

## Responsibly, accurately reporting on sexual violence

Like many, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) has been following the media coverage of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former-IMF chief who was indicted on multiple charges that he sexually assaulted a Manhattan hotel employee.

While we applaud media efforts to bring awareness to the topic of sexual violence -- in this case workplace sexual assault -- we are deeply troubled by some of the coverage. We are sorely disappointed that most of the media coverage we're seeing is sensational, insensitive or victim-blaming. It is extremely troubling to see some media outlets promoting harmful stereotypes and fueling rumors about the victim in this case.

Nearly 20 percent of the population will experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Sexual assault is a violation of human rights and dignity that affects everyone regardless of age, race, ethnicity, religion, geography, ability and sexual orientation. Although it is often a hidden part of our culture, it is not uncommon. Typically, high-profile cases, such as this one, become newsworthy and garner a lot of media attention. But regardless of the level of media coverage, these violations are widespread and occur daily in our communities, schools and workplaces.

Sexual assault is always committed because an offender chooses to abuse someone by exploiting an opportunity or vulnerability and exercising power, force or violence. Ultimately, these crimes have nothing to do with a victim's behavior. Why then, has the woman in this case been the target of speculation? If she were the victim of another crime such as theft, there would not be the same backlash. Plain and simple: When someone is sexually assaulted, they are not to blame.

When victimization occurs, it takes bravery to report abuse. Survivors of sexual assault often feel alone, and fear further isolation if they report the crime. Perpetrators rely on people to question the victim -- doing so increases their isolation and ultimately helps keep the crimes secret. When victims come forward, they should be supported and believed. NSVRC commends those that assisted in the investigation to swiftly react to the woman's disclosure in the IMF case. Many immigrants or members of marginalized groups distrust police and do not report abuse. In fact, the majority of sexual assaults, an estimated 63 percent, are never reported to the police.<sup>2</sup>

News coverage of sexual assaults is important, and NSVRC implores reporters to realize that the background information included in coverage, as well as the language used to describe the events, is terribly important. The tone of a story can largely impact public perception, and it all starts with a reporter's word choice. For example, most coverage we're seeing in the IMF case states, "The victim performed oral sex." Instead it would be more accurate to say, "The offender forced oral sex from the

victim,” or “The offender was reported to have forced the victim to perform oral sex.” We urge reporters to carefully select words to accurately report cases of sexual assault.

Over the years, NSVRC has worked with hundreds of anti-sexual violence professionals and journalists to provide a mutually beneficial exchange of information about ethically and accurately reporting sexual assault cases. NSVRC knows these cases are impactful and newsworthy. We also know that increasing awareness of sexual violence fuels prevention, and wish other cases, not just high-profile cases, were discussed. That said, we ask that you take responsibility for accurately and thoughtfully portraying the dynamics in sexual assault cases. People want the truth and rely on you to report it in a manner that is fair and unbiased. That’s why we’re asking you to report incidences of sexual violence factually by not relying on innuendo, sensationalism or victim-blaming.

The following sites may be helpful to journalists as they report on sexual assault:

- National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), visit [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)
- The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, visit <http://dartcenter.org/topic/sexual-violence>
- The Poynter Institute, visit [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> Tjaden, P. and Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Rennison, C. (2002). *Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992-2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf>