Doubly Victimized: Reporting on Transgender Victims of Crime

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Transgender people, and particularly transgender women of color, are disproportionately affected by hate violence. Sadly, the tragedy of these incidents is often compounded by reporting that does not respect (or even exploits and sensationalizes) the victim's gender identity.

Reporters telling the stories of transgender victims of violent crimes will often be given incorrect or incomplete information from police, from witnesses, or even from family and friends of the victim. However it's critically important that journalists make the effort to report on each victim with dignity and respect. Disregarding the victim's gender identity and misgendering them in news reports adds insult to injury, compounding the tragedy by invalidating the person's lived reality.

The following guidelines will help you ensure that transgender victims of violent crimes are always treated respectfully and fairly. These guidelines apply to all stories that involve the transgender community, but are especially important when the person has been attacked or killed.

PLEASE NOTE:

The following illustrations are based on a *fictional* example of a person who was assigned male at birth and given the name John Smith, but who was a

transgender woman who was named Rachel Smith at the time she was killed.

What does transgender mean?

Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically. A person's medical history has no bearing whatsoever on whether or not they should be considered transgender.

For more information and terminology, check out our resources for covering transgender people in the media.

Using the word "transgender"

A person assigned male at birth but who lives as a woman is a transgender woman. A person assigned female at birth but who lives as a man is a transgender man.

> **Incorrect:** Rachel Smith, a transgender man, was 27 years old.
> **Correct:** Rachel Smith, a transgender woman, was 27 years old.

The word *transgender* is an adjective, and should never be used as a noun nor should it have an "ed" at the end.

> **Incorrect:** Rachel Smith, a transgendered woman, was 27 years old.
> **Incorrect:** Rachel Smith, a transgender, was 27 years old.
> **Correct:** Rachel Smith, a transgender woman, was 27 years old.
> **Incorrect:** Violence against transgenders is at an all-time high.
> **Correct:** Violence against transgender people is at an all-time high.

Gender and Pronouns

The only important piece of information in identifying a victim's gender is how they currently identify or, if they were killed, how they identified at the time of their death. Always use the gender and pronoun that corresponds with the way the victim identified. If how the person identified is not known, use the pronoun consistent with how the person lived publicly.

> **Incorrect:** A man was found on Friday morning in his Brooklyn neighborhood.
> **Correct:** A transgender woman was found on Friday morning in her Brooklyn neighborhood.

This holds true even if you have only been given the victim's birth name, and even if the only name you have for the victim does not match their self-identified gender. (Also see NAMES section below)

> **Incorrect:** The victim, John Smith, was found on Friday morning in his Brooklyn neighborhood.
> **Correct:** The victim, who was identified by police as John Smith, was found on Friday morning in her Brooklyn neighborhood.

Should pronouns be skipped?

The short answer is no. It is possible to write a piece without using pronouns, instead referring to a subject only by last name, or with plural pronouns like "they" or "them." This is marginally preferable to using incorrect pronouns, but it creates very awkward sentences, and conveys a clear level of discomfort with referring to the victim as his or her lived gender. This is seen as disrespectful not just to the victim, but to the entire transgender community.

> **Incorrect:** Smith was found Friday morning in the Brooklyn neighborhood he lived in.
> **Still Incorrect:** Smith was found Friday morning in the Brooklyn neighborhood Smith lived in.
> **Correct:** Smith was found Friday morning in the Brooklyn neighborhood she lived in.

Names

A transgender person's chosen name should be considered by reporters to be their *real name*, whether it has been legally changed or not. Often transgender people cannot afford a legal name change, or they live in a community where obtaining correct identification is difficult. All transgender people should be treated as though they have changed their name legally to their chosen name.

> **Incorrect:** John Smith, who used the name Rachel, was 27 years old.
> **Correct**: Rachel Smith was 27 years old.

Never put a person's chosen name in quotes. Treat their name the same way you would treat any other person's name.

> **Incorrect:** "Rachel" Smith was 27 years old.
> **Correct:** Rachel Smith was 27 years old.

If you do not know a transgender victim's chosen name, make the source for the name you are using clear.

> **Incorrect:** The victim, John Smith, was found on Friday morning.
> **Correct:** The victim, identified by police as John Smith, was found on Friday Morning.

Non-binary Victims

The terms non-binary, genderqueer, and gender fluid are terms used by some who experience their gender identity as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from those terms. It is increasingly common for people who have a non-binary gender identity use they/them as their pronoun. In cases where the victim is non-binary, it is important to use the correct name and pronoun for them.

For example, if a person who was assigned male at birth and given the name John Smith is a non-binary person whose name is Jordan Smith and uses they/them pronouns, then here are tips for writing about them:

> **Incorrect:** On Friday, a funeral service will be held for John Smith, organized by his close friends. Smith sometimes identified as a woman.
> **Correct:** On Friday, a funeral service will be held for Jordan Smith, organized by their close friends. Smith described their gender identity as non-binary and used they/them pronouns.

Avoid using qualifiers like "identified as" and "preferred they/them pronouns." A non-binary person's gender identity is as legitimate as anyone else's, and the pronouns they use reflect that reality - they are more than just a preference.

> **Incorrect:** John Smith, a 27-year-old who used the name Jordan Smith, identified as non-binary and preferred they/them pronouns.
> **Correct:** Jordan Smith, a non-binary 27-year-old person, used they/them pronouns.

If a source uses incorrect names or pronouns

Many transgender people are only able to live as their authentic gender some of the time. Some have only disclosed the fact that they are transgender to certain people. Often a victim's co-workers, neighbors, or even friends and family won't know that the person was transgender. In many instances, family members may know the victim was transgender, but continue to use the person's birth name and old pronouns; sometimes because they don't recognize the trans person's identity, and sometimes because families are often the last to begin using the new name and pronoun. Police reports will typically use the wrong name or gender for the victim. Often because the victim carried ID that still lists their birth name and gender marker, or because the police gender the victim based on the victim's anatomy.

In these cases, paraphrase rather than quote directly, or quote elements of the statement that do not include this incorrect information. If this is not possible, leave the quote as-is but make sure that you, as the journalist, use the correct information. Reporters should also make an effort to learn the victim's true identity, and use the name and pronoun that matches their gender identity. This

information may often by found in the victim's social media profiles, and by talking to people within the transgender community who knew the victim.

> **Incorrect:** "It looks like Smith was coming out of a local bar when he was attacked," said Officer Jones.
> **Correct:** Officer Jones said it appeared as though Smith was coming out of a local bar when she was attacked.
> **Correct:** According to Officer Jones, "It looks like Smith was coming out of a local bar" at the time she was attacked.

Things to avoid

Do not use language that implies the victim's identity was not real, or that it was a costume, a disguise, or a false identity.

> **Incorrect:** Rachel Smith, whose real name was John Smith, was found on Friday morning.
> **Correct:** Rachel Smith, who was named John Smith at birth, was found on Friday morning.
> **Incorrect:** The victim, John Smith, was dressed like a woman at the time of the attack.
> **Correct:** The victim, identified by police as John Smith, was a transgender woman.
> **Incorrect:** Police say the suspect attacked Smith after finding out he was actually a man.
> **Correct:** Police say the suspect attacked Smith because she was transgender.

Do not mention or even hint at the victim's genitalia or history of surgical procedures under any circumstances.

> **Incorrect:** Police say the suspect attacked the victim after discovering that Smith had a penis.
> **Incorrect:** Police say the suspect attacked the victim after discovering that Smith was anatomically male.
> **Correct:** Police say the suspect attacked Smith because she was transgender.

Do not overemphasize or exploit the victim's transgender status. Treat the victim the way you would treat any other victim, and treat their transgender status the way you would treat any other identifying characteristic, even if police suspect it was the motive for the crime.

> **Incorrect:** Rachel Smith was dressed in high heels, a short miniskirt, a low-cut top and a wig at the time she was killed. Her purse contained makeup and a feather boa.
> **Correct:** (There is no "correct" version of this sentence. These details are insignificant to the story and disrespectful to the victim, and should be skipped entirely.)

Providing Context

The victims of anti-transgender violence are overwhelmingly transgender women of color, who live at the dangerous intersections of transphobia, racism, sexism, and criminalization, which often lead to high rates of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs reports an alarming multi-year trend showing that trans women of color experience a greater risk of death by hate violence than any other group. The staggering levels of poverty transgender people face can put them in unsafe situations, and sometimes lead to their participation in the street economy. If the victim was homeless, unemployed, engaging in sex work, or marginalized in any other way, please provide information in your story about why she may have been in that situation.

Example: Rachel Smith was homeless at the time of her killing. Friends say she had been kicked out of her home for being transgender.

Example: Rachel Smith was homeless at the time of her killing. Transgender advocates say that this is a problem faced by many transgender young people who are kicked out of their homes, and often end up on the street.

Example: Police say Rachel Smith was working as a sex worker and suspect the attacker was one of her clients. According to transgender advocates, many transgender people, especially transgender women of color, face extreme discrimination in the workplace and might turn to the street economy as a last resort.

Example: The victim, Rachel Smith, was found on Friday morning. She is believed to be the fourth transgender New Yorker to have been killed in the last year, all of them women of color.

Example: The victim was identified as Rachel Smith by neighbors, but was identified as John Smith by police. Advocates say many transgender people are unable to legally change their names or obtain corrected identification documents.

More Information

Please see GLAAD's blog post about transgender victims of violence for additional background and resources on how to report on the violence experienced by transgender people, especially trans women of color. Additional resources on how to report about transgender people and issues, (including a glossery of terms and defamatory terms to avoid), may be found in GLAAD's Media Reference Guide here and here.

Refer to the database Unerased: Counting Transgender Lives for a comprehensive look at transgender murders since 2010 to provide further context about the epidemic of violence facing the transgender community. Meredith Talusan's accompanying article provides an analysis of that data from 2010 through November 2016. Talusan may be contacted for an interview or comment at meredith.talusan@gmail.com

For information about the poverty, discrimination and violence faced by the transgender community, see the statistics provided by the The National Center for Transgender Equality's 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey.

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