



INSTITUTE ON WOMEN
& CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Full Disclosure: A Guide to Speaking Out About Your Life in the Media & Public Forums

**By the Members of the Women's Advocacy Project
A Project of the Women's Prison Association**

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ABOUT WPA

The Women's Prison Association is a service and advocacy organization committed to helping women with criminal justice histories realize new possibilities for themselves and their families. Our services make it possible for women to obtain work, housing, and health care; to rebuild their families; and to participate fully in civic life. Through the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice, WPA pursues a rigorous policy, advocacy, and research agenda to bring new perspectives to public debates on women and criminal justice.

ABOUT THE WOMEN'S ADVOCACY PROJECT

The Women's Advocacy Project (WAP) trains emerging leaders to craft solutions to the problems facing women in the criminal justice system. We are a diverse group of women who have had direct experience with the criminal justice system and other public systems such as child welfare, homelessness, and public assistance. Our group includes women who are college students, social service professionals, and dedicated advocates. We work together to transform our personal experiences into strategies for change. WAP is a project of the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice at the Women's Prison Association.

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As dedicated advocates, speaking out is one way we make change in the world. Our direct experiences with the criminal justice, homelessness, and the child welfare systems give us a unique perspective on public debates about these issues. When we speak about our personal experiences, people listen and understand important issues in new ways. Still, especially in the internet age, there can be drawbacks to sharing personal information in a public forum, even for a good cause.

While there is a lot of information available about how to be an effective public speaker or media spokesperson, there is little to guide someone trying to weigh the benefits and risks of taking advantage of these opportunities. This guide is intended to help people who are thinking about sharing personal stories in a public way. We hope it will help you make the best decisions for yourself and for the causes you care about.

Why Speak Out?

We have had experienced both benefits and drawbacks in speaking out in public about our lives.

Some of the **benefits** of speaking out have been:

- Getting results! It is rewarding when we speak out about an issue and something changes as a result.
- Giving voice to issues that are not often talked about. We know these issues because we have lived them.
- Being a “reality check” – through our experiences we can let people know what’s really going on.
- Creating dialogue – when we speak out and

“If it’s an issue that concerns you, and speaking out can do something, then it’s good to speak out”
- Julia

“I speak out to be an example to my children”
- Jackie

become associated with an issue, people want to talk to us to continue the conversation.

- Personal growth – we have grown through speaking out about issues we are passionate about. For some of us, experience speaking out

has also been helpful in advancing our careers.

Some of the **drawbacks** some of us have experienced from speaking out have been:

- Not having control over how widely a public appearance or media story will spread via the Internet.
- A long interview is boiled down to a sound bite or small quote, and not always our best quote.
- We have felt, in retrospect, that we disclosed too much.
- Some family members and employers have disapproved of our decision to disclose our personal stories in the media.

“I spoke to a reporter for two hours and all she mentioned was my drug use.”
- Cathy

Making Public Speaking and Media Opportunities Work For You

When you are asked to appear in the media or a public forum, consider the benefits and risks before you say yes.

Ask yourself:

- How will this appearance benefit the issue you are working on?
- How will this appearance benefit you, personally or professionally?
- Are there any risks to your family, children, or employment status if you speak out about certain personal issues?
- If this does not seem like a good fit for you, is there someone else you would recommend?

Know what you are and are not comfortable speaking about publicly.

Every person has different issues they do and do not want to speak about publicly. These are examples of things that some of us are comfortable talking about publicly, and others are not: nature of the crimes for which we were incarcerated, HIV/AIDS status, histories of domestic violence, sexual orientation, details of past substance abuse, affects of our incarceration on our children... the list goes on and on.

Only you can determine what are okay topics for discussion, and what is off limits. Take some time to think about what you are and are not willing to speak about. This will help ensure that you are not caught off guard should one of these topics come up.

“I like to say, ‘Yes, I had a substance abuse issue,’ but that’s it. I don’t go into details.”

- Lucy

You will also need to consider how you will respond if you are asked about something you do not want to speak about. Here are some general pointers:

- o Be professional and keep it positive (don’t get upset).
- o Be mindful of your body language.
- o Gently steer the conversation back to a preferred topic OR ignore the question and make a point more central to your purpose.
- o Answer a personal question with a more general response. (Example: Question: “Tell me, did your imprisonment result from you being abused as a child?” Answer: “What we know is that well over 80% of women who are in prison have suffered some kind of abuse, so this is a very important issue to consider.”)

Finally, remember that the internet is forever. A news story that features your name and details about your past can be “Googled” by a potential employer five years from now. Consider what you do or do not want out there, thinking not only about your current situation but the future as well.

For public speaking events, find out as much as possible before you say yes.

Some of the questions you might want to ask the event organizers include:

- What are the goals of the event? What perspectives are you expected to bring?
- Who are the other speakers/panelists? Find out about their viewpoints and backgrounds.
- What is the tone of the event? Is it a friendly discussion, or a lively debate?
- Will you be able to speak to the other panelists/speakers before the event? Will you get to see questions you will be asked ahead of the event?
- Who is the audience?
- What is the structure/format of the program? How long will you have to speak? Is there a moderator? A question and answer time?
- Will there be media at the event?
- Is there a stipend provided to speakers? (Don't be afraid to ask!)

Clarify how you want to be identified.

For example, do you want to be identified as “Valerie, who served 10 years in prison,” “Valerie, a case manager working with youth,” “Valerie, an advocate for prison reform,” “Valerie, mother of three,” or some combination of these?

Be sure to make your preference known to the event organizer or journalist to avoid being surprised or represented in a way you do not wish to be.

“I didn’t even use my real name.”

- WAP Member

Prepare, prepare, prepare.

You can greatly reduce surprises and nerves by preparing before you speak out.

- If you can, find examples of the journalist’s past work to get a sense of their approach.
- Gather any facts you may want to be able to cite during your talk/interview.
- Identify the main “take-aways” you want your audience to get out of what you have to say.
- Practice your responses to uncomfortable questions with a friend or colleague.
- Get a good night’s sleep and eat a decent meal before you speak out.
- Find a breathing exercise or ritual that helps you calm your nerves.
- Bring water, taking a sip gives you time to slow down and collect your thoughts.
- Bring notes or index cards to help you keep on message.

“It’s OK to say, ‘That’s a good question, however I’ll get back to you, I don’t want to give you the wrong information.’”

-Theresa

Things to remember when speaking with the media:

- With journalists, assume that everything is “on the record.”
- Don’t get too comfortable – remember that this is an interview, not a friendly chat, and anything you say could wind up being used in the story.
- Keep a record of your media appearances – they can be put on your resume.