

GETTING YOUR VOICE HEARD



Tips for spokespeople on sexual and reproductive health and rights

A spokesperson is the face of an organization and represents the organization when addressing an audience or speaking to the press. The topic of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is sometimes sensitive or controversial, making the job of a spokesperson for an SRHR-focused organization very important.

Spokesperson training aims to help you understand how to:

- Reach your audience with key messages
- Tell your organization's story—or your own advocacy story—in a succinct way
- Talk to the media or someone outside of the reproductive health field about SRHR

SECTION 1: GOAL, AUDIENCES, FRAMING AND MESSAGING

As a spokesperson, you'll need to develop key messages for any speaking engagement or media interview. Developing your key messages requires careful thought and understanding of a few essential elements, explained here.

Goal

Before speaking to anyone as an organization's spokesperson, you must be clear on your goal. This must guide your creation of messages. Your goal may be simply to define your organization—what it does and why its mission is important. Or, your goal could be to highlight a specific issue your organization is working on and its importance.

Audience

You must define your audience before you begin to write messages. This requires some thinking about who can help you achieve your goal. Remember: The general public is not your audience, as that is far too broad for you to be effective. Try to narrow the audience as much as possible.

Example #1: If you are going to attend a government meeting and your goal is to convince decisionmakers to support your organization's work, you'll need to think about who the key stakeholders are. Who do you need to convince specifically? Members of parliament? Officials in the ministry of health? Be as specific as possible.

Example #2: You have an interview with a national reporter and your goal is to make clear your organization's mission and the importance of its work. You'll need to think about the publication for which the reporter writes. Who reads this publication? Is it aimed at youth? Or perhaps older people read it? These readers are your audience, and you should craft your messages with them in mind.

Framing

Before you write specific messages, it's important to think about how you want to frame your issue. Think of framing a message the same way you think of capturing a landscape in a photograph or painting. Framing information means putting it into a context that helps audiences absorb and interpret it. You need to help them view and understand your messages the way you intend.

TWO MAJOR FRAMEWORKS: HUMAN RIGHTS AND PUBLIC HEALTH

You'll need to choose a messaging framework based on your goal and audience. While human rights and public health are the most commonly used frameworks when talking about SRHR, these are not the only ones you might choose to use.

Human rights framework

Reproductive rights include a woman's right to make fundamental decisions about her life and family, to access the reproductive health services necessary to protect her health, and to decide whether and when to have children.

When we frame reproductive health issues in a human rights framework, we talk about how reproductive rights are based on a number of fundamental human rights—including the rights to health, life, equality, information, education, privacy, and to freedom from discrimination. International human rights agreements have defined the right to health as including the right to a high quality of sexual and reproductive health.

When sexual and reproductive rights—and thereby human rights—are denied, there are harmful consequences. Women and girls are less able to access reproductive health care, including safe abortion. This in turn puts them at risk for seeking unsafe, clandestine abortions that endanger their health and lives. Singling out women's reproductive health services such as abortion for targeted regulation and restriction is discrimination based on gender—and violates women's human right to be free from discrimination.

Examples of rights-based messaging:

- All people who are pregnant have the right to make decisions about their bodies and decide if, when and how to have a child.
- All women have the right to access safe, legal and affordable abortion services.

Public health framework

The public health framework for talking about SRHR issues uses research and evidence to make a compelling case. When using this framework, we talk about the problem of unsafe abortion within the greater context of public health and development programs designed to improve health.

Abortion is a common reproductive health experience. Most women around the world will be sexually active and fertile for up to 40 years and therefore may want to (and have a right to) control if and when they have children. If a woman has an unwanted pregnancy and is unable to access a safe, legal abortion, she may resort to an unsafe procedure, which risks her health and life. This is a preventable public health problem. Solutions exist right now that countries can and should implement.

Examples of public health messaging:

- Unsafe abortion is a public health concern, especially for young women.
- Unsafe abortion is one of the four main causes of maternal deaths globally—this is a public health concern in our country for women and young girls.

Messaging

Every organization should have a list of key messages that spokespeople can repeat over and over. Repetition is key to getting your message across to your audience. Each key message should be just 1-3 sentences.

There are four simple messaging rules for getting people to understand and absorb what you're trying to tell them.

- 1. Keep it short:** Don't try to squeeze too much information into one point. Less is more most times. You may know a lot, but you don't need to share everything you know all at once.
- 2. Keep it simple:** Whenever possible, try to write your message in simple, everyday language.
 - Round your numbers. Say 48%, not 48.2%. Say "more than 6,000 people," not "6,100 people."
 - Talk about fractions rather than percentages—for example, one half rather than 48%.
 - Talk about women rather than populations.
- 3. Keep it concise:** You should be able to deliver a key message in 7-8 seconds.
 - By being concise, you have more control over the message your audience hears.
 - If you deliver a long, rambling answer to a reporter, you lose control over the message and they will pick the words they think are most interesting, which probably isn't your core message.
- 4. Keep it real:** You're talking about real people with real experiences. In addition to using short, simple language, your argument should be relevant to people's lives.

MORE MESSAGING TIPS

- Be judicious with numbers: Don't overload your audience with numbers. The fewer the better.
- Avoid jargon: You may know what you are talking about, but that does not mean your audience will. Use simple language.
- Stay away from acronyms: Public health and development professionals LOVE acronyms, but they do not work for your audience.
- Check your facts: Statistics change over time. Keep going back to review the sources of your information and update as needed.

SECTION 2: ELEVATOR SPEECHES

An elevator speech or an elevator “pitch” is a very short speech that introduces your issue in a way the listener can understand in just a brief period of time (the time it might take to ride an elevator with someone and deliver this speech). It’s also a way of hooking people into wanting to know more about your issue. The length of this speech can differ depending on your audience. For example, about 15-30 seconds is usually good if you’re introducing yourself somewhere, introducing your issue on a panel discussion, or meeting briefly with a public official (perhaps in an actual elevator!). But a three-minute speech may be more appropriate if you’re on a panel and will have a bit more time to explain your point.

4 parts of an elevator speech

Hook: A statement that captures the listener’s attention and makes them want to listen to what you are saying. For example, this could be your own personal advocacy story or a story about someone you know who had an unsafe abortion.

Body: This is where you build your case or argument. The body of your speech establishes your credibility and includes three main elements:

- Problem: A clear statement of the main issue or problem
- Supporting statement: Why your audience should care about this problem or why it matters. Is there a story or fact you can use to support your problem statement?
- Solution: What can be done about the problem?

Conclusion: This simply summarizes the three main points from your body.

Close and call for action: What do you want your audience to do or what is the way forward? Is there a call to action? Should someone do something in response to your speech?

SECTION 3: TALKING TO THE MEDIA

The media is a tool or vehicle for you to get your message across to your audience and to share expertise about your organization's issues, programs and advocacy work.

The media itself is NOT your audience. The end consumers of a media outlet's products are your audience—the readers, viewers or listeners of a particular publication or program.

Preparation before talking to the media is crucial. Never take a cold call from a reporter seeking comment. You can always call back. Even if it is just 10-15 minutes later, that gives you time to write down some key messages. Remember you can always ask the reporter for their deadline, say you are busy at the moment, take some time to prepare and then call back.

Tips for talking to the media

- **Don't be afraid to refer:** If you are not the right person, then refer the reporter to someone who knows about the issue.
- **Know the reporter:** If you're able to, take some time to look up the reporter's name and get an idea of their writing.
- **Anticipate questions:** Think about what the reporter may want to know. Have there been recent events that have sparked this interview request?
- **Gather data:** Make sure you have the correct data and can talk about it accurately and with concise, easy-to-understand statements.
- **Schedule time to prepare:** Set aside 15-30 minutes before any media contact, when possible, to review your messages and to prepare yourself mentally and emotionally. If you are not comfortable or do not know the topic you are being interviewed about, it will show. The story the reporter writes may be skewed, you may be misquoted, or you may not be quoted at all—and this is a lost opportunity to positively represent your organization.
- **Prepare key messages:** Have 3-4 key messages ready to get your point across to the reporter—or ask your organization's press officer to help you with the messaging.

During the interview

- **Stick to your message:** Do not be tempted to "educate" the reporter.
- **Watch what you say:** There is really no such thing as "off the record." Even if a reporter assures you they won't publish some things, anything you say could end up published.
- **Give up on abstract ideas:** Use only concrete examples that people can relate to or easily visualize.

Tools for getting your key messages to the reporter

- **Flagging or headlining:** Keep stressing the key message with introductory statements like:
 - "But the important thing to note is..."
 - "The key issue is..."
 - "The one essential point I would like to make is..."

- **Repetition:** Reporters take notes throughout an interview. If you keep repeating your key messages, you will help the reporter prioritize what goes into the story. However, if you keep talking beyond your key messages—using long sentences, jargon and acronyms—the reporter is going to have to take a lot of notes and may end up with no clear idea of your main points and no good quotes from you.
- **Bridging:** This is the art of bypassing a reporter’s question to get your message across. There are no guarantees that a reporter will stick to the story during an interview. If a reporter goes off script and tries to lead you down an unexpected path, you can use a transitional phrase or sentence to “bridge” back to your key messages. Bridging can neutralize negative questions and focus the interview back on your key points. Examples of bridging phrases are:
 - “That is an interesting question, but I think the real issue here is...”
 - “What’s important is...”
 - “The point is...”
 - “What I really want to focus on is...”
 - “That question is important, but doesn’t really focus on the core issue...”

Tips for print, radio and television interviews

PRINT

- **Take your time:** Listen to the question and think about your answer. You do not need to answer the questions immediately.
- **Personalize your message:** Do not be afraid to use real-life details to help paint a picture and illustrate your points.
- **Don’t ignore questions:** If you do not have an answer, then tell the reporter. If you do not understand the question, say so and ask them to rephrase it. If you feel the reporter has asked a negative question, then reframe it by focusing on the positive side of the issue or bridge to a more appropriate answer. Remember to use the bridging technique!
- **You have control:** If you feel the reporter is trying to guide you to a particular answer or get a reaction from you, change the direction by simply answering the question you want to answer.
- **Don’t be afraid of the silence:** Sometimes a reporter will remain silent after you answer because they may think you will say more. Don’t. Once you have finished answering the question, stop talking. Use the silence to breathe deeply.
- **Don’t be afraid of ending the interview:** If you think the reporter has changed direction and you are uncomfortable, just tell the reporter that you have to end the interview. If this does happen, tell your organization’s press officer as soon as possible so they can follow up.

RADIO

- **Prepare your interview space:** If you are at the office or at home, turn off cellphones and background noise and make sure you have a glass of water nearby.
- **Be on time:** If you are calling the station, being on time is essential.
- **Answer questions concisely:** Keep your sentences short and use simple words. You want to provide a brief sound bite. While in print media you get 2-3 sentences, in radio you only get 10-20 seconds.

- **Sound energized:** Put some energy into your answers and try not to speak in a flat tone.
- **Keep track of time:** Make sure you know how much time you have. Most interviews are short, and you need to get your message across quickly.
- **Personalize your message:** Do not be afraid to use real-life details to help paint a picture and illustrate your points.
- **Don't ignore questions:** If you do not have an answer, then tell the reporter. Remember to use the bridging technique.

TELEVISION

- **Watch what you wear:** Some outfits just don't look good on camera—or distract from your face and your message. Try to wear solid colors and avoid white. For example, a lighter-colored solid shirt (no patterns) with a darker jacket is a good choice.
- **Stick to your key messages:** Keep your statements short and concise.
- **Be mindful of your body language:** Keep eye contact with the interviewer, do not look at the camera, keep breathing and try to stay calm.
- **Talk slowly:** To ensure what you're saying can be understood, speak just a bit more slowly and clearly than you normally would—and practice beforehand.
- **Maintain a listening face:** Try not to look angry or bored. Settle on a facial expression you are comfortable with, like smiling, and stick with it.



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