Listening to Survivors

How the voices of victims and their families can lead to better journalism

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Being a good journalist doesn't just mean making important revelations and conducting investigations, or developing a special talent for interviewing and storytelling. Being a good journalist is much more. It includes, above all, the way we treat our sources, especially if they are victims or survivors of some form of violence, abuse, or brutality.

In Mexico, a country overwhelmed by such cases, journalists are accustomed to covering violence, but almost never -or I would dare to say never- do we sit face to face with survivors to ask them what they think of our work. The pressure of the day-to-day rush, our lack of self-criticism, or worse, our lack of sensitivity and respect for those who share their stories with us, lead us to move on and forget about the issues once they are published.

Lorena Gutiérrez is the mother of Fátima, a 12-year-old girl who on Thursday, February 5, 2015, was attacked and killed by three young men from her neighborhood on her way home from school. This highly publicized child femicide, due to its brutality, has turned Lorena into a tireless activist in Mexico.

Her experience and relationship with the media and journalists over eight years have left her with a wealth of wisdom. "As victims, what we want is media coverage. We do want coverage. There are many journalists whom I thank for their work and they are the majority... but it is also true that there are journalists without ethics, without values, and without empathy, who have taken advantage of our vulnerability and pain for their own benefit," she tells me during a recent interview about her experience with the media.

Experiences like Lorena's are the cornerstone of the project I am working on as a 2024 JSK Journalism Fellow at Stanford. I am trying to create a prototype of a dynamic tool — which may include workshops, manuals, and classes — to help those of us who tell stories do our job better.

The main idea is to change the sensationalist narratives that prevail in the media and documentaries around gender violence and femicides and incorporate ethical codes of conduct with our sources. Narratives that focus on angles which explain, for example, the reasons for this structural violence in each case or that show and account for the failures in the justice system.

On this path, the first step is to thoroughly understand and explore the experiences of survivors who, due to a tragic event, have been caught up in the media whirlwind. We can learn a lot from their experiences, including how to create a guide of good and bad practices with all their nuances and scales.

The day Fátima was the victim of tumultuous rape and torture, two of the three killers were caught by the neighbors of the neighborhood who were about to lynch them, but Lorena, the girl's mother, prevented it and decided to hand them over to the authorities. From that moment on, a long fight would begin to obtain justice in a country where the impunity rate is more than 90%.

On the day of Fátima's femicide, a journalist arrived in the community and approached Lorena. She remembers it perfectly and actually appreciates that this newspaper reporter covered the case because she soon realized that if Fátima's case had coverage, "we were going to be able to put some pressure on the authorities."

"At first, we didn't know anything, absolutely nothing about what the media had to narrate, whether they did it with respect or not. In those early moments, we didn't even pay attention to the news reports because we were in shock and didn't know what was right or wrong in a story. I just wanted the whole society to find out what had happened, and that what we wanted was justice," she tells me. This is the starting point that journalists must keep in mind to avoid taking advantage of the vulnerability of people when doing their job: They are in a state of shock.

From this moment, Lorena Gutiérrez began to weave — like many other families of victims — a relationship with media, journalists, news broadcasters, and filmmakers who wanted to tell their story. She has had experiences where her family's life has been treated with respect, sensitivity, and empathy, but others where she has felt betrayed and hurt.

The idea of media betrayal that I landed as a part of the project that I develop at Stanford occurs when narrators and media make disastrous coverage that ends up hurting, exploiting and exposing the people who suffered a tragic event.

My conversation with Lorena gives some very concrete clues of media behaviors that due to their seriousness and lack of ethics should never happen and effectively betray the victims.

On the one hand, we have the sensationalist press "that hopefully at some point will cease to exist," Lorena expresses. "Unfortunately, the media knows that sells, sensationalism and morbidity… they explain in detail how (the victims) were, or in what way they were found." But if journalists are going to sensationalize, Lorena reflects, let them do it with the truth: "If you're going to write that Fátima was stabbed around 93 times, it's false. Fátima was stabbed 236 times. And you don't have to help the system, nor the killer."

"If journalists only ask for information from the prosecutors and narrate what the authority tells them or allows them to, they are not doing their job well," comments Lorena. And indeed, any journalist with experience covering these types of crimes in Mexico knows that authorities usually try to manipulate the media while also blaming families.

But another of the most damaging practices for Lorena is the "use" that is made of the victims. "What has hurt us the most is that journalists have approached us. They have invaded our spaces taking advantage of our vulnerability, our pain. They have made us believe that they are with us and that they really care about us… they have entered our safe houses, and then we realize that they wrote down everything they heard us talk about without asking for our permission."

Lorena and her family have been through this and more. From journalists who ask them for their judicial records or case materials and then disappear, and do not return their calls and ignore them once they get what they want, to others who publish stories without their consent and financially benefit off her family's pain.

This lack of transparency and revictimization are very common. Lorena Gutiérrez, for example, has always been very transparent in pointing out that she felt "betrayed" when she decided to give her testimony for a controversial book written by a Mexican activist. She didn't learn of the title,"Cursed among all women," until it was published in 2022.

The title is just the beginning of Lorena's revictimization. She explains: "Cursed? Why? How did they come up with that? My daughter was not cursed. Cursed because unfortunately she had to pass through that place at that time? Cursed for being a 12-year-old girl coming from studying? Or because she wanted to go home to be with her parents and her brother Dani? I mean, cursed, why?" Even worse, Lorena was never notified that her testimony would appear in the same book alongside the testimony of one of her daughter's murderers. "If I had known, I would never have accepted that interview," she says.

Although Fátima's murderers have been sentenced for their crimes, the family's revictimization and fight for justice has not ended. On the long and sinuous road to obtain justice for their daughter, Lorena and Jesús Quintana's son Daniel also died as a victim of medical negligence by four government hospitals.

Shortly after the Fátima's femicide in 2015, the family faced death threats. They came from those around one of the murderers. So under the "protection" of the government they were all forcibly displaced to Monterrey, a state north of the Mexican Republic. There, Daniel suffered a serious health crisis, and although the authorities had to provide the family with everything necessary since he was "under protective measures," four public hospitals refused to treat Daniel, and a poor diagnosis caused his death in November 2020. He was 16 years old. The Nuevo León Prosecutor's Office has an open investigation file for homicide by the state, but no one has been charged in his death.

Lorena will be one of the voices, along with others like María Elena Ríos, a survivor of femicide attacked with acid in Oaxaca, who will help me shape this project. The mission, and the great achievement, will be that the new generations of reporters, journalists, and storytellers have a range of tools for decision-making in their work, regardless of the format. That the media have better leaders, section heads, editors, and directors in the future.

In a country where criminal violence produces human tragedies every day (80 violent homicides on average every 24 hours), journalistic work to report and try to understand the problem is absolutely necessary, but it is also necessary to understand that above all, we must show respect to survivors.

**I welcome any ideas from fellow journalists, and also from NGOs and activists who work with victims of femicides and survivors of gender violence who want to collaborate on this project by facilitating interviews.*

You can write to me at karlacas@stanford.edu or send private messages to X @karlacasillas20

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