



JUST

NEUTRAL

BIASED OR

BLIND?

PAKISTANI MEDIA IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: A GENDERED FOCUS

MARCH, 2021



Just, Neutral, Biased or Blind? Pakistani Media in the time of Covid-19: A Gendered Focus

This report is the product of a nine-months-long research endeavor that was based on extensive media monitoring and content analysis of selected Pakistani mainstream news media on their coverage of Covid-19 through an intersectional gender lens. The report has been powered by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at the Rutgers University and the Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence.

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Disclaimer

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Tasneem Ahmar
Director, Uks

The Covid-19 pandemic that has plunged the world into chaos has fast emerged as a gendered crisis. Across the world, women are struggling with physical, emotional or sexual torment and Pakistan is no different to the world in that sense. But while some other countries might allow women better legal recourse, there is a deafening silence about excesses and abuse in our country — including in the mainstream media. There is also a general tendency to disregard gender-based concerns as “newsworthy” — unless it creates controversy or sensationalism for commercial gains, gender is left to a side.

This is a folly, of course.

‘Gender’ pervades all matters private and public, at an individual level, at a family level, and in terms of society. In the midst of a pandemic, it becomes even more crucial as it impacts a broad spectrum of decisions that need to be taken — money needed to meet household requirements, for example, or the everyday struggle of putting food on the plate.

Is the Pakistani media unaware of these realities or is it simply uninformed?

When you bring up the absence of women with media managers and the big bosses, their usual response is: “*there is*

so much to cover, women aren’t a priority right now”. “*Why should a pandemic be focused on how it impacts women? The impact is the same for men and women, so why focus specifically on women?*”

The answer is that in its nuances and its details, gender pervades all spheres of life. And this dynamic is magnified in a pandemic since all interactions are crucially interlinked, both in the preparedness phase and while in the midst of the pandemic.

Using a gender lens helps highlight the specific risks and vulnerabilities girls and women face because of deep-rooted inequalities and traditional gender roles.

And most importantly, the knowledge and awareness engendered by this perspective can help evolve inclusive, effective and equitable policies and interventions to ensure that nobody is left behind in our emergency responses.

awareness engendered by this perspective can help evolve inclusive, effective and equitable policies and interventions to ensure that nobody is left behind in our emergency responses.

We have compiled this report to help build an understanding of how girls and women experience outbreaks differently than boys and men. Any national agenda or national response to a pandemic that is set without considering women’s voices is flawed and doomed. And unfortunately, in terms of its duty to educate and to inform the public about how the Covid-19 crisis is gendered, the media’s performance has been sub-par. ■

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GENDER, MEDIA AND A WORLD OF CASCADING CRISES

In July 2020, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict warned the Security Council against silencing the voices of those most affected by this crime: *“Diverse life experiences must inform policy, operational, and funding decisions. If these are not gender-based in their design, they will be gender biased and exclusionary in their effect.”*

No words could apply more accurately to the need for states to recognize the current pandemic as a gendered crisis.

It calls for responses that address the unique and exacerbated ways in which women are affected, and that include them as decision-makers.

The media, in this context, has an essential and parallel role in showing how women and girls experience the pandemic differently, how and why they are especially at risk of intensified discrimination or violence, and how their voice matters to assess needs and contribute to effective solutions.

At the global level, the UN has called for Covid-19 measures that will factor in the specific needs of women. *“Some women already enduring discrimination are at particular risk of being further marginalized,”* the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls warned as early as April 2020. *“Indigenous, migrant and elderly women, as well as women with disabilities, lack information on prevention strategies.”*



Dr Cosette Thompson
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Journalists can serve their communities and counter unfounded perceptions about the causes, impact, and management of the pandemic. They should avoid echoing stereotypes and biases, as well as disrespecting or even blaming its most vulnerable victims.

Media decision-makers who question the newsworthiness of gender-based violence (GBV) in the pandemic context need to take into account the potential impact of Covid-19 and government responses, such as lockdowns. UNFPA, for instance, estimated that “for every three months the lockdown continues, an additional 15 million cases of gender-based violence are expected.” The agency also predicts “an additional 13 million child marriages taking place that otherwise would not have occurred between 2020 and 2030.”

Journalists also ought to report on the complex web of resulting factors that further deprives women and girls of basic human rights, such as access to health services, paid jobs, education, and food, as well as access to justice for the increasing number of GBV survivors.

Echoing health and human rights experts and advocates, several journalists around the world have been referring to gender-based violence as the “other” or “shadow” pandemic.

The core concepts are that violence can spread like a contagious disease and that exposure to violence generates more violence. When these two types of pandemic interact, risk factors

usually associated with gender-based violence intensify, and adverse consequences get normalized.

Significant stories can result from illustrating the amplified impacts of such intersecting crises. However, as the *Uks* study demonstrates, GBV reporting is too often blemished by “missing stories” about: new trends; long-term repercussions; stigmatized and silenced victims; their needs and quests for justice, and about government accountability, among others.

The reliance on data collection and analysis combined with personal accounts from community members most affected by these pandemics is a defining strength of the *Uks* media monitoring research and a commendable example of evidence-based advocacy.

The US-based Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL), which initiated the Global 16 Days of Activism Campaign, became aware of the *Uks* contribution to the field of media monitoring when it started its own Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence. Since 2018, CWGL has been convening regional groups of women journalists with experience in GBV reporting. Most of them have stressed the importance of media monitoring, mostly for a double purpose: improving media coverage through a gender analysis of reporting trends, and examining the representation of women in media institutions.

The CWGL, as an advocacy and research human rights center working for the elimination of discrimination and GBV, is well aware of the adverse impact of the under-representation of women, especially at the decision-making level. In the context of its Journalism Initiative, it is also aware of the vulnerability of women journalists targeted both for their work and gender. Recent examples around the globe, including in Pakistan, show that they can be at risk of online harassment and threats or acts of violence, for reporting on the impact of and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. These are violations of their basic human rights, and their voices should be protected, not silenced. ■

Dr Cosette Thompson

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Were we to read the media and watch the news today, almost a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, there is much talk about the “new normal” — how the world is no longer the same place, how realities have changed for countries and people alike, and how these new conditions demand new ways of thinking and living.

While there is some truth to this argument, it is incomplete.

For women across the globe, the “new normal” is terrifyingly familiar — in part because this new normal is largely being constructed by men. The pandemic hasn’t suddenly changed women’s realities nor has it caused a halt in everyday violence aimed at women and children. It hasn’t caused a halt in sexual aggression and micro-aggressions nor has it lessened the mental turmoil that many women lived with before the pandemic.

Women, once again, have had to struggle to be heard during the Covid-19 crisis let alone have their voices amplified. The “new normal” that women are braving today is a world that is more insecure for them, one that has seen old gender-based brutalities return — the same excesses that women thought were dead and buried after decades of feminist struggle and lives lost. In Pakistan’s case, this has meant that antiquated cultural and traditional mores about women have returned with a vengeance.

This is best captured by the much-publicized and televised ‘dua’ led by televangelist Maulana Tariq Jameel, who held Pakistani women’s “immodesty” as (in part) being responsible for the test that the Almighty had put the country through¹. Jameel is a close personal associate of Prime Minister Imran Khan and enjoys a substantial cult following of his own. His repeated appearances on television in the earlier days of the pandemic was meant both to prop support for a government that didn’t know how to respond to the pandemic, and to provide

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Covid-19 has been a godsend for the patriarchy in Pakistan in terms of reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and bolstering the notion that women’s place is within the confines of the ‘home.’ All affairs of the government and the governed were men’s affairs while women’s matters were to be confined under the broader categories of nation and community

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some religious solace for the many whose worlds had turned upside down because of the Covid-19 crisis. Predictably the solace provided was in terms of policing women's bodies.

This televised dehumanization and disrespect towards women that was described as “emotional dua” by broadcasters captures how Pakistan responded as a country and a society to the pandemic — couched in religious terms and propped through culture and superstition rather than being driven through science and fact. In many Pakistanis' initial imagination of the Covid-19 crisis (when bodies were falling in China and Italy), the virus had seemingly been designed in the heavens to punish infidels and the impious. But when the crisis reached our shores, a new target was sought to blame the pandemic on: Pakistani women.

More than six months have elapsed since and there is still no recognition or acknowledgement in the media that Covid-19 is a gendered crisis. In the Pakistani media as in ordinary people's imagination, Covid-19 is a crisis for the country and its dismal healthcare system (governed primarily by men), for the economy and for many businesses (most of which are run by men), for politics (the main participants of which are men), and even for national security and foreign policy (the guarantors of which happen to be men).

In other words, Covid-19 has been a godsend for the patriarchy in Pakistan in terms of reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and bolstering the notion that women's place is within the confines of the 'home.' All affairs of the government and the governed were men's affairs while women's matters were to be confined under the broader categories of nation and community. This is why Maulana Jameel was able to get away with dehumanizing women on television without much challenge.

When the Covid-19 crisis is evaluated from a gender lens, however, there is much to learn from what our media is showing us, what it isn't showing, and what it thinks doesn't merit coverage. News media, in very fundamental ways, is a reflection of who we are as a people and what our collective attitudes look like.

This report is a compilation of four months of media reportage around the Covid-19 crisis as experienced in Pakistan. We have monitored over 600 hours of television coverage spanning five news channels as well as newspaper content over nine months — three before the onset of the pandemic and six during the pandemic.

Through the following content analysis, we have tried to ascertain whether the Pakistani media has been just, neutral, biased or blind when it comes to reporting on women during a pandemic and ensuring that their voices are represented in the media. Our assessment situates the media in the larger picture of how the country understood the pandemic, how it responded to the virus, and the role and place ascribed to women in dealing with the crisis. ■

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

A note on the data collected for this report: despite the rigorous monitoring, the sample size remains representative — we have only managed to capture a segment of the media albeit one that tends to garner the greatest number of eyeballs. And while this is a representative sample, the breadth of content from multiple sources that was pored over by our monitors allows us to find critical insights about the Pakistani mainstream media's treatment of gender-based matters during the pandemic.

Another key element of recording data for this report is that our concern was the primary and secondary lens deployed in a news story. What we are looking for is the number of times women and children were put front and central in news reportage during the Covid-19 crisis. Some stories take topics rather discretely — provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical professionals, for example. Other stories might handle the same topic with more intersectional treatment — the fact that women doctors and nurses were often discriminated against in the distribution of PPEs. We have attempted to capture both kinds of stories.

Data collected was married with ordinary women's accounts during the pandemic, collected as interviews, focus groups and through social media. This process allowed us to deepen our understanding of the emotional and mental toll that women from a broad spectrum of backgrounds were braving during the pandemic. And simultaneously, whether these realities were being captured by the media. ■



CHAPTER 2

DATA-WISE: GENDER IN THE
CONTENT PRODUCED

The range of topics covered by the Pakistani media during these times of a pandemic is impressive indeed. But if viewed at through a gender-sensitive or gender-aware lens, the picture is rather horrific.

Consider the 9pm news bulletin on national TV channels — ostensibly the news bulletin that captures the happenings of the entire day, which throws spotlight on issues of grave concern, and informs the publics about the realities of society today. And in principle, it is a bulletin that is watched together by families and their varied age groups. As such, news items broadcast in the 9pm bulletin help shape discussions within the family about the world around them.

We monitored the 9pm news bulletin broadcast by five channels with arguably the greatest audience pull: *Geo News*, *ARY News*, *92-HD News*,

NEWSPAPERS MONITORED

DAWN

INTERNATIONAL
THE NEWS

THE EXPRESS
TRIBUNE



NEWS CHANNELS MONITORED



In March, together these five channels broadcast 4,056 news items in the 9pm news bulletin. And together, they managed to include gender-aware content (including gender-based violence) only 85 times — that's 2.10% of the entire content.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA



Dunya News and *Hum News*. In March, together these five channels broadcast 4,056 news items in the 9pm news bulletin. And together, they managed to include gender-aware content (including gender-based violence) only 85 times — that’s 2.10% of the entire content.

The numbers worsened in April. News items that were gender-aware,

gender-sensitive or were reporting gender-based violence fell to 30, out of a total 3,913 items that were broadcast. In other words, only 0.77% of the content took women into account.

Interestingly this drastic fall in April coincides with the Prime Minister’s flip-flops about the nature and extent of the Covid-19 crisis.

PM Imran Khan and his government’s response to the pandemic has largely been confused and mired in indecision. Unlike New Zealand PM Jacinda Arden, for example, who deferred her country’s response to the pandemic to scientists, PM Khan in an address to the nation urged his people not to be scared of the pandemic and claimed that “only

one or one-and-a-half” people out of 10 would die to the virus were they to contract it “because it is just like the flu.” In later addresses and statements, PM Khan would prescribe “self-belief” as the antidote to the virus. While the Pakistan Telecom Authority (PTA) was being engaged by Tania Aidrus, a woman special advisor to the Prime Minister on digital governance, to

launch messaging about social distancing, the President of the country was reassuring clerics that mosques will not be closed down for congregational prayers.

Such mixed messaging on what the government was doing to tackle the virus as well as what needed to be done at governmental levels and social levels meant that the Khan government failed in evolving a national consensus on what the pandemic was and how to battle it. In part, such a line of reasoning only reinforced toxic male behavior as it spelt false bravado in the face of a deadly virus.

It is no surprise, then, that as the pandemic worsened and women's crises — personal, professional and at the household level — intensified, representation of these issues almost disappeared from the screen. The same airtime was instead allocated to politics with some stories of substance dotted in between. Newspapers fared a little better, giving finer details more attention than the television broadcast media. ■

RAPE: MISSING STORIES OF THE PAKISTAN MEDIA

In the graph on the right are the number of rapes reported in the print media and the corresponding number of cases that were reported in the electronic media's 9pm news bulletin during the months of May and June. These have been grouped by week, since news often reaches electronic media newsrooms from far-flung localities after a few days.

However, despite factoring in such operational concerns of various newsrooms, the incidence of rape finds very little mention in the 9pm bulletin. This glaring difference makes rape cases the "missing stories" of the electronic media.

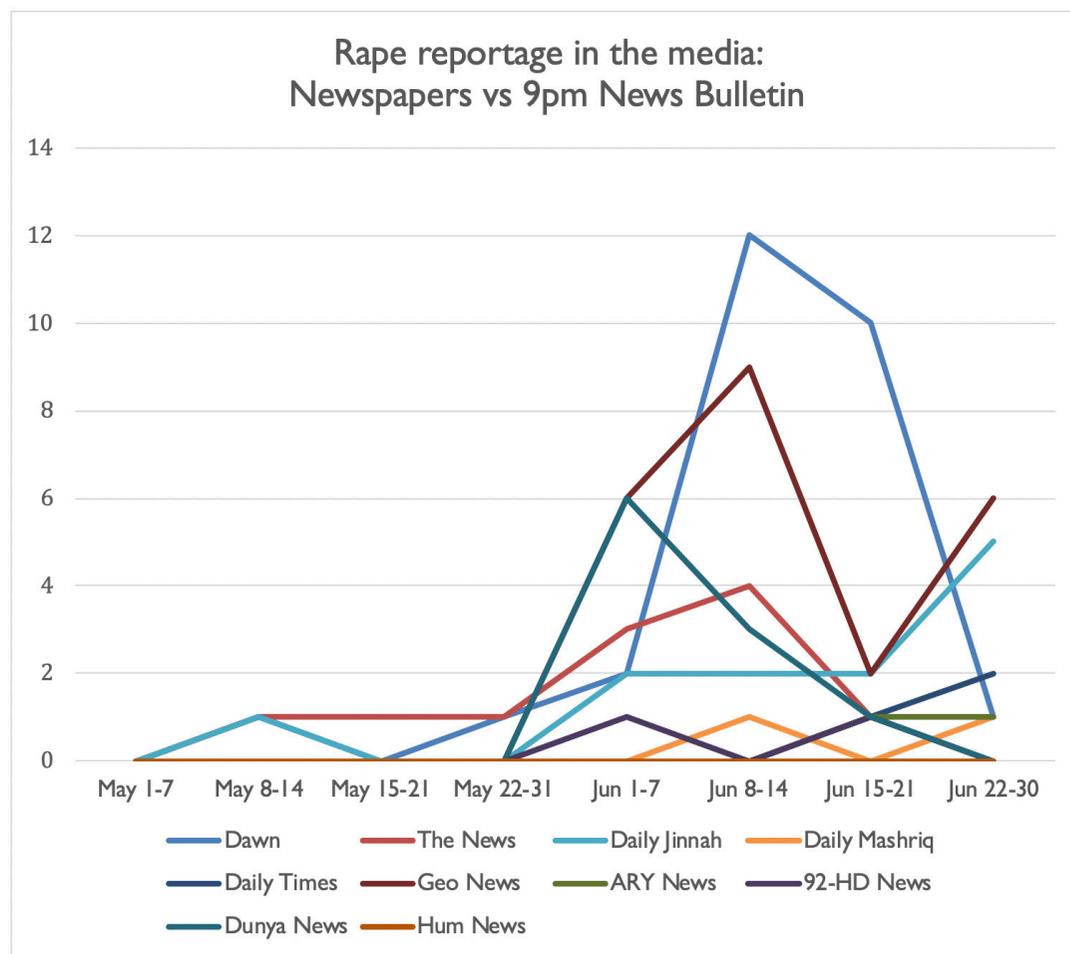
As the data shows, rape stories being reported in the 9pm news bulletin happens rather infrequently. Another way of seeing the same data is who ran the story, who missed it and by how much.

The situation is similar when we monitor the media for other forms of sexual abuse and violence apart from rape.

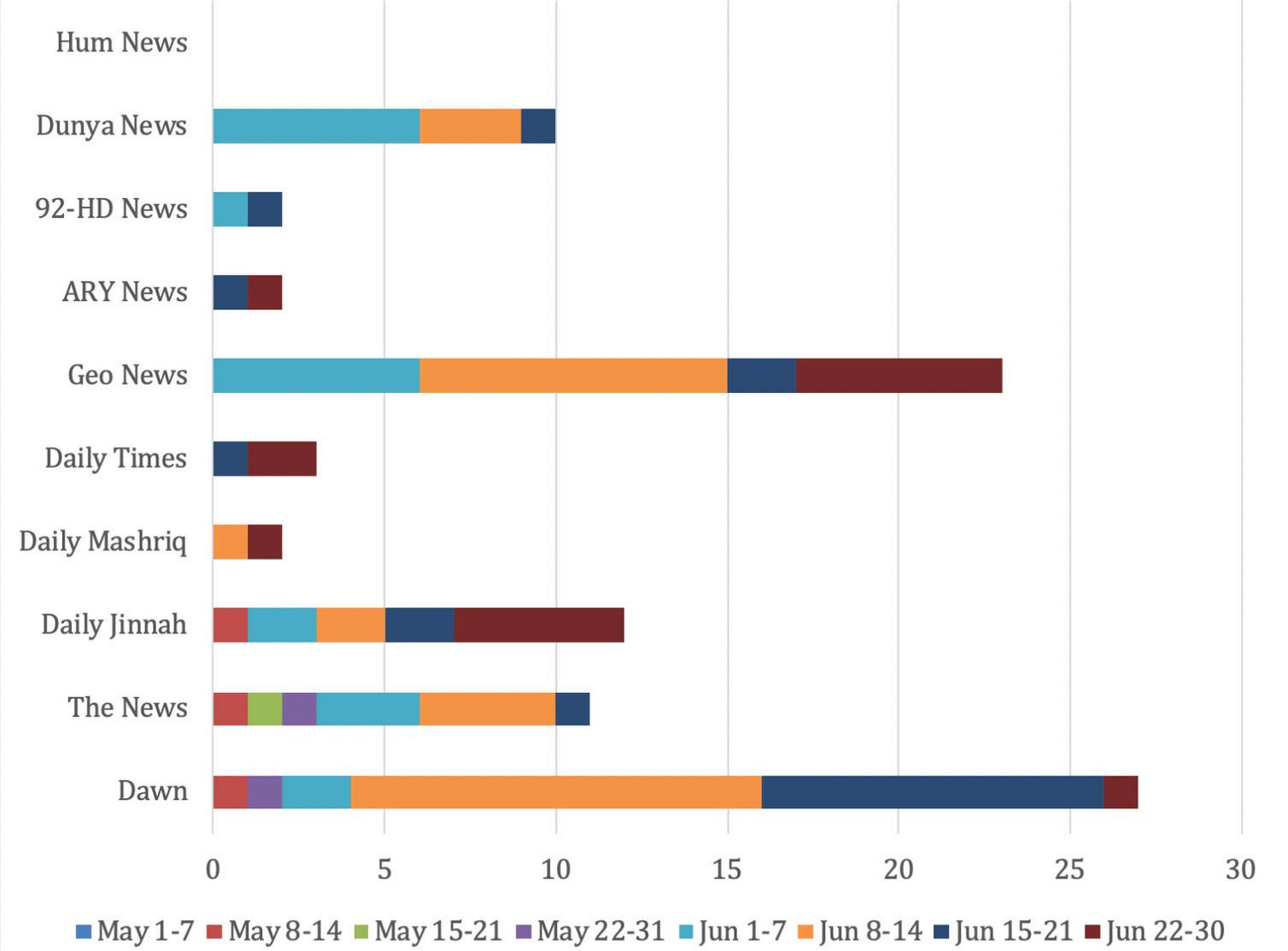
It is worth reiterating that we have recorded the 9pm news bulletin — broadcast during prime-time and finding family audiences in many homes across Pakistan. Ultimately, in pursuit of some notion of what Pakistani nationalism ought to be, the omission of rape reportage or that on other forms of sexual violence deprives information from the very demographic that is likely to become victims of these crimes.

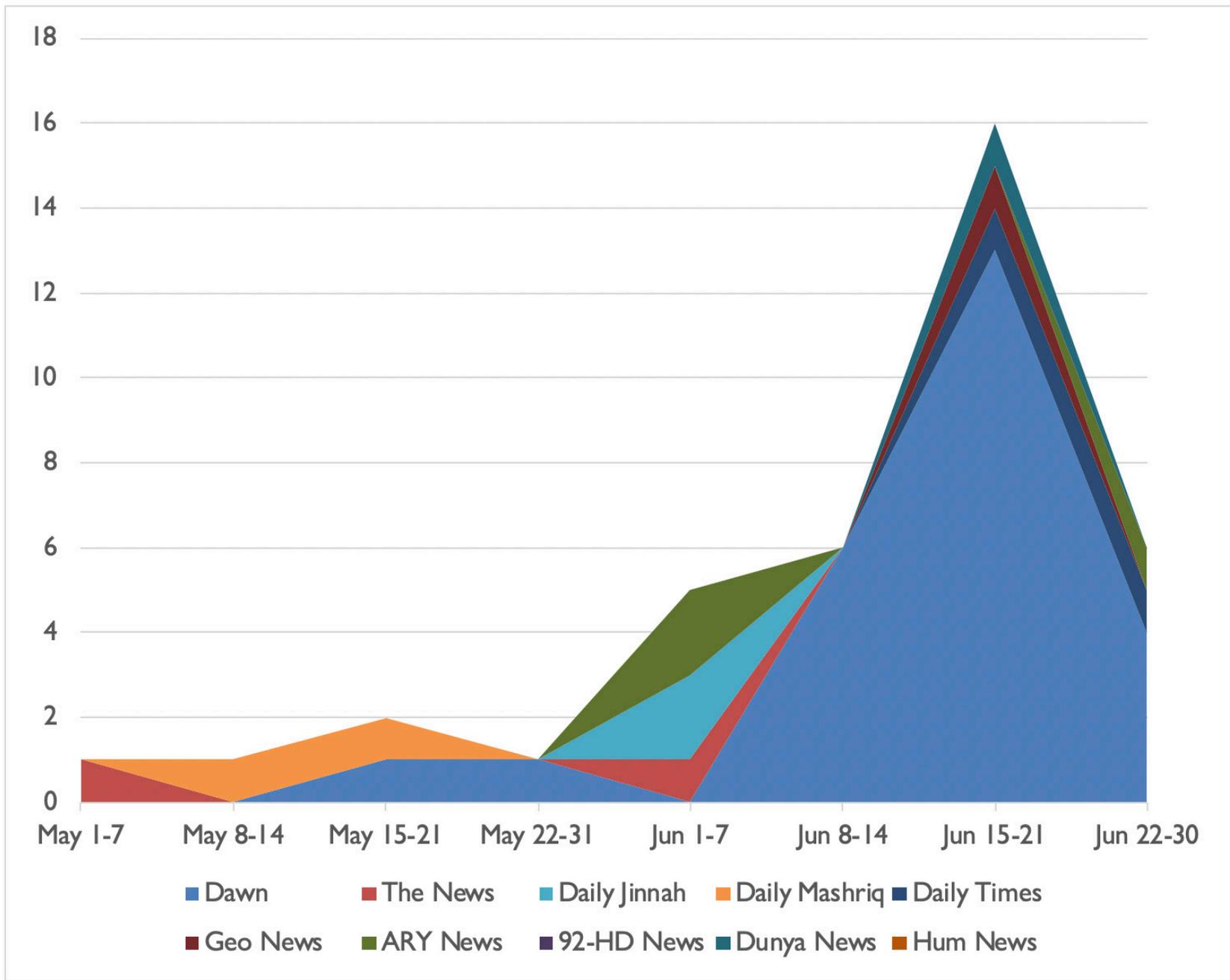
But there is far more to unpack from the fact that these news items do not make it to the 9pm bulletin. Media is a reflection of society and as such, the suspicion accorded to claims of rape, abuse and harassment is reflected in news coverage.

And while caution is understandable when proceeding with these stories, what is unforgivable is the absolute disappearing of the story from the airwaves. Not only is there no acknowledgement of an everyday phenomenon but there are no discussions or debates organized and broadcast on the topic either. This



Rapes in the media: Newspapers vs 9pm News Bulletin





points to the hold of men on newsrooms and the reign of regression that often exists in media organizations across the country.

Among the newspapers and news bulletins monitored, Pakistan's newspaper of record, *Dawn*, enjoyed the lion's share of all coverage pertaining to rape, sexual abuse and harassment, and domestic abuse and violence with 44.19% of reportage. *Hum News* was conspicuous by its absence — it scored 0%. The saving grace for the electronic media was *Geo News* with 11.63% of the content.

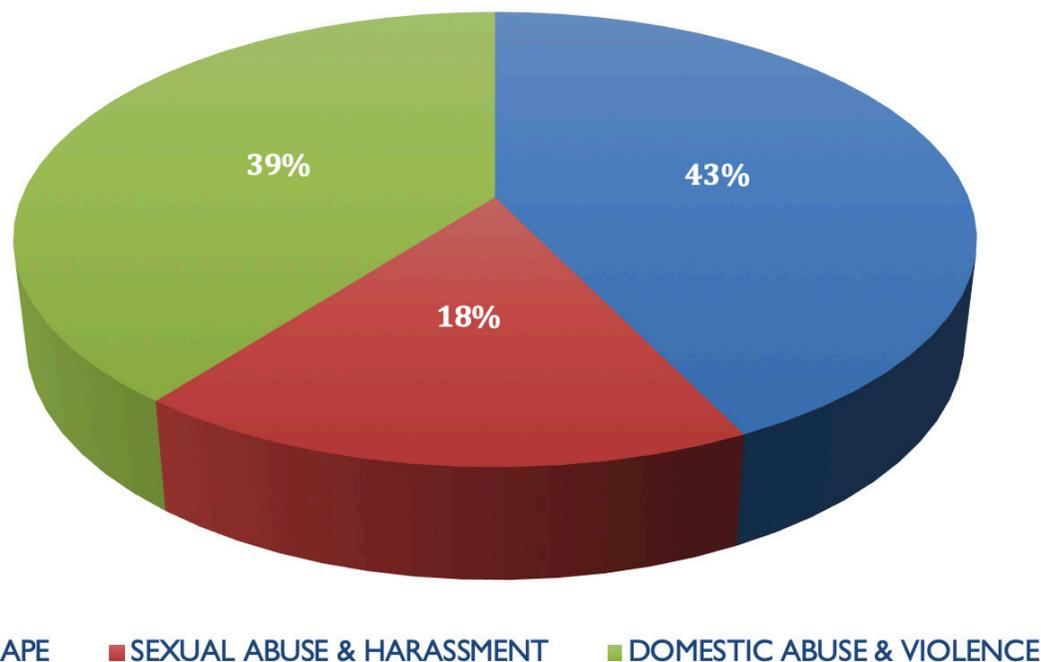
In fact, newspaper coverage dominated completely over the 9pm bulletin as 79.53% of content appeared

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In March, for example, the media reported on gender-based violence eight times out of the total 4,056 news items in the 9pm bulletin while April saw only four reports on gender-based violence across the electronic media that was monitored.

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WHAT KIND OF GBV IS MORE "NEWSWORTHY" TO THE MEDIA?



in the print media as compared to the paltry 20.47% in the electronic media.

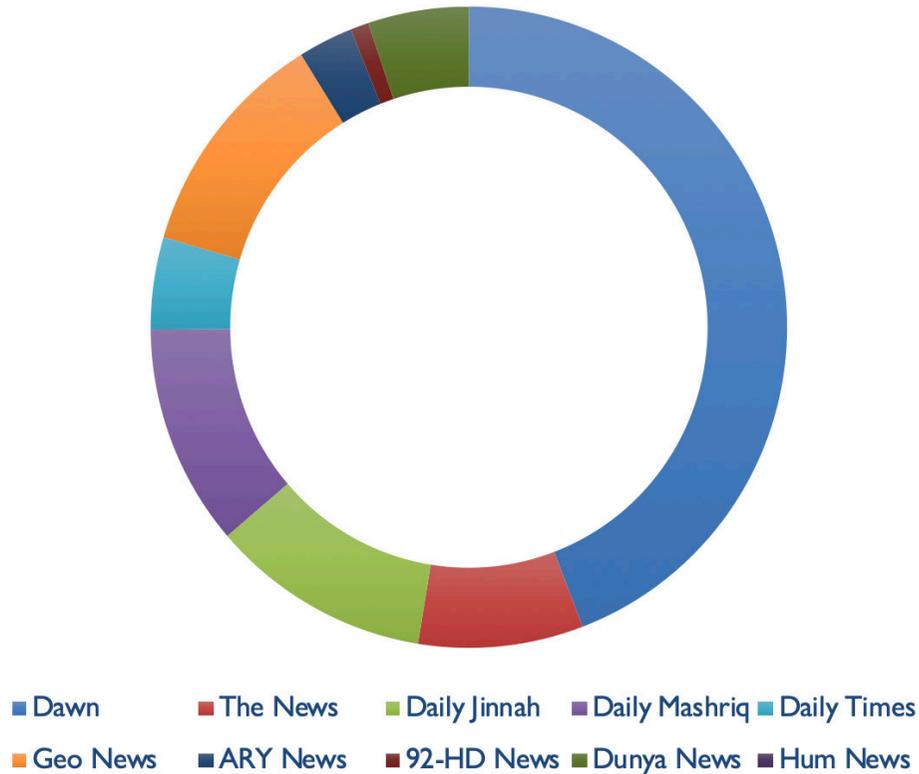
This speaks to what is being broadcast among millions across the nation versus what is appearing in the written word. As far as the 9pm news bulletin is concerned, channels are reticent to even register the incidence of rape, sexual abuse and harassment, and domestic abuse and violence — in other words, a lie by omission.

Another interesting insight that the data reveals is that the media is happy to delve into stories of rape as well as domestic abuse and violence but

is reticent to broach the topic of sexual abuse and harassment. One possible reason for this is to accept the routineness of such crimes that are endemic to society and workplaces in Pakistan. Meanwhile, stories of rape and domestic abuse and violence allow greater sensationalism and ability to go viral as they feed on the public's morbid curiosity about others' affairs. This is the demand that the mainstream Pakistani news media appears to be fulfilling.

Such treatment of the news means that real stories with harrowing consequences don't often make it to the fore. By all accounts, the largest spike in violence

WHO REPORTED THE MOST?



against women the world over was in domestic violence and abuse — only that it was neither recognized as such by the media nor reported on as such. The pandemic put women in abusive situations with their abusers for a far greater length of time than usual. In Pakistan, although there are accounts of women having made it to safety or a shelter but the majority of cases remained unreported on the electronic media even if they were reported in the print

media.

In March, for example, the media reported on gender-based violence eight times out of the total 4,056 news items in the 9pm bulletin while April saw only four reports on gender-based violence across the electronic media that was monitored. It isn't as if the media was not reporting other crime stories: March saw 132 crimes stories being covered in the bulletin while 116 crime stories were presented during April.

It was only gender-based violence that didn't make its way into news directors' imagination as being "newsworthy."

The story follows the same trajectory in May as very little reportage exists on domestic abuse and violence (despite many personal accounts having started to emerge on social media about women suffering more intense and more frequent domestic abuse and violence).

But in June, the numbers spike significantly as *Dawn* reported 14 stories in the first seven days of the month followed by 22 stories over the next seven days. However, a corresponding spike does not exist in other papers or on electronic media. Once again, both the 9pm news bulletin and talk shows remain off bounds for stories around domestic abuse and violence.

This stark difference between what the electronic media was showing versus the numbers that were reported in the print media skews the portrayal of what is actually happening in society and whether we are acknowledging the crimes being committed inside our homes. The answer is of course in the negative and returns to how religion is sold on the idiot box to frame a particular setting of normalcy and what society ought to be.

It also goes back to the expectation of women carrying the burden of abuse to protect the "family" or the "community" and at a macro level, the "nation." While academic works such as Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* attempt to situate forms of women's agency within religious frameworks, Pakistani media has sought to construct "ethical and political imaginaries" regarding women, all of whom must stay within the bounds that the media has constructed for them.

This is a theme that recurs at every point in our data analysis since the content being produced isn't reflecting the gravity of the situation, in fact it is only mocking it. ■

INTRODUCING A NEW METRIC: REPORTING INTEGRITY INDEX

In our interactions with media managers and editors last year, many tend to hide behind aggregates and not talk about singular cases — unless the case has consumed national imagination and rage and has suddenly become “newsworthy” to them.

Many editors, particularly in the vernacular media, are reluctant to print sexual abuse, harassment and assault stories because they either don’t believe the victim or that they don’t believe the incident ever happened. The bare minimum journalistic requirement, however, is to record stories on gender-based violence as part of crime since it is the only “recorded” version of reality; the rest is merely hearsay. And while only a handful of newspapers only ever acknowledge the existence of gender-based violence, we are often told that when looked at over a long-term the “media” reported “most” of the cases.

At *Uks*, we decided to track the “long-term” and assess whether the media did indeed report most of the cases as many media managers tend to claim or is the reality something else.

We had begun this study before the pandemic had reached Pakistani shores. But once it arrived and it became evident that Covid-19 was a gendered crisis, it provided us with an opportunity to deconstruct the ethical and moral framework of the mainstream Pakistani media when it comes to reporting on women.

It goes without saying that the pandemic also brought about stories of hope and resilience in women. These stories are rightly celebrated but the context is one of resistance against systemic oppression. In the media, however, there is a tendency to overly romanticize what ought to be the norm or to celebrate tokenism. What the media shies away from is what are considered “routine” stories in Pakistan: sexual abuse, harassment, assault and other forms of gender-based violence.

As mentioned earlier, the aversion to printing or giving airtime to gender-based violence is a widespread phenomenon. But it needed to be quantified in a systematic manner. What we sought to do, therefore, was begin comparing — both qualitatively and quantitatively — the number of gender-based violence cases being reported by the newspaper of record versus what some of the more established publications and news channels were reporting.

Through a comparative study of nine months of reportage in selected newspapers and news channels, we are now able to present a new metric that captures what happened to each case of gender-based violence that was reported in the Pakistani media: the Reporting Integrity Index (RII).

The RII is a score awarded to a publication or news channel for how its gender-based violence reportage stacks up against what the newspaper of record reported. This ratio is captured on a scale from 0 to 1 — the closer to 1 the score, the better a publication has registered gender-based violence. Scores at zero or closer to zero indicate a publication or news channel omitting gender-based violence from its reportage altogether.

The RII can be calculated on a daily, monthly, quarterly or yearly basis but for our purposes, we are breaking it down by month. This is primarily to extend as great a benefit of doubt to media organizations as possible given the organizational constraints many organizations have.

Crime is usually reported in Pakistani media houses through the record maintained by local police stations. In an everyday news cycle in a daily newspaper, this means that a crime reporter calls each and every police station in the city, jots down numbers for each station and then produces a tally for the newspaper to print in the morning edition.

That said, only a few newspapers and reporters are diligent enough to do compile figures in this manner. The RII captures this organizational inefficiency as well as whether there is a particular emphasis on gender-based violence not being reported.

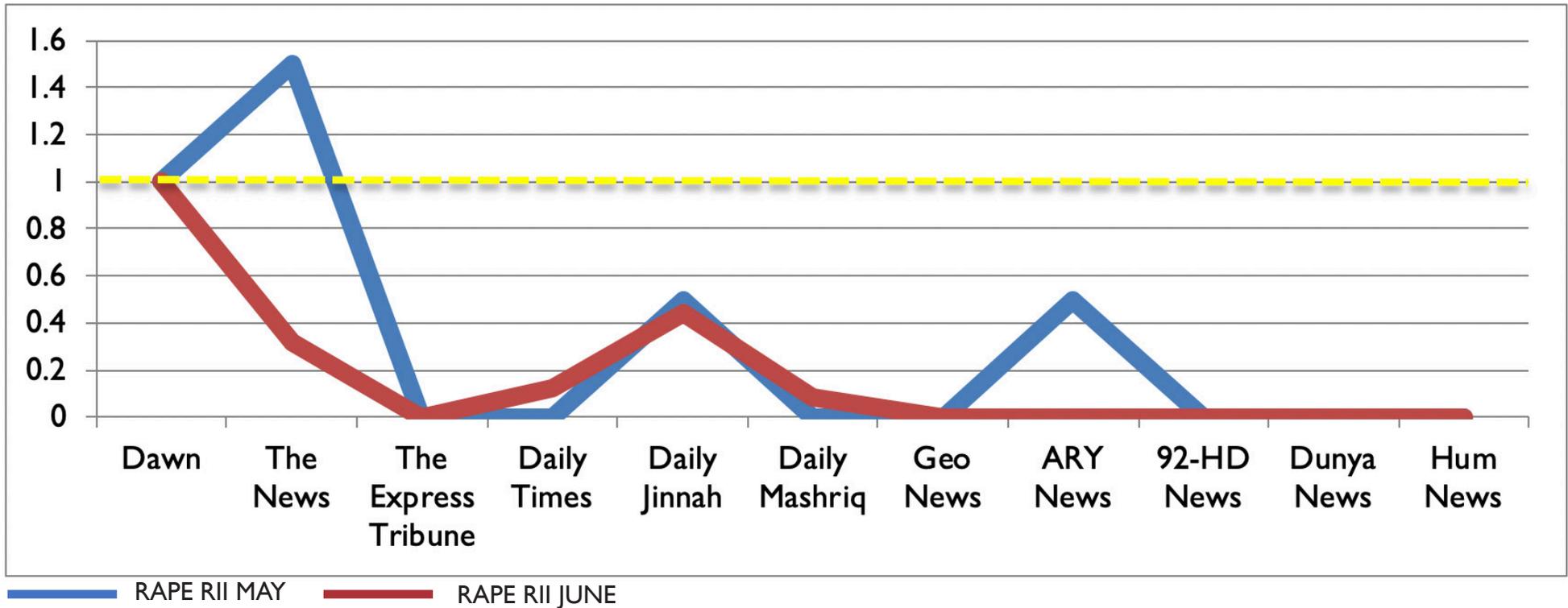
As for television news media, the process of gathering crime figures is more complex since only a handful of reporters are at hand to report and gather nationwide information on crime. But while this organizational shortcoming is understandable and is noted, sexual violence in our understanding is a newsworthy story regardless of organizational context — particularly given the fact that the media is able to manufacture national outrage on selected incidents of sexual crime. The RII figures below will show that the absence of registering sexual crime on television is a far graver and more widespread phenomenon than our media managers would have us believe. ■

RAPE RII

A crucial difference needs to be maintained before proceeding: sometimes multiple stories are contained within one news item with a singular headline. We are concerned with the number of stories, not the number of items. So, for example, “Two women assaulted at gunpoint” will register as two stories contained in one news item.

Below is a snapshot of how the number of rape cases reported in the newspaper of record, *Dawn*, during the months of May and June, 2020, stacked up against other news media:

Only once did an organization other than *Dawn* report on rape cases more than the newspaper of record — *The News* in May, 2020. The incidence of rape

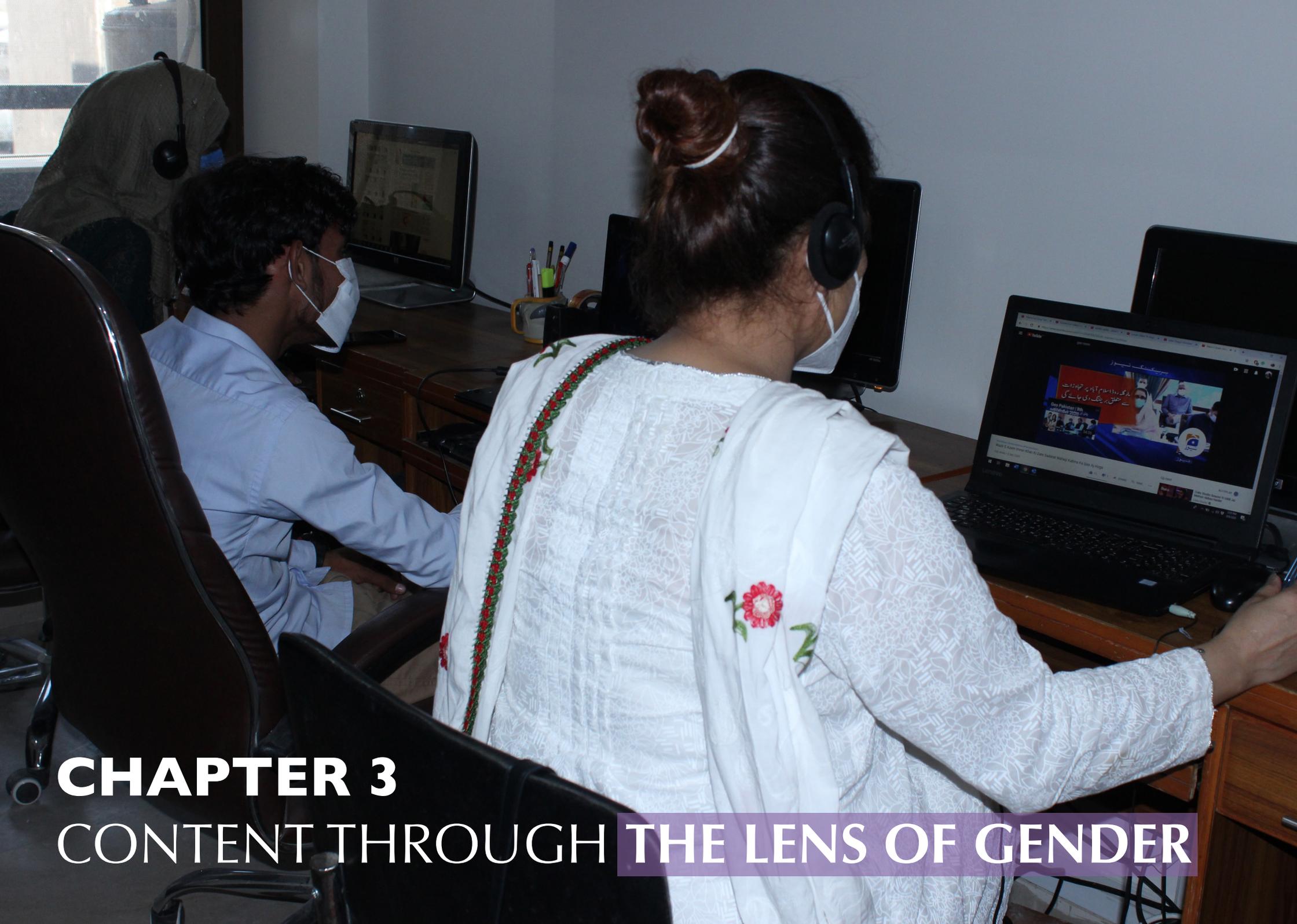


went up manifolds in June but apart from the Daily Jinnah and *The News*, who reported roughly half the cases, others largely did not report on the crime or got their figures horribly low.

The data from June is instructive.

When juxtaposed against a timeline of events, the month of May was also the holy month of Ramazan in Pakistan — a time of piety in traditional terms. This ended in late May and the month of June spelled the beginning of a less ‘pious’ time.

The chart above remarkably shows a consistent trend of the electronic media not reflecting a rise in rape incidents in the 9pm news bulletin. This absence, whether witting or unwitting, meant that public interest was compromised since most cases of gender-based crime had been hidden from the public eye. ■



CHAPTER 3

CONTENT THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER

Every five years since 1995, on one designated day, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) takes a snapshot of media reportage across the world to capture women's presence in news media content in relation to men, gender bias and stereotyping. The GMMP is the largest and longest longitudinal study on the gender in the world's media and this year marked the sixth time this exercise has been conducted worldwide (Uks being part of the project from Pakistan).

As part of coding stories for the monitoring process, the GMMP deploys a qualitative framework that classifies stories into four kinds². The framework is being reproduced here verbatim:

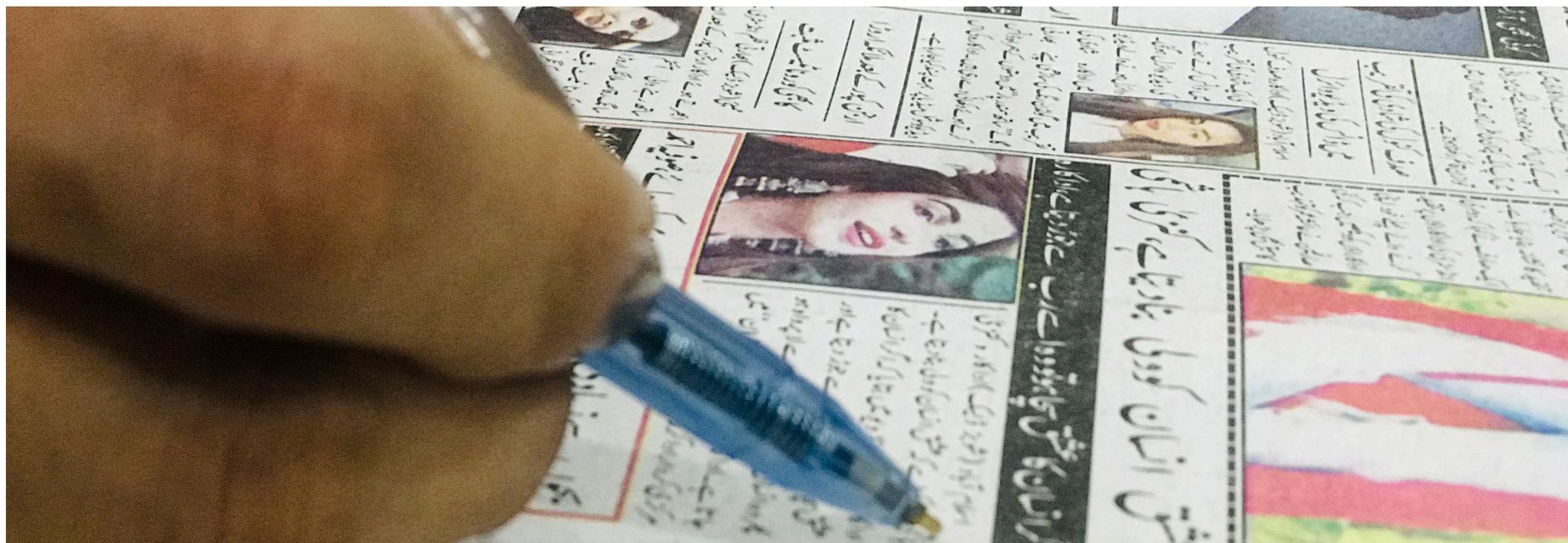
1. News articles or stories that convey blatant gender stereotypes — articles or images in which women are presented in stereotypical roles such as victims or sex objects and men presented as strong entrepreneurs or leaders.

2. News articles or stories that convey more subtle stereotypes — these are about unstated assumptions about the roles of women and men, conveying stereotyped beliefs (such as women are emotionally fragile) or stories whose range of sources is limited only to men, or only to women

3. News items or stories that are missed opportunities or gender blind — stories that could have been enriched and expanded by including a wider range of sources and viewpoints, or

by shedding light on different implications for women and men.

4. News items or stories that are gender-aware — these stories are a negation of the aforementioned three types of stories. They challenge stereotypes and prompt debate on topical gender issues from a human rights perspective. These stories have a gender balance of sources and they demonstrate different perspectives on women and men, including through the use of gender-disaggregated data. And they are gender-specific: they focus on systemic structures and processes that construct inequality between women and men. Per the GMMP framework, these stories would certainly



The common perception about Urdu newspapers' gender reportage is about them catering to news items such as the one above. The headline here quotes an actress as saying that love can turn a man pious. Such news items are, of course, plenty but some Urdu newspapers' direct reportage on gender-based violence in times of Covid-19 surpassed the English-language print media. A welcome development, indeed

support the basic journalistic principles of:

- * Fairness
- * Balance; getting all sides of the story.
- * Challenging assumptions and prompting debate
- * Fresh ideas and perspectives
- * Doing no harm; Respecting the human dignity and rights of sources

We deployed the same framework to understand the content produced by the Pakistani media. We discovered that the majority of Pakistani print and electronic media's reportage in times of Covid-19 falls under the first three categories — consistent with the trend in gender-based reporting around the globe. Gender-aware stories are conspicuous by their near-absence although when they do appear, they are usually in English-language publications.

One significant difference in Urdu-language and English publications, however, is the nature of news item published. The English-language media has a healthy habit of periodically shedding light on matters of gender, family structures and violence. However, much of this exists either in the opinion

Contrary to common expectations, the Urdu-language publications that we monitored reported on gender-based violence in more direct terms and in their daily editions, some even including the story of the rise in domestic violence during the pandemic as well as significant developments on their back pages.



This story was printed on the back pages of the Daily Mashriq's Islamabad edition. In such cases, the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had decided

pages or as part of their in-paper magazines. In other words, as think pieces or news features.

On the other hand, and contrary to common expectations, the Urdu-language publications that we monitored reported on gender-based violence in more direct terms and in their daily editions, some even including the story of the rise in domestic violence during the pandemic as well as significant developments on their back pages.

This obviously changes the emphasis of the story — not only does placement signify the story's importance but it also reaches common people in their everyday language and making the issue part of everyday imagination. On that count, publications such as Daily Jinnah and Daily Mashriq need to be lauded



for being highly gender-aware and inclusive.

This begs the question: how should we classify a "missed opportunity" when it comes to gender-based reporting? How should impact be understood in gender-aware contexts?

Uks has long been arguing that number of gender-based news stories printed or broadcast and their repetition is but one criterion. How the news item has been treated and its placement are more significant in terms of the impact that a story will

Gender-based concerns ought not to be recorded ceremonially; there ought to be a larger nation-building agenda associated with it. Amidst the violence suffered by women during the pandemic, media organizations missed the opportunity to help tell a story that was more widespread than many men believed.

have on its audience.

Our qualitative analysis reveals that the range of gender-based issues broached by the English-language media is rather broad. But in terms of impact, news stories buried in the inside pages and

their repetition in opinion pages and magazines simply do not and cannot compare with the massive impression left by a single news item carried on the front page or back page.

This has been proven time and again as well — the national outrage at the abduction and sexual abuse of seven-year-old Zainab Ansari in 2008, for example, resulted in Pakistan's first national child abuse legislation coming into existence. This ensured life imprisonment for anybody found guilty of child abuse as well as punitive action against any police official over causing unnecessary delay in investigating missing children cases.

A more recent example is the national manhunt launched to catch perpetrators of gang-rape in Lahore; the case came to limelight because the survivor had been raped along a highway, in front of her toddlers.

For the English-language media, therefore, it is important to understand how a single story, if done correctly and placed in the right columns, can effectively press forward the more urgent gender-based concerns into national imagination and debate.

Gender-based concerns ought not to be recorded ceremonially; there ought to be a larger nation-building agenda associated with it. Amidst the violence suffered by women during the pandemic, media organizations missed the opportunity to help tell a story that was more widespread than many men believed.

The following section analyzes a few stories that appeared in the Pakistani media during the pandemic through the GMMP framework. These examples are all illustrative and not meant to single out organizations over bad practices. We also provide constructive suggestions on how the story could have been told better or more accurately in an attempt to inform and educate our audience. ■

BLATANT STEREOTYPES

Articles or images in which women are presented in stereotypical roles such as victims or sex objects and men presented as strong entrepreneurs or leaders

In *Dawn's* October 1, 2019 edition, the Karachi metro pages carried a crime story titled "Gang busted; arms, law enforcers' uniforms seized."³ Nestled inside the story is another significant story: "18 transgender persons held."

We came across this story when conducting our comparative analyses and, although it did not appear during the first wave of the pandemic, it provided the perfect depiction of how language reinforces stereotypes.

Back in 2012, Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) announced that transgender citizens would now have the option of registering themselves as transgender and that it'd be reflected on their computerized national identity cards. This measure came three years after the Supreme Court of Pakistan had instructed the authority to allow citizens to do so.

The transgender community in Pakistan is much like other minority communities: it exists on the margins, largely to find some sanity and security that is almost impossible to find for them in the mainstream. Historically, transgender women and men have struggled to find acceptance from their families. Ordinary jobs, too, have been very difficult to come by. In a situation where surviving and building a life for themselves seems an impossible affair, many end up in secluded spaces created in obscure localities. In an attempt to survive, some also turn to commercial sex work.

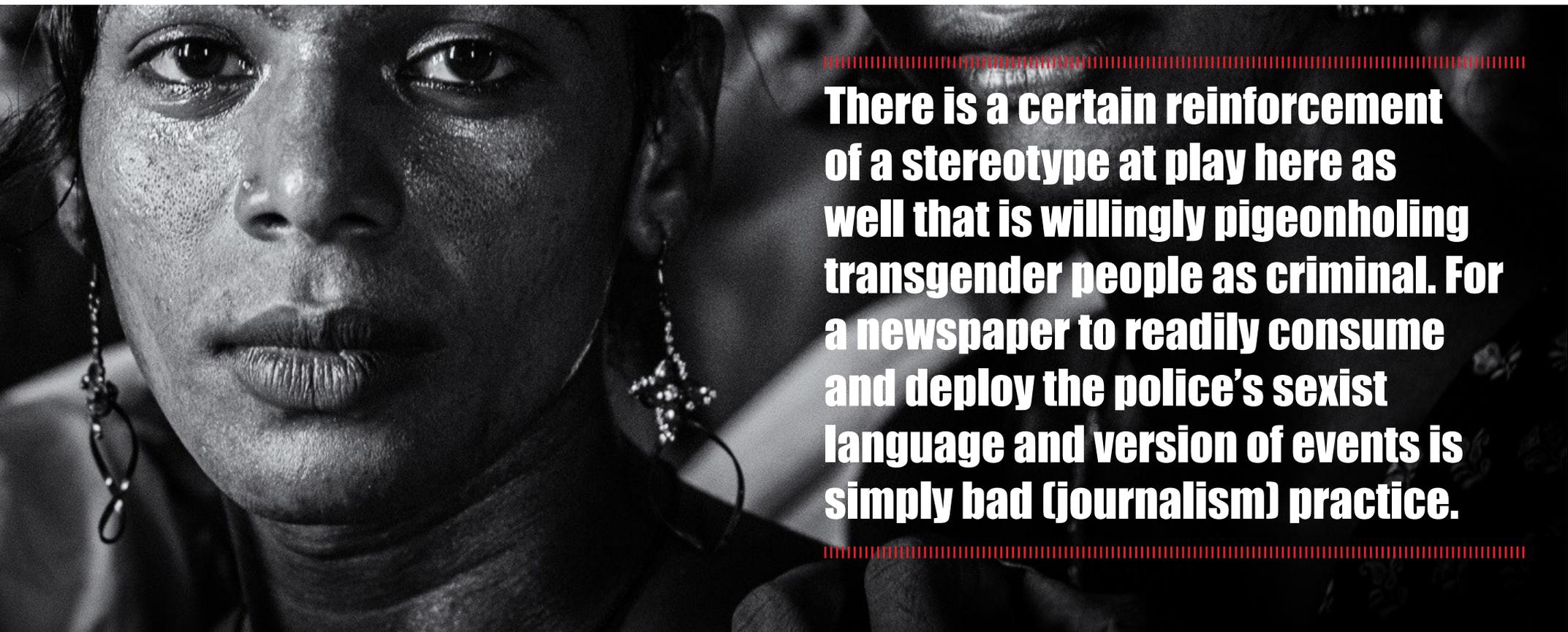
But while the transgender community is far more than sex work, everyday culture has created a stereotype for them as sexually amoral, available and different. Many stories paint all transgender people through the same brush and it is something that the *Dawn* story is guilty of also doing. As we can see below, the story is sourced from a named male police officer and it is through his lens that the story is told and recorded.



"Police on Monday arrested 18 transgender persons over charges of beating some people and later on attacking Darakshan police station to get their arrested accomplices released, according to South SSP Sheeraz Nazeer.

Police arrested them over complaints that they were allegedly involved in sale of illegal drugs and prostitution, particularly in Badar Commercial, Saba Commercial and other commercial areas of DHA, said the senior officer.

Late on Sunday night, the accused



There is a certain reinforcement of a stereotype at play here as well that is willingly pigeonholing transgender people as criminal. For a newspaper to readily consume and deploy the police's sexist language and version of events is simply bad (journalism) practice.

allegedly beat citizens at Badar Commercial when the residents tried to prevent them from indulging in such activities.

The police arrested nine transgender persons who were brought to Darakshan police station. Their several accomplices allegedly attacked the police station, damaged chairs etc, to get their held accomplices released from custody."

From the language used in the story, the words "attack," "assault" and "accomplices" criminalize transgender persons without due

process. There were no eyewitness accounts nor was there any named resident complainant — this is pertinent since the story began with the narrative that the accused were beating up residents of the area, over which nine people were initially arrested.

Newspapers ought to be doubly careful when reporting on sexual minorities, given that they have no voices in the mainstream to plead their case and also, since the power differential that exists between transgender people and the police is huge. In actuality, sexual harassment of transgender people

at the hands of the police is an established phenomenon in Pakistan. They need not be commercial sex workers or drug peddlers either for them to become the police's prey; it is merely being different that puts them in harm's way.

A second concern is the veracity of the facts. Reporters who have actually visited the police station mentioned would testify to how heavily it is guarded. The police claim that the station was "attacked" ought to have been questioned at the outset since minor disturbances are not the same as an "attack."

These two terms carry two very different connotations, one that is more forgiving of citizens and one that presents them as hardened terrorists.

Charges levied by the police cannot and should not be assumed as reality by a newspaper because ultimately, that is what the audience will assume as well. There is a certain reinforcement of a stereotype at play here as well that is willingly pigeonholing transgender people as criminal. For a newspaper to readily consume and deploy the police's sexist language and version of events is simply bad (journalism) practice.

Another item that we believe is relevant, despite not being "mainstream" (yet), is a tweet put out by *Haqeeqat TV*, a wildly popular citizen media account that operates on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.

For *Haqeeqat TV* tradition and culture are set in stone. Their worldview is defined by an identity drawn from military conquerors of yore. And this romanticism extends into the political sphere, which is where this worldview is executed.

The tweet reads: *"Be grateful that Esra Bilgiç (Halima Sultan) didn't declare Pakistanis the most hypocritical nation. We have been commenting on what she was wearing, lectured her about Islam, but now we have an actress of Turkish drama Ertugal starring in a bridal photoshoot in vulgar clothes for a Pakistani fashion designer. If asked where has your Islam gone now what will be the answer?"*

Haqeeqat TV did not release a news item, it offered commentary within which a news item was encapsulated. And the framing of the tweet checks all the wrong boxes. For example, journalism holds only facts to be accurate not opinions. This tweet presents the (sexist) opinion to be true. Men who hold such opinions are dime a dozen on the internet in Pakistan, the fact that they now have tools to propagate ignorance, face no recrimination as such and are gaining more audience numbers is worrying

The first half of the tweet identifies what kinds of messages Pakistani men tended to send the actress Esra Bilgiç. But instead of apologising for such harassment, the worry for *Haqeeqat* is that the hypocrisy will be found out. The tweet is meant to be incendiary and loaded: to provoke toxic masculinity to rise and to label the wardrobe as vulgar – thereby associating anybody with a fondness for the clothes to also be equally vulgar. The moral judgement is inbuilt. ■



TRANSLATION: Be grateful that Esra Bilgiç (Halima Sultan) didn't declare Pakistanis the most hypocritical nation. We have been commenting on what she was wearing, lectured her about Islam, but now we have an actress of Turkish drama Ertugal starring in a bridal photoshoot in vulgar clothes for a Pakistani fashion designer. If asked where has your Islam gone now what will be the answer?

SUBTLE STEREOTYPES

On May 21, 2020, *The Express Tribune* ran a story filed from Hyderabad with the headline, “Woman withdraws rape charges against judge.”⁴ The catchline added: “Says she made accusation fearing he would send her back to her family.”

Over the past few years, the #MeToo movement in Pakistan has grown stronger by the year, best illustrated by the increasing numbers pulled in by the Aurat [Woman] March on International Women’s Day over the past couple of years. More numbers have meant greater resistance as well, with conservative members of society often taking to the idiot box to express outrage over women leaving the confines of their homes and operating on a “foreign agenda” (to demand their rights and end to all forms of sexual violence).

This trend, at least in our understanding, signifies a demographic shift: there are more young women who are aware of their rights than ever before and they belong to a younger generation, often from middle-class households. Many of these young women have either been educated at liberal arts colleges in Pakistan or abroad and many have them have gainful employment in schools, colleges, universities, the non-governmental sector and the policy sector. Unlike previous generations, they also have strength in numbers and are vocal — no longer is it taboo to mention or discuss sexual violence since the new generation of urban Pakistani women is not willing to suffer in silence.

This generation of women came out to bat for singer Meesha Shafi after she alleged in a tweet that singer Ali Zafar had sexually harassed her during a professional engagement. This happened on April 19, 2018. A national debate ensued and

the matter ended up in court. It was only late last year when Shafi appeared in court to record her statement; in 2020, however, Zafar has managed to counter-sue for wrongful allegation levelled against him⁵, managed to have a case registered against Shafi and her most vociferous supporters on Twitter⁶, and bagged a national award from the prime minister⁷.

All throughout, Zafar left no stone unturned to discredit Shafi and her version. Sexist critics of the Aurat March found a new ally in the seemingly sophisticated Zafar to slate the “feminist agenda” with these men teaming up to prove that somehow, all allegations of sexual violence are somehow unfounded.

The Express Tribune story needs to be understood in the context described above: another fake rape allegation, another man winning in court.

The woman who accused Sehwan judicial magistrate Imtiaz Hussain Bhutto of rape withdrew the charges in court on Thursday.

“I feared that the judge will send me back to my family, owing to which I levelled the accusation,” the woman told the court. She had claimed two months ago that the judge raped her in his judicial chamber, when she had appeared before him to record a statement about her free-will marriage.

The woman also distanced herself from the complaint filed on her behalf by the Sehwan police, claiming that the police obtained her signature on a plain paper. She maintained that she was not changing her statement under duress.

According to the woman’s previous statement, the judge allegedly raped her in

Stories with unstated assumptions about the roles of women and men, conveying stereotyped beliefs (such as women are emotionally fragile) or stories whose range of sources is limited only to men, or only to women

his chamber in Sehwan on January 13. The FIR was registered on the state's behalf at Sehwan police station.

The judge, however, had expressed a lack of trust in the Jamshoro police, which was conducting the investigation of the case, after which the home department transferred the case to the Hyderabad police.

Hyderabad SSP Adeel Hussain Chandio then assigned the inquiry to a team led by DSP Aurangzeb Abbassi. The judge had said that a Sehwan police official had a personal bone to pick with him, asserting that he had "invented the rape case allegation in connivance with the woman."

Over half a dozen hearings of the case were held in district and civil courts prior to Thursday.

The judge, in this duration, continued to avoid compliance with court orders to provide his samples for DNA testing, arguing that he did not trust the laboratories in Pakistan. He had requested the court to allow DNA testing from a lab in a foreign country.

Meanwhile, Sindh Human Rights Defenders convener Ali Palh, who is also a member of the Sindh Commission on the Status of Women, had filed an application under Section 493 of the Code of Criminal Procedure to become a party in the case on February 29. However, the application was dismissed.

Palh had claimed that the woman was facing threats and that she was hiding in a district in upper Sindh. He also said that DSP Abbassi had pleaded the court to cancel the judge's bail because he was not cooperating in the investigation.

Any reading of the story would tell the reader that there is more to it than meets the eye, undoubtedly casting greater aspersions on the judge who was accused and his version of events than on the woman. There ought to also have been concern for the whereabouts of the woman, who seemed to first have been wronged and then was used to settle political scores.

The catchline's concern, however, was not the judge but the fact that the woman seemingly made a false allegation.

Indeed, newspaper editors should, in principle, stand by a women survivor of rape and assault particularly when it is clear she is in double jeopardy. That was not the principle deployed by the newspaper when printing the story. Catchlines are typically used to depict a different idea to the one represented by the headline; in this case there is a doubling down



Samaa English
@SamaaEnglish



.@AliZafarsays has filed an FIR against @itsmeeshashafi, and eight others for posting defaming him on social media.

They have been charged under Section 20 (offences against person's dignity) of PECA and Section 109 (abetment punishment) of PPC

samaa.tv/entertainment/...



3:59 PM · Sep 29, 2020

The aggrieved and the accused both tagged in a news item. Such practices ought to be abandoned as they breach privacy, are mentally and emotionally invasive, and run the risk of more trauma wounds being inflicted

on the women's retraction without understanding or having any empathy or sympathy about what might have made her do it. ■

M I S S E D

O P P O R T U N I T Y

When speaking of the impact the pandemic has had on employment, the earlier reportage of jobs being lost during the pandemic, predictably, revolved around men. Women losing jobs during the pandemic wasn't entirely treated as a story perhaps because of the assumption that their "real place" was in the confines of the home.

The reality is that women have been struggling and fighting on many fronts. And while many issues faced by women during the Covid-19 pandemic pervade classes, some have hit women in the laboring classes more than women who are more privileged.

Typically, urban settings such as Karachi

see a healthy contribution of women in the workforce including working in factories. When the initial lockdown arrived, and with it came the closure of industry, women were among the first to be laid off.

This is significant since women employed in the garments sector, for example, often find gainful employment because remuneration rates are far lower than what men in the same job would be paid.

But with exports grinding to a sudden halt, many factories initially asked workers to stay home for a couple of weeks before asking them to sign over resignations. Many factories that continued to do business began paying

Stories that could have been enriched and expanded by including a wider range of sources and viewpoints, or by shedding light on different implications for women and men.



men remuneration rates that they were previously paying women to do and with jobs in very short supply, many men took these opportunities with both hands.

This presents a larger sociological problem: the pandemic has re-domesticated women who were otherwise gainfully employed.

This has grave implications for how much agency a woman can exert given that her financial empowerment has suddenly been snatched away. And this also impacts the well-being of the household where critical expenses are often fulfilled by women

through the money that they have earned themselves.

What women in many lower-income households have now been forced into is to manage household expenses on a shoestring budget.

And where such pressures exist, so too does domestic violence as men tend to place the burden of low quality of life on the women of the house.

The media was ultimately able to report on women losing jobs but little exists on the very large ramifications this is already having on the social fabric and structure of the country. ■



G E N D E R A W A R E



RAWALPINDI: Two girls riding a motorcycle on Murree Road amid shortage of transport due to coronavirus. The trend of women bikers across Pakistan is on rise as females have started utilising the two-wheelers to mitigate any chance of harassment they face while commuting in public transport. — Sardar Heera

These stories challenge stereotypes. They prompt debate on topical gender issues from a human rights perspective. They display a gender balance of sources and they demonstrate different perspectives on women and men, including through the use of gender-disaggregated data. And they are gender-specific: they focus on systemic structures and processes that construct inequality between women and men. Per the GMMP framework, these stories would certainly support the basic journalistic principles of:

- * Fairness
- * Balance; getting all sides of the story.
- * Challenging assumptions and prompting debate
- * Fresh ideas and perspectives
- * Doing no harm; Respecting the human dignity and rights of sources

Among the most heart-warming pictures that emerged during the pandemic was this one in *The News'* Rawalpindi edition dated May 28, 2020⁸.

Together with the caption this is a great example of gender-aware reportage — it challenges old notions and stereotypes, it identifies a problem (that often remains unspoken), and it recognizes a new social process being underway.

Another angle to the same story is Covid-related: many women lost

their jobs in various sectors of the economy, particularly during lockdown days, since they could not reach their place of work on account of public transport being widely disrupted. With household incomes greatly affected, women in many cities learnt how to ride motorcycles as a cheaper alternative to get to work.

That said, sexual harassment inside buses has long been a concern for women. *The News* is correctly linking the new phenomenon of women on bikes as women's way to combat the menace of harassment; the pandemic merely accelerated women's measures to find solutions for their mobility concerns.

Another story that we discovered during GMMP monitoring that deserves mention was published by *BBC News Urdu*. The reporter of this exemplary story is Farhat Javed and her topic was maternal and child health in the rungs of a government priority.

This story is only applause-worthy – borne out by the audience numbers that it managed to pull: over 4,700 people. It is the perfect length – 2 minutes 18 seconds – and it has the right focus for the topic that is to be broached. The story began with talking about health as an overall governance concern. It deploys just the right amount of data points to educate the audience and provide them with an overall landscape of things. It presents history and takes stock of the current number of basic maternal and child healthcare centers – the number of operational facilities has dramatically declined in Pakistan's most populated areas.

The story then presents two cases of pregnant women going through grief because of this situation. It then presents (male) expert

opinion from the director of the national nutrition program about what is needed at the grassroots level. His solution is more leady health workers.

Since the narrative is controlled and delivered by a woman, the story hits all the right points despite a male voice coming through at the end. ■



BBC NEWS اردو 
@BBCUrdu 

پاکستان میں صحت کے لیے مختص مجموعی بجٹ انتہائی کم اور بنیادی انفراسٹرکچر بھی آبادی کے لحاظ سے ناکافی ہے۔ ماہرین کے مطابق، حاملہ خواتین اور نوزائیدہ بچے ترجیحات میں پیچھے رہ گئے ہیں، ماں اور بچے کے لیے ملک بھر میں صرف 756 بنیادی صحت مراکز ہیں۔

ماں اور بچے کے لیے
ملک بھر میں صرف
756 بنیادی صحت مراکز

BBC NEWS | اردو

5:33 PM · Sep 29, 2020 

 133  46 people are Tweeting about this



CHAPTER 4

WOMEN, NATIONALISM AND COVID-19

On April 25, 2020, Maulana Tariq Jameel appeared on *Hum News*' discussion show *Breaking Point* with Mohammad Maalik to ask for forgiveness⁹ — particularly from the “media” and “anchors” whom he had slighted in the same televised dua where he had offended women. No forgiveness was sought from women but a more blanket apology was offered to everyone whom he might have unwittingly offended. In fact, the Maulana appealed to media anchors to concede “what is happening in our advertisements.”

Compare this with the aftermath of the destruction brought about by the 2020 monsoons. Dozens of homes were washed away in the city of Karachi alone as urban flooding wreaked havoc in parts of the metropolitan city. Similar scenes were witnessed in Lahore as rainfall lashed across the provincial capital of Punjab. No televised duas were held for the many affected even though more misfortune had befallen those already reeling from the pandemic.

Ultimately the Maulana had deployed the sacred act of a dua as a political tool. And among large swathes of Pakistani men it was consumed hook,



In this pandemic, women are losing part of themselves and we aren't able to 'officially' register this phenomenon.



Even in their criticism of the maulana's framing of the dua, gender was not a primary concern. The quote reads: "Incumbent ruler as the only truthful one while the rest are liars: why such lowly comparisons?"

line and sinker.

The media in Pakistan prides itself as being

the “fourth pillar of the state.” But unfortunately, rather than help history move forward, some media



Question posed to the maulana and displayed on screen
 | YouTube screen grab

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Ultimately the Maulana had deployed the sacred act of a dua as a political tool. And among large swathes of Pakistani men it was consumed hook, line and sinker.

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natural calamity. This practice is underpinned by the belief that Pakistan has a particular “national” and “Islamic” identity to adhere to and protect — at least in the electronic media. And towards that end, it is kosher for certain types of news to disappear if it serves some kind of a larger purpose. If it isn’t reported in the media, it hasn’t happened.

Such choices in any nationalist project are unhealthy and indeed, the real-life consequences for Pakistani women and children because of omission of news are grave. While men are being told to ensure their wives’ piety — or whatever they believe to be piety — women have been bearing many forms of violence and torture during the pandemic, some of which are also legally recognized as criminal offences.

Women have soldiered on regardless.

But there is a need for us to pause and think about whether the Pakistani media is aiding the nationalist project or impeding it with vacuous content? Were any lessons learnt from the past?

What were those lessons to begin with?

The earthquake of 2005 that shook many parts of Pakistan was indeed the worst natural disaster to have ever hit the country. More than 80,000 people are said to have perished in the quake that rocked the Kashmir region while an estimated 4 million people lost their homes. This was a time when the Pakistani mediasphere had been invaded by dozens of 24/7 television news channels and FM radios. For many days to come, audiences sat glued to their TV sets or the radio to get the latest on destruction, casualties, and the relief work and then on efforts for the rehabilitation of the survivors.

Although a younger generation of Pakistanis was seeing natural disaster and its destruction for the first-time, its reportage was carried out through a predominantly male, conservative lens. Most news coverage at the time was devoid of any gender sensitivity: it presented women as helpless while men were projected or presented as brave survivors.

Rather than bringing up stories of how courageous most of these women were in the given situation, the focus was more on establishing women as heavily dependent on their physical and biological characteristics. This included their ability to give birth; many in the media portrayed the impression that now, since so many had been rendered disabled, many are finding it useless to live on.

Amidst such vile, misogynist assumptions that many journalists and news anchors were making, the media also missed stories that were worth a million tears.

There were, for example, no reports about the fact that there were more women casualties because women in these very conservative areas rarely venture far from their homes, most of them were indoors and died when their homes collapsed on top of them.

Another story was mass wedding ceremonies carried out in quake-hit areas, which the media covered — without understanding that a number of young girls were hurried into forced marriages by worried parents or guardians. These mass weddings indicated how unprotected young girls in our society are, and for discerning journalists, this was a much larger story about state failure and citizens' helplessness and desperation. *Uks'* content analysis from the time revealed very few exclusive stories on how women are affected during any natural disaster.

This trend of gender bias and blindness in humanitarian situation is also visible in reportage on HIV/AIDS. In early 90s Pakistan, the official response was denial and then half-hearted acceptance under pressure from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNAIDS. This attitude led to half-baked information via the media (mostly print along with the state-owned radio and TV channel) but nothing significant of educational value.

In many ways, media history has been repeated in 2020 in terms of turning women invisible or into criminals responsible for human tragedy.

Principally, those running newsrooms as senior editors today would have been working as junior reporters and editors during the 2005 earthquake. Many civil society organizations, including *Uks*, led gender sensitization interventions with media personnel back then but we seem to be back at square one.

Many issues that were dealt by the media are commonly defined or understood as discrete categories in the Pakistani media — economics is just about demand and supply, for example, but not about how household and community economics are run. These parochial understandings often mean that many journalists and anchors tend to miss the little things that have a very large impact.

Perhaps this is a larger issue of understanding: in its nuances, gender pervades all spheres of life. There are some topics that relate solely to women but in terms of family, community and the country, women's voices cannot be ignored if we want to reach humane and inclusive solutions.

What became clear very early on in the pandemic is that by and large Pakistani men are not attuned to life at home or staying for extended periods at home. Women's widespread experiences of the pandemic, as related on social media, tend to indicate that Pakistani men largely struggled to carry their weight in household chores and tasks, including childcare, placing the burden of managing the (extended) family entirely on women of the household. This means a bundle of emotional and mental labor, laden on women without their consent, and which is largely going unacknowledged and unrecognized.

Another phenomenon that was witnessed was how women doctors, nurses

.....
Rather than help history move forward, some media channels have been complicit in demonizing women in an attempt to find rationalizations for natural calamity.

This practice is underpinned by the belief that Pakistan has a particular “national” and “Islamic” identity to adhere to and protect — at least in the electronic media. And towards that end, it is kosher for certain types of news to disappear if it serves some kind of a larger purpose.

If it isn't reported in the media, it hasn't happened.
.....



Gender-bias in the distribution of PPE coveralls and masks was reported on social media from medical professionals across the country | Zafran Awan

and health workers were given second priority in the disbursements of personal protective equipment (PPE) coveralls and masks inside government hospitals — many women health professionals from different parts of the country took to social media to complain. In some cases, PPE coveralls and masks were withheld by hospital administrations and staff urged to reuse disposable protection gear. It was only when multiple women began reporting the same thing from hospitals and hospices across the country that it became evident that this was a larger phenomenon.

And yet, depiction of these realities in mainstream news media is absent.

A key topic in human interest stories is the loss of agency that many women, both from the middle class and from the lower class, are now experiencing because they have lost their jobs and newer opportunities are harder to find.

The pandemic has impacted the market economy in many ways, and one of the most significant ones has been that women in the labor force have quickly been replaced by men, often at even lower remuneration rates than women. Employers argue these days that with public transport severely disrupted because of lockdowns, they don't have any guarantees that women will reliably show up to work.

The oppressive nature of this argument notwithstanding, women have suddenly been pushed into domesticated roles. Suddenly there are questions over their needs and whether the family can meet them in financially dire times. It is quite revealing that while Covid-19 relief responses — both public and private — focused greatly on grains and cooking oil, items of personal hygiene were not part of the emergency assistance. Neither were soaps part of relief packets nor were menstrual pads deemed necessary. For thousands of women who toiled for their financial independence for years, the pandemic has spelt a loss of self-esteem and they have been forced to start from square one whenever

life goes back to the old normal.

From the many stories that we have collected, read and analyzed, we also believe that potentially the greatest story from the pandemic that is yet untold is women's crippling mental health brought about by violence of various kinds: mental, emotional, physical and sexual.

Till now we have only been able to tell one part of the story: violence being committed. But there isn't much about the scars left in its trail and how

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Potentially the greatest story from the pandemic that is yet untold is women's crippling mental health brought about by violence of various kinds: mental, emotional, physical and sexual.

.....

lives have been broken because of it. Some women whom we interviewed, particularly and repeatedly, used the word "exhausted" to denote their state of being. One described the past six months as living on a raft in the open sea — a feeling of nothingness accompanied by the fear of what is coming.



In this pandemic, women are losing part of themselves and we aren't able to 'officially' register this phenomenon.

While much of this story of women's crippling mental health during the pandemic was revealed and told in women's whisper networks on social media, women rights activists have also been relating it through apps such as Twitter. Authors of a recent study on women's mental health warn, however, that based on their research from the field from 2016, the situation during the pandemic should be considered dire and urgent.

The study, published in the Journal of Epidemiology and Public Health in 2020¹⁰, was conducted in the federal capital, Islamabad. Using convenience sampling, the authors followed the lives of 93 women to assess the prevalence of clinical depression, "particularly in more upscale communities where many traditional risk factors for depression and associated treatment are greatly reduced."¹¹



78%

PREVALENCE OF DEPRESSION
2016 STUDY CONDUCTED IN ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

Researches deployed the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale assessment tool to assess depressive symptoms with responses summated on a 0-60 point scale. According to them they ensured "high specificity and sensitivity" by using cutoff scores to define the mental health categories of no clinical depression, minor to moderate clinical depression, and major clinical depression.

It is important to note here that academic research into women's mental health is already scarce. Through the literature review provided in the article, some data points are important to highlight: in 2003, another study had placed the percentage of women suffering from depression at 25%-75%. This range is rather large and therefore ambiguous. Haque et al have sought to reach more specifics in terms of prevalence. The authors have also quoted a 2013 article by another team of researchers who hypothesized that "gender disadvantage may strongly influence mental health, as many Pakistani women exhibit less control over their lives than men."¹²

Despite the low sample size the results, however, are staggering.

The prevalence of depression was unanticipated at 78%; 53% of these women sampled had major depression, 22% of women reported ever having spoken to a provider about their mental health, 41% of women further

Marina
@Marina__Haque

Assembling a team to fly to 🇵🇰 & the arduous process over years to get this piece published was well worth it. My pilot [#mentalhealth](#) study should NOT be one of the handfuls of peer-reviewed papers in the past 20 yrs out of [#Pakistan](#), the 5th most populous country. 🙄 is devastating!

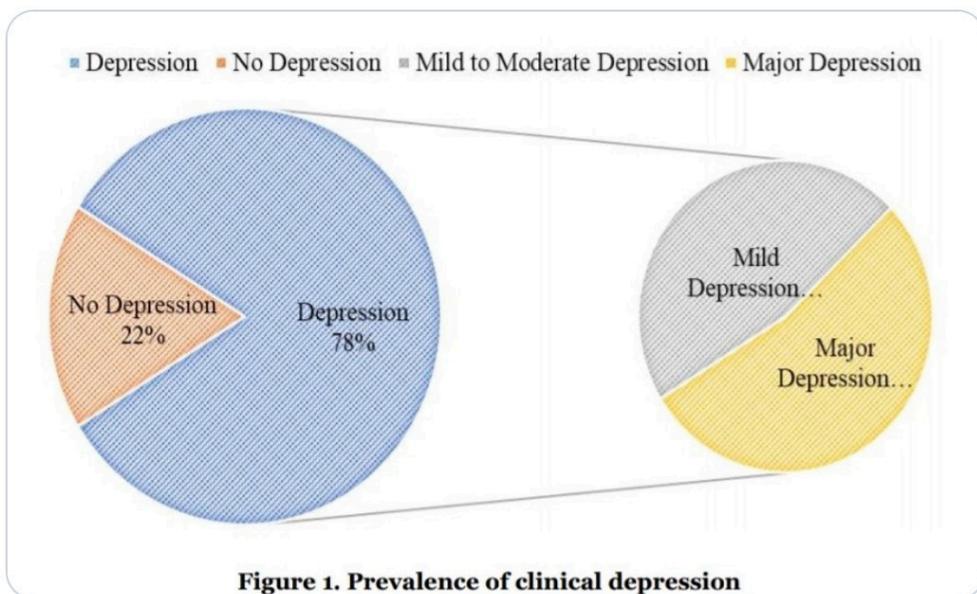


Figure 1. Prevalence of clinical depression

8:22 PM · Aug 19, 2020



Back in late August, academic Marina Haque and her team released the findings of a seminal study on the prevalence of clinical depression among women | Twitter

Marina
@Marina__Haque

Unilateral depression further has a significant association with barriers to accessing treatment too (shown 🙄).

Barriers such as feeling unworthy of care, 🚫 restraints, etc. Unimaginable how much more difficult it made it to access [#COVID19](#) treatment during these trying times.

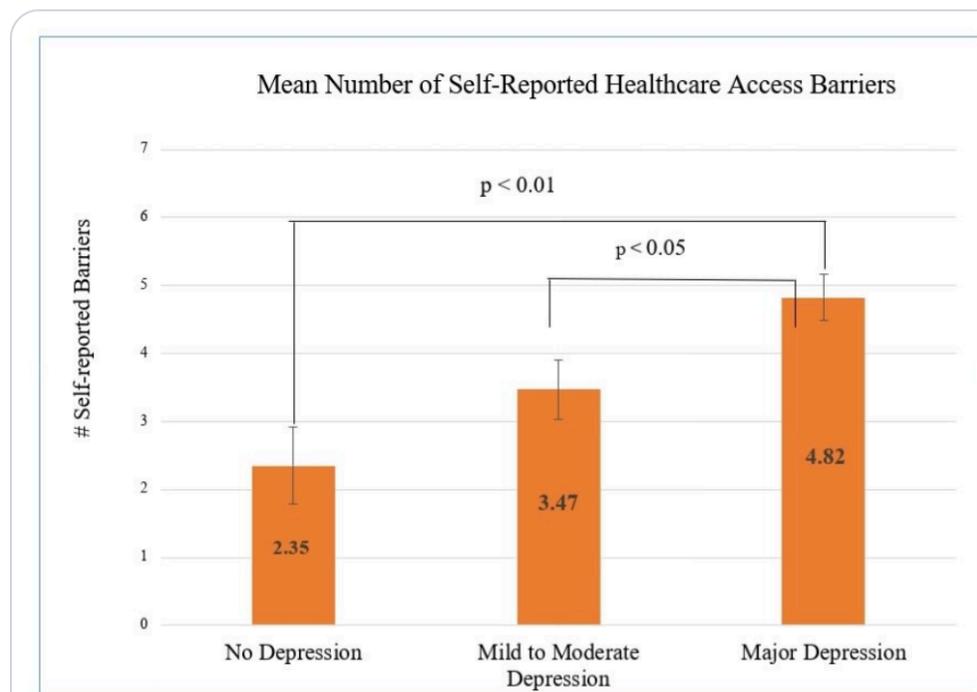


Figure II: For women without depression (n=20), the average number of barriers was 2.35 ± 2.54 , Mild-Moderate Depression (n=34) ± 2.57 , and Major Depression (n=39) ± 2.11 .

8:22 PM · Aug 19, 2020



reported that their mental health negatively impacted their decision to receive care. The only independent risk factor for depression was the diagnosis of another disease. Indicators of poor-socioeconomic status, however, were consistently associated with higher depression¹³.

Among the more interesting data points revealed is the demographic breakup of the women. The largest group in terms of percentage that was suffering major depression was women in the 45-59 years age bracket — 50% of the respondents from within this demographic group reported that they were suffering major depression.

The 25-44 age group ranked second with 46.51% (although in terms of numbers, this group had the most). The 18-24 years age bracket ranked in third with 33.33% of respondents described as suffering from major depression while 20% of the women who were aged 60 and above could be classified as suffering heavy depression.

Another significant concern was the number of women who believed in “self-rated health”: only 53.42% of those suffering depression believed that they were worthy of self-care. Of the women described as depressed, only 21.43% had spoken to a self-care provider about suffering from depression.

Considering the limitations of the sample size — which the authors accept and acknowledge, there is some caution in extrapolation and reaching grand conclusions. That said, however, data captured by researchers is indicative of better times, the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened all kinds of hardship and it stands to reason that statistics from the pandemic proper would be at least as bad if not worse.

Seven out of ten women suffering some form of clinical depression and only two of them receiving treatment should sound the alarm bells in any civilized society; the mere suggestion that the actual situation could be even worse should see the media spring into action. Unfortunately, women’s poor mental health is a parallel pandemic that has received nowhere near the media coverage that Covid-19 has received, or for that matter, deserved to receive on merit of newsworthiness. ■



WHO SET THE AGENDA?

The country is clearly in crisis mode as it grapples with the demon of the Covid-19 pandemic. And whenever the country is in crisis mode, the media demands solutions. Like every other time, however, the number of women proferring their expert opinion on television talk shows, through published news stories and in opinion pieces is paltry.

We monitored 219 hours and 43 minutes of programming in discussion shows across five channels — *Geo News*, *ARY News*, *92-HD News*,

It stands to reason that since much of the debate since the beginning of the crisis has been carried out by men and carried between men. The agenda that these men have set has led to the hyper-politicization of the crisis, much to the detriment of those who needed the most help. Much of it is framed in bravado and toxic masculinity, completely missing out on the human story of the pandemic or the women's story during the pandemic. Hyper-politicization of the crisis is perhaps a convenient method to deflect attention away from the crisis

broadcast, the advice given in these (such as wearing masks or sitting at least 2 feet apart) was ignored in the studios. In fact, in none of the shows that were monitored by *Uks* were the guests or the host wearing face masks. None of the sets had made arrangements for distancing between seats either. It is no surprise then that some politicians who came to television studios or were interviewed elsewhere later tested positive for Covid 19.

This is not merely an observation about media practices; it reflects how the mere act of not wearing

11%

PROPORTION OF WOMEN GUESTS
AS PANELISTS ON DISCUSSION SHOWS TO
DISCUSS COVID-19 SITUATION OR CONCERNS

Dunya News and *Hum News* — in the 8pm-9pm slot. This particular slot was chosen because it represents primetime content. Out of a total of 288 episodes, 217 pertained to the Covid-19 pandemic — over 75% of the total programming.

And while 1,026 guests were invited as panelists, women made an appearance only 115 times (some women made repeat appearances) or 11.21% of the total. In other words, most of the panels were in fact manels. Women panelists' repeat appearances also signifies the media's paucity of imagination when it came to finding qualified women talking about the various crises that the country was faced with and the layered gendered dynamics and dichotomies that these crises had thrown up.

itself, which, in turn, has aided and abetted government inaction or delay in tackling the virus.

This goes back to what we had suggested earlier: women's voices were not considered in the national debate on how to tackle the crisis and what kind of assistance to provide those in need.

Another disadvantage to this approach is that the media lost sight of the innovations and community-driven interventions against the pandemic that were kicked off by citizens. Many of these initiatives were driven by women, but with the media only focused on the hyper-politicization of the pandemic, these voices of change never made it to the mainstream.

An associated concern is one of messaging. While public service announcements were often

a mask in public makes it a gendered problem because the virus was brought home by a man who wasn't observing the recommended measures to prevent against the virus. Later on, doctors confirmed on social media that elder women who hadn't left the confines of their homes for months on end had contracted the virus because their sons and husbands didn't observe the proper protocols while stepping outside and passed the virus onto these women.

Such were the kinds of everyday realities that needed to be reported and reported with care. The Pakistani media, unfortunately, did not see the story brewing or happening. And today, cases are on an exponential rise once again. ■



CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION





We began our journey by asking: in the times of Covid-19, has the Pakistani media been just with women, has it been neutral, or has it been biased or blind? An examination of media trends, however, turned into a comment on the nationalist project in Pakistan, which remains rooted to its ideals of making women invisible by omitting them from the discussion altogether.

Much of the results of this study, as well as our discussion above, go back to gender being a pervading theme in matters of everyday life. The feeling of getting overwhelmed by circumstances is one that many women have reported. Unwanted pregnancies have been many, probably outnumbered by the number of women who didn't receive adequate healthcare. Official numbers have been slow to emerge, however, as counting gender-based crimes and excesses is nowhere near the top rung of priorities for the provincial or federal governments.

Similar is the case with senior citizens and persons with disabilities — in these testing times it was almost as if they didn't exist. From interviews that we carried with widows reliant on their husband's pension, we discovered that governmental relief in utility bills payment was mishandled. Many ended up paying the government more money in lieu of the relief offered than they would have if they had simply paid their bills per regular schedule.

These aren't concerns that were or are being captured by the media barring the odd opinion piece. And it is worth arguing that the media ignoring these concerns ostensibly translates into the Pakistani news media losing women as an audience demographic. For any nationalist project losing half its intended audience is counter-productive.

Feminist scholarship on Egypt and Iran has explored the notion of how an "Islamic civil society" came about and how human rights defenders found space to plead for justice within largely theological frameworks. Women cleverly inverted the idea of "home" — home would represent more than just the place where one lived, they argued that the country ought to be considered "home" and women would be the "home-makers."

Women in Pakistan have no such luxury. Inside closed WhatsApp and Facebook groups hundreds of women pour their heart out and divulge details of the excesses committed against them on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. There have been countless cases of women banding together to help another in need — of shelter, of jobs, and many times, of the belief that they can rebuild themselves again from the embers of grief.

The men of the mainstream media, however, seem reluctant to listen. ■

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