RAPE STORIES IN PAKISTAN

THE FLAWS IN THE TV COVERAGE: REASONS AND SOLUTIONS

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ANALYSIS

According to a research by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), a woman is raped every two hours in Pakistan, and an incident of gang rape occurs every four to eight days.

It’s an ongoing issue that needs better media coverage.

This article aims to highlight the flaws in the TV coverage of rape cases by the Pakistani national news channels and the possible solutions to improve the reporting on rape.

The research is based on one-on-one in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 journalists and journalism trainers in Pakistan and the U.S. The interviews were conducted on phone and via email and besides this analysis, which is based on my interviewees’ opinions; I have also designed a free online course in collaboration with the Poynter’s News University that will be available next year. The course basically targets Pakistani TV journalists but can be useful for journalists across the Indian subcontinent.

The reason for choosing TV media for this project is that the literacy rate in Pakistan is 58 percent, according to the 2014-15 Pakistan Economic Survey. The national language of the country is Urdu. Because of the high illiteracy rate in

Pakistan, only 11 percent of the population can read English newspapers.\(^2\) While Urdu language newspapers cater to a wide range of audience, growing number of Urdu language news channels have been playing a great role in informing the public.

**Cultural biases against women**

Joanna Jolly, who was recently assigned to the BBC’s Washington bureau as a feature reporter, has experience of working in South Asia. She recently wrote a paper\(^3\) about the rape coverage in Indian English press. According to her, the concept of ‘false rape’ is popular in South Asia.

Mukhtara Mai, a gang rape victim in Pakistan, fought for justice and gained international media attention.\(^4\) She also received aid from international organizations for her bravery. Pointing towards Mai’s celebrity status, former president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, in an interview with the *Washington Post* said, “You must understand the environment in Pakistan ... This has become a money-making concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped.”\(^5\)

“Getting raped is not a pleasant thing to happen to anyone. No one would volunteer to be the victim of a violent crime voluntarily,” Jolly said.

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She suggests that it’s important to view this as one narrative – what she calls as a patriarchal narrative – and then counteract it with a different perspective that speaks for the rights of victims.

Sherry Ricchiardi is an expert in international media training and has conducted journalism workshops in Pakistan as well. She says that cultural biases toward women in Pakistan are a big influence. “This needs to change and media can be instrumental in showing — not just telling — about the impact/consequences of these injustices.”

Ricchiardi says that in the Pakistani society, rape is not just an attack on a woman. “In this male-dominated society, it also can be revenge against her father, brothers or husband. You can find many examples of this.”

Masood Haider, a New York-based United Nations correspondent for the Dawn Media Group in Pakistan, says that in the Pakistani society, there are biases against women.

“There’s this male-dominated feudal system, which rules Pakistan, and the mindset of Pakistani journalists is also made by that because they are not devoid of the society,” he says.

Haider suggests that journalists need to be more sensitized to the needs of the profession and also towards women – how they are mistreated and maltreated.

“Until they are sensitized, until they know that this is right or wrong, they will continue to operate in a male-dominated, male chauvinist society,” he says.

The way rape cases are reported in Pakistani newspapers and news channels is changing and improving, yet it’s not perfect. For TV journalists, covering rape is challenging, even more so than for print journalists, because of the visual aspect.
Amy Herdy, an investigative producer for Chain Camera Pictures and an expert with more than 20 years of experience in covering crime for both television and print newsrooms, says that being a visual medium, television news can carry a greater impact than a print story. “Toward that end, if TV stations reported on sexual assault in a responsible way, conveying sensitivity and confidentiality for the victim and approaching the issue as a societal issue, then they could help shift the culture of shame and blame.”

Kristen Lombardi, an award-winning journalist who has worked for the Center for Public Integrity since 2007 says that the situation in the United States is not very different. She says that social myths and cultural norms influence journalism because journalists are part of the society in which they practice their craft. They are susceptible to the same biases and prejudices. “It’s up to journalists to recognize their own biases. If they don't then journalism won't be much of an agent for social change.”

Pointing towards Pervez Musharraf’s statement for Mukhtar Mai rape case, Paula Lavigne, an investigative reporter with ESPN, suggests journalists to keep an open mind. “Although very, very rare, I have come across at least one case where a woman completely made up an accusation against an athlete just to get him in trouble, which she herself later admitted to me.”

Lavigne also urges journalists to realize the importance of good judgment during interviews. “Getting all sides of a story. Talking to witnesses, friends, etc. And getting information from police/prosecutors is key.”

**Rape trauma**

It’s important for journalists to understand the trauma of a rape victim.
Laura Palumbo, communications director at the National Sexual Violence Resource Center in the U.S, says that for victims and survivors of sexual assault, there are many short and long-term impacts on physical, mental and emotional health.

“There is significant stigma and barrier for those who experience sexual assault, and most survivors never report their experience for fear they will not be believed or supported.”

Palumbo says that when victims of sexual assault do report, their actions are often scrutinized or misunderstood. For instance, after traumatic events, delayed reporting is common. It is also common for memories to be unclear or inconsistent. She defines it as the neurobiology of trauma that most lay people and even many professionals are not aware of. They don’t understand what behaviors to expect from those impacted by trauma.

“When rape is covered in the news without proper context it can contribute to victim-blaming and myths such as false reporting,” she says.

**Challenges for TV reporters**

Kathleen Culver, assistant professor and associate director at the Center for Journalism Ethics, University of Wisconsin-Madison, believes that speed, competition and productivity are the main challenges a TV reporter has to face. “… how fast you are getting information out there, competition and … the need to fill time on the air is certainly a factor.”

Culver says, “In TV, we see more competition for ratings that can lead to more sensationalism, so you have to be extra careful, extra aware of whether you should play certain angles of a crime because you’re chasing ratings.”
Another challenge TV journalists face while covering a rape story is to show visuals and no doubt, it’s tricky.

On the one hand, they are equipped with all sorts of visual tools they can use to enhance the impact of their stories. On the other hand, all those tools can play a negative role – if not used carefully – in covering a sensitive issue such as rape.

Aisha Khalid, managing editor, Urdu department at the Voice of America, says that the tools that are available to TV journalists are not available to print journalists. “The only tool available to them [print journalists] is the language. So, sometimes it can be hard to find the right kind of words.”

Khalid says that the right use of TV reporting tools such as graphics, visuals, natural sound and pictures can enhance the impact of stories.

Lavigne suggests using videos of the place where the alleged rape occurred, or of any other location tied to the incident. She also advises TV reporters to film police interrogation as much as possible and also courthouse video.

“We also use animations of documents – police reports, trial transcripts, mug shots. Any sort of social media video from the time of the incident or of the parties together -- maybe an Instagram of the suspects from just a few hours before the reported assault.”

Lombardi says that covering sexual assault cases was the hardest topic she has experienced in her two-plus decades as a journalist, for a myriad of reasons. She says that victims often do not want to come forward because of the disbelief they have experienced when trying to report their rape or assault to institutional authorities, family members, friends, etc. That disbelief makes them very wary of reporters' motivations as well.
“You have to gain their trust and you have to cede your own control over the reporting, writing and editing process in ways that you don't encounter with other topics,” she says.

Lavigne says that the biggest challenge for TV journalists covering a rape case is getting women to talk to you.

“They’re skittish enough to talk on the phone or over email, but getting them to sit down in a chair in front of a camera is a huge hurdle.”

Lavigne says that in many cases, they ask to have their identity shielded, so you need to figure out how to do that with lighting/shadows, b-roll and, if necessary, altering their voice.

“It’s also tough to come up with b-roll. That’s true in either case, but especially again if you’re trying to protect someone’s identity,” she says.

With all challenges involved in the TV coverage of a rape case, it has some plus points as well.

Lavigne suggests that emotions get conveyed extremely well on television.

“Even if you have to shield a woman’s identity, hearing her tell her story in her own words is incredibly compelling,” she says.

Besides interviewing the victim, talking to the suspect(s) too is an important aspect of covering a rape case that can not only provide the audience with both sides of the story but can also lead to follow-up story ideas.

Lavigne says that in interviews with the suspects, you might get details that weren’t given to law enforcement or attorneys, and that might lead you to other follow up investigations.
“You can get to those questions about personal life, etc. with a suspect that probably weren’t covered in a criminal investigation. Does the suspect have some sort of alternate justification for what happened? It’s important to get that and for people to hear it in the suspect’s own words.”

To interview a rape victim, Lavigne advises journalists to give them space to tell their whole story but she also asks journalists to remain persistent in challenging statements that don’t add up, that seem fishy or that contradict one another.

“I think sometimes reporters are wary of being confrontational with an alleged victim, but you have to be. If there’s something in her story that doesn’t add up – and you don’t question it – then that puts you and the story at a disadvantage,” she says.

According to Lavigne, you might not end up using every bit of information in the finished piece because of its relevance, or time constraints, but you need to have that on the record and feel confident that you’ve got your own questions answered.

“Same thing with interviewing suspects and witnesses, although I think people are more comfortable being confrontational in those types of interviews already.”

**Revealing the victim’s identity**

In a 2010 story about the rape case of a nurse in Karachi’s Jinnah Hospital, a reporter from the Dawn News showed the victim’s face on TV while she was on the hospital bed. Also, in 2013 a five-year-old girl was raped in Lahore and not only her name was revealed, her face was shown, her father was also interviewed on TV.7

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6 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-OcC1L7Dpc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-OcC1L7Dpc)

7 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptEwQ6W88XA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptEwQ6W88XA)
Regarding the revelation of a victim’s identity, there are two contrasting views: one is based on the media law and the other on ethics.

In 2002, the Press Council of Pakistan implemented a 17-point Ethical Code of Practice. According to this, “In the cases of sexual offences and heinous crimes against children, juveniles and women, names and identifying photographs shall not be published.”

“The naming of rape victims or interviewing of the family is not a criminal offence. It is more of a matter of ethics and not law,” says Kamal Siddiqi, Director, Center for Excellence (CEJ) in Karachi, Pakistan.

Siddiqi mentions that the legal recourse to address this issue is the defamation law, which is weak and largely unenforced in Pakistan.

“What we have seen is that over the passage of years through training and awareness and by involving news directors and news editors, the practice of naming rape victims or minors involved in offences of any kind has become minimal. But there are still some newspapers and TV channels who continue the practice to gain ratings. But they are in a minority,” Siddiqi says.

Haider says that the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) is responsible for monitoring the TV stations in the country. But PEMRA’s code of conduct is ineffective as a guideline for Pakistani journalists.

Haider also mentions that there are a lot of influences that prevent PEMRA from performing its duties. Journalists in Pakistan don’t abide by the rule of law. “In Pakistan there is no rule of law so, anything goes,” he says.

According to Lombardi, in the United States, the press has generally kept anonymous the identity of rape victims for years.

“There are historical reasons for doing so, largely having to do with the backlash women have faced when coming forward with rape claims,” she says.

Lombardi believes that there is a line of thinking that argues against shielding rape victims' identities. She says that the thinking goes, because journalists protect victims' identities, journalists perpetuate the rape culture of shame and blame for rape victims.

“I have only rarely used pseudonyms for rape victims. I don't write about a rape victim unless she or he wants to go public and, in my experience, most victims who want to go public with their stories want people to know their names and the details of their cases. I would never publish a victim's story if he or she did not want to go public.”

Mark Memmott, National Public Radio’s supervising senior editor for standards and practices, says that media outlets such as NPR try to be sensitive when reporting about those affected by any type of trauma.

“We do not want to ‘retraumatize’ the survivors by unnecessarily making them relive the events.”

Memmott mentions that rape survivors are particularly vulnerable. “To a great extent, we follow their lead. If a survivor does not wish to be identified, we respect that decision. If a survivor wants to be identified – perhaps to ‘destigmatize’ what has happened – we also respect that decision.”
When the victim is a minor …

Covering the rape case of a minor is more difficult and should be dealt with more sensitivity.

Memmott says that in such cases because the survivor -- because it’s a child -- cannot make an informed decision about whether or not to speak about what happened; only if the child’s parents agree can they be interviewed. “And even then, a media outlet should consider carefully whether to broadcast or publish such an interview. It will follow that child the rest of his or her life,” he says.

Palumbo says that protecting a minor’s identity and privacy are very significant concerns.

“Identifying information about the accused can also betray a victim’s identities in cases when a family member has perpetrated the crime or in small communities where people are familiar with one another.”

According to Palumbo, parents may be involved in the legal considerations of the case, but the child or minor may not agree with the parent’s view or response to the situation. “These family dynamics can make stories involving children very difficult to cover,” she says.

When the victim/suspect is a public figure …

Covering rape cases in which public figures are involved can raise challenges. Lavigne has covered sexual assault cases in the U.S. in which athletes were involved. She says that some people – often fans of that particular athletic team – say the women do it for the money, because a few – although very few – women end up filing lawsuits and getting legal settlements that can be substantial sums of money.
“Sometimes they accuse women of targeting athletes who are likely to turn pro, because then they’ll have bigger paychecks to pursue.”

Memmott says that in cases where any public figure is involved, to some extent, he or she has already given up some of his or her privacy by courting public attention. But that does not mean, however, that the media can be any less careful about what to report or not report.

“Credible news outlets must avoid the temptation to report something just because a famous person is involved,” he says.

Palumbo says that in cases where a celebrity is involved, there is often heightened public response and it can be difficult for members of the general public to reconcile this information with their expectations of a high profile figure.

“Yet we know people who commit acts of sexual violence sometimes abuse celebrity status and the illusion of trust that comes with it. We also know sexual violence impacts such a significant portion of the population. This also includes leaders, celebrities and public figures.”

**Victim blaming**

In the 2010 nurse rape case in Karachi, the suspect was a doctor and the incident happened at his on-call room. A reporter from Dawn TV said in his report, “The question that needs to be answered is that what that nurse had been doing at the suspect’s place?” He said this in a very judgmental tone and so is the Pakistani society’s mindset towards women – women are blamed even if they are victims.
Memmott says that often the person accused of the crime will allege that there was ‘consensual sex’ or that the survivor did something to signal that the sex was consensual.

“Media outlets need to be careful about drawing conclusions. They should stick to the facts as investigators determine what happened.”

Memmott also points out the issue of ‘rushing to judgment.’

“As we saw with the ‘Rolling Stone’ story about an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia, stories of rape can be fabricated. Care must be taken to protect the suspect’s rights as well.”

Focus on the issue, not on the individual

There are different strategies to cover a rape case. Either journalists can focus on the individuals involved in the story (rape victim or suspects), statistics of the crime in that particular city, state or country or the issue in general.

There’s neither a set rule for this nor can we say with surety which strategy would bring a positive impact in the society. Experts have different views. But the aim is to do objective reporting that is not sensationalized in any way. However, Jolly believes that it’s important to focus on the factors that lead to rape and not on individual stories -- which are often sensationalized as horror stories for high ratings.

10 http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-what-went-wrong-20150405
Lack of training

In the Pakistani media, the root cause behind unethical practices while covering rape cases is the lack of training. Most practitioners of journalism in Pakistan do not have a degree and very few have any formal training in the profession.

Altaf Khan, a journalism professor at the University of Peshawar says that mass communication departments in all Pakistani universities are teaching the same courses which include reporting, editing, media history and law, public relations and advertising. Media ethics is part of media history and law course.

Professor Khan believes that journalism is an art of communication. “You have to be good at writing and speaking, if you want to be a journalist.”

Khan says that Pakistani education system is not designed to groom students’ communication skills and without these skills, we can’t expect to have good journalists.

He says that many Pakistanis think that they are not good at expressing themselves in English while he believes that most Pakistanis can’t properly read and write Urdu either, which is their native language.

“It’s the problem of the entire education system but it shows up immensely in the media teaching institutions because these schools are all about communication skills. In any other discipline you can just hide behind books.”

Khan criticizes the media organizations in Pakistan that expect journalism schools to train students to meet the needs of the market more than the needs of the society.

He says that at journalism schools they are serving the society. “We can’t produce graduates who are more useful for the market but less useful for the society.”
Khan also urges the importance of teaching the courses of media laws and ethics to journalism students. “… Otherwise anyone with good writing and communication skills can become a journalist with any other degree. Professional journalists must be aware of media ethics and laws.”

Lombardi tends to believe that most journalists are in this business to make the world a better place and that lack of training is the primary reason reporters screw up when covering sexual assault.

“They just haven’t been trained on how to properly recognize signs of trauma and how to handle trauma victims with sensitivity yet still be a dogged reporter.”

Noren also agrees that covering stories about rape is not for everyone. “It should only be done by journalists who understand their responsibility to cover these stories fairly and accurately and have the training, emotional maturity and sensitivity to follow recommended best practices.”

**Inclusion of women in newsrooms**

Kamal Siddiqi suggests the inclusion of women in newsrooms as a possible solution for the better coverage of rape cases in Pakistan.

He says that barely five percent of working journalists in Pakistan are women.

“But this percentage is now changing and more women are coming into the profession.”

Siddiqi agrees that when women cover a rape case, there is more sensitivity involved.

“I know from my experience when I assigned a woman reporter to cover a rape case after a male crime reporter did the typical judgmental job, it showed how reporting can change based on who is covering the story.”
But at the same time, he adds, the larger challenge is to make sure every reporter - both man and woman -- is able to cover with sensitivity and consistency.

Lombardi agrees that men can cover such stories with sensitivity. “I know plenty of male investigative reporters who have written incredibly powerful journalistic pieces involving victims of sexual assault. The difference is, they took the time to learn about the psychological, emotional, and social fallout of sexual assault and adjusted their reporting techniques accordingly.”

However, based on her experience of training journalists in Pakistan, Ricchiardi believes that male-dominated newsrooms in Pakistan are a major factor behind insensitive media coverage of rape cases. “During media ethics workshops in Islamabad that I ran, a female reporter shared her feelings about the injustice rape victims face,” she says.

Jolly too is of the same opinion that it’s very difficult for journalists to remain free from their culture. “The only way to counteract a dominant patriarchal mindset in a newsroom is to hire lots of women and make sure women are in positions of leadership,” she says.

Jolly strongly believes that women are more than capable of doing the job. “The impetus behind hiring more women needs to come from the senior management -- they need to be open to the idea of change. Journalists tend to be liberals so this is not impossible.”

**International media training and fellowship programs**

Over the past few years, quite a few international media training programs have been launched that provide Pakistani journalists with opportunities to learn journalism in
Western countries. But Jolly says that a training lasts one week. “The society you live in has a far bigger influence on you so it’s not surprising that Western values do not stick.”

Jolly says that the more sensible approach is to see a change in attitudes as a long-term project, which may take a decade or so to happen.

**Conclusion**

Based on this research, here are some recommendations for Pakistani journalists to improve the practice of reporting on rape cases:

- They must observe the code of ethics implemented by PEMRA and the Press Council of Pakistan, according to which the identity of a rape victim should not be revealed. Even if a victim wants to be identified, she should be warned about the long-term consequences of this decision. In case of a minor, even if the child’s parents allow journalists to disclose their kid’s identity, care must be taken because revealing a child’s identity who became a victim of a sexual offense might affect the rest of his/her life.

- Training shouldn’t be only for reporters, it’s equally important to train editors as well because they are the ones who are involved in policy formulation in any news organization.

- Hiring more and more women in newsrooms is one of the solutions, not the only solution. The right strategy is to make both men and women reporters capable enough to cover rape cases in an ethical manner.

- Training shouldn’t be considered as a short-term goal. It should be treated as a long-term project and journalists should be facilitated to participate in more and more training programs.