

UNDER-REPORTING AN ENDEMIC

ANALYSIS OF NEWS REPORTS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN NEPAL



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Under-reporting an Endemic: Analysis of News Reports on Violence against Women in Nepal

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Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN)

Kupandole, Lalitpur

Synopsis: Using datasets of publicly-reported incidents collated by Nepal Monitor (reported by news media, INSEC, and Nepal Police) between 2018 and 2020, Democracy Resource Center Nepal analyzed how these incidents were covered in news-media. In the publicly reported incidents of Violence Against Women (VAW), the stories of rape and sexual assault are prioritized, while domestic violence is under-reported even though it is far more endemic. The frequency of public-reports does not reflect provincial prevalence levels of VAW. News reports on VAW were at least three to four sentences shorter than on incidents other than VAW and mostly prioritized the point of view of law enforcement agencies. Accounts by survivors, their family members, and other witnesses were rarely included. Many news stories tried to protect survivors/victims by not revealing their names but included information that could easily reveal their identities. Most importantly, news stories were incident driven and made little effort to connect the incident to the larger context of violence against women. By moving away from incident driven reporting and adopting a public health framework to report VAW, news media can make positive contribution to the larger narrative of VAW. Such a framework includes incorporating relevant data and statistics, contextualizing stories, suggesting the responsibilities of communities in preventing VAW, and improving access to justice for survivors. Further, reporting on VAW needs to confront the structural constraints that result from the inadequate presence of women in senior positions within news media.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis that has placed additional care duties on women and has resulted in an increase in occurrences of violence against women (VAW). UN Women calls it a ‘shadow pandemic’ as emerging data shows an increase in calls to domestic violence helplines in many countries since the outbreak of COVID-19.¹ In line with this, a study done by Nepal’s National Women Commission (NWC) noted a “sharp increase” in calls to helplines attributed to “growing incidents of violence.”² Given the apparent rise in incidents of violence against women, Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN) in collaboration with Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP) initiated an analytical study on reported incidents of VAW. DRCN analyzed the data from the past three years (2018-2020) to identify patterns and build an understanding on reported incidents. Data for

the study was collated by COCAP’s ongoing project – Nepal Monitor.

Nepal Monitor collects disaggregated data on different incidents of violence including those pertaining to gender-based violence (GBV) and VAW. Using news reports in national and local media, and short incident reports from the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) and Nepal Police websites, Nepal Monitor collected 3,715 different incidents of VAW including incidents of sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, persecutions related to dowry, and mob violence from the beginning of 2018 till the end of 2020. This data provides detailed coverage and a map of incidents related to VAW that are publicly reported. However, the data only covers publicly reported incidents and does not provide an idea about prevalence levels of VAW across the country. Using surveys and other secondary data sources, the prevalence of different forms of VAW was compared, and contrasted with what is covered in the news and incident reports. Additionally, using several variables including details of incidents, a content-analysis on news reports was conducted to understand how news media is shaping the narrative around VAW (See, Appendix I). Since, Nepal Monitor’s primary source of information is Nepali-language media, this report limits its analyses to contents from news reports published in Nepali.

In the next section of this report, the ways in which incidents of VAW reach different news media and the factors that determine whether they are covered is

¹ UN Women. 2020. The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19/>; accessed on December 28, 2020.

² National Women Commission. 2020. National Women Commission’s Initiatives in Responding to and Reducing Gender-based Violence during the Lockdown. Available at https://www.nwc.gov.np/Publication_file/5fa78a6eb289f_2020_Sep_18_Lockdown_Report_-_4_months.pdf; accessed on December 28, 2020.

assessed. The third section compares the frequency of publicly reported incidents with the prevalence levels of VAW as measured by the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) and the dataset published by Women, Children and Senior Citizen Service Directorate (WCSCSD), a wing of the Nepal Police, which records all incidents of VAW reported to the Nepal Police. This will help answer whether publicly reported incidents are representative of societal prevalence levels.³ The fourth section analyzes the content of news reports including their length, and the text used for headlines and to present stories on VAW. The fifth section discusses the challenges to reporting VAW in Nepal, and the sixth assesses the observed increment in incidents of VAW in Nepal during the pandemic. The final section includes conclusions.

2. Ecosystem around reporting VAW in Nepal

Depending on the nature of the crime, when an incident of VAW takes place, the survivor along with their family, community, or the witness, has to report a complaint against the perpetrator with the police or a local mediation committee.⁴ They may also choose to go to news media or other organizations providing rescue and relief services directly. In certain cases, news media might pursue the case out of their own accord. However, after a first information report (FIR) is filed by a victim, through DRCN's interview with journalists, it was found that the information was provided to news media by the Nepal Police. The court and lawyers can also choose to provide, not provide, or even censor information to news media in an on-going trial. At any point of time during this process, if a reporter files a story with their publication, the

³ Nepal Police dataset on VAW includes all incidents that occur across the country and comes to its notice, but it only publishes incident reports on some of these cases. Both data is used in this study, and one must not be conflated with the other.

⁴ The legal jurisdictions on different types of VAW incidents fall to different authorities. Minor disputes can be reported and settled by local mediation committees, while criminal incidents of VAW need to be reported to Nepal Police or courts. Here local mediation committee includes both ward-level mediation committee and judicial committee.

editor has the final say on what is published and how it is published. The three 'gatekeepers' are the family and community, the criminal justice system comprising police, courts and mediation committees, and the news media. They influence what, when, and how any incident of VAW is shared, and in the process, how each incident shapes the larger narrative on the issue.

As illustrated further in the next section, only a few incidents of VAW are likely to be reported by the news media. The incidents reported by news media are in turn influenced by how "filters" are enacted at each subsequent step by the gatekeepers, who largely operate within the structural boundaries shaped by the patriarchal socio-culture and political economy that lead to the occurrence of VAW in the first place.⁵ A journalist who regularly covers violence against women expressed these structural constraints poignantly:

Violence against women, more often than not, are committed by individuals who are more powerful than victims. As such, the victim risks being further abused/tortured when she seeks justice. The perpetrator has better access to and more influence in politics, the police, the court system, and the media.

At each level of the criminal justice system and news media, which determine the incidents that are reported in the news, women's representation is severely low. This implies that men play a disproportionate role in deciding how incidents of VAW are processed and portrayed.⁶ Additionally, the normalization of crimes like domestic violence across the country also suggests

⁵ Filters are often informed by news media biases which in turn are influenced by the dominant socio-culture and political economy. See; Zollmann, Florian, et al. 2018. The Propaganda Model and Intersectionality: Integrating Separate Paradigms. *Media Theory* 2(2): 213-239. Available at <http://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/69>; accessed on March 20, 2021.

⁶ National Women Commission's data from 2017 shows that the percentage of female judges in all the courts across the country is around 2 percent, the percentage of female police persons in the Nepal Police is around 6 percent. Similarly, the percentage of female workers in the media is around 20 percent. Available at https://www.nwc.gov.np/Publication_file/5d5cf5e93fc45_NWC-Gender-Data-Final.pdf; accessed on March 20, 2021.

Table 1: Types/causes of VAW incidents covered by the news and incident reports (2018 to 2020)

Types/causes of VAW	Reported number of incidents	Percentage
Rape/Sexual assault	2,917	78.52%
Domestic violence	495	13.32%
Human trafficking, dowry and other GBV	134	3.61%
Individual conflicts, political conflicts and other VAW	126	3.39%
Extra-judicial response and mob violence (Witchcraft allegations and others)	29	0.78%
Other crimes (Kidnap, organized crime, illegal trade, theft)	8	0.22%
Discrimination against Dalit women	4	0.11%
Law and order violence	2	0.05%
Grand Total	3,715	100.00%

Source: Nepal Monitor (nepalmonitor.org)

that incidents of VAW are culturally trivialized.⁷ A sub-editor at a national daily argued, “VAW is an under-reported issue with issues of other minorities.” Representatives of the organizations working on the matter also regularly mentioned that VAW had not become a “national issue” and felt it required more attention than it was currently getting. This context ultimately plays a part in what, when, and how incidents of VAW get reported by the news media and, in turn, helps shape public opinion on the topic.

3. Patterns in reported incidents and prevalence levels of VAW

Most incidents of VAW covered by the news and incident reports were related to rape and sexual assault (79 percent). The second most reported incident is that of domestic violence (13 percent). Other forms of violence constitute less than 10 percent, even when clubbed together (See, Table 1). This trend is consistent across all the seven provinces and all three years, between 2018 and 2020 (See, Appendix II).

⁷ National Demographic and Health Survey (2011) found that 21 percent of the male respondents feel a husband may be justified in beating a wife, suggesting a broad tolerance for domestic violence.

Incidents of domestic violence are reported in far lesser number in comparison to incidents of rape and sexual assault despite a much higher prevalence of the former. The WCSCSD data, which gives a measure of prevalence levels for severe forms of VAW, shows that most cases of VAW are related to domestic violence followed by incidents of rape/sexual assault.⁸ In 2019-20 WCSCSD recorded 11,738 (74 percent) cases of domestic violence, while cases of rape/sexual abuse were around 3,063 (19%), the remaining include incidents related to polygamy, child marriage, accusations of witchcraft, untouchability and abortion. The relative proportion has been consistent for the past decade (See, Appendix II).⁹ However, this is not reflected in frequency of incidents that become public through the news reports and incident reports recorded by Nepal Monitor. Even in organizations like Women’s Rehabilitation Centre Nepal (WOREC) that provides relief and legal aid to women who face violence, the most common cases reported were of domestic

⁸ While Nepal Police might record all incidents of VAW that come to their attention, they do not publish incident reports on all the cases.

⁹ While this data is for women and children, the proportion is not likely to be too different for women. Available at <https://cid.nepalpolice.gov.np/index.php/cid-wings/women-children-service-directorate>; accessed on February 14, 2020.

violence.¹⁰ A representative of WOREC stated that often when the police is reluctant to file a FIR on the cases of domestic violence, the victims directly reach out to them for help. This shows that domestic violence is under-reported at both the law-enforcement level and the news media. Consequently, due to the relative under-reporting of domestic violence, a large portion of the public discussion, when it comes to GBV and VAW, highlights incidents of rape/sexual abuse, while domestic violence as a form of VAW draws far less attention even though it is more endemic.

Several reasons explain why publicly reported incidents are not representative of the prevalence levels of different types of VAW. Especially, why domestic violence is under-reported. At the family and community level, women are less likely to report incidents of violence against them, especially domestic violence, unless they are critically injured. Risks of economic insecurity and fear of stigmatization, associated with making an incident or persistent episodes of domestic violence public, prevent women from reporting such incidents to the police, let alone, to news media. For example, a lawyer who provides legal aid to survivors of VAW states that, in cases of domestic violence, many women might not want to report such incidents in order to protect the ‘honor’ of their family. This points to a larger problem of structural constraints censoring certain types of VAW from becoming public.

If a woman facing domestic violence seeks justice through the Nepal Police or other authorities, data suggests that such cases are mostly mediated. For example, during the lockdown between March 24 and July 21, 2020, of the total incidents of domestic violence reported to the police, 42 percent were mediated and only 4 percent were forwarded to concerned agencies while the rest of cases were in progress, suggesting a high ratio of mediation in closed cases of domestic violence. Stakeholders interviewed for this study also

¹⁰ Data recorded by WOREC from July 2019 to June 2020 includes 67.1 percent pertaining to incidents of domestic violence, 11.1 percent includes social violence, 16.4 percent includes incidents of rape, attempt to rape and other sexual violence, and the remaining constitutes other forms of violence. Available at: <https://www.worecnepal.org/uploads/publication/document/1272259663Anbeshi%202020.pdf>; accessed on April 1, 2020

confirmed that most cases of domestic violence were mediated either by the police or local governments. The Domestic Violence (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2009 has made a provision whereby the police or local government can conduct reconciliation between the parties if the victim so desires within 30 days from the date of registration of the complaint.¹¹ Since, the provision provides an avenue for mediation, even in severe cases of domestic violence, if mediated, such cases are not likely to be reported by neither news media nor organizations tracking VAW.

News media covers domestic violence only when it is of an extreme form or when it generates outrage from the public. Of the 224 incidents of domestic violence for which news media (local and national) was the primary source of information, 152 (68 percent) involved at least one death. In the remaining 72 incidents, 51 involved injuries. This suggests that coverage of domestic violence is mostly limited to incidents that are of a severe kind, involving deaths and injuries. Other forms of domestic violence besides physical abuse, like sexual abuse, captivity, emotional abuse and intimidation, isolation, verbal abuse, and economic abuse are rarely reported. Similarly, the news media (along with reporters and editors) have a tendency to normalize the more prevalent forms of VAW, reducing the priority given to reporting domestic violence.

3.1 Provincial and temporal trends

Between 2018 and 2020, while reported incidents of VAW have been increasing, this trend is not consistent across all provinces. Reported incidents have only increased over the three years in Province 2, Lumbini, and Sudurpaschim. The highest number of reported incidents was in Province 2 followed by Lumbini, Province 1, and Bagmati which are also the most populous provinces. The numbers of reported incidents in Gandaki, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim were 312, 227, and 300 respectively, all three provinces are comparatively less populated. Reported incidents seem to closely follow the population, ranging from 117

¹¹ *Domestic Violence (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2009*, Section 4 (8)

Table 2: Prevalence and reported incidents of VAW

Provinces	2018	2019	2020	Total (reported incidents)	Population	Reported incident per million population	Prevalence of VAW as measured by NDHS, 2016*	Approximate number of women facing violence**
Province 1	216	261	232	709	4,501,499	157	7.0	315,105
Province 2	212	261	280	753	4,592,434	163	14.3	656,718
Bagmati	214	246	244	704	5,423,262	129	8.5	460,977
Gandaki	103	99	110	312	2,380,749	129	5.1	121,418
Lumbini	205	236	269	710	4,458,253	159	10.0	445,825
Karnali	56	96	75	227	1,555,816	145	7.0	108,907
Sudurpaschim	69	104	127	300	2,530,988	117	7.0	117,169
Total	1,075	1,303	1,337	3,715	25,443,001	145		

* Percentage of women aged 15-59 who have ever (often or sometimes) experienced physical violence in the past 12 months

** Population (fifth column) multiplied by prevalence of VAW as measured by NDHS, 2016 (sixth column)

Source: Nepal Monitor (nepalmonitor.org), NDHS 2016, CBS 2011

reported incidents per million in Sudurpaschim to 163 in Province 2. Even though reported incidents are somewhat proportional to the population, it does not reflect the prevalence of VAW in different provinces.

The percentage of women aged 15–59 who have experienced physical violence in the past 12 months shows that the prevalence of VAW is the highest in Province 2 with 14.3 percent, while it is the lowest in Gandaki with 5.1 percent. The approximate number of women facing violence based on the prevalence data from NDHS in Province 2 is the highest and is more than double of that in Province 1. However, the number of reported incidents in Province 2 is only 41 (6 percent) more than that of Province 1. Similar discrepancies are also seen in Bagmati and Lumbini where the approximate number of women facing violence is much larger than Province 1, but the reporting of the incidents in these three provinces are similar. In less populous provinces, discrepancies are not as pronounced as those in the more populous provinces.

Since the numbers of news and incident reports do not reflect the actual prevalence levels of VAW, the frequency of reported incidents does not give an accurate picture on the prevalence of VAW across

provinces. Evident from the data above, the incidents are under-reported especially in provinces with high prevalence level of VAW. A reason for this might be that journalists normalize incidents of VAW where the prevalence levels are high – an opinion shared by one journalist, who claimed without being privy to the data shown above that, “reporters in Province 2, where incidents of VAW are rampant, might start normalizing such incidents and not report them as much.” Similarly, editors might also normalize such incidents and de-prioritize their publication. This requires a detailed study to understand why reporting of incidents of VAW does not resemble actual prevalence levels but instead roughly corresponds to population size.

4. Content analysis of news-reports

The analysis in the third section included all 3,715 incidents recorded by Nepal Monitor. In this section, the analysis is limited to news reports by national and local media, and will leave out incident reports by INSEC and Nepal Police.¹² News reports can

¹² INSEC and Nepal Police reports are primarily made for disseminating information to news media and other concerned stakeholders.

Table 3: Length of VAW and other news reports*

Length of news-reports	Reporting of VAW incidents		Reporting of other incidents	
	Local media	National/Online media	Local media	National/Online media
Short (less than 100 words)	52.50%	48.64%	42.59%	33.01%
Medium (101 to 200 words)	39.50%	36.46%	42.43%	41.92%
Long (more than 200 words)	8.00%	14.90%	14.98%	25.07%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

* This includes data on 1,490 VAW news stories and 4,981 news stories of other incidents from 2018 to 2020.

Source: Nepal Monitor (nepalmonitor.org)

be analyzed using their contents, and the narratives they intentionally or unintentionally push can also be assessed. Nepal Monitor recorded 1,490 incidents between 2018 and 2020 whose primary sources of information were national newspapers, online media, and local newspapers.¹³ Length, content and the stories in these news reports are assessed here.

4.1 Length of news reports

The average length of news reports on VAW was 133 words. In comparison, the average length of stories on incidents other than VAW incidents recorded by Nepal Monitor was 160 words.¹⁴ The fact that the reports on VAW are shorter by 27 words, at least three-four sentences, suggests that news reports on such incidents provide relatively less information. Reporting on VAW is generally shorter than 100 words (around 50 percent for both national and local media), while reports on other incidents tend to be more than 100 words. The percentage of longer news reports on VAW (8 percent and 14.9 percent for national and local media respectively) is also much lower in comparison to that of stories on incidents other than VAW (14.9 percent and 25 percent for national and local respectively). This shows that coverage on

VAW tends to be shorter than coverage of stories of incidents other than VAW. Not only is the frequency of news reports on incidents of VAW not reflective of the actual prevalence levels, but the content also tends to under-report the stories behind the incidents as evident from their short length, generally and also in comparison to stories on incidents other than VAW.

While the actual content of these reports is discussed later in this section, several reasons were given for shorter news reports on incidents of VAW by journalists and editors. “Incidents of VAW are taken as filler stories,” a reporter from a national daily said. This was also seconded by other journalists and concerned stakeholders interviewed for this study. Another journalist from a major national daily said, “Stories of VAW are not pursued by senior reporters, and often left to junior reporters who are under equipped to take on that responsibility.” The lack of priority given to covering incidents of VAW by news media could be responsible for news reports being much shorter. This would also make more difficult to acquire adequate information on incidents of VAW. Covering cases of rape/sexual assault, which tend to be reported more often in Nepali news media, requires a journalist skilled in gaining the trust of the survivor, asking uncomfortable questions, corroborating aspects of the story through documentation and other interviews.¹⁵ An inability or a lack of priority to do so, might mean information is not gathered and the final outcome only chronicles accounts provided by authorities or a

¹³ Nepal Monitor records each unique incident and corroborates the information with multiple sources. However, they might not include follow up stories, which have not been analyzed here. Additionally, Nepal Monitor uses data from more established sources, reports by publications and portals lacking credibility are not assessed here.

¹⁴ Nepal Monitor tracks other incidents like political violence and other disputes, besides GBV and VAW.

¹⁵ Bladling, Micheal. 2017. Covering Sexual Assault. Nieman Reports. Available at <https://niemanreports.org/articles/covering-sexual-assault/>; accessed on January 4, 2021.

Table 4: Average length of different types of VAW news reports

Types/causes of VAW	Average word count
Rape/Sexual assault	125
Political and other conflicts	134
Domestic violence	140
Law and order violence	141
Other crimes (Kidnap, organized crime, illegal trade, theft)	156
Extra-judicial response and mob violence (Witchcraft allegations and others)	167
Other forms of GBV (Human trafficking, dowry, and others)	193
Discrimination against Dalit women	267
Total	133

Source: Nepal Monitor (nepalmonitor.org)

singular person, which tend to be short. This seems to be consistent with trends in other countries.¹⁶

Reports on VAW by national news media (online or newspapers) were generally longer than that by local outlets. The average length of a national news media report was 136 words compared to the 113 words written by local media. Local newspapers are normally closer to the location of the crime and usually have easier channels to access concerned individuals, despite this, their reportage tends to be shorter than that of national news media. Local newspapers are also shorter than national dailies which might influence the length of VAW stories along with other stories. However, a journalist pointed out that local reporters might find it difficult to follow sensitive issues given their close involvement with the community. On the one hand, it might be easier for local journalists to access concerned individuals to inform their reporting, at the same time, the size and scope of their newspaper and their close involvement with the community might limit the extent to which they can pursue stories of VAW. These reasons need to be explored further in understanding local media's role in covering VAW.

Moreover, the length of news reports of rape/sexual assault are the shortest and the reports on domestic

violence are also relatively shorter. In comparison, less frequently reported types of incidents like extrajudicial responses and mob violence, and other forms of GBV like human trafficking, dowry, etc. and issues pertaining to discrimination against Dalit women are relatively longer. The reason for relatively shorter news reports on rape/sexual assault and domestic violence can also be explained by their relative wider prevalence and their frequent reporting. As discussed earlier, journalists and editors might normalize incidents that are more frequent, consequently, they do not cover these stories in depth. The fact that such stories are mostly run as newspaper fillers might also explain their short length. In comparison, other incidents of VAW that are less prevalent and only reported occasionally, tend to be longer.

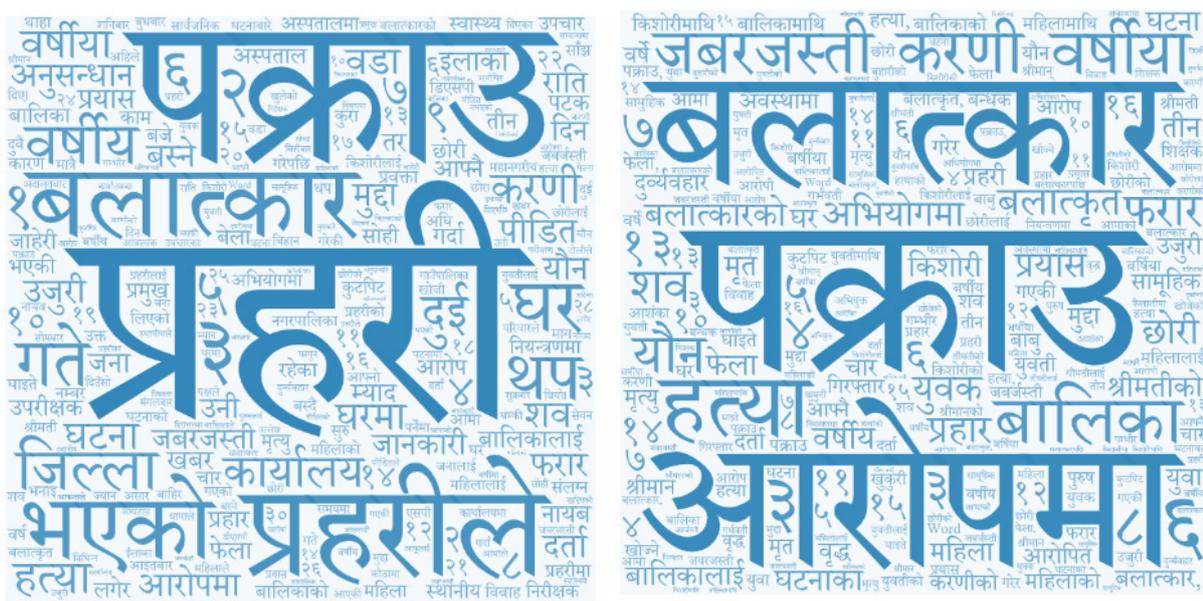
4.2 Content of news reports¹⁷

The use of words and phrases (of two, three, and four words) in headlines and news stories and their frequencies were analyzed to find patterns in the content of news reports, and also to check if any words or

¹⁶ UN Women. 2016. Research on media reporting on gender-based violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Available at https://bosniaherzegovina.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/Istrazivanje_o_medijskom_izvjestavanjuUNWOMEN_BiH_ENG_0.pdf; accessed on December 24, 2020.

¹⁷ DRCN used the programming language Python to find the most frequently used words and phrases (of two, three, and four words) to assess the content of news reports.

Figure 1: Word-cloud of frequently used words in headline (left), and news reports (right)



Source: Nepal Monitor (nepalmonitor.org)

phrase stigmatized, blamed, or caused intended or unintended harm to the survivor. It was found that the words and phrases used in the headlines of most incidents provide information on the following things: a culprit has been accused and/or arrested, the nature of the crime, and age of the survivor. Some of the headlines particularly emphasized the victim’s age and her relationship with the accused, especially in cases of rape. This seemed to be intended to scandalize. Beyond this, the headlines were methodically written with similar words and information used in many of the reports (See, Figure 1, left).

News stories were not substantively dissimilar to what is suggested by the headlines. The most frequently used words included police—*prahari*, arrests—*pakrau* and the nature of the crime (rape, murder, etc.). These news stories chronicled the event, providing information on the location of crime, address of the perpetrator and survivor, and the relationship between the perpetrator and the survivor. They point out the stage of investigations and mostly take quotes from a representative at the District Police Office (Figure 1, right).

4.3 Stories told by news reports

The list of frequently used words and phrases gives a general impression of the content in news stories. However, it does not give an understanding of the stories that these reports are telling and the common practices employed by journalists to tell these stories. Qualitative aspects of a 5 percent (73 incidents) random sample of these news reports were analyzed.¹⁸ Such aspects included: who speaks in these news stories, if survivors are identified by name or can be identified through other information, what prompted the publication of these news-reports, and whether any other contextual information was included regarding these incidents and VAW in general. Using this information, why certain incidents were covered and how they were covered in the news can be assessed.

¹⁸ The framework for this section was made employing the method used by Berkley Media Studies Group’s report “What’s missing from the news of sexual violence?” BMSG. 2020. Available at: http://www.bmsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/bmsg_issue22_sexual_violence_news.pdf; accessed on March 20, 2021.

Why were incidents reported?

The majority (more than 70 percent) of incidents covered were to announce the news of the arrest of the perpetrator. The next two major reasons for covering an incident of VAW were the absconding of a perpetrator (6 percent), and notification of an ongoing police investigation on the incident (4 percent). Only 4 percent of the reports covered the lodging of a complaint against the perpetrator. Around three percent of the incidents included investigations by national or local media. Other reasons for covering an incident included the death of the victim and when a survivor's complaint was not lodged by relevant authorities. Such news reports account for only two percent of the sample. This shows that the primary event that drives the reporting on incidents of VAW is police arrest and very few incidents are covered by news media out of their own accord.

Were survivors de-identified?

Reports on incidents of VAW need to be sensitive to the impact it might have on survivors. One method of survivor sensitive reporting is to de-identify the survivor. In the majority of news reports (71 percent) the names of victims were suppressed, while the rest were identified. In 9 percent of the news reports, the identified victims were dead. While for the others, there appeared no rational reason for revealing the survivor's identity.

In nearly half of the reports where the survivor's name was de-identified, their address was identified. Similarly, in 13 percent of the reports where the survivor's name was de-identified other information like the victim's relation to the perpetrator (whose identity was revealed) and the location of the crime, which could reveal the survivors' identity, were published. Similarly, in incidents where the victim's name was revealed, other information such as photos of victims, even when a minor, were revealed. Additionally, 78 percent of news reports identified the names of the accused or perpetrator, no matter the

stage of the investigation. Similarly, in two instances, the name of a juvenile, accused of rape, was revealed.

This data shows that while news reports have made attempts to de-identify victims/survivors by suppressing their names, many recklessly reported information that might easily help identify the survivors through their location or relationship with the accused/perpetrator. This suggests that many news outlets understand the need to de-identify the survivors, but only use the technique of suppressing names rather than running a due diligence on the story and seeing if any information reveals the identity of the survivor/victim. This shows limited understanding and negligence in news media on the need for maintaining the confidentiality of the survivor and in ensuring that consent is taken before the publication of any material related to the survivor. A journalist also pointed out that, especially in rural and less populated areas, revealing any details regarding victims, perpetrators, location of the crime, etc. could easily give away the survivor's identity.

Who speaks in news reports?

Who speaks in a news report on VAW is crucial. In a news report that can set the tone for the kinds of stories that are told or that are being kept away from the public. In the sampled news reports, all the individuals whose quotes or accounts featured have been counted. Some reports featured more than one individual's account. In almost all of the news reports (94 percent), direct or indirect quotations by a representative from the Nepal Police were included. Only in 15 percent of news reports was an account by family members included, while only 10 percent of news reports included an account by the survivor. Only in seven percent of the stories, accounts by a third party like witnesses, elected representatives, villagers, school principals, or local activists were included.

A high percentage of direct or indirect quotes from the Nepal Police suggests that the primary information source for the media on most incidents of VAW is the police. Essentially, the narratives presented were from the perspective of the Nepal Police. Most journalists also confirmed that news reports relied on information from the Nepal Police. The police also had a practice

of sending daily bulletins to journalists which include incidents reported/investigated by the police including that of VAW. A journalist from a national daily also argued that since covering incidents of VAW was assigned to the crime beat, perspectives of law enforcement dominate the issue. Consequently, most information on news reports do not account for the experience of survivors, corroboration from different witnesses, or other contextual information but contain indicative information on the stage of the investigation, and personal details of survivors and the accused or perpetrator.

Was any other contextual information included?

Besides an account of the incident or information on arrests, absconding, or death, most (more than 70 percent) incidents did not include any contextual information. News reports that added additional context were limited and only added one or two lines of contextual information. These were mostly conjectural rather than substantive. However, they did add some useful insights to the news stories. A few news reports stated that despite the illegal nature of crimes like the mob violence against a woman accused of witchcraft and VAW for reasons related to dowry, such crimes continue to be a constant occurrence in society. One news report pointed out how discriminatory views against the Dalit community play a role in perpetrating VAW. A few reports highlighted the experience of survivors – how survivors can take a long time to open up about their experience of abuse and how they are likely to lodge a complaint only after incidents of an extreme nature. One news report also provided an account of a case where VAW with criminal intent was referred to local police by the District Police Office for mediation. Such contexts are important in shaping public opinion and provide a better picture on the prevalence of VAW.

On the other hand, some reports, while providing contextual information, chose to scandalize the incident, pushed unsubstantiated claims, and even reported rape myths without refutation. For example, a few news reports covering incidents of rape noted an increase in rape in general and in certain locations,

however, they did not provide any substantial evidence for this claim. Similarly, one incident in our sample perpetuated a myth that alcohol consumption leads to rape, without refuting the idea.

Most contextual information, irrespective of the information's nature, were perfunctorily kept and did not elaborate on the factors that influence the prevalence of VAW. None of the reports in the sample provided statistics and data on the local or general prevalence of VAW, GBV, or different forms of such crimes. None of the reports pointed out how a survivor of VAW can pursue legal aid or reach out to authorities, or helplines. For example, a news report pointed out one incident as the first time a case against intimate-partner violence was lodged by the survivor in the district. However, the report did not explain the legal provisions regarding intimate-partner violence, or how other survivors could access justice.

Contextual information can help in understanding social and community level prevalence rates, provide information on how VAW can be prevented, and include themes of resilience and reintegration for those who commit or experience violence. However, most journalists confirmed that reporting on VAW was incident driven. A journalist claimed, "We are running after each incident, and only covering superficial details. We have not been able to provide in-depth coverage that takes into account larger societal factors that cause VAW in the first place." Additionally, the contents in these stories neither create a positive environment for the prevention of VAW nor provide information on recourses available to survivors.

5. Challenges in reporting incidents of VAW

In Nepal, reporting on VAW is largely incident driven and fails to provide contextual information that would improve the understanding of public on the topic. This problem seems to stem from a lack of priority given to the coverage of VAW in news media. Most journalists who have covered the issue at one point confided that newsrooms often take VAW to be a "secondary issue". And as has been discussed earlier reporting incidents of VAW is often assigned to junior reporters. The sensitive nature of VAW incidents demands careful coverage and

requires time and resources to be invested. But the low priority given to the issue by news media means that the reporters are not provided with adequate resources and encouragement to cover the issue. This has led to under-reporting of the incidents both in frequency, and length and quality.

While reporters are responsible for covering VAW, the ultimate responsibility of publishing and pursuing stories is dependent on the newsrooms and editors who head them. Editors have the responsibility to orient and train reporters in ways to cover VAW. To that end, a former editor pointed out that, “Journalists are under-trained, and are hardly acquainted with literature in the field. They need to be sensitized through training, discussions, and serious orientations by editors and seniors in the newsroom.” Another journalist at a major daily claimed that training and orientation on VAW had been happening lately and that they (members of the newsroom), “had a lot of discussion on which stories to report, we often left out stories that only flagged the incident and did not touch upon additional details.” However, he also admitted that this was not enough for the news media to cover VAW, adequately and sensitively. Most journalists pointed out that the severe under-representation of women in news-rooms and editorial responsibilities was one of the major underlying reasons behind the coverage of VAW not receiving the required attention. A study done in 2016 had found that of the 68 editors in 32 influential media houses, only 1.5 percent of the editors were female. Female representation was similarly low in other senior positions like senior correspondents and sub-editors.¹⁹ These structural constraints continue to play a major role in shaping decisions around the coverage of VAW.

Reports on VAW are shaped by the news-gathering process, screened through law enforcement filters, and molded by the conventions and requirements of news-media.²⁰ Incident based reporting and the

prioritization of certain forms of VAW over others are a consequence of this process. Moving away from such reporting requires changes in the structure, careful examination of the methods employed by news media, and an orientation away from incident-based reporting towards a public health model to frame crime stories. This model of reporting promotes the incorporation of broader contextual and statistical information into a single event story and the application of same tools as those used to reduce or control other epidemics.²¹ News stories on VAW in Nepal can include relevant statistics from surveys and other studies, community risk level factors, society’s responsibilities in the prevention of VAW, and information on how to access relief, support, and justice for survivors.

6. VAW during the pandemic

Across the world and in Nepal, reports surfaced that VAW was on the rise during the pandemic. As noted earlier, NWC reported that in the first three months of the lockdown from the late of March to June, the number of calls to their 24-hour toll free helplines for survivors of VAW doubled. Adding to this, a report published by WOREC at the end of 2020 using a survey of stakeholders working to prevent VAW and improve the victim’s access to justice, suggested that the likelihood of domestic violence in particular had significantly increased. This highlighted the vulnerability of women to social and economic shocks. Individuals providing free legal aid, relief, and support to the survivors of VAW agreed that incidents of domestic violence rose during the pandemic. They pointed out the importance of understanding domestic violence not just as an incidental event, but as a persistent form of abuse by family members. A lawyer who provides legal aid to women facing violence argued, “The lockdown meant that those already facing abuse at home faced more violence as they had to spend a longer period of time in their homes with perpetrators.”

Even though, an increase in incidents of VAW was observed, the reporting of such incidents did not seem

¹⁹ Sancharika Samuha. 2016. Women Journalists in Nepal: Research on professional status of women journalists in Nepal. Available at http://www.sancharika.org/portal/html/images/item_images/files/All_Sancharika_English_Survey_book_2016.pdf; accessed on March 19, 2021.

²⁰ SACCOVE. 1995. Media Constructions of Crime. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716295539001011>; accessed on March 20, 2021.

²¹ Thorson, Esther, Lori Dorfman, and Jane Stevens. 2003. Reporting crime and violence from a public health perspective. *JJIS*; accessed on March 20, 2021.

to have increased. Nepal Monitor's data does not show much of an increase in the number of publicly reported incidents of VAW during the pandemic and lockdown period. In fact, number of incidents collected by Nepal Monitor has remained more or less consistent between 2018 and 2020. Importantly, WCSCSD data shows a decrease in the incidents of VAW for the fiscal year 2076-77 BS (2019/2020) compared to earlier years. The data also shows a decrease in incidents of domestic violence.²² The fiscal year includes the time period of the early pandemic and the lockdown that followed. As stakeholders interviewed by WOREC suggest, if cases of VAW in general and domestic violence in particular increased, this is not reflected in the publicly reported incidents recorded by Nepal Monitor and the data by WCSCSD. Besides the general problem of under-reporting of VAW, several reasons might be responsible for why the incidents of VAW were not reported during the pandemic. A journalist pointed out that during the first phase of the lockdown, police gave counselling from the phone and suggested survivors of domestic violence to stay home as they were not allowed to come to the police station. Additionally, the incidents that most likely increased during the pandemic were domestic violence, which as shown earlier, are most likely to be under-reported. Similarly, the pandemic saw closure of several national and local newspapers²³ and many journalists raised the issue that their employer had not paid them for months.²⁴ All of these reasons might have led to a decrease in the reporting of VAW incidents during the pandemic.

Given the increased calls to helplines, several (non-) governmental organizations including NWC, Legal Aid and Consultancy Center (LACC), and WOREC took initiatives to make it easier for women facing violence to reach them by disseminating disclaimers and their contacts over social media. In light of the pandemic, a more thorough investigation is necessary to understand

²² Nepal Police, 2020. 24 years of crime data related to women, children and senior citizens. Available at <https://cid.nepalpolice.gov.np/index.php/cid-wings/women-children-service-directorate/>; accessed on February 4, 2020.

²³ Pandey, Lekhnath. DW. 2020. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/nepal-independent-media-struggles-to-survive-amid-pandemic-pressure/a-54039476>. Accessed on March 2, 2020

²⁴ Record Nepal. 2020. Available at: <https://www.recordnepal.com/covid19/nepali-journalists-demand-salary-stage-sit-in-protests/>. Accessed on March 1, 2020.

the ways in which economic and social shocks increase the risk of VAW, and to identify effective ways to ensure survivors have access to justice even during events like the lockdown.

7. Conclusion

An increase in incidents of domestic violence was observed during the lockdown and the pandemic. However, VAW in general and domestic violence in particular has been endemic in Nepal. NDHS data from 2016 shows that 22 percent of women in Nepal aged 15-49 have experienced violence in the course of 12 months before the survey was administered. Additionally, the prevalence of domestic violence and spousal violence is especially chronic as 26 percent of married women experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence. Despite this the reporting on incidents of VAW misrepresents the extent and nature of this endemic. More prevailing types of incidents, and incidents from regions with high prevalence levels of VAW are under-reported. Additionally, the news reports lack context and details to aid in understanding the nature of VAW in Nepal.

Data collected by Nepal Monitor offers a wide coverage of incidents of VAW that are publicly reported through news reports in local and national media and through institutions like INSEC and Nepal Police. In this data, most of the publicly reported incidents of VAW include incidents of rape/sexual assault. While domestic violence is the second most publicly reported incident, it appears to be relatively underreported in comparison to its prevalence. WCSCSD data shows that domestic violence is prevalent four times more than incidents of rape and sexual violence. However, publicly reported incidents of domestic violence are only about two-tenth of the publicly reported incidents of rape/sexual assault. Domestic violence is under-reported because most cases are mediated by authorities, a culture of silencing and stigmatizing limits the survivors from telling their stories openly, and due to structural constraints that enforce filters on news media and the criminal justice system. As such, stories about domestic violence are hidden from public view even though it causes suffering for a large number

of women. Similarly, the number of publicly reported incidents does not reflect the provincial prevalence of VAW. The frequency of publicly reported incidents is broadly representative of provincial variation in population but areas with high prevalence levels of VAW are underreported.

In the content of news reports, stories of VAW were relatively shorter in length compared to other incidents of conflict. This is a consequence of the lack of priority given to covering such incidents and due to the difficulty in acquiring primary source information on incidents of VAW. Additionally, stories are mostly accounts from one source – Nepal Police. They were mostly published to announce the arrest of the accused/

perpetrators. While news media make an attempt to identify survivors in their reports, they do so mostly by suppressing the names of the survivors while keeping other information like address and relation to the identified perpetrators that can help easily reveal the survivor's identity. Additionally, the stories, mostly of rape and sexual assault, are chronicles of individual events. Relevant stakeholders can push for efforts that help in producing better coverage on VAW that contextualizes events and uses a public health model by including relevant statistics, risk level factors, society's responsibilities in prevention, and providing details on access to justice, relief, and support for survivors, as opposed to the incidental reporting that is in practice.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: Data and methods

Nepal Monitor & Data

Nepal Monitor is an online platform that provides comprehensive database of incidents related to violence and contestations in Nepal to facilitate the analysis, study, and research of violence with the aim of identifying measures to reduce and eliminate violence in Nepal. Nepal Monitor collects data on VAW, human rights violation, contestations related to politics, governance and economics including natural resources and development of infrastructure projects through extensive media monitoring. The database contains more than 20,000 coded individual reports through 2015 to 2021 freely available for download at nepalmonitor.org.

Methods of Analysis

The analysis was conducted using several secondary data sources including NDHS 2016, WCSCSD data on violence against women, children and senior citizens publicly available on the Crime Investigation Department (website), and publications by organizations like WOREC and NWC among others. Additionally, DRCN also conducted key informant interviews with stakeholders working to prevent VAW and providing access to justice, relief, and support to survivors. These include representatives of organizations like LACC, WOREC and Nepal Police, among others. DRCN also conducted interviews with journalists to generate information on how and what types of VAW incidents are covered by the news media. Additionally, other relevant documents, surveys, studies, and literature on the topic were also consulted.

The content analysis of the stories covered by news reports was conducted using Excel (for length of the stories) and Python programming language (for word and phrase frequencies). To understand the qualitative content, a random stratified sample of 5 percent (73) was taken from a total of 1,490 incidents whose primary sources of information were news reports. The strata chosen for the sample were the nature of news sources (national and local), and the seven provinces. Each of the stories was then perused to count for relevant details.

APPENDIX II: List of tables

Composition of publicly reported VAW across seven provinces*

Type/causes of VAW	Provinces							Grand Total
	Province 1	Province 2	Bagmati	Gandaki	Lumbini	Karnali	Sudurpaschim	
Rape/Sexual assault	78.78%	70.72%	82.17%	83.44%	83.47%	71.68%	76.77%	78.48%
Domestic violence	14.29%	15.64%	11.13%	9.09%	9.32%	24.78%	15.49%	13.32%
Other forms of GBV (Human trafficking, dowry, etc.)	2.69%	6.95%	2.71%	2.60%	2.68%	2.21%	4.04%	3.63%
Other forms of VAW (Individual conflicts, political conflicts and other)	3.54%	4.14%	3.00%	4.22%	3.81%	0.88%	2.36%	3.41%
Extra-judicial response and mob violence (Witchcraft allegations and others)	0.42%	2.01%	0.57%	0.32%	0.42%	0.44%	0.67%	0.78%
Other crimes (Kidnap, organized crime, illegal trade, theft)	0.14%	0.13%	0.29%	0.32%	0.14%	0.00%	0.67%	0.22%
Discrimination against Dalit women	0.14%	0.27%	0.00%	0.00%	0.14%	0.00%	0.00%	0.11%
Law and order violence	0.00%	0.13%	0.14%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.05%
Grand Total	100.00%							

* Total number of incidents = 3715

Composition of publicly reported VAW from 2018 to 2020*

Types/causes of VAW	2018	2019	2020	Grand Total
Rape/Sexual assault	77.16%	75.90%	82.05%	78.48%
Domestic violence	15.17%	14.81%	10.40%	13.32%
Other forms of GBV (Human trafficking, dowry, etc.)	2.56%	3.68%	4.41%	3.63%
Other forms of VAW (Individual conflicts, political conflicts and other)	3.79%	4.68%	1.87%	3.41%
Extra-judicial response and mob violence (Witchcraft allegations and others)	1.14%	0.54%	0.75%	0.78%
Other crimes (Kidnap, organized crime, illegal trade, theft)	0.09%	0.23%	0.30%	0.22%
Discrimination against Dalit women	0.00%	0.15%	0.15%	0.11%
Law and order violence	0.09%	0.00%	0.07%	0.05%
Grand Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

* Total number of incidents = 3,715

WCSCSD, Nepal Police crime data on women and children

Fiscal Year (BS)	Year (AD)	Rape	Attempt to Rape	Abortion	Polygamy	Child Marriage	Domestic Violence	Witch Craft	Untouchability	Child Sexual Abuse
2070/071	2013-14	912	414	18	421	15	6835	39	14	
2071/072	2014-15	981	562	17	518	23	8268	43	10	
2072/073	2015-16	1089	452	22	463	20	9398	28	19	
2073/074	2016-17	1131	536	22	464	26	11629	24	17	
2074/075	2017-18	1480	727	18	602	59	12225	48	18	
2075/076	2018-19	2230	786	27	1001	86	14774	46	43	211
2076/77	2019-20	2144	687	29	734	64	11738	34	30	232