

A freelancer's guide on gender and identity

How journalists report on issues relating to gender and represent women and LGBTQI+ people in their stories can help uncover new perspectives, challenge stereotypes and better reflect reality. The voices and perspectives of women and LGBTQI+ people are significantly under-represented in news media. Addressing this gap in journalism can help change this and boost equality for all.



Why does this matter?

1

It's good journalism

The under-representation of women and LGBTQI+ people in the news creates an inaccurate representation of reality. It suppresses **relevant perspectives and stories** and allows misinformation and disinformation to grow.

2

It builds trust

Lack of diversity and representation contributes to distrust in the media. Audiences disengage when they do not receive **information relevant to their experience** and circumstances.

3

It's good for society

Society benefits when expert and authoritative voices are accurately reflected in the news and harmful **gender and identity stereotypes are left behind**. Gender and representational bias in schools, workplaces and communities can be diminished to the advantage of all.

Source: **Reflect Reality** →

Actively balance your sources



To help address under-representation in the media, freelance journalists can **make sure women and LGBTQI+ people feature as active central characters, experts and narrators in their reporting**. Give them and their voices prominence and make your interview, quotation and image choices more representative.

Seek out women and LGBTQI+ sources and experts, especially if you are repeatedly being referred to male officials or sources for your story.

Similarly, across your reporting, don't just focus on transgender people in the context of their rights. Include transgender voices in other stories and profile transgender people from all fields to show that their stories and lives go beyond being transgender and to counter imbalanced coverage.

Expert tip

You could build a spreadsheet to track the gender and representational balance of sources in your reporting over time.

Pay particular attention to stories about topics and circumstances that disproportionately affect women or LGBTQI+ communities and fields where their voices and expertise are often overlooked. GMMP/WACC's guidance on gender and reporting on climate change, for example, suggests there is a journalistic bias towards men as experts on this topic.

Connect with women's groups where you're reporting, says Sarah Macharia, Manager, Gender & Communication, at the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP). These groups can help share the perspectives of ordinary women affected by a story and highlight work done by women in their communities or at a national level. There will always be a female voice available if you look hard enough, says Macharia.

In the long-term, think about how you can build networks and sources that better reflect your audiences and cover communities, says Hadjar Benmiloud, Founder of Vileine Academy.

What to consider in your coverage

Choose your words and images carefully

The language and images we use can perpetuate stereotypes. Question if it is necessary to mention someone's gender, marital status or appearance in a report, for example. By using the same language for women and men and portraying them in the same way, **we can reduce sexism and stereotyping by gender**.

For stories involving LGBTQI+ voices, in particular, be aware of language that's outdated or considered offensive to some people, says Rachel Savage, a journalist with Thomson Reuters Foundation, focused on LGBTQI+ issues.

Women are often depicted in a hyper-feminine or sexualised way - a stereotype also perpetuated in news images, says Macharia: "We see the sexualisation and objectification of women in the portrayal of women in helpless, hopeless victim poses. It's the male figures who seem to be decisive and authoritative."



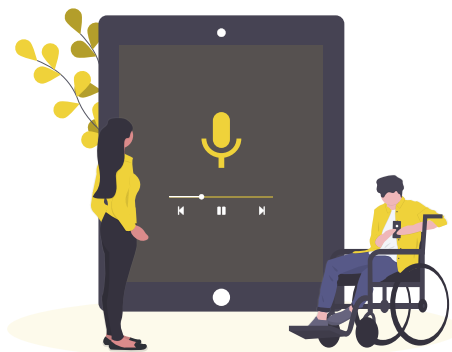
Expert tip

Remember that while adding a plus to LGBTQI+ can make things more inclusive, this is still an umbrella term and may have different implications in different regions.

"In the West, a lot of people have campaigned to be part of the wider umbrella; in other countries, being LGBTQI+ is explicitly criminalised, politicised, or there are recriminations," says Savage.

What to consider in your coverage

Explore gender and identity angles



When reporting on economic, environment or health stories, remember that sexuality and gender identity are variables that can significantly affect a person's economic status, their access to health care or education or how climate change impacts them, for example.

Apply a gender or identity lens to development stories to explore more angles and improve under-representation. Ask what this means for women, young women, transgender or intersex people, for example.

Expert tip

For stories with a gender or identity focus, make sure you have a coherent and compelling narrative with strong characters and perspectives to engage those not already interested in these issues.

"Finding the people at the heart of the story is usually the hardest part of the features I pursue, but having the time to build relationships and trust is key to find the perspectives you don't normally get to hear," says freelance journalist Preeti Jha, who adds that exploring more creative or multimedia formats can be beneficial to appeal to new audiences to this subject.

Address implicit biases - including your own

GMMP's research suggests that the conventional reporting approach imagines a male audience.

To produce journalism that's more representative, **we need to think about angles and not just the diversity of sources and topics**, says Benmiloud. What angles or people's experiences are we not covering because of our lack of experience with that perspective?

Question your assumptions - maybe even test them - and look at your motivations for reporting this story.

Know the current state of laws and rights for women, men and LGBTQI+ people in the country you're reporting on. If they are part of your story, understand when and how these were implemented, including if they were introduced by colonial regimes.



Expert tip

Do your research on the spectrum of debate on issues relating to gender, sexuality and identity within different communities, says Jha.

Leave room for different narratives on a subject and don't decide the tone of a story in advance, adds freelance journalist Megan Clement. When reporting on human rights abuses relating to abortion rights, she recalls the positive outlook of the activists involved in helping women access their reproductive rights: "There may be space for the joy, even in the worst situations."

Identify your blindspots as early as you can in the process, says Benmiloud. This should be more than just a sensitivity read at the end of reporting. Make these checks, for example, by consulting an expert external to your story, as part of your interview and research process.

Don't be reductive



Men, women, transgender people and other identities are not homogenous groups. Understand how different issues affect different groups and sub-sets within those groups, including statistically. Is your reporting inadvertently omitting or erasing the experience of any groups that are already under-represented? Make a point to include their voices.

Speak to different people within these groups to get varied views and explore ranges of opinion. This is particularly important for LGBTQI+ stories where one person can't be expected to represent the entire spectrum.

Expert tip

Freelancer Jha explains the importance of finding the nuance of opinions within different communities and cultural groups and not reducing characters to case studies.

"In Malaysia, when it comes to LGBTQI+ people and Islam, there is a spectrum of thoughts among Muslims," she says.

"For instance, there are small but growing numbers of openly gay Muslims, as well as Islamic groups and academics that are supportive of LGBTQI+ identity in Malaysia despite laws that criminalise same-sex relations. I think it's important to hear more from them in stories about state crackdowns [against LGBTQI+ people], for example."

In pitches to editors, highlight how your story might expand the audience of the news outlet by reflecting more diverse perspectives and experiences, suggests Benmiloud.

Reporting on sexual and gender-based violence

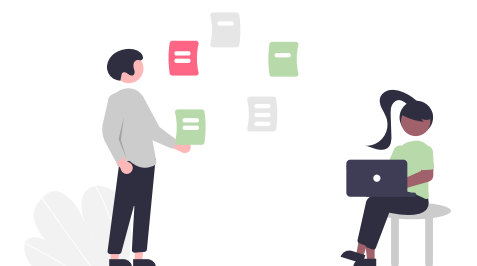
If your story involves survivors of sexual or gender-based violence, remember that an interview may cause fresh trauma as it asks an individual to recall or relive past events. This can be exacerbated if a charity or NGO repeatedly puts forward the same interviewee.

Your source might change their mind about what they are sharing. This is not uncommon in reporting on these topics. Anonymity may be a necessary condition for the interview.

"Understand that you are speaking to whole people with complex emotions that aren't neatly packaged trauma narratives," says Clement.

Think about what details you need to include in your piece - will they help audiences better understand the issue or crime, or will they victimise or stigmatise the survivors? Avoid **sensationalism or lurid** details and put the frequency of these violent crimes in context with data from the region.

Avoid placing blame on survivors or absolving the perpetrator(s) of responsibility through your choice of words or images. Can you use survivor rather than victim, for example?



Expert tip

Don't expect NGOs to do all the work for you, says Clement: "They're not necessarily going to turn over a client to you for an interview. You get a better story if you find your own sources."

Be clear with an interviewee about where their story will be published and respect their wishes if they don't want to share certain details or answer particular questions. Take time to go back through an interview with your subject at the end to revisit what they've said and told you. Check they are comfortable and explain what you will include in the piece.

What to consider in your coverage

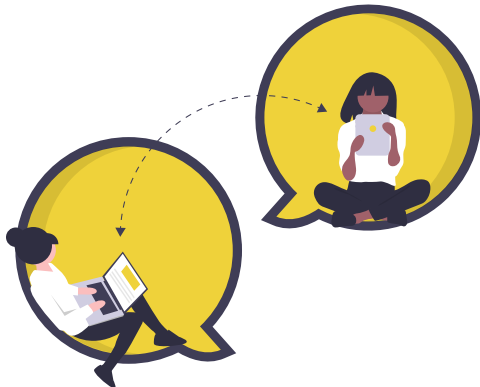
Remember your duty of care



Speaking to a journalist could have personal repercussions or endanger the safety of an interviewee in some contexts. Check with local organisations, such as women’s or LGBTQI+ groups, to **understand your interviewee’s risks and assess these before you proceed.**

In developing countries where gay sex is illegal, a source may say they are fine to be quoted but look carefully at the context. Consider what the future repercussions could be for your subject, says Rachel Savage.

Reporting on transgender persons



There are crucial words and concepts you will need to know and understand if you cover stories involving LGBTQI+ communities.

When telling a story involving a transgender person, for example, be careful not to misgender or deadname them. Use their chosen name in your reporting and avoid phrases that could cast doubt on a transgender person’s identity.

Transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun - a transgender woman or a transgender person, for example.

Use the right pronouns - ask your sources and interviewees if you’re not sure what their pronoun preference is. Doing this for only visibly transgender sources could be marginalising; doing so for all your sources standardises the practice. If you cannot confirm the best pronouns to use with a source or if there are conflicting pronoun uses, use their chosen name and as few pronouns as possible.

If an editor asks for balance, challenge this if it means giving a platform to someone who questions transgender people’s rights. Explain the damage dismissing a transgender person’s experience in this way could do to your sources, subjects and wider discourse in the country you are reporting on, as well as your audience’s understanding of this issue.

Expert tip

“It’s about meeting people where they are,” says [Hannah Storm](#), CEO of the [Ethical Journalism Network](#). “Ask your interviewees: ‘How would you like me to address you? How do you identify yourself?’”

Expert databases and sourcebooks

Reflect Reality: An inventory of women-centric expert databases by region and topic.	>
SheSource: Online database from the Women’s Media Centre of media-experienced women experts.	>
The Women’s Room: Search for sources by country, research interest university and more.	>
500 Women Scientists: A database of women and gender minorities in science.	>
According to Her: Find an expert by field in Zimbabwe.	>
QuoteThisWoman: A database of experts in South Africa.	>
Women Also Know Stuff: A global database of experts in political science.	>
Women Also Know History: A database providing the credentials and areas of expertise for female historians.	>
AcademicNet: Global database of several hundred women leaders and scientists in academia, searchable by field.	>
Diverse Sources: Searchable database of hundreds of under-represented experts in science, health and the environment.	>
List of women in Computer Science: Concise list of women, both known and unknown, in the world of computer science.	>
InterviewHer: Comprehensive global database of women sources on peace and security, by local geography.	>

Resources

ICFJ: How to handle gender identity reporting.	>
GLAAD: Media Reference Guide - Transgender.	>
UNESCO: Guidelines for Gender-Inclusive Language.	>
GMMP: Learning Resource Kit for Gender-Ethical Journalism and Media House Policy - Who makes the news?	>
NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists Stylebook on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Terminology.	>
European Journalism Centre: LGBTQI+ Communities, A Reporter’s Guide.	>
Journalism.co.uk: A guide to reporting on LGBTQ community.	>
The OPEN Notebook: Including Diverse Voices in Science Stories.	>
The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma: Reporting on Sexual Violence.	>
Ethical Journalism Network: Guide for reporting on domestic violence.	>
Level Up: Media guidelines for reporting on domestic violence deaths.	>
AKAS/IWMF: The Missing Perspectives of Women in News.	>

