



Ethical Deviance in Reporting Violence Against Children: A Cross-National Index-Based Content Analysis of Selected South Asian Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

South Asia is identified as the second-highest region for violence against children by UNICEF in 2024. Communication and public health experts express concern about victims' portrayal in the daily media. Grounded in normative framework of child rights and ethical journalism, this study aims to assess how the media report on violence against children aligns with UNICEF (2006) reporting guidelines. From eight South Asian countries, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan were randomly (lottery method) selected. Three national dailies, namely The Daily Star (Bangladesh), The Telegraph (India), and The News International (Pakistan), were purposively chosen as data sources for their national significance, online accessibility, and applicability for cross-national comparison. Data were retrieved from 01 July 2024 to 31 December 2024. An index-based quantitative content analysis was applied on a total of 792 news reports. Researchers codified the reports into three categories namely violation, partial compliance and full compliance. To score guidelines specific indicators researchers developed an Ethical Compliance Index (ECI). In result, dominance of partial compliance (53%), followed by violations (27%) and full compliance (20%) is found prevalent. It points out discrepancies following ethical guidelines. Considerable variation is found in reporting practices across the three newspapers. The News International shows highest level of both compliances in methodological aspects and violations in Avoid Stigmatization category (78%) and Maintain Absolute Confidentiality category (88%). Conversely, The Telegraph demonstrates the lowest compliance to Serve Child's Best Interest category (11%). A balanced reporting manner is found in The Daily Star's reports. The study concludes that in South Asia, reporting practice on violence against children exhibits marginal level of adherence to ethical guidelines remaining significant gaps in practices.

Keywords: Violence against children, ethical reporting, Ethical Compliance Index, South Asia, national dailies

INTRODUCTION

Human beings under the age of eighteen are considered children, and they are assured of legal and social protection according to the international standards set by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Childhood is a critical period in human development when experiences shape a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social well-being (Mercy & Saul, 2017). According to the UN, Violence Against

Children (VAC) refers to all forms of physical or mental violence, harm, abuse, neglect, mistreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2005). It is acknowledged as a significant worldwide issue impacting millions of children whose health, well-being, development, prospects, and physical and mental health are profoundly affected (WHO, 2022; Hillis et al., 2016). Worldwide estimates show that the degree and intensity of violence against children, with around one billion

children, about half of the world's child population, suffer from abuse every year (UNICEF, 2020; WHO, 2022), and 1.6 billion children (two out of three) are subjected to violence (UNICEF, 2024). Moreover, past data show that 1 in 7 males and 1 in 5 females suffered sexual abuse as children (WHO, 2024). With about 130,000 deaths every year among children and teenagers, a child is killed by violence almost every four minutes worldwide, emphasizing the life-threatening effects of such abuse (UNICEF, 2024).

In 2005, UNICEF published *The Media and Children's Rights*, encouraging media outlets to uphold children's rights and dignity (UNICEF, 2005). In 2006, it reinforced these principles through *Ethical Guidelines for Reporting on Children*, which provide recommendations on representing and reporting on children (UNICEF, 2006). Additionally, according to Social Responsibility Theory (SRT), the media should act as a watchdog and remain accountable to society. Media must work in accordance with ethical and professional standards (McQuail, 2010). It also suggests balanced and objective reporting, public debate, and the protection of vulnerable groups (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947; McQuail, 1987, 2005). Therefore, UNICEF's ethical reporting guidelines serve as a standard framework of news reporting principles, especially in ensuring the ethical framing and protection of children as a vulnerable group. Reporters should uphold ethical principles and report in a responsible manner to promote public interest (McQuail, 2000; Uzuegbunam, 2013).

After Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia is marked as the second-highest region for child violence, where prevalence remains alarmingly high despite efforts by governments and international organizations (UNICEF, 2024). Apart from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, children also suffer from child labour, child marriage, and human trafficking (UNICEF 2020, 2024). Reported instances of child abuse are growing rapidly in Bangladesh (Save the Children International, 2021). According to the Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF, 2019), roughly 812 children experienced at least ten kinds of abuse or violence in 2018. In 2016 and 2017, the numbers were 894 and 686, respectively. There were monthly average reports of 48 child rapes in

2018. 4,381 children were abused in 2019; in 2018 the number was 4,566 (Anadolu Agency, 2020). Compared with previous years, violence against children continued to be a major concern in Bangladesh in 2020, with 626 child rape cases reported nationwide (Manusher Jonno Foundation [MJF], 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, 145 child rape victims perished as well (Prothom Alo English Desk, 2021).

Estimates place India among those with the highest rates of child sexual abuse worldwide. One in two children experiences some kind of sexual assault before the age of 18. Physical assault, especially corporal punishment, is also rather common in homes, schools, and other settings (UNICEF India, 2024). Cases of crimes against children continued to rise in India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023), more than 162,000 offences against children were reported in 2022, reflecting an 8.7% increase from the previous year. Gaps in law enforcement and socio-cultural obstacles have long posed problems for child protection in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2025).

Alongside heinous crimes like rape and murder, children in Pakistan have recently faced many types of abuse, including physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). Pakistan reported a high frequency of child abuse cases in 2023, averaging 11 children maltreated each day. During the year, 4,213 incidents, including child marriage, abduction, sexual assault, and missing children, were reported. Startlingly, even youngsters aged 0–5 were not free from sexual assault (Imran, 2024).

According to Ramasubramanian (2016), limited and inaccurate media coverage of social issues can reinforce the persistence of social stigma. Research on VAC reporting in Bangladesh highlights major ethical challenges in media practices. Using Berelson's quantitative content analysis, Anik et al. (2021) examined the ethical coverage of child sexual assault (CSA) in Bangladesh by analyzing 1,093 news items from four Bengali and two English publications collected in 2017. More than 40% of the reports violated ethical norms according to the study results. Episodic framing was more likely to be immoral than thematic framing (42.8% versus 11.6%). Furthermore, 23% of the reports contained sensational descriptions, and 37%

disclosed the victims' identities. These indicate recurrent violations of ethical standard which affects children's rights. For instance, Jahan and Razib (2023) investigated child abuse reporting in one tabloid and two broadsheet newspapers in Bangladesh through the Children Act. Reports from the tabloid publication were more prone to being dishonest and deceptive. Episodic framing was found prevalent, which frequently violated reporting norms. Singh et al. (2022) examined 149 internet news pieces on child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Indian context, focusing on information quality and framing. Episodic approach, underlying criminal justice elements, and particular events were found most prevalent. It claims the urgency for better journalistic methods and suggests training to raise the quality of CSA reporting. Studying the treatment of the Kathua rape case in The Times of India and The Hindu, Rohman (2019) showed how public opinion and policy reaction were significantly shaped by media coverage. The reporting provoked outrage and forced the administration to tighten legal policies, as well as to change the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, which included the death penalty for child rapists. Using seven UNICEF-suggested principles, Habes et al. (2022) examined how three Urdu newspapers depicted child sexual abuse in Pakistan. With many articles including victim helpline information, indicating a rather responsible attitude to reporting, the results imply that newspapers mostly followed several ethical norms.

Most studies focused on specific problems, such as child sexual abuse, neglect, media ethics, or on single countries. The present research has considered how South Asian media report on violence against children, particularly in terms of compliance with or deviance from UNICEF's reporting guidelines. Besides, a comparison across these media is still absent. Guided by the following research objectives, this study tried to fill this vacuum: RO1. To assess the degree of deviance in news reporting based on UNICEF's guidelines for reporting violence against children, RO2. To compare deviance across selected South Asian countries' national newspapers.

METHODS

This study applied an index-based quantitative content analysis. Considering the objectives and scope, along with the constraints of time,

financial resources, and researchers' capabilities, this study was limited to three of the eight South Asian countries. The simple random sampling method was adopted (lottery method), and a random draw, without replacement, was conducted using identical slips of paper, resulting in the selection of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Then three prominent English-language national newspapers were purposively selected as data sources. The newspapers were The Daily Star from Bangladesh, The Telegraph from India, and The News International from Pakistan. For their national prominence, broader circulation, online accessibility, and eligibility for cross-national comparison, these newspapers were chosen (Department of Films and Publications [DFP], 2024; Registrar of Newspapers for India [RNI], 2023; Audit Bureau of Circulations Pakistan, 2023). For analysis, all news items on violence against children published in the selected dailies' e-paper version between 1 July 2024 and 31 December 2024 were retrieved. For violence against children, both in terms of the number of children afflicted and the degree of its effects on their lives, the year 2024 has been designated as one of the worst on record (UNICEF, 2024). Data were gathered using a PRISMA-influenced approach. Keyword-based headline filtering revealed an initial corpus of 856 articles on violence against children. No identical records were discovered in the first stage. All retrieved articles were then thoroughly scanned for suitability. Articles that did not fulfill the inclusion criteria, including those on adult violence (over 18 years), were eliminated. Following filtering, 64 articles were excluded, leaving a final sample of 792.

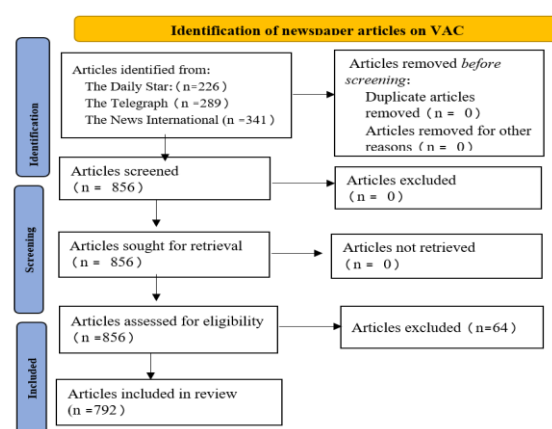


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2021), PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (CC BY 4.0).

To streamline data collection, analysis, and presentation, reporting guidelines from ‘Guidelines for Media Reporting on Children’ (UNICEF, 2006) were operationalized into short, clear analytical categories, maintaining a one-to-one correspondence with the original guidelines. Only reporting-related guidelines were included; those related to interviewing practices or general principles were excluded. The categories are as follows:

Category 1: Avoid Stigmatization: Under UNICEF (2006) guidelines, reporters should not additionally stigmatize any child; they should avoid classifications or descriptions that expose a child to adverse repercussions, including more physical or psychological damage or to lifetime abuse, discrimination, or exclusion by their local communities.

Category 2: Maintain Absolute Confidentiality: The journalist should always replace the name and hide the visual identity of any children found to be: (a) Someone abused or exploited sexually, (b) an abusive physical or sexually offending person, (c) living with HIV or has died from AIDS, unless the child, a parent, or a guardian gives fully informed consent, (d) charged or convicted of a crime.

Category 3: Maintain Risk-sensitive Confidentiality: The reporter should change the name and hide the visual identity of any children named in some situations of danger or possible harm or retaliation as: (a) an asylum seeker, a refugee, or an internally displaced person, (b) violent survivors, (c) a child in residential care (d) a street-living child is exposed to the possibly danger or reprisal.

Category 4: Serve Child’s Best Interest: The journalist should use a child’s name, identity, and/or distinguishing visual in certain instances in the best interests of the child. But when the children are used, they need to be protected from damage and supported against any discrimination or retaliation.

Category 5: Use Multiple Sources’ Information: The journalist should verify the testimony either with another adult or with other children, preferably both.

Category 6: Prioritize Thematic Reporting over Episodic: When doubtful about whether a child is in danger, a journalist should cover the overall circumstances of children rather than a particular child, no matter how newsworthy the story is.

Each report was considered as unit of analysis. This study developed an Ethical Compliance Index (ECI) to numerically evaluate deviance from or adherence to ethical standards in reporting child abuse. Six indicators representing the encoded categories made up the index. Each indicator was scored on a three-point scale: 0 = violation; 1 = partial compliance; 2 = full compliance. To enable cross-national and cross-newspaper comparison, the total score was transformed into a percentage index. At first, two independent coders scored the articles. Then, inter-coder reliability was tested using Krippendorff’s alpha (2018). The reliability coefficient was $\alpha = .86$, which indicates a high level of coding consistency between the coders. Research ethical protocols were intensively maintained by ensuring the objectivity of data, maintaining transparency regarding data analysis and interpretation, and protecting human rights.

RESULTS

Researchers analysed a total of 792 articles from the sampled newspapers.

The News International contains the maximum portion of reports 329 (42%), next to The Telegraph 256 (32%) and The Daily Star 207 (26%). Sexual violence has emerged as the most prevalent kind, accounting for over half of all coverage 404 (51%). About one-fourth of the reports 190 (24%) are on physical abuse; emotional violence is less reported 87 (11%). The results show a great dominance of hard

Table 1: Descriptive information and characteristics of news articles

Newspaper’s Name	News reported	Types of violence reported N=792 (% of N)		Types of news reported N=792 (% of N)	
The Daily Star	207 (26%)	Sexual	404 (51%)	Hard news	673 (84.95%)
The Telegraph	256 (32%)	Physical	190 (24%)	Soft news	119 (15.05%)
The News International	329 (42%)	Emotional	87 (11%)	News with photo	141 (17.80%)
Total news	N=792	Others	111 (14%)	Without photo	651 (82.20%)

This table describes the distribution and key characteristics of the 792 articles collected across three South Asian newspapers.

news types, accounting for 84.95% of all articles. Soft news, by contrast, made up a much smaller part (15.05%). Regarding pictorial representation, only 17.80% included pictures, while the majority of news reports were released without any accompanying images 651 (82.20%).

A gross frequency of violations across all aspects is found. However, the degree of these violations varies significantly across the dailies as well as ethical guidelines. The highest degree of violation across most of the categories is found in reports of The News International from Pakistan. It highlights the least strict compliance with ethical standards. This newspaper violates Maintain Absolute Confidentiality (88%) and Avoid Stigmatization category (78%), which proves a frequent exposure of children's identities and the use of potentially harmful details in reports. Besides, over half of the reports violate Serve Child's Best Interest (51%) and Use Multiple Sources' Information categories (54%), which reflect limited consideration for children's well-being. It also demonstrates a very poor cross-checking practices. Though relatively low violation rate in Maintain Risk-sensitive Confidentiality category (38%), it is still noteworthy. It points out weak management of child-related sensitive information.

The Daily Star violates ethical reporting guidelines in a modest degree. It violates Prioritize Thematic Reporting over Episodic category at 89%. It denotes a notable tendency toward event-driven episodic reporting rather than contextualized narratives. Question about the protection of children's identities and dignity is emerged from violations of Maintain Absolute Confidentiality (76%) and Avoid Stigmatization category (56%). However, in Maintain Risk-sensitive Confidentiality (22%)

and the Serve Child's Best Interest category (27%), a better performance is found. The Telegraph from India shows a mixed pattern compared to the other newspapers. It scores lower violations in various key categories. Especially, it records the lowest violation rate in Serve Child's Best Interest category (11%), which means a comparatively higher degree of care for children's interests in reporting. In addition, violations in Maintain Risk-sensitive Confidentiality (20%) and Use Multiple Sources' Information category (26%) are comparatively low. It is evident from the violation of Maintain Absolute Confidentiality (75%) and Avoid Stigmatization category (57%), that the core ethical guidelines are frequently violated by the newspapers. The violation rate in the Prioritize Thematic Reporting over Episodic category (64%) demonstrates a heavy reliance on episodic framing, although less pronounced than in The Daily Star.

Diverse tendencies are visible in the newspapers' reports. Though Maintain Absolute Confidentiality and Avoid Stigmatization categories are fundamental guidelines for reporting on VAC, violations in these categories are found to be most dominant. This proves that reporting practice often breaks fundamental child safety rules. However, a lower degree of violation in Maintain Risk-sensitive Confidentiality and the Serve Child's Best Interest category indicates a minimal awareness of ethical concerns in reporting. Findings reflect variation in newspapers' house policy, institutional normative practice, reporters' professionalism and commitment to ethical reporting.

In terms of ethical compliance, partial compliance resulted as the highest ethical compliance domain with 53% (n = 421) of the whole reports. It means that the newspapers

Table 2: Frequency of guideline violations across three newspapers

Guideline categories	The Daily Star N=207 (% of N)	The Telegraph N=256 (% of N)	The News International N=329 (% of N)
Avoid Stigmatization	115 (56%)	147 (57%)	256 (78%)
Maintain Absolute Confidentiality	156 (76%)	192 (75%)	289 (88%)
Maintain Risk-Sensitive Confidentiality	45 (22%)	52 (20%)	125 (38%)
Serve Child's Best Interest	55 (27%)	27 (11%)	169 (51%)
Use Multiple Sources' Information	76 (37%)	66 (26%)	178 (54%)
Prioritize Thematic Reporting over Episodic	184 (89%)	163(64%)	273 (83%)

The table offers a thorough evaluation of ethical guidelines violations in reporting VAC across three major South Asian papers.

often lack full compliance with the ethical reporting guidelines, though they follow some elements of the guidelines. The highest rate of violation (36%) is scored by The News International (Pakistan). On the other hand, The Telegraph (India) scores the lowest violation rate (16%) and the highest partial compliance rate (66%). This suggests a tendency toward moderate adherence rather than an absolute deviance or complete compliance. With a result of (50%) partial compliance, (26%) violations, and (24%) full compliance, The Daily Star (Bangladesh) shows a balanced reporting manner. It shows a comparatively better performance in attaining full compliance. Only 20% of full compliance rate is found, which is extremely poor. It criticizes a major gap between recommended ethical reporting guidelines and actual journalistic practices. In terms of reporting, especially in sensitive reporting like child-related events or violence, this is a serious matter of concern.

One of the major findings is the widespread use of episodic framing, which focuses on individual events rather than broader contextual issues. This finding supports Niner and Cuthbert (2013), who claim that media coverage often focuses on severe cases of child maltreatment, shaping public perception. It is also consistent with the arguments of Kim et al. (2010) that episodic reporting limits understanding of the socio-economic and political causes of violence.

The probability of ethical violations is raised in this study, as all three newspapers mostly depended on episodic stories with vivid and explicit descriptions. Thematic reporting, on the other hand, less often followed ethical standards by using expert viewpoints and contextual analysis, therefore supporting evidence that thematic framing allows for more responsible journalism (Gross, 2008). Event-driven over contextually in-depth reporting is encouraged by the media house for hard news

Table 3: A cross-national comparison of compliance with and violations of ethical guidelines across the selected newspapers

National Daily	Violation (Article number and Score%)	Partial compliance (Article number and Score%)	Full compliance (Article number and Score%)	Total Reports
The Daily Star (Bangladesh)	54 (26%)	104 (50%)	49 (24%)	207
The Telegraph (India)	41 (16%)	169 (66%)	46 (18%)	256
The News International (Pakistan)	118 (36%)	148 (45%)	63 (19%)	329
Total	213 (27%)	421(53%)	158 (20%)	N=792

The table presents how ethical compliance and violations are found across the three dailies.

DISCUSSION

UNICEF (2024) marked South Asia is one of the most affected regions in the context of violence against children. Mass media in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan report incidents of violations against children in a wide range for its seriousness and high news value. But the reporting manner is not very satisfactory in line with the ethical reporting guidelines recommended for the reporters. Although VAC is widely reported, adherence to UNICEF's ethical guidelines remains low. Only 20% of reports entirely follow the guidelines, while most of the reports show partial compliance or complete violations. The findings of this study, consistent with earlier studies (Naylor, 2001; Foley et al., 2007), point that media often prioritize sensational and crime-related news, occasionally at the expense of ethical reporting standards.

values, commercial purpose, prioritizing urgency, emotional appeal, and audience engagement (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

The results also show that sexual abuse is the most often reported kind of violence against children, therefore pointing to a lot of media attention on such situations. This may be connected to the high news value and emotional salience connected with reporting on sexual violence, which sometimes causes its overrepresentation in news coverage (Greer, 2007; Jewkes, 2015). Furthermore, across all three countries, newspapers mostly used hard news formats (84.95%), therefore implying that violence against children is largely covered as event-based hard news rather than contextual or analytical soft reporting, congruent with the prominence of episodic framing in crime journalism (Chermak, 1995).

Another important issue is the widespread violation of ethical standards regarding confidentiality, stigmatization, and source verification. Newspapers often fall short of completely preserving children's identities throughout the narratives, with instances of violation of the Maintain Absolute Confidentiality and Avoid Stigmatization category being the highest across all three newspapers. Directly opposed to UNICEF policies, these practices agree with past studies pointing toward comparable ethical difficulties in Asian media environments (Tahir, 2024; Anik et al., 2021; Maharani, 2018). In many situations, children's confidentiality is inadvertently broken by the revelation of identifying information such as the offender's name or their relationship to the child, therefore making victims identifiable even without expressly naming them, thereby echoing results by Jones et al. (2010). Moreover, the limited usage of several sources in reporting points to inadequate verification procedures, hence questioning journalistic reliability because reliance on a small number of sources is linked to diminished accuracy and credibility in news production (Reich, 2011). Use of stigmatizing words and emotive framing raises the possibility of stigmatization and compromises the dignity of children even more (Mowri & Bailey, 2022).

Cross-national comparison highlights notable differences in ethical compliance across the newspapers. The News International (Pakistan) records the highest degree of violations suggesting weaker adherence with child safety guidelines. The Daily Star (Bangladesh) shows moderate compliance but continues to rely on episodic reporting and include identity-related violations. In contrast, The Telegraph (India) performs relatively better, especially in safeguarding children's best interests and using multiple sources. Significant gaps still remain in preventing stigmatization and maintaining the privacy of children. These variations may reflect the influence of editorial policies, institutional procedures, socio-cultural context, and professional journalistic norms. As argued by Hanitzsch et al. (2011) and Hallin and Mancini (2004) the differences in media systems and journalistic cultures shape news production and ethical standards.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that national newspapers do not

consistently uphold the principles of social responsibility theory, which emphasizes ethical reporting, public accountability (McQuail, 1997) and the protection of vulnerable groups (Paul & Kabiru, 2019). Instead, the frequent use of stigmatized frames, breaches of confidentiality, and insufficient context reporting indicates a failure to balance news values with moral obligations.

This study has several drawbacks. First, it focuses on only three English-language national newspapers, which may not fully represent the broader media landscape, including vernacular newspapers and local media. Second, the analysis is confined to e-paper editions and excludes digital-native news outlets and television, where ethical dynamics might vary. Third, while the content analysis identifies the patterns of adherences and violations, it does not explore the underlying process of editorial decision-making behind these practices.

Despite these limitations, this study has crucial implementations. The results underscore the need for stronger editorial oversight, tailored training on child-sensitive reporting, and more effective implementation of UNICEF's reporting guidelines. Future research could investigate audience perceptions of VAC reporting, explore newsroom practices to identify the structural factors of ethical violations, and extend the analysis to digital media platforms.

The role of mass media in shaping public understanding and informing policy discussion is globally recognized. Mass media cover reports on violence against children widely, but the quality of reporting remains ethically questionable. This inevitable role of mass media is being constrained by the predominance of episodic framing, along with persistent violations of privacy, confidentiality, and source verification practices. Without stronger adherence to ethical standards and greater commitment to child-sensitive, context-based reporting, media coverage may reinforce harm rather than support child protection or public awareness.

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