

# **BREAK THE SILENCE: TELLING YOUR STORY**

A RESOURCE FOR **SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE**



**women's aid**  
until women & children are safe

# BREAK THE SILENCE

A resource for **survivors** of **domestic abuse**

After living through domestic abuse, some women may wish to speak out and tell others about their experiences.

This can be incredibly powerful and positive - in doing so they can bust stereotypes about who experiences abuse, help others recognise abuse in their own relationships, and show that there is life after abuse.

However, it is also important to recognise that speaking out can leave women feeling exposed, and can bring about unexpected consequences. We've put together some tips and points to consider, to help you make the right decision about whether and how you tell your story.

- ▶ You should **never** feel **forced** or **pressured** to speak out.
- ▶ You have the **right** to change your mind at **any time**.



# TELLING YOUR STORY

## Speaking out

### Why do you want to speak out?

There are many reasons why women want to speak out about their experiences. Often the main reason is to seek support from others e.g. from friends, family, police or domestic abuse services. If you are reading this and need immediate support please visit:

▶ [womensaid.org.uk/information-support/](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/)

Later on in their journey, some women may want to continue to share their story in order to raise awareness, campaign for change, inspire others, and/or because telling their story can be part of the recovery process.

It's important to think through why you want to speak out, and to manage your expectations. This is not to lessen the power of your story, but to recognise that speaking out has its challenges and limits, and think through what you can put in place to ensure your personal well-being.



### Deciding when you are **ready** to speak out

It is important to think through your safety and wellbeing when deciding if you are ready to speak out about your experience. Only you know when the right time is for you or what the right format is. Read on for some of the most important things to think through when deciding on your next steps.

# SAFETY AND WELLBEING



## Physical safety

One of the most important things to consider when thinking about speaking out is your safety. This is about both your physical safety and the risk of retaliation, as well as your emotional well-being.

## Physical safety

You are the expert in your own experience, and the best judge of how safe you (and your child/ren) will be in different situations. Spending some time considering some of the potential consequences of speaking out is important, including:

- ▶ The potential for the perpetrator to find out you are talking about your experiences
- ▶ You (and your child/ren) being identified as experiencing domestic abuse by people in your community
- ▶ By association the perpetrator being known or inadvertently exposed

- ▶ Your location being revealed accidentally
- ▶ Take some time to think about how your perpetrator might react if he found out you are telling your story in public.
- ▶ Is there a risk he might retaliate? Or his friends and family?
- ▶ Do you have a safety plan in place to manage this? What do you need to feel safer?

[You can find tips on how to make a safety plan here.](#)

## Emotional wellbeing

While for many women speaking out can be a healing and empowering experience, it can also be difficult to relive past experiences. Being aware of the potential impact is really important, and thinking through how you can prioritise your wellbeing and set your own boundaries is key.

# SAFETY AND WELLBEING

## Emotional wellbeing

Some of the **difficulties** you might want to think through include:

- ▶ If telling your story has an emotional impact, what do you have in place to help you manage this?
- ▶ Sharing your story will inspire many. But there are still many harmful attitudes about domestic abuse e.g. victim blaming, disbelief and judgement, which can be really tough to deal with. What might you need to help you deal with any hurtful and upsetting comments?
- ▶ Online spaces can be especially difficult in regard to negative comments and responses. Are you aware of how to stay safe online? e.g. how to protect your accounts, deal with online trolls, how to disable comments on social media posts.

You can find more information about digital and online safety here:

▷ [womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/onlinesafety/](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/onlinesafety/)

- ▶ When speaking out, people may want to ask questions about your experience. Some of these questions may be about very personal experiences, or potentially asking for graphic details. How might you feel if this happened? It's important to set your own boundaries – it is your story and you choose how much you want to share.
- ▶ Often when women speak out they find that other survivors will reach out to them and share their experiences. Do you feel ready to listen to someone else's potentially very upsetting story? It's important to know your own boundaries and prioritise your own self-care, and to know where to signpost others for help.

# SAFETY AND WELLBEING

## Emotional wellbeing

► Once you've shared your story, it is difficult to take back or to control the audience or context in which it is shared. This is especially true if shared online, or if your story was recorded in some way e.g. you shared your story in a video. This is why it's really important to think everything through carefully before making the decision to speak out.

## Support

Getting the right support and looking after yourself before, during and after telling your story is really important. Sometimes sharing our experiences can be part of our recovery, but even if we feel strong there are always things that will affect us or cause us to relive the most difficult parts of our experience.

- You should **never** feel **forced** or **pressured** to speak out.

## Self-care

Below are some questions you might want to ask yourself before speaking out:

- What does self-care look like for you? What healthy coping strategies do you have to help in difficult situations? Some tips for self-care available here:
- ▷ [womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/surviving-after-abuse/](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/surviving-after-abuse/)
- Who could you reach out to and ask for support if things become difficult? This could be a friend, family or a support service.
- If you are asked to speak at an event or to a journalist, ask what support is available afterwards?

# LIBEL AND THE LAW

## Some things to consider

If your perpetrator has not been convicted in a criminal court, there is a risk that he may attempt to sue you for 'defamation' if you speak out publicly e.g. claim there is no proof the abuse occurred, and that his reputation is being damaged by you speaking out. These allegations could be deeply distressing, and the onus would be on you to prove that the abuse occurred. To avoid this, you can tell your story anonymously.

## Other things to consider

Below are some other things you might want to bear in mind if you have been asked to share your story:

- Do you feel you've been asked to share your story in a meaningful way? It's important to think through who is asking you to share your story and why. Consider if you can be involved in setting the purpose or explaining what you want to get out of it.

- If you are being asked to travel (e.g. to an event or to meet a journalist) or incur any other costs such as childcare, interpreters or other accessibility costs – the organisers should pay. They may also be able to offer some kind of payment for your time, or opportunity for skill development.
- Is the place you're being asked to speak in suitable? Consider how you've been asked to speak and if this feels right for you E.g. is the venue accessible, can you bring someone along for support, are there interpreters if needed?

- You have the **right** to change your mind at **any time**.



# HOW TO TELL **YOUR STORY**

## **Guidelines** and **tips**

If you have decided you feel ready to share your story, the next thing to consider is how you want to do it, and whether you'd prefer to do it anonymously (e.g. using a pseudonym) or under your own name. The following are examples of ways in which women choose to speak out:

### In your **community**

For many women the first place they begin sharing their experiences is with the people around them e.g. friends, family. This is the most common way women speak out. This is often done in person, through informal conversations.

### **Online**

Some women may choose to share via online mediums like Facebook or other types of social media, personal blogs, or on specialist platforms like Women's Aid's Survivors Forum.

Some groups have privacy functions where you create a user name and no one knows who you are.

### The **media**

Some women choose to tell their story to journalists. This could be a local or national journalist, and the story could appear in a newspaper, a magazine, or on radio or TV news programmes. You could choose to do this with or without anonymity (e.g. real name/ pseudonym).

### Through an **organisation**

Some specialist domestic abuse organisations have opportunities for survivors to speak out. This could involve being a spokesperson, getting involved in campaigns, providing your story as a case study, or writing an article for a newsletter or blog post.

# HOW TO TELL **YOUR STORY**

## **Guidelines** and **tips**

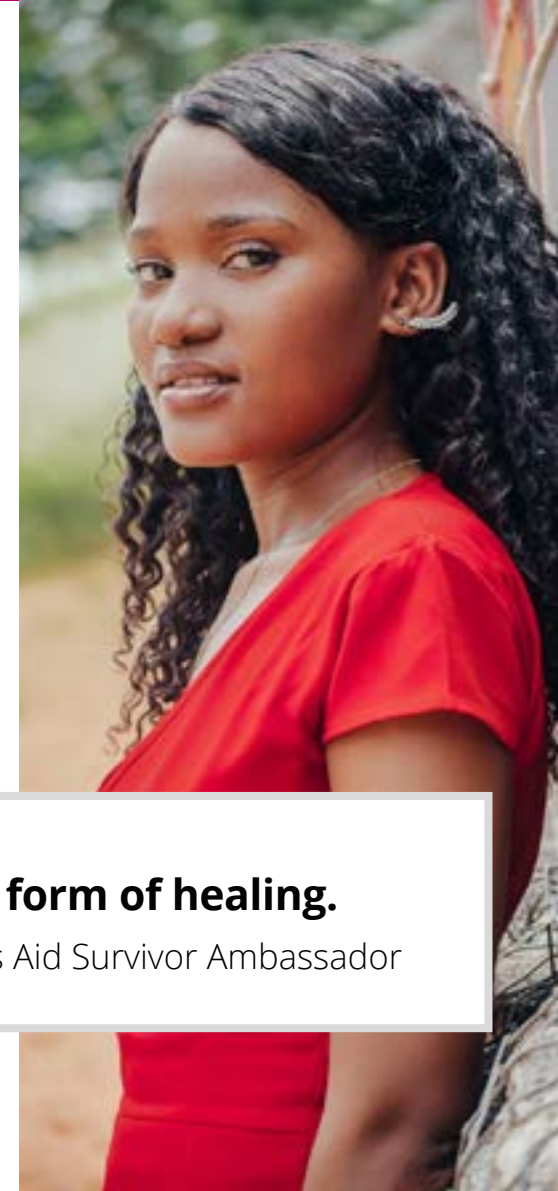
### At **events**

Sometimes survivors speak at specialist events about domestic abuse, and there are often local and/or national opportunities around calendar events such as the UN 16 days of activism against gender-based violence in November, or International Women's Day in March.

Each of these have different implications for your safety and well-being, and it's important you pick the one that works best for you.

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For me, **activism** is a **form of healing**.  
- **Saliha Rashid**, Women's Aid Survivor Ambassador



# HOW TO TELL **YOUR STORY**

## **Guidance** for **speaking** with the **media**

### Speaking with the **media**

If you would like to tell your story to the media, it's best to do so with the support of a media professional from an organisation like Women's Aid, or another domestic abuse charity. The media professional, or 'press officer', will carry out a safety and needs assessment, to discuss how best to share your story with the media (e.g. if they recommend also discussing using a pseudonym and your boundaries). They will also support you throughout your media interview, and ensure that the journalist sticks to pre-agreed boundaries.

Finally, the media professional can request copy approval for print interviews, which means you can read and agree your quotes before it is published. We would not advise survivors to tell their stories to the media without the support of a trained press officer.

### Media **tips**

- ▶ Don't rush into media work – take the time to nurture your emotional wellbeing first. There's no deadline – many survivors wait several years before sharing their story.
- ▶ What issues are you passionate about, and most want to raise awareness about?
- ▶ It's best to approach media work with the support of a trained press officer from a domestic abuse charity. Journalists can be pushy, and working with a press officer means you have someone to support you and ensure you don't get taken advantage of.
- ▶ Think about your boundaries – what do you not want to talk about? Discuss this with your press officer ahead of any interviews.
- ▶ What type of media work do you want to do? This can be anything from providing a one sentence anonymous quote for an article, to a live interview on national TV.

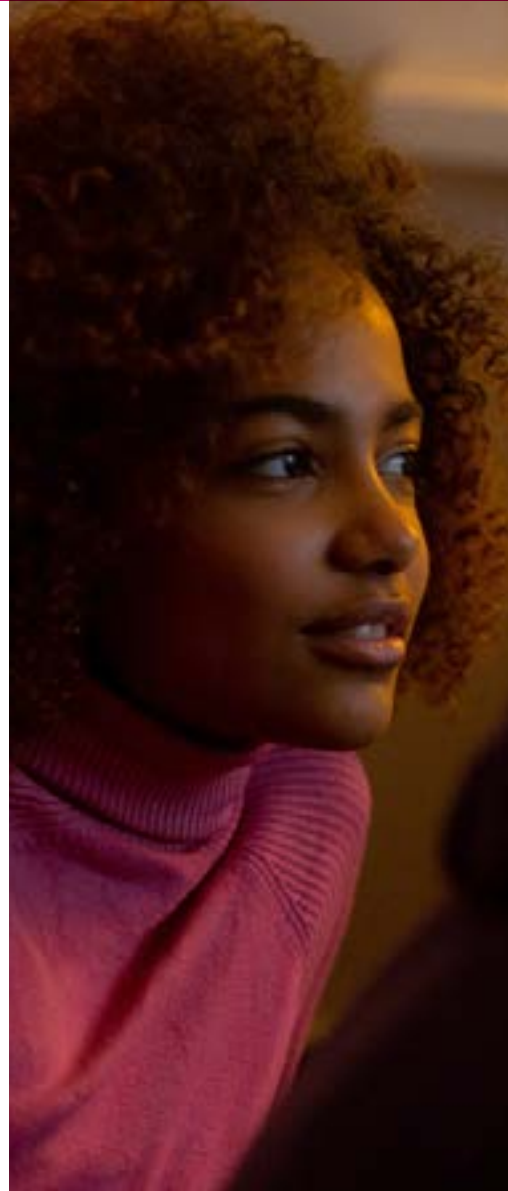
# HOW TO TELL **YOUR STORY**

## **Guidance** for **speaking** with the **media**

- ▶ Your press officer should do a safety assessment with you – if he or she doesn't, raise it with them. This is to determine if it is safe to tell your story, and if you should use a pseudonym. It's also an opportunity to discuss your emotional wellbeing and establish boundaries for particular topics.

### **Speaking out** with Women's Aid or your local service

Do get in touch with Women's Aid or your local service if you are interested in telling your story. We often work with survivors who speak out on different issues, and in different formats. Please visit our [Survivor Engagement – Expert by Experience webpage](#) to find out more.



# WE'RE HERE FOR **YOU**

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Visit our **website** for more info



For more **information** and **support**, follow the link below and visit our website:

**[Women's Aid website](#)**

