

Chapter - VI

GENDER, CRIME AND HEADLINES: HOW SENSATIONALISM SHAPES BIAS

BY

Roshmi Paul

Abstract

Gender-based crimes are rising in both visibility and severity, yet public understanding of these offences is shaped less by actual crime patterns and more by how the media frames them. Contemporary coverage particularly in mainstream outlets and digital platforms tends to amplify extreme incidents through sensational headlines, emotionally charged language, and repetitive dramatic framing. While such reporting temporarily mobilises outrage, it simultaneously obscures the systemic, everyday forms of gendered violence that statistical records consistently highlight. This disconnect creates a skewed cognitive map of gender based crime: certain victims become hyper-visible symbols of national shock, while others remain peripheral, normalised, or invisible. This study interrogates the relationship between gender, crime, and headline construction, examining how sensationalism shapes public bias, risk perception, and implicit hierarchies of victimhood. Drawing on crime data, media content analysis, and discourse patterns found in national and international reporting, the research explores how linguistic choices such as episodic framing, victim-blaming cues, moral panic triggers, and crisis-centred headlines distort societal understanding of gender-based violence. The analysis also considers how media sensationalism influences social attitudes, policy expectations, and the public's selective empathy, reinforcing stereotypes around female vulnerability, class, morality, and "ideal victims." By integrating insights from criminology, media psychology, and gender studies, this research identifies the structural gap between crime reality and crime representation. It argues that sensationalised headlines not only shape bias but actively participate in constructing which crimes matter, which victims are heard, and which forms of violence remain unaddressed. The findings aim to contribute to more ethical reporting frameworks and a more grounded public discourse on gender and violence.

Keywords: Sensationalism, Gender-based Crime, Media Framing, Headlines, Public Bias

Introduction

One such societal issue that has become a crisis of visibility in the recent arena is the Gender Based Violence (GBV). It has become a public discussion and the role of media is significant in such. Among all violence, one which has dominated the shadows of private life is the hidden violence against women and girls. In the recent years, persistent reporting of crimes, horrific case studies along with convicting statistics suggests that crimes against women and girls are neither unusual nor unique, thus it has become a topic of public discussion. Assumptions that such violence is uncommon or declining have been challenged by media outlets which have provided striking visualisations and analysis revealing escalating crimes against Indian women in various forms over the years.¹

Today's visibility of gender-based violence is a result of two interrelated dynamics: a real persistence or, in many cases, an increase in reported instances, and increased public awareness driven by media coverage that documents both individual tragedies and statistical trends. As per the official crimes report of 2022, it has been observed that more than 445,000 incidents are the crimes against women which includes rape, assault, mental harassment as well as cruelty by husband and relatives either. This horrible report represents an average of one crime case in every 51 minutes and highlights that the problem of crimes against women are beyond anecdotes. As per the report of the United Nations, intimate partner violence in both ways sexual or physical as well as mental violence affects millions of women worldwide.

Media has a great influence in framing public perception. In addition to such, media plays an important role in communicating factual clarity and logic to the people as well as outlets the individual stories which such as tragic death of a young girl who had made repeated complaints of sexual harassment which went unanswered due to lack of attention and systematic failures as well. Media positively encourages its viewers to view violence as a result of structural inequality rather than as random violence. Emotionally charged reporting is a common journalistic practice that helps humanise abstract statistics and bring systemic injustices to life². However, concerns are raised to bring Sensationalism that positively bring public awareness about Gender Based Violence along with that focuses on the widespread form of Gender Based Violence that occurs worldwide.

¹ Social and Political Research Foundation (SPRF), Crimes Against Women in India: Trends, Challenges and Policy Responses (SPRF)
<https://sprf.in/crimes-against-women-in-india-trends-challenges-and-policy-responses/> accessed 20 December 2025.

² Monika Bastian and others, 'Media Framing of Gender-Based Violence' (2024) Media and Communication
<https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/download/8964/4226> accessed 20 December 2025.

In fact gender based violence concentration is at high risk as it has become persistent. Systematic form of violence against gender like domestic violence, harassment in public as well as private places, online harassment and discrimination towards gender influences every day crime lives. However, many instances would go unnoticed and public indignation would be subdued in the absence of such media coverage. In the end, media framing both amplifies and complicates public understanding: it calls attention to the seriousness of Gender based Violence while making it difficult for viewers to see that every news conceals a larger pattern of pervasive inequality and normalised violence.

Gender-Based Crime and the Gap Between Reality and Representation

In India as well as throughout the world, gender-based violence (GBV) is widespread and underreported, reflecting profound systemic injustices. Data from India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that 4,45,256 crimes against women were registered in 2022, or about 51 complaints every hour, with a crime rate of 66.4 per 100,000 women. The majority of such incidents are outlets as domestic violence, violence against a woman either by the spouse or family members or both. Nowadays the scope of domestic violence have broadened as the dataset includes here also involves a portion of rape, kidnapping or abduction, committing assault, modesty, and new cybercrimes³.

However, according to the data from National Family Health Survey-5(NFHS-5) survey based data indicates that the official statistics often underestimate the actual extent to which the violence is caused to a woman. Approximately, one of the three Indian women who have been married, experiences physical, sexual or emotionally they are being subjected to violence as well. The report estimated from UN Women suggests that one in three women who is either the age of 15 or above 15, once had been the victims of either sexual or physical abuse by a partner or not partner. As per the official crimes report and data, less than 40% of the women who are the victims if such violence seek official assistance, and the horrible fact suggests that less than 10% of the women report to the police regarding the violence faced by them which exacerbates the obscurity of these crimes.

Everyday Forms of Gender Based Violence

One such violence that is deeply ingrained in daily life and interpersonal relationships are gender based crimes. One such crime which is very prevalent in numerous cases are the intimate partner

³ Max H Bazerman and Ann E Tenbrunsel, Ethical Breakdowns (Harvard Business School Working Paper No 11-092, 2011)
https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/11-092_05eaf393-0012-4d12-9d73-0c07d3f7af46.pdf accessed 20 December 2025.

violence (IPV), which affects millions of the women in everyday lives but these crimes are rarely included in the official statistics. This crimes includes sexual, emotional as well as physical violence by husband or the male partner. Women are also subjected to economic pressure, psychological assault, dowry death , sexual harassment as well as stalking. Within patriarchal social institutions that support male entitlement and restrict women's autonomy, these behaviours are frequently accepted⁴. In-law abuse and dower deaths are two other examples of culturally specific forms of violence that are common in South Asia. The prevalence of cyber-enabled abuses, such as online stalking, digital harassment, and non-consensual sharing of private photos, is rising quickly, demonstrating how gendered violence adapts to new platforms.

Media Emphasis on Extreme Incidents

The most extreme or dramatic instances of gender-based crime, including well-publicized rapes or high-profile killings, are frequently highlighted by the media. Even if these tales garner crucial attention and spur legislative changes (such as the adjustments to the penal code following Nirbhaya), they produce an inaccurate portrayal of commonplace violence⁵. Even though they are significantly more common, routine, pervasive types like workplace harassment, street harassment, and marital abuse receive relatively little notice. This discrepancy adds to the public's belief that only big events "count" as severe, despite the fact that millions of people are harmed by everyday violence.

Understanding Crime Prevalence: Reported vs Reality

The discrepancy between reported offences and lived experience is a fundamental issue in comprehending the incidence of Gender Based Violence (GBV). Only officially registered offences, which make up a tiny portion of actual violence, are reflected in official police records. Reporting is discouraged by institutional impediments, cultural stigma, fear of reprisals, mistrust of the police, and social obligation to "preserve family honour." More concealed prevalence is captured by survey data. For instance, the results of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) survey on IPV are significantly higher than those of the NCRB register, demonstrating how formal statistics understate the scope. The difference between what is recorded in crime statistics and what survivors go through is fundamental to the gap between reality and representation.

⁴ Asha Bajpai, 'Gender-Based Violence and Media Representation' (2024) Journal of Social Justice <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11610212/> accessed 20 December 2025.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Gender-Based Discrimination and Women in Conflict with the Law (E4J Module 9)

⁵ UN Women, Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women> accessed 20 December 2025.

Normalisation and Invisibility of Gender-Based Violence

There are certain types of violence that are normalised to maintain the cultural standards and often those violence are treated as " private or domestic issues" rather than calling them as "crimes". In situations where marital rape is not legally recognised, patriarchal ideas may minimise or justify economic dominance within families⁶. Victims are silenced by these rules, and their experiences are hidden from statistical visibility and public discourse. Additionally, survivors' mistrust is reinforced and chronic underreporting is exacerbated by the fact that police and legal systems are not always prepared to deal to violence against gender in a compassionate or consistent manner.

Sensationalism in Contemporary Crime Reporting

In today's media landscape, audience engagement requires frequent influence of crime reports rather than rigorous dedication of factual accuracy or ethical responsibility. The concept Sensationalism prioritizes emotion, shock,drama and therefore it has become prevelant in both the mainstream as well as the digital media which positively change public perception as well as the way crimes are portrayed changes.Sensationalism is fundamental in attracting attention. Headlines that are exaggerated and emotionally charged with languages attracts strong responses from the viewers both in traditional as well as digital media.Stories are constructed to emphasise the most dramatic aspects, frequently putting "shock value" ahead of substance, rather than presenting events with objectivity and complexity.⁷

The use of exaggerated imagery and narrative decisions is one characteristic that distinguishes sensational crime reporting. Lurid elements are often emphasised in media reports: vivid personalisation of crime scenes, graphic depictions of violence, and emphasis on the terror or anguish of victims. Instead of encouraging contemplative thought, these components are intended to provoke instantaneous emotional response. This impact is amplified by clickbait titles on digital platforms, which promise dramatic revelations but frequently fall short in terms of factual despthity . Additionally, sensationalism frequently oversimplifies difficult problems. Nuanced features of criminal acts, such as socioeconomic causes, legal context, or systemic concerns, are sometimes

⁶ Ritu Menon, Sensationalism in Crime Reporting (PhD Thesis, West Virginia University 2018)
<https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4222&context=etd> accessed 20 December 2025.

⁷ UN Women, Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women> accessed 20 December 2025.

overlooked or ignored in the haste for dramatic impact. What's left is a stark and limited story that portrays crime as unexpected, frightening, and abrupt.⁸

This trend is largely driven by commercial drivers. Media companies are competing more fiercely for viewers' attention as conventional income models have moved online. Sensational material is very good at generating clicks and increasing ad income, especially when it's about crime. The function of journalism as a trustworthy source of public information may be weakened by this economic pressure, which has the potential to subvert professional standards of fair reporting.

Lastly, ethical values are sometimes marginalised by sensationalism in criminal reporting. The pursuit of dramatic storylines may result in the invasion of victims' privacy, the exploitation of weak people, and the perpetuation of preconceived notions about particular groups. Such reporting can sensationalise misery and generate spectacle around catastrophe rather than teaching or enlightening the audience.

Headline Construction and Linguistic Framing of Gender-Based Crime in Media

In addition to just reporting incidents, media framing of gender-based crime creates meaning through certain language choices, narrative patterns, and headline techniques that influence how viewers view the victims, offenders, and social context of those crimes. These creations are intricately linked to societal power systems and current gender standards. The use of passive language and agent deletion is one of the main characteristics of headlines in gender-based crime reporting. The perpetrators are frequently left out of crime headlines, such as "Woman found strangled," which reduces agency and obscures accountability. This trend normalises violence against women as a background phenomena rather than the consequence of clear misbehaviour and perpetuates the idea that women are helpless victims.⁹

Bias in headline and text framing is also reflected in naming and identification standards.

It has been observed by many reports that male offenders are generally identified with their full names while the female victims are often represented as relational or descriptive titles like "mother of a child" or "wife". This is another form of unequal treatment in headlines which often indicates the presumption which often works as underlying forces that suggests that women identities are

⁸ Ritu Menon, Sensationalism in Crime Reporting (PhD Thesis, West Virginia University 2018) <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4222&context=etd> accessed 20 December 2025.

⁹ S K Verma, 'The Ethics of Reporting: Balancing Truth and Sensationalism in Global Media' (2023) Global Media Journal <https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/the-ethics-of-reporting-balancing-truth-and-sensationalism-in-global-media.php?aid=94551> accessed 20 December 2025.

secondary or derived, this inbuilt the patriarchal standards. The gender marking of occupations and professions in headlines is another noteworthy trend. When a woman is the subject, neutral job terms become gendered (e.g., "female judge," "lady teacher"), indicating surprise or departure from an assumed male standard. By emphasising gender in situations where it is irrelevant, these markers might affect reader interpretation and subtly exoticize female characters.¹⁰

Sensationalist headlines have also drawn a lot of criticism. Sensational language increases the emotional effect of a crime by highlighting its severity, "shock value," or uncommon elements, but it frequently does so at the expense of context. The systematic prevalence of gender-based violence is obscured by headlines that depict offenders as "monsters" or obsess over graphic details, turning complicated social issues into entertainment. Instead of educating viewers about the seriousness of the problem, they may unintentionally titillate or sexualise them. India's feminism Experts advocate for survivor-centered, trauma-sensitive language that avoids victim blaming, honours dignity, and eliminates superfluous graphic information in ethical reporting discourse. Guidelines for ethical communication emphasise that words have a real-world impact, influencing society attitudes, supporting stereotypes, or assisting in their dismantling.

Hierarchies of Victimhood and Selective Visibility in Gender-Based Crime Reporting

Instead of operating on neutral ground, media coverage of gender-based crime creates a hierarchy of victimhood through selective visibility. While the great majority of survivors of gender-based violence remain structurally unseen, some victims become hyper-visible, elevated as symbols of public anger or "national shock." Editorial choices, story framing, and cultural presumptions about morality, class, caste, and respectability all contribute to the construction of this hierarchy. High-profile cases, which frequently involve young, urban, middle-class, or "respectable" women, garner political criticism, dramatic headlines, and prolonged media coverage. Public sorrow and cries for reform are sparked by the framing of these victims as symbols of societal failure. On the other hand, domestic workers, Dalit women, migrant labourers, women affected by war, and those criminalised by the legal system frequently endure everyday violence that is either underreported or rendered statistically abstract.¹¹

¹⁰ Journalism University, The Problem of Sensationalism in the Media

<https://journalism.university/media-information-literacy/problem-sensationalism-media/> accessed 20 December 2025.

¹¹ S Chandra and R Dutta, 'Discourse Constructions of Gender-Based Crimes in Newspaper Reports' (2019)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336672543_Discourse_Constructions_of_Gender-Based_Crimes_in_Newspaper_Reports accessed 20 December 2025.

Victims who conform to standards of domestic respectability, chastity, and femininity are highlighted, while those who are seen as deviant are either indirectly blamed or left out of sympathetic framing. Whose suffering is publicly acknowledged and whose is normalised or ignored is determined by this moral filtering of suffering.¹² Furthermore, reporting frequently creates a false antithesis between "gentleman offenders" and "ideal victims," especially when elite or influential males are involved. By using euphemisms, passive constructions, or highlighting their professional accomplishments, perpetrators from powerful social groups may be linguistically softened. By implying that violence is an anomaly rather than a continuation of structural privilege, this framing weakens accountability and perpetuates gender and class power disparities. Selective visibility has two effects. The "everyday ten" the innumerable victims of regular domestic abuse, workplace harassment, prison violence, and conflict-related sexual assault are first marginalised because their experiences seldom qualify as newsworthy. Second, by concentrating reforms on extreme cases rather than tackling long-standing disparities in social protection, legal access, and policing, it limits the policy imagination.

As a result, media coverage intentionally organises public attention by ranking victims according to symbolic worth, rather than just reflecting gender-based violence. Justice and prevention are undermined by this hierarchy, which perpetuates social injustices and hides the structural causes of violence.

Public Risk Perception, Selective Empathy, and the Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes

The public's sense of risk and the distribution of empathy are strongly influenced by the selective framing of gender-based crime. Media narratives affect audiences' emotions as well as who they fear, who they blame, and whose suffering they accept as justified. A distorted emotional and cognitive map of risk is created when some types of violence are emphasised while others are marginalised due to sensationalism and repetition. While drawing attention away from the most prevalent types of violence intimate relationship abuse, familial coercion, and institutional harm this focus on uncommon but startling occurrences heightens societal fear. Because of this, audiences overestimate external threats and underestimate relational violence that occurs on a daily basis, which results in ineffective preventative measures and societal vigilance.¹³

¹² Bushra Nursuhaila, 'Representation of Gender in Crime News Reports' (2021) *Journal of Gender Studies* <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8405979/> accessed 20 December 2025.

¹³ R Anitha, 'Gendered Framing of Crime and Media Bias' (2022) *Cogent Social Sciences* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311983.2022.2146927> accessed 20 December 2025.

When viewers are trained to emotionally invest in victims who reflect socially prized identities, selective empathy develops. By consistently linking men with agency, violence, or moral authority and women with vulnerability, this dynamic perpetuates gender stereotypes.¹⁴ While systemic enablers of violence continue to be understudied, women are portrayed as constantly at risk and in charge of ensuring their own safety. Such framing reinforces victim-blaming attitudes by gently shifting accountability from institutions and offenders to the actions of specific women. The media promotes informed empathy rather than reactive indignation when it highlights prevalence, power dynamics, and survivor dignity. Stereotypes are contested, the circle of concern is widened, and structural reform is supported by such reporting.¹⁵

Conclusion

Media portrayals of crime actively create social meanings, affect emotional engagement, and mould public views of gender, power, and justice in addition to just communicating facts. The media frequently reproduces and reinforces gendered preconceptions that deviate greatly from the reality of crime patterns, according to studies on gender and crime reporting. This creates social narratives that uphold uneven power systems.¹⁶

This pattern is amply demonstrated by empirical study on crime news coverage.¹⁷ According to Grabe and colleagues' analysis using the chivalry hypothesis, female offenders who follow traditional gender norms that is, nonviolent, nonthreatening women often receive more lenient or muted coverage, while female offenders who defy gender norms such as those who commit violent crimes or crimes against children—are portrayed more harshly than male offenders for similar acts. Larger headlines, more coverage days, and justifications based on personal shortcomings rather than contextual social causes are used to sensationalise these women. Therefore, this subtle "patriarchal chivalry" is a conditional media framing based on gendered norms of "gentleness" and nurturing rather than universal forbearance.

¹⁴ Arvind Narrain, Media Trials and Gender Justice (SSRN Working Paper No 3677965, 2020)

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3677965 accessed 20 December 2025.

¹⁵ Feminism in India, 'Sensationalist Headlines and the Media's Treatment of Gender-Based Crimes' (2019)

<https://feminisminindia.com/2019/10/31/sensationalist-headlines-media/> accessed 20 December 2025.

¹⁶ Dianova International, Ethical Communication and Media Guidance on Gender-Based and Domestic Violence <https://www.dianova.org/opinion/ethical-communication-and-media-guidance-on-gender-based-and-domestic-violence-speaking-truth-with-dignity/> accessed 20 December 2025.

¹⁷ Nicole M Rader and others, 'Gender in Crime News: A Case Study Test of the Chivalry Hypothesis' (2006) Journal of Criminal Justice

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233016810_Gender_in_Crime_News_A_Case_Study_Test_of_the_Chivalry_Hypothesis accessed 20 December 2025.

Content and discourse analyses of gender representation in criminal news across several contexts reveal stereotypical and systematic under-representation of women. Women are under-represented in crime reporting compared to men, according to studies on Pakistani English newspapers. When they do appear, headlines and linguistic structures frequently highlight relational identifiers (such as marital status or relationship to men), which diminish women's agency and reinforce patriarchal scripts. Readers' cognitive "mental schemas" are shaped by these depictions, which cause viewers to perceive female victims less as independent actors and more as passive or characterised by gender relations.¹⁸

According to media psychology, crime reporting benefits from emotional engagement, such as drama, menace, and morality plays, which make stories captivating and memorable. However, by favouring dramatic and exceptional incidents over representative statistics, this emotional hook can skew public perception and fuel moral panic and terror. According to the Transform Justice framing guide, default criminal justice ideas like punishment and deterrence are strong but ineffective if they are used blindly. Rather, reorienting communications to emphasise human potential, contextual justice, and societal causes might lessen sensationalism and increase public awareness of crime and justice.¹⁹ From a gender studies standpoint, societal power systems are impacted by women's visibility as both victims and offenders. Women are often portrayed in news media as emotional beings, victims, or outliers to the masculine norm, which perpetuates systemic disparities in power and visibility. Gendered language has an impact on mental representations, according to research that goes beyond direct criminal reports. Using gender-inclusive language makes women more visible in roles that are often assigned to men, indicating that linguistic framing alone can change conceptions of gender roles. When combined, these studies highlight the discrepancy between the reality of crime and how it is portrayed in the media: rather than presenting objective facts, the media frequently reproduces cultural biases that skew public perception²⁰. It is, gender, and justice. crucial to reframe crime and headlines using nuanced, contextual, and inclusive ways in order to dispel preconceptions and promote a more fair and truthful public conversation about crime

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¹⁸ Nursuhaila A Rashid, 'Representation of Gender in Crime News Reports' (2018) <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Representation-of-gender-in-crime-news-reports-in-a-Nursuhaila/111fd71573ecd9698fa7b97c985a4915d3a57ca9> accessed 20 December 2025.

¹⁹ Transform Justice, Reframing Crime and Justice: A Handy Guide (2023) https://www.transformjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Reframing-crime-and-Justice-a-handy-guide_Transform-Justice.pdf accessed 20 December 2025.

²⁰ Temple International & Comparative Law Journal, 'Gender, Crime and Media Narratives' (2020) TICLJ https://sites.temple.edu/ticlj/files/2020/05/34.1_Article-G-Final-Format.pdf accessed 20 December 2025.