

Good practices for handling survivor testimony

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The approach to collecting the testimony of a survivor of sexual violence in the context of armed conflict presents multiple challenges. One has to consider the implications of social and cultural diversity, as well as the resilience of those women who have experienced the hell of abuse.

While there is no single recipe, and the response needs to vary and become more flexible depending on the situation, the point is to establish some rules based on my dual experience as a survivor and a journalist.

The first crucial step when conducting an interview is to **understand how the interviewee sees herself, either as a victim or as a survivor**. The answer will tell us a lot about her outlook and about how she overcame the aggression committed against her. Understanding the historical context beforehand is a necessary step.

There is nothing more upsetting for a victim than to have to explain the circumstances of her trauma that she would rightly feel should be known by the interviewer. The survivor must be able to give her testimony in a quiet, intimate setting, without being filmed or recorded if it is not necessary.

The road to full testimony being given can be long, so **patience is the key**. The interviewee should not be rushed, as she is keeping for herself facts brought up in previous interviews, and her behaviour will show whether or not he or she trusts the person recording the testimony.

The bitter memory of the aggression inevitably leads to a flood of emotion which must be met with silence and empathy by the interviewer. In this situation, recourse to professional psychological help might be necessary. Talking about painful details of the crime can plunge the survivor into a state of re-victimisation, and this must be avoided unless the interviewee feels the need to do so in order to give a full account of the cruelty has suffered.

Each testimony is unique. Giving and receiving this carries a strong emotional charge that may generate unexpected and contradictory emotional reactions. For example, a person who seems firmly convinced that they decided to talk about their experience during an interview may withdraw just before the interview for various personal reasons. These must all be respected. At every stage of the information-gathering process, the dignity of survivors must be preserved.

