

Putting the Human Into Human Trafficking Reporting: Tips for Interviewing Survivors

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Guiding Principles (adapted from E. Benjamin Skinner)

- The person you are interviewing makes the rules.
- Be transparent and deliberate as a reporter.
- Remember that this is a *person*, not a representative of a victim class.
- Your purpose is seek the truth and to tell it to the public.
- Above all else, do no harm.

Contacting a Survivor

→ Introduce yourself.

- Give your full name, title/position, and media outlet.
- Share your level of knowledge about human trafficking.
- Share what experience you have with reporting on human trafficking, or if this is your first story. If you've written stories before, provide links to them.
- Inform the interviewee how you heard about them, and/or if someone referred you.

→ Provide clear and accurate information about the context of your story.

- What is the purpose of your story? To raise awareness? To inspire action?
- Were you given an assignment to cover a specific event?
- What are your deadlines? **Provide alternative times for interviews.**
- Provide 4-5 examples of questions you would like to discuss in the interview.
- Inform the interviewee if you are willing to run the article by them before you send it to your editor.

→ Ask for permission to interview the survivor.

- Instead of saying, "Please call me back by 4pm because I have a deadline," use language that is more inviting, such as: "Are you interested in participating in an interview? If so, please tell me if you are available any of the following times..."

→ Consider interviewing a non-profit representative instead.

- Non-profits and social service providers work with multiple survivors and can provide information on the trends they see.
- They are community leaders and experts who can give you anecdotal information of trauma from a more personal distance.

- Providing information about non-profit agencies allows your reader to know how and where to get involved *and* provides information to the public about resources for survivors.

Preparing for the Interview

→ Ask the interviewee for suggestions on where to meet.

- Inform the interviewee if you will be inviting anyone else to be present. Invite the interviewee to have a friend/ally with them during the interview.
- Be prepared to cover costs associated with interview, i.e. pick up the tab.

→ Ask if it is the person's first time interviewing.

- Obtain verbal and, if possible, written consent for the interview.
- Explain the difference between on-the-record and off-the-record.
- Do not raise the expectation that the person will get paid for the interview.
- Make it clear that you may be doing background investigation to verify aspects of their story.
- If it is not their first interview, ask for links to other media appearances or conduct research on other media interviews the survivor has participated in
- If some of your questions are answered by other media sources (e.g. the details of their traumatic story), ask the survivor if it is okay for you to reuse the content.
- Prepare new questions for your upcoming interview.

→ Learn more about human trafficking from validated sources.

- Do not expect the survivor to represent all other survivors.
- Have a clear definition of what human trafficking is.

→ Prepare questions that go beyond the traumatic story.

- Think about the unique expertise the interviewee brings to the table and frame your questions to draw that expertise out. What can the interviewee bring to the story that is different from other news articles you've seen?
- For example, if the interviewee is currently in college, you could ask: What role do students play in the movement to end human trafficking? What does your area of study contribute?
- Other questions:
 - o What do you think needs to happen to end human trafficking?
 - o What programs or laws helped you in your transition out of trafficking? What programs or laws were barriers?
 - o What inspires you? What keeps you motivated despite all you went through?
 - o What and where do you see positive change occurring?

→ Engage in self-reflection.

- What biases and stereotypes do you hold about the issue of human trafficking?
- Do you already have an angle that you are going to take on the story?
- Do you feel uncomfortable or unsure about speaking with the survivor?

During the Interview

→ Make medium talk.

- Small talk can seem trite. You and the interviewee both know that you are about to talk about some difficult material. Spend time with the interviewee before hand and make medium talk – ask how their week is going, what's exciting in their lives, what are they up to now, etc. **Make sure you inform them that this is off the record.**

- If you have done some research and know that the interviewee is working for X organization or studying at Y school, ask about that.

→ **Ask open-ended questions instead of leading/closed ones.**

- E.g. “What would the best form of reconciliation with your perpetrators look like?” Instead of “Have you forgiven your perpetrators?” or “Do you want them in jail?”

→ **Ask what terms the interviewee identifies with.**

- Victim, survivor, domestic trafficking, CSEC (commercially sexual exploited child), labor trafficking, human trafficking, other?
- Note that people can be both a victim and a survivor. Typically, victims are people who have recently escaped from their abuser and survivors are at a more stable place in their lives.

→ **Be mindful of your nonverbal communication.**

- Let the interviewee know if you will be taking notes or recording the interview.
- Notice when you might be done listening to their answer but they are still talking. Looking away or saying “uh-huh” when you are actually thinking about your next question can be perceived as lack of genuine interest.

→ **Resist the snowball questioning due to your personal state of shock.**

- Often times, reporters will feel genuine horror about the stories they will hear. Their curiosity and need to make the world make sense, leads them to ask more detailed and personal questions to help them understand various characters in the narrative, to fill in plot gaps, or just to make sense of the interviewee’s story.
- Reflect on the purpose of these questions and whether or not they are central to your story. If you can, notice that this is happening and remind the interviewee that they can decline to answer any of the questions they don’t want to answer.

→ **Ask if there is anything else the interviewee would like to share or would like to amend.**

Writing the Story

→ **Use accurate descriptions for the interviewee.**

- Avoid using the following words as nouns or titles: former prostitute, child prostitute, underage prostitute, and illegal immigrant.
- Ask the interviewee about the terms s/he is most comfortable with (see above).
- Don’t fit someone into a box you already have pre-determined.

→ **Do not take statements out of context.**

→ **Consider re-framing the story.**

- Survivors can be interviewed as experts, not just as case stories.
- Avoid sensationalizing the story. Stories that are framed primarily to report a crime or arrest are written to instill shock, horror, and disgust. While human trafficking is horrifying and disgusting, we need the general public to move beyond their shock and to understand the issue. We need people to understand that the issue isn’t just a horrible crime that the police need to do something about.

- Your role is *not* to impose value judgments or try to contort the person into a narrative slot.

→ **Validate your statistics or don't use them.**

- Track down the original source of any statistics you read. Report them accurately. Pay attention to what the statistic actually counts. *Many statistics, even from government sources, are not academically peer-reviewed.*
- Do not begin your article with a statistic. This sets up your article to prove that statistic.

→ **Do not conflate human trafficking with prostitution.**

- Human trafficking is about humans forcing other humans into slavery and profiting financially and emotionally from others' labor.
- People are forced into many different industries of labor, including agriculture, childcare, medicine, manufacturing, and yes, the sex industry. Survivors of human trafficking do not get to keep any of their wages.
- This differentiation does not mean that people in the commercial sex industry do not experience exploitation.
- There may be some adult sex workers who were once victims of sex trafficking.

→ **Be sensitive about the photos you take/ask for or images you use.**

- Do not ask for "environmental shots." You are asking the person to revisit a crime scene and a scene of immense traumatic history.
- Avoid cliché images such as a girl in chains, a person with a barcode on them, a girl who is bruised up, or a brown kid in a brothel. This contributes to the stereotypes about human trafficking and is misleading. Survivors of slavery are treated like they are objects; however, how does a picture of a faceless human with a barcode on them help humanize the survivors? Survivors are also often not brutally forced into exploitation. They are manipulated through love and dependency.

After the Story is Written

→ **Inform the interviewee that the story is published.**

- Send a link/copy of the story

→ **Ask for feedback and make sure there are not any adverse impacts.**

- Ask how the process was, if there are any errors in the story, and if any negative consequences have occurred as a result of the story