

Colored and Constrained Hues
Exploring the Depiction of Gender-Based Violence in South Asian News Media

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the representation of gender-based violence (GBV) in Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi news media through the lenses of sensationalism and victim-blaming. Using the vivid metaphor of a color spectrum, this analysis delves into how media frames, language, and imagery contribute to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, rape myths, and the stigmatization of survivors. The narrative is anchored by personal reflections of the author, who navigates the patriarchal landscape of Karachi, Pakistan. Drawing attention to a tragic incident involving Noor Mukaddam, the paper dissects how media sensationalism transforms real-life tragedies into spectacles, overshadowing the gravity of the crimes. Examining specific cases and headlines, the study reveals the sensationalist tactics of attention-grabbing language, vivid imagery, and the creation of a spectacle around certain types of GBV. Simultaneously, the victim-blaming frame is scrutinized for its role in shifting responsibility onto survivors, discouraging them from reporting, and fostering a culture of shame. Victim-blaming language is exposed through strategic details being deleted, euphemisms, and the 'good girl–bad girl dichotomy,' which perpetuates stereotypes and diverts attention from the true root of the social problem. The paper concludes with a call for transformative narratives in South Asian media, emphasizing the need for thematic framing, intersectional analyses, and a shift away from sensationalist and victim-blaming practices. Ultimately, the paper envisions a reimagined color wheel where empowering narratives replace debilitating hues, fostering justice and institutional change.

I was never allowed to walk down a street alone. Memories like walking back from an ice-cream shop with a cone and a strawberry scoop in hand or rushing to the next block to pick up groceries were memories I never had. Living in Pakistan as a young girl was far too dangerous – walking alone opened the possibility of leering stares, unwanted groping, and in some cases, rape. And if the latter was to happen, it would be my fault – if I had chosen to walk outside alone, I had chosen my fate.

At least that’s how the media and wider culture described it.

I remember what happened to Noor like it happened yesterday. On the 20th of July 2021, 27-year-old Noor Mukaddam, a girl who grew up in the same place I did, was raped, murdered, and beheaded by her ex-boyfriend, Zahir Jaffer (Amanat, 2021). Noor was forced to endure one of the most horrific experiences I’ve ever heard of. But even in death, the Pakistani media made a spectacle out of her experience and blamed her for what happened to her. Phrases such as “accused tortured Noor with knuckleduster before beheading her” (Azeem, 2021), “man beheaded childhood friend Noor Mukaddam who refused to marry him” (Amanat, 2021), and “this will ultimately happen with Pakistani liberals” (Amanat, 2021), were plastered all over the news. The media shamed her, declaring that she had chosen her fate.

Cases of gender-based-violence (GBV)¹ like Noor’s murder are presented in South Asian news coverage through a variety of distinct media frames and rhetorical approaches. Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi news media use sensationalism and victim-blaming frames, employing specific language, images, headlines, and euphemisms that reinforce gender-stereotypes and trivialize experiences. The implications of these two media approaches to GBV are multi-faceted: Not only do they perpetuate traditional hegemonic narratives about survivors of GBV, but they also trigger survivors and present cases as episodic rather than thematic — isolated rather than contextualized — diminishing the extent of the problem.

I’m someone who has always perceived the world through colors. Residing in the vibrant yet often dangerous milieu of Karachi, I use thinking through color to understand the nuances of the patriarchal society I grew up in, especially when cases like Noor’s are broadcasted on news media. This personal affinity for color-thinking emerges as a valuable tool in unraveling the complex spectrum of GBV cases depicted in the media. Exploring this color continuum of GBV cases in South Asia² is necessary to understand the lived experiences of women, because these “media portrayals of violence against women provide a potential site for the reproduction of gender inequality” (Easteal et al, 2014, p. 106). In certain instances, the South Asian color wheel is dominated by bold shades — vivacious indigo and eye-catching tangerine — reminiscent of graphic details that transform real-life tragedies into sensational spectacles. This phenomenon aligns with the sensationalism frame, a concept examined in Part I of this paper. The media's

¹ The United Nations High Commissioner uses the phrase gender-based violence to specifically highlight violence that targets individuals or groups based on their gender, including human trafficking, forced prostitution, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, and hate crimes (Cuklanz and Moorti, 5). Although GBV can target men and the LGBTQ+ community as well as women, this paper will solely focus on the experience of female-identifying individuals, and in most cases will refer to gender-based violence as GBV.

² The South Asian media coverage that this paper will analyze will be exclusively focused on Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi print newspapers and online news, and will not include television, literature, or film.

vivid portrayal, akin to the exuberant indigo, vividly highlights the explicit, creating a spectacle that overshadows the gravity of the crime itself. Conversely, there are moments when the colors are subdued — like purple fading into melancholy mauve — mirroring the silencing of survivor voices. This shift reflects the victim-blaming frame, dissected in Part II of this paper. The melancholy mauve encapsulates the hushed tones surrounding survivors, emphasizing the subtle shaming tactics employed by media that contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality.

The South Asian news color spectrum lacks the varied hues that symbolize the multi-faceted experiences of gender-based-violence. It sensationalized and blamed Noor, and if I walked alone on a road and were to succumb to the unimaginable, it could potentially do the same to me, too. By infusing color into the analytical process, I hope to elicit a more visceral and empathetic response, fostering a deeper connection to the individual experiences of women like Noor that are painted into the chromatic narratives of South Asian media. As I coalesce my own experience as a Pakistani woman with my research on South Asian news coverage, I will delve into how exactly the news depicts distinctive cases of GBV, and the implications of such representations.

Bold Hues of Distortion: Unveiling Sensationalism in South Asian Media

Sensationalism is at the crux of news media — it represents the entertainment value. Media history specialists Gretchen Sonderlund and Amanda Frisken state that sensationalism is a combination of striking content and elements that are used to attract an audience (Sonderlund and Frisken, 1). These elements can include graphic headlines, inflamed rhetoric, and startling imagery. The main aim of the sensationalism frame is to use visual and textual techniques to elicit an effect from an audience: to provoke them, anger them, rouse them, or make them sympathetic (Sonderlund and Frisken, 2022, p. 1). In the context of media history, “crime weeklies” were the first forms of media to use sensationalism on a large scale — they used images and graphic details to illustrate crime scenes (Sonderlund and Frisken, 2022, p. 3). And today, with the dominance of striking shades in the color spectrum of the South Asian media representation of GBV, sensationalist tropes such as lurid details attract audiences. Further, sensationalism distracts audiences from acknowledging the structural factors that cause GBV, promote rape myths, and trigger survivors.

One of the most common ways South Asian newspapers use sensationalism is through headlines. According to journalist Amrita Ghosh, in the Indian media industry, headlines compete to grab the most eyeballs, and keeping the sentiments of the survivor in mind is “sacrificed at the altar of TRP ratings and sales” (Ghosh, 2019). An example headline that epitomizes her claim is as follows: “The Rohtak Gang-rape Horror Gets Uglier: Victim’s Food Pipe was Ripped Out and Marks Found on Her Chest” (Ghosh, 2019). This headline sensationalizes by using violent details about the victim’s food-pipe, and additionally presents this GBV case as one-off and graphic, framing it as an isolated incident. The portrayal of this case demonstrates the media ‘episodic vs. thematic’ concept. When GBV cases are presented in the media as isolated events, with a focus on details of crimes and individual behaviors as shown in the headline above, the journalism takes an isolationist approach known as episodic framing (Tasneem, 2022, p. 16). Media experts suggest that employing a thematic frame instead, where

the reporting focuses on a contextual narrative to address the whole cycle of GBV, from prevention to prosecution, is what actually helps curb cases (Tasneem, 2022, p. 16).

Another example of a sensationalist headline in South Asian media is “Uncle Turns Monster, Rapes 18-month year old Baby” (Feminism in India, 2021). In using the euphemism “monster,” this headline implies that these men are barbaric and rare, taking away from the ubiquity of sexual violence. The term additionally leads to the development of what a “monster” looks like, which often aligns with caste discrimination in South Asia (Feminism in India, 2021) and makes it difficult for survivors to speak out about “respectable” perpetrators. This sensationalist trope therefore makes it harder for all survivors to be believed and promotes the stereotype of perpetrators fitting into a singular category.



Figure 1: Stock Images used in Bangladeshi News Coverage of GBV (Mowri and Bailey).

Aside from graphic headlines and euphemisms, sensationalist media tropes use imagery and graphics that impose certain narratives to displace the reality of GBV. South Asian media tends to use stock images that depict a woman cowering and hiding her face, which reinforce gendered prejudices that women are weak and require rescue (Som, 2020). Figure 1 shows common images Bangladeshi media uses when reporting cases of violence against women. By exposing audience members to images of victimized women, the media further fuels stereotypes about women being helpless, and ignores the more important question of how perpetrators can be stopped (Mowri and Bailey, 2022, p. 272). Such images can also be triggering for people who have faced abuse, forcing them to relive the horror in their minds, furthering their trauma, increasing feelings of loneliness, and impacting their mental health (Som, 2020). Research indicates that articles accompanied by photographs, “especially those depicting victimization,” enjoy longer reading time and audience attention — demonstrating the impacts of the sensationalism frame (Mowri and Bailey, 2022, p. 272). Certain Pakistani news articles even use photographs of survivors, which disclose otherwise private identities and further create a spectacle out of the crime (Ali and Pasha, 2022, 10)

Another sensationalist pattern found within images used in South Asian media is the visual depiction of perpetrators: They are either completely absent, or a menacingly overbearing presence (Som, 2020). The latter claim is exemplified by Figure 2, where eyes are staring down on a survivor. This could be interpreted to represent perpetrators fixating their eyes on women, or even as the wider South Asian society judging the survivor. Either way, these types of images are triggering, and employ the sensationalist strategies of turning a “grievous crime into a media circus,” thus resembling entertainment (Sonderlund and Frisken, 2022, p. 17).



Figure 2: An Image of Eyes Staring at a Survivor in Indian News Media (Som).

Another crucial component of sensationalism is the concept of very specific cases of GBV sparking outrage. Paromita Vohra, a documentary filmmaker whose work focuses on gender in South Asia, states that “the rape cases that get sensationalized have certain elements in common” — they are violent cases that are

accompanied by death and perpetrated by strangers (Singh, 2020). According to India’s National Crime Records Bureau, 94.2 percent of registered rape cases in 2019 were perpetrated by individuals known to the victims. But mainstream media coverage tended to ignore these cases, due to “victims surviving their crimes and the details of the attacks not being obscenely graphic in nature” (Singh, 2020). It is therefore clear that the sensationalism used in the media has far-reaching consequences: By making graphic cases hyper-visible and more common cases invisible, most women in South Asia remain unaware of the different forms GBV can take.

I remember this being the case with me, too. Growing up, I thought one could only be raped by a by stranger and that cases of GBV had to be extremely violent, with a victim either dying or being close to death. This is what the newspapers fed the public — only certain types of cases made it to the media. The sensationalist media tactics of attention-grabbing headlines, vivid imagery, and the creation of a spectacle around specific types of GBV, are deeply ingrained within the South Asian media spectrum. By exclusively spotlighting the conspicuous crimsons and bold blues on the color wheel, South Asian news coverage sidesteps cases that may require greater institutional focus and also distorts the presentation of these incidents. It is not merely the sensationalist choice of cases, but also how the media presents and frames these incidents: It perpetuates a cycle of misinformation, stigmatization, and a skewed understanding of GBV in the South Asian public consciousness.

Muted Tones of Blame: Illuminating Victim-Blaming Dynamics in South Asian Media

The second core media frame that applies to the South Asian news portrayal of gender-based-violence is victim-blaming. According to distinguished Professor Rae Taylor, victim blaming is defined as placing the blame of the perpetration of violence onto the victim, a narrative to which female victims are particularly vulnerable (Taylor, 2009, p. 24). In the context of the media, victim-blaming tactics predominantly include the use of unnecessary details about the victim and strategic language to place the burden of responsibility on them. Tactics can also

include the deletion of information about perpetrators to absolve them of their guilt, placing the blame on survivors. According to Taylor's research, victim-blaming is the main barrier to social change with respect to GBV, as it diverts attention from the true root of the social problem, which is the abuse of women by men (Taylor, 2009, p. 22). When examining the specific language and frames of responsibility used in the South Asian media color spectrum, it is apparent that the glistening pastel hues that could represent survivors as strong and empowered are dim. The luminescent shades are muted, with the responsibility of GBV falling on survivors, thereby exacerbating trauma, reinforcing rape myths, and discouraging women from fighting back.

According to Indian journalist and activist Purnima Singh, the victim-blaming frame is one that is inherent within Indian news articles about violence, as most articles either partially or entirely shift the blame onto survivors (Singh, 2019). An example of this is a headline that states "Woman Gang-raped in Odisha on Suspicion of Having Illicit Affair" (Singh, 2019). By providing a motive — the suspicion of an illicit affair — this phrasing in an Odisha newspaper ends up justifying the horrific act of gang-rape. The survivor is now viewed with judgment and stigma for a suspected affair, potentially preventing more women from sharing their stories. Through giving reasons as to why a particular case might have occurred, South Asian media builds a dangerous culture which holds survivors responsible for the crime rather than the perpetrators (Singh, 2019).

Furthermore, another example of phrasing that perpetuates victim-blaming structures is the mainstream media statement, "Indian woman admits to being raped" (Singh, 2019). Words like "admits" or "confesses" imply that the woman had a choice or agency in the matter of her rape, suggesting that she willingly participated or was complicit in the act. This language shifts the focus away from the perpetrator, who is the one responsible for committing the crime, and places undue blame on the victim, thus reinforcing the narrative that women themselves are responsible for being raped. Rather than employing such words, the media should strive to use neutral language like "woman shares experience" when covering cases of gender-based violence, especially since reporting statistics are already low within South Asia (Singh, 2019). Using language that suggests that being raped is contemptible does not only make survivors feel ashamed, but also prevents future generations from reporting, thereby continuing the cycle of violence.

An additional example of an Indian headline on a case of GBV is "Canadian Woman Allegedly Raped by Man She Met at a Pub in South Delhi" (Singh, 2019). By mentioning specifically that the woman was Canadian and that they met at a pub, this media representation reinforces South Asian stereotypes that "white women who hang out in South Delhi bars are loose" and "women who drink alcohol invite rape" (Singh, 2019). Similar victim-blaming language is highlighted in the Indian news coverage of a "mass molestation event" in Bangalore (Diwanji et al, 2021, p. 352). Leading newspapers coined this incident as "Bangalore's night of shame" and stated that the women "self-invited the violence" by wearing "western clothes," exacerbating the prevalence of the concepts of demeaning and shaming survivors (Diwanji et al, 2021, p. 353). Another well-known GBV case in Bangladesh is a case involving 21-year-old college student Mosharat Jahan Munia, who committed suicide after being assaulted by a prominent Bangladeshi businessman (Islam and Siddique, 2023, p. 23). The Bangladeshi media

used phrases such as, “she had an uncontrolled lifestyle,” “she targeted well-known people,” and “she had great ambition” to describe Munia, thereby using the victim-blaming frame to place the onus of responsibility on her (Islam and Siddique, 2023, p. 24). These examples give credence to the notion that South Asian victim-blaming media tactics often portray women in a negative light and use rape culture stereotypes about clothing and alcohol to make survivors culpable.

Another way the victim-blaming frame is used in the media is through strategic deletion of facts and information to exonerate perpetrators and ostensibly place the onus on victims. An example of this strategic deletion was used in the newspaper portrayal of the case of 6-year-old Zainab in Pakistan, who was kidnapped, raped, and strangled to death by a man, Imran Ali (Zaman et al, 2023, p. 590). A research study analyzed the use of deletion in Pakistani media on this case, reaching two core findings. Firstly, most newspapers focused on highlighting details about Zainab and her family, with comparably minimal information on her rapist and the other people who kidnapped her (Zaman et al, 2023, p. 592). Zainab’s name, age, and personal details were published, and the media also highlighted how her family went to Saudi Arabia to perform pilgrimage before her kidnapping.



Figure 3: An Image of Zainab that went viral (Zaman et al).

This was used to insinuate negligence or irresponsibility on the part of the family, subtly shifting blame away from the perpetrator, Imran Ali. By emphasizing this detail, the media implied that the family's absence created an opportunity for the crime to occur, suggesting that they were somehow at fault for Zainab's abduction, rape, and subsequent tragic death. Secondly, most news articles did not mention the word “rape,” describing the case simply as a “heinous crime” (Zaman et al, 2023, p. 593). The hence media trivialized the case, presenting it as solely a murder case, using deletion to ignore the rape. Zainab’s example thus shows how deletion is used in the media to exonerate perpetrators of their complete crimes, thereby blaming survivors and their families, utilizing victim-blaming techniques.

Media experts such as Columbia professor Helen Benedict have also identified a ‘good girl–bad girl dichotomy’ that is commonly used by the media to unfairly depict female crime victims within the victim-blaming frame (Benedict, 1992, p. 16). This is used extensively in South Asian media. Sidra Fatima Minhas’s paper on the newspaper coverage of a particular rape incident in Pakistan is an example that epitomizes this dichotomy. In the case she focuses on, Doctor Shazia Khalid was raped and later threatened, silenced, and forced to leave the country because the alleged perpetrator was an army officer (Minhas, 2009, p. 65). In the Pakistani context, “good women” are portrayed as virtuous, domesticated, and traditional, and a “bad woman” is portrayed as a woman who “indulges her ego, seeks recognition for her work, and neglects her familial responsibilities” (Minhas, 2009, p. 68). By being a renowned doctor, Dr. Shazia immediately fell into the “bad woman” trope. She was described by newspapers as a “loose woman,” and a “kari”

— which translates to being a “a stain on the family’s honor” (Minhas, 2009, p. 72). It is therefore clear that the notion of a “woman becoming ‘bad’ by virtue of having been raped” (Benedict, 1992, p. 17) is an inherent part of the victim-blaming framing in South Asian media, as can be seen by Dr. Shazia’s experience. According to Minhas, this is intrinsically connected to the “patriarchal character of the Pakistani state,” as the state is supported by the media (Minhas, 2009, p. 70).

Feminist writer Nawal Aamir Khan describes it very simply: “for women in Pakistan, victim-blaming is the only thing that awaits you after you have been subjected to a crime” (Khan, 2022). She describes how the “training to victim-blaming begins very early on in our lives” (Khan, 2022) — this is something I have felt, too. Our schools would teach us that wearing eyeliner or lipstick was immoral because it would entice men, leading to harassment and rape. From a young age, we were taught that it would be our fault, and that only we could prevent something awful from happening to us. There was rarely a focus on institutional changes, or a focus on the abusers themselves. And as shown above with the “good girl–bad girl dichotomy” and victim-blaming language, South Asian media continues to spin the subdued color wheel — where female empowerment is replaced by female shame, rape culture stereotypes are embedded within readers, and there is minimal focus on how perpetrators can change their actions.

Reimagining the Color Wheel: Transformative Narratives on Gender-Based Violence Discourse in South Asian Media

Ultimately, the answer of how exactly gender-based violence is portrayed in news media in South Asia lies within the media framing paradigms of sensationalism and victim-blaming. On one hand, the sensationalist frame includes exaggerated headlines, graphic rhetoric, and stock images that make cases of GBV a spectacle. On the other, the victim-blaming frame shames survivors and makes them hyper-visible, while keeping perpetrators invisible. These frames are epitomized by the Noor Mukaddam case that was mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The graphic details highlighting how she was “tortured with a knuckleduster” and repeatedly mentioning her name sensationalized the case, while the character assassination done by the media perpetuated victim-blaming (Azeem, 2021).

But today, two years after Noor was killed, the impact of her experience has resulted in changes in Pakistani law, with the creation of special courts for cases of GBV, and my community at home becoming adamant to change the stigma around GBV (Jaffery, 2022). Noor’s case



Figure 4: An Image of Pakistani women fighting for #JusticeforNoor at a rally (Saifi).

resulted in #JusticeForNoor protests on social media and across the nation about how women are treated by men, society, and the media. I attended some of these protests myself, raising posters with my friends to call for justice and change in Pakistan. There had previously never been any national law criminalizing domestic violence, but Noor's case prompted the Pakistan Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Bill to be passed in the National Assembly (Saifi, 2021). Although the initial newspaper coverage on her case was sensationalist and blamed her, that coverage transformed as protests increased, becoming more empowering and focusing on holding Zahir accountable (Saifi, 2021).

The urgency of transforming the harmful media practices around GBV in South Asia is clear — there needs to be thematic framing instead of episodic framing, intersectional patterns of violence should be highlighted, headlines need to use less graphic language, and the mindset that continues to perpetuate rape myths and gender stereotypes needs to change (UNICEF and UN WOMEN, 2022, p. 40).

Noor's experience can become a watershed moment for a transformation of the media across South Asia – the multi-faceted hues of survivor justice and institutional change can replace the muted hues of victim-blaming and the striking shades of sensationalism in the color wheel. The colors can become empowering, not debilitating.

And if there's change, maybe, just maybe, one day, I will be able to walk alone on the street next to my home.

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