

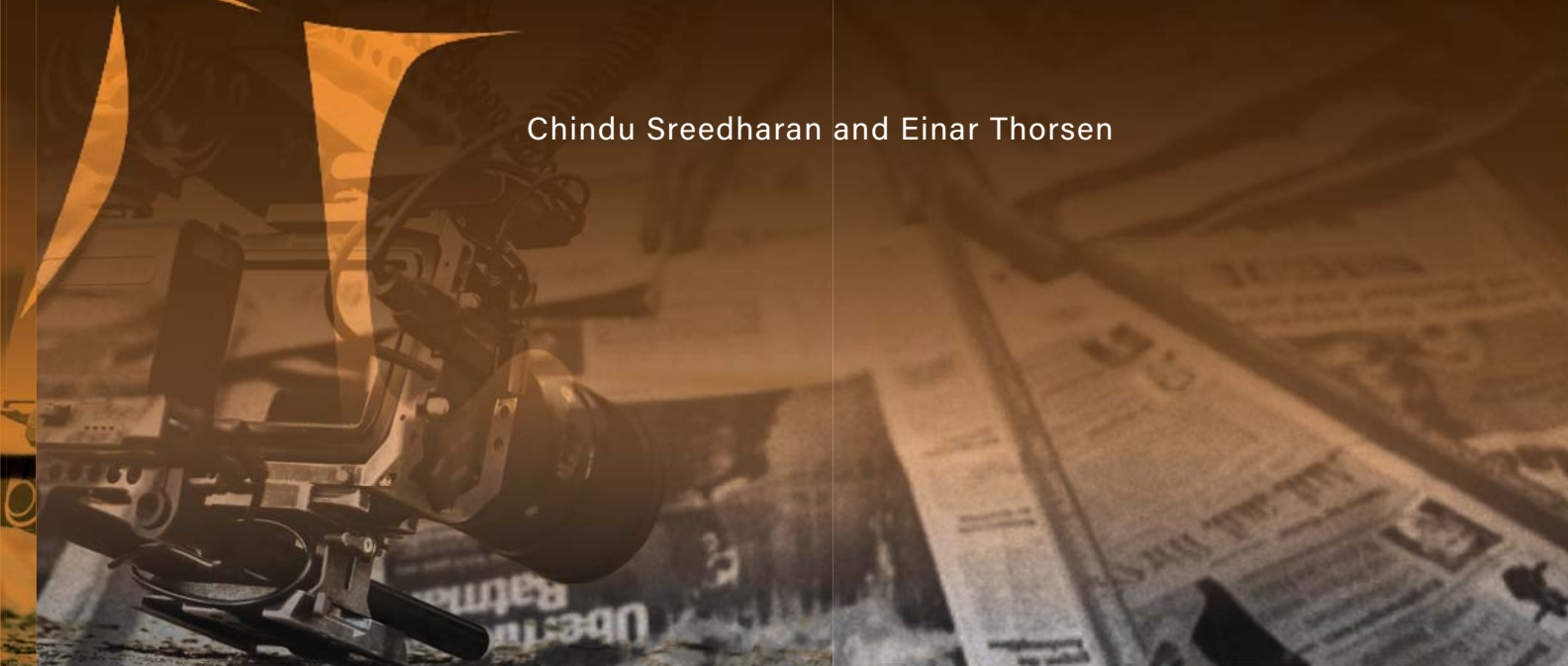


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# SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Issues, challenges, and guidelines  
for journalists in India

Chindu Sreedharan and Einar Thorsen





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This report is part of Media Action Against Rape (MAAR), a research and capacity-building project led by Bournemouth University and UNESCO New Delhi. MAAR is funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund, UK

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## SHORT SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a multilingual national study on the news reporting of sexual violence in India. Drawing on a content analysis of 10 newspapers covering six languages, and semi-structured interviews with 257 journalists working across 14 languages, it provides comparative insights into the routines journalists follow and the challenges they face when they cover sexual violence.

The report evidences how news outlets tend to disproportionately publish unusual cases, such as those involving extreme brutality; focus on rape in urban areas; and rely heavily on police sources. Journalists rarely undertake in-depth inquiries into the cases they cover. The challenges they face include safety issues while newsgathering, difficulties in accessing key sources, and distress from the requirements of their assignments. Overall, nearly 20% of our respondents experienced psychological challenges while reporting on sexual violence, and 55% of women journalists reported workplace sexual harassment or violence.

Based on the evidence, the report presents seven national and 10 organisational recommendations. It concludes by offering guidelines that individual journalists and media houses can adapt to suit their news routines.



# About this report



This report on sexual violence and the news media is a more than welcome addition to existing literature on the subject. The combination of content analysis and interviews with reporters makes it particularly credible and authentic. The scope—10 newspapers in six languages scrutinised over a three-month period and interviews with 257 journalists working in 14 languages across India in all sectors of media—renders it authoritative and persuasive. The accessible style and presentation will no doubt make it not only palatable but helpful to journalists, including decision-makers, and invaluable to media educators. If the recommendations and guidelines are taken on board by news media organisations it could result in a welcome sea-change in coverage of sexual violence in the Indian media.

**Ammu Joseph**  
Independent journalist, Bengaluru



This study presents a wide-ranging, rigorous, and in-depth analysis of the relationship between news media and incidents of rape and sexual violence, both in terms of the stories told and the people who tell them. There is a persuasive analysis of a wide range of newspapers in multiple languages, coupled with in-depth interviews with an impressive number of journalists. The recommendations of the project are informed not simply by the data discussed in the body of the report but by the perspectives of journalists, NGOs, and women's rights organisation representatives, and media educators. As the authors say, their recommendations are presented as a set of principles which should be implemented, both at the national and organisational levels, including the need to improve training for both journalists and journalism students, as well as develop a common framework for writing about such crimes which they also, helpfully, provide. Importantly, the recommendations also recognise the need to acknowledge safety issues for journalists reporting these crimes, both in the field but also in terms of their mental health, and the need for care, support, and empathy.

**Karen Ross**  
Professor of Gender and Media, Newcastle University, United Kingdom



An extremely thorough and thought-provoking report that contains precious analysis and many qualitative interviews with journalists. The pointers and recommendations to journalists at the end are excellent and can lead to a new form of journalism education which has been completely absent from all J-schools in India. This is an exceedingly useful report that should be made mandatory in newsrooms and all journalism training institutes.

**Vaiju Naravane**  
Professor of Journalism and Media Studies, Ashoka University, Sonapat

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**Chindu Sreedharan and Einar Thorsen**  
Bournemouth University, UK

# Foreword

**W**orldwide, nearly one in three women (30%) have at some point in their lives experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their intimate partners, and 7% have experienced sexual assault by another person, according to a World Health Organization (WHO) report. However, only a fraction of these cases receives the media attention they deserve. A visible pattern of attention-grabbing headlines instead of depth in reporting, together with the pernicious nature of the news cycle, also limit awareness around the subject.

To address this issue, we felt it was important to study the pattern closely. This publication, entitled 'Sexual violence and the news media: Issues, challenges and guidelines for journalists in India', is the result of a concerted effort between UNESCO and Bournemouth University (BU).

Our report, authored by Chindu Sreedharan and Einar Thorsen at BU and carefully peer-reviewed, presents the findings of a comparative content analysis of 10 newspapers in India—regional and national—to study and understand the patterns related to the reporting on critical gender issues. It brings insights based on extensive interviews conducted with more than 250 media practitioners—working across print, television, radio, and online platform—and spanning over two years. It also sheds light on the very important aspect of the psychological trauma felt by journalists covering stories on gendered violence.

Based on the detailed study of the issue, the authors also list a set of recommendations that could help shape an inclusive media and encourage media organisations to set the narrative right.

As highlighted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in September 1995: "The media have a great potential to promote the advancement of women and the equality of women and men by portraying women and men in a non-stereotypical, diverse and balanced manner." By adapting a gender-sensitive approach and aiming to eliminate all forms of violence against women, the media can indeed foster a change in public opinion and behaviour.

UNESCO strives towards empowering all genders equally. With a specific mandate to promote a free and pluralistic media, we are committed towards assisting media professionals, media organisations, and other stakeholders in adopting a more holistic approach while reporting on violence against women, and promoting equal gender representation within newsrooms.

Thanks to global partnerships and relentless efforts by stakeholders everywhere, significant progress has been made on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women in the public and private spheres, but a lot more needs to be done and we hope that this report offers a useful contribution.



**Eric Falt**  
Director and UNESCO  
Representative  
UNESCO New Delhi Cluster Office



# Preface

Gender violence, and more specifically the crime of rape, has arguably been one of those perennials in the news space. Under the influence of second wave feminism—Susan Brownmiller’s classic *Against Our Will* came out in 1975—the casualness with which newspapers had covered such crimes earlier came to change slowly. In India, the Supreme Court verdict, *Tuka Ram And Anr vs State Of Maharashtra (1978)*<sup>1</sup>, popularly known as the Mathura rape case, proved to be something of a watermark.

Media coverage was recognised as crucial in unpacking the social impacts of rape, and came to be analysed, critiqued, and theorised over the years. Questions arose about the possible connections between news content and patterns of gender inequality, brutality, and justice delivery. What were the factors that created such violence, and was media coverage one of them? Did such coverage encourage further violence? Did rape lend itself almost inevitably to sensational and coloured journalism? Apart from gender, how did other stratifications like class, caste, race, and location impact such coverage? These are questions still searching for definitive answers, and understanding media treatment of gender violence continues to be a work in progress.

It is against this backdrop that this study, ‘Sexual violence and the news media: Issues, challenges, and guidelines for journalists in India’ should be read. It breaks new ground, I would argue, in four ways: one, it possesses a strong empirical underpinning by capturing the opinions of journalists; two, it identifies emerging patterns in daily reporting; three, it tries to break through the national-regional, English language-regional language

binaries; and, four, it offers a very comprehensive set of recommendations and guidelines.

The effort of this intensive study, which scrutinised more than 33,000 pages from 10 carefully identified newspapers and interviewed 257 journalists, was to arrive at a “more generalisable set of findings about the norms within this genre of news coverage”.

In the process, the researchers unpack several sociological insights that go beyond the four walls of media criticism. For instance, while gang-rape was the most frequently reported, marital rape remains largely invisible, which also reflects the larger reality that such a crime is not regarded as socially deviant. Same-sex assault also does not attract much attention which, as the study points out, should not surprise us given the lack of legal protections for the rape of men.

One of the major flaws in the reporting of gender violence—the lack of contextualisation—attracts scrutiny here: it is only in 9% of news stories that sexual violence was found to be framed as a social problem. This lack lends itself to the vicious cycle of public advocacy for solutions like the death penalty, which gets echoed in media reportage and goes, in turn, to expand further public approval of such forms of retributive justice. Such a pattern, very evident in the Delhi gang-rape case of 2012, has played out time and again.

Another insight that emerges tangentially in this study is the way varying terminology adopted by journalists, sometimes dictated by cultural pressures to choose more ‘palatable’ expressions, leads to unhelpful outcomes. There is, after all, a great difference between a crime reported as a “violation of a woman’s modesty”

<sup>1</sup> The Mathura rape case of 1972 sparked public protests about sexual violence for the first time in India when two policemen accused of raping a teenage girl were acquitted on the grounds that the complainant was “habituated to sexual intercourse” and did not bear any marks of struggle. The case eventually led to amendments in the rape law in 1983, including enhanced punishment and shifting the burden of proof to the accused once intercourse was established under certain circumstances.

and “a violation of a woman’s right to bodily integrity”. Euphemisms serve to tamp down the seriousness of the crime, a point well made here.

Some of the concerns highlighted have been raised in media and feminist circles, such as the manner in which subjects are framed in ways that undermine their search for justice. But the close attention the study pays to visual/representational images of the assaulted person is exceptional and welcome. The news desk, we know, has the thankless task of attracting readers’ attention to stories of this kind while keeping on the right side of a law that proscribes revealing the identity of the assaulted person. In the process it has often erred on the side of being either sensational, or stereotyping survivors as helpless victims.

Speaking of layout and appeal, most research of this kind tends to be densely laid out, which is why I found the present study not just well-conceptualised in terms of content, but stylistically as well. The use of boxes to highlight important aspects, as well as charts and graphs, make for an easier read.

The heart of the study lies in the two sections that conclude it. Section 5 comprises recommendations,

divided into national ones and those involving media organisations. The disaggregation is useful and I do hope media houses use these bulleted points as institutional precepts. The section titled ‘Guidelines’ collates the learnings from the study in a succinct way and could well prove to be an individual road map for journalists struggling to make sense of this epidemic of gender violence, as well as for journalism schools invested in making the potential newsperson a socially conscious, gender-sensitive practitioner of journalism.

*Pamela Philipose*

**Pamela Philipose** is the public editor of *The Wire*, in, and author of *Media’s Shifting Terrain: Five Years that Transformed the Way India Communicates* (Orient BlackSwan, 2019)



# Executive summary

This report presents findings from a large-scale national research project on the news reporting of sexual violence in India. We undertook a comparative content analysis of 10 newspapers covering six languages, and semi-structured interviews with 257 journalists working across 14 languages, representing print, radio, and online sectors for this project.

The first study to analyse a multilingual dataset from across India, with a comprehensive cross-section of vernacular languages, the report provides

comparative insights into the routines journalists follow and the challenges they face as they report on sexual violence. It investigates the role of organisational and regional contexts. Further, it documents the influence of attitudes, identity (gendered or cultural), and the self-perception of journalists on their reportage.

The report presents seven national and 10 organisational recommendations grounded in research evidence. We conclude by offering guidelines that individual journalists and media houses can absorb into their news routines.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Patterns in daily news about sexual violence

- News outlets tend to disproportionately publish unusual cases, such as those involving extreme brutality or attacks by strangers, thus presenting a misleading picture of how sexual violence usually manifests in India.
- The key deciding factor that governed journalists' decision on covering a sexual violence incident is the 'profile' of the victim or perpetrator (according to 20.6% of respondents). Law-and-order responses is the second-most critical factor (16.7%), followed by 'gravity' of the crime (14%).
- Newspapers were typically concerned with rape in urban areas (49%); only 22% were about incidents in rural locations.
- The majority of news reporting on rape and sexual violence was made up of 'spot' news stories, focusing on the details of the attack, and lacking in context.
- While overt victim-blaming was evident in only 2.2% cases, very rarely was there an attempt to provide a voice, direct or otherwise, for the victim.
- Only 19.5% of respondents said they used the term 'rape' in their news reporting. Most (51%) tended to use euphemisms instead.
- The majority of journalists (78%) said they felt responsible for effecting change in relation to sexual violence. Despite this, very few stories, just below 7%, focused on solutions.

## Sources and newsgathering challenges

- More than 50% of reporters said they relied heavily on police reports and sources for their crime stories, and generally approached other sources (if at all) afterwards.
  - 27% of journalists cited hurdles from police as limiting their work.
  - Women reporters were overall less inclined than men to depend on police sources. Some women journalists also mentioned experiencing gender bias from the police.
  - 35% of respondents cited lack of access to victims as a hurdle when reporting on sexual violence.
  - More than 74% of respondents who discussed details of their reporting indicated they did not undertake investigations or in-depth reportage of sexual violence incidents.
- 

## Safety of journalists and personal impact

- Almost 20% of respondents said they experienced significant distress while reporting on sexual violence. This factor was more pronounced among women than men.
  - 55% of women journalists said they had directly experienced or witnessed workplace sexual harassment or violence, typically perpetrated by someone who wielded power through seniority or a supervisory role.
  - We identified three areas where women journalists are particularly vulnerable to harassment and unwanted attention during newsgathering: from bystanders; during interactions with police officers; and when dealing with elite sources.
- 

## Guidelines and training

- There was a conspicuous lack of formal editorial guidelines across newsrooms in India. Only 13% of the respondents said they had access to written guidelines, while 14% said they did not have any type of guidelines at all.
  - Education and training were seen as critical mitigations against stereotypes and biases.
-

## INTRODUCTION

# Uncovering the coverage of sexual violence

One dismaying but typically less discussed aspect of sexual violence<sup>2</sup> is its universality. Borderless, cultureless, and classless, it is a global problem that has aggressively resisted the socio-legal deterrents put forward to contain it over the decades.

Statistics in support of this expansive entrenchment are depressingly plentiful. A World Health Organization study published in 2021,<sup>3</sup> which analysed data from 154 countries and areas, estimates that 736 million women—almost one in three—have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence at least once in their lifetime. A representative national survey<sup>4</sup> in the United States found that more than one in four women (27%), and one in 14 men (7%), survived sexual assault. In South Africa, the nation with the most rape prevalence per 100,000 population, more than one in three men (37.4%) admitted to perpetrating sexual violence<sup>5</sup>. In England and Wales<sup>6</sup>, crime statistics published in 2020 recorded 773,000 sexual assaults (including attempts) in 12 months. And in India, despite the host of legislative reforms introduced to address

sexual violence after the 2012 Delhi gang-rape, the latest National Crime Records Bureau<sup>7</sup> data place the yearly number of rape incidents at 32,033—one rape, on average, approximately every 16 minutes.

Stark as these numbers are, more perturbing is the fact that they only capture part of the reality; under-reporting of sexual violence, as sexual violence itself, is well-established as a global issue. Well-established, too, is the significant role news media can play in containing this age-old pandemic.

## News media and sexual violence

News coverage, as we know, has the potential to shape people's knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes surrounding sexual violence, including rape. By extension, it also influences the societal responses to such crimes. 'Good' news coverage—journalism that negates attitudes and beliefs supportive of gendered violence, challenges social and cultural norms, and seeks solutions—is hence critical in preventing sexual violence.

<sup>2</sup> In line with the World Health Organization definition, we use sexual violence as an umbrella term for a variety of physical and mental assaults "directed against a person's sexuality using coercion". This includes rape and any "sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances". See 'Understanding and addressing violence against women.' [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77434/WHO\\_RHR\\_12.37\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=618FE37F8FC4110E7196DF3E9CB74384?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77434/WHO_RHR_12.37_eng.pdf;jsessionid=618FE37F8FC4110E7196DF3E9CB74384?sequence=1)

<sup>3</sup> 'Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018.' <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256>

<sup>4</sup> 'The facts behind the #MeToo movement: A national study on sexual harassment and assault.' <https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/full-report-2018-national-study-on-sexual-harassment-and-assault.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Smith, David. 'One in three South African men admit to rape, survey finds.' *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/25/south-african-rape-survey>

<sup>6</sup> 'Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: Year ending March 2020.' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/sexualoffencesinenglandandwalesoverview/march2020>

<sup>7</sup> 'Crime in India 2019 (statistics), volume 1.' <https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII%202019%20Volume%201.pdf>

Yet, historically and universally, the news reporting of sexual violence has been anything but 'good'. Over the last several decades, scholars and writers from various countries have pointed to a range of issues that permeate such reportage. News of sexual violence is criticised for being sensationalist, insensitive, and superficial. Rape is often—and openly—sexualised<sup>8</sup>, explicit in detail, lurid in presentation, capable of causing moral panics amongst news audiences.

Multiple studies have highlighted the journalistic tendency to spread "rape myths", which Martha Burt, in her seminal paper 'Cultural myths and supports for rape',<sup>9</sup> defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs" that create "a climate hostile" to sexual violence victims. Myths that frequently corrupt news reporting include: only promiscuous women get raped, the victims provoked the crime by their behaviour, and suggesting those who come forward to report assaults are lying. Perpetrators are usually portrayed as strangers and deviants, when there is overwhelming evidence<sup>10</sup> that most sexual assaults are committed by an acquaintance—not 'sex-crazed perverts', but someone 'ordinary'. Such myth-endorsing representation shifts the blame to the victim, perpetuating the destructive culture of victim-blaming that deeply undermines the responses to sexual violence at the personal, legal, and policy levels.

## Reporting sexual violence in India

These problematics are deeply imprinted in the news reporting of sexual violence in India. Sunil Behera's analysis<sup>11</sup> of 400 hours of Indian TV content that found "women are portrayed as victims, caretakers,

and sex objects while men are presented as masters, doers, and intellectuals" is among the early studies<sup>12</sup> to provide empirical evidence of the gender stereotyping prevalent in the Indian news media. In 2010, Sameera Khan<sup>13</sup> underlined the "moralising tones" that journalists take on when discussing gendered violence, and how such stories revolve around common rape myths and stereotypical images of women. One persistent myth that underlies much of the reporting in the Indian print media, according to Khan, is that the victim is lying and the crime is "false".

Similar critiques, delivered more stridently and with increasing urgency, have shadowed the news coverage in India in recent years, particularly after the 2012 Delhi gang-rape. While the media activism in the wake of that incident attracted much praise, analyses of the resulting news coverage, and also of the series of sexual assaults that captured news media attention thereafter, present a troubling picture of sensationalistic and stereotypical representation underwritten by patriarchal values. A 2014 dissertation by Kierandeep Sandhur<sup>14</sup>, which scrutinised Hindustan Times and the Times of India between 2011 and 2013, noted that while the number of news reports picked up substantially after the Delhi gang-rape, the media resorted to the "symbolic annihilation" of women, "implicitly propagating the notion ... of a secondary sex by repetitively relegating them to the private sphere and covertly perpetuating patriarchal ideology". An inquiry by Divya Arya<sup>15</sup>, which analysed data from interviews with correspondents and editors to understand the changes within journalism after the Delhi gang-rape, argued that journalists continued to "allow themselves to be susceptible and pliant to the widespread stereotypes of 'real rape' and

<sup>8</sup> Carter, Cynthia. 'When the extraordinary becomes ordinary: Everyday news of sexual violence,' in *News, Gender and Power*. Routledge 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Burt, MR. 'Cultural myths and supports for rape.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/7373511/>

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of rape myths, see Merken, Stacie & James, Veronyka. 'Perpetrating the myth: Exploring media accounts of rape myths on "women's" networks.' *Deviant Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1603531>

<sup>11</sup> Behera, Sunil. 'Gender role biases on Indian television.' *Media Asia*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.1989.11726308>

<sup>12</sup> See also Sharma, Sima, Weerackody, Irvin, Panday, Narendra R, Al-Mujahid, Sharif & Musa ABM. 'Women and the media in South Asia.' *Media Asia*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.1987.11726265>

<sup>13</sup> Khan, Sameera. 'When survivors become victims,' in *Missing, Half the Story: Journalism as If Gender Matters*. Zubaan 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Sandhur, Kierandeep. 'The monochrome lens of the media? Women's subordination in news print coverage of rape in India.' [https://www.southasia.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/southasia/documents/media/the\\_monochrome\\_lens\\_of\\_the\\_media\\_womens\\_subordination\\_in\\_news\\_print\\_coverage\\_of\\_rape\\_in\\_india\\_k\\_sandhur\\_2014.pdf](https://www.southasia.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/southasia/documents/media/the_monochrome_lens_of_the_media_womens_subordination_in_news_print_coverage_of_rape_in_india_k_sandhur_2014.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Arya, Divya. 'Reporting sexual violence in India: What has changed since the Delhi gang rape?' *Economic and Political Weekly*; available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44002804>



‘true victims’”. Sumedha Pal<sup>16</sup>, who analysed the coverage of the rape of a Dalit woman in three English national dailies, drew similar conclusions, highlighting how news stories “riddled” the victim “with unwarranted attention to her actions and relationship history” and portrayed her as “a fallen woman... who had transgressed social and cultural norms”. There is evidence, thus, to suggest that news media continue to cover “rape in shame culture”<sup>17</sup>.

That is not all. Journalist and author Ammu Joseph, who has written extensively on the mediation of gender, underscores another enmeshed news practice that plagues journalism: the tendency to direct media outrage selectively, to cases that feature violence against ‘people like us’, involving victims of ‘our’ strata, in ‘our’ cities, by perpetrators from the socio-economic underclasses. What happens elsewhere, outside ‘our’ world, to ‘others’ in the small towns and villages that make up most of India, is less deserving of attention. “Today the media often determine, directly or indirectly, which cases ‘outrage the nation’ and which sink without a trace in public consciousness,” Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma wrote in *Whose News? The Media and Women’s Issues*. They further noted:

“[M]edia coverage of rape [...] generally conforms to a predictable, episodic pattern: long spells of routine reports regularly, if randomly culled from police hand-outs, broken by brief periods of intensive and extensive coverage catalysed by one or more cases that happen to grab the imagination of the media and public—usually in that order.”

Causes often cited as responsible for such episodic framing and sensationalistic journalism include the skewed gender balance and patriarchal attitudes that pervade many—most—Indian newsrooms. Also blamed is the increasing competition for eyeballs among the nation’s diversity of news outlets, burgeoning in numbers but faltering of finance. If we were to take a more philosophical

view, looking through the prism of ‘news values’<sup>18</sup>, the responsibility could equally well rest on the very nature of news itself. News, after all, is about timeliness, drama, proximity, conflict, human interest—and the victimhood perpetrated on one of ‘our women’ ostensibly by someone unlike ‘us’, that usually evokes outrage in the news media.

## Peering behind the content

All this suggests a certain naivety—even implicit villainy—on the part of the news narrators of today. But the truth is, while we know much about what appears in the English-language news, we know less about what goes behind the production of such content. Most journalists are well-intentioned people, it goes without saying; many, in fact, see themselves as agents of change and view their work as a service to society. Why, then, do well-meaning professionals contribute to the problematic narrative outlined above? How do they approach the demanding task of reporting on sexual violence? What issues and challenges do they face in their news practices, and how do these influence their news sense, their news-gathering, their linguistic choices?

Such were the questions that sparked this study. As indicated above, attempts to peer behind the news content have been comparatively few, mostly undertaken in the Western context, or contained to journalists in urban India. One key issue earlier studies highlighted was the macho culture that pervades most newsrooms, and allows “masculine values to masquerade as journalistic norms”<sup>19</sup>. This culture is absorbed by even female journalists, writes Deepa Fadnis<sup>20</sup>, who are “more actively trying to change the ways that rape and sexual assault were covered”. She goes on to explain:

<sup>16</sup> Pal, Sumedha. ‘Blame and shame: Examining the media coverage of a Dalit rape victim in India.’ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/04/13/blame-and-shame-examining-the-media-coverage-of-dalit-rape-victim-in-india/>

<sup>17</sup> Rao, Shakuntala. ‘Covering rape in shame culture: Studying journalism ethics in India’s new television news media.’ *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2014.918497>

<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Harcup, Tony & O’Neill, Deidre. ‘What is news? News values revisited (again).’ *Journalism Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193>

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion on gender and newsroom cultures organised around the ‘man-as-norm and woman-as-interlope’ structure, see Ross, Karen. *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*. Wiley-Blackwell 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Fadnis, Deepa. ‘Uncovering rape culture: Patriarchal values guide Indian media’s rape-related reporting.’ *Journalism Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1301781>

[W]hile female journalists often experience the ‘sharp end of the deal’, some fail to acknowledge the influence of patriarchal hegemony because of their deep integration in the system that revels in their subordination in a male-dominated environment.

Compounding this systemic problem are the practicalities of reporting sexual violence. Like other incidents involving trauma, sexual violence is exceedingly difficult to depict with ‘adequate’ sensitivity and context. Information is often scarce, as the stigma of rape is particularly severe in India, silencing survivors and limiting journalistic enquiry. Many reporters also face safety issues<sup>21</sup> themselves, including sexual harassment in their professional environments. And many find the experience of reporting on sexual violence highly unsettling and traumatic, constraining their journalistic abilities. To what extent are these constraints present in the everyday worklife of those who published news on sexual violence in India? How do they deal with them?

## High-profile vs. routine rape

Sexual violence, as we have seen earlier, falls into two broad categories of newsworthiness: those that excite the news media into a frenzy of public outrage, and those that don’t.

Research into this area follows a similar pattern, unfortunately. Most of what we know is based on studies that analysed the journalism surrounding the ‘high-profile’ cases, the ‘sensational’ incidents. We know little of how other incidents, which make up the vast majority of such crimes, are covered. Of the more than 32,000 rape cases reported to the police in India every year, only a few—a minuscule percentage—capture media attention. We have little analysis of how the news media treat the rest that do not ‘stand out’.

Our knowledge is further limited by another paradox in scholarship. Research has highlighted the inequities within the news representation of

sexual violence—the preference for urban over rural incidents, for example. Yet, researchers have seldom ventured beyond content produced by English-language publications in urban centres. We know, for instance, little of how sexual violence is covered in the regional publications that make up India’s extended and deeply complex media ecology<sup>22</sup>. We know even less of the dynamics that affect vernacular newsrooms or the regional journalists who serve much of India’s culturally diverse population of 1.4 billion, spread across 28 states and eight Union Territories.

## In this report

It is this gap that we strive to bridge with this study, which forms part of Media Action Against Rape, a research and capacity-building project led by Bournemouth University and UNESCO New Delhi. In Section 1, we present the findings of a comparative content analysis of 10 newspapers—two Hindi, one each in Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil, and four English—that cater to diverse regional audiences across India. Our purpose is to identify the patterns in the daily reportage of sexual violence—the non-sensational assaults—that make up the bulk of incidents across India. We do this across news content in six languages, for a comparative analysis.

Sections 2, 3 and 4 are based on in-depth interviews with journalists across India. Informed by the patterns identified by the content analysis, we spoke to 257 reporters and editors—working across print, television, radio, and online—in 14 languages, to identify how they reported on sexual violence. We sought information on their story-identification and newsgathering practices, the challenges they faced within and outside their newsrooms, the guidelines and principles they followed, and the way they thought about their own roles in mitigating sexual violence. The interviews provided us with an exceptionally robust multilingual dataset (more than 1.1 million words when translated to English), which

<sup>21</sup> Sreedharan, Chindu, Thorsen, Einar & Gouthi, Ananya. ‘Time’s up. Or is it? Journalists’ perceptions of sexual violence and newsroom changes after #MeTooIndia.’ *Journalism Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1682943>

<sup>22</sup> India’s linguistic and regional diversity is reflected in its media landscape. According to statistics from the Registrar for Newspapers in India, there are over 1,40,000 registered publications in the country, including more than 9,000 dailies in at least two dozen languages. Many publications in regional languages are also published in different states to cater to migrant communities: for instance, publications in 18 different languages are brought out in Delhi alone. See also [http://rni.nic.in/pdf\\_file/pin2019\\_20/pin2019\\_20\\_eng/Chapter%201.pdf](http://rni.nic.in/pdf_file/pin2019_20/pin2019_20_eng/Chapter%201.pdf) and ‘Is regional the new national?’ <http://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/nationalandregionalmedia/>

was thematically coded for our analysis. We present our findings under three headlines: Challenges of reporting on sexual violence; Narrating sexual violence; and Rules, codes, and personal principles.

In the last two sections, based on our empirical analyses and two rounds of consultations with journalists, educators, and other stakeholders, we offer a set of recommendations and guidelines for the news industry. Section 5 outlines our 17 recommendations, which are principles to implement, both at the national and organisational levels. The final section, which focuses on individual journalists and newsrooms, presents five sets of guidelines—including good practices and do's and don'ts—that can be absorbed into routine newswork.

## Further context

The first 12 months of this study proved to be more eventful than we had anticipated. In the three months we took to complete our comparative content analysis of 10 newspapers, between 1 June and 31 August 2018, several 'high-profile' rape cases captured news media attention in India, reflecting as significant spikes in coverage in our findings (see Section 1, Figure 1).

The irony was not lost on us: even in our exploration of the 'routine' and daily reporting of sexual violence, our results were influenced by a handful out of the thousands of incidents that took place in this period. These prominent cases included the systematic sexual abuse of destitute girls at a Muzaffarpur (Bihar) shelter home. This story received major coverage from June, after sexual offences were unearthed at a government-funded facility. The similar Deoria shelter home case from Uttar Pradesh, which in August 2018, also received interest, as did, to a lesser extent, stories from orphanages and other "houses of horror" that played into the wider narrative around Muzaffarpur.

Other cases that appeared frequently in our analysis included the Kathua rape and murder, which received regular coverage since January 2018 due to its political and communal overtones, the Daati Maharaj case involving rape allegations against a well-

known 'godman', the Unnao rape case in which the accused was a popular MLA in Uttar Pradesh, and the gang-rape of a girl in Chennai by several employees at her apartment complex. Capital punishment also featured in the news coverage of sexual violence in this period, largely due to the passing into law in August of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2018, which among other things, provided for the death penalty as a possible punishment for rape of a girl under 12 years of age. In the same month, the death penalty was also awarded to two men in the June 2018 abduction and rape of an 8-year-old-girl in Mandsaur (Madhya Pradesh)—a case that was widely covered and drew comparisons with the Delhi gang-rape due to the brutality involved.

The year 2018 also saw the #MeToo movement in India. A number of accusations emerged against prominent filmmakers, journalists, and politicians across the nation from September. We were, by then, undertaking semi-structured interviews with journalists, and the responses to our queries on sexual violence and harassment at workplace must be read in the context of #MeTooIndia. As presented in Section 2 (see Sexual harassment and abuse in newsrooms, and Safety of journalists in the field), this was a major concern to many respondents, with 55% women journalists reporting personal experience or awareness of sexual harassment or violence at work.

In the months after we completed this study, the world has changed significantly. The Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed the publication of this report by more than a year, has intensified the crisis of sexual violence. Vulnerable groups are at heightened risk during humanitarian situations, we know, and one 'gender effect' of the pandemic has been a significant rise in sexual assaults and intimate partner violence. Multiple incidents of abuse, including rape, have even been reported in medical facilities catering to the Covid-infected. Atreyee Sen<sup>23</sup> writes of the emergence of 'pandemic rape' in India, even as the media continue to bring us a steady stream of coverage of other routine—and non-routine—sexual violence. Our work is presented against this backdrop, as an evidential basis to promote better news coverage of a pressing social problem. ■

<sup>23</sup> Sen, Atreyee. 'Pandemic rape in India.' *Eurozine*. <https://www.eurozine.com/pandemic-rape-in-india/#anchor-footnote-13>. See also Rabby, Md Insiat Islam, Hossain, Farzad & Akhi, Israt Jahan. 'Sexual violence against COVID-19-positive girls in India.' *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539521997714>



## SECTION 1

# Patterns in daily news

The news reportage of sexual violence in India has frequently been criticised for perpetuating rape myths, using sensationalistic language, victim-blaming, and selectively covering cases based on the sites of crime and the profile of those involved. Such critiques have mostly been underpinned by studies based on the news coverage of sexual violence in English-language national newspapers, rather than in the plethora of vernacular and regional publications that serve much of India's culturally diverse 1.4 billion population. Moreover, most analyses are limited to how 'high-profile' or sensationalist cases are covered. In fact, very few—if any—focus on identifying the patterns in the daily reportage of

sexual violence that features in the news media. There is, thus, a significant gap in our understanding of how such events are reported in different types of publications and media sectors across India.

In response to this gap in existing research, we undertook a comparative content analysis of 10 newspapers across six languages (two Hindi, four English, and one each in Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil). Our purpose, as indicated above, was to better understand the routine reporting of rape and sexual violence in the news media, especially the portrayal of such crimes in the vernacular news media. We also wanted to understand how these reports played out over time—the patterns that

## RATIONALE

- ▶ No previous study has tracked how rape in India is reported daily over a period of time
- ▶ This content analysis informs the in-depth interviews conducted in the next phase of this project: a qualitative study on the challenges faced by journalists reporting sexual violence in India and how they operationalise existing codes of practice

## METHODOLOGY

- ▶ 3 months (1 June–31 August 2018, 33,575 newspaper pages)
- ▶ 1,635 stories about rape and sexual violence analysed in total
- ▶ 10 newspapers, 6 languages (Hindi, English, Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil)
- ▶ Readership range: 0.94m–68m
- ▶ 8 coders, native speakers in respective languages
- ▶ Inter-coder reliability test conducted in English and Hindi, scores with Krippendorff's Alpha=0.816

emerged across weeks—to allow us to offer a more generalisable set of findings about the norms within this genre of news coverage. We therefore designed a three-month study, from 1 June to 31 August 2018. During this period, eight research assistants went through the 10 newspapers every day—cumulatively, more than 33,575 pages—to identify reports on sexual violence. This was done manually to ensure that we captured all news reports, including those that might escape a keyword search. In all, we found 1,635 such news reports.

Across the newspapers, we compared the frequency of reports, the placement of stories (as an indicator of the importance accorded to the issue), the types of sexual violence reported, and the locations—urban or rural—that are prioritised. We also examined how victims and perpetrators are described, and which sources are afforded a voice in relation to rape and sexual violence.

The newspapers selected for the study are widely circulated in specific regions of India, with a reported range in readership of between 0.94 million and

68 million (see *Table 1*). The newspapers chosen represent six of the 10 largest languages in India by number of speakers as a percentage of total population. These are rooted in two different language families, and represent six different writing systems. In determining the sample, we sought to cover a broad cross-section of India geographically. The vernacular language was chosen in each instance, apart from the seven states in the North-East, where we chose the largest English-language publication (which served as a link publication). We also included regional editions of the three English-language national dailies—the Times of India, Hindustan Times, and the Hindu—due to their wide readership in their respective regions/nationally (see Appendix for more details).

Newspapers are a significant source of news in India. Although the Indian Readership Survey has recorded a slow decline in readership from 2019 across most regional and English-language newspapers (after several years of sustained growth), multiple recent studies have shown that print is still seen as a more credible source of news

**TABLE 1: NEWSPAPERS SAMPLED FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Newspaper	Language	Edition	Area	Total Readership*
Dainik Jagran	Hindi	New Delhi	Hindi belt	68,667,000 (all-India)
The Times of India	English	Mumbai	National	17,344,000 (all-India)
Hindustan Times	English	New Delhi	North India	1,822,000
The Hindu	English	Chennai	South India	946,000
Hindustan Dainik	Hindi	Ranchi edition, Jharkhand	Hindi belt	3,852,000
Assam Tribune	English	Guwahati	North-East	2,65,000
Gujarat Samachar	Gujarati	Ahmedabad	Gujarat	8,355,000
Eenadu	Telugu	Vijayawada	Telangana	5,149,000
Vijaya Karnataka	Kannada	Bengaluru	Karnataka	8,226,000
Dina Thanthi	Tamil	Chennai	Tamil Nadu	25,754,000

\* Data from *Indian Readership Survey (IRS) 2019*, except for Assam Tribune where the last available data is from 2011

**TABLE 2: NUMBER OF NEWS STORIES ON RAPE PER PUBLICATION**

Publication	June	July	August	Grand Total
Dainik Jagran (Hindi)	91	150	167	408
The Times of India (English)	89	152	158	399
Hindustan Times (English)	52	85	95	232
The Hindu (English)	40	64	41	145
Hindustan Dainik (Hindi)	35	52	23	110
The Assam Tribune (English)	22	37	27	86
Gujarat Samachar (Gujarati)	10	27	44	81
Eenadu (Telugu)	23	33	23	79
Vijaya Karnataka (Kannada)	11	22	19	52
Dina Thanthi (Tamil)	15	18	10	43
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>640</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>1,635</b>

than others. For instance, according to the CVoter Media Consumption Study 2020, 66.6% of the 3,000 respondents cited newspapers as their “most important” source of information, and 72.9% said they believed that print news was more reliable than TV. A September 2020 survey report by the media consulting firm Ormax, which measured the “credibility perceptions of news media”, similarly found that 62% of the 2,400 respondents believed that print media was the most factually accurate source of news. Thus, to a large extent, print continues to be viewed in India as the arbiter of reliable, credible information, and plays a key role in shaping public opinions and perceptions, including on the issue of sexual violence.

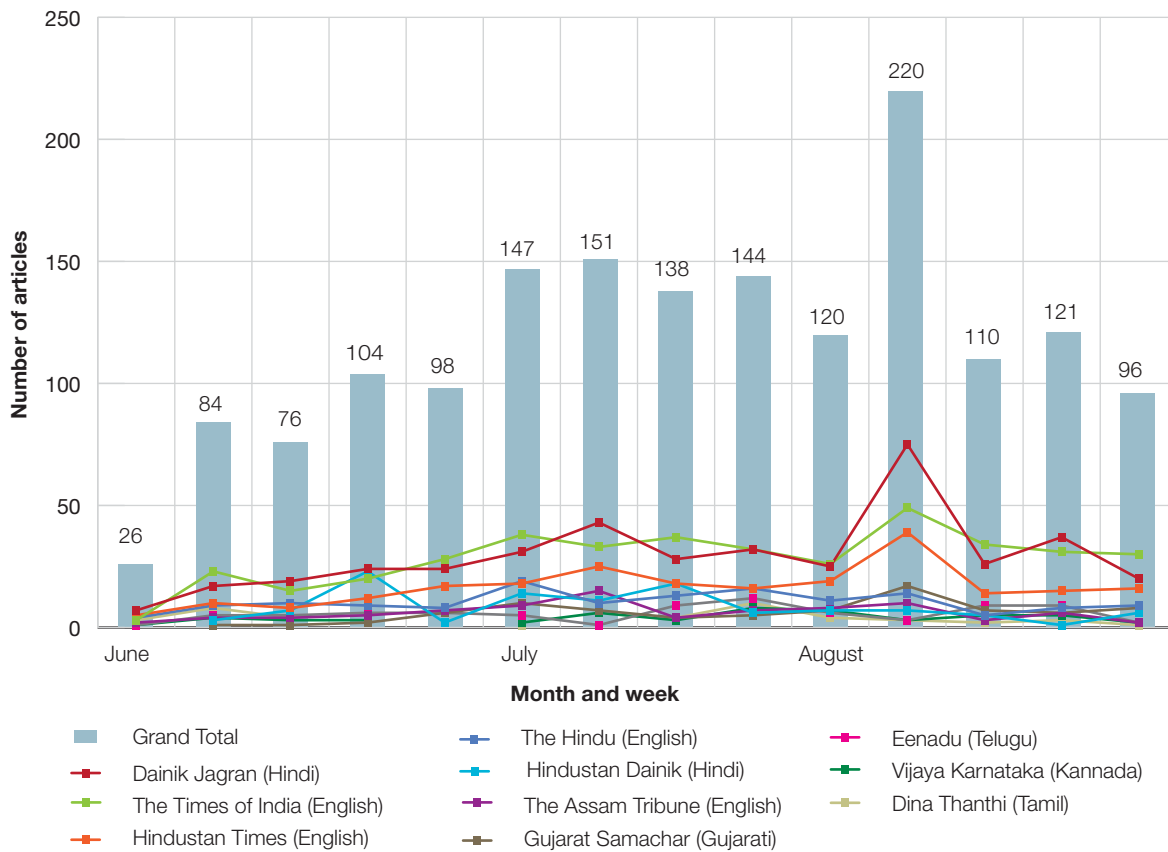
### Distribution of news reports

According to the 2019 report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), an average of 88 rape cases are registered every day in India. Only a fraction of these receive any kind of

media coverage. Over the three-month period of this study, the greatest number of reports on sexual assault appeared in the Hindi-language Dainik Jagran (n=408), followed by the English dailies the Times of India (n=399) and Hindustan Times (n=232). Incidentally, all three of the above newspapers are headquartered in North India, which more than any other region in the country has been in the wider media focus in recent years for its “rape problem”. Several high-profile cases and public protests—including the Nirbhaya case of 2012—from this region have garnered national and international attention. Sexual violence, thus, is perhaps more widely acknowledged to be a pressing social issue here.

The lowest frequency of coverage was observed in the three regional-language newspapers from South India—Dina Thanthi (n=43), Vijaya Karnataka (n=52), and Eenadu (n=79), followed by Gujarat Samachar (n=81), and the Assam Tribune (n=86). Interestingly, the Hindu’s Chennai edition published significantly more stories (n=145) than its vernacular counterparts in the South, possibly reflecting the

**FIGURE 1: WEEKLY COVERAGE OF STORIES ON RAPE**



perceived sensibilities and interests of its English-speaking and more ‘cosmopolitan’ readership.

Newspapers with national distribution (Dainik Jagran, the Times of India, and Hindustan Times) reported a consistently higher number of rape cases across the period. The only notable exception was in week four, when Hindustan Dainik featured the second-largest number of stories (n=23), just one less than Dainik Jagran that week and 11 more than its English-language counterpart Hindustan Times (n=12).

Hindustan Dainik also matched Hindustan Times in week 8 (n=18). The Tamil daily Dina Thanthi carried the least number of stories cumulatively, but in week nine it published more stories (n=10) than Hindustan Dainik (n=6).

There is a clear increase in coverage in July and August, compared with June, and a noticeable spike in coverage in week 11 (in August). This increase is partly attributable to coverage of ‘high-profile’ stories that made national news, such as the systematic sexual abuse of minor girls at a state-run shelter home

in Bihar’s Muzaffarpur as well as developments in the communally charged Kathua rape and murder case.

### Story placement: frontpage and quartiles

The prime location of a paper is its frontpage. It’s the first page that readers see and so editors strive to ensure that it contains news that is of the most relevance to their target audience. Using similar logic, stories that are believed to be less important are usually placed accordingly in the inside pages of the newspaper. This study analysed patterns in the placement of reports on sexual violence as an indicator of the importance accorded to the issue in different publications.

In this study, only 8.4% (n=138) of rape stories were reported on the frontpage of the newspaper. However, there was significant variance from this trend in the two national dailies, the Hindu (22.1%,

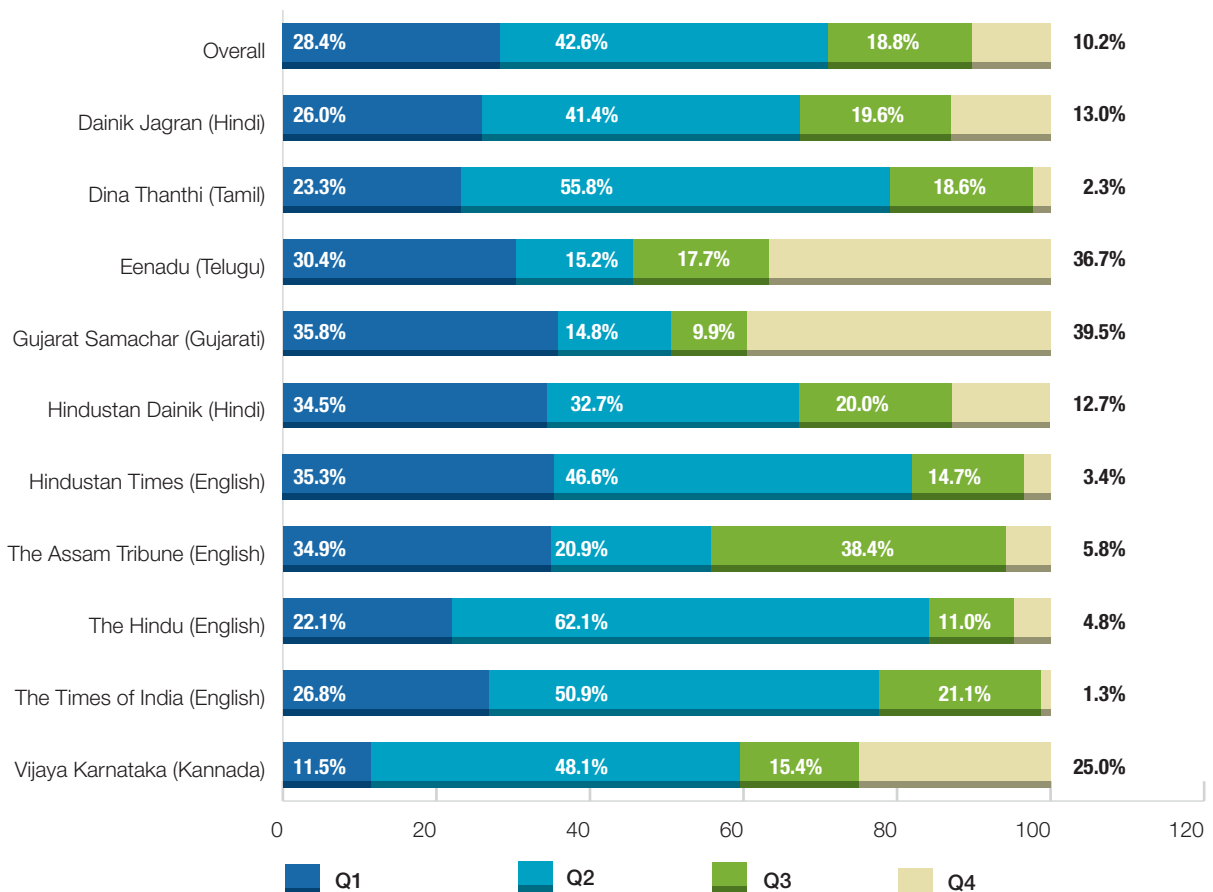


n=32) and Hindustan Dainik (20%, n=22). Both had two out of every 10 rape-related stories they carried on their frontpages. In contrast, Dainik Jagran, which was consistently one of the two highest in terms of the number of reports carried per week, featured only 3.9% (n=16) of sexual assault-related stories on the first page. All the regional newspapers published a relatively low number of stories on rape on the frontpage, ranging from just below 4% to just above 8%.

Page 11 was the most frequent, with 11.19% (n=183) of articles that we analysed published there. However, since newspapers have different lengths we calculated the quartile of each page based on the total number of pages for the paper on the day the article appeared. We thus enabled a comparison of where the articles appeared relatively speaking. Our analysis revealed that 28.4% (n=464) of stories overall featured in the first quarter of the paper, 42.6% (n=697) in the second quarter, 18.8% (n=297) in the third quarter, and 10.2% (n=167) in the fourth quarter.

- ▶ 8.4% of stories about rape and sexual violence make the frontpage
- ▶ The Hindu and Hindustan Dainik stand out: 2/10 of their rape-related stories were carried on the frontpage
- ▶ Dainik Jagran published the highest number of stories... but only 3.9% of these were placed on the first page
- ▶ Vernacular newspapers published a low number of stories on the frontpage, ranging from just below 4% to just above 8% (Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and English in Assam)

FIGURE 2: PLACEMENT OF STORIES PER NEWSPAPER



Again, we observed that newspapers with national reach had very high percentages in the second quarter, with the others demonstrating a more balanced distribution. It is notable that as a percentage of their own coverage, Eenadu, Gujarat Samachar, and Vijaya Karnataka all featured more than 25% of their rape-related stories in the final quarter of the newspaper. Among these, Gujarat Samachar published almost 40% of its reports on sexual violence in the final quarter, more than any other newspaper that we analysed.

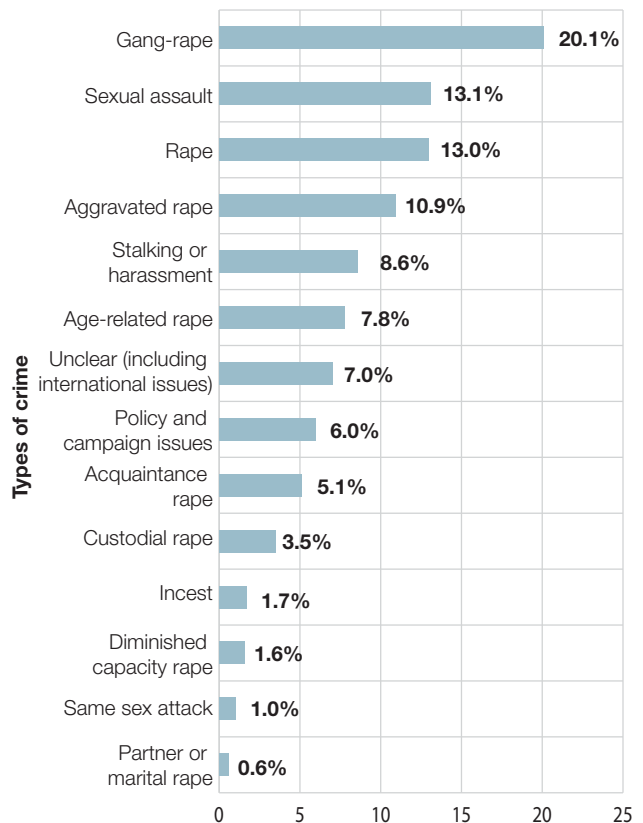
### Types of sexual violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”.

This broad definition encompasses a range of sexual offences that are defined and punishable by law, although the understanding of such definitions may vary in different languages and local contexts. For the purposes of this study, we classified rape and sexual violence into several categories. These categories are to help illustrate the thematic balance of news reports only. They are not indicative of how the crimes are classified by police, or legally, but rather the characteristics of the crime that were most prominent in the news reports. As such, these terms are not mutually exclusive and nor do they imply any form of ranking in terms of severity—they simply reflect the descriptives that could be derived from the news content.

We drew on a range of reference points when devising the original list, including IGO and NGO categorisations of different types of sexual violence: *gang-rape* refers to rape by two or more people; *sexual assault* refers to physical violation of a victim in a sexual way; *diminished-capacity rape* is when the victim does not have the ability to consent due to factors such as intoxication or physical/intellectual limitations; *aggravated rape* involves serious bodily injury to the victim; *age-related or statutory rape* pertains to sexual acts with a minor below the age of

FIGURE 3: TYPES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



consent; *acquaintance rape* is when the perpetrator and the victim know each other socially; *custodial rape* is said to occur when the victim is raped while in custody or in prison; *stalking and harassment* refer to acts of sexual misconduct such as making unwelcome physical advances, or behaving in a sexually inappropriate way; *incest* and *partner/marital rape* refer respectively to forced sex between family members, and rape on a spouse or intimate partner.

The 2012 Delhi gang-rape, in which the attack on and subsequent death of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student led to protests across India, marked a shift in how the Indian media reported on rape. On the one hand, sexual violence was brought into the mainstream discourse as an issue of pressing importance, but on the other, it led to the perpetuation of certain archetypes in news coverage about victims, perpetrators, and rape. Gang-rape perpetrated by bands of savage strangers has since become codified in the cultural consciousness as the most serious threat to women. This myth continues, aided considerably by the types of cases that the media chooses to

- ▶ Gang-rape accounted for over 20% of news reports overall, and was the largest single category of sexual violence covered in terms of volume of reports. However, it was the highest crime type in only three—Dainik Jagran, Hindustan Times, and Vijaya Karnataka— out of the 10 newspapers we analysed, indicating a significant variance across the different languages in terms of prominence
- ▶ Gujarat Samachar stands out with 28.2% of its rape-related news referring to ‘age-related (statutory) rape’
- ▶ Underreported in news coverage overall:
  - Partner or marital rape accounted for only 0.6% of news reports
  - Same-sex rape accounted for only 1.1% of news reports
  - Acquaintance/date rape accounted for only 5.5% of news reports
- ▶ Newspapers were typically concerned with rape in urban areas
  - Overall 49% was urban, 22% rural (rest were overseas or unclear from report)
  - An exception was Hindustan Dainik (Hindi) with 53.6% rural

highlight, even though the statistics tell us that 94% of offenders are known to victims<sup>24</sup> (such family members, partners, friends, neighbours, employers).

Our study reflected this tendency to focus on ‘outlier’ cases. Gang-rape is by proportion overall the most frequently reported sexual violence crime in newspapers, accounting for just over 20% (n=328) of articles. However, this is only reflected in three of the newspapers as a proportion of their own coverage (Dainik Jagran, Hindustan Times, and Vijaya Karnataka). By contrast, acquaintance rape, which occurs far more frequently, made up only 5.5% (n=84) of the coverage in all the newspapers surveyed, with the exception of the Assam Tribune (16%, n=13). Acquaintance rape did not feature at all in Gujarat Samachar’s sexual violence coverage, and in only 1.4% of Eenadu’s (n=1) in the period of the study.

Gujarat Samachar stands out here with 28.2% (n=20) of its rape-related news referring to age-related (i.e. statutory) rape. It is worth noting here that the age of consent in India is 18, which is lowered to 15 if the two parties are married. Activists in India have voiced concerns that this law can be misused in cases where two juveniles of the same

age have consensual sex by family members who may have moral, religious, or caste objections.

One type of non-consensual sex that is legal in India is marital rape, unless the victim is less than 15 years old. The problem, however, is rampant. For example, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) of 2018, 7% of ‘ever-married’ women experienced spousal sexual violence. The news coverage does not reflect the pervasiveness of intimate partner sexual violence in India, with marital rape accounting for only 0.6% (n=9) of the news reports overall. Same-sex sexual assault is also afforded scant attention (1.1%, n=17), and is sometimes euphemistically referred to as “forced unnatural sex” (The Hindu, 24 July 2018) or “sodomy” (for example, the Times of India, 9 August 2018). This was not unexpected as even the law in India does not have adequate provisions and protections for genders other than women.

Another pertinent finding here is that almost all of the newspapers we surveyed were typically more concerned with rape in urban areas. Overall, 49% (n=805) of stories were from urban areas, 22% (n=367) from rural, and the remainder were either overseas or not specified clearly. The exception

<sup>24</sup> See TABLE 3A.4 Offenders Relation to Victims of Rape (Section 376 IPC) of the 2019 National Crime Records Bureau report: <https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII%202019%20Volume%201.pdf>

**TABLE 3: THEMES IN NEWS REPORTS ABOUT RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Specific themes in news reports about rape and sexual violence	% of all articles	The Times of India (English)	Hindustan Times (English)	The Hindu (English)	Dainik Jagran (Hindi)	Hindustan Dainik (Hindi)	Dina Thanthi (Tamil)	Eenadu (Telugu)	Gujarat Samachar (Gujarati)	The Assam Tribune (English)	Vijaya Karnataka (Kannada)
Details of attack (including events leading upto)	38.84%	17.3%	18.1%	65.5%	41.4%	76.4%	76.7%	87.3%	21.0%	12.8%	88.5%
Victim blaming (suggesting the victim encouraged or is at fault for the attack)	2.20%	0.3%		2.8%	6.4%	1.8%	2.3%	2.5%			
Political rivalry (explicit politicisation of the attack or aftermath)	7.34%	1.5%	2.2%	3.4%	22.3%	7.3%	4.7%	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%	
Caste or religious rivalry	2.02%	0.8%		0.7%	6.6%		0.0%	1.3%	1.2%		
Social problem/ challenges (e.g. describing rape as a cultural issue, rather than just a criminal act)	9.17%	4.0%	3.9%	1.4%	19.1%	3.6%	11.6%	10.1%	14.8%	11.6%	11.5%
Solutions for reducing rape (e.g. changes to legal/penal system, education etc)	6.67%	6.3%	7.3%		11.3%	0.9%	14.0%	3.8%	4.9%	5.8%	3.8%
<b>Total articles per paper (n=)</b>	<b>1,635</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>52</b>

to this was Hindustan Dainik, where 53.6% (n=59) of the stories pertained to rural areas.

The tendency to focus disproportionately on urban crime, of course, is not limited to the media. While the NCRB does not clearly categorise crimes according to their urban or rural location, it does take particular note of metropolitan and ‘mega’ cities. According to the 2019 ‘Crime in India’ report, for example, a total of 32,063 rape cases were registered, of which only 3,320 (10.3%) took place in metropolitan cities. It can be surmised that a large percentage of these cases were registered in rural areas, which are in general overlooked in the Indian media.

### Themes in ‘routine’ news about sexual violence

The way that the news media frames sexual violence is critical to how the public perceive the issue. This

framing includes which aspect of incidents journalists choose to present, what they choose *not* to, and how they organise and offer their news presentation linguistically. News media representations of sexual violence, in general, tend to be episodic: they are organised so as to focus public attention on the specific episode and the details around it, often scrutinising the individual(s) involved, and largely devoid of the social and structural context. This is in contrast to thematic framing, wherein issues are contextualised, and public attention is drawn to the underlying factors and where even solutions may be discussed. Though there has been a recent shift in the news media towards a more thematic approach when reporting on sexual violence, there is evidence that the broader themes and socio-cultural issues still largely escape the news portrayals of sexual violence<sup>25</sup>.

We coded for the specific themes within the news reports to examine this situation in relation to routine reporting of sexual violence. The majority of the reports that we analysed—39% (n=635)—focused

<sup>25</sup> See Aroustamian, Camille. ‘Time’s up: Recognising sexual violence as a public policy issue: A qualitative content analysis of sexual violence cases and the media.’ *Aggression and Violent Behavior, A Review Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.101341>

- ▶ Majority of reports focus on the details of the attack
- ▶ Overt victim blaming in only 2.2% of reports
- ▶ Caste or religious conflict is mentioned in only 2%
- ▶ Political factors in 7.3%, but very high in Dainik Jagran (Hindi) at 22.3%
- ▶ Just over 9% of reports frame sexual violence as a social issue
- ▶ Very few stories focus on solutions (6.67%), and when they do it is on the death penalty

on the details of the attack, including what led up to it. This emphasis was particularly pronounced in the three vernacular papers from the South—Vijaya Karnataka (88%,  $n=46$ ), Eenadu (87%,  $n=69$ ), and Dina Thanthi (77%,  $n=33$ ), which also incidentally had the lowest coverage of sexual violence in general—followed closely by Hindustan Dainik (76%,  $n=84$ ). However, the English-language dailies were all below 20% on this parameter, with the exception of the Chennai edition of the Hindu (65%,  $n=95$ ).

Themes of victim-blaming were less prevalent than previous research might suggest, being present in only 2.2% ( $n=36$ ) of news reports. Naturally, any kind of victim-blaming would be too much, although our results demonstrate that news reports of rape and sexual violence could be mapped according to the long-tailed distribution principle—where a relatively small number of cases generate stories with a sufficient number of sources and detail, but where most are simply ‘spot stories’ (also known as ‘news briefs’) to note a reported crime without any further detail. This was corroborated in some of the vernacular papers, such as Tamil Nadu’s Dina Thanthi in which rape stories are typically

featured only once a week, and where a series of short articles were collated on the same page.

Sexual violence was framed as a social problem in just 9% ( $n=150$ ) of the stories and solutions were suggested in only 7% ( $n=109$ ), and then typically associated with debates about the use of the death penalty as punishment. Several news articles in our study made reference to—or focused solely on—legislation relating to the use of death penalty for rape of girls under 12 years, and more stringent punishment for rape of girls under the age of 16. Some articles outlined arguments from sources on opposing sides of this debate (politicians, lawyers, advocacy groups all cited), while others noted how the death penalty was given in cases covered by the new law. Coverage of this nature was particularly prominent in July and August when The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2018, was being passed into law by both houses of Parliament.

In general, there was very little critique of rape culture in India, the role of law enforcement, flaws in the legal machinery, government policies (beyond the aforementioned death penalty debate), or the patriarchal and antediluvian moorings of the Indian Penal Code. Among all the newspapers studied, Dainik Jagran took a more contextual approach with just over 19% of its stories placing rape as a social issue, and about 11% ( $n=46$ ) suggesting solutions. This Hindi daily also highlighted political factors in 22% ( $n=91$ ) of its stories, more than any other publication; this is partly attributable to Dainik Jagran’s sustained coverage of the Muzaffarpur and Deoria shelter home rape cases (both of which took place in the Hindi heartland), where people with political connections were implicated.

## Victim/survivor and perpetrator comparison

There is a wealth of studies<sup>26</sup> that identify ‘rape myths’—prejudicial or stereotypical beliefs, or misinformation about rape and sexual violence—as deeply problematic, as they are associated with victim-blaming, directly or indirectly. Here

<sup>26</sup> For a study in the Indian context, see Rao, Shakuntala. ‘Covering rape in shame culture: Studying journalism ethics in India’s new television news media.’ *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2014.918497>. For an overview, see Grubb, Amy & Turner, Emily. ‘Attribution of blame in rape cases: A review of the Impact of rape myth acceptance, gender role conformity and substance use on victim blaming.’ *Aggression and Violent Behavior, A Review Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.06.002>

**TABLE 4: DETAILS ABOUT VICTIMS/SURVIVORS AND PERPETRATORS**

Information mentioned		PUBLICATION										
		% of all articles	The Times of India (English)	Hindustan Times (English)	The Hindu (English)	Dainik Jagran (Hindi)	Dina Thanthi (Tamil)	Eenadu (Telugu)	Gujarat Samachar (Gujarati)	Hindustan Dainik (Hindi)	The Assam Tribune (English)	Vijaya Karnataka (Kannada)
Name	Victim	0.9%	0.8%	0.4%	2.1%				2.5%		5.8%	
	Perpetrator or accused	46.5%	46.6%	51.7%	38.6%	41.2%	65.1%	31.6%	30.9%	60.0%	58.1%	69.2%
	Both	2.1%	2.0%	1.3%	4.1%	1.0%	7.0%	2.5%	6.2%		4.7%	
Age	Victim	24.6%	26.1%	28.4%	38.6%	17.9%	16.3%	35.4%	22.2%	23.6%	19.8%	15.4%
	Perpetrator or accused	6.5%	10.5%	4.7%	8.3%	2.7%	4.7%	8.9%	4.9%		11.6%	13.5%
	Both	18.4%	24.1%	27.2%	14.5%	5.1%	62.8%	25.3%	9.9%	5.5%	15.1%	50.0%
Profession or occupation	Victim	6.5%	4.3%	3.4%	11.7%	5.9%	4.7%	6.3%	6.2%	10.9%	8.1%	19.2%
	Perpetrator or accused	28.6%	39.1%	37.9%	26.2%	21.8%	48.8%	12.7%	21.0%	8.2%	32.6%	23.1%
	Both	11.4%	12.8%	13.4%	13.8%	5.6%	18.6%	17.7%	6.2%	10.0%	14.0%	23.1%
Caste, ethnicity, or religion	Victim	3.2%	2.3%	3.4%	8.3%	2.7%		6.3%	1.2%	3.6%	2.3%	
	Perpetrator or accused	1.8%	1.5%	1.7%		1.5%	11.6%			0.9%	5.8%	5.8%
	Both	0.6%	0.5%	0.4%		1.0%					1.2%	3.8%
Featured in image (if present)	Victim	0.2%	0.5%	0.4%	0.7%							
	Perpetrator or accused	3.5%	3.3%	2.2%	2.1%	5.1%	9.3%		1.2%	4.5%	5.8%	
	Both	0.2%	0.3%				2.3%	1.3%			1.2%	
Clothes worn during attack	Victim	0.4%				1.2%		1.3%			1.2%	
Behaviour during attack (what they did)	Victim	0.7%				1.2%	4.7%	6.3%				
	Perpetrator or accused	26.6%	33.3%	31.0%	40.0%	11.5%	58.1%	6.3%		60.0%		55.8%
	Both	2.9%	1.8%	0.4%	0.7%	3.4%		10.1%	1.2%	2.7%		25.0%
Behaviour prior to attack	Victim	5.6%	3.0%	0.9%	9.7%	9.6%		5.1%		17.3%		3.8%
	Perpetrator or accused	5.4%	1.3%	2.6%	2.1%	9.8%	48.8%	7.6%	1.2%	2.7%		7.7%
	Both	5.5%	1.0%	2.2%	0.7%	9.8%		11.4%	1.2%	0.9%		55.8%
Personality traits, hobbies, interests	Victim	0.3%				0.7%				0.9%		1.9%
	Perpetrator or accused	1.3%		0.9%		0.7%	27.9%	1.3%				5.8%
	Both	0.2%				0.2%	4.7%					
	<b>Total articles per paper (n=):</b>	<b>1,635</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>52</b>

we coded for a range of factors relating to both the victim/survivor and the perpetrator, to systematically compare how they are spoken about in stories about rape and sexual violence, and the information mentioned about them in each case.

Indian law forbids rape victims/survivors from being named or identified in the media, so it was unsurprising that most stories refrained from doing so (there were very rare exceptions such as in a stalking and harassment case in Gujarat Samachar, published on 1 July 2018). The accused/perpetrators, on the other hand, were named in 46.5% (n=760) of the stories in our sample.

Notably, the age of the victim was revealed more frequently than that of the accused at 24.6% (n=403) and 6.5% (n=106) respectively, and with the ages of both being mentioned in 18.4% (n=301) of stories. The victim's age was more likely to be revealed if they were a minor, often in headlines; the prioritisation of this information could arguably serve as shorthand for their 'innocence' and thus absence of complicity in the attack, and this 'vulnerability' could also elicit a stronger reaction from readers.

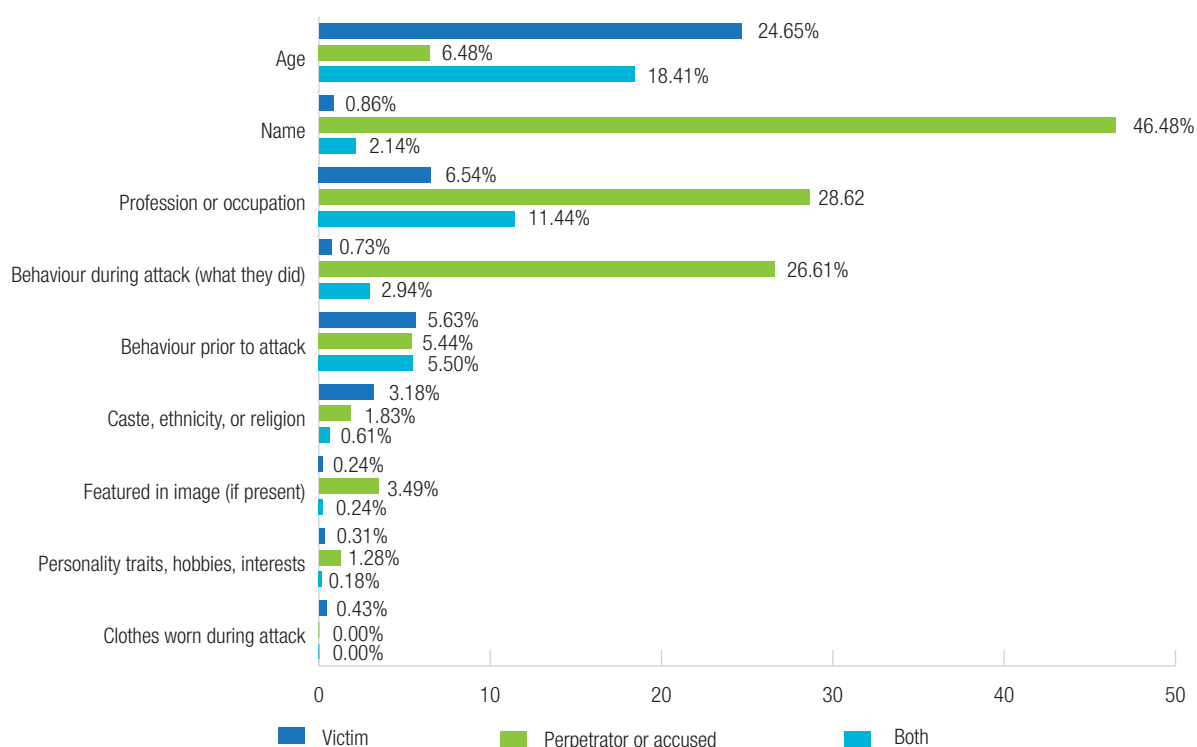
The profession of only the accused/perpetrator was mentioned in 28.6% (n=468) of the stories and that of just the victim in only 6.5% (n=107). It may

be argued that details about profession/occupation serve to characterise the offender in a manner that is external to the crime and places them within a role in society, but the victim is more frequently situated firmly within the context of the crime and on what was 'done' to them. A very minimal percentage of the stories described the personality traits or interests of either the victim/survivor or the perpetrator/accused.

The caste, ethnicity, or religion of the victim alone was mentioned in 3.2% (n=52) of the stories, especially when these were believed to have been a factor in the crime, while for perpetrators this was only 1.8% (n=30). The caste/religion of both were mentioned in below 1% of the stories in our sample. The caste and religious dynamics of sexual violence in India have frequently been commented on in academic and political discourse, but in the news media, this type of identity information is often used to highlight the vulnerabilities of victims rather than the social factors that may possibly motivate or embolden perpetrators.

A roughly equivalent number of stories, about 5% each, described the behaviour of the victim/survivor and accused prior to the incident of sexual violence. However, 26.6% (n=435) of stories described only the accused's behaviour during

FIGURE 4: DETAILS GIVEN IN REPORTS



the attack, 0.7% (n=12) focused on the victim's actions, and 2.9% (n=48) elaborated on both.

There were some remarkable outliers in our data, however.

The Tamil daily Dina Thanthi gave significantly more information about the perpetrator as a percentage of its own coverage than any other newspaper. Out of a total of 43 stories on sexual violence in Dina Thanthi, more than 65% (n=28) provided the name and age of the perpetrator, 49% (n=21) described the perpetrator's profession, and 28% (n=12) gave information about aspects of the perpetrator's personality and interests. The perpetrator's actions prior to and during the crime were described in 49% (n=21) and 58% (n=25) of the stories respectively. Only the perpetrator's religion or caste were mentioned in 11% (n=5) of stories, and that of the victim was never referenced.

The Kannada newspaper Vijaya Karnataka also tended to provide more information about victims as well as perpetrators than most other publications. For example, 56% (n=29) of the 52 stories published described the actions of both perpetrator and victim before and during the crime. This paper also provided information about the victim's occupation alone in 19% (n=10) of its news stories, and for the perpetrator alone as well as both the victim and perpetrator in 23% (n=12) respectively.

The Hindi daily Hindustan Dainik, on the other hand, described only the victim's actions prior to the attack in just over 17% (n=19) of its 110 stories,

but less than 1% (n=1) for perpetrator alone, and only about 3% (n=3) of reports gave this information for both. In contrast, only the perpetrator's actions during the crime were described in 60% (n=66) of the stories, and only 3% (n=3) of the stories mentioned the actions of both perpetrator and victim.

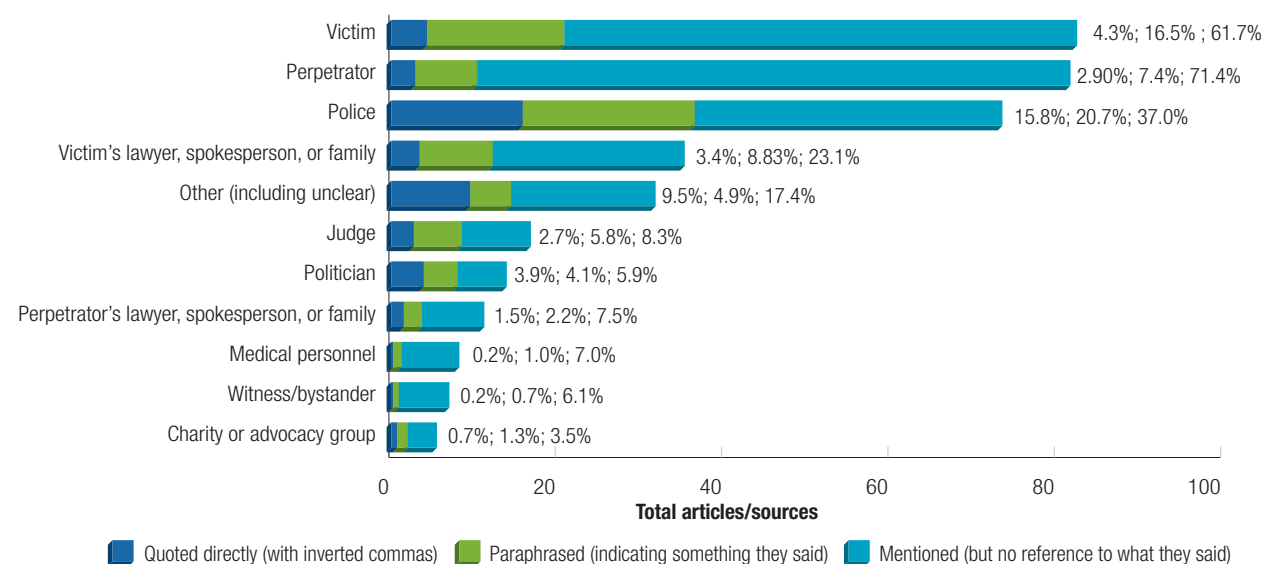
## Sources

The news media portrayal of rape and sexual violence has the potential to influence policies and law. It is thus important to understand the 'sources' quoted in news stories, as these become the voices—victims, perpetrators, police, lawyers, politicians, activists, medical experts, family members, and so on—that are heard by the public and policymakers in relation to sexual violence.

We coded for both active (direct quote) and passive voice (paraphrasing). Further, we coded for when the person was mentioned without being given a voice. The latter is unusual in sourcing studies, but gives unique insights into how different actors are spoken about. We are not suggesting these are sources where journalists are intentionally not providing a voice—they may indeed not have been available—but nevertheless signal a prominence and importance, indicating that providing voice can (and perhaps should) be of greater concern.

We found that the police were by far the most prominently quoted—directly in more than 15%

**FIGURE 5: SOURCES CITED ACROSS SAMPLE**





- ▶ **Victim/perpetrator: Most prevalent, although rarely given a direct voice**
- ▶ **Police: Largest source cited, crime beat**
- ▶ **Legal professionals: Significant source, especially in relation to verdicts**
- ▶ **Politicians: Not frequently cited or mentioned, despite perception that sex crimes are politicised**
- ▶ **Medical personnel/ charity or advocacy organisations: Overall, rarely used as sources, and typically in isolation (features on social issues/solutions, rather than everyday reports)**

(n=258) of stories and paraphrased in nearly 21% (n=338). Victims were the next most commonly cited sources, but what they said was more often paraphrased (just over 16%, n=270) than directly quoted (about 4%, n=70). There were then lower instances of other voices, including the victim's lawyer/representative, perpetrator, politicians, and judges. It is worth noting that perpetrators were given almost as much prominence as victims in news reports, but they were rarely quoted directly, and were only occasionally paraphrased.

While the heavy reliance on police sources reflects on the treatment of rape/sexual violence as a crime beat, the patterns of other sources were a little more unexpected. There was very little representation of sources who could have provided more context about not just the particular crime but sexual violence in general, such as medical experts and NGOs/ civic advocacy groups. Those who 'spoke up' for the victim extended to their own family members or legal representatives, but this comprised only 3.4% (n=55) of the total sources in our sample. It is worth noting that the importance of these sources within sexual violence cases is inferred as they are often mentioned (see Figure 5). However, what is missing from the news reports is the active voice (quoted or paraphrased) of these sources, to

explain the context, the trauma, the medical or legal processes. The absence of such voices prevents all aspects of the case from being brought to the surface, and places attention almost solely on the criminal justice aspects of sexual violence—at the expense of the human and social impact, which extends far beyond the incident. In so doing, it also restricts the journalistic narratives from expanding beyond episodic framing, as discussed above, into a more thematic or solutions-oriented approach.

## Summary

A rape is reported roughly every 16 minutes in India<sup>27</sup>. This means that it is a 'common' occurrence, and not every case is treated as newsworthy. There is, hence, a clear tendency in newsrooms to disproportionately pick up relatively unusual cases—involving excessive brutality, multiple perpetrators, under-age victims, or stranger assaults—rather than those that take place more commonly (such as within homes and perpetrated by someone known to the victim) and where the violence is less 'spectacular'. This, of course, presents a misleading picture of how sexual violence usually manifests in India. The majority of articles treat incidents of sexual violence as standard crime stories, focusing on the details of the event, and pay scant attention to the *incidence* of sexual violence.

The stories could be mapped to a long-tailed distribution continuum: generic 'spot' stories or news briefs that lack any kind of context make up a large portion of the coverage, with only a relatively small number of cases generating substantive reports—these are often cases that involve unusual violence or are politicised in some way. While overt victim-blaming was evident in only just about 2% of cases, there is also very rarely any attempt to provide a voice, direct or otherwise, for the victim. Very few stories, just below 7%, focus on solutions, and when they do, it is often with an emphasis on the death penalty. This focus on capital punishment was particularly prominent in our study as the sample period coincided with prominent policy debates on the penal code and the use of the death penalty to combat rape. ■



<sup>27</sup> According to the 2019 National Crime Records Bureau report: <https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII%202019%20Volume%201.pdf>



## SECTION 2

# Challenges of reporting on sexual violence

The previous section provided a baseline of the patterns present in the daily news reporting of rape in India. The news media tendency, as we have seen, is to focus on the ‘out-of-ordinary’ incidence of sexual violence, relegating the ‘non-spectacular’ to episodically framed spot news stories.

While the issues associated with such micro-viewing of macro concerns have been subjected to study by several scholars in the Indian context, and many more outside, we wanted to understand what went behind such content production. What were the factors that influenced journalists as they went about their newsgathering and publication processes? What were the guidelines and principles that they followed while reporting on sexual violence? How did aspects of journalists’ identity (gendered or cultural), and the organisational and regional contexts they are situated in play into their approach to the subject? And how did they view their own practices of reporting sexual assaults?

To provide insights into these and related questions, we conducted 257 semi-structured interviews with journalists working in 14 languages across India, and representing print, television, radio, and online sectors. Interviewees were drawn from the North, North-East, East, Central, West, and South regions, primarily based on the Government of India’s division of Zonal Councils<sup>28</sup>. For illustrative purposes, though, we treated the capital city of New Delhi as separate from the North, given its high concentration

of national media houses. The 14 languages we drew our interviewees from include Hindi and English, the main languages of India, and 10 of the other most-spoken languages: Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, Kannada, Odia, Malayalam, and Punjabi. We also included Assamese, which is the main language of the state of Assam in the North-East, and Kashmiri, from the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the North. Kashmir has a history of insurgency, with a heavy presence of security forces and restrictions on news media. North-East India, including parts of Assam, has also been a site of conflict due to the presence of insurgent groups. Including J&K and North-East India in our study allowed us to cover places where the journalism environment is considered different, and which rarely feature in comparative research owing to difficulties of access.

Hindi, which is the national language and mother tongue to more than 528 million people, is the largest in our sample, while Kashmiri, which has slightly less than 6.8 million speakers, is the smallest. English, the lingua franca that cuts across India’s many states and regions, is considered their primary language only by around 256,000, according to the 2011 census—but is more influential than that number indicates due to its reach into the political and bureaucratic elite, and the fact that it serves as the second- or third-language to more than 125 million Indians.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.mha.gov.in/zonal-council>

TABLE 5: TOTAL INTERVIEWS ACROSS REGIONS AND SECTORS

Region	Print	Television	Radio	Online	Total
North	29	13	6	16	64
North-East	5	5	1	2	13
East	14	8	1	6	29
Central	15	6	3	0	24
West	22	6	0	3	31
South	51	30	9	6	96
<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>257</b>

TABLE 6: TOTAL INTERVIEWS ACROSS MEDIUMS

Region	Online	Print	Radio	Television	Total
New Delhi	13	8	1	7	29
West	3	22	0	6	31
South	6	51	9	30	96
North	3	21	5	6	35
Central	0	15	3	6	24
East	6	14	1	8	29
North-East	2	5	1	5	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>257</b>

The interviews were conducted between September 2018 and July 2019, and our questions spanned newsroom practices, newsgathering and sourcing, editorial gatekeeping, news narration, and follow-ups and investigations vis-a-vis the journalism on sexual violence. We also queried journalists on the personal principles and guidelines they followed when reporting on sexual violence. Our analysis, which pays attention to regional variations across India, is

presented in the following sections, beginning with the reporting challenges that journalists face (see Appendix for more details on the method).

### Story identification

An average of 88 rape cases are reported to the police in India every day across the states. Given this volume of incidents, we wanted to understand

the factors—including personal and editorial news values—influencing which cases were identified by journalists as suitable for coverage.

Worth noting in the analysis of our interviews is the relatively high proportion of journalists who claim, rather optimistically, that *all* cases are reported—22.2% (n=57) overall. Next in order of prominence are cases that are described as ‘high-profile’, where 20.6% (n=53) of respondents said the status or fame of the people involved in a case increased its newsworthiness. This was followed by law-and-order responses at 16.7% (n=43), ‘gravity’ at 14% (n=36), locality at 13.2% (n=34), and editor’s decision at 7% (n=18).

Across the regions, we also observed some notable differences. The proportion of respondents claiming that all cases were covered was highest in the North-East at 38.5% (n=5), followed by the North (28.6%, n=10), East (27.6%, n=8), and South (27.15%, n=26).

High-profile cases were described by respondents as involving “a very famous person”. This category included government ministers, political leaders, elite bureaucrats, film actors and celebrities, “godmen who break the trust of followers”, “people associated with

big matters of society”, and sometimes merely “rich families and rich people”. This was rated especially high as a news value in the Central (50%, n=12), East (41.4%, n=12), and North (24.7%, n=9) regions.

The ‘gravity’ of a case, on the other hand, came in at only 14% (n=36) overall, but featured as the highest value in Delhi at 20.7% (n=6). Delhi was also the highest in ‘editor’s decision’ and ‘exploring new angles’, with both at 13.8% (n=4) each.

Only in the South did law-and-order response feature above 20% in relation to the story identification process (21.9%, n=21). Locality was given most importance in the East (27.6%, n=8) and Central (25%, n=6) regions. Resonance with readers featured minimally everywhere, (with a total percentage of just 4.7%, n=12), except for the West at 12.9% (n=4).

We also observed some interesting language variations. The ‘gravity’ and ‘high-profile’ nature of a case were particularly high in Bengali and Odia. Despite overall low numbers, resonance with readers and ‘exploring new angles’ were both prominent in Marathi, and the age of the victim was highest in Tamil. Editor’s decision was highest in English.

**TABLE 7: FACTORS FOR STORY IDENTIFICATION ACROSS REGION**

Story identification process	New Delhi (n=29)	West (n=31)	South (n=96)	North (n=35)	Central (n=24)	East (n=29)	North-East (n=13)	Total (n=257)
Age of victim	10.3%	12.9%	9.4%	2.9%	0.0%	13.8%	0.0%	8.2%
All reported	10.3%	9.7%	27.1%	28.6%	8.3%	27.6%	38.5%	22.2%
Editor’s decision	13.8%	9.7%	5.2%	8.6%	4.2%	3.5%	7.7%	7.0%
Explore new angles	13.8%	12.9%	3.1%	2.9%	0.0%	10.3%	0.0%	5.8%
Gravity	20.7%	16.1%	10.4%	8.6%	4.2%	34.5%	7.7%	14.0%
High-profile	17.2%	19.4%	8.3%	25.7%	50.0%	41.4%	7.7%	20.6%
Law-and-order response	10.3%	19.4%	21.9%	8.6%	16.7%	13.8%	15.4%	16.7%
Locality	13.8%	16.1%	9.4%	5.7%	25.0%	27.6%	0.0%	13.2%
Resonates with readers	3.5%	12.9%	5.2%	2.9%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%
Stranger rape	0.0%	3.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	0.0%	0.8%

Below is a discussion of some of the most frequent points cited by journalists when explaining their rationale on reporting on rape and sexual violence.

### **‘All stories are reported’**

This claim was made by 22% (n=57) of respondents, who said stories were never left out because of any bias. Some stressed the point with statements such as “whatever comes our way, we report it”, “every case is definitely taken up”, and “that’s the purpose of a newspaper”.

When asked whether the profile of the victim or perpetrator or the number of stories on a given day made any difference, some respondents held fast that these factors did not. For example, a woman broadcast journalist from Kerala said:

*“We don’t suppress stories related to rape or sexual violence. I don’t think [there was] any instance where a report was not aired. Every case related to this was aired.”*

A male journalist for a news outlet in Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir also spoke of “all” incidents being reported, but mentioned that there were just a “few” cases in his city, presumably precluding the need to choose:

*“If you look here in Srinagar, at least in my experience, there is no priority. Cases are few and all are reported. There hasn’t been any pick-and-choose, in my experience.”*

Others expanded in a way that referenced personal principles and opinion more than actual practice, such as a male print journalist based in Lucknow, who said:

*“You see, in rape, we cannot differentiate. A rape is a rape, whether it happens with a lower caste or a poor girl, or it happens with a middle-class or college girl, or in the upper class, or at a bar or at a party.”*

A number of respondents, however, said whether and how a case was reported also hinged on factors such as the editor’s decision, which in turn might be based on aspects like perceived news value. A male print journalist in Chennai noted:

*“They [editors] won’t turn it down completely. As I said, depending on the essence of the*

*case, it will be decided if it should go small or big. Definitely we will report [if] a case has happened and a complaint has been filed. But how big it goes, depends.”*

Some were more critical of their editors. A Srinagar-based journalist working for a national newspaper said his editor was “not interested in normal crime” and preferred not to invest resources into incidents that happen “all the time in New Delhi”. He added that his paper did carry a story he filed on rape, but only because it also involved murder.

A woman broadcast journalist based in New Delhi said that she had to sometimes “convince” her editor, a man, to cover a sexual violence case:

*“Your editor is your first reader, your first audience. So you have to convince him that the story is worthy enough.”*

A woman TV journalist based in Shillong made a similar point:

*“Every person has their own way of, you know, prioritising the news. Maybe if I was the news editor I would have highlighted that. But the news editor maybe doesn’t see it as very important... it also depends [on the discretion] of the person in authority.”*

Some reporters also mentioned a process of “screening” before going forward with a story, such as a woman TV journalist from New Delhi who said:

*“When we start reporting, we already know what kind of story it is and what is the requirement of our organisation. So, we screen it and go to the editor, and it is the editorial call [on] how [the story] has to go or if it will go.”*

### **‘High-profile’ cases**

The ‘profile’ of the victim or perpetrator was a deciding factor in the coverage of a case, according to 20.6% (n=53) of respondents.

A Lucknow-based reporter for a national newspaper illustrated this with an example:

*“See, it’s decided [on the basis of] the profile. Like we reported an incident in which in a car [some people] abducted a girl in Ghazipur. The vehicle belonged to a minister. So we took it on page one.”*

Another experienced journalist of a Hindi newspaper based in the same city added:

*“The high-profile cases, we have to get involved in them, cover them. It’s like a compulsion. We are helpless in this.”*

A Punjabi journalist summarised:

*“The bigger the person involved, the bigger the news will be published. The smaller the person’s status, the smaller will be the news.”*

A woman journalist based in Delhi, currently working for a Hindi broadcast channel, expanded on the selection bias, referring to her previous experience in print newsrooms as well:

*“The kind of television channel I am working for now, they don’t take [rape] stories. They say we are a political channel and these stories are of no use for us. The organisation I used to work for earlier, they’d say... ‘Every day hundreds of rapes are happening. Yeh itni badi khabar nahi hain yeh utna important nahi hain (this isn’t such a big story, it’s not so important). Don’t take this, just let it go’. The kind of atmosphere or environment in newsrooms that I have experienced is, unless it’s a big breaking, big rape case, leave it.”*

A Srinagar-based reporter put it more succinctly: “It is only reported when the rape gets politicised, or when there is a lot of [public] outrage.”

## Law-and-order response

There is a heavy reliance on the police as the authoritative source for rape incidents, with 16.7% (n=43) of respondents stating that the registration of a case was a key determinant of whether or not they reported it. As a print journalist for a Bengali publication said, “If the case is not reported to the police station, we cannot write about it”.

An experienced Hyderabad-based journalist who has worked for several news organisations said the same: “The FIR [First Information Report] is sacrosanct to us.” Important, too, is under which section of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) the complaint has been lodged. The same journalist expanded:

*“It depends on the FIR. If the FIR mentions it as Section 376 [rape], then we definitely report it... if the FIR says molestation, and there are 10 other molestation cases that day, then we don’t report it. Because there is not enough space for that. We have to leave it out because of space constraints. It all depends on the IPC sections.”*

A broadcast journalist, also from Hyderabad, expanded:

*“The crime reporters... get in touch with all the police stations on a daily basis. So if something has happened and it’s been reported, then it comes into the papers automatically.”*

A radio journalist in Chennai mentioned waiting for court or legal ‘events’ /episodes:

*“Once something happens and when it comes to the court or officials, we respond. Then we take up the news, okay? Once the officials are responding and the court is giving some kind of verdict, we take it up.”*

A handful of journalists spoke of exceptions to waiting for an FIR to be filed. An editor of a New Delhi-based online news outlet said:

*“If a woman says that she was raped and her medical examination has been conducted, the Supreme Court has issued guidelines that the police have to immediately register an FIR. But in most cases the police do not register an FIR because the concerned superintendent wants to report minimum crime from his or her district. We don’t bother about that. If we get to know about an incident, our correspondent rushes to the spot and covers the story.”*

A broadcast journalist in Kerala added that on occasion it was necessary to expend additional effort to draw attention to an incident and to help a disadvantaged victim:

*“[If sexual violence happens to] a person with high education or a person who is socially [privileged], the victim doesn’t need much support from the media. The police and the other organisations, they will come to help them. But when the victim is from a socially or educationally or economically backward*

*class, they need more help. In those cases, I try to support them... to bring issues to the limelight. Otherwise what happens is that those cases will definitely get washed away. They will clear all the evidence. It is quite common these days that people try to hide the crime."*

### Gravity of crime

Another deciding factor that respondents spoke of was the 'gravity' of the crime (14%, n=36). As a print journalist from Kerala summarised, "brutality is the benchmark" for reporting sexual violence. A New Delhi-based woman reporter similarly said:

*"It depends on the goriness of the crime. How the incident was carried out. So, goriness of the incident brings that news to the frontpage."*

A Mumbai-based bureau chief of a national channel also said that brutality made a story more "compelling":

*"News primarily is reported in terms of the unusuality of the crime. [If] there is some gruesome element involved in it... that a newspaper feels makes for a compelling story, only then it is picked up. Otherwise not every rape case is picked up."*

An online journalist from Bengaluru added that the brutality of a crime is a factor in how much outrage it can trigger:

*"[W]hat is important is the severity of the crime. Some cases demand much more anger out of you, demand much more outrage out of you. They really make your blood boil..."*

A woman journalist based in New Delhi and working for a national news website also spoke of the importance of shock value:

*"I think it is easier to justify a story that has a lot of vivid details. For example, oh my god, they shoved something into her vagina and all of that. Yeah, that is the kind of stuff that keeps happening, and people are, like, oh my god... So that is what I was looking at."*

Several respondents spoke of sexual violence against minors as being more important than other cases.

*"If I say this girl has been molested, and this girl has been raped. Our priority will be the girl [who] has been raped. First we'll cover that. If it is a child, our priority will be first to cover rape of the child. There is more sensitivity and more priority goes to that child rather than the girl."*

'Gravity' was of particular importance to electronic media journalists since more resources have to be put into production and there are greater limitations on how many stories can be covered at a time. A broadcast journalist spoke of the difference between TV and print newspapers, which are expected "to cover everything":

*"Our story is an electronic story, where we need visuals also and we need supporting bites also. If it is sensitive, like some gang-rape happens, or girl is raped and murdered, and it is done in a very ruthless way, then we cover."*

A national radio journalist also spoke of this criterion for selection:

*"In radio, they don't take all rape cases. If it was a rape and murder, and it had taken place in a violent manner, or if it has created something among the people or has affected them, outraged them, that is when radio covers it."*

A crime reporter for a Marathi-language news channel indicated that the extent of coverage depended on the extent of brutality:

*"The position that I am at, I get cases about small schools in rural areas, where young girls are raped. So we show those cases, but we show it in such a manner that it runs for maximum 30 seconds. If it is very brutal, then we show it two to three times in a day."*

A woman journalist working for a Bengali online news publication observed that desensitisation is an expected outcome of having to daily go through dozens of rape stories in newsfeeds, and that there has to be a "hierarchy" in place for selecting stories about rape. Referring to her stint as a sub-editor, she recalled:

*"We used to get an unending newsfeed from PTI, AP, AFP etc. From hundreds of news stories, we had to choose maybe 20 stories. We would casually discuss among us, and*



*ask each other to see if there is any hanging case or [if it was] just rape. We would say only if they are hanged, we would take the story. It might sound insensitive... we would not take the story if it was just rape. We have to maintain a hierarchy even for rape incidents. That is our job. We have to remain detached."*

She further reflected:

*"Rape or molestation is very disturbing, but in our case, we who have to write on this every day, unwillingly, unknowingly, we become immune to the sensitive aspect associated with it."*

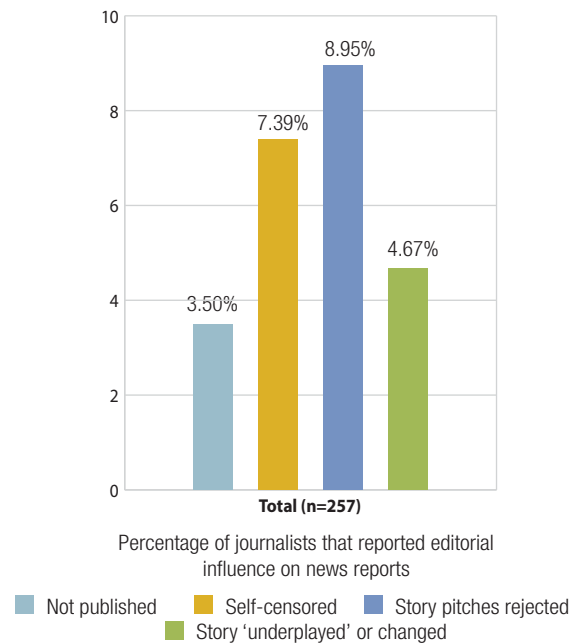
As indicated by the interviews, and also by the content analysis, print and online journalists have more scope than TV or radio to cover rape cases, even if many of these are merely spot stories. They are thus also more likely to break stories that become more 'important'. Electronic media lag behind other outlets in picking up stories due to the need to gather sound bites and visuals. Thus, electronic media tend to follow up stories that have already received news coverage, and sources for soundbites and visuals are identified. In addition, while some journalists say they cover 'all' stories, others acknowledge that they feel "desensitised" due to the sheer number of stories they come across every day, and do not see rape alone as newsworthy, resulting in a preference in coverage for extremely brutal or 'high-profile' cases.

## Editorial gatekeeping

'Editorial gatekeeping' in news publishing refers to how a report or story is processed by editors once it is pitched or filed. During this process, all, none, or some of the news content may be allowed to pass through to publication. It includes decisions to omit details, add information, revise the story, and, in some instances, to forego publishing a report altogether.

To understand the role of editorial gatekeeping vis-a-vis news about sexual violence, we queried journalists on instances where their story pitches or filed copies were changed or not published. We probed the editorial explanation (if any) given to them, in such cases. We also queried the journalists on the extent to which they self-censored.

**FIGURE 6: EXPERIENCE OF EDITORIAL GATEKEEPING**



Out of all the 257 respondents, 8.95% (n=23) said that their story pitches had been rejected, and 3.50% (n=9) said that their reports were filed but never published. Self-censorship was reported by 7.30% (n=19) of interviewees, while 4.67% (n=12) said their stories were changed or underplayed by editors. English-language reporters were more likely to note rejection at the story pitch stage, followed by Hindi and Tamil. Self-censorship was spoken about more frequently by Malayalam and Telugu journalists. Stories being 'underplayed' or changed, on the other hand, were mentioned most frequently by Punjabi, Odia, and Urdu reporters.

## Dropped stories

A range of reasons were given for why filed reports were dropped, from space constraints, to sensitivity of the subject, to consideration for the victim, to a deeming of the case as not 'high-profile' enough.

A Bengaluru-based print journalist working for a national newspaper said that it was common for stories on sexual violence to be discarded in favour of other news if there was a lack of space:

*"Most of the cases, you feel bad... They compare this with advertisements. If there's no space... if it can be replaced, they say no. Forget it. It will go as a filler. If there is*

*space to fill somewhere, it goes. If it isn't high-profile they don't even consider it."*

A Hindi TV journalist from Uttar Pradesh also mentioned the 'profile' of the victim being a key factor in whether a story was published or not:

*"This happens quite a lot of times actually. Recently, an incident took place. A girl went to a funfair in our district and when she was returning home at night, four villagers picked her up, raped her, and left her in the car. In the morning, the girl went and filed a complaint with the police. During the medical check up, she drank poison, and her health deteriorated. She was then transferred to Lucknow. We covered the story, but it was dropped. Dropped because the girl had no profile. It was election time—sometimes to not ruin the atmosphere of the election, a big story may be dropped."*

Another reporter working for a newspaper based in Srinagar said stories she had pitched and reported had been turned down "many times". Asked for the reason given, she pointed to the volatile situation that exists in Kashmir:

*"These stories are very sensitive and they can incite violence, and the editor decided not to put it out. We are in denial. We don't want to accept things. I will give you an example. I also do juvenile justice. I have worked a lot on that. So recently, a minor girl had delivered a baby... So I did a story on it and it was not published. So, yeah, such things happen."*

## Self-censorship

Reporters spoke of self-censoring for various reasons, such as concerns about the impact on the victim or with a view to 'protecting' society in some way.

A male Kerala journalist working for a print newspaper said he was reluctant to draw "unwanted" attention, among other reasons:

*"Sometimes, if no other media highlights and we are highlighting, it might draw unwanted questions and unwanted issues. In other cases, if there are other members in the family,*

*especially girls [who might be shamed], we pull back. Because they also have to live, right?"*

He added that he did not want to make stories about sexual violence seem "normal" because of their frequency and that this was a "responsible" stance to take:

*"Only in extreme cases, we put up stories. We are reluctant in giving such stories because there might be an idea that hits the public that this is a normal scenario that occurs in society frequently. A girl who is 10–14 years old might look at her own father as a predator. We are keeping a responsible position. In communication, we have the social responsibility theory just to avoid such types of stories. We believe that it is good to remove such stories rather than selling more newspapers with them."*

A Tamil print journalist based in Trichy offered a similar view, especially regarding cases of familial rape:

*"There have been times when a father rapes his daughter. We avoid those stories, keeping in mind the future of the victim."*

A print journalist working for a Hindi newspaper in UP spoke of "underplaying cases where the accused was a family member or a person in close relation":

*"Most of the cases of rape or attempts of rape are committed by people from the family or a relative itself. Maximum cases are like this. In 90% of the cases the accused is a person known to the victim, especially in the cases of minors ... Writing about all these cases affects me personally, as a reporter. I start thinking about what the people will read first thing in the morning, in their newspapers. Especially if a daughter picks up the newspaper, how will she feel? So we try to underplay it; we try to write it in brief that, okay, something has happened."*

Another journalist, based in Mumbai and working for a Marathi print publication, said he bypassed cases that did not meet his criteria for "genuine" complaints:

*"Basically, [it depends on] how genuine the case is. After so many years of experience, we know when it is. Today also, if you will see in Mumbai, two to three cases will be*

*registered of rape, in which [sexual intercourse] happened with consent but later they must have refused marriage or deceived the person about being unmarried, or they were both in a relationship. Basically, we let such cases go. There's no burden that you must do those."*

A journalist based in Hyderabad and working for a Telugu TV channel admitted that her own feelings of distress occasionally influenced her decision to cover a story or not:

*"Sometimes, I turn down [a story] because it is really getting to me. It's really, you know, heartbreaking all the time. So sometimes I prefer not to do [such stories] because I keep talking about these things all the time in my television program. I did a lot of talk shows on child sexual abuse... sometimes it's me who feels, 'Let's not do it this time'."*

## Rejected story pitches

Story pitches were rejected for a multitude of reasons, from a general aversion to publishing reports on sexual violence to editorial concerns about evidence to back proposed stories.

A TV journalist based in Lucknow said:

*"Many-a-times it has happened in cases of rape and sexual assault. When you report such cases or incidents, there are many aspects involved. Many-a-times we are told that we will not be showing that in the larger interest of the society."*

A New Delhi-based reporter working for a wire service provided an example:

*"I wanted to report on a case of sodomy of a 7-year-old boy. That time I was denied. I was told that this is too sensitive, don't report it."*

A Hyderabad-based female print journalist spoke of her organisation's aversion to sexual violence stories as a reason for pitch rejection.

*"Being in Telugu culture, we are supposed to cover stories about successful women, successful entrepreneurs. Those kinds of stories we are supposed to cover and write on our pages. So, when we approach*

*our editor or in-charge, like, 'Sir, we want to write these kinds of stories, interview her [victim],' they tell us, 'Who will read this news? Nobody wants to read a rape victim's case or those kinds of things in the newspaper when they wake up early in the morning.' That's the approach here."*

Several reporters also spoke of incidents where their pitches did not go forward because the editors were not sure they had enough access, or were doubtful about being able to find evidence to support allegations. A reporter from Kerala said that in her experience the usual reasons for rejected pitches on sexual violence were either that the story was weak or lacked corroborating evidence, although in some cases, she said, the editors "also mention that there might be a backfire" on the publication.

Quite often, pitches were rejected because an FIR had not been filed. Several reporters spoke of coming to know of rape incidents and approaching their editors, only to be advised to wait for the FIR to be filed before going ahead with a story.

## Underplaying of rape cases

The rationale given for underplaying rape stories was either external pressures, political factors, or the stance (as described in the section on self-censorship) that society needed to be spared further grief, caused particularly by cases of familial rape.

A Bengali print journalist highlighted political affiliations as a significant factor in how a story might be treated:

*"Various media houses treat the same story differently. Say, if a Trinamool Congress leader is involved, a pro-BJP newspaper will flash it all over the frontpage. And again, if the offender is [from the] BJP, then the same newspaper may do the story in an inside page and in a small way. Maybe the incident itself will not be suppressed but it will be given less importance."*

A newspaper reporter from Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir said that sometimes direct intervention from some sort of authority influenced how stories were published:

*“Sometimes, [there are] calls from the government, police, or the army to downplay a particular story. This doesn’t happen only cases of rape, but also other cases.”*

A journalist, who has served as the editor of a Punjabi newspaper, spoke of “softening these stories a lot” to avoid legal action. He said:

*“The newspaper owners are scared of one thing the most... legal action taken against them. The second thing is relationships. In Punjab, most of the newspapers have some political [connection] as well. I can’t let that particular party be defamed or something like that, so these things are there.”*

### Newsgathering challenges

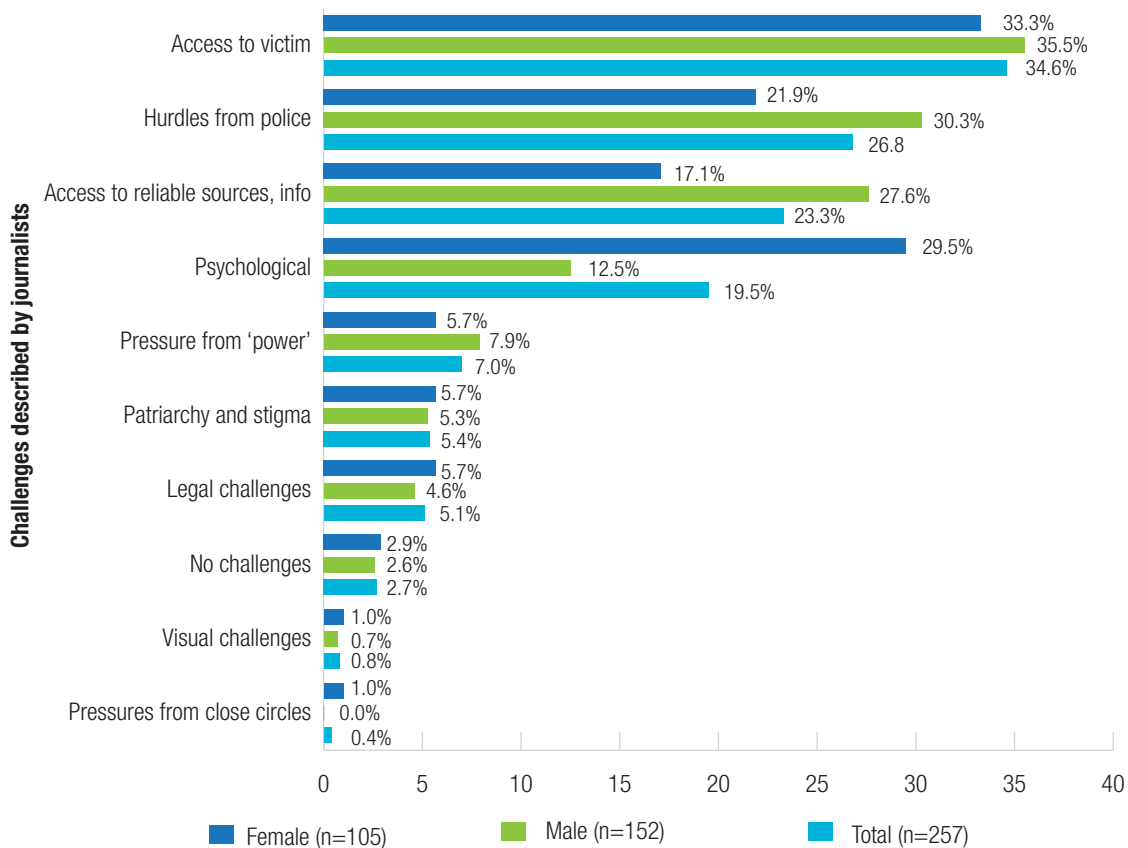
Reporting on sexual violence comes with specific issues, such as the need to safeguard victims’

privacy. In India, it is also a subject that is often shrouded in shame and secrecy. We asked journalists about the challenges they faced while gathering information for reports on sexual violence. Overall, the obstacles cited most were those of access, both to victims and other sources. Next were hurdles from the police, mentioned by more than a quarter of respondents, followed by psychological difficulties while reporting on gender violence. A small percentage said they faced no challenges at all.

### Access to victims and other key sources

Some 35% (n=89) of respondents cited lack of access to victims as a hurdle. This was not unexpected considering the trauma suffered by victims, but reporters mentioned other reasons as well. External reasons included obstruction from the victim’s family and/or acquaintances, and internal obstacles included reticence on the part of the reporter either due to a need to be

**FIGURE 7: NEWSGATHERING CHALLENGES**



“

How do you talk to a rape survivor, in a society like ours? How do you say, ‘How were you raped?’ I have always faced problems speaking to a survivor. Because I don’t know where to draw the line.

”



sensitive to victims or because they felt ill-equipped, due to a lack of training, to interview them.

Several journalists mentioned that it was not possible to push victims to speak out until they were ready. A New Delhi-based online journalist, for instance, said:

*"It's really hard to go and convince women to [speak]. You're talking about people's experiences that have traumatised them and possibly altered their lives forever. You cannot possibly force them to tell their story when you want the story."*

Some reporters are reluctant to speak to victims because of their own 'sensitivities', feelings of inadequacy, or lack of training. A Mumbai-based crime reporter for a national daily, spoke of this:

*"See, at some level I would want to speak to the victims themselves, but I also know it's too much to ask from anybody who's gone through that."*

Another New Delhi-based journalist spoke further, focusing on his feelings of uncertainty and confusion about speaking to survivors:

*"So how do you talk to a rape survivor, in a society like ours? If you want to get the story from the horse's mouth, how will you talk to the rape survivor? How do you say, 'How were you raped?' I have always faced problems speaking to a survivor. Because I don't know where to draw the line. I don't know. We do hold some sensitisation courses. I think just about two months ago there was a gender-sensitisation course and some other similar workshops. But still... I mean, when I go to the field it sometimes becomes difficult."*

A woman journalist, also working for an online publication based in New Delhi, and who has got several survivors to open up, spoke of the time it takes to 'cultivate' or convince such sources to be interviewed:

*"Talking to victims is the biggest challenge. We spend days and months with them till they get comfortable talking to us. The victims are not in a condition to talk to us after what has happened to them. Even the family is not in a condition after such a*

*traumatic incident so you can't force them to talk to you. So it takes a lot of time."*

A more serious concern was the potential to cause the victim further harm. A Gujarati-language journalist based in Ahmedabad said:

*"Nobody wants to talk about it too soon. Even if someone has reported or complained, the victim and the people around her, the family, are not ready to talk, as they are scared. We are also in a position where we don't want to rush into things and harm someone."*

A reporter from the North-East, who worked for a national publication, spoke of a specific case illustrating how journalists can at times endanger the safety of victims. He too was threatened and "had to "change my hotel overnight and "seek police protection" in connection with a case:

*"It sounds exciting, but it is not because you are constantly thinking if you will be able to go home or not. [I have to think about] my safety and the safety of the source. I may escape through any means but what about the person who is living there? It has happened. For an interview, one of the sources, she was threatened, and she called me up later and said, 'Do not write about me!'"*

He spoke of another incident where his presence had endangered a victim, but where he was also required to help:

*"In one of the cases, I went to a village in a very remote area ... [T]his mother, she took me to her room and she told me, 'Just leave as soon as possible, because if someone sees you with me, they will beat me up and my daughter will not be able to return'. The neighbours were involved in trafficking her daughter. She was desperately waiting to see her daughter back and she also told me that I should do something."*

He elaborated on how many parents and guardians had asked him to "do something", but that there was a need to take the responsibility seriously and to tread cautiously:

*"For a mother, losing a child... I remember one Boro lady telling me, 'Bring back my*

*daughter, bring back my daughter.’ She wrote her number on a piece of paper and she gave it to me, saying no one should know that I gave you the number, I just need my daughter back. So, I have to be very cautious while reporting and representing their stories to the world. I may get recognition after the story, but if there is no outcome, the person suffering does not get any help, I think my journalism has then failed.”*

Several other reporters also mentioned that their attempts to “go out to help out the victim” were not received as such:

*“The affected party will shower all their anger on us reporters. They will scold us. They will not know that we are writing for their benefit, and we won’t be descriptive about it. So they will look at us in a bad light. Sometimes they will assault us also. We don’t have a choice and that happens.”*

Some journalists found that their access to the victim was occasionally blocked by external parties. A journalist working for a Bengali newspaper said it was not uncommon to get resistance from people who wanted to suppress negative news coverage of their area or to protect the accused:

*“Some occasions, the victim and her family want to talk. We too are there to initiate a conversation. But some third person arrives and starts shouting against the media and calls out others to clear the area and starts pushing and shoving. Local goons or politicians also try and suppress these incidents. Sometimes we overcome them with the help of police and in some cases, we can’t overcome them.”*

The woman online journalist quoted earlier in this section also spoke of pressures to “suppress” coverage:

*“[T]he people in that area where the incident has happened, they will try to suppress this. The accused or his family can threaten you. How you handle that is very important, because if you are working on this, then you can’t just back off because the organisation that you are working for will also*

*pressurise you to get the news. So at that point you have to work very cautiously.”*

Many respondents (23.4%, n=60) further spoke of difficulties when dealing with other sources who could shed light on a case, such as family members, neighbours, and so on. As a Pune-based journalist said, “The problem is that in these incidents nobody wants to come forward”. Another journalist spoke of hostile responses from those close to the victim and “being on the receiving end of their anger”. A journalist in Bengaluru also said that other sources involved with the case, including doctors, sometimes try to “protect the victim” by “withholding... complete information”.

### Hurdles from police

Hurdles from police is the next biggest category overall, with some 27% (n=69) citing it as an issue. A number of reporters across all regions mentioned the police “as the biggest hurdle” to not just journalists reporting on rape but to victims reporting rape to authorities. Well over a quarter of respondents from all regions, with the exception of Central and North-East India, said the police made it more difficult for them to do their work by either holding back information (sometimes for ‘valid’ reasons) or actively trying to suppress coverage.

Notably, problems with the police were cited more frequently by men journalists (30.3%, n=46) than women (21.9%, n=23), although several women journalists pointed out that they encountered gender bias when engaging with law enforcement.

Many reporters spoke of how the police “mostly don’t cooperate” with the media. An online journalist from Karnataka said, “Police will try to hush up the case. They will not give any details”. A Bengaluru-based crime reporter for a national daily spoke of how this sometimes led to factual inaccuracies:

*“We are under pressure to give some details. [But] the police are not willing to share details, even basic details.. We don’t want much details. Just when it happened, where it happened, such details. When they won’t share even these details and we are under pressure to report it, there will be some mis-reporting in some cases.”*

TABLE 8: NEWSGATHERING CHALLENGES (BY REGION)

Newsgathering challenge	New Delhi (n=29)	West (n=31)	South (n=96)	North (n=35)	Central (n=24)	East (n=29)	North East (n=13)	Total (n=257)
Access to victim	48.3%	38.7%	26.0%	34.3%	25.0%	58.6%	23.1%	34.6%
Hurdles from police	31.0%	25.8%	28.1%	28.6%	20.8%	31.0%	7.7%	26.9%
Access to reliable sources, info	17.2%	25.8%	27.1%	31.4%	20.8%	6.9%	23.1%	23.4%
Psychological	44.8%	19.4%	14.6%	11.4%	12.5%	27.6%	15.4%	19.5%
Pressure from 'power'	3.5%	3.2%	6.3%	5.7%	8.3%	17.2%	7.7%	7.0%
Patriarchy and stigma	10.3%	9.7%	4.2%	0.0%	8.3%	0.0%	15.4%	5.5%
Legal challenges	3.5%	9.7%	5.2%	5.7%	4.2%	0.0%	7.7%	5.1%
No challenges	0.0%	0.0%	5.2%	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	7.7%	2.7%
Visual challenges	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
Pressures from close circles	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%

It is a particularly frustrating situation for journalists since information on sexual violence cases is not made available on police websites. A New Delhi-based journalist spoke of this difficulty in accessing basic documentation to help with reporting.

*“So, first of all, it is very difficult to get hold of the documents—especially the FIR. A lot of FIRs are uploaded on the site, except for rape cases and cases related to minors. So if it’s a case like that, you cannot find it on the police website.”*

While many complaints from reporters centred on the police being guarded with information and sharing only basic details, others spoke of instances where they felt the police were deliberately non-cooperative. A journalist working for an Urdu newspaper in Uttar Pradesh alleged that the police sometimes purposely misled the media. “Many times the information given to us is incorrect”, he said. “We really have to dig deep to get the information. Police plant wrong information.”

Reporters also spoke of the police actively trying to cover up sexual violence cases because “sometimes police would have taken money from parties”. A Bengaluru-based online journalist expanded, “Say the accused is some big shot, then the police will not be so cooperative”.

The behaviour of the police also came up, particularly their “rudeness” and unapproachability when asked for information. A Punjabi journalist elaborated on his experience with police rudeness:

*“[T]he policemen talk in a very impolite way. Not just with the reporter, but with everybody. They keep abusing and if someone asks them something then they start abusing again.”*

Several women journalists brought up that they are often treated differently by the police on account of their gender. A reporter who works for a news agency in New Delhi said:

*“A lot of the time, they don’t talk to you properly unless there is a male colleague with you. And even when they do, I would ask them something and they would look at my colleague and answer. That happens a lot.”*

Another journalist, based in Bengaluru, expanded on how the gender bias among many police officers adds a layer of hard work for female reporters:

*“[T]here are certain police stations where the officers don’t talk to women. So it’s really so challenging to get them to talk. You have to talk to them like... you’re not really very rude, you’re not very nice either. There’s a middle*



*ground which you have to find to talk to them. Because you have to be assertive and at the same you have to try not to piss them off."*

A female journalist who works for a national publication and has travelled across the North-East states to report on sexual violence underlined how her gender and her status as an 'outsider' made it especially difficult to navigate contact with the police. She described how the police were not hesitant to detain troublesome journalists from outside, sometimes "ransacking where you are staying" and/or confiscating equipment:

*"It happens many times. Police do it with journalists. They take their cameras and everything. When you are a girl, you have to be doubly careful and travel with so much precaution. I had to wear their clothes to blend in with the locals, no cars, stay on foot..."*

While the tension between journalists wanting information and the uncooperative police was a recurring theme, a small section of respondents acknowledged that the police might be economical with details for valid reasons. A broadcast journalist for a Marathi news channel said the media's reputation for sensationalism played into the police's tight-lipped stance:

*"Sometimes the cases are very sensational, so many times the police don't want the media to show the case in a certain way. This makes them reserve some information because of the way the media reports these days."*

A print journalist from Bhubaneswar added:

*"In some cases, the police maintain secrecy and say 'further investigation is going on'. There is a standard guideline that says the dignity of the victim should be protected. So from the police's side, they keep [that] secrecy."*

Overall, many respondents described the relationship between the media and the police as one characterised by mutual mistrust. While some described experiencing rudeness, ethical misconduct, and gender bias on the part of the police, others acknowledged that the nature of sexual violence cases necessitated circumspection from investigators and that they had to find ways

to work around this. Some police officials also did not seem to see any 'value' in media coverage and perceived journalists as being out only for a 'sensational' story, and thus did not cooperate.

## Psychological challenges

Overall, nearly 20% (n=50) of respondents mentioned experiencing psychological challenges while reporting on sexual violence. This factor was more pronounced among female journalists (29.5%, n=31) than men (12.5%, n=19). Journalists from New Delhi (nearly 45%, n=13) were most likely to experience emotional difficulties, followed by those from the East (about 27%, n=8).

Male journalists spoke about feeling "extremely bad", "very uncomfortable", and emotional during their interactions with victims and relatives, and that this impacted their newsgathering. A seasoned crime reporter for a Marathi daily said:

*"In rape cases there is an emotional touch for us as well. We feel bad that such a thing should happen to these girls... It gets tough to write. While writing you're like, how do I write on this? While writing, it feels really bad! But our field is like this. Whatever tragedy happens we must write and share it with people."*

Another reporter from Kerala spoke of how a particular incident affected him even though he believed he had to rise above emotions to do his job:

*"When this Thodupuzha incident [involving a child] happened... I am also a father of a five-year-old, so I got emotionally connected... But reporters should not empathetically connect to the victims or the accused, whoever it may be. They should not be so emotional. Some people cry, you know. That even happens to me also. But that is something that we should never do while reporting. This is our job."*

A crime reporter working for a Tamil daily said cases involving children affected him particularly hard:

*"I cannot go home and eat. Physically and mentally, it affects me. If a burglary happens... there are options to improve safety. But there are no options in rape cases. What can a child do if she is being overpowered?"*

*Stories like these affect me. So I look for twists, clues... that can aid the police."*

Women's reactions were similar, but tended to be more visceral (feeling "traumatised", for instance) and coloured by their own gendered experiences. Some were so personally impacted that it affected their newsgathering. An experienced journalist who has worked for a variety of publications in English and Gujarati, spoke of how reporting on rape and sexual violence cases was "emotionally exhausting" and could be "torture" for the victim as well:

*"I would start crying when hearing the story in my early days. It is challenging... because, how do you ask her for details? Why should you ask and give her more... torture? As it is, the police have already tortured her by asking irrelevant questions."*

Several women reporters recounted how they were more powerfully affected by rape cases earlier in their careers. A reporter based in New Delhi said experience had numbed her to the trauma:

*"As a woman, you relate to it. I remember this case... When she was describing what these men had done to her, it almost felt like it was happening to me. And now, I think we have come to a point where it is so normalised. When I started out to report these cases initially, I remember feeling so traumatised and shaken for a few days after submitting the story. Now that's not there, but I can't say that I am completely objective while reporting it."*

An online journalist based in Kolkata described how writing about sexual violence when she was still "untrained" affected her professional performance:

*"When I started as a 22-year-old, my mind was untrained. When I had to write a story of rape, molestation, or child abuse it would affect me so deeply that I would continue making mistakes in my next 10 stories. It was then that I decided to seek counselling. I had to take medicines."*

Asked if the emotional impact is more manageable now that she has more experience, she said she still found it disturbing to report on sexual violence, but no longer let her feelings affect her work:

*"Like a machine I gather information and try to use sharp language and write—just as I would do for any other story. But after going to bed, it affects me. But it is my personal problem. It does not affect my job."*

A journalist in New Delhi spoke of seeking out stories on sexual violence because she believed in the importance of telling them despite the deep psychological impact this work had on her:

*"I am usually not well for a few days. There was this woman who was telling me about what happened to her and all throughout, I was cringing and it felt like they were doing it to her. It drains you out. So a lot of times in my office they are like, she is the tragedy queen because she is only looking at the stories of grief and tragedy. I know that they need to be told, but after a point it just gets you and you don't know how to deal with it."*

This journalist was not a crime reporter, but someone who followed up for deeper stories. She spoke further of the dilemma she faced in the field, even while reporting:

*"Every time I talk to a woman, they are like, is this going to get me justice? And then you are in that ethical dilemma. Because for you it's a job. She will probably have to retell the story to every other reporter who comes to her. The problem with me is even more as I go after a while, so I don't know if she has coped with it or moved on a little. So it's more difficult, because I am trying to make her relive the memory. As journalists you are told to be objective and corroborate, but how do I do that in cases of rape?"*

A TV journalist from Kerala spoke of the challenges faced by broadcasters because of the particular demands of visual media:

*"Rape cases always emotionalise us. Especially in visual media. It affects us so much... We have to have mental preparation to overcome what we see. Visually, we have to see and hear everything. The masking happens only afterwards. Then when we*

*are reading [news], this comes to our mind. With this challenge, we have to read news.”*

## Sexual harassment and abuse in newsrooms

The sexual violence-related trauma experienced by journalists at the workplace was, unfortunately, not always vicarious. We queried all respondents about the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence at media workplaces in India. Our interviews, which began in September 2018, coincided with the start of the #MeTooIndia movement. In all, this issue was also discussed by 190 interviewees, of which 45% were women and 55% men.

Overall, 55% (n=58) of the women journalists we interviewed about this said they had directly experienced or witnessed workplace sexual harassment or violence, typically perpetrated by someone who wielded power through seniority or a supervisory role. These respondents described a range of offences, running the gamut from sexual assault and molestation, to unwanted touches, kisses, or advances.

One woman journalist described how she “was assaulted by my own editor”. According to her, the work environment for women journalists in India was “pretty unsafe” and that her ordeal made it “indescribably hard” for her to report at that point of time. Her distress was compounded by the fact that many people in her organisation took the side of the editor after she registered a complaint.

This was a common pattern we found with those describing personal experiences: the reporting of offences often polarised people in the workplace, with some taking the ‘side’ of the accused and the others backing the accuser. Problematic responses from colleagues included expressing doubts about the complainant’s accusations, minimising the gravity of the allegations, or choosing to turn a blind eye so as to not upset working relationships.

Non-physical sexual harassment was even more prevalent, with respondents describing unwanted behaviour such as inappropriate comments from male colleagues about the appearance or behaviour of women journalists. Some journalists described isolated incidents, while others said they experienced prolonged patterns of systematic

abuse and coercive behaviour by superiors. A New Delhi-based journalist from a Hindi publication, for instance, said that her editor subjected her to a campaign of verbal sexual harassment:

*“My editor, he started stalking me and started sending messages, calling me, saying all kinds of things, making me sit in the cabin the entire day and saying things about my body and making very sexist remarks.”*

Despite such behaviour being clearly unwanted, interviewees often described how the journalism work culture had normalised these interactions—to the point they became accepted as a troublesome but unavoidable part of the everyday lived reality of women journalists. Consequently, we found that in our interviews, women often described harassment ‘accidentally’, and did not always peg the behaviour as predatory or unacceptable. This was a theme that arose during the #MeTooIndia movement as well—prompted by the revelations of others, some journalists recognised only in hindsight that they had been subjected to sexual abuse and harassment. However, this is not to imply that these incidents did not have a deleterious impact on those who did not recognise the gravity of what had happened to them. Many felt traumatised but questioned their own judgment and reactions because harassment was so normalised and deeply woven into the fabric of newsroom interactions.

We found evidence to support that journalists experienced severe mental distress, both as a consequence of physical abuse and other forms of coercive behaviour that created a hostile work environment for them. Some journalists would go to significant lengths to avoid advances or potential abuse from colleagues, which sometimes caused them to change their patterns of behaviour in their private lives as well. A journalist from the North-East described how she arranged to be picked up from work by male friends out of fear of her superior:

*“I felt so harassed mentally, I would break down in office because he would shout at me in front of everyone. I got so depressed that I felt that when I was staying late at office, he may rape me. Oh god! I felt so scared that he would molest me or rape me.”*

While our study focused on journalists currently working in the news industry, we know from

experiences shared through the #MeTooIndia movement that many women left the profession as a consequence of harassment or assault. Our interviews also revealed some examples of this, where respondents described moving from one news organisation to another, or spoke about friends who had quit the profession entirely.

While these issues were found across India, some interviewees described regional newsroom challenges as greater than those in metropolitan media organisations—ranging from sexual harassment to professional marginalisation due to patriarchal cultures. Other journalists described being abused or harassed even after they resigned because of ‘toxic’ working conditions. They also spoke of the lack of repercussions for male journalists, who continued to work in the same place, thus contributing to a hostile environment by their very presence. This lack of consequence for perpetrators was also a common theme in the #MeTooIndia campaign, and was often described in online debates and panel discussions organised around the issue.

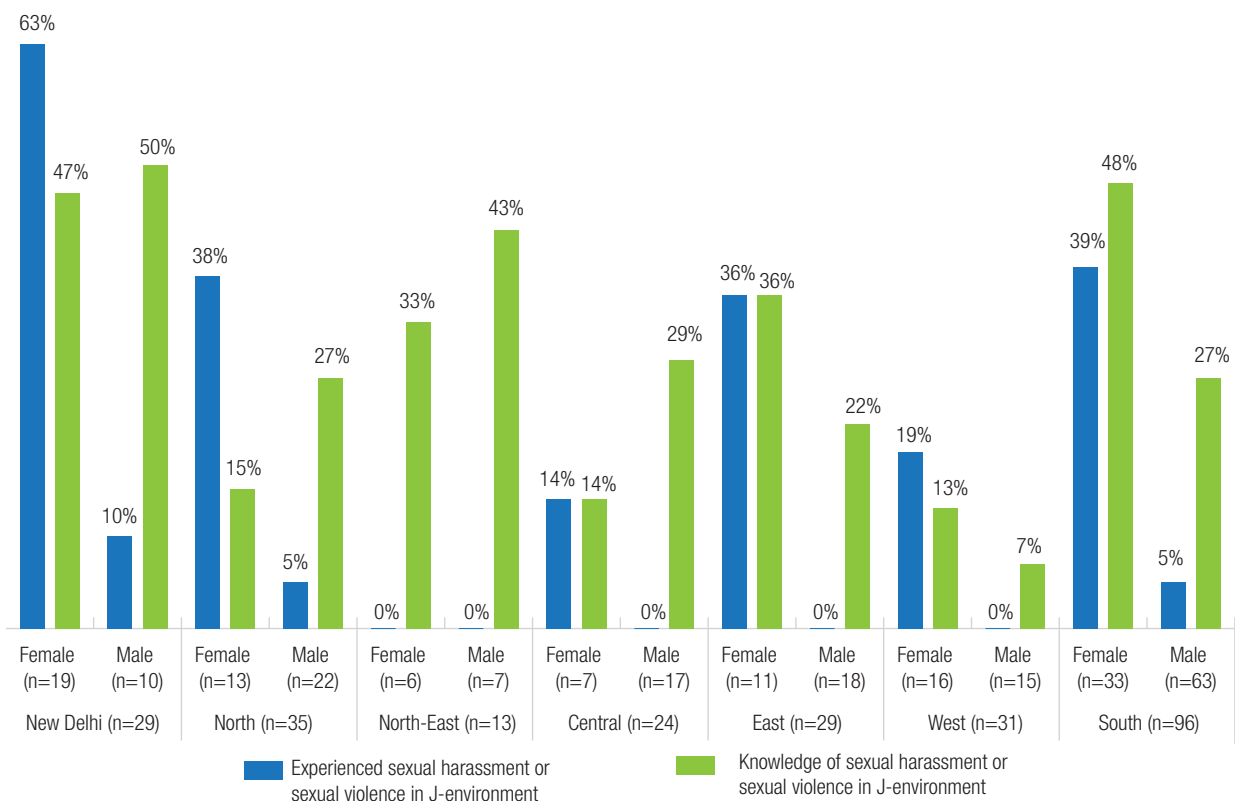
**Safety of journalists in the field**

Newswork frequently involves going out on the field and engaging with a variety of sources. These points of interaction may on occasion heighten vulnerabilities or pose risks to journalists, including the possibility of sexual harassment or violence. Thus, we queried journalists about their experiences on the field, i.e. the working conditions outside newsrooms. We found that sexual harassment in the field was often described as more prevalent than in the newsroom, and an almost expected condition of being a journalist. A print journalist from Chandigarh, for instance, said she had been subjected to sexual harassment more times than she could count:

*“In the field, I have lost count. It happens so many times in a day when you are on the field... In the organisation, touchwood, nothing as such. Field reporter, too many times.”*

We identified three areas where women journalists are particularly vulnerable during news-gathering. Firstly, ‘incidental’ abuse by passers-by, often “drunken

**FIGURE 8: EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT / VIOLENCE IN JOURNALISM ENVIRONMENT**



guys”, shouting demeaning or sexualised comments at reporters. Here it is unclear if the harassment is targeting the journalist because of their profession, or because of their gender. One television reporter from the state of Karnataka described both scenarios:

*“When I am on the field, the drunken guys will irritate us, wherever we go. Or boys on two-wheelers or bikes, they will shout on us. They will put some kind of vulgar words towards us.”*

Secondly, journalists described their interactions with police officers as potential events for harassment. “A criminal has never made me feel as uncomfortable as a police officer makes you feel”, noted a woman Gujarati print journalist. This journalist, as also several others, described changing their behaviour and dress code when working in these spaces.

Police stations were also described as potentially unsafe for people who were arrested. A male print journalist in Tamil Nadu, for example, described the arrest of a teenager on suspicion of stealing a mobile phone and how “the police themselves sexually harassed him, around three–four men”. While incidents such as these did not directly involve the reporter (indeed the journalist described doing a subsequent sting to uncover the abuse), they reinforced that journalists may often encounter hostile environments during the course of their work.

The third area of challenge for women journalists in the field related to dealing with elite sources, such as politicians, public officials, senior civil servants, and celebrities—fairly routine interactions for many journalists. Here journalists described some sources as behaving unprofessionally, at times making advances, with a sense of entitlement—either by talking or acting in a derogatory manner towards them. This included people who themselves held senior positions, as well as those who had connections with people in senior positions. A New Delhi-based online journalist described an encounter as follows:

*“Yeah, and this was a very senior bureaucrat. People with high, like, political connections. I ignored it the first time, I thought I heard it [wrong]. That’s what women do right, but he said it again so that I hear it.”*

For women journalists, this creates a duality of professional pressures. In the newsroom, they

potentially jeopardise their career progression (or even employment) by rejecting the advances of superiors. And in the field, by rejecting overtures made by their sources, they may miss out on key aspects of stories, which in turn may affect their career. These pressures have historically meant a degree of self-censorship from women about the conditions they endure, both in the workplace and the field.

## Other challenges

A few journalists mentioned other hindrances to reporting, although the numbers were low. These included pressure exerted implicitly or explicitly by ‘powerful’ people such as politicians to not report on certain cases and legal challenges. A handful of journalists mentioned the impact of patriarchy and social stigma, not only in terms of the perception and treatment of female reporters, but on how sources and victims respond to questions on sexual violence (for instance, some victims are afraid to speak up because they fear social censure). A very small number of journalists mentioned challenges centred on how to represent rape or what footage to show in the visual media.

## Investigations

Our content analysis had indicated that in-depth exploration of sexual violence cases was rare. Most stories were spot news, not extending beyond basic information. As elaborated earlier, there was a heavy reliance on FIRs for information and a tendency for many cases to be written off as not ‘remarkable’ enough for significant coverage. Nonetheless, in order to further understand patterns of reporting, we probed to see if there were occasions in which journalists undertook investigations into sexual violence cases.

Out of 121 respondents who spoke of this, a little over 74% (n=90) indicated they did not undertake investigations or in-depth reportage of sexual violence incidents. Many spoke of verifying the story—of doing ‘spot checks’, and speaking to the police and relatives. But beyond the routinised practices of authentication of information, this was not an area into which journalists, including crime reporters, ventured. The rest indicated that

such investigations were highly uncommon and they undertook deep reportage rarely, if ever.

Not surprisingly, the most prevalent reason for not undertaking investigations were legal sensitivities— as a radio journalist based in Chennai put it:

*“We take only what the court says. Because it is a legal issue... We are governed by a code. That code does not allow us to investigate. We don’t do investigations.”*

A Mumbai-based journalist working for a Marathi newspaper believed that delving too deeply could result in legal challenges and adversely impact victims and their families:

*“Rape is a very sensitive topic, so writing [about it] is a big challenge. The victim’s name cannot be revealed even by mistake. The facts [that would identify the victim] shouldn’t be there. The family’s facts should not be there, so that no one bothers them. So all of this exists in rape cases. Even if we want to investigate, we can’t after a certain point.”*

A similar explanation was provided by a print journalist in Jammu and Kashmir:

*“Almost all crime-related stories require investigation [but] in rape stories a woman is involved, and no journalist would want to defame a woman... That would harass her unnecessarily.”*

According to a regional print journalist from Kerala, journalistic investigations were not needed unless the police were derelict in their duties:

*“The scope for investigating such rape cases is less. The police investigate cases properly, the cases that are reported. When the police are trying to protect the culprit, that is the time where we have to do investigative journalism. In most of the cases, that is not necessary in Kerala.”*

A journalist who worked for a Punjabi newspaper spoke of not undertaking investigations himself, but of sharing information with the police to assist them in their work:

*“I have given leads to the police ... There was this girl whose maternal uncle had raped her*

*and had made her pregnant. So initially the police arrested the uncle on the [accusation] of the girl, but when the DNA of the child was [compared] with the uncle, then it didn’t match. But the DNA instead matched with another uncle of that girl. We gave that lead to take the sample of the other uncle.”*

A small number of journalists spoke of undertaking investigations, albeit rarely. A crime reporter for a national English newspaper said:

*“Presently I am doing one. This is not a new case. You might have heard of it. A girl was raped and murdered. Presently I am doing an investigation and have brought many things to light [about the] accused, the court proceeding, and investigations. The thing is that the case has been given to the CBI now.”*

A journalist based in the Kashmir valley spoke of a case where he tried to investigate, but failed to make any headway:

*“We tried so hard to identify the perpetrators of the double murder and rape case of Asiya and Neelofar in 2009 [in Shopian], but we failed. The case was clouded by so many police technicalities. It went to the crime branch also, but still the charge sheet is nowhere. We tried to connect the dots and see why a policeman was there, among other things. You know, in cases like this, it is very hard to find an eyewitness.”*

A broadcast journalist spoke of helping to uncover a paedophile gang that operated out of houseboats in Alleppey, in Kerala.

*“[W]e got this information from a lady who was staying there, near the boat jetty. She [told us] there was something suspicious happening near her house. So many boys, small boys, are coming and they are staying there. We enquired ... and we got clear information, we got video visuals. Soon after the story, there was a raid... the boys were used as sexual slaves actually.”*

In Chennai, a broadcast journalist working for a Tamil channel described how he worked with an activist to

gather evidence of a child rape case from a 14-year-old victim who had been placed in a welfare home.

*“To go and talk to her, we had to complete a lot of formalities. We had gone under the guise that the child was a relative of ours. She had not spoken to anyone since she came to the home. She looked terrified. We approached her very patiently. We tried to make her understand that if she reveals what had happened to her, this will help in preventing any other child from facing the same thing. Only after this she opened up and started crying. We recorded everything. The person who had come with me was a child welfare activist.”*

He explained that the victim was originally from Andhra Pradesh and had been in the care of extended relatives until she turned 11, when she was sent to Kilpauk in Chennai to work in a businessman’s house. Her employer almost immediately started to sexually harass her by showing her inappropriate video content, among other things. This, said the journalist, continued for three years:

*“The girl couldn’t tell anyone because she has no one... she was harassed with no humanity. Then this was found out by the gardener who was working in their house. He approached child welfare and only after that, this incident came out in the open. We registered a complaint and showed this recorded evidence and made sure he [the businessman] got arrested.”*

While there were some heartening incidents—such as the ones in Alleppey and Chennai described above—where journalists investigated cases even without an FIR, this was far from the norm. Most journalists said they only considered cases for which police reports had been filed and anything else was outside their purview. This trend was prevalent across all languages, although Tamil journalists appeared to be the least likely to investigate. A Chennai-based reporter for a Tamil TV channel echoed the stance of many journalists when he said, “We cannot do such things in cases related to rape and sexual violence. Apart from the police, nobody should be involved in it”.

## Following up cases

A frequent criticism of the news reporting on sexual violence is that cases are rarely followed up. We queried respondents about their practices regarding follow-ups. Overall, more journalists than we might have expected said they continued to cover cases after the initial story: 47% (n=122) said they selectively followed up, while 39% (n=99) said they usually did so. However, some journalists acknowledged that follow-ups of sexual violence cases were not the norm.

A Chennai-based crime reporter said that his organisation did not follow up rape and sexual violence stories, in general, as much as “we follow up other cases”. A Lucknow-based news editor of a regional newspaper provided insights into how his organisation handled follow-ups:

*“I would say 80% of the [time], follow-up doesn’t take place in these cases. The remaining 20% are those cases which are high-profile, or the cases where reporters have a personal interest. Then the follow up will be done.”*

The main parameters cited by journalists for warranting follow-ups were the profile of the victim and the brutality of the crime—or, as a TV journalist in Mumbai said, “if the case is very sensational”.

A crime reporter from Tamil Nadu spoke of this:

*“The rape of [an upper class] woman by a security guard, that will make headlines. That’s the type of case you will follow right up to the end, especially if they [victims] are born to a bureaucrat, or they are influential people.”*

How ‘common’ or ‘unusual’ the victim or crime were perceived to be was another factor. A TV journalist working for a national channel in New Delhi expanded:

*“[A] foreign national woman gang-raped in the national capital... something like this is worth following up. But if you’re talking about... if it’s a general thing, you know, this man laced my drink with sedatives and raped me, we might report it, but we wouldn’t follow it up because it is something which is really common.”*

A Lucknow-based reporter working for a Hindi broadcast channel said follow-ups are limited to big cases, especially if they are “brutal”:

*“Then we definitely follow up. What happened in court, what investigations are happening, whoever has [been] accused... and the criminal, have they been arrested or not, what are the next processes, how is this case being built, how strong are the medical reports...”*

Those who said they usually followed up appeared to be more process-driven in how they kept track of cases and approached their coverage.

A Bengaluru-based crime reporter explained the “three-step” basis on which he covered and followed up a crime story. Once the incident was reported on, the next follow-up point would be the arrest, which, in some cases, “will happen immediately after the incident” or may “take months”. The next point for coverage, he said, would be when the police filed the chargesheet.

The bureau chief of a TV channel in Andhra Pradesh mentioned keeping track of rape cases for several months:

*“We usually follow stories for three to four months. If five rapes happen in a week, then the case won’t end soon. We will have to look at it for three to four months and get stories.”*

However, he said that the coverage was also contingent on factors such as the age of the victim, police involvement, and the “security” angle. He explained:

*“Suppose there are two cases here, and two in Vijayawada, then we will look at all evidence, and see what the police are giving importance to. Based on all that we follow up, report, and publish. We review every three to six months about the increase in the crime regularly.”*

Another print journalist working for a Kannada newspaper said he went “back to the files a month later”:

*“We ask the police and the NGOs handling the case for updates. We find out if the victim has been provided justice—in terms of punishment for the perpetrator, or compensation for the victim, or both.”*

A TV journalist from the same state added that he made an effort to follow up any story “to its logical end”.

*“Every case, especially crime, has a logical end... the accused will get arrested, he is produced in the court, or first he’ll be taken into police custody. More information will be produced to the court. Then it goes on: the police file a chargesheet. Finally, he may be convicted or let out. Till then, the crime reporter will be following up. And then if it goes to court, the court correspondent will be following it up.”*

This was more true of ‘big’ incidents, he acknowledged. A similar view was expressed by a crime reporter based in Tamil Nadu, who said his organisation usually followed up until the accused was arrested, but if the “case is very sensitive” it would be covered until a court judgment.

A New Delhi-based woman journalist added to this, speaking of the incidents that do not get followed up:

*“The ones that slip through are the ones that are sadly forgotten. These are the ones that are not high profile, and [the cases that are] not known for their brutality.”*

An Urdu journalist from Uttar Pradesh spoke more of this: “Follow-up dies after a certain limit. After two or three times neither the reporter nor the editor is able to do the follow up.”

## Sourcing stories

The sources used by journalists, to a significant extent, determine how the news gets portrayed. Sources may include victims, perpetrators, police, medical and legal experts, eyewitnesses, NGOs, and so on, and each of these may have an impact in how a report is framed and then received by the public. We queried reporters on the range of sources they routinely used for news stories about sexual violence.

Just over half of the interviewees spoke of the police as their primary source of information. This was expected—as described earlier, reporters rely heavily on police reports for their crime stories, and as one journalist put it, “the station police officer has the most information”. However, overall, women journalists were less inclined than men to approach the police, with several reporting they did not “trust” them as a source.

After the police, journalists reported reaching out to a variety of other sources, such as advocacy groups



and NGOs, lawyers and court officials, and witnesses and bystanders. A smaller number described victims as a source, after an FIR had been filed. Medical personnel and perpetrators were also mentioned, as well as secondary sources such as other news media.

Interestingly, many journalists were not specific about the sources they used (many said that “everything” could be a source), indicating that they employed an ad hoc rather than systematic approach to reporting on sexual violence.

### Police as primary source

More than 50% (n=129) of reporters said they relied heavily on police reports and sources for their crime stories, and generally approached other sources (if at all) afterwards. A crime reporter in Tamil Nadu explained the process he usually follows:

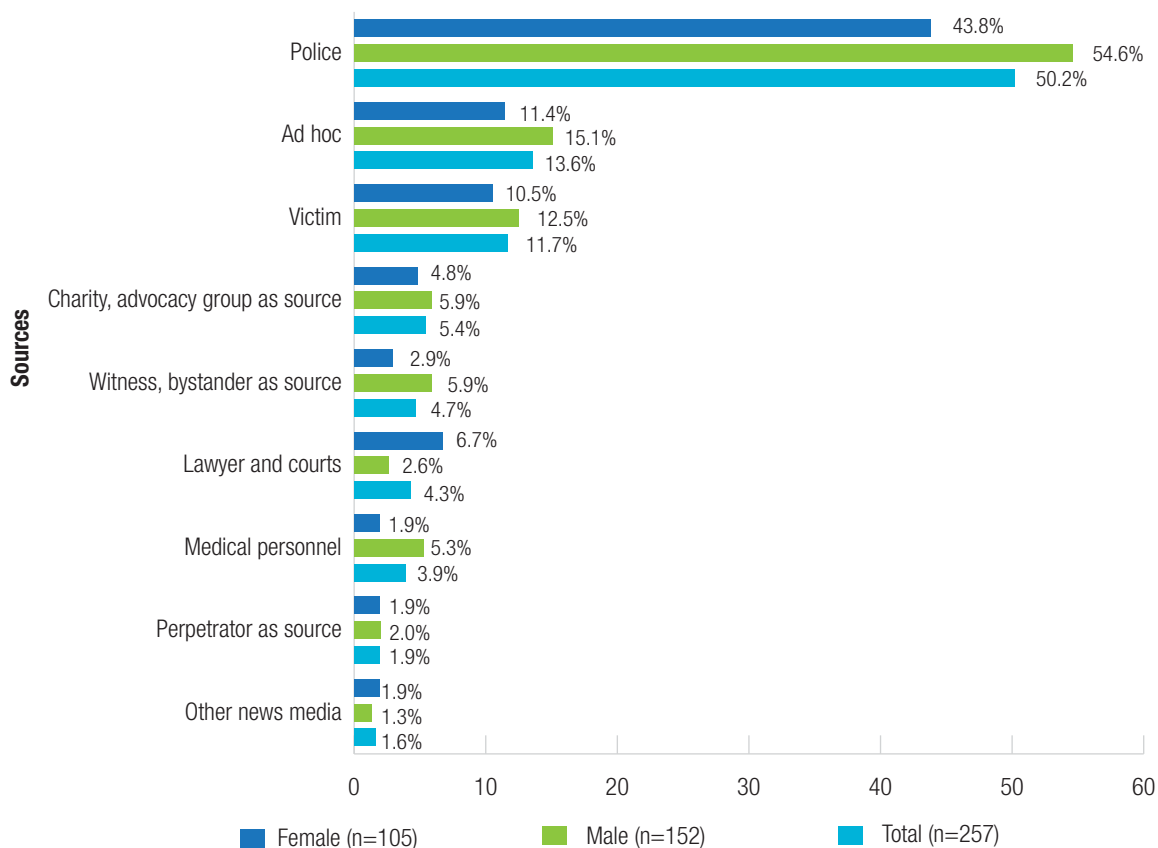
*“First, it will be the police. They receive the complaints first and with what they give us, we dig a little deeper. They will take the victim*

*to the hospital to get her treated or to confirm the rape. So our next investigative spot will be the hospital. After that, the victim’s place, the neighbours, or relatives. And parents, if they are willing, and the victim’s lawyer.”*

The practical reason for relying primarily on the police is that if there is no FIR, there is no case, and thus no legal basis to report. Journalists are wary about taking the risk of reporting on the basis of victim or eyewitness accounts and are not generally equipped to undertake their own investigations. A male online journalist based in Guwahati said:

*“If a case is not registered, then it is not wise on our part to report it. Because then we can get into trouble. So that’s our starting point. Then we go to the victim. We try to go and meet the perpetrator, speak to him. But this starts with the police, the police case, the police FIR.”*

FIGURE 9: SOURCE RELIED UPON BY JOURNALISTS IN RELATION TO RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE CASES



A TV journalist in Lucknow also said that the police are more willing and more neutral than other sources:

*“The family of the victim is not willing to talk to us. If we speak to the accused, why will he tell us the truth if he has committed the crime? He will never say that I admit I have committed the crime. In situations like these, the only source left with us, is the police.”*

Other reporters, however, emphasised that it was necessary to supplement police sources with others to get more “authentic” information. A Chennai-based crime reporter spoke of first talking to the police, “make them feel like they are our only source of information”, before moving to other sources who could help.

*“We will go to the spot of the crime and speak with neighbours or relatives. The police source will be very artificial. To get authentic information, we need to go to the spot. While doing that, we will get to know of many things... we will go to the doctor, if it's a murder. Then, talk with activists and ask what they are going to do.”*

### Women journalists and concerns with police as a source

Women reporters were overall less inclined than men to depend on police sources (43.8%, n= 46 vs. 54.6%, n=83). While many women journalists did speak of beginning their reporting with law enforcement sources, several indicated an aversion to approaching the police and said they did not “trust” the information provided by them.

A Hyderabad-based reporter working for a Telugu print publication said: “I never go to the police. I never believe in police information. I never write the [news given by the police].” Another reporter, based in Srinagar, preferred to “start with the local people” because “the police can give you a biased opinion”.

A TV reporter in Hyderabad said she doubted the competence of the police and felt that they did not take sexual violence cases seriously enough:

*“The police come into the picture only when [the crime] is reported and they have to write an FIR. But I am really pissed off with the police. They really don't write good, strong FIRs. Not*

*good, strong. The proper FIR. Lots of details are missing. Every opportunity I get to talk to the police, I ask that question: why do you do that? Why do you allow people to get away?”*

It is worth noting that significantly more men than women are crime reporters. Many women journalists who report on sexual violence are not on the ‘crime beat’ and so tend to source their stories differently, sometimes bypassing the police. An English-language news journalist from Karnataka explained:

*“I am not a beat reporter, so I don't call up the cops to ask them if they have a story. That's not how it works. Over the years, I have made my contacts with civil society workers or social workers, who tell me if there is a case that is interesting. And by interesting, I don't mean sensational, but a case that tells us that this also happened or this can happen. One time, one of my contacts told me this really nice story where the survivor's life turned around because the community came together to send her to a private boarding school. Her mom lived in a shanty and now this girl is getting her life back together. So they do tell me about these cases. Then I go and speak to the family.”*

A New Delhi-based online journalist highlighted how gender and cultural mores made it difficult to establish connections with the police:

*“The police never help you. I have called up the police, gone and met with them, but you know I have seen that this is a gender issue. Because we are women journalists and we don't have ‘chai and sutta’ [tea and cigarettes] with police.”*

An online journalist based in Mumbai, who worked for a national news outlet, added:

*“Every gender violence story that I do is more like reacting to the news rather than breaking the news itself. So I first try to get in touch with the complainant or the survivor. Then I speak to lawyers, other people—someone that the complainant might have confided in. Just to understand or corroborate the story. Other stakeholders who may know the survivor, and of course if there is a company or an employer*

*involved, then getting quotes from them. And then getting a quote from the accused.”*

### An ad-hoc approach

Besides the police, both men and women journalists approached a variety of other sources, often on an ad hoc basis. These included charity and advocacy groups, legal sources, other news media, witnesses and bystanders, victims, and perpetrators. As a Chennai-based crime reporter put it, “everyone is a source, that’s the way I take it”. Another journalist, a reporter based in New Delhi, said, “It’s the papers, the social media, stuff that people tell me”. An online journalist working for a national news outlet based in New Delhi spoke of a certain impromptu approach in his work, saying, “There is no laid out protocol. Depends on what works, when”.

### NGOs and advocacy organisations

Charity and advocacy groups were used by a similar percentage of female and male respondents (4.8% or n=5, and 5.9% or n=9 respectively). A Chennai-based woman journalist said:

*“My biggest source is women’s associations. Those guys always have details. And if you’re talking about organisations like AIDWA [All India Democratic Women’s Association] and all, these guys have filed police complaints for a lot of victims ... So a lot of unheard of information comes from them—especially from rural areas. They bring them [victims] here and get them to meet the press and get them to meet some higher-ups in the police.”*

A male online journalist from Delhi also said that NGOs can function as a channel for access to the victim:

*“Sometimes NGOs are helpful. They’ve been in touch with the victim, the victim’s family. So if you go through them, there is a possibility that you can get access through them. They sort of trust them, they’ve been with them.”*

The activism and resultant social media posts of NGOs were also seen by some reporters as a useful resource for leads. A male journalist based in Bengaluru said:

*“NGOs are very helpful. Child welfare committees also. Sometimes people are also publishing on social media. We can take that as a lead and go follow it. They [might] have caught the accused and uploaded a video... We can take that as a source too.”*

### Witnesses and bystanders

Witnesses and bystanders were important sources for about 4.7% (n=12) of respondents. A Bhubaneswar-based journalist working for an Odia newspaper said:

*“[W]e start our investigation from the ground level. We talk to the people on the ground. Like, it can be the watchman of a school if there is some case [there]. We ourselves have to figure out who will be having the information here. See, the police and the doctors, they arrive really late, right? So we go to the ground first and investigate who might be the one who knows. They are our main source.”*

Some journalists mentioned the relatives, friends, and acquaintances of the victim as sources that helped with building context and providing information related to the case. A male print journalist in Kerala said:

*“First of all, we check if the relatives of this victim are ready to give information. Or the college in which she studied. Her friends, maybe. Friends, teachers, relatives—then police. These four are the major sources.”*

### Legal sources

Overall, 4.3% (n=11) of respondents mentioned lawyers and courts as their sources, with a greater proportion of women journalists (6.7%, n=7) using them than men (2.6%, n=4). Several women journalists, many of them court reporters, spoke of how they sourced stories from the cases that came up for hearing.

A journalist working for a Marathi newspaper said most of the stories she reported on sexual violence—including, occasionally, sub judice cases—came from lawyers and, to a limited extent, from court officials:

*“It is mostly lawyers. There are other staff as well, but they do not always get involved in*

*all this. Lawyers, they give us information but it is off the record because of the restrictions and sensitivity of the cases. But if the accused is creating a big deal... that should reach the people. So lawyers give us information on that."*

### Victims and their relatives

Although several journalists said they "always begin with the victim", it emerged in their responses that this was only after the victim had been identified via police sources or an FIR. A smaller number described victims as a "primary" source.

A crime reporter working for a Kannada newspaper spoke of "directly approaching" the victim or "going to the victim's house". Another journalist also mentioned trying to contact victims directly, acknowledging that this needed to be done sensitively but was sometimes necessary to "confirm" the exact nature of the complaint: if it was rape, attempted rape, or something else.

A Vijayawada-based reporter working for a national English daily admitted that this direct approach was fraught with pitfalls and that a great deal of sensitivity was required:

*"The family of the victim is our main source. Only if they are in a position and state to talk to the media, we approach them. Many times we have been pushed away and kicked out from a victim's house when the family members get angry because of our presence."*

### Medical sources

Medical personnel can be important sources, but they were mentioned by a very small proportion of journalists. A woman TV reporter in Kerala spoke in broad terms about maintaining a network of sources in hospitals:

*"We get information from the hospital. Our personal connections help us in getting information from the hospital. Doctors, attenders—we do keep such personal relations with almost all hospitals."*

Multiple reporters spoke of consulting medical sources as a way of corroborating the nature of the

assault. A crime reporter in Tamil Nadu mentioned speaking to the "doctor to confirm it is really a rape case". Another reporter from Ahmedabad and working for a Gujarati channel said that medical information was "most important in these cases to see if what the girl is saying is right or not".

Others spoke of using medical sources in grave cases where the victim had been killed (to get "post-mortem reports") or where "the injuries are bad". There was evidently more trust in medical sources, who journalists felt were "neutral", but there appeared to be less effort to cultivate them as sources—or as indicated by our content analysis, bringing them into the stories more frequently or prominently.

One woman reporter for a Kannada TV channel even espoused the view that doctors are "never" used as primary sources:

*"Doctors are never the sources when it is a rape case. They never open up. It is always the police. So when the police say there is such-and-such case, there are hospitals in Bangalore where these victims are, so that's when we call the doctor. 'The police have already told you that there is a certain patient in your hospital. So are you ready to speak?' So that's how it goes. It's never the doctor [first]. They don't have that power to come and speak."*

### Perpetrators

Perpetrators were mentioned as sources by only a small proportion of respondents. They were largely approached to "get a quote from the accused" rather than as a main source for deeper stories, to understand motivations, or to contribute to a thematic perspective. A Guwahati-based online journalist working for a national news outlet said speaking to the accused was the "last step", coming after "the police and the victim if possible".

Some reporters highlighted that access to perpetrators was an issue, while others mentioned that suspects were unlikely to give truthful accounts of what happened. A TV journalist from Lucknow said:

*"If we speak to the accused, why will he tell us the truth if he has committed the crime? The accused will always defend himself. He will never say that I admit that I have*

*committed the crime. In situations like these the only source left with us, is the police.”*

Another Lucknow-based reporter also mentioned not having much trust in what suspects said, but that he did still try to interview perpetrators for more insight:

*“The accused will mostly say things that prove him innocent, and he says things in order to save himself. But we still ask him, what came in his mind, why did he do it? What situation were you in that you committed the crime? Did you watch something that influenced you to do this?”*

Overall, the respondents in this study mentioned exploring a number of sources for stories about sexual violence. However, there was a heavy reliance on the police, most so in the case of crime reporters, who were primarily male. Beyond approaching the police, there was no systematic strategy to find stories or cover them from different angles. While there were some practical constraints, such as access to victims and perpetrators, very few respondents attempted to cultivate alternative sources such as medical personnel, NGOs, or legal professionals, and instead adopted a more passive, ad hoc approach to reporting on sexual violence. ■





## SECTION 3

# Narrating sexual violence

This section focuses on how the journalists, once they had gathered information about an incident of sexual violence, went about constructing their narratives. Here we were looking for their reflections on general characteristics that are often identified in scholarly literature as problematic, such as the use of sensationalistic language, euphemistic terminology, and gender stereotyping. In essence, we were looking for insights into how they framed the story—what they chose to focus on, why, and what they chose not to. This is about the self-reflexivity of the journalists, and their own perception about *their* practice and the choices they make—as opposed to their analysis or reflection on news reporting in general.

## Story content

We found that journalists were most likely to claim they focused on the factual details of sexual violence cases. Overall, this was 28% (n=72), with a greater emphasis in New Delhi (48.3%, n=14) and the South (31.3%, n=30). Several journalists reinforced that their primary duty was to report ‘just facts’ and anything beyond that would not be aligned to their journalistic principles or job description. As one print journalist (English) said, “Delivering the facts is our work. Other than where we present previous statistics, we only give the basic facts of the case”. Another male Kannada journalist from Bengaluru seemed aghast at the idea that reportage on sexual violence should

include anything other than the bare facts: “We just report the incident. What happened, why it happened. Why should we focus on any particular thing?”

Some other journalists, however, said they were careful to stick to just the ‘facts’ because they did not want to risk falling afoul of the laws around reporting on rape. This appeared to be a major concern in the South. For instance, one male radio journalist in Chennai was vehement, “That is the most important thing according to us. What the court says... That is more important than what kind of a thing has gone in the background”.

Others said they believed that abbreviated reporting was in the best interest of victims. “Even the Supreme Court has said that the media has a responsibility when it comes to rape or sexual violence cases. Going beyond that will only affect the victims. Only judgment is reportable”, said a male journalist for a Tamil newspaper.

Overall 17.1% (n=44) of respondents described their content as being focused on the accused/perpetrator. This was most prominent in the South (26%, n=25) and in Central (25%, n=6) regions. Some interviewees expressed pride in taking this approach, such as a male Tamil print journalist who said, “Be it city or village, we always focus only on the accused”.

Some believed they were furthering the cause of ‘justice’ by throwing the spotlight on the accused, such as a woman Gujarati print journalist, who noted:

*“We focus on the accused and ensure that potential perpetrators know what they are in for, so they understand the consequences of*

TABLE 9: ASPECTS OF STORY CONTENT DISCUSSED ACROSS REGIONS

Themes	New Delhi (n=29)	West (n=31)	South (n=96)	North (n=35)	Central (n=24)	East (n=29)	North East (n=13)	Total (n=257)
Behaviour of victim	3.5%	0.0%	5.2%	0.0%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	2.7%
Factual details	48.3%	29.0%	31.3%	22.9%	25.0%	6.9%	23.1%	28.0%
Focus on perpetrator	10.3%	12.9%	26.0%	11.4%	25.0%	6.9%	15.4%	17.9%
Sensationalistic details	10.3%	19.4%	22.9%	14.3%	20.8%	3.5%	15.4%	17.1%

*their crimes. This is what we concentrate on. We ensure that the accused does not escape justice. We check the police are not aiding them or something and publish everything."*

'Sensationalism' as an important factor was reported by 17.1% (n=44) of the respondents overall. This was most prominent in the South (22.9%, n=22) and Central (20.8%, n=5) regions. Several respondents suggested that highlighting details about the crime served to create an impact on the audience and jolted them out of indifference. A male print (English-language) journalist in Tamil Nadu said that he deliberately crafted reports so that "the reader feels for the victim and is angered by the perpetrator".

Another reporter said that highlighting "brutality" was "always a priority", but not just to grab eyeballs:

*"It's our job to hold a mirror to society. The charge has been levelled a lot of times that we get into titillating details, but I never agree with that because until we get into the nitty-gritty of what actually happened the enormity does not come across. And it is always our effort to at the same time be sensitive towards the victim."*

What is notable is the very small number of journalists who considered the behaviour of the victim/survivor as a factor in news reporting on sexual violence. Overall this was 2.7% (n=7), and only featured in interviews from New Delhi, South and Central regions (and by language breakdown, only in five languages overall). This is significant in that focus on the behaviour of the victim/survivor is often linked to victim blaming, and frequently features as a key challenge in news reporting. Some respondents who

spoke about victims/survivors clarified that they did so not to apportion blame but to provide context and to explain the 'why and how' of the incident. According to a female Hindi TV journalist in Lucknow:

*"Giving the contextual information is important, especially providing the previous events related to the story because they help us in understanding the background of the crime. There is no justification for a crime—a rape is a rape and a gang-rape is a gang-rape. But the question arises in such cases, where one needs to know about the victim. Who was she? Why did this happen with her?"*

Another reason for mentioning the victim's/survivor's behaviour was that it was a means to highlight dangers in certain situations or even the traits of a perpetrator. A male Kannada print journalist offered some reasoning for a particular case:

*"A woman was travelling alone in the car, and that time this driver misused the loneliness or darkness. She was alone and he attacked the woman. He had no fear of policemen or law."*

Some journalists also felt a need to 'humanise' victims/survivors and to present them in a way that placed them in a wider social context and allowed the audience to relate to them. A woman Tamil print journalist from Chennai spoke about a case where the victim belonged to the marginalised Dalit community:

*"[The victim] would tell her parents that, uh, you know what? I want to buy you a new set of curtains. I want to buy a toy for my sister."*



*I want to spend my own money on it. I don't want to take your money. Those are the signs of a woman who was coming of age, [wanted] independence, upward mobility. And it's not something that you would [normally] consider. We would just look at, 'Oh, she was raped, she was murdered and this is how brutal it was'. But we're not actually looking at the deeper sense of what makes this person. That is important. We consider this community very inconsequential, but even the smallest thing—even a woman thinking, you know what, I want to be independent—matters. And that independence threatens so many men. She's at risk because of her own independence, for the fact that she wants to take a stand and wants to help her family! So many people overlook these details that are actually very important to the larger picture. So that I feel is something journalism really needs today."*

## Terminology

Accuracy of language and terminology is of critical importance when the news media talk about sexual violence. This is not just due to to ensure factual correctness, but because euphemisms and other terms that minimise acts of sexual violence play into rape culture. Not calling rape 'rape', for example, could detract from the seriousness and severity of the crime, undermine victims/survivors, and obscure public perception.

The matter of terminology is not always clear-cut, especially in a country such as India with its multitude of languages—14 of which are covered in this study. One important differentiator is the language journalists use to refer to 'rape' specifically. This is important in terms of understanding vernacular/cultural differences in news reporting across India.

Notably, less than 20% (n=50) of respondents said they used the term 'rape' in their news reporting. By far the most common way of referring to 'rape' was through some form of euphemism. This totalled 51% (n=131) overall, with significant spikes in the South (71.9%, n=69) and North (54.3%, n=19). In both regions there was also a clear preference

for not using 'rape' as a term at all (South at 47.9% or n=46 and North at 37.1% or n=13).

The euphemisms for rape deployed by journalists included: manabhangam (shaming), manabhanga sramam (attempted shaming), apamanikkal (shaming) or laigikam (sexual) in Malayalam; baaliyal thunburuthal (sexual abuse) and baaliyal kodumai (sexual torture), baaliyal thondharavu (sexual trouble) or vanpunarvu (violence) in Tamil; atyacharam (victimisation), leingika daadi (sexual harassment) in Telugu; shoshan (exploitation), yaun hinsa (sexual violence), chhed chhaad (molestation, messing about), dushkarm (bad deed) in Hindi; ismat dari (ravish, rob of honour), ziyadati (mistreatment), and jinsi tashadud (violence with women) in Urdu.

Respondents generally expanded on such usages by citing convention, and 'the way things are done'. For instance, a male print journalist from Tamil Nadu said that the term baaliyal thunburuthal (sexual abuse) was preferable to the technical term for rape: "That is what we write. It encompasses everything. Baaliyal kodumai (sexual torture) also." Another journalist said:

*"We don't usually use the word 'balatkar' [the Hindi term for rape]. We say 'yaun hinsa', 'chhed-chhaad'—we use words like this."*

Other reasons to avoid the term 'rape' were that it was a "harsh word", "a little too sensitive", "too scary", and not "reader-friendly". Some journalists indicated that they believed using the technical term for 'rape' in their language would be seen as culturally inappropriate or misunderstood by their target audience. As a woman radio journalist in Mewat, Haryana, noted:

*"The word 'rape' in the village is only understood by educated people. Old people don't understand... rape, balatkaar—these words we cannot say directly on the radio."*

A male print journalist from Kerala made a similar contention about needing to keep a soft touch, possibly based on the perceived capacity of the audience to take in such news:

*"Balalsangham is the exact translation of rape. In most situations we avoid using that term. Peedanam (harassment) or manabhangam (ignominy) or manabhanga sramam (attempted ignominy) or apamanikkal (outrage, insult). We*

*are using such light terms to reduce the sexual tone of the story and bring a humane touch.”*

Consideration for the victim was also a reason offered by some respondents to explain why the term for ‘rape’ was not used. According to a male online journalist based in Srinagar:

*“In Urdu we write ‘jinsi tashadud’ (sexual violence) but we don’t write ‘ismat dari’ because that translates to robbing someone’s honour. In Hindi also we write ‘shoshan’ which mean sexual exploitation, but never rape. Rape degrades a woman psychologically.”*

A female journalist working for an English newspaper in Nagaland (North-East) was also squeamish, but more so out of consideration for the victim’s feelings:

*“I would probably say ‘abuse’, ‘violated’, ‘physically’, ‘sexually’. If the person on whom the crime has been committed is willing to say ‘rape’, I think that is totally different. But I would not want to say, ‘Oh, she was raped’.”*

There was also an acknowledgment that since victims of sexual violence are often stigmatised in India, vague terms can offer some measure of protection:

*“In my experience, generally... women harassment or assault is what we say. If she was raped in a violent manner or was gang-raped, and if we say something like this, it might affect her future.”*

Some journalists also mentioned a cultural distance from the term ‘rape’ in India, and felt that it did not translate well in regional languages. According to a woman radio journalist based in Hyderabad: “In English [using rape] is okay. In Telugu script, we do not use the word rape. We use ‘atyachaaram’.”

Interestingly, even New Delhi features low in terms of preference for the direct usage of the term ‘rape’ (only 10.3%, n=3), with most expressing a preference for euphemisms (24.1%, n=7) or simply not using the term at all (20.7%, n=6). One journalist who was herself a survivor of sexual violence said she steered clear of the word ‘rape’ because it might be triggering:

*“I don’t use the word rape. I usually go with the way the survivor wants to describe it. But I usually prefer to just use the term sexual assault. Honestly, frankly, having been assaulted myself and being a survivor myself, rape is a word that is hard to come to*

**FIGURE 10: NOMENCLATURE – REFERRING TO ‘RAPE’ AS TERM IN VIEWS REPORTS**

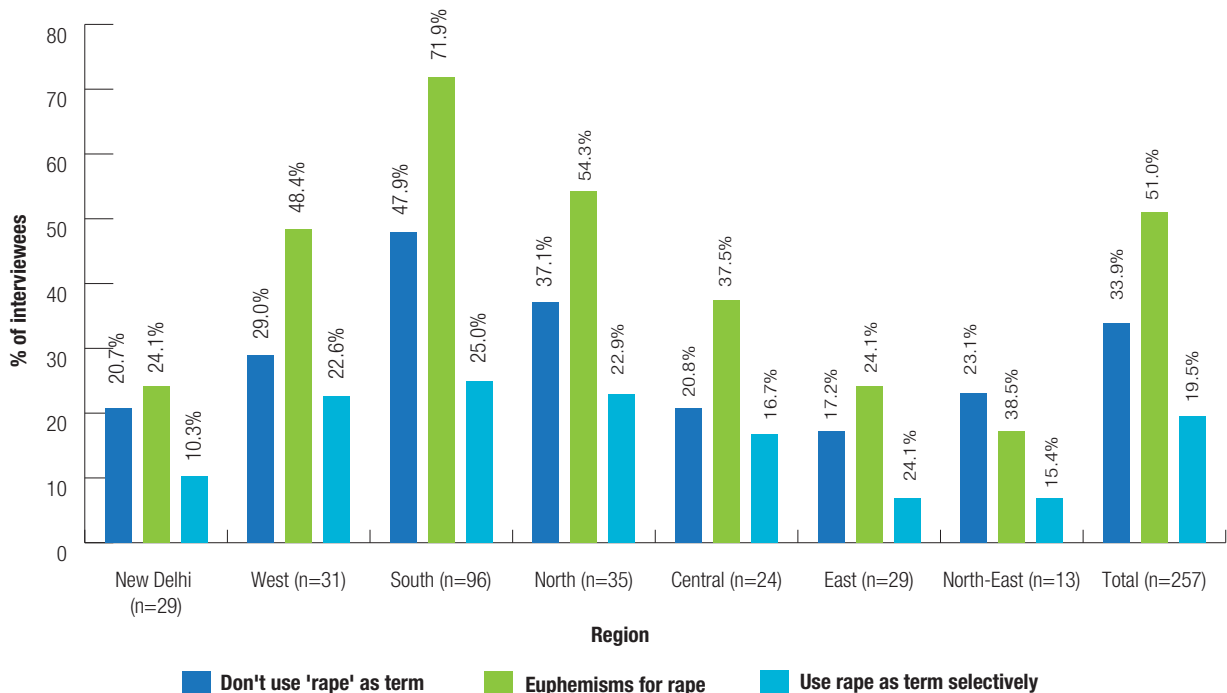
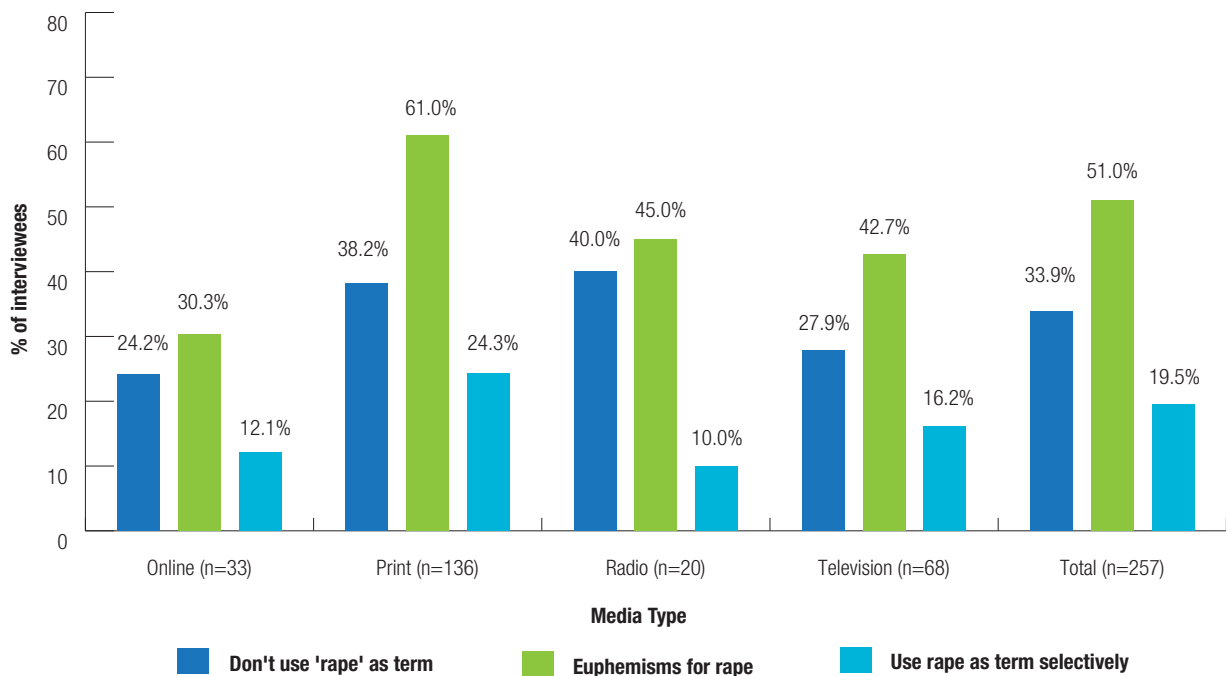


FIGURE 11: NOMENCLATURE – REFERRING TO ‘RAPE’ AS TERM IN VIEWS REPORTS



*terms with and it feels already like a loaded and scary word. A lot of women that I have spoken to prefer to use sexual violence, assault, and even sexual molestation.”*

Breaking down the use of euphemisms by media type, we found that print and radio journalists were most reluctant to use ‘rape’ and were most likely to pick more ‘palatable’ alternatives. Print was nevertheless most likely to use the word ‘rape’ selectively. Perhaps worth noting here is the low preference for the term ‘rape’ in online media.

Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Malayalam were the most prominent languages in terms of using euphemisms, and all apart from Urdu had more than half of interviewees noting they do not use ‘rape’ as term.

## Stereotypes

Comments relating to the stereotypes and prejudices associated with the reporting of rape came up in the responses of 44.3% (n=114) of respondents; interestingly, 62% (n=71) of the respondents who touched upon this topic were men. The comments ranged from a negation of any bias to expanding on the prevalence of stereotypes that discriminated on

the basis of location (especially the priority given to urban over rural incidents) and economic status.

Assertions of ‘no bias’ came primarily from male reporters, some of whom cited their belief that they and their colleagues were honouring their journalistic responsibility to “cover things with an open mind” (a male Tamil TV journalist) and that “news will go as news only, without any biases... I have never felt [my reporter friends] are doing biased reporting (a male Odia print journalist in Bhubaneswar). Others mentioned the values of their own newsroom, such as a male journalist from a Tamil news channel who said, “In my organisation we are neutral. No caste, no religion, nothing. If anyone is affected by anything, we will report”. A few hinted that there were also practical reasons to “collect exact information”; in the words of a male TV journalist based in Kerala: “People are watching this. So if we make some mistake that would be like spreading defame. So we don’t approach any news with stereotypes or prejudice.”

Some of the journalists who acknowledged that stereotypes and biases coloured news media coverage disavowed any such tendencies in themselves or their organisation. For instance, an English print journalist based in Mumbai said, “I have known some reporters to dismiss a case because it

is in a lower section of the society. But then, that's probably because their paper allows them to". Another male TV journalist from Chennai noted that modes of storytelling were sometimes stereotypical to the extent that they were designed to "turn you on" rather than "feel sorry for the victim [or] angry at the accused".

A few journalists, however, did speak candidly about the stereotypes they witnessed in their newsrooms and which affected coverage.

### **Stereotypes about victims**

Several journalists spoke about how preconceptions of what victims are and 'should be' affected the treatment given to cases. Some women journalists also reported feeling personally affected by this, and a few expressed a desire to effect change in newsrooms.

A male TV journalist based in Chennai recounted how complainants were sometimes "judged" on their appearance:

*"They [other reporters] will say she doesn't look like a victim at all. She is wearing make-up and her dressing sense is not good. They will go through [victims'] pictures on social media. Or we get their pictures through WhatsApp but we don't publish. They might say the photos are not good. It looks like the girl must have also been involved in this. She is tricking us now."*

Women reporters were less dispassionate about the existence of newsroom stereotypes. A Lucknow-based reporter for a Hindi newspaper revealed her discomfiture at the biases prevalent in her office, as well as her attempts to counter them:

*"Many times I get into heated discussions when people say stereotypical and sexist things about girls. They say the victim was wearing skimpy clothes. I tell you, if you go and check the data provided for the cases of rape, you will see that more cases of rape happen in the villages or in rural areas than in the cities. In villages, girls don't wear skimpy clothes and leave their houses at midnight, but still more cases are happening in villages. So how can you say that all this is because they wear skimpy, provocative clothes and leave their houses late at night?"*

Another Delhi-based journalist, who reported online and for TV, also brought up her attempts to actively break stereotypes:

*"There is this narrative where if the victim is alive, then she has to keep on crying, weeping, all the time. Then only you will believe she is a victim. This is a very wrong prejudice and most of the time the regional media puts a lot of stress on this. If the victim has smiled, then people start drawing inferences from it. For example, the Park Street victim from Kolkata, Suzette Jordan. About her it was being said she is carrying on with her life. The entire target of our judicial system is to bring back the survivor and her life to a state of normalcy... So if a person is trying get back to her normal life and is living a normal life, you cannot forcefully torture her saying, "You look normal!" This is patriarchal thinking according to which a victim always has to be in a sad, miserable state. We need to shame this and challenge this. We have to create a narrative against this. So this is one stereotype that I have tried breaking in my reporting of these cases."*

The second stereotype [that I try to break] is the character assassination of the victim—victim-shaming and victim-blaming... that the victim only must have started all of this, she must have done this, she must have given the hint, she must have gone out in the night. No matter what happens, the first thing that is done is to start questioning the victim. This has also been derived from patriarchal thinking. The boy can never be wrong; the girl must have provoked him. We have to challenge this entire thought process."

### **Rural-urban divide**

While several respondents claimed that their news organisations made no distinction based on the status of the victim when deciding newsworthiness and coverage, many others spoke in detail about how there was usually a preference for covering stories from urban locations.

A male print journalist based in Bengaluru said location was an important predictor of whether a story would receive coverage:

“

In case of a gang-rape we put the image of a frightened, cowering girl sitting and crying, shouting under a dark background, absolutely powerless. There is a reason behind this. We do this in order to show her poor condition and helplessness and to connect with the reader in a powerful way... We cannot put images of a laughing girl or a girl holding a sword.

”



*"[I]n the organisations I worked in, there has been importance given to rape cases if the person belongs to a city. The outskirts of the city, like small villages or small towns, if the victim's from those places, it is sort of overlooked. That particular story is overlooked. This kind of stems from caste or religious discrimination also."*

An experienced woman journalist from the South recounted a disturbing experience when she was tipped off by the police about the rape and murder of a 6 or 7-year-old from a rural area whose body had been found in a sugarcane field. The police source had even sent her harrowing pictures in a bid to capture her attention:

*"The girl had been reported missing a day ago. Her neighbour had walked up to her house when her mom had gone to buy vegetables. He kidnapped her, kept her in a house opposite to her parents' house. He raped her and then he dumped her body the next morning. And her parents have been looking, looking, looking everywhere. Oh god, so messed up. And the kind of condition in which the girl was found! There was this sad photograph of the dad. He had a towel wrapped around her. He was carrying her and he was crying. Her limbs were seen from the towel. He was carrying her and walking. I wrote the story. The case was so horrifying, but no one picked it up."*

The journalist filed the story for her online publication, but it received little attention from others in the news media. According to her, the location of the crime and the profile of the victim were likely reasons for this:

*"There was a single column story, probably 150 or 200 words in another newspaper. The TV channels didn't cover it. Except for [some] local Kannada media, there was no traction on that case. But when [a similar incident] happened in Kathua, it became a huge thing. When it happened in Kashmir it became a huge thing. It's more a conflicted zone. When it happens to say, the daughter of someone rich, it's always gathering eyeballs."*

*But when this girl... I'm sure a lot of reporters got the same images [that I got from the police]. And if that can't drive someone to tell her story, I don't know what will."*

These views are consistent with what we found in our content analysis of 10 newspapers from across India—49% of the 1,635 reports we studied pertained to cases in urban locations, 22% from rural, and with the rest either from overseas or unspecified locations. Our interviewers probed to understand this trend further, asking journalists to expand on what guided their reportage.

One issue that several respondents brought up was crime reporters' reliance on FIRs (First Information Reports to the police) to cover cases. A Madurai-based journalist, acknowledging that "urban and rural make a difference" pointed out that "reporting is largely based on FIRs that are filed ... So if an FIR is written and it comes in the DSR [Daily Situation Report], we follow it up".

In addition to this and newsroom partiality for urban cases, respondents also spoke about the difficulties of newsgathering from rural areas. These included cultural factors such as the stigma around rape and the complex dynamics of caste and privilege, which are also factors that may prevent people from filing FIRs.

A male TV journalist from Chennai said his hands were essentially tied:

*"First, no information comes out to us from villages. They hide it there. They don't even approach the police. The villagers usually don't let it out. Even doctors there won't tell the police!"*

Another TV reporter from Tamil Nadu expanded further on the social factors that inhibit the coverage of sexual violence in rural India:

*"Urban people are educated about [these things]. But here, coming to rural areas, people are not that educated about the legal procedures or the injustice done to them. People are afraid... if somebody else, if somebody who knows about this, would marry [the victim]. With such [problems], the media is also like, okay, when the victim is not ready to cooperate, what can we do?"*

A Telugu journalist noted that a history of oppression and the threat of retaliation prevents people from coming forward:

*“In rural areas, it is very common for the [dominant] caste and [people in dominant] positions—sarpanch or anybody—to use their position on downtrodden people. I know of so many [instances], I have covered so many such cases.”*

She added that the situation was even worse in areas with tribal populations, where there is greater mistrust of the police as well.

*“In tribal areas, they don’t even think that this is rape. They think, ‘We shouldn’t oppose’. Because if they oppose, the police will torture them like anything. That’s why they don’t even tell anybody.”*

### Class bias

Within urban areas as well, journalists spoke of class factors directly or indirectly affecting reportage. In general, cases involving victims of a lower economic strata were less likely to receive coverage.

A male print journalist working for a national daily admitted he felt “very bad” at his boss’s line of questioning when informed about a “sexual harassment” case:

*“The first question asked is the profile, the background. If the family belongs to techie, doctor, or engineer [sic], then they will allow. They will [ask to] file 300 or 350 words—word count will increase. If the victim is low profile, labourer family, lower middle class, some kind of slum-dweller, then they say take note. That is how we are told. Which is very bad. I mean rape is rape.”*

A male reporter for a national daily based in Karnataka shared a similar observations about the class divide:

*“If the victim and accused are from an affluent family or they are from the press, more importance will be given. If the victim and accused are working in some government factory, though the incident could be more brutal, it will not be given much importance.”*

A female Kannada TV journalist based in Bengaluru spoke about some of the practical challenges that occasionally come up when reporting on cases involving the very poor, particularly urban migrants:

*“Suppose it is a construction worker or someone who has migrated from Bihar, UP, or somewhere. So they are given [some] money and they are being sent off... which we would know only later on. Like much, much, much later on. There is no proper address for us to go and find them. They’re always in a [state of crisis]. They lead a very struggling life, first of all, and they don’t want this extra problem to burden them. Most of the time, they don’t come forward. They just settle for the money and run.”*

### Perceived causes of newsroom biases

Some respondents discussed the possible reasons behind reportorial bias. These included lack of training in journalism ethics and practice and an absence of awareness-building programmes to tackle socially ingrained biases in journalists.

A male journalist, who headed a radio station in Chennai, spoke of how he sees journalists holding victims responsible if they travel alone or use mobile phones, and that a change in “mindset” is needed:

*“Most of the media is handled by untrained [reporters], coming out of college. They are not given proper orientation about how to handle this issue. We used to suffer a lot because the level of understanding of the person is totally different. In some cases, if they are boys, they are totally against the girls who are victimised.”*

A male reporter based in Chennai pointed out that generational issues with older journalists, particularly on the crime beat, can affect how sexual violence and rape are covered.

*“There are many [stereotypes]. Mostly these cases are covered by crime reporters only. And 90% of them are male and that too they are very old people. Senior reporters to us are at least 10 years ahead of us in experience. They have many stereotypes. A few don’t even take up these cases. They blame the victim.”*

A woman reporter based in Ahmedabad further observed that there is a general newsroom expectation that rape is ‘spot news’, episodic—something that “is looked at as a quick thing that crime reporters are supposed to cover.” Underlining the view that most crime reporters are men, she suggested that gender dynamics hinder reporting:

*“Victims don’t open up to men easily. And that’s why I always have an advantage, because, after a certain point they were very comfortable talking to me.”*

### Knowledge and training as a solution

Respondents focused on education and training as a way to address stereotypes and biases. According to a woman online journalist from Bhubaneswar who writes for English and Odia publications, journalism students need “a course on gender studies”:

*“This class should happen before entering into the field of journalism so that they can get an orientation right then. Otherwise, it will reflect in their whole life. We see so many senior journalists who have such [sexist] mindsets. But there are many juniors and middle-level journalists who don’t think that way. It is changing. So when they are studying journalism, they should have an orientation about this.”*

A New Delhi-based woman journalist felt appropriate training on ethics could help journalists prevent bias from colouring their work:

*“This is when your ethics come into play. When I was doing my postgraduation, we had this entire paper on ethics. We would have separate classes and exams just to teach us journalism ethics. I was at work once and this really young student, a fresh graduate from college, had reported this case from Kerala where this young girl was raped and she was a Dalit. The accused was also a Dalit. But as long as I don’t know if there was an angle of power or caste ... I don’t see the need of using [their caste in my reporting]. I know that if I say that a young Dalit woman was raped, that will play with my reader’s mind. So if I don’t know*

*whether caste was a factor, why to put it out at all? If I do, that will work as a bias.”*

### Taking a stand vs. bias

A few respondents provided the interesting insight that they sometimes deliberately adopted certain ‘biases’ in their reporting in order to highlight issues faced by marginalised groups. A male TV journalist who worked for a Telugu channel said:

*“We do focus on a few things. We can’t exactly call it stereotyping. The Supreme Court has [highlighted] a lot of grievances [faced by Dalit people]. They are really downtrodden and they are the ones who have to go through a lot of these issues. So we have to ensure that their stories come out. So this way [we have focused] on caste in our reporting.”*

An Ahmedabad-based print reporter working for an English newspaper also mentioned that certain kinds of ‘bias’ can be useful in driving better reporting on sexual violence:

*“I have realised that it is okay to have a little bit of bias. I think, for me, the bias has always been that I have tried to take a stand for the victim. I am writing a story on her behalf. I am involved. [T]here are days when I used to come back and cry while filing the story. And I have been told often, by a lot of seniors, that, you know, don’t be involved in the story. You just write. Rather than just forgetting about the case and saying that ‘ye toh hota hai’ (‘this kind of thing happens’), I’d rather just stick to a few stories and see them to an end. The court may take its time to come up with a verdict, but at least [we are] looking at whatever can be done to help the woman get her rights.”*

### Use of images

The use of imagery in the reporting of sexual violence has drawn the attention of researchers and has become a subject of discussion in the media of late. There is now an increasing understanding of how visuals are consumed as part of the story and thus influence audience perceptions about the



reported event. Several studies have highlighted the significance of photographs and illustrations in reports about sexual violence, and how they often represent crimes, victims, and perpetrators in misleading ways. For instance, news media outlets often use the image of a cowering woman (or similar), depicting those affected as weak, helpless, and lacking in agency<sup>29</sup>. The possible impact of such visuals deserves significant consideration, and is an area of focus for scholars<sup>30</sup>.

To understand how journalists thought of this issue, we queried them on their image-use practices in their publications. Of the 191 respondents who discussed images, 36% (n=69) said their publications routinely used images with news reports, while 7.7% (n=15), most of them print journalists, said their publications tended to publish without accompanying photographs or illustrations.

### Images of victims/survivors

The main reason for avoiding such images was the risk of going against the law on identification of victims, especially those who were still alive. For example, a Bengali print journalist said that while the publication would earlier use “masked” images of the victim, even this was avoided currently due to a Supreme Court order [in 2018] directing media outlets to not use even blurred pictures: “We will never use. Court clearly says that we should never use the victim’s image even if it is masked”, he said.

Others, however, said they continued to use photo manipulation and other means to hide the victim’s identity rather than avoiding such imagery altogether. Whether the victim was alive or not was sometimes factored into such decisions. A Bhubaneswar-based Odia journalist, for instance, said, “If she has been raped and then murdered, then we might print it. But we blur the face”.

Notably, one print journalist from Maharashtra said that though there was a preference for representative images, in “exceptional” cases, photographs of living victims were used:

*“There was this case of a 10-year-old being raped and getting pregnant. I remember we used a photo of her sitting in the hospital and her mother caressing her head. We took a back shot, we didn’t show their faces.”*

Similarly for TV, anonymised interviews were sometimes filmed. A woman Hindi TV journalist in Lucknow described the treatment given to interviews with victims:

*“In most of the interviews that I have conducted of rape survivors, the sitting arrangement is face to face. But we place our camera [behind the victim’s] shoulder so that not even her back or hair is visible. Only my face will be visible. We mostly ask her to cover herself with a shawl or a dupatta. We put the camera in such a frame so that it looks graceful and we are able to hear her out as well.”*

In cases where victims have died, the legal guidelines for images are not as clear, but several reporters underlined the need to avoid disturbing images. According to a print journalist working for a Tamil daily:

*“[I]f she was murdered we can use [the victim’s photo]. But according to the rules of the organisation I am in currently, we don’t put the body’s picture. Nothing gory or bloody or depressing. If she is alive, no images are used.”*

Another online reporter from New Delhi said she tried to avoid images that might cause trauma in readers. In contrast, a Bengali print journalist based in Kolkata spoke of one instance when her publication made a deliberate choice to use a disturbing image:

*“[The victim’s] body was fully burnt. The photo was taken in a way that her identity was not revealed [but it showed her] charred body. We used it to bring gravity. I was there at the spot. Internally, we had a lot of debate before publishing the photo.”*

<sup>29</sup> See Schwark, Sandra. ‘Visual representations of sexual violence in online news outlets.’ *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00774>

<sup>30</sup> Schwark, Sandra & Bohner, Gerd. ‘Sexual violence-“victim” or “survivor”: News images affect explicit and implicit judgments of blame.’ *Violence Against Women*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218820202>. See also Mitra, Saumava. ‘The many things wrong with the visual representation of rape.’ <https://medium.com/maarnewstracker/the-many-things-wrong-with-the-visual-representation-of-rape-4dcde42778a4>

## Depicting perpetrators

Several respondents said that, as much as possible, they sought to publish the pictures of suspects. A reporter working for an online publication in Assam spoke passionately about publishing the identity of the accused, complete with photographs. “We boldly carry images. We are never scared”. He elaborated on an instance when an accused called up his correspondent and cited his political connections to apply pressure. However, the publication did not budge from its position. “We carried his images ... we sourced [images] from his Facebook account and we carried those.”

Some respondents were sensitive to the possibility that revealing the accused’s identity could compromise the victim’s privacy. A Bengaluru-based print journalist explained:

*“Yeah, the perpetrator’s images we will definitely put. Unless they are related to the victim. If the victim’s uncle or cousin is committing the offense, then we will not be able to put that. Because it will show [who the] victim is.”*

Another consideration was that revealing the perpetrator’s identity could harm the legal case. A chief reporter working for a regional South Indian newspaper elaborated:

*“We will want to make sure the people know [the perpetrator]. But the police will try to hide the face... because the accused can plead not guilty by saying that the media published his face first and that was the reason he was framed. Thus, the case won’t stand. Before, we have tried to reveal the face, but not any more. Because if we really want to bring him to justice, we should also follow certain ethics.”*

## Contextual images

Several reporters said their publications opted to use images of locations or of law enforcement to depict contexts related to the crime. These were sometimes used as proxies for the people involved. A Punjabi print journalist said that if his publication was unable to source a photograph of the accused,

they would instead “show the place. Sometimes we show the house... And mostly we show the police”.

A Tamil newspaper reporter added that his paper used visuals of “the crime scene, the accused, the police station, the people waiting outside the entrance if the accused is produced in the court”.

Another journalist, from Kerala said photographs were generally used in “sensational” cases such as the Jisha rape and murder:

*“In the case of Jisha, the house in which she lived was the major highlight. As we know, it is a small hut. So when it comes to such news, these types of photos are given. Also when the accused are brought for taking evidence, we give that photo.”*

## Representational images and re-enactments

Many respondents discussed their use of representational or symbolic images—sourced from agencies such as Getty or from free and/or paid online photo banks—as well as illustrations, sometimes referred to as “caricatures” or “cartoons”, that were occasionally created in-house.

The use of symbolic images was mentioned by 46.3% (n=105) out of the 227 journalists who discussed images. A Lucknow-based print journalist said illustrations helped readers to “understand” the case while also sparing them from viewing “frightful” images:

*“Most of the images used are like a painting or caricature that people get to know about the case and understand it as well. Like if an incident has happened with a student where acid was thrown at her, here the imagery would be very frightful. Most [other publications] source such images from google but in our organisation we make the caricatures ourselves so that a layman is able to understand how this incident actually took place. Since we cannot print the picture of the victim here, we use caricatures only.”*

An English national daily reporter also said that for visual purposes, “90% of the time it will be a graphic”. A TV journalist for a Kannada channel was more descriptive about the kinds of illustrations preferred:

“

There should be many people fighting in this battle. In this battle, I can't substitute for an activist or police official or a doctor. But I should certainly do my bit. I think journalists do have a responsibility.

”



*"We use graphics. We have a graphic team [to do] the general drawing. If it is a 16-year-old female, [we might use] a general sketch of a 16-year-old girl turning her face towards the wall, something like that."*

Other participants mentioned a preference for images of faceless women. For example, an Urdu print journalist based in Lucknow said:

*"[We use] file photos that we take from Google. Like there is an image where a girl is there and the background is all dark and you cannot see her face or her body."*

A Tamil TV reporter used similar terms for "file photos that we take from Google":

*"Like there is an image where a girl is there and the background is all dark and you cannot see her face or her body."*

An online journalist based in New Delhi said:

*"We have a good illustrator here, but it is very difficult to draw illustrations around gender. So we use silhouettes or pictures of random women whose faces are not seen."*

For TV, "re-enactments" of crimes using actors were occasionally created to serve the visual needs of the medium. A male TV journalist in Kerala described how his channel sometimes chose to "dramatise" events and highlight what the victim went through, such as for a high-profile case in Kochi involving the sexual assault of an actress in a car.

*"We dramatise... the vehicle and how it happened and all. I give the script and call some actors to [enact]. Just like a movie shoot. It is being done for visual effect ... but more than that, everyone can see what happened to the victim. I think people are interested in watching it."*

### Themes of survivorship vs. victimhood

Several journalists spoke of using photographs of anti-rape protests, both to convey a sense of empowerment to survivors and to get around the practical constraints of using other types of images. Some respondents were

also sensitive to the problematic nature of the typical imagery used to convey victimhood.

A news manager with several decades of experience, working for a national English daily, spoke of the tendency to show "images of women covering in a corner" and "men moving around her in the shadows", and the need to combat that:

*"This is all awful. I think protest symbols and showing women looking angry is a good way to combat that. I mean, even with silhouettes or things like that, I feel like rather than using a picture that desolates, why not use an image that speaks of strength? Something that speaks of hope and light and moving forward. I would show a sturdy table as opposed to a broken bamboo."*

A woman journalist based in Mumbai, working for a national news site, added:

*"We try to use March against Violence photos or a crowd holding up placards because that's somehow less sensational than using one of those graphic images of women crouching. We source our images from the photo agencies or things like that. It is a problem. There aren't just enough images out there."*

A Lucknow-based Hindi print journalist also expressed her aversion to images of victimhood:

*"Instead of all these images ... timid, fearful girl sitting alone and crying, I prefer using the pictures of a protest where the girls are demanding justice or fighting against this issue. All these images should be used because it... gives a different message to the public."*

Some journalists used images of protests to drive home a point, such one Delhi-based journalist working for a Punjabi channel, who said:

*"We usually use a protest picture... of somebody saying rape culture is bad. We usually use that or even zoom in to one of the placards that says rape is a crime."*

Others saw protest pictures not so much as a means to empower, but more pragmatically. A woman online journalist in Ahmedabad explained how protest images could convey a message but in a 'safe' way:

*“Protests are a great source of images because there will be banners, they’ll say things that help you take the story forward. There’ll be people but you’re not showing the victim, you’re not showing the perpetrator. So it’s kosher.”*

Interestingly, multiple journalists also made a case for using representational ‘victim images’ as a way to emphasise the gravity of sexual violence and the trauma it causes. Several reporters spoke of using images such as that “of a faceless girl... [but] there might be two eyes with teardrops” or a photo of “a girl sitting, in shadow or darkness” to signify pain and distress. A male journalist working for a Hindi news channel in Uttar Pradesh expanded on this sentiment:

*“There is a reason behind it, try to understand. In case of a gang-rape we put the image of a frightened, cowering girl sitting and crying, shouting under a dark background, absolutely powerless. There is a reason behind this. We do this in order to show her poor condition and helplessness and to connect with the reader in a powerful way. Whatever we write in the copy will be [reflected in] the caricature. We cannot put images of a laughing girl or a girl holding a sword.”*

Representational images depicting a suffering victim are quite common in Indian news media, but may be used for different reasons. One reason is a deliberate choice emerging from the kind of rationale exemplified in the quote above. Another could be a vacuum as far as guidelines for image usage, other than proscriptive ones emanating from court orders. Finally, the image ultimately chosen may not always be agreed on by everyone in the newsroom, but there is no real room for discussion on the matter. In one instance a Delhi-based reporter for an online portal spoke of their objection to a picture chosen by a desk editor:

*“I had a huge problem with a story that I had done. The picture that [was used] was of a bunch of abla naries (helpless women) or some random women covering their faces and on the fields. I was like, ‘Where did you get this from? You should have asked me because by using this you are just furthering a stereotype’. So I think a lot of times, involvement of a reporter*

*is required in these stories... these are not general political rallies where you can bring in whatever [image]....”*

Overall, our interviews with journalists elicited a variety of comments about how they choose images and think about them. The major concerns for a large proportion of respondents were two-fold: compliance with legal orders about protecting the identity of victims and practical constraints in sourcing and publishing meaningful imagery. Many reporters also expressed personal concern for victims’ privacy. Some said that the legal guidelines were not definitive with regards to depicting deceased victims and they sometimes used pictures of the crime scene or of the victim’s body (albeit with identity hidden).

While many journalists expressed eagerness about publishing photographs of the accused, very few demonstrated awareness about the legal issues this could cause in terms of a future or ongoing court case. Only one reporter mentioned that media coverage could negatively impact the case against the accused.

A number of journalists said they preferred to use images of relevant locations (such as the perpetrator’s house) and contexts such as courts and law enforcement. Many said the use of graphics helped them convey more information about the incident but in a way that was sufficiently removed from the brutality of the crime.

In terms of representative images and illustrations, several women journalists mentioned their distaste of typical depictions of victims as helpless and despairing, and said they preferred to use more ‘empowering’ images of protests and marches. Others argued that such images of ‘empowerment’ may detract from the seriousness and trauma of sexual violence. ■





## SECTION 4

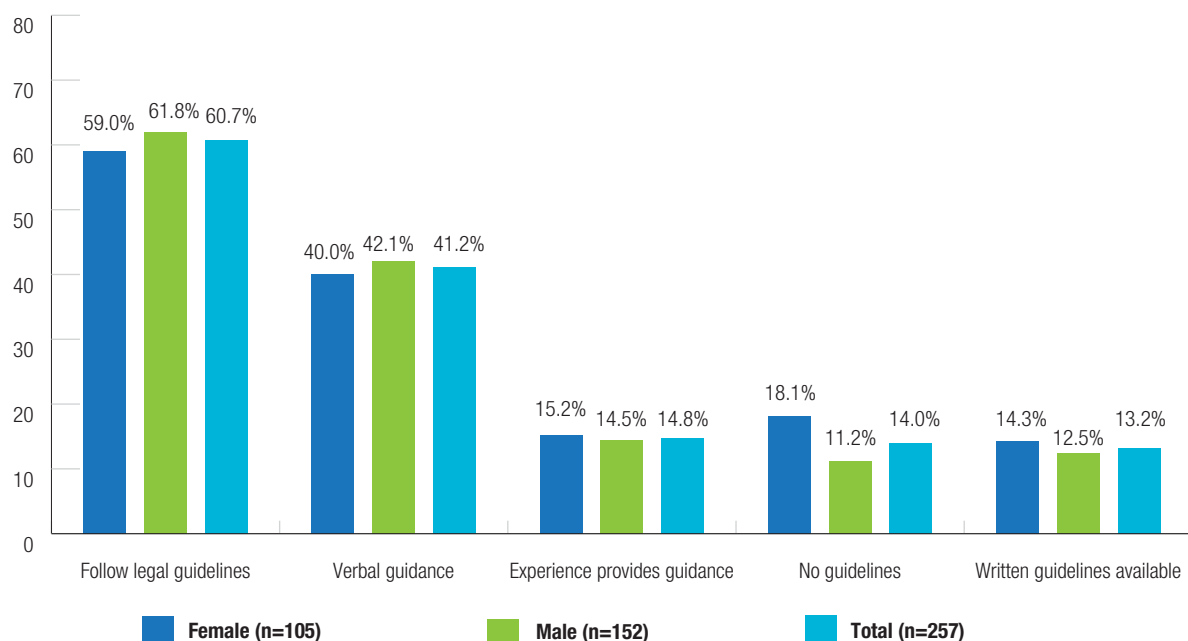
# Rules, codes, and personal principles

Clear newsroom guidelines on reporting and publishing/presenting stories are essential to establish best practices for the coverage of sensitive issues such as sexual violence. We sought to identify the principles that journalists across India relied upon when reporting on rape and sexual violence, querying them on the availability of editorial guidelines issued by their news organisations, their personal principles, the codes of conduct they tried to follow, and their own understanding of their responsibility as journalists.

## Editorial guidelines

We found a pervasive lack of *formal* editorial guidelines across newsrooms in India, with only a few exceptions. Most reporters—nearly 61% (n=156)—generally interpreted editorial guidelines to be legal guidelines for the media. Others spoke of verbal briefings from their superiors (41% n=106) and of developing their own informal guidelines based on their experience over the years (15% n=38). Only 13% (n=34)

FIGURE 12: JOURNALISTS' RESPONSES TO GUIDELINES



**TABLE 10: JOURNALISTS' RESPONSES TO GUIDELINES ACROSS REGIONS**

Nodes	New Delhi (n=29)	West (n=31)	South (n=96)	North (n=35)	Central (n=24)	East (n=29)	North East (n=13)	Total (n=257)
Follow legal guidelines	37.9%	71.0%	71.9%	65.7%	29.2%	55.2%	61.5%	60.7%
Verbal guidance	48.3%	48.4%	41.7%	37.1%	12.5%	55.2%	38.5%	41.3%
Experience provides guidance	24.1%	22.6%	14.6%	5.7%	12.5%	13.8%	7.7%	14.8%
No guidelines	13.8%	6.5%	13.5%	5.7%	8.3%	20.7%	53.9%	14.0%
Written guidelines available	13.8%	19.4%	9.4%	8.6%	16.7%	20.7%	15.4%	13.2%

of the respondents said they had access to written guidelines, while 14% (n=36) said they did not have any type of guidelines at all.

**Following legal guidelines**

Reporters spoke of ‘following the law’, ‘not naming the victim’, or referred to the Supreme Court’s directives to the media when asked about editorial guidelines that they drew from in their organisations. Several did not believe that there could be guidelines beyond these. A Vijayawada-based crime reporter for an English daily said:

*“Particularly when it comes to reporting rape cases, we follow one important guideline: not providing the details of the victim, not disclosing. So the identity will not be revealed. Other than that I strongly believe there are no other guidelines for the reporter while reporting the rape cases.”*

When asked about guidelines, another reporter for a national English-language newspaper in New Delhi also understood it as pertaining to legal directives:

*“Yeah, there are directions. The major thing is that... you can’t reveal the identity of the victim. So the family can file a defamation*

*suit in the court if they feel that their identity is being compromised in any way.”*

An editor at a national Hindi newspaper spoke of following “proper HR guidelines”. Asked if these included guidance on reporting rape and sexual violence stories, he said:

*“Exactly. The guidance is there. These are forwarded to us. We know that HR has certain policies and that the Supreme Court has given certain instructions and we cannot show anything beyond that.”*

A number of reporters, similarly, who spoke of having editorial guidelines, when pressed, said they were not aware of any “official” or organisational policies other than those issued by the Supreme Court. A journalist based in Srinagar spoke of the “Supreme Court order which says that the name of the victim is not to be mentioned”. Pressed again for any editorial guidelines he followed or was aware of, he said:

*“I mean the only thing is I try to give all the versions. If someone claims she has been raped or molested, as a journalist your job is to investigate. If speaking to the victim isn’t possible and it is an allegation, then you have to talk to the other side as well.”*



Another Ahmedabad-based journalist for a Gujarati daily, pressed the same way, said:

*“Yes, there are simple rules like don’t mention the name of the victim. Additionally, the reporting should not cause any trouble to the victim. Other than that there are no such guidelines.”*

A Mumbai-based TV journalist underlined the same point: “No, there are no such guidelines. The only guideline is not to reveal the victim’s identity.” Queried specifically, another Gujarati journalist said, “Apart from the law, nothing. I don’t remember seeing any other guidelines”.

### Verbal guidance

Many journalists (41%, n=106) spoke of editorial guidelines in terms of the verbal guidance they received from their chief reporter or senior colleagues. This understanding was most pronounced in the East (55%), West (48.4%, n=15), and New Delhi (48.3%, n=14) regions and least so in Central (12.5%, n=3) and North India (37.1%, n=13).

A Bengaluru-based reporter for an English national daily said that directions from editors came for “big” stories:

*“Normally, when it is something big, the editor tells us that certain points should be covered. Or, after filing the story, if they feel like giving any inputs related to the data, they inform us.”*

A broadcast reporter based in New Delhi said, in her experience, there were few organisations that had specific editorial guidelines on how to report sexual violence stories. She said she took advice from editors as needed, and that this was a common practice for when reporters were “confused” about how to approach a story:

*“I believe that reporters themselves are confused. They go and speak to the editor. I generally do that. I speak to my editor before [going into the field]. I ask my boss as to what exactly you need from this. For print, the story works differently. So for them it’s more like get us everything, whatever you have, and we will publish what should be published. But news on TV is very different, because*

*it depends on what the other channels are getting. If the competitor managed to get the parents, then you also have to do that. So these are the directions... I sometimes feel like I don’t get enough space to follow my own voice. I have to navigate through my bosses, because, at the end of the day, I work for him. So I have to do it.”*

A news editor working for an Urdu publication said verbal guidance is provided to younger reporters, with the understanding that those who are more experienced will know what to do:

*“Most of the reporters who become experienced know what sort of reporting needs to be done. But the ones who are new, or do not know, they are guided a bit—for example, how to talk to the police, the victim and the accused.”*

A journalist based in New Delhi, who has worked for several news outlets in her career, spoke of guidance being embedded in training sessions offered to new reporters.

*“[W]e hold workshops for young journalists and tell them how they can cover rape or sexual violence stories sensitively. Like, don’t reveal the identity of the victim... and there is actually a lot that you need to tell your reporters in terms of what is acceptable and what is non-acceptable. We have all heard this as young reporters: Don’t out her identity and keep the reportage sensitive and don’t victimise her’.”*

Overall, many reporters said they received “guidance” from seniors, but this seemed to be on an ad hoc basis and limited to technical aspects (such as what angle to focus on and who to speak to) and legal directives. Some newsrooms did verbally ‘train’ younger journalists on the basics of covering sexual violence responsibly and with sensitivity, but there were no comprehensive resources on how this could be accomplished.

### Guided by experience

Nearly 15% (n=38) of journalists said that their own experience was their best teacher and they relied on what they learnt by trial and error over

the years. Some journalists mentioned the lack of training and acknowledged that there was a need for clear guidelines, including a New Delhi-based reporter working for a national news agency:

*"[T]hese are things that you learn over time. Nobody tells you these things and you are just expected to be aware of these things. But I guess it's required, we need some sort of system in place."*

An experienced journalist working for a national radio station spoke of "not going by the book", since there usually isn't one, but learning from experience:

*"See, I have filed a story, and my higher ups in Delhi, they point out [issues]. So through that learning only, through mistakes that we do, what we hear other correspondents in other parts of the country have done... So it all is accumulated experience that guides us. It is there [in] our mind that we should not sensationalise any of the incidents, and we should go by the facts, whatever is told to us by an official source."*

Another reporter, based in Ahmedabad, spoke of arriving at her "own code of conduct" based on her experience. A Lucknow-based journalist, similarly, pointed out that "most of the reporters become experienced, and when they see such cases they know what sort of reporting needs to be done".

A journalist in Kerala who also spoke of relying on experience felt "editorial directions are not necessary for this kind of news." He added:

*"It is simple. We should not report anything that harms society or the readers. We should not create a situation that blocks the victim from having a proper social life. So we take care of these things."*

## Written policies

A small section of respondents (13.2%, n=34) spoke of having written policies. A Mumbai-based reporter working for a national English-language publication spoke of "internal policies on the matter", which drew from the legal guidance, and was "circulated in writing". A few other respondents said that guidelines were embedded in the newspaper stylesheet, which

provided clarity on "which terms to use", with one journalist adding that reporters were also notified of "updated verdicts by the Supreme Court".

A Tamil journalist, who worked for a national radio station spoke of a section within his organisation's style book "which clearly mentions the dos and don'ts while reporting on sexual violence":

*"This is the basic document we use. There was [also] a circular based on UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] recommendations on how sexual violence cases must be dealt with—the victim, immediate relatives of the victim... we got a circular. So these are the main documents which we refer when reporting on sexual violence."*

A Hindi print journalist based in Lucknow and working for a national daily spoke of "an entire sheet of guidelines". He said, "Our first priority is to write in such a way that no identity is disclosed of the victim".

A journalist in Kerala who worked for a daily newspaper explained his organisation's guidelines in greater detail:

*"We have printed guidelines, which in detail explain many things related to reporting and editing. It is almost 60 pages. It includes guidelines that have to be followed while reporting such cases. We have created these guidelines based on the guidelines from police, court, child rights commission, women's rights. We update it accordingly. When directions come from the government, we update it."*

Another journalist working for a different newspaper in the same state also spoke about specific guidelines for reporting on sexual violence:

*"We have a proper guideline for this. Describing what are the factors that have to be taken care of when you are dealing with rape cases. If the victim is a child, in no circumstance the name should be revealed. Nothing that points to the identity of the victim. Some cases [for example] are reported as stepfather raping the child... We are conscious in that case that we might not be able to reveal the name of*

*the stepfather because that might lead to the identification [of the victim]."*

A TV journalist working for an Odia channel referred to guidelines provided by the NGO, Breakthrough:

*"We follow their guidelines [for using images]. I have a booklet of them. The major things are, no image that looks very violent, [or] revealing the identity of the victim or her family."*

While a few journalists spoke of guidelines specific to sexual violence, many appeared to lack clarity when they were probed further. Some referred broadly to "general guidelines" from NGOs etc, which were circulated by their editors. Very few organisations, it appeared, had taken the initiative to create their own comprehensive set of guidelines and policies.

Overall, it appeared in this study that journalists who gave the response that they relied on "legal guidance" were less likely to consult or even feel the need for any other guidelines for reporting on sexual violence. As a result, many journalists were focused on what they could *not* do in their reporting (such as naming the victim or writing about sub judice cases) rather than what they could or should do.

## Personal principles

To better understand their approach to reporting, we further queried journalists on the personal principles that guide their work on sexual violence cases. Many respondents (38.2%, n=39) emphasised "sensitivity", followed by factual accuracy (12.7%, n=13), and avoiding sensationalism (9.8%, n=10). A small number of respondents, all men (5%, n=5), said their personal principles did not play any part in their reporting.

Being sensitive was most highlighted, with women reporters (54.3%, n=19) giving it considerably greater importance than men (29.9%, n=20). An independent journalist from Chhattisgarh, who has covered several sexual violence stories, said she prioritised a victim's wellbeing while reporting:

*"I try as much as possible to not sort of cause trauma again. [This] is very difficult with the nature of the questions that you're asking, especially if [the victims] are minors. If I'm using a translator, then I try to use a woman translator. If I'm on my own, then I try to spend as much time as I can, and*

**FIGURE 13: JOURNALISTS DESCRIBING PERSONAL GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN NEWS REPORTING**



*you know, not just land up and start asking questions. I try and speak to other people around first, family members and so on."*

Another woman journalist based in Delhi spoke of the insensitivity with which many reporters approach victims, and how she follows a different tack:

*"I have seen reporters walking in and saying 'Haan bhai, Shabana bolo tumhare saath kya hua tha (Hey, Shabana, tell us what happened to you)'. So this is how people talk to you. It's an absolutely nasty kind of mindset. I understand that there's a lot at stake when people actually talk to a reporter about an experience of this sort. So I try to respect that and I try to make sure that if they want to be anonymous, they remain anonymous, no matter what. I make sure that I don't approach the topic in a way that they get hurt or offended. I also try to talk about it through a larger prism of socio-economics rather than just calling them victims of sexual violence."*

Several women journalists spoke of "backing off" and not "pressurising" survivors if they felt they were causing harm. A journalist based in Srinagar put it thus: "I understand that she is harassed and is almost soulless". A male journalist, also based in Srinagar, said his personal rule is not to seek out the victim for "at least three days", while a woman journalist from the same city said she never asks the "rape victim to recall whatever has happened".

Reporters also spoke about steering clear of sensationalism, including being careful with their choice of words and also avoiding "going into details like what she was wearing and what she was doing or where". A TV journalist working for a national channel from Assam said: "You have to show what is necessary for the audience. Not show her belongings or her clothes scattered—anything of that nature should be cut".

Factuality and accuracy were also emphasised by several respondents. Reporters spoke of this as "making sure my report was based on truth" and avoiding "hearsay", as well as "sticking to facts and figures". A Tamil TV journalist said, "I don't rush to telecast it first. Since I work in the visual medium, bringing [a story] out first is

more important. But in these cases, I make sure the facts are right even if I telecast it late."

In terms of language, Tamil journalists were most likely to cite a range of personal principles, while the numbers were fairly low for Hindi and Punjabi.

## Responsibility of journalists

We queried journalists on how they perceived their own societal role when reporting on sexual violence, and whether they felt a sense of responsibility to combat the issue. Overall 166 of our participants offered reflections on this. The majority of journalists (78.3%, n=130) said they felt they had the responsibility to effect change, with a similar proportion of women and men expressing such sentiments, at 77.1% (n=54) and 79.2% (n=76) respectively.

Looking across languages, this is lower in Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi, which is worth noting. It is possible that these journalists may be more resistant to pursuing proactive solutions. Telugu and Gujarati are the only languages where some journalists explicitly stated that they did not feel responsible for change. Some 14.5% overall said journalists have limited impact, but this is particularly high in Malayalam and Bengali.

Those who felt a high sense of responsibility often referenced broader journalistic ideals. A New Delhi-based reporter said:

*"Journalists have their responsibilities, unavoidable responsibilities. You can't shy away. It is our responsibility to speak up on these matters which constitute the burning questions of our times. So it is the responsibility of the journalists to raise the issues that are concerning women, who make for 50% of the population."*

A Srinagar-based editor said:

*"Of course! As a journalist, yes, there is a huge responsibility. Journalism is all about trying to bring out the truth. It is an agency which should help in bringing about justice in society. It should help. If it does not help in the cause of justice for individuals and the society, then it is not achieving its purpose and its motive."*

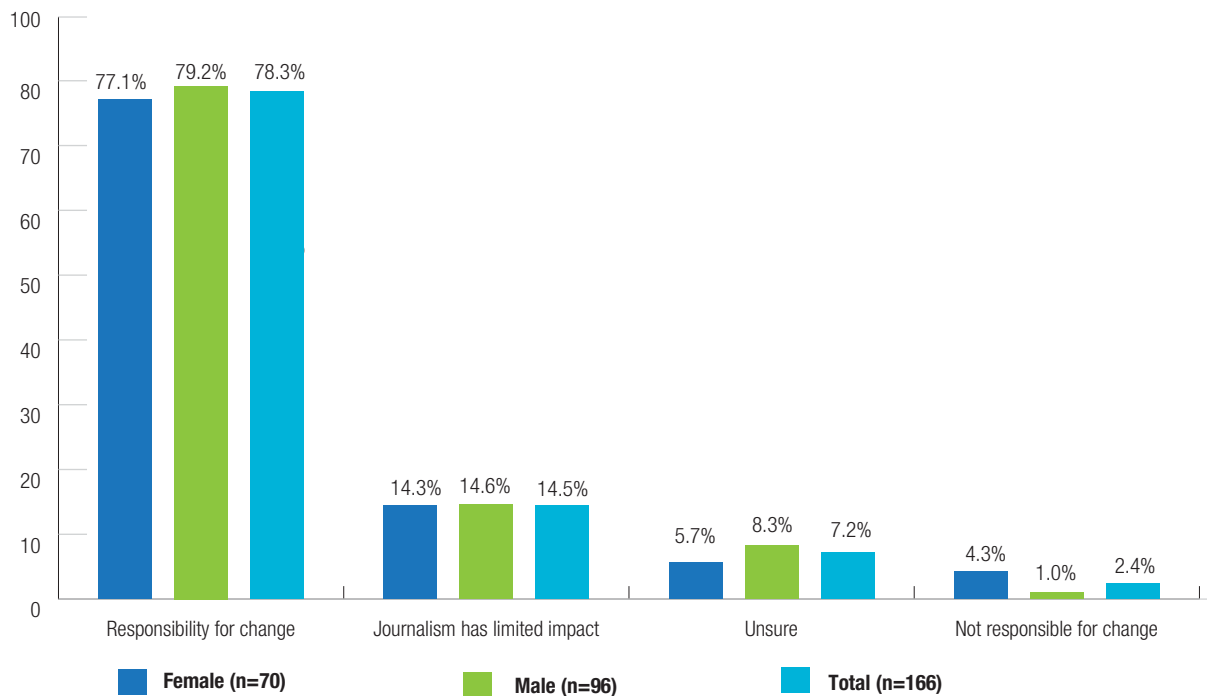


“

I try as much as possible to not cause trauma again. [This] is very difficult with the nature of the questions that you're asking... If I'm using a translator, I try to use a woman translator. I try to spend as much time as I can, not just land up and start asking questions. I try and speak to other people first, family members and so on.

”

**FIGURE 14: JOURNALISTS REFLECTING ON THEIR RESPONSIBILITY IN RELATION TO RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE**



An Urdu journalist from the same city added:

*“I want to help women by giving them their dignity back and stop such injustices. This newspaper is not printed merely for the sake of publishing. It’s a mission. It’s a voice against injustices and excesses.”*

Some journalists spoke more specifically about their responsibility to tackle the issue of sexual violence. A Gujarati journalist who covered crime for a TV channel said journalists have a major role to play in engendering change, and particularly in combating sexual violence. A woman Telugu journalist echoed the same sentiment. According to her, women journalists “particularly have to take more responsibility”.

A Mumbai-based woman journalist for a national TV channel said that journalists have a small but important role in change-making, and that it starts with “asking the right questions to the law enforcement agencies and not laughing at the sexist jokes the police or the prosecutor make at times”.

Several respondents said that reporting accurately and creating public awareness were how change could be effected, but others spoke of more actively seeking to get “justice” for the victim. As a Tamil journalist put it, “We have to ensure there is awareness

among people by writing about these issues. It is our duty to ensure that the victim gets support and justice”. A smaller segment said reporting on the trial and punishment and highlighting the consequences of committing sexual violence would act as a deterrent.

Although the majority of respondents agreed that journalists should strive for change, some were of the view that journalism could only have a limited impact. Several journalists pointed out that while the media could help, sexual violence was too pervasive a societal problem for them to make a significant change. A radio journalist based in Hyderabad conceived of journalists as just one part of a battalion that could fight sexual violence:

*“There should be many people fighting in this battle. In this battle, I can’t substitute for an activist or police official or a doctor. But I should certainly do my bit. I think journalists do have a responsibility.”*

A reporter working for a Malayalam newspaper in Kerala made a similar point, saying that journalists were among the many “different levels of people” such as “pastors, teachers, police, politicians” who could help bring about change:

*"We are raising our [voice] along with them against this. We can only be part of the campaign. That's all we can do. There are a lot many journalists writing against rape for more than 40 years. We can't see any significant change. The world is like that."*

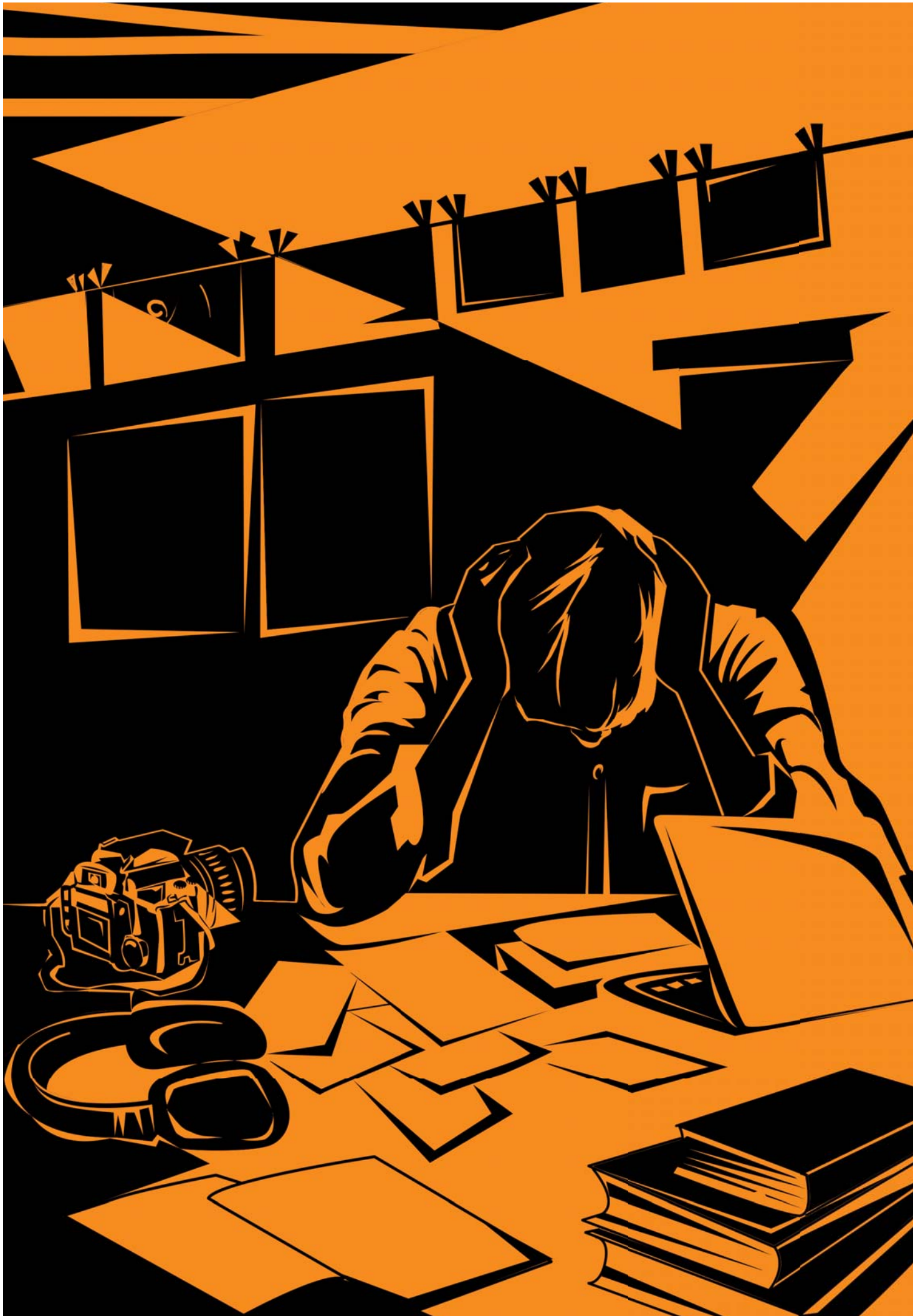
Another TV journalist who worked for a New Delhi-based channel said that while journalists do have a responsibility, they "can't really change the world". A TV journalist from the same state expanded that earlier in his career he believed he could play a vital role in preventing sexual violence, but he was now less idealistic:

*"I think we have a job in reporting sexual crimes. We have a role in finding out the psychological status of the person, we have a role in enlightening others that these types*

*of people are there in the society, and you should be more careful in sending your children out, while getting involved with a person, while getting in a relationship or affair or something. We can give information to millions of people. That's all we can do."*

While most respondents referenced their positioning as change-makers of society who could "build awareness" and help fight for "justice", many also acknowledged that their role was limited. A sense of futility—that there was only so much they could do—came through in the language of several journalists. While many felt that the magnitude of the problem was too great for them to make a significant impact, others said that being part of a collective effort with other stakeholders such as doctors and activists could yield more substantial results. ■







## SECTION 5

# Recommendations

This research provides insights into two critical aspects of the news reporting of sexual violence across India. While the content analysis offered a national profile of how rape and sexual violence are routinely portrayed by the news media, the interview data elaborated on the constraints and challenges that journalists face as they undertake sexual violence reporting on a day-to-day basis. Based on our findings, this section offers a set of recommendations to address the key issues that our research highlighted. These recommendations are informed by two rounds of consultations with stakeholders in India—journalists, representatives of NGOs and women’s rights organisations, and media educators—and are presented as principles to implement, both at the national and organisational levels.

## National recommendations

1. **Establish a national charter for news reporting of rape and sexual violence.** Journalism associations and news industry leaders should take the lead in establishing a national charter that promotes news organisations’ accountability and commitment to sensitive reporting. The charter would be based on a public pledge that media outlets sign up to. It should include a commitment to the best practices outlined below in terms of the reporting and representation of sexual violence, and, importantly, a commitment to addressing sexual harassment and violence towards their own news personnel.
2. **Establish collaborative news media networks to share experiences and best practices.** Journalism associations, as also NGOs and women’s rights organisations, have a role to play here. A fundamental objective of these networks is to foster direct interaction between newsrooms and among journalists.
3. **Establish peer-support networks for journalists experiencing personal trauma.** These networks could be in partnership with national and international organisations. It is important to recognise that journalists reporting on rape and sexual violence are exposed to distress and even post-traumatic stress. This may be exacerbated if they have experienced intimidation or harassment by sources or bystanders, or have been personally affected by violence.
4. **Train journalists in the complexities of law enforcement procedures.** Sensitive treatment of victims and witnesses, and a robust understanding of the legal requirements involved are critical to how cases are reported in the news media. While training programmes that focus on such aspects are available in some metropolitan areas, there is a need for a national initiative to ensure regional areas are also covered adequately. This study highlighted a number of areas where the FIR and initial police responses were detrimental to the victim/survivor and subsequent media coverage of the case would need to highlight such lapses.
5. **Develop specific educational interventions for media and journalism students.** These could be pedagogic strategies, curricula, and learning material, which can be used to ensure journalism education at all levels includes

considerations of rape and sexual violence, and journalists are equipped to deal with challenges associated with such reporting.

**6. Develop general educational interventions to improve media literacy for young adults.**

These should be aimed at developing a good understanding of sexualised media content they may be exposed to, and should include knowledge on how to report concerns about problematic media reporting, as well as reporting rape and sexual violence to authorities. This is important to demystify the process for reporting sexual violence for victims and witnesses.

**7. Commit means-tested industry funding and guidance to build capacity among journalists and newsrooms.**

Resources and lack of clarity in policy expectations often hinder the implementation of training, guidelines, and processes related to the coverage of sexual violence. This is particularly true in vernacular media houses, and a concerted industry-led initiative is required to address this issue.

**3. Agree on institutional approach to the use of language associated with rape and sexual violence.**

This should be incorporated into institutional style guides, and should be specific to the regional context and vernacular language the news outlets function in. If external style guides are used or referenced, news organisations should be proactive in adapting these to include appropriate guidance on language used to describe all aspects of rape (see 'Depiction and news framing' on p91 for additional guidance on this). In basic terms this means using 'rape' or 'sexual assault' in the first place, rather than terminology that seeks to sidestep the crime. In more complex terms, this involves narrating the incident factually, without sexualising or sensationalising it.

**4. Introduce a regular debriefing session for staff involved in reporting on rape and sexual violence.**

The process for such debriefing sessions should be clearly defined in institutional training materials, and should include up-to-date contact details for national and regional support groups.

## Organisational recommendations

**1. News organisations should adopt and integrate reporting guidelines into everyday newswork.**

Recommendations and good practices on covering rape and sexual violence (see example guidelines on p90) should be operationalised in newsrooms to inform daily editorial decisionmaking and train staff members.

**2. Establish routines for fact-checking and verifying FIRs and other official sources.**

This should include a commitment to always corroborate reports with multiple sources, and diversify the sources consulted in relation to rape and sexual violence. In particular, this means going beyond police and court reporting, and incorporating the voices of medical personnel, women's rights organisations and other relevant NGOs, among others.

**5. Establish institutional processes to ensure safety of journalists.**

These internal processes should be to facilitate the reporting of intimidation/harassment within their own organisation. This could include an anonymous whistleblower system, but, crucially, it should provide journalists the opportunity to report concerns or incidents to an independent person within the organisation but *outside* the journalists' editorial or line management control. This is to address the concern unearthed by the MAAR research that suggests journalists have raised issues but not been listened to, and cases where the intimidation was from their immediate superior.

**6. Journalists should be equipped with self-defence accessories when reporting from the field and have completed appropriate personal safety training.**

Tools might include personal alarms, self-defence pepper spray, and other personal safety equipment. Journalists should also be aware of how to utilise emergency

features on mobile phones, including alarms and automatic dialling of emergency numbers, and/or utilise dedicated wearable devices for this purpose.

- 7. Establish clear guidelines on how gender will be considered while assessing risk for assignments.** Risk assessments should be carried out to identify threat and mitigation procedures, rather than discriminating which journalistic roles or beats can be performed based on gender. Excluding women from assignments based on gender is disadvantageous, and also hinders preparation for such assignments should they be tasked with such in future. Editors, hence, should avoid 'sexist deployment'.
- 8. Engage in regular promotion and reporting of policies and programmes targeting rape and sexual violence reduction.** This would act as a preventative measure and encourage journalists to advocate social change on the issue.
- 9. Commit to reporting on rape and sexual violence irrespective of victim's relative 'newsworthiness'.** This is to ensure that violence perpetrated against vulnerable victims does not go unreported. This includes rape by a family member, individuals with disabilities, elderly, people in institutions (eg: orphanages, detention centres), prisoners, and the LGBTQ community.
- 10. Commit to applying guidelines to both editorial and advertising content.** News outlets should not agree to advertising that perpetuates negative gender stereotypes and portrays sexual violence. Further, they should ensure that any ads that are displayed alongside news stories pertaining to sexual violence are not inconsistent with the subject matter and are not insensitive to those involved. ■

## SECTION 6

# Guidelines

The previous section put forward several recommendations to be implemented at the national and organisational levels for the attention of journalism bodies and networks, media houses, and industry leaders. This section focuses on individual journalists and newsrooms, and provides five sets of guidelines—including good practices and do’s and don’ts—that can be absorbed into routine ‘newswork’. This resource can be used to help inform actions in relation to our recommendations set out in Section 5, for example relating to development of institutional guidelines, training materials, and educational curricula.

## Principles and practice

- 1. Establish routines for fact-checking and verifying FIRs and official sources.** This should include a commitment to corroborate reports with multiple sources, and diversify sources consulted in relation to rape and sexual violence. In particular, this means going beyond police and judicial sources, and incorporating the voices of medical personnel, NGOs, and women’s rights organisations, among others.
- 2. Check with health professionals or support organisation involved (where possible) before interviewing survivors.** Take advice on the survivor’s mental wellbeing. Avoid the interview, or moderate approach as needed, if it might aggravate the situation of the survivor.
- 3. Recognise cultural differences within a news organisation’s audiences.** Be sensitive towards

local customs, including differences between urban and rural locations, places with significant wealth disparities, or conflict/insurgency.

## Interviewing survivors

- 1. Recognise the effects of rape and sexual violence on the survivor (and other affected parties).** This includes physical (injuries suffered), mental (shock, anxiety, fear, distrust, shame, guilt, depression, sleep deprivation, etc), and social impact (isolation, stigma, ostracisation, forced marriage). Survivors are often vulnerable and journalists need to take adequate care in their interactions to be sensitive to visible *and* invisible signs of distress.
- 2. Be transparent.** When interviewing a survivor, be open about your intentions, where the report will be published, and how you might angle the story.
- 3. Establish boundaries with the interviewee.** Ensure that you do not provide false hope, and commit only to facilitating their voice being heard. Always carry a card with information for local services that can help rape and sexual violence survivors (including police, hospital, and support organisations).
- 4. Be flexible, accommodate survivor needs.** Survivors might have specific requests to allow them to cope with being interviewed. This could be taking breaks during the interview, preferring certain venues or timing, or having someone else present during the session.

If there is someone else present, you may need to ask them to allow the survivor to respond themselves and in their own words.

5. **Be sensitive to any preference that the survivor may show for the interviewer.** For instance, women survivors may prefer being interviewed by women journalists.
6. **Do not press survivors for details about the attack.** Allow them to tell the story in their own way, their own words.
7. **Allow survivors to define how they are referred to.** Generally 'survivor' is preferable to victim, although good practice would be to take the lead from how they describe themselves and the attacker.

## Depiction and news framing

1. **Avoid using language that detracts from rape or sexual violence as a crime.** This is a particular challenge in vernacular media, where some languages do not have a conventional usage/phrase for rape or sexual assault. While practical realities of journalism may dictate that cultural sensitivities be respected, be aware that ambiguous references to sexual violence may trivialise or downplay the severity of the crime and perpetuate its non-criminalisation.
2. **Be mindful when using inverted commas in headlines around selected words, unless it is a complete or partial quote.** Inverted commas for the term only (e.g. "rape") may give the impression that the validity of the claim is in question.
3. **Be diligent about the choice of photographs and illustrations.** Care must be taken to ensure that visuals and images accompanying reports on sexual violence do not depict the survivor in stereotypical ways (see guidelines below), or misrepresent (by trivialising or sensationalising) the crime.
4. **Similar care must be taken with captions that may accompany visuals.** The guidelines that apply to news reports should also be applied to texts that accompany the imagery in such stories.
5. **Avoid perpetuating rape myths that imply guilt or blame on the survivor (often referred to as victim-blaming).** This may take different forms, but undermines the criminality of the act and perpetuates trauma for survivors. Rape myths and problematic stereotypes include:
  - questioning if a rape was really a rape (either due to statutory considerations, or speculating about the willingness of the survivor);
  - implying the survivor provoked the attacker;
  - implying the survivor lured or seduced the attacker;
  - implying the survivor was at fault in any other way (e.g. by dressing in a particular way, by being in a location they shouldn't be, by acting in a way they shouldn't, by being drunk, and so forth);
  - implying the survivor could have prevented the attack;
  - questioning the character of the survivor (and thus the validity of their claims);
  - sympathising with the attacker based on previous conduct or standing;
  - implying local customs or cultural specificities explain or justify the behaviour of the attacker(s);
  - implying rape as a form of revenge can be explained or justified;
  - implying rape is a domestic issue (e.g. if involving spouse or family member);
  - assuming rape is committed by a stranger;
  - assuming that a rape report is false.
6. **Avoid unnecessary focus on details or characteristics of survivor or perpetrator.** Journalists should recognise that this is often victim-blaming in another guise.
7. **Do not perpetuate criticism of the victim for reporting the crime.** This might include citing sources that are critical or question the motivation of the survivor, by, for example, suggesting they

have filed a false report to seek attention, to enact revenge, to seek reward, and so forth

8. **Avoid sensational details or exaggerating the threat factor.**
9. **Avoid presenting the crime of rape as random, risky, or inevitable.**
10. **Avoid stories that may promote or glamourise perpetrators.** This includes providing a platform for perpetrators on stories or subjects unrelated to the crime.

## Sources

1. **Ensure that the anonymity of sources is not compromised unwittingly.** This happens when news reports accidentally reveal personally identifiable information. Identity may be deduced from age, caste, employment, and location details. This is particularly problematic where geographic location is precise, or in places with smaller populations.
2. **Incorporate a broad range of sources in the story.** In particular, this should include voices that can speak to the medical effects or trauma suffered by the survivor, or sources who can appropriately contextualise the crime.
3. **Treat subjects and sources equally regardless of sex or caste.**
4. **Ensure equitable treatment of all genders in news coverage, providing appropriate balance of sources and commentators.** Avoid negative gender portrayal by associating certain characteristics, behaviour, roles, professions, or status with gender.

## Context and solutions

1. **Add depth to coverage by providing context to rape as a societal issue.** This includes up-

to-date trends and statistics, as well as overtly challenging social stigma, myths, or stereotypes. Go beyond reporting on rape and sexual violence as merely a crime and justice issue; present it as a wider social problem underpinned by a range of factors.

2. **Surface important contexts of marginalisation and dispossession in news reporting.** For example, marginalised castes, marginalised ethnicities, situations of militarisation or communal violence, and conflict—where rape is used as a weapon, to keep certain communities in “their place”.
3. **Include contact details of support and welfare groups within stories of sexual violence.** This should include details for police, medical help, and charities, with geographic relevance to the readership of the publication. This is an increasingly common practice in relation to mental health and suicide, and the same approach could help increase awareness about support mechanisms for survivors of rape and sexual violence. In time, this could help address the underreporting of the crime to police.
4. **Highlight prevention initiatives to combat sexual violence, as well as solutions to address it.**
5. **Avoid trivialising rape cases by providing insufficient information.** The MAAR research shows that newspapers at times collate rape and sexual violence stories on a single page, or publish very little information or context, and routinely fail to follow up on what has been reported. Contextualised reporting is important. So are follow-ups.
6. **Avoid placing rape and sexual violence stories alongside other stories or adverts where the juxtaposition or association can be considered to be insensitive, inflammatory, or misleading.** It is important to consider how guidelines apply to both editorial and advertising content, and the composition of these. ■

# Related resources

## Journalism ethics and codes of conduct

- **Norms of journalistic conduct, Press Council of India**  
<https://presscouncil.nic.in/OldWebsite/NORMS-2010.pdf>
- **Gender code of ethics for media practitioners and owners.**  
<https://accountablejournalism.org/ethics-codes/botswana-gender-code-of-ethics>

## Guidelines for reporting on sexual violence

- **Reporting on violence against women and girls: A handbook for journalists**  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371524>
- **Gender-based violence in media: A media ethics toolkit on sensitive reportage**  
[https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/GBVInMedia\\_Report\\_FII.pdf](https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/GBVInMedia_Report_FII.pdf)
- **Reporting gender-based violence: A handbook for journalists**  
[http://www.ips.org/africa/library/publications/ips\\_reporting\\_gender\\_based\\_violence.pdf](http://www.ips.org/africa/library/publications/ips_reporting_gender_based_violence.pdf)
- **Use the right words**  
<http://www.femifesto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/UseTheRightWords-Single-Dec3.pdf>
- **Conducting safe, effective and ethical interviews with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence**  
[https://gbv.witness.org/portfolio\\_page/conducting-safe-effective-and-ethical-interviews/](https://gbv.witness.org/portfolio_page/conducting-safe-effective-and-ethical-interviews/)

## Gender disparities in news media

- **An unfinished story: Gender patterns in media employment**  
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000101613.locale=en>
- **Global report on the status of women in the news media**  
<https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf>
- **Gender inequality in the Indian media: A preliminary analysis**  
[https://www.im4change.org/siteadmin/tiny\\_mce/uploaded/Gender%20Inequality%20in%20India%20Media.pdf](https://www.im4change.org/siteadmin/tiny_mce/uploaded/Gender%20Inequality%20in%20India%20Media.pdf)

## Threats against women journalists

- **Violence and harassment against women in the news media: A global picture**  
<https://16dayscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Violence-and-Harassment-Against-Women-in-the-News-Media-PDF.pdf>
- **Online violence against women journalists: A global snapshot of incidence and impacts**  
<https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/UNESCO%20Online%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20Journalists%20-%20A%20Global%20Snapshot%20Dec9pm.pdf>
- **'Violence' online in India: Cybercrimes against women & minorities on social media**  
[https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FII\\_cyberbullying\\_report\\_website.pdf](https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FII_cyberbullying_report_website.pdf)

# Appendix

## Method: content analysis

We undertook a comparative content analysis of 10 newspapers across six languages (two Hindi, four English, and one each in Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil). Our purpose was to better understand the routine reporting of rape and sexual violence in the news media, especially in the portrayal of such crimes in vernacular outlets. We also wanted to understand how these reports played out over time—the patterns that emerged across weeks—to allow us to offer a more generalisable set of findings about the norms within this genre of news coverage.

We designed a three-month study, from 1 June to 31 August 2018. During this period, eight research assistants went through the 10 newspapers every day to identify reports on sexual violence.

The coders were assigned according to their proficiency in the respective languages, and they

covered a total of 33,575 pages in the period of the study. They identified, in all, 1,635 stories about sexual violence. Utilising a manual content analysis was important since we required coders to identify stories about rape and sexual violence even if there were phrases that could not be captured by keyword searches (including regional euphemisms for rape and sexual violence).

We conducted two pilot tests before finalising the coding sheet. These pilots were conducted on English and Hindi newspapers as these were the only languages shared by all eight coders. This enabled us to test the reliability of their interpretation in two different languages, thus giving us confidence about their coding in a language not spoken by the authors of this report. We reached an inter-coder reliability of Krippendorff's Alpha 0.816, which is satisfactory given the complexity of the coding sheet and cultural specificity.

**TABLE A: NEWSPAPERS SAMPLED FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Newspaper	Language	Edition	Area	Total Readership*
Dainik Jagran	Hindi	New Delhi	Hindi belt	68,667,000 (all-India)
The Times of India	English	Mumbai	National	17,344,000 (all-India)
Hindustan Times	English	New Delhi	North India	1,822,000
The Hindu	English	Chennai	South India	946,000
Hindustan Dainik	Hindi	Ranchi edition, Jharkhand	Hindi belt	3,852,000
The Assam Tribune	English	Guwahati	North East	2,65,000
Gujarat Samachar	Gujarati	Ahmedabad	Gujarat	8,355,000
Eenadu	Telugu	Vijayawada	Telangana	5,149,000
Vijaya Karnataka	Kannada	Bengaluru	Karnataka	8,226,000
Dina Thanthi	Tamil	Chennai	Tamil Nadu	25,754,000

\* Data from Indian Readership Survey (IRS) 2019, except for the Assam Tribune where the last available data is from 2011



Across the newspapers, we compared the frequency of reports; the placement of stories, as an indicator of the importance accorded to the issue; the types of sexual violence reported; and the locations—urban or rural—that are prioritised. We also examined how victims and perpetrators are described, and which sources are afforded a voice in relation to rape and sexual violence.

The newspapers selected for the study are widely circulated in specific regions of India, with a reported range in readership of between 0.94 million and 68 million (see *Table A*). The newspapers chosen represent six of the 10 largest languages in India by number of speakers as a percentage of total population. These are rooted in two different language families, and represent six different writing systems.

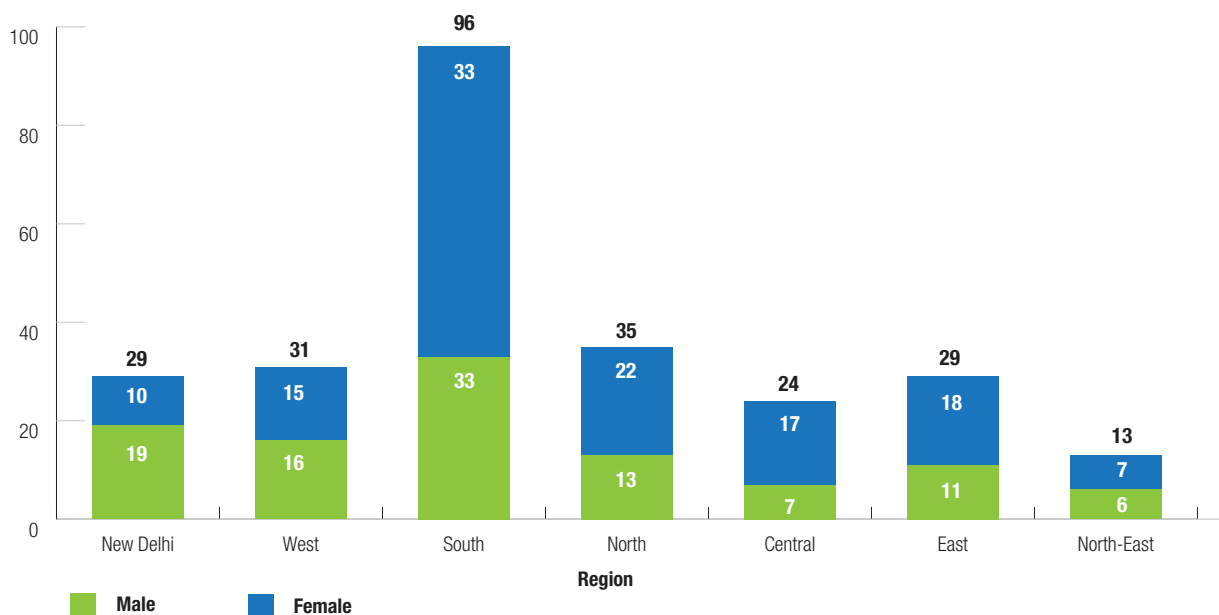
In determining the sample, we sought to cover a broad cross-section of India geographically. We ensured that we had a native speaker to carry out the coding for each chosen language. The vernacular language was chosen in each instance, apart from the seven states in the North-East, where we chose the largest English-language newspaper (which served as a link publication). We also included regional editions of the three English-language national dailies—the Times of India, Hindustan Times, and the Hindu—due to their wide readership in respective regions/nationally.

## Method: interviews

For this study, we conducted 257 semi-structured interviews with journalists working in 14 languages across India, and representing print, television, radio, and online sectors. The interviewees were drawn from North, North-East, East, Central, West, and South regions, primarily based on the Government of India's Zonal Councils<sup>31</sup>. For illustrative purposes, though, we treated the capital city of New Delhi as separate from the North, given its high concentration of national media houses.

The 14 languages we drew our interviewees from include Hindi and English, the main languages of India, and 10 of the other most-spoken languages: Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, Kannada, Odia, Malayalam, and Punjabi. We also included Assamese, which is the main language of the state of Assam in the North-East, and Kashmiri, from the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the North. Kashmir has a history of insurgency, with a heavy presence of security forces and restrictions on news media. North-East India, including parts of Assam, has also been a site of conflict due to the presence of insurgent groups. Including J&K and North-East India in our study allowed us to cover places where the journalism environment is considered different, and which rarely feature in comparative research owing to difficulties of access.

**FIGURE 15: NO. OF INTERVIEWEES BY REGION**



<sup>31</sup> <https://www.mha.gov.in/zonal-council>

**TABLE B: TOTAL INTERVIEWS ACROSS REGIONS AND SECTORS**

Region	Print	Television	Radio	Online	Total
North	29	13	6	16	64
North-East	5	5	1	2	13
East	14	8	1	6	29
Central	15	6	3	0	24
West	22	6	0	3	31
South	51	30	9	6	96
<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>257</b>

**TABLE C: TOTAL INTERVIEWS ACROSS MEDIUMS**

Region	Online	Print	Radio	Television	Total
New Delhi	13	8	1	7	29
West	3	22	0	6	31
South	6	51	9	30	96
North	3	21	5	6	35
Central	0	15	3	6	24
East	6	14	1	8	29
North-East	2	5	1	5	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>257</b>

Hindi, which is the national language and mother tongue to more than 528 million people, is the largest in our sample, while Kashmiri, which has slightly less than 6.8 million speakers, is the smallest. English, the lingua franca that cuts across India’s many states and regions, has only around 256,000 who consider it their primary language, according to the 2011 census, but is more influential than that number indicates due to its reach into the political and bureaucratic elite, and the fact that it serves as the second or third language to more than 125 million Indians.

Interviews were conducted by nine research assistants based in India in the preferred language of the journalist, translated into English and transcribed by a native speaker of the language interviewed in. All transcripts were anonymised, and information that could identify the respondents was removed before we began our analysis.

The interviews were conducted between September 2018 and July 2019, and our questions spanned newsroom practices, newsgathering and sourcing, editorial gatekeeping, as well as news narration, follow-ups and investigations vis-a-vis the journalism on sexual violence. We also queried journalists on the personal principles and guidelines they followed when reporting on sexual violence.

Data analysis was done using NVivo. We conducted a thematic content analysis, coding for a range of themes as outlined in this report. The coding was carried out by two coders, who achieved an inter-coder reliability of Kappa=0.82. To record this figure, we went through three rounds of preliminary coding, with the lead report author moderating disagreements, before the coding manual was finalised. ■





**“This report on sexual violence and the news media in India is a more than welcome addition to existing literature on the subject. If the recommendations and guidelines are taken on board by news media organisations, it could result in a sea-change in coverage of sexual violence in the Indian media.”**

**Ammu Joseph, journalist and author**

**“This study presents a wide-ranging, rigorous, and in-depth analysis of the relationship between news media and incidents of rape and sexual violence in India, both in terms of the stories told and the people who tell them. There is a persuasive analysis of a wide range of newspapers in multiple languages, coupled with in-depth interviews with an impressive number of journalists.”**

**Karen Ross, Professor of Gender and Media**

