten on freepik; a free to use image library.



Reporting
Violence
Against
Women and
Girls

Benin. Burkina Faso. Togo



African Women in the Media

African Women in Media (AWiM) is an international nongovernmental organisation that aims to positively impact the way media functions in relation to African women. AWiM collaborates with a variety of partners to achieve our vision that

One day, African women will have equal access to representation and opportunities in media industries and media content.

AWiM activities create opportunities for knowledge exchange, building networks, and economic empowerment of women in media through their **Pitch Zone** and **Awards**.



Donor Name / Project Information

This study was funded by the Africa Women Development Fund.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Understanding VAWG	5
Relating to Survivors	9
Reporting on VAWG	15
Visual and Multimedia	22
Reporting on Femicides	24
Ensuring Accuracy and Depth	29
Vicarious Trauma: Awareness and Self-Care	33
Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning	36
Responsible Social Media Engagement	39
AWiM VAWG Media Coverage Toolkit - Additional Tools	40
Annexes	44
Annex 1: Glossary of Terms	
Annex 2: Preliminary Referral List - Support Services in Burkina Faso	
Annex 3: Resources	
List of References	45

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Toolkit

AWiM's **VAWG Media Toolkit** is designed to equip women journalists and media practitioners in Benin with knowledge, guidance, and practical tools to accurately and sensitively report on **violence against women and girls (VAWG)**.

The toolkit was developed on the basis of insights derived from AWiM's 2024 research on the media's coverage of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and on violence against women journalists in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo¹. One key finding of the research was the virtual absence of guidelines dedicated to VAWG coverage. Based on interview findings, across the three countries, only one Togolese feminist media outlet appeared to have such guidelines for journalists covering VAWG. While weak reporting on VAWG can perpetuate stigma, victim-blaming, and misinformation, accurate and sensitive reporting helps: Challenge harmful norms, Support survivors, Pressure authorities to take action. By supporting improved media coverage, we hope to: Raise awareness, Influence policy, Encourage Society change, and ultimately contribute to ending VAWG.

Toolkit Targets

This toolkit is designed specifically for women journalists (of all media formats) covering VAWG in Benin.

While male journalists may refer to and benefit from the guidelines provided, it is important to acknowledge that, despite their best intentions, awareness, or sensitivity, their involvement in VAWG reporting may unintentionally cause fear or discomfort for survivors. For this reason, it is recommended that men refrain from covering VAWG, especially in cases involving direct interactions with survivors. Women journalists, due to their lived experiences and understanding of gender dynamics, are better suited to approach these sensitive topics with the care and empathy required.

Contextual Background

According to data from the Public Listening Center, which manages the only free helpline for survivors of workplace violence in Benin², corroborated by World Bank findings³, approximately 70% of women in Benin experience some form of violence (physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, or harmful traditional practices) during their lifetime⁴. Yet, the 2024 Afrobarometer survey showed that VAWG is not taken seriously by a significant portion of the population⁵. Data suggests widespread cultural tolerance of VAWG.⁶

ⓘ Note

AWiM's 2024 research⁷ points to a lack of consistency and specialization in reporting on this violence in Benin, leading to superficial or harmful reporting. Beninese women journalists who contributed to this research highlighted sensationalism, victim-blaming, insensitivity, and stereotyping in media reporting, with an insufficient number of prevention- or education-oriented media reports.



UNDERSTANDING VAWG

1.1 Defining VAWG

While the Beninese Media overwhelmingly emphasizes physical forms of violence in its coverage of VAWG, the latter encompasses a wide range of psychological, financial, digital, and political forms of violence.⁸ Journalists must be able to recognize VAWG in its multiple dimensions as a grave violation of women and girls' human rights in accordance with the internationally accepted definitions such as the United Nations':

Any act that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, in both public and private life.⁹

Forms of VAWG range from sexual exploitation and trafficking to harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, and so-called "honor killings" (femicides by family members for perceived violations of honor, such as engaging in relationships deemed inappropriate). More recently, online harassment and cyberstalking have expanded the reach of such violence into the digital sphere, further threatening women's safety.

While legislations tend to passively refer to "violence against women and girls," the latter must be understood and framed as a male issue. It is deeply rooted in the patriarchal order that perpetuates men's social, economic, and political domination over women¹⁰. Although women also commit acts of violence against other women or men, the overwhelming majority of VAWG are inflicted by men.¹¹ Indeed, this violence is sustained by historically unequal power dynamics between men and women, as highlighted by the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. These power imbalances often lead to cycles of abuse that intertwine physical, sexual, emotional, and economic harm, trapping women in oppressive situations with lasting psychological and financial consequences.¹²



Note

Refer to the Toolkit Annex 1 to access a glossary of key terms for the coverage of VAWG.

1.2 Zooming in on VAWG's Impact

In reporting on VAWG, journalists must adopt a women's human rights perspective, recognizing both the individual and key generational implications of this pervasive issue. Moreover, a perspective on the wider societal and developmental consequences of VAWG is essential – notably:

- * **Health Impacts:** Survivors frequently endure long-term physical and mental health challenges. These may include trauma, chronic pain, depression, anxiety, and other serious conditions, all of which can drastically affect their quality of life and require ongoing care.
- * **Psychological Effects:** The emotional toll of VAWG is profound. Survivors often struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), diminished self-esteem, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation. These psychological scars can persist for years, affecting all aspects of a survivor's mental and physical safety and well-being.
- * **Socio-Economic Consequences:** VAWG severely undermines women's economic and social participation. Survivors may face barriers to employment, struggle to remain in education, and experience financial instability. These challenges not only hinder their personal development but also contribute to gender inequality and economic stagnation at a societal level.
- * **Financial Burden on Society:** The societal costs of VAWG are immense. Governments and communities bear the financial burden of healthcare, legal services, social welfare, and lost productivity. This economic strain slows development, as resources are diverted to address the consequences of violence rather than toward growth and progress.

By highlighting these multifaceted impacts, journalists can bring attention to the widespread, long-lasting effects of VAWG, underscoring the urgency of addressing it as a human rights, feminist, social justice, and developmental issue.

1.3 Adequate Training

Whenever possible, women journalists should expand their capacity to report on VAWG effectively.

- ✓ **Ongoing Training:** Regularly participate in training sessions on diverse aspects of VAWG. This continuous professional development is crucial for staying informed about the latest practices, emerging challenges, and policy changes in the field.
- ✓ **Constant Learning:** Be familiar with relevant manuals, recommendations, and guidelines for responsible media reporting on sexism, discrimination, and VAWG. Stay informed about evolving trends in VAWG, such as the rise of digital violence, to ensure their reporting remains current and reflective of the latest realities.
- ✓ **Networking:** Establish connections with colleagues who have experience in ethical reporting on VAWG, particularly through mentorship programs that foster peer learning.

List of governmental and non-governmental structures supporting VAWG survivors in Benin:

1 ABPF (Association Béninoise pour la promotion de la famille)

2 Association des avocats du Bénin

3 Care Benin

4 Famille Nutrition Développement (FND)

5 Institut National de la Femme

6 Réseau des féministes du Bénin

7 WILDAF Bénin



RELATING TO SURVIVORS

2.1 Approaching Survivors

- ✗ **Do not initiate contact:** Never call a survivor first. If she reaches out, respond promptly, as she may have taken a long time to build up the courage to speak.
- ✓ **Offer alternative means of sharing the story:** If the survivor prefers, allow her to share her experience in writing.
- ✓ **Ensure the survivor has overcome trauma:** If speaking with a survivor is unavoidable, ensure she has moved beyond the immediate trauma, lives free of violence, and is in a position to empower other women.
- ✓ **Clarify expectations early:** Before starting the interview, discuss the survivor's goals for sharing her story. Decide whether to proceed based on whether the media outlet can meet her expectations.
- ✓ **Explain the limits of going public:** Inform the survivor that going public does not guarantee action from institutions. The media can only amplify her voice—not deliver justice.
- ✓ **Warn of potential consequences:** Inform the survivor of potential risks, including threats to her safety, possible public backlash, and the emotional toll of revisiting her trauma.
- ✓ **Tailor interviews:** Survivors should feel in control during interviews. Journalists must respect their preferences, whether regarding location, timing, or format (e.g., in-person or phone interviews).
- ✓ **Minimize media presence:** For in-person interviews, avoid bringing others, such as photographers or camera operators, unless the survivor consents.

2.2 Interviewing Survivors

When engaging with survivors of violence, journalists must adopt a sensitive, empathetic, and trauma-informed approach to ensure they do no further harm. This requires specific training and an understanding of the psychological, emotional, and legal complexities involved.

- ✓ **Believe Survivors:** Trust survivors' accounts, even if their narratives are not linear or consistent—this is a common effect of trauma.
- ✓ **Let the Survivor Guide the Narrative:**
 - * Acknowledge that the survivor may not know where to begin.
 - * Allow her to control how and when she shares specific details.
 - * Ask follow-up questions gently.

- ✗ **Do Not Offer Advice:** Even if asked, refrain from giving personal advice. Your role is to report the story, not intervene in the survivor's situation.
- ✗ **Avoid Responsibility-Shifting Questions:** Do not ask why she dropped charges or refused to testify. Domestic violence cases should be prosecuted by the authorities, regardless of the survivor's involvement.
- ✓ **Ask Non-Threatening Questions:** If something is unclear, seek clarification in a respectful and non-intimidating manner.
- ✗ **Avoid Blame-Inducing Questions:**
 - * Never ask: *"Why didn't you leave him?"*
 - * Never ask: *"Why did you go back?"*
 - * These questions can retraumatize the survivor and shift blame onto her.
- ✗ **Avoid Questions About Children:**
 - * Refrain from asking about the survivor's children, as this could be used against her in custody disputes.
 - * Do not ask: *"Why did you leave your children with your husband?"*
 - * Survivors may have fled under difficult conditions and may now be fighting for custody.
- ✓ **Express Gratitude:**
 - * Thank the survivor at the beginning for her trust and time.
 - * At the end, acknowledge her bravery in sharing her story.

2.3 Trauma Awareness

Journalists have a duty of care toward survivors and must recognize signs of distress, responding appropriately.

- ✓ **Consult with Experts:**
 - * Seek guidance from psychologists or trauma specialists to understand the effects of VAWG.
 - * Remember, your role is as a journalist—not a counselor.
- ✓ **Keep Interviews Brief:**
 - * Due to the emotional weight of discussing trauma, interviews should not exceed an hour.
 - * Suggest breaks when needed.

✓ **Prepare for Emotional Impact:**

- * Engaging with survivors can be emotionally taxing.
- * Prepare yourself mentally before and after the interview to manage your own emotional response.

✓ **Maintain Professional Boundaries:**

- * While empathy is essential, avoid forming a personal attachment to the survivor.
- * Your role is to report the story, not become personally involved.

✓ **Acknowledge Trauma's Impact on Communication:**

- * Survivors may be unclear or inconsistent in their statements due to trauma.
- * These are normal reactions to a distressing experience.

✓ **Understand Trauma's Effect on Memory:**

- * Survivors may struggle to recall events in order or remember all the details.
- * Traumatic memories can be fragmented and should not be dismissed.

2.4 Referring Survivors

Journalists covering VAWG should be knowledgeable about available support services (NGOs, legal aid, shelters, counseling centers, medical facilities, and crisis hotlines) to prioritize the survivor's safety and recovery.

✓ **Anticipate Support Needs:** When conducting interviews, have a readily accessible list of trusted support organizations and services that can provide short or longer-term assistance to survivors.

✓ **Respect Survivors' Choices:** Offer support resources in a respectful and non-intrusive way, allowing survivors to decide if and when they want to engage.

✓ **Facilitate Support (If Appropriate):** Where possible, offer to connect survivors with relevant organizations, while always respecting their autonomy.

List of governmental and non-governmental structures supporting VAWG survivors in Benin:

1 ABPF (Association Béninoise pour la promotion de la famille)



2 Association des avocats du Bénin

3 Care Benin

4 Famille Nutrition Développement (FND)

5 Institut National de la Femme

6 Réseau des féministes du Bénin

7 WILDAF Bénin

2.5 Post-Interview Care

When crafting media content, journalists must uphold the same level of care and sensitivity applied during the interview process.

- ✓ **Yield control of the story to the survivor:** Unlike standard journalism practices, survivors should have the final say over what is published. Allow them to review, revise, and approve the parts of the story that include their statements.
- ✓ **Protect the survivor's dignity:** If certain details are too humiliating or graphic, explain why it may be in their best interest not to publish them. Avoid using labels like "victim" unless the survivor chooses to describe herself that way.⁹

- ✓ **Assess the survivor's readiness:** Before publishing, evaluate whether going public will empower or further traumatize the survivor. If she lacks professional support or has not fully processed her trauma, consider delaying publication.
- ✓ **Honor your commitments:** If you promise to show the survivor the article before publication, follow through. She has the right to see how her words are represented.
- ✓ **Allow for changes of mind:** Ensure the survivor understands that she can withdraw consent at any time before the article is finalized.
- ✓ **Plan for post-publication risks:** Discuss potential negative reactions, such as media scrutiny or public criticism. Encourage the survivor to limit social media exposure if necessary.
- ✓ **Manage the ongoing relationship:** Even after the story is published, maintain a professional relationship, ensuring the survivor knows she can contact you with updates but also reminding her of the limits of the support you can provide her with.



REPORTING ON VAWG

3.1 Respect for Privacy and Confidentiality

When reporting on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), journalists must prioritize the safety and privacy of survivors and their loved ones. Ensuring confidentiality is crucial to protecting them from further harm, particularly when legal proceedings are involved.



Prioritize Survivor Safety and Privacy:

✓ **Do this**

✗ **Don't do this**



The survivor's safety and well-being must always come first, even if their identity is concealed.



The survivor's safety and well-being must always come first, even if their identity is concealed.



Avoid publishing any details that could expose them to risk, such as location, personal background, or identifying descriptors.



Protect the Identity of Family Members:

✓ **Do this**



If the survivor has family—especially underage children—ensure their identities remain confidential.

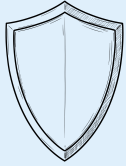


Revealing family details may lead to further trauma or unintended disclosure of the survivor's identity.



Presumption of Innocence and Anonymity for the Perpetrator:

✔ Do this



Uphold the legal presumption of innocence by avoiding prematurely identifying the alleged perpetrator.



If disclosing their identity could indirectly expose the survivor, omit specific details.

✘ Don't do this



Avoid reporting elements that could lead to public identification of either party.

Special Considerations in Legal Cases

When legal matters such as divorce, child custody, or criminal proceedings are involved, journalists must take extra precautions to ensure fairness, privacy, and legal integrity.



Avoid Reporting on Active Legal Cases:

✘ Don't do this



Refrain from covering ongoing judicial proceedings, especially those related to divorce, child custody, or domestic disputes.



Public reporting on such cases can jeopardize fairness, compromise legal outcomes, and endanger the safety and privacy of those involved.



No Interviews with Involved Parties:

✘ Don't do this



Do not conduct interviews or seek statements from any party while the case is actively ongoing.



Engaging with either side could introduce bias into reporting and potentially influence the case's outcome.



Use Accurate Legal Terminology:

✔ Do this



When covering criminal cases, adhere to terminology as defined by the Criminal Proceedings Code.



Use terms like **"suspect,"** **"defendant,"** **"accused,"** or **"convicted"** based on legal status.

✘ Don't do this



Avoid subjective or misleading language, such as **"alleged"** or **"wrongly accused,"** as these can imply judgment before a court ruling.

3.2 Crafting Sensitive Headlines

Headlines should adhere to the ethical guidelines outlined for reporting on VAWG (above), and require even further attention as they are the most visible part of an article, often being the only thing readers engage with. Even if the content is handled sensitively, an inappropriate headline can undermine the entire piece.

✘ Don't do this



Avoid sensationalism:

Ensure headlines reflect the seriousness of the issue without sensationalizing the violence.



Avoid shock and surprise:

Do not frame the headline in a way that expresses astonishment, as this can downplay the prevalence of such violence and its societal context.

Effective headlines on VAWG must avoid sensationalist language such as "brutal," "horrid," "shocking," "horror," and similar terms.

✔ Do this



Preserve survivor dignity:

Headlines must always prioritize the dignity and respect of the survivor.

3.3 Avoiding Victim-Blaming or Condoning Perpetrators' Actions

When reporting on VAWG, it is essential to avoid diminishing the severity of the violence, blaming the survivor, or condoning the perpetrator's actions. Reports must not downplay violence or cast doubt on the survivor's credibility. Instead, journalists should use language that holds the perpetrator accountable and respects the survivor's experience.

✘ Don't do this



Do not diminish or ridicule violence:

Reports should never trivialize or romanticize violence, nor cast doubt on the survivor's honesty. The language used must reflect the seriousness of the act and the survivor's reality. Avoid terms that suggest violence is part of a romantic relationship or merely a product of jealousy. Violence, including femicide followed by the perpetrator's suicide, must not be framed as a "tragic love story," but rather as an expression of power, control, and ultimate violence.

✘ Don't do this



Do not equate violence with arguments or domestic problems:

Violence is not an argument or a marital problem. An argument involves mutual engagement without fear, while violence is about power, inequality, and control, often leaving the survivor in fear of consequences. Reports should clearly distinguish between the two, avoiding language that suggests they are comparable.



Avoid downplaying so-called "minor" forms of violence:

Sexual harassment is a serious criminal offense and should never be confused with harmless flirting or excused by cultural or societal norms. All forms of VAWG must be reported with the seriousness they deserve.

✔ Do this



Hold the perpetrator accountable:

The language used should clearly identify the perpetrator's responsibility. Avoid passive constructions like "she was raped"; instead, use active phrasing such as "he raped her." Avoid using terms like "alleged" when discussing the crime—reporting should focus on the facts without casting doubt on the survivor's experience (e.g., "he was arrested for reported rape," not "he was arrested for alleged rape").



Challenge justifications of violence:

Violence should never be justified by external circumstances or the perpetrator's characteristics, such as mental illness, addiction, or socioeconomic factors. Similarly, public figures or influential personalities should not be excused for their actions because of their status. Always reinforce that violence is a choice made by the perpetrator, regardless of their personal background or circumstances.



Handle unproven cases with care:

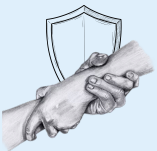
Even if a perpetrator is not convicted, this does not mean that the violence did not occur. This is particularly true in cases of sexual violence, which are often challenging to prove. Reports must balance the presumption of innocence with a recognition that the lack of a conviction does not automatically render the survivor's story false. Survivors should never be labeled as liars.

✓ Do this



Be mindful of how sexual violence is reported and avoid euphemisms:

Avoid presenting sexual violence as an issue tied to the use of force. Lack of physical resistance does not equate to consent, as many survivors experience a "freeze" response. Emphasizing the need for proof of force minimizes the true nature of sexual violence and further victimizes survivors who may not have been able to defend themselves. Even when physical injuries are absent, survivors of sexual violence should never be described as "unharmful." Sexual violence is a severe crime with deep psychological consequences, and every survivor deserves recognition of the trauma they've endured.



Respect the survivor's subjective experience:

Especially with sexual violence, the survivor's feelings and experience should guide the narrative. This is particularly important for sexual harassment, which depends entirely on the survivor's perception.

3.4 Avoid Stereotypes, Ensure Dignity

✗ Don't do this



Avoid stereotypical depictions:

Describing survivors as always visibly distressed, crying, or showing physical signs of violence reinforces harmful stereotypes. This is especially problematic in cases of psychological, economic, or sexual violence, where the impact may not be immediately visible. Each woman responds to violence in her own way, and assuming a universal reaction can mislead the audience.



Avoid graphic details of violence:

Refrain from including specific or explicit descriptions of violent acts, such as the details of a femicide, or irrelevant statements from interviewees. Providing graphic descriptions disrespects the dignity of the survivor or victim and risks placing the audience in a voyeuristic role. Do not describe how the murder was committed, the exact location, or other explicit details that could sensationalize the crime or cause distress to readers. The emphasis should always remain on the broader issue of violence rather than the gruesome specifics. Additionally, graphic depictions can unintentionally inspire copycat behavior among potential perpetrators.

✓ Do this



Respect survivors' dignity:

Do not describe survivors as “poor” or “unfortunate.” Such depictions strip them of their dignity and reduce them solely to their victimhood. Violence is just one aspect of their lives, and media coverage should uplift and empower survivors, motivating them to seek help, rather than portraying them as helpless or pitiable.

On Visuals

When selecting visual materials to accompany VAWG stories, it is crucial to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or retraumatizing survivors. When choosing visual materials, always prioritize content that respects the dignity of survivors, avoids glorifying violence, and prevents retraumatization for anyone with similar experiences. Consider the following best practices:

✓ Do this



Steer clear of violent reenactments:

Simulations of violence, such as images depicting a woman being physically threatened by a man, should be avoided. Even if these scenes are staged, they can retraumatize survivors and perpetuate the image of women as powerless victims, rather than highlighting their strength or recovery.



Respect privacy on social media:

Do not use images from the social media profiles of survivors, perpetrators, or their families. These images can fuel harmful commentary, expose survivors to further risk, and violate their privacy. Such content also risks encouraging a culture of violence through public reactions.



Opt for symbolic or empowering visuals:

Instead of focusing on depictions of violence, choose illustrations or animations that reflect the survivor's emotional experience or resilience. For example, visuals can portray a woman with a determined gaze, standing tall, or holding her child protectively.

✓ Do this



Consider alternatives to photographs:

Not every report requires a photograph or video. Infographics, statistical charts, or images from protests and advocacy events can effectively convey information without retraumatizing the audience. Images like handcuffs, police vehicles, or legal symbols (e.g., a judge's gavel) can also be used to shift focus to justice and accountability.



Expert visuals are preferable:

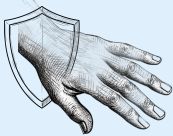
Where relevant, use images of experts, advocates, or other trusted sources involved in the story to add credibility and context without exposing survivors or exploiting their experiences.

✗ Don't do this



Avoid identifying survivors or their families:

Under no circumstances should photographs or videos reveal the identity of survivors, their families, or those close to them. This includes any visual cues that could inadvertently expose their identities.



Do not use images of women or girls with visible injuries:

Photos showing bruises or other signs of physical harm contribute to the misconception that violence is only physical. This undermines awareness of other forms of abuse, such as psychological, sexual, and economic violence, and can retraumatize both survivors and the audience.



Avoid placing the perpetrator and survivor side by side:

Visuals that position the perpetrator and survivor together, such as in a montage, can create a false equivalence and romanticize their relationship. This can cause further distress to survivors and mislead the public about the power dynamics of abuse.

Reporting on Femicides

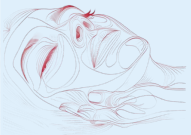
Femicide, as the most extreme form of gender-based violence, requires in-depth and context-driven reporting.

✓ Do this



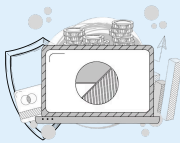
Investigate prior reports of violence:

Before reporting on a femicide, research whether there were prior reports of violence and how institutions responded. This allows for a more complete picture of the situation and can highlight systemic issues in preventing and addressing violence against women.



Contextualize femicide within a broader narrative of violence:

Even if prior violence was not reported, it is crucial to explain that femicide is always the final and most brutal stage of ongoing violence. Providing this context helps readers understand that the murder was not an isolated incident, but the culmination of a pattern of abuse.



Highlight the known risk factors for femicide:

Include data on risk factors associated with femicide, such as the abuser's jealousy, possessiveness, the victim's decision to leave the abuser, and the presence of firearms. These risk factors are often indicators of heightened danger, and their inclusion can help inform public understanding.

✗ Don't do this



Avoid expressing surprise if there were no prior reports:

If it is the case, do not stress the fact that the victim did not report earlier instances of violence. This can implicitly place blame on the victim for not seeking help, while the focus should remain on the perpetrator and systemic failures.

Reporting on Violence Against Girls

✓ Do this



Children of survivors:

In reporting on violence against mothers, always acknowledge that children of survivors, whether directly or indirectly, are survivors of violence.



Safeguarding identities:

Be cautious when sharing details. Never disclose information that could lead to a child's identification. While general details, such as the number of children or their age range, may be shared, avoid specific identifiers like initials, addresses, schools, or the names of relatives. These can inadvertently expose their identity.

✗ Don't do this



Avoiding harmful stereotypes:

Avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes, such as the notion that "children need both parents." What children truly need are caregivers and environments that are free from violence. Similarly, it is critical to avoid framing violence as natural part of a child's upbringing or education, as this perpetuates harmful narratives.



Shielding children:

Refrain from interviewing children, even if a parent or guardian consents. Given the sensitivity of their situation and vulnerability, it is crucial to protect them from potential harm or retraumatization.

Reporting on VAWG Committed by Women

✓ Do this



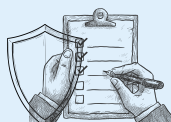
Acknowledge Women as Perpetrators:

Report on women who have committed VAWG without hesitation. Follow the same guidelines for accuracy and sensitivity, but always note that men overwhelmingly constitute the majority of perpetrators in domestic and intimate partner violence cases, while women are predominantly the victims. Use reliable, up-to-date national or global statistics to reinforce this context.



Examine Underlying Causes:

Understand that a woman's violent behavior is often a reaction to violence she has endured. Always investigate if she has been subjected to abuse, and gather information to provide context for the case.



In-depth examination:

If a woman has killed her partner, thoroughly investigate whether the partner was an abuser. This detail is crucial in understanding the full scope of the situation.

3.5 Ensuring Consistency

✓ Do this



Ensure Regular Coverage:

Approach VAWG as an ongoing issue, not one to be covered only occasionally or on specific dates like International Women's Day or during campaigns like the 16 Days of Activism. Consistent reporting helps keep the topic visible year-round. Collaborate with journalist unions and advocacy groups to maintain this coverage, ensuring the issue remains on the public agenda.

✓ **Do this**

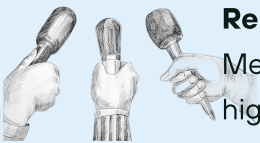


Track and Follow Cases:

When covering specific incidents of violence, provide a complete narrative by following the case from the initial report through to its conclusion, including the legal outcome. Reporting on the trial process and the penalties imposed on perpetrators is vital. This reinforces the message that violence is unacceptable, punishable by law, and that justice is served. In particular, femicide cases often receive initial attention, but it is crucial to continue reporting on legal consequences to highlight accountability.

3.6 Awareness-raising

✓ **Do this**



Report on the broader phenomenon, not just isolated cases:

Media coverage should extend beyond individual instances of violence and highlight the larger issue of VAWG. This includes framing the problem within its broader societal context to help prevent future violence and educate the public. The media can build trust with survivors and amplify their stories, contributing to shifts in public opinion and greater understanding of the issue.



Fulfilling an educational role:

Every report on VAWG should serve an educational purpose. Journalists should make use of statistical data to illustrate the prevalence of violence and explain the root causes behind this societal problem. Whenever possible, reports should be supported by insights from experts—whether from government bodies or civil society—who can contextualize each case and provide a broader understanding of the issue.



Deterrence and Public Awareness:

Comprehensive coverage of legal outcomes helps prevent future violence by showing that offenders are held accountable. It also shapes public opinion, increasing awareness of the seriousness of VAWG and the importance of protecting survivors.

✓ Do this



Incorporate expert analysis and contextual information:

When reporting on specific incidents, it is essential to consult and include statements from experts on violence against women. This not only provides context but also prevents sensationalism. Experts can explain the dynamics of abuse and its warning signs, helping readers or viewers understand the issue at a deeper level.



Highlight key risk factors for fatal outcomes:

When reporting on cases of domestic violence, draw attention to key factors that increase the likelihood of femicide:



Jealousy or possessiveness on the part of the abuser



The period when the woman decides to leave or report the abuser, which is statistically the most dangerous time for her.



Jealousy or possessiveness on the part of the abuser



Provide referrals for survivors in media pieces:

In addition to referring survivors interviewed to appropriate services, journalists should ensure their coverage of VAWG stories should include information on where survivors can seek help. Contact details for local support organizations, shelters, and national hotlines should be consistently mentioned to ensure that survivors and those at risk know where to turn for assistance.



Action-oriented reporting:

Engage human rights defenders, legal experts, and psychologists to deepen the public understanding of VAWG and call for policy and social action in line with their analyses and recommendations.



ENSURING ACCURACY AND DEPTH

4.1 Providing Contextual Understanding and Ensuring Critical Analysis

- ✓ **Highlight Power Imbalances:** Emphasize that all acts of violence stem from unequal power dynamics, global patriarchy, and violent masculinities.
- ✗ **Reject Justifications Based on Culture or Religion:** Never excuse or justify violence by invoking cultural traditions, religious beliefs, or stereotypes tied to specific social groups. Violence is a result of power imbalances and should always be reported as such, regardless of who the perpetrator or survivor is.
- ✓ **Incorporate Societal, Cultural, and Legal Context:** Reporting on VAWG should include explanations of the societal norms, religious beliefs, and legal frameworks that shape both the prevalence of violence and how it is addressed. This helps the audience understand the systemic nature of the issue.
- ✓ **Examine Cultural and Societal Factors:** Investigate how cultural practices, gender roles, and societal expectations contribute to VAWG, without reinforcing harmful stereotypes or stigmatizing specific communities. Focus on the systemic factors that perpetuate violence while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

4.2 Research and Fact-Checking

- ✓ **Ensuring Accurate Information and Statistics:** When reporting on violence against women and girls, accuracy is paramount. Journalists must use reliable sources, verify all statistics, and take care not to spread misinformation, which can mislead the public and potentially cause harm.

Here are some key guidelines:

- ✓ **Verify information from multiple sources:** Ensure that any published information has been corroborated by at least two independent and credible sources. This helps maintain journalistic integrity and prevents the spread of false or misleading details.
- ✓ **Prioritize official and expert sources:** Whenever possible, rely on official sources such as the police, courts, prosecutor's offices, attorneys, and violence against women experts. These sources tend to provide more accurate and authoritative information.
- ✓ **Collaborate with Advocacy Groups:** Partner with advocacy organizations, legal experts, and VAWG specialists to enhance the accuracy and depth of reporting. These partnerships strengthen the knowledge base behind the stories.

4.3 Inclusive Reporting

- ✓ **Diversity:** When reporting on VAWG, it is essential to consider the perspectives of all affected groups. Journalists should strive to reflect the experiences of these groups without reinforcing harmful stereotypes or justifying violence based on cultural, religious, or social norms.
- ✓ **Intersectionality:** Women who belong to multiple marginalized groups—such as ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities, women with disabilities, or rural women—are at a higher risk of violence. Journalists should use relevant statistics to convey this reality and avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Reports should focus on the specific challenges these women face without reducing them to their marginalization.
- ✓ **Ensure accurate and respectful depictions of women with disabilities:** Avoid presenting women with disabilities as asexual or immune to violence. They, like all women, are vulnerable to various forms of violence, and this should be acknowledged. Depictions should not perpetuate stereotypes of passivity or dependency; instead, they should emphasize the dignity and humanity of these women.
- ✓ **Sensitive reporting on violence linked to cultural or religious practices:** When reporting on violence committed as a result of religious or cultural customs (such as arranged marriages, female genital mutilation, so-called corrective rape, or honor killings), journalists should gather comprehensive and accurate information about these practices. Reports should avoid sensationalism and ensure that coverage does not incite prejudice or exacerbate racial, nationalist, or religious tensions.

✘ **Avoid overemphasizing the perpetrator's background:** The ethnic, religious, or cultural background of the perpetrator should only be mentioned if it is directly relevant to the act of violence (e.g., if it is part of a practice or belief that led to the violence). Do not focus on or sensationalize the perpetrator's background by mentioning aspects like ethnicity, religion, or migration status if they are irrelevant to the crime.



VICARIOUS TRAUMA- AWARENESS AND SELF-CARE

- ✓ **Acknowledge the Emotional Toll:** Reporting on VAWG, especially in conflict areas, can be emotionally draining and triggering. Acknowledge your own feelings of distress, anger, or helplessness. It is normal to be affected by the stories you cover, but recognizing your emotional response is the first step to addressing it.
- ✓ **Set Emotional Boundaries:** While empathy is vital in storytelling, it's important to set emotional boundaries to protect yourself from becoming overwhelmed by the trauma of others. Establish clear distinctions between your professional responsibilities and personal life, taking breaks when needed to avoid emotional exhaustion.
- ✓ **Practice Grounding Techniques:** When you feel overwhelmed, use grounding techniques to stay present. Simple practices such as deep breathing, focusing on your immediate surroundings, or physical activities like walking can help you regain a sense of control in moments of stress.
- ✓ **Limit Exposure to Graphic Content:** Minimize your exposure to graphic details, images, or videos whenever possible. Repeatedly consuming such content can compound secondary trauma. If you must engage with it, ensure you're in a mentally safe space and take breaks to decompress.
- ✓ **Access Professional Support:** Consider seeking professional mental health support when dealing with particularly traumatic coverage. Many VAWG-dedicated organizations (Box 1) offer trauma counseling and support services. Accessing this kind of help can be an essential step toward maintaining mental well-being.
- ✓ **Debrief and Reflect:** After covering distressing stories, make time to debrief with colleagues, supervisors, or trusted friends. Reflecting on your experiences helps to process emotions and may offer valuable perspective. Peer support can remind you that you're not alone in navigating this challenging work.

- ✓ **Practice Self-Compassion:** Recognize that witnessing and reporting on trauma can lead to feelings of guilt or helplessness. Be kind to yourself and avoid self-criticism. Understand that you are playing a crucial role in bringing these stories to light, and no single individual can fix systemic problems on their own.

- ✓ **Create a Self-Care Routine:** Develop a regular self-care routine that includes activities you find soothing and restorative, such as reading, exercising, meditation, or creative hobbies. Maintaining a consistent routine can build resilience and help you recover more quickly from stressful assignments.

- ✓ **Stay Connected to Support Networks:** In conflict zones, isolation can heighten stress. Stay connected to loved ones, fellow journalists, or professional support networks. Regular communication helps you stay grounded and provides a sense of safety and solidarity.¹⁴

A stylized illustration of a woman with long black hair, wearing round white-rimmed glasses, a white button-down shirt, and a purple blazer. She is holding a blue pen in her right hand and an open book with a green cover in her left hand. The background behind her is a large yellow circle. The entire page has a colorful, abstract border with pink, blue, and yellow patterns.

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

6.1 Assessing Media Coverage

Assessing Media Coverage: To be most effective in covering VAWG, it is crucial to advocate for systematic monitoring and evaluation within your media outlet, journalist unions, or groups of fellow journalists.

Encourage them to consider the following guidelines for assessing your organization's coverage, or the broader media landscape in Burkina Faso.

This approach will ensure consistent, ethical, and impactful reporting that drives public awareness and fosters positive societal change.

To ensure a thorough evaluation of how media outlets are covering VAWG, it is essential to develop and track a set of clear, specific metrics. The below metrics can help gauge both the quantity and quality of reporting and offer insights into how the subject is being framed.

Evaluating Coverage Breadth

✓ **Frequency of Coverage:** Track how often stories about VAWG appear in media outlets.

Consider the following:

- * How many stories related to VAWG are being published or aired over a specific period (monthly, quarterly, or annually)?
- * Are stories only published around specific events or commemorative dates (e.g., International Women's Day, 16 Days of Activism), or is the issue being covered consistently throughout the year?
- * How frequently do stories from different media types (print, digital, broadcast) address the issue of VAWG?

✓ **Framing of Violence:** Analyze how VAWG is framed in the media. This refers to how the issue is presented and contextualized, influencing public perceptions and attitudes.

Key questions include:

- * Are VAWG incidents reported as isolated or sensationalized events, or are they connected to broader social, cultural, or systemic issues like gender inequality?
- * Is violence portrayed as a crime with societal implications, or is it framed in a way that trivializes or normalizes it?
- * Are causes of violence discussed, including underlying factors such as power imbalances, patriarchal norms, or conflict situations?

- * Are survivors empowered in the narrative, or are they portrayed primarily as victims without agency?

- ✓ **Diversity of Voices:** Evaluate how many different voices and perspectives are included in the coverage of VAWG

Particularly:

- * **Survivor Voices:** Are survivors given space to share their experiences in a respectful, trauma-informed manner? Is their privacy protected while telling their stories?
- * **Expert Input:** Are experts on gender-based violence, including activists, researchers, and legal professionals, consulted to provide context and analysis?
- * **Intersectionality:** Are voices from marginalized communities—such as women from different age groups, ethnicities, economic backgrounds, etc.—heard in the coverage?

Evaluating Coverage Depth

- ✓ **Contextual Reporting:** Does the coverage go beyond the incident itself to explore the societal, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to VAWG? For example, does it explore the role of poverty, education, conflict, or legal gaps in perpetuating violence against women and girls?
- ✓ **Follow-Up Reporting:** Are stories followed through from initial reports of violence to the outcomes, such as the legal processes, the support survivors receive, and the long-term impact on communities?
- ✓ **Solutions-Oriented Journalism:** Does the media highlight potential solutions to VAWG, such as prevention strategies, support services for survivors, and policy changes? Does it report on organizations working to address the issue, including NGOs, community groups, and international bodies?

6.2 Assessing Audience Engagement

- * **Audience Engagement:** Track reader/viewer engagement through comments, shares, and discussions. Are readers engaging thoughtfully with the coverage? Are articles sparking meaningful conversations around gender-based violence, prevention, and policy?
- * **Changes in Public Perception:** Conduct surveys or studies to assess shifts in public attitudes toward VAWG over time. Does the media coverage contribute to increased awareness of VAWG as a systemic issue rather than an isolated problem? Are readers more aware of legal protections for women and the support services available?
- * **Policy and Advocacy Influence:** Is media coverage leading to tangible changes, such as increased advocacy efforts, policy reforms, or community-based initiatives to combat VAWG?

Responsible Social Media Engagement

When covering VAWG through online media, invest the necessary resources and care in managing the audience's response, particularly in the comment sections of articles and on social media platforms.

Here are some guidelines:

- ✓ **Social media platforms require close moderating:** For platforms like Facebook and YouTube, it is crucial to have moderators carefully manage comments on posts related to violence. Avoid posting sensitive content on platforms such as Twitter, where moderation tools are limited, unless you have a dedicated team member who can actively manage and address harmful comments, including removing or blocking inappropriate users.
- ✗ **Consider disabling comments:** Allowing comments can lead to harmful remarks, including secondary victimization and retraumatization. Such comments may affect not only the survivor in the story but also other women who have experienced similar violence, potentially discouraging them from reporting their own abusers.
- ✓ **Be prepared for direct outreach from survivors:** It's possible that survivors may reach out through comments or direct messages. Make sure moderators are trained on how to handle these cases and are equipped with referral information for appropriate support services to direct survivors to the help they need



AWIM VAWG MEDIA COVERAGE TOOLKIT - ADDITIONAL TOOLS

Annex 1: Glossary of Terms

Femicides

Femicides, the intentional killing of women, represent the most extreme and deadly form of violence against women and girls (VAWG – defined below). Their gravity is amplified by their widespread occurrence, which underscores a global failure to protect women from systemic VAWG. Often, these killings are perpetrated by intimate partners or family members, driven by motives of power, control, or perceived violations of societal norms surrounding women's behavior.¹⁵

Gender Bias

Prejudiced actions or thoughts based on the gender-based perception that women are not equal to men in rights and dignity.¹⁶

Such biases may be implicit, involving automatic and unconscious prejudiced judgments and behaviors toward women. Gender bias often manifests through stereotyped thinking about the roles of women and men, devaluing "women's work," and lacking awareness of the social and economic realities of different genders. Studies show that implicit sexism affects various domains: women are interviewed more critically, interrupted more often, and face difficulties in leadership roles due to perceived incongruence between femininity and leadership. Hiring practices frequently display bias, with male candidates often favored and job advertisements using male-associated words being less appealing to women.¹⁷

Gender Norms

Standards and expectations to which women and men generally conform, within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community at that point in time.¹⁸

Misogyny

Feelings of hating women, or the belief that men are superior to women.¹⁹

Patriarchy

Social system in which men hold the greatest power, leadership roles, privilege, moral authority and access to resources and land, including in the family. Most modern societies are patriarchies.²⁰

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a mental health condition that can arise after experiencing or witnessing traumatic events. Survivors of violence against women may suffer from PTSD due to enduring physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the traumatic event. For women, PTSD is often compounded by feelings of shame, guilt, and fear, which can deeply affect their personal and professional lives. Women who experience gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence or sexual assault, are at an increased risk of developing PTSD.²¹ The disorder can have long-lasting effects, leading to emotional numbness, difficulty forming relationships, and a constant sense of danger, known as hypervigilance. Understanding PTSD in the context of violence against women requires recognizing how trauma affects not only the mind but also the body and social relationships, impacting the survivor's sense of safety and autonomy.²²

Safety and Wellbeing

Violence, whether physical, psychological, or economic, can significantly impact women's health, both in their personal and professional lives. These experiences often lead to mental and physical health issues, such as low self-esteem, guilt, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and in some cases, self-destructive behavior.²³ The latter may induce further financial and psychosomatic damage. However, survivors' safety and wellbeing shouldn't be solely measured by the absence of abuse or mental disorders. AWiM considers mental health a fundamental right for women, including journalists, emphasizing the need for safe, confidential, and non-discriminatory access to mental health services in workplaces. Mental health is defined as a state that enables individuals to manage life's challenges, reach their potential, and contribute to their communities.²⁴

From an intersectional feminist perspective (explained in the following section), the safety of WJs encompasses physical, psychological, and professional security. It requires protection from violence, harassment, and discrimination, which can arise from intersecting identities such as gender, race, age, and socio-economic status. Ensuring their safety involves addressing violence and broader power dynamics that perpetuate structural inequalities.²⁵

Sexual coercion

The exertion of undue pressure, influence, or power by someone in a position of authority—such as an employer, editor, senior colleague, or information source—through harassment, subtle manipulation techniques, intimidation, or threats, to compel someone (typically a woman) to engage in sexual activity. In the context of journalism, this often involves leveraging professional opportunities or career advancement to manipulate women into believing they owe sexual favors in return. This abuse of power is a severe form of sexual harassment and exploitation.²⁶

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. While typically involving a pattern of behaviour, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders.

Survivors

The term "survivor" refers to any woman or girl having experienced violence. While synonymous with the term "victim," "survivor" is preferred because it invokes a notion of resilience, whereas the term "victim" can be stigmatizing, suggesting passivity and weakness.

ANNEX 2: USEFUL RESOURCES

Below is a list of manuals, reports, guidelines, and websites providing further guidance for improved media coverage.

- * COFEM. 2024. "A joyful Self-Care Toolkit," Nourishing Feminist Tools.

- * Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.
See: <https://vawnet.org/publisher/dart-center-journalism-and-trauma>

- * Internews. 2021. "Speak Up, Speak Out: A Toolkit for Journalists Reporting on Gender and Human Rights Issues"

- * International Federation of Journalists Guidelines for Reporting on Violence Against Women.
See: https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Guidelines_for_Reporting_on_Violence_Against_Women_EN.pdf

- * International Center For Journalists. 2022. The Chilling: A Global Study On Online Violence Against Women Journalists.
See: <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/chilling-global-study-online-violence-against-women-journalists>

- * United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime. 2009. Knowledge Tools for Academics and Professionals. Module 9: Gender Dimensions of Ethics.
See: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/integrity-ethics/module-9/key-issues/forms-of-gender-discrimination.html>

- * United Nations Women Training Center. 2016. Self-Learning Booklet: Understanding United Nations Development Programme. 2021. Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women by the group Journalists against Violence against Women.

- * FSN Network. Self-learning Booklet: Understanding Masculinities and Violence against Women and Girls.
See: <https://fsnnetwork.org/resource/self-learning-booklet-understanding-masculinities-and-violence-against-women-and-girls>

LIST OF REFERENCES

- * Africa United Nations Women. "What We Do to: Ending Violence Against Women".
See: <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence-1>

- * American Psychiatric Association. 2024. "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?"
See: <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>

- * Antai, Diddy & Oke, Ayo & Braithwaite, Patrick & Lopez, Gerald. (2014). The Effect of Economic, Physical, and Psychological Abuse on Mental Health: A Population-Based Study of Women in the Philippines. *International journal of family medicine*. 2014. 852317. 10.1155/2014/852317

- * Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. 2020. Violence against women and mental health (ANROWS Insights, 04/2020). Sydney: ANROWS

- * CNV Internationaal. 2023. Break the silence in Benin. See:
<https://www.cnvinternationaal.nl/en/topical/stories/the-history-of-ligne-verte>

- * COFEM. 2024. "A joyful Self-Care Toolkit," Nourishing Feminist Tools.

- * Mechanic, Mindy B. 2024. "Beyond PTSD: mental health consequences of violence against women: a response to Briere and Jordan," *J Interpers Violence* 19(11):1283-9. doi: 10.1177/0886260504270690.

- * Medica Mondiale. Violence Against Women Causes and Consequences.
See: <https://medicamondiale.org/en/violence-against-women/causes-and-consequences>

- * Michael G. Wessells; Kathleen Kostelny. The Psychosocial Impacts of Intimate Partner Violence against Women in LMIC Contexts: Toward a Holistic Approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2022, 19, 14488.

- * United Nations General Assembly Resolution 48/104. 1993. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women
See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>

- * United Nations Women. "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women."
See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

- * United Nations Women Training Center. 2016. The Self-Learning Booklet: Masculinities and Violence against Women and Girls.
See: <https://portal.trainingcentre.unwomen.org/resource-centre/entry/46990/>
- * United Nations Development Programme. 2021. Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women by the group Journalists against Violence against Women.
- * Romito, P., Pellegrini, M., Marchand-Martin, L. & Saurel-Cubizolles, M. 2022. L'impact des violences conjugales sur la santé psychologique des femmes. *Empan*, 128, 3949. <https://doi.org/10.3917/empa.128.0039>
- * World Bank. 2023. For Women and girls in Benin, multi-faceted gender reforms offer new opportunities. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/03/01/for-women-and-girls-in-benin-multi-faceted-gender-reforms-offer-new-opportunities>
- * World Health Organisation. 2022. Mental Health.
See: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>