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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Work Ethics and Accountability

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: MEDIA

Module No. 2

by: Hochschule Wismar

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1. Why this subject matters

"As journalism impacts public opinion and democracy, work ethics and accountability are essential to ensure that news reporting is reliable, fair, and socially responsible.

When journalism relates to report gender-based violence (GBV), media coverage is a powerful tool that can either challenge or reinforce the structural norms that enable violence.

Journalism in this field requires transforming coverage from treating gender-based violence (GBV) as a "private tragedy" to recognizing it as a public human rights violation, thereby challenging systemic inequality rather than reinforcing it.

The competence in work ethics and accountability for reporting on gender-based violence (GBV), that revolves around a survivor-centered approach, helps prioritize safety, privacy, and dignity over sensationalism. Therefore, the competence in work ethics and accountability in journalism form the foundation of professional integrity. ”

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2. Learning Outcomes



01

Identify and apply core ethical principles in journalism—specifically seeking the truth, minimizing harm, and maintaining independence—when reporting on gender-based violence, moving away from viewing it as a "private tragedy" to recognizing it as a systemic human rights violation.

02

Navigate ethical dilemmas and problem-based situations in the newsroom, balancing the public's right to information with the imperative to prioritize survivor dignity, safety, and a trauma-informed, survivor-centered approach.

03

Demonstrate professional accountability by adopting transparent editorial practices, which include recognizing implicit biases (such as "himpathy" or victim-blaming), taking responsibility for the social impact of news framing, and proactively exposing unethical conduct or correcting mistakes.

3. Definition

Work ethics define the moral principles that guide a journalist's daily behavior, such as seeking the truth and minimizing harm.

Accountability refers to the responsibility of journalists and media organizations to explain their decisions, correct mistakes, and be answerable to the public.

Work ethics and accountability are inter-connected: if a journalist or a media organization is a responsible person or actor, the performance of a journalist or media organization is professional and ethical.

4. Psychological and neurolinguistic mechanisms

Table 2: *Mechanisms of the competence in work ethics and accountability*

Competence elements	Sub-elements	Description
Work ethics	Do No Harm (Prioritizing Safety)	The paramount ethical duty is to avoid putting survivors in further danger of stigma or retaliation. This includes securing informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting anonymity.
	Survivor-Centered Approach	Journalists must respect the autonomy of survivors, allowing them to control the pace of interviews, choose the interviewer's gender, and decide which details to share.
	Avoiding Sensationalism & Blame	Ethical reporting avoids dramatized details, graphic images, or language that implies victim-blaming (e.g., questioning "why she stayed").
	Context and Systemic Focus	Rather than isolating incidents, journalists should explain the root causes, such as patriarchal norms, inequality, and lack of justice access.
	Language and Terminology	Using precise, respectful language—such as "survivor" instead of "victim" and "perpetrator" instead of "abuser"—is essential.
Accountability	Fact-Checking and Accuracy	Journalists must verify information using official crime, health, or judicial data, avoiding speculative or emotional phrasing.
	Holding Perpetrators Responsible	Accountability means focusing on the actions of the perpetrator, not the behavior of the victim.
	Internal Editorial Policies	Media organizations should establish clear guidelines for reporting, including internal ethics committees to review content.
	Providing Resources	Ethical reporting includes listing helplines, support services, and legal aid in all stories to directly assist other survivors.
	Training and Education	Journalists should undergo regular training on trauma-informed interviewing and the legal frameworks surrounding gender-based violence (GBV).

5. Typical errors in journalistic practice

Table 3 presents the overview of typical errors in journalist practice and reports related to gender-based violence.

Table 3: *Typical errors in journalist practice*

Typical key error	Error dimension	Description
Victim-Blaming and Misplaced Sympathy	Shifting Responsibility	Headlines and stories often implicitly blame survivors by asking why they did not leave, focusing on their actions, or highlighting their clothing, alcohol consumption, or behavior.
	"Himpathy"	Reporting often expresses sympathy for the perpetrator, focusing on how the crime has "ruined" their life, rather than the impact on the victim.
	Doubting Accounts	Reports may question the honesty or reliability of the victim's account, particularly in sexual assault cases.
Inappropriate Language and Euphemisms	Trivializing Violence	Using terms like "family dispute," "domestic incident," or "marital dispute" minimizes the reality of the crime.
	Passive Wording	Using passive voice (e.g., "she was raped") instead of active voice (e.g., "he raped her") hides the perpetrator's responsibility and makes the violence seem inevitable.
	Romanticizing Motives	Describing violence as a "crime of passion" or resulting from "jealous rage" excuses the perpetrator's actions.
Sensationalism and Inaccuracy	Graphic Detailing	Excessive focus on gory details, blood, or sexual violence can turn a serious crime into a spectacle or entertainment.
	Stereotypical Imagery	Relying on photos of women with bruises, crying, or in despair to represent all forms of abuse.
	Misidentifying Victims	In sexual assault cases, failing to protect the identity of the victim can lead to further trauma.

Lack of Context and Understanding	Isolated Incidents	Reporting GBV as a one-off "tragedy" rather than a widespread, systemic issue rooted in patriarchy and unequal power dynamics.
	Focus on Extreme Cases	Prioritizing homicides or rare, violent cases over more common, subtle forms of abuse, such as coercive control or stalking.
	Ignoring Non-Physical Abuse	Neglecting to report on psychological, economic, or digital violence.
Improper Sourcing and Framing	Ignoring Experts	Failing to interview domestic violence experts, advocates, or those with lived experience.
	Neglecting Safety Info	Failing to include resources or hotlines for those seeking help.
Misrepresentation of Perpetrators	"Monster" Tropes	Characterizing perpetrators as anomalies or "monsters" rather than as individuals operating within a permissive society, which obscures the systemic nature of the violence.
	Excuse Making	Attributing violence to the perpetrator having "snapped," using drugs/alcohol, or having mental health issues without proper context.



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6. Impact on media narratives on gender-based violence

Table 4 outlines typical errors' impact on media narratives and public perception.

Table 4: *Errors' impact on media narratives*

Impact	Description
Normalization of Violence	Consistent exposure to stereotypic and sensationalized reporting can lead society to accept gender-based violence (GBV) as an inevitable occurrence rather than a preventable crime.
Reduced Survivor Reporting	When media outlets publish insensitive or harmful coverage, it can discourage survivors from coming forward due to fear of being blamed or re-traumatized by public scrutiny.
Reinforcement of "Rape Myths"	Framing cases as incidents committed only by "strangers in dark alleys" obscures the reality that most violence is committed by known individuals, leading to a false sense of security and misplaced blame.
Policy and Legal Response	The way media frames GBV can influence government action; purely sensationalized narratives may lead to "hopelessness" rather than demanding accountability and systemic policy changes.
Shaping Gender Norms	Media narratives influence what society expects from men and women, often demeaning those who oppose violence or take on caring roles, thus entrenching patriarchal structures.



7. Positive Reframing

Table 5 reflects positive reframing of work ethics and accountability in media narratives on gender-based violence.

Table 5: *Ethical and responsible reporting about gender-based violence*

Competence	Skill	Description
Work ethics	Seek Truth and Report It	Journalists must verify information before releasing it, provide context to avoid misrepresentation, and update information throughout the life of a story.
	Minimize Harm	Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. This includes showing compassion for victims of crime and avoiding unnecessary intrusiveness.
	Act Independently	Journalists must avoid conflicts of interest, refuse gifts, and resist internal/external pressures to influence coverage.
	Fairness and Impartiality	Reporting should be objective, balanced, and unbiased, giving voice to diverse perspectives.
	Respect for Privacy	Balancing the public's right to know with an individual's right to privacy is a critical ethical challenge.
Accountability	Correcting Mistakes	Mistakes should be acknowledged and corrected promptly and prominently.
	Transparency	Journalists should explain their ethical choices and processes to their audience, such as why a source was granted anonymity.
	Audience Engagement	Openness to criticism and maintaining a dialogue with the public about coverage is crucial for building trust.
	Exposing Unethical Conduct	Journalists are expected to hold themselves and their peers to the same high standards, including exposing misconduct within their own organizations.
Profession	Building Credibility	Consistent adherence to ethics and accountability is the primary way journalists earn trust.
	Defending Democracy	Ethical journalism serves as a watchdog over government and public affairs.
	Combating Misinformation	In the digital age, rigorous fact-checking is necessary to combat the rapid spread of "fake news".



8. Case study

Music professor to stand trial on sex abuse charges (adapted from LSM.lv)

In Latvia, the problem of sexual harassment in higher education institutions was raised in 2024 by the LTV program "Culture Shock", which had access to testimonies from seven JVLMA (the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music) students about the actions of individual lecturers.

Two lecturers at the Latvian Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts were suspended for alleged harassment of female students. One of them is the head of the Department of Early Music, Māris Kupčs, born in 1966, who sued the academy. The Riga Regional Court ordered his reinstatement. The other lecturer is Rolands Kronlaks, born in 1973. The court also ordered his reinstatement after he was suspended.

In March 2024, the JVLMA Council expressed no confidence in JVLMA rector Guntars Prānis, calling for his resignation. A month later, Prānis announced his resignation. Ilona Meija was elected as the new rector of JVLMA.
The Ministry of Culture has called on students of the academy who have been victims of sexual harassment by lecturers to submit whistleblower applications.

Questions for discussion:

1. The LTV (Latvian Television) program "Culture Shock" reported about testimonies from seven JVLMA (the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music) students. Is these journalists' report accountable? Please, explain your opinion.

2. In line with standard practice, the prosecutor of the Riga District Prosecutor's Office has not named the accused individual during the interview with journalists, but Latvian Television has learned and reported the name of the accused (Māris Kupčs, a suspended professor of the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music (JVLMA). Is it ethical to provide the name of the accused (not yet sentenced) in media? Note: A sentence shows that the person is proved to be guilty in a crime while an accused person is under investigation which has not finished yet. Please, justify your choice.

3. Journalists published the call of the Ministry of Culture for whistleblower applications from students of the academy who had been victims of sexual harassment by lecturers. Is it ethical that journalists support the submission of whistleblower applications to the Ministry of Culture but not to the Police or similar organizations? Please, provide your explanation.

9. Practical Exercises

01

Quiz: Ethical Concepts in Gender-Based Violence

Objective: to revise some aspects of ethical concepts on gender-based violence in media and to update skills for active participation in qiuzzes

Duration: 10 minutes.

Materials: quiz
Instructions (step-by-step):
Please, answer the quiz questions:

Quiz: Ethical Concepts in Gender-Based Violence

Question n. 1
Which of the following best describes the ethical requirement of a "survivor-centered approach" in GBV response?

1. The service provider makes decisions that they believe are in the best interest of the survivor's safety, regardless of the survivor's input.
2. The survivor's rights, needs, and wishes are prioritized, making them the primary decision-maker in their own care and recovery.
3. The community's cultural norms and family unity are prioritized over individual grievances.
4. The immediate arrest and legal prosecution of the perpetrator are prioritized above all other considerations.

- *Correct answer: B*. This honors the survivor's autonomy and agency, ensuring they are treated as an active participant rather than a passive victim.

Question n.2

A frontline worker breaks confidentiality to tell a survivor's family about an incident of abuse without the survivor's explicit consent, arguing it was "for her own protection." Which core ethical principle of GBV response has been violated?

1. Autonomy and respect
2. Non-maleficence (Do no harm)
3. Confidentiality
4. All of the above

- *Correct answer: D*. Breaking confidentiality without consent violates autonomy (the right to choose), confidentiality (the right to privacy), and non-maleficence (putting the survivor at risk of retaliatory violence).

Question n.3

What ethical framework is severely violated by the practice of "survivor-blaming" (e.g., claiming a person's dress or behavior caused the violence)?

1. Distributive justice, because resources are not allocated fairly.
2. Moral accountability, by falsely shifting the ethical responsibility of a choice from the perpetrator to the victim.
3. Utilitarianism, because it fails to maximize the happiness of the community.
4. Deontology, because it does not follow strict legal codes.

- *Correct answer: B*. Ethical accountability dictates that the person committing the action is solely responsible for it. Survivor-blaming removes moral agency and accountability from the perpetrator.

Question n.4

Under the GBV guiding principles, when is it ethically permissible to breach a survivor's confidentiality without their explicit consent?

1. When a close family member demands to know what happened to maintain family honor.
2. When the perpetrator is a prominent public figure and the community deserves to know.
3. Only when there is an immediate, life-threatening risk to the survivor or others, or if local laws mandate reporting for specific populations like children.
   Never, under any circumstances, even if life is in imminent danger.

- *Correct answer: C*. The ethical principle of beneficence and saving life overrides confidentiality only during an imminent threat of severe harm or death, or under strict legal mandates regarding child protection.

Question n. 5

Ensuring that GBV services are accessible to all individuals regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, or disability status fulfills which ethical pillar?

1. Non-discrimination
2. Retributive justice
3. Paternalism
4. Informed consent

- *Correct answer: A.* Non-discrimination is a core humanitarian and ethical pillar ensuring equal right to protection and care for all human beings.

How many of your responses were correct? How many of them were false?

Please, reflect if the questions were difficult to answer or not?

Expected Output: revised knowledge on work ethics and accountability in media on gender-based violence

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- How are work ethics and accountability inter-connected?
- What are typical errors in media on gender-based violence?
- How do work ethics and accountability impact media on gender-based violence?



02

"Journalist's Report on Gender-Based Violence"

Objective: to improve report writing skills
Duration: 90 minutes
Materials: paper and pencil or computer
Instructions (step-by-step):

1. Choose a media you wish to present your report
2. Formulate a title related to gender-based violence
3. Identify your readers – target audience, remember about the obstacle – the editor (newspaper, social media, etc) who has his/her own opinion about gender-based violence
4. Formulate what, to whom and why you wish to share in your report
5. Introduction in Report: write about an event or a fact. If possible, indicate date and time.
6. 2nd paragraph:
7. a detailed description of an event or a fact;
8. impact of the event or fact;
9. alternative interpretation of the event or fact
10. 3rd paragraph: opinions about the event or fact
11. The closing part: less important details about the event or fact

Expected Output: a written Report on gender-based violence in an ethical and accountable manner

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- How to formulate a title of the report on gender-based violence in an ethical and accountable manner?
- What is the structure of a report?
- What is the difference between target audience and the editor?

03

The Ethical Quiz: Principles in Action

Objective: To test the understanding of core ethical principles (Do No Harm, Survivor-Centered Approach, Accountability).

Duration: 15 minutes.

Materials: Pen and paper.

Instructions (step-by-step):
Read the following scenarios and choose the most ethical journalistic action. Scenario A: You discover the identity of a survivor who wishes to remain anonymous, but her story would make your article go viral. Do you publish her name? (Ethical principle tested: Minimize Harm vs. Sensationalism).
Scenario B: A perpetrator of GBV is described by neighbors as a "great father." Do you include this in the headline? (Ethical principle tested: Accountability and avoiding 'Himpathy').
Discuss your answers in pairs, referring to the ethical pillars outlined in Chapter 07.

Expected Output: Enhanced critical thinking regarding daily editorial choices.

Debriefing: Why is ethical journalism often about what you choose not to publish rather than what you publish?

Checklist time!

Before submitting a story on gender-based violence, journalists and editors should use this checklist to ensure their work aligns with the highest ethical standards. This is not just about compliance; it is about professional integrity.

- Truth & Context: Have I framed this incident within the broader systemic context of gender inequality, rather than treating it as an isolated "private tragedy"?
- Minimize Harm: Have I prioritized the safety, dignity, and privacy of the survivor over the potential for higher audience engagement (clicks/views)?
- Survivor-Centered: If interviewing a survivor, did I respect their autonomy regarding what details to share and when to stop the interview?
- Accountability: Does the focus of my reporting rest squarely on the actions and responsibility of the perpetrator, avoiding any implicit victim-blaming or "himpathy"?
- Transparency: Am I prepared to publicly explain the ethical choices made in this reporting and promptly correct any mistakes if they occur?

If the answer to any of these questions is "No," the editorial team must halt publication and review the ethical framing of the piece.

Resources

- Sala, A., Punie, Y., Garkov, V. and Cabrera Giraldez, M., LifeComp: The European Framework for Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Key Competence, EUR 30246 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020, ISBN 978-92-76-19418-7, doi:10.2760/302967, JRC120911.
- Vita Anstrate (Latvian Television), LSM English (Latvian Public Media), Music professor to stand trial on sex abuse charges, Latvian Public Service Media LSM, November 26, 2025, https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/crime/26.11.2025-music-professor-to-stand-trial-on-sex-abuse-charges.a623881/

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