



Code of

Conduct

for Media Coverage  
on Gender-Based Violence



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
Netherlands





# About Fe-Male



Fe-Male is a civil feminist collective aiming to achieve a just world free of patriarchy. Fe-Male works with women and girls to eliminate injustice through building young feminist movement, empowering agents of change, and campaigning together against discriminatory norms and policies.

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# FOREWORD

Media in Lebanon has achieved a position of great prominence in producing, developing and disseminating information. Although it is referred to as the Fourth Estate, it has become clear that the media is confronted with many dilemmas when it comes to human rights. These include conflicts pertaining to marginalized groups, mostly women and children.

These violations are made worse by the absence of the rule of law, which should protect vulnerable groups. There is also a lack of implementation of the honor codes governing the media.

Hopes had been high in the past with respect to proper media regulation in Lebanon; especially because of the new media law initiative, drafted by the Media and Communications Committee in 2016. These expectations have turned into disappointments. It is still unclear how and when the new law will be implemented. Furthermore, the draft contains substantial gaps related to gender equality.

A decision has been made by the authors to focus this COC primarily on women because of the unique issues related to gender and age discrimination. Media exploitation of women is based largely on a patriarchal mentality rooted in political, sectarian, and materialistic submission to the logic of consumerism and the advertising industry more specifically. This interlocking intellectual context has been accentuated by the current crisis confronting the media institutions in Lebanon. The ongoing and longstanding crises in the media sector are being used by many outlets to justify a constantly deteriorating quality of coverage, increased levels of yellow journalism, distorted portrayal of women's issues, and outright sexism; all in the name of the race to increase audience levels.

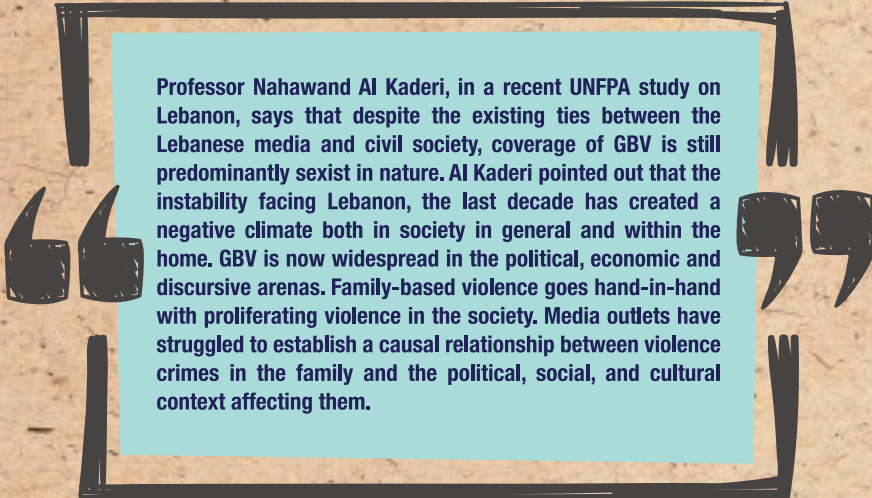
# Why a Code of Conduct (COC) Is Needed?

Since its founding in 2012, Fe-Male has not merely dealt with such traditional gender-related issues as objectification, stereotyping and exploitation in advertising and the media. By linking the issues of violent transformation to the role of the media in promoting human rights violations, Fe-Male has been able to add new insights into the study of Gender Based Violence (GBV). Building on our general COC “Towards a Balanced Image of Women in Media and Advertising in Lebanon,” this document adds a new dimension to our numerous programs and reports to further include women survivors of violence, especially in regard to the delicacy of their situation in the country and the violations that the media commit while dealing with their issues.

Although some media outlets have played a prominent role in the field of advocacy for women’s issues and have proven to be key partners in lobbying the Parliament to repeal some unfair laws against women and/or enact other protective laws, a significant amount of media coverage of women’s issues does not abide by the professional and ethical principles, which ultimately leads to constant promotion of stereotyping and objectification of women.



In times of conflict and its aftermath, women and children, in particular, remain the two most affected and vulnerable groups in various areas, including in media coverage. This shows in the portrayal of women and survivors of violence in mainstream and digital media alike. The survivor is either condemned or mistaken for a victim pleading for sympathy. Media coverage of women remains largely dependent on the arbitrary actions of individual reporters.



**Professor Nahawand Al Kaderi, in a recent UNFPA study on Lebanon, says that despite the existing ties between the Lebanese media and civil society, coverage of GBV is still predominantly sexist in nature. Al Kaderi pointed out that the instability facing Lebanon, the last decade has created a negative climate both in society in general and within the home. GBV is now widespread in the political, economic and discursive arenas. Family-based violence goes hand-in-hand with proliferating violence in the society. Media outlets have struggled to establish a causal relationship between violence crimes in the family and the political, social, and cultural context affecting them.**

This dual rise in GBV and distorted portrayal of women in the media has led to this COC project, a collaborative work between Fe-Male and ABAAD with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Lebanon. This COC is the outcome of five focus group discussions that targeted experts in gender and communications, journalists working in local and foreign media institutions, media and law specialists, and social workers. Survivors of gender-based violence and exploitation in Lebanon played a key role in drafting this document. This COC takes an evidence-based approach to the topic and links it to cutting-edge research on the topic, as well as the personal insights of the authors themselves and GBV survivors.

# Goals of the Code of Conduct (COC)



**Establish the scientific basis for strategies followed in gender-sensitive media coverage away from stereotyping, objectification and exploitation;**

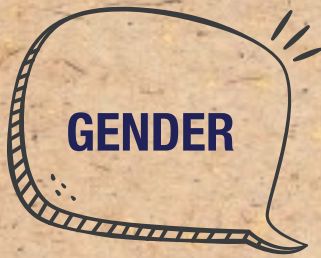


**Encourage the application of the clauses of the COC and transform its recommendations into practical steps that would lead to developing the capacities of the media in dealing with gender-related topics, and deepening the collaboration between the different concerned parties;**



**Guarantee protection for women survivors of violence and seek to shield them from the risks that can be caused by media coverage that is insensitive to their conditions and issues.**





# SENSITIVE MEDIA COVERAGE FOR TARGETED GROUPS



**1**

Integrate gender into the documents governing the work of media institutions (internal bylaws), emphasizing the necessity to promote diversity, dignity and respect for women in media coverage;

**2**

Present news coverage, talk shows, reports, public service advertising, social marketing ads and sitcoms which break stereotypical images of women and reflect upon their advanced social, economic and political role in the Arab world;

**3**

Embrace policies regarding the ethical press coverage in all media institutions to ensure that their employees abide by the rules and principles of covering issues of violence against women;

**4**

Pledge to implement memorandums of understanding, which include practical mechanisms and clauses that activate pacts of ethics and provide professional coverage, between civil society organizations and media institutions;

5

Train journalists and staff working in media institutions on the techniques of gender-sensitive coverage (adopting the appropriate terminology in dealing with survivors, referral system, informed consent) and ensure that they benefit from gender related training programs;

6

Give space to programs and advertisements to be broadcasted on both traditional and virtual media platforms that aim to spread awareness about gender-based violence;

7

Develop complaint mechanisms through which viewers can report any disturbing content.

**Journalists and Personnel in Media Institutions and Organizations**

**A. In Case of Media Coverage of Gender Related Issues:**

1

Highlight success stories of women survivors of violence as a means of inspiration to other women with the aim to break the cycle of violence and gain their right to life and protection;

2

Produce consistent media coverage which highlights the patriarchal context within which violence against women thrives, while avoiding anecdotal and superficial reporting which does not reflect the social, political, and economic complexities of the overall problems;



3

Seek guidance from legal, psychological and social experts (based on the needs) while reporting women's issues; particularly gender-based violence;

4

Include in the coverage information about the means of protection that the survivors can turn to when in need of psychological, social or legal support;

5

Refrain from vindicating gender-based crimes and avoid including prejudices or phrases that might encourage the reader/viewer to blame the victim like "irrelevant details", "sexual relations" and "love life";

6

Cover all issues and highlight the special needs of women, especially while covering news of wars, crises, and conflicts;

7

Collaborate and share experiences among local journalists/reporters and concerned local and international organizations and associations via, for example, interviewing their representatives during coverage or referring the encountered violence cases to the concerned organizations for assistance;

8

Refrain from exploiting issues of sexual violence and utilizing them as audience grabber through exercising caution, precision and objectivity;

9

Rely on a "checklist" that includes a summary of the most prominent clauses of the Code of Conduct, or the basic principles and elements of gender-sensitive coverage, to be used prior to any breaking news coverage.



## **B.** In Case of Interviewing Survivors of Violence:

**1**

Commit to the standards of an interview; i.e. privacy, confidentiality, and protection. Prioritize the privacy of women and refrain from disclosing any private information related to their identity or residence, for the sake of protection and dignity preservation;

**2**

Collaborate with professional networks (organizations, institutions) while covering a violence-related issue, and ensure the presence of a social worker during the interview, and that the interview is being conducted in a safe and comfortable place;

**3**

Obtain prior and informed consent, whether written or recorded, of the survivor regarding the content of the interview prior to publishing or broadcasting its content;

**4**

Inform the surviving woman of all the circumstances and details surrounding the interview. Take into account her psychological situation; respecting her desire to refrain from talking at certain points; and stopping the interview upon her request. In addition, providing her with the contact information of the journalist/reporter who is conducting the interview to have easy access if need be;

**5**

Avoid bribery (offering remuneration or unguaranteed promises) or intimidation (pressurizing or embarrassing the survivor) during interviews.



**C. In addition to the previously mentioned requirements, and in case of interviewing a minor (below the age of 18), the below must be considered:**

**1**

Pay attention to the consolidated operating procedures of working with children, especially those needed to ensure each child's right to privacy, confidentiality, and non-discrimination, and to have their opinions heard, to participate in decisions affecting them and to be protected from harm and retribution, including the potential of harm and retribution;

**2**

The best interests of each child are to be protected over any other consideration, including over advocacy for children's issues and the promotion of child rights;

**3**

When trying to determine the best interests of a child, the child's right to have their views taken into account are to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity;

**4**

Guardians of the child, or those that the child demands their presence, are to be consulted about the political, social and cultural ramifications of any reportage;

**5**

Do not publish a story or an image which might put the child, siblings or peers at risk even when identities are changed, obscured or not used;

**6**

Obtain permission from the child and his or her guardian for all interviews (the necessity of coordinating with the Office of Juvenile Protection in case there is an order of protection of the child or the need for it). In addition, prior and informed consent should be obtained before videotaping and taking photos. When possible and appropriate, this permission should be given in writing. Permission and approval must be obtained in circumstances that ensure that the child and guardian are not coerced in any way and that they understand that they are part of a story that might be disseminated locally and globally. This is usually only ensured if the permission is obtained in the child's language and if the decision is made in consultation with an adult the child trusts.

## Media Personnel in Organizations of the Civil Society

1

Carefully select the survivor in accordance with safety and protection standards. Make sure she is psychologically and mentally ready to make an appearance in the media and share her story;

2

Through the specialized team, inform the female being interviewed about all the details of the interview, ensure her consent and guarantee with the journalist the secrecy of the disclosed information, while maintaining her dignity and the privacy of the centers;

3

Prioritize the moral and lawful factor over all other factors in scoop news cases;

4

Remind journalists that the safety, privacy and mental health of the survivor are a priority;

5

Organize workshops for journalists, especially directors and editors of media institutions, on dealing with the issues of survivors;

6

Provide the necessary assistance and support to media personnel to ensure that reports related to gender-based violence are professionally administered and guarantee the journalist's right to access information and resources;

7

Organize workshops aiming at university communications and journalism students in order to prepare them for the production of gender-sensitive information material before entering the profession.



## General Articles

1

Form neutral committees or gender focal points in every media outlet that monitor the quality of work and the extent to which it is free from gender-based discrimination on the one hand, and integrating gender in the general policies of the media outlet on the other;

2

Work on building a collective database in which all organizations working on gender-based violence can contribute to the continuous development and updating of its content in order to ensure that media professionals are constantly provided with facts and accurate up-to-date figures on the subject;

3

Review lexicons, terminologies and expressions used to cover the issues of survivors of gender-based violence and encourage the use of unified lexicon;

4

Encourage centers of research, statistics and universities to produce more studies on women's issues and gender-based violence, and work on enriching their content, in addition to publishing them and benefiting from the outcomes;

5

Produce an informative brochure to be disseminated to media outlets, enclosing a list of associations or social workers, specialists and provided services;

6

Produce training toolkits on gender-based violence which aim at building the knowledge capacities of those working in journalism and the ethical principles that should be embraced in coverage; and ways of creating professional, gender-sensitive material;



7

Include gender-mainstreaming in all laws, charters, and policies associated with the media sector and in the curricula of colleges and institutes of journalism and information;

8

Work with syndicates and media organizations and urge them to adopt gender-mainstreaming and encourage journalists to unite and create alliances that expose and challenge all forms of violations against women and gender-based violence;

9

Develop official and civil monitoring networks and digital platforms to monitor offensive media content on women's issues, which violates the standards of privacy, protection, and human dignity when covering gender-based issues;

10

Work on continuous awareness-raising regarding stereotyping, commodification and exploitation of women in the media and advertising and the implications of such practices in relation to the establishment and reproduction of gender-based violence, with the aim of creating public opinion that would account for the exploitations that may occur during women's rights related coverage, particularly the most marginalized women survivors of violence because of conflict or asylum;

11

Highlight information that provide a balanced picture of women and adopt ethical, professional and human rights-based standards in coverage, especially in cases of gender-based violence, by promoting or allocating annual awards or financial incentives;

12

Mainstream this code of conduct in all media institutions, digital platforms, websites and universities.





# Terms



## Gender:

The term is used to describe those characteristics of women and men which are socially constructed, while sex refers to those which are biologically determined, or:

- Socially constructed roles for both male and female, which are learned through socialization processes. They are context- and time-specific and changeable.
- Gender determines what is expected from a woman or a man in a given context (roles and responsibilities assigned and activities undertaken). It is also the image imposed by the society on both; attributes and character traits.



## Gender-Based Violence:

The violence involving men and women, in which the female is usually the victim and which is derived from unequal power relationships between men and women and the violence which is targeting a woman because she is a woman, or it affects her excessively. GBV encompasses - but not only - the psychological, physical and sexual practices (threat, torture and rape, privation of freedom within and outside the family). It covers also practices by the State or by political groups, including the amnesty law in favor of GBV perpetrators. (Gender-Based Violence Conceptual Framework, UNFPA 1998)





### **Violence against Women:**

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (CEDAW-1993)



### **Prior and Informed Consent:**

Is an ethical and legal pledge for the protection and safety of women survivors that are being interviewed, and that is by ensuring their consent to do the interview and their knowledge of all the negative and positive consequences that may result from the media coverage.



### **Gender-Sensitive Media Coverage:**

Coverage that depends on unique standards that result in the production of a fair content and that is compliant to women's privacy. It requires full knowledge and awareness of women's issues and the basic concepts related to them, in addition to justice in the presentation and the resources adopted in media.



### **Survivor:**

A person who positively and actively reacts to acts of violence committed against him or her. According to the prevailing trend in international cultures and in the recommendations for dealing with those exposed to violence, it is best to use the term "survivor" instead of "victim" when referring to recipients of violent crimes. The term victim is a negative term, suggesting weakness, pity and surrender, while as the term "survivor" has a positive connotation, which suggests strength and steadfastness. The term also emphasizes that what has been done against them is a crime, rather than a stigmatization as a victim.





### **Referral:**

The process whereby a health care or a social worker performs a series of operations and procedures for the purpose of organizing these services into different and holistic levels.



### **Stereotyping/ Stereotypical Image:**

An exaggerated generalization about an entire group of people based on their gender. This stereotypical image usually creates prior prejudices on a certain gender even though these characteristics can be common for both genders and it has a negative impact because it involves broad generalizations that ignore individual realities.



### **Objectification:**

The practice of handling or considering a person as a mere object of sexual desire without considering the person's dignity and human rights. Objectification is used as a term within media content context, such as ads or films which exploit women's body for marketing and consumer oriented purposes.



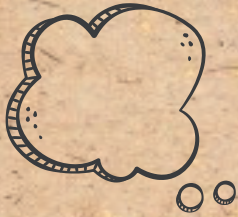
### **Masculinities:**

Are behaviors, ideas, laws and interpretations that impose male domination over females, in a certain society.



### **Patriarchy:**

A social system usually based on customs and traditions where the eldest male, the father or the parents have absolute or partial power over the wife or children, especially girls. The brother can be the authority over his sister or his mother sometimes, as well as the guardian where he is the authority.



# QUOTES

**Women's rights issues are humanitarian, not just local issues.**

**Larissa Aoun**  
Journalist  
Sky News Arabia

**"The journalist must refrain from blaming the victim and involving personal details in coverage such as nationality, emotional life, and religion."**

**Patricia Eid**  
Assistant Professor and Psychotherapist

**Professionalism attracts higher ratings because it tackles several angles of the issue and urges the audience to further reflect instead of stirring things up for a short period of time**

**Sahar Arnaout**  
Journalist-AI Horra

**Developing a code of conduct and a compulsory investigative checklist for journalists in coverage is essential to ensure the quality of media production.**

**Morris Aek,**  
Journalist-BBC Arabia

**There are no codes of conduct available in the Arab and local institutions that journalists adhere to, unlike international institutions**

**Layal Haddad**  
Journalist- AI Arabi Al Jadeed



“The media does not care to protect abused women; on the contrary, it seeks a scoop without considering the harm that might be inflicted on them”

Woman survivor

“There are subjects that are being exploited, and tackled in the wrong way making the victim of rape a victim of the media as well”

Rania Hamza  
Journalist- Legal Agenda

“There is a decline in the ethics of the journalist, he/she is looking to excite the viewer/ reader, and tackles one side of the story”

Rola Rashed  
Journalist

“We, as Syrian women, are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation than others in Lebanon because of displacement and the severe economic and social conditions that we live in”

Woman survivor

“There has been remarkable progress related to media advocacy and greater emphasis on women's issues”

Azza Baydoun  
Researcher in Women's Affairs

“The reality of the image of women in the media and coverage related to gender cannot be interpreted regardless of the structural crisis of the media”

Manar Zaiter  
Lawyer  
and Human Rights Activist

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