Asymmetrical gendered crime reporting and its influence on readers: A case study of Pakistani English newspapers

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ABSTRACT

Media plays a crucial role in information dissemination, reflection, or mass attitude in the growing economies. The present study intends to explore the representation of women in crime reporting and its influence on readership. A mixed-method approach is followed in data collection and analysis. Data are collected from four English newspapers over one month, and crime reports are analysed through discourse analysis and content analysis to identify the gender portrayal. Moreover, the readers' opinion is sought through semi-structured interviews with six experts from diverse fields. Recorded and transcribed data is analysed thematically. Findings show that women are underrepresented in crime reports, and their portrayal also strengthens gender stereotypes. Such representation affects the mental schema of readers, which in turn supports patriarchal order.

1. Introduction

The press, like other types of mass media, is a powerful tool of socialization. It plays a crucial role in disseminating information and thus can influence people's perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. A thematic and linguistic analysis of media helps the readers to locate media's implicit contribution to gender construction. The messages are gendered through semiotic and linguistic choices and acclimated and normalized in the mainstream media discourse. Pakistani print media not only shows the gendered notions but also reflects its distinctive cultural influences which carries Islamic traits, a long history to live with Hindu majority community.

There is dearth of literature with in-depth linguistic studies on women portrayal in media. The researchers aim to examine in a methodical and in-depth fashion how Pakistani women are represented in English newspapers including Dawn, The News, Daily Times, and The Nation, four immensely popular publications in Pakistani media. Present study also focused on the study of potential impact of media discourse on readers.

1.1. Gender and language

Gender and language have long been subjects of interest for researchers in the West. Various researchers studied the significance of language in producing a sense of powerlessness. Sexism in English language is examined as an instrument to sustain and increase the power gaps in any society. Earlier research was conducted to examine the convention of naming (Spender, 1980), asymmetrical titles, terms of address and vocabulary (Lakoff, 1973), the use of generic 'he' and 'man' that excludes women, and semantic derogation within the terms related to women more often than those of men (Schulz, 1975; Yasmin, Masso, Bukhari and Aboubakar, 2019a; Yasmin et al., 2018; Yasmin, Naseem and Sohail, 2019b).

1.2. Gender in print media

How news and other mass media represent women and their role in society have been researchers' focus over the last 25 years (Meyers, 1999). Research showed media's power of gender construction and representation in various fields. It is established that certain gendered messages are perpetuated by media at workplaces (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000), in politics (Joshi et al., 2020; Mavin et al., 2010). Women politicians are talked about in terms of their family responsibilities and appearance more than their national or international achievements. Also, the studies on female athletes showed under-representation, a less focus on their competence and more on their femininity and their appearance. Social status was also found influencing the representation of women in case of business executives that apparently, showed resistance towards the societal stereotypes; however, Krefting's (2002) analysis of American business print media discourse revealed that the image of businesswomen was fractured in comparison with that of men.

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1.3. Women in crime reporting

Previous research established that women face asymmetrical treatment in media. Yasmin, Sohail, and Mangrio (2015) compared crime reporting over a period of ten years and found that stereotypical representation prevails. Their findings showed that headlines carried the gender-specific description in crime reporting. According to their analysis, women as criminals or victims were biased by offering positive labels for men and negative labels for women. Women offenders are treated worse than male offenders in reporting. It can be inferred from the results that victimized women were not portrayed as victims as Greer (2003) defined an ideal victim as one who must be worthy of sympathy, while in Yasmin et al.’s results, the negative labels might take the readers’ sympathy away. Naming conventions in crime reporting were also problematic and varied for males and females (Yasmin, Masso, et al., 2019a). Kress and Leeuven (1996) categorized the nomination in media reporting as formal, semi-formal, and informal through the use of surnames with or without honorifics, given/surnames, and first names, respectively. It was observed through discourse analysis that the use of the first or given name as informal nomination warrants attention and, aside from informality, or a personal relationship, it also potentially signifies ‘a lack of respect’ (Felton Roseuke, 2015:61). Jekwes (2011) noted that women who challenged the stereotype of a good mother or good wife are doubly damned. Women are more subjected to the scrutiny of their sexuality than men as they are portrayed as ‘bad mothers’ more than men as ‘bad fathers.’ Women victims or offenders are found reported in terms of their stereotypical roles of motherhood and their relationship with men. Research showed this practice even when children are not involved in the crime, female victim or offender is described as ‘mum of two’ implying that she transgressed the law of nature and social norms. Research also showed that the reality of crime is marginalised with mutuality of responsibility for the violence (Easteal et al., 2015).

Researchers analyzed the grammatical sentence structure in crime reporting and found it benefitting male perpetrators (Frazer and Miller, 2009). Henley, Miller, and Beazley (1995) analysed the consequence of certain voice usage in crime news on readers. The content analysis showed that men found less harm to the victim and less responsibility to the offender. Bohner (2001) study analysed undergraduate students' descriptions of rape cases and found that writers exhibited a high rate of passive voice in describing rape cases. Work also showed that passive voice assigns the victim with the role of subject and puts the blame on the victim.

On the other hand, Frazer and Miller (2009) study involved the participant in writing stories on a given event of violence. Their study demonstrated a tendency of using the passive structure for female victims while active voice when the perpetrator was female. Following a mixed-methods approach and conducting word-level content analysis, Lussos and Fernandez (2018) investigated whether the choice of voice for the actions of the assailant or victim showed an absence of agency. The researchers found a systematic variation in the use as the verbs for perpetrators were primarily written in passive voice. The account of accuser or victims were made in an active voice. The systematic choice was similar to the earlier study of Frazer and Miller (2009) in that the use of passive structure was more frequent for male perpetrators. Northcott Bohmert et al. (2019) found that the responsibility of the suspect was moderated through the use of passive voice, and they found it frequently used more in sexual assaults and rape cases (100% and 75% respectively) than the physical assaults news (25%). The studies reviewed further exhibit how the use of voice may contribute to responsibility attribution when men were perpetrators and women were victims (Northcott Bohmert et al., 2019).

Media discourse analysis is not a widely researched field in Pakistan (Yasmin, Masso, et al., 2019a). Previous studies are limited in number and quantitative in nature. These studies lacked in highlighting how lexical and grammatical choices play a role in constructing a particular image concerning socio-economic and cultural factors.

The main research questions for this project are as follows:

1. How are women linguistically represented in crime news reporting in Pakistani English newspapers?
2. How are women represented in Pakistani English Crime reports in terms of visibility?

2. Method

A mixed-method approach was selected to achieve the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2014). First, a concurrent embedded strategy was adopted by collecting qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously to address two different questions. The data was collected from newspapers and interviews. The themes that emerged from the first discourse analysis of newspapers helped designing an instrument to get in-depth information from experts. The significance of sample lies in its capacity of being a main source of information in the country and with higher news-sensitivity in comparison with magazines.

The first sample was taken from the following English-medium newspapers: Daily Dawn, The News, The Nation, and Daily Times of one month. Sample was selected through probability technique to avoid any bias. This method gives each newspaper an equal chance to be selected. Interviews were held to gather the opinion of experts from different fields. These interviews were one-to-one semi-structured with six experts, including two media reporters, one media researcher, one social worker, one psychologist, and one linguist. Audio-recording of the interview was selected as it is less intrusive than videos and gives informants a complete recording of the interview.

Data were analyzed quantitatively as well as qualitatively to answer the research questions above. Content Analysis was selected to see the frequency of visibility of men and women. Besides frequency, the location was also examined in terms of news on the front page, last page, top, and bottom. News articles were analyzed using the discourse analysis method. Themes were identified which emerged out of the text itself and were analysed with a feminist view. In this study, the researchers used Mills’ (1995) approach to ‘Feminist Stylistics’ as it deals with the analysis of linguistic features with a feminist view. Mills’ approach towards a feminist analysis of linguistic units goes beyond linguistic stylistics, which emphasizes identifying patterns of usage in speech and writing. Feminist stylistics governs stylistics to include socio-economic factors which influence the language, and it also foregrounds the factor of gender in the text. It shows how the linguistic forms contribute to producing a character as powerless and how women are represented in language by using ‘false generics’ (Cameron, 1995). Data recorded during interviews was transcribed first. Later, it was organized. Codes were assigned to interviewees as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, and R6. Codes for content were not assigned; rather they were generated from the data. Connections of related concepts were made, and patterns were observed to be emerging in codes. These patterns or themes were later interpreted and linked to the themes that emerged out of news articles.

3. Results and discussion

Results of the data analysis showed that women are underrepresented and in a biased and stereotypical way. A study of news discourse highlighted the following patterns in crime reporting. The analysis showed that women were represented in a biased way as compared to men in the same news. Asymmetrical representation was found in naming conventions, use of gender markers in the profession, marital status, sensationalizing details, blame-game, relation with men, age, and responsibility shift.

Regarding research question 1, participants were asked to comment on the representation of women in crime reporting in general and in the context of themes that emerged from news articles and how this may affect the reader. When participants were asked to comment on the representation of women in newspapers: in general, and in crime
reporting, their response was mixed. The major codes that appeared were 'negative,' 'stereotypes' and social status.' For some, it was not good, and 'it needs awareness' (R1). According to participant P, Women are 'underrepresented for being a part of patriarchal society.' One viewed it better as highlighting human rights and 'victimization is reported' (R2). Women are portrayed stereotypically, and as a result, her appearance is made on some specific pages dealing with soft issues like fashion. Even the political leaders are 'not well represented' (R5). The social background of women plays an important role in deciding about their representation. Either woman of the elite class or lower class may get some appearance. Still, whereas the majority, i.e., the middle class, is concerned, as R3 responded, Issues of general women are not selected representatively.' When the participants were asked about this representation in crime reporting, all agreed that representation is quite negative. Only one of them felt it positive. R4 felt that 'Women are mostly shown as victims of crime.' It is negative, but overall, the image of women is of a 'suppressed' and 'helpless' creature, as R3 responded. Respondent R1 said, 'the main focus of news is to highlight her vulnerability, fragility, and dependency.'

3.1. Gender visibility in crime reports

A content analysis of news covering crime themes gives an overall gender representation in all four daily Pakistani newspapers. The graphic presentation gives a striking contrast between the representation of men and women. Men are more visible in crime reports (70%) as compared to women (15%), while their combined presence is found 12%. This representation of women is relatively higher than their overall presence in general news where men received more attention (76%) as compared to women (6%), as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

One interesting trend is observed in both genders, women are more visible in pictures than in news articles, while in men, the situation is vice-versa. Images of women victims are found 22% in the sample, while men appeared with 77% of the same sample (see Figure 3).

If four newspapers are analysed separately, Dawn is comparatively more generous in the overall coverage of women than other newspapers. In the crime news, 70% were about men, and 16% were about women, while in images, both men and women were equally represented. The News gave coverage of 78% and 13%, while The Nation, on the other hand, gave coverage of 69% and 18% to men and women, respectively. This ratio of women representation rises in Daily Times as 23% of articles were about women, and 43% were about men.

Besides visibility in terms of frequency, men dominated the newspapers in terms of news location (91% of all articles and 84% of all pictures) on the front page. On the other hand, women got higher visibility on the last pages in pictures. Last pages are particularly a place for entertainment news. It shows that they are taken as commodities to 'watch' not to read about. High visibility of women in Crime news strengthens the stereotypical image of women who are passive victims and gets coverage to make the newspaper sensational. Out of four newspapers, 'Daily Times' seems to excel in the tactics of increasing marketability. Women's visibility confirms the previous findings of Bryant (1980) who found women overrepresented in Crime and underrepresented in Sports.

3.2. Naming convention for women victims

Naming practices for women and men are found to be asymmetrical. Inequality is implied in two ways: in cases where a woman victim is addressed many times by her first name (67 times) than full or last name, but a man is addressed mostly by his full name (79 times) or last than by first name. At other places, the names of female victims are not mentioned at all. When they are addressed, they are referred through any relationship with others. Another unique tradition found is the use of the first alphabet of victim's name as in 'N of Satania' in The Nation 23/3/07, 'daughters S, B and T' in The Nation 1/4/07. Replacing human names with letters only gives the impression that the whole matter is a non-human affair. Both strategies are conflicting as if the rule of protection applies, the use of letters instead of victims' names and the absence of victims' names are well justified. However, the rule appears violated when the same newspaper uses first names of female victims more frequently than it uses the same for males; hence it makes the victim more exposed and vulnerable.

When the participants were asked to comment on naming convention used in reporting, three themes 'Patriarchal male-dominated society', 'protection' and 'marketability' appeared. The first two themes overlapped to the extent that they gave a picture of cultural influence together. Some, who viewed the absence of the victim's name as a consequence of the patriarchal system, agreed to the fact that Pakistan has a male-dominated society where the male gets more coverage than the female. Besides this domination, Pakistani culture attached high values and responsibilities to a woman. A woman's domain is home, and it is considered her duty to save the sanctity of the home. She is regarded as a symbol of honour. Being a male-dominated society, it forgives a male role.
for sin but not a female for the same whether she commits it or not. It is a society where she gets ‘penalized for no fault’ of her own (S). If she is victimized and if her identity is revealed, it may hinder her social life, and society is not ready to accept her existence. In a culture where chastity is valued a lot, loss of chastity becomes a black mark; she would be considered unworthy of marriage. Her future life is ruined. She won’t be able to lead an active and happy life as our informants agreed to this fact as R2 said, ‘A mistake by a woman is never forgiven.’ R6 argued that, ‘It is due to the reason that journalist and society take it very carefully when they report some wrongdoing related with female and publishing their full name which may be a hazard for them in future. It means that our society considers the guilty women very awkward whereas this is not the case for a male.’

Ethics demand here protection for women who are victimised. By publishing her name and making her identity known will do no good to her. Victims and their families may feel violated by this coverage and may feel its intrusion into their privacy. Crime may bring humiliation to a victim, and she may not want anyone to learn about it. She may lose her and her family’s identity. To save her and her relatives from any further disgrace, it becomes necessary to hide her identity. Again, reporters must wait for authenticity; even once it is authenticated, the reporter should not report her name to save her from further harm. The victim will be re-victimised if media coverage proves to be inaccurate. And as R3 feels, ‘It is just to maintain the confidentiality of the case, and I think that ethically it’s a good practice’. R2 explained, ‘We don’t show a woman’s name. The newspaper gives news only. When its FIR is entered, it may come out false. Even if it happens to be true, a woman has already been a victim. The newspaper reaches everywhere, her family, neighbours and village. It is, therefore, intended not to dishonour her anymore.’

Where the name of the woman victim was mentioned, they were reported with their first name more than men. According to R1, in our society, women carry the first name only while men carry two names: first and last name. This is not true if we look at the names of women in Pakistan. R2 took it as a sign that ‘Pakistani media sells negativity’. Present results echo the previous literature. Joshi et al. (2020) found media representation of politicians belittling by denying honorifics and calling first names. Similarly, Power et al. (2020) investigated and found that disclosing victims’ names may lead to exacerbating trauma, complicating recovery, and discouraging future disclosures and how an unnecessary use of first name where a formal convention was expected may lead to subtle belittlement.

3.3. Gender marking in professions

Though the names of professions are mostly gender-neutral, analysis showed that when women were described with reference to their profession, affixes of gender marking like ‘lady’, ‘woman’, ‘female’ or ‘-ess’ were added to the profession. The terms like ‘women teachers’, ‘female teachers’ in Dawn ‘lady teachers’ in The News, ‘woman judge’, ‘spokes—woman’ in The Nation show women as some appendages of man. In Dawn, the news introduced woman participant as a ‘female suicide bomber’ as the femaleness in bomber may exhibit some different capacities than any male suicide bomber. A focus on the gender in the description of work shows that the earlier concerns of Spender (1998) are still relevant and worthy of serious attention.

3.4. Focus on women’s marital status

Another feature, the marital status of a woman, was unnecessarily mentioned in a news ‘Miss Farhan’ (The News) while no such title was used to show marital status of men. This implies (unfairly) that it is more important for a woman than a man to show whether they are married. In the same news, another woman was mentioned as ‘wife of Director’, whereas she was employed at a different place, and the news was about her behaviour which necessarily does not require her marital status. Present results support earlier research on female politicians who were also described in terms of their marital status more than their work (Joshi et al., 2020).

3.5. Sensationalizing the report

Sexual assault is a distressing and among the most serious of all criminal offenses. Besides its being traumatic for the victim, it has devastating effects on the family. Social pressure may prevent the victim from getting reported. If they are reported, they are described in a way that creates a sensation for the readers. Unnecessary details of rape or victimization are given. Dawn, though considered a comparatively liberal newspaper than others, yet gives details like ‘she was stripped naked, gang-raped and left for dead’.

3.6. Blame game

Similar to previous research, women victims are blamed for the wrong in Pakistani newspapers. In places, it was considered a woman’s fault to be victimised as Dawn reported. (she) was condemned by village assembly to be gang-raped as it was her mistake and will to be wronged. The present study supports recent findings of Northcutt Bohlert et al. (2019) who analyzed 99 student newspaper crime stories from one academic year to investigate how perpetrators and victims were framed, and found higher victim blaming levels for female victims.

3.7. Description of women in terms of relationships with men

Women are referred to differently than the way men are. They are referred to in terms of their relationship with other males. Women are mentioned 18 times, being referred to as mother, daughter, sister, wife, niece, aunt and even as a widow. For example, in The Nation, the news starts as ‘A mother of two’, showing that her being a victim becomes a serious matter only because of her two children. The description of two gives the news a sympathetic look by highlighting children instead of the victim and thus renders the victimization of a woman of secondary importance. In Dawn the victim is introduced as ‘daughter of Sarmad, a journalist’. In daily The News, the victim, who herself is an employee in a school is introduced as the ‘wife of director’. The same newspaper uses the words of ‘mother of an infant child’. The News describes its victims as a ‘sister’ and ‘daughter of...’, ‘wife of director...’ in two different news articles. Daily Times also describes female victims as ‘daughter and niece of’. The Nation uses the words ‘a transportor’s daughter’, ‘daughter of a labourer’, ‘niece of...’ and ‘daughter of a labourer’. The News also uses ‘daughter of...’ in a different news article. This description shows that male and female stereotyping frequently occurs about occupations and gender roles. Men, however, are hardly ever described in terms of the relationship with women as previous reports also showed.

When experts were asked about their opinion on women’s representation in terms of their relation to men, they found three reasons: to increase newsworthiness in general, to seek justice from an authority, to make the victim a central character of the family. More involved to feel that a family is hurt as a woman is considered the central character of the family.

Media discourse is controlled by power. The social status of the victim and his/her family has an important role in highlighting the news. Powerful has privileged access to media resources. If a female victim belongs to a family with high social status, she will get more space, perhaps on the front page. Similarly, if she belongs to a poor family, again, she may get reasonable attention. Newspaper tries to highlight that the poor are victimized so news will be highlighted as R1 stated. She is termed as to show that poor is repressed so authority must take action...
Then, the relation of ‘daughter’ may get more attention to feel the pain and for action. The impact is doubled.’

It again shows that a female of the middle class may not receive attention, thus will be underrepresented. Then focus on high profile case pay no attention to those who are denied such coverage only because their case lacks sensation. The respondents agreed on the fact that women have no identity of their own. R2 explained, ‘Women, on the other hand, are not as much well-known that their names may receive attention. Man is dominant and a source of identity for a woman.’ Another participant, R3 shared, ‘Some role is defined to the female in our society and female are envisioned with relations only.’ R5 found the very reason in social structure which is patriarchal and women are dependent on men for their identity.

Another reason for highlighting the relationship with men is to seek the attention of authorities to get justice. Timely and sensitive coverage may help to get access from authority as R2 speaks out:

The relation is used to sympathize that this poor is deserving; he/she can’t approach, so the concerned department should probe. It is to seek attention; this is the only intention. It is a habit of CM that he approaches every poor victim...A poor's daughter, a widow's daughter may get more attention.

3.8. Description of women in terms of age

Women victims are described in terms of their age pointlessly as ‘a twenty-one-year-old young woman’, ‘twenty-two-year-old Fatima is a married girl student’ (Daily Times). The Nation states about the victim as ‘Saima Bibi, 28’, ‘65 years-old woman’. The News states a 19-years old woman and describes her as one of ‘teenage murders’. Women are mentioned 18 times mostly with an age range of 14–28. Men perpetrators, on the other hand, are not described in this way at all, as was found previously (Jewkes, 2011).

When participants were asked about the representation of women in terms of age, they came up with three major themes: sympathy-seeking, negative approach and legal implication. According to reporters, every newspaper's policy to mention the age of the victim to win the sympathy (R1) of readers. It is by Greer (2003) notion of ideal victim-a victim that is worthy of arousing sympathy. What the reporter says about following these tactics is to increase the impact seems to sensationalize the issue—a common trait of media coverage (Kothari, 2008). R2 disregarded this policy and declared it a negative approach as either age of both sexes should be reported, or neither should be reported in terms of age. ‘Age must be reported, and it is true for both sexes. If the only female is reported this way, it shows a negative mental approach’, R2 said.

R2 explained the legal dimension of reporting age for the cases where the age limit is below the maturity level, ‘Law punishes the perpetrator more if the victim is young’. But this doesn’t explain the reports reporting female victims of an age range 14–29 which was the age range of 90% of stories where the age of the only female victim was reported.

3.9. Responsibility shift through passivization

A striking feature was the frequent use of a particular sentence structure which makes this section different from others and which allows suspect mitigation. Almost 90% of the total headlines and their stories were in the passive structure, and 10% of the headlines of the news were in the active voice, but a woman was placed as an object. At places where they are in subject position, mostly they were subjects of the passive structure except the news informing about committing suicide as in ‘woman commits suicide’ (Nation).

The reading of the headlines showed two features: all headlines with passive structure have their agent deleted such as ‘Women injured’ (Dawn), ‘2 girls smuggled to ME recovered’ (Dawn), ‘Woman found strangled’ (The Nation), ‘Two women abducted’ (The News). The agent deletion of the male aggressor in headlines does not appear to be just a matter of journalistic strategy of making headlines brief as the body or detailed news report also showed a higher tendency of passive voice usage in crime reports than in other general news. Here the direction of violence is ignored, and the ideology supporting male dominance is confirmed. Few examples from the data included: ‘A minor girl was killed, and two women injured...’ (Dawn), ‘A mother of two was found strangled...’ (Nation), ‘Two women were kidnapped from their house’, (The News). More importantly, though the woman is shown as a victim, agent deletion makes it less serious. This feature in the crime reports is symbolic and dangerous as it makes the reader take it as a norm and decreases the intensity of action and makes it a less disturbing event.

While exploring the reason for using the passive voice and removing agents in headlines and news detail, reporters found it just a pattern of headlines. ‘Using passive structure is our pattern for headlines. It is adopted due to short space. It is a tradition’, said R1. R2 explained it further as the guilty is not confirmed, ‘It is just an allegation. It’s not necessary to hide the agents’ names. The verbs ‘Assaulted’ and ‘Abducted’ in The Nation are thought to be sufficient as independent headlines. It is presumed that the reader will understand and take it as news about women, which strengthens the idea that only women are passive victims that a man cannot be. While talking about one-word headlines like ‘abducted’, R1 explained that size and kind of headline depend on the news’s significance. News about a minor may take very short space. Then the social status of the victim also determines the headline. Besides the social status, it depends on the reporter how he constructs. An experienced and trained reporter always comes up with a perfect headline.

But this is not simply a case of headline pattern, social status or the reporter that all news related to a crime carries a definite structure. Either the media is not as mature as R2 feels, or has its purpose, i.e., to sell a story as media researchers reveal. ‘Naming accused female first makes the news more sensational for the audience. I think it is considered that it may grab attention more. Media person always compromises on quality to make the message more appealing’ (R5).

Language is a vital tool in shaping human minds; the specific language structure is used to direct the thinking of a common reader’ (R4). Respondent P is of the view that agent deletion is purposive as it conceals the wicked acts, and it may be done on criminal’s desire. Whatever the reason is, the matter of concealing the perpetrator is not simple. The focussing victim takes the reader’s attention away from the perpetrator. Simultaneously a picture of a woman emerges as a victim throughout that normalizes the victimization.

Present finding endorses recent study of Northcutt Bohnert et al. (2019) who showed through their empirical study that the responsibility of the suspect was mitigated using passive voice (25% in physical assault, 75% in rape news, 100% in sexual assault). Hence, victims of sexual offenses were held responsible, which is consistent with prior literature that highlighted the concerns about the faulty reporting that would negatively impact the readers’ belief in claims made for responsibility (Coronel et al., 2015).

3.10. Effect of this media representation on readers

As visuals have a drastic impact on the psychology of children and they imitate actions, in the same way, grown-ups cannot avoid the influence of media. Whereas violence in children is tractable, it gets deep-rooted in adults (Brown and Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). When participants are asked about the impact such representation may exert, all agreed that the impact, overall, is negative more than being positive. Any such crime highlighted by media may make readers able to identify themselves as potential perpetrators or victims. As R2 shared, ‘The impact is certainly negative. Now there are more cases of elopement. No doubt, it created awareness but negative... Evil is growing by making it public. Despite reporting, the news is highlighted’.

Media is not only a mirror but also it shapes and frame the reader’s perception. If the media leads the public to feel that crime against women is at large, it may lead to negative stereotypes. It not only affects a person socially but also psychologically. Psychological impact proves more
harmful as S observes, ‘Such reporting reinforces gender discrimination in the very subtle way’. R2 further explained the reason as:

There seems a competition and victory is publicised that this newspaper excelled others. That’s why the story goes without investigation. In reality, if some incident happens in Manga Mandi, I need 500–600 rupees for petrol to reach over there. Media does not facilitate its reporters, so lack of facilities becomes the reason for news publishing without investigation.

It is true as investigative reporting involves the intensive gathering of information than picking it from institutions like police etc.

4. Conclusion

This study has investigated the linguistic representation of women in crime reporting, and its impact on readers. Women are found more visible in crime reporting than their presence in other stories but are placed in middle pages as compared to men. Results also showed that women received an asymmetrical portrayal as they were reported in crime news in terms of their relationship with men, with a focus on their marital status and age. The news of women victims were found sensationalized more that those of men. Women victims were blamed for the crime and grammatical structure of passive voice was found most frequent in crime against women than in other stories. The expert respondents found the present reporting style a by-product of patriarchal male-dominated society, and linked sensationalising practices and blame game to marketability. The absence of names was considered a strategy to avoid disclosure of victim to save her from further trauma. The study shows that the vague identity of the female victim in sexual crimes is embedded in the formation of cultural gender ideology. However, the unnecessary details and the use of first names was found a symbol of unsatisfactory. The careless reporting was found creating negative awareness among readers and enhancing gender discrimination against female victims. The negative impact of this depiction is expected more severe on female readers than on the male. Women would be more likely to be discouraged from playing an active role but also may start thinking about them from a men’s angle. The representation of a woman reflects the influence of socio-economic factors and culture.

The present study showed that women are described as passive victims. Hence their role as the perpetrator is thus an area worthy of further research.

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Author contribution statement

Musrat Yasmin: Conceived and designed the analysis; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Ayesha Sohail: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

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Data will be made available on request.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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