

Women Protection Legislation and Media Discourse In Pakistan

Abstract

This current study is an attempt to examine the role of national media towards the promotion of women rights awareness. For the purpose, media coverage, during the time period when women protection legislation was proposed, debated and passed in Punjab assembly, has been examined. It has been studied as to what extent the media focused to discourse the legislation and in what way the bill, which became law later on, was conversed. Moreover, it has been observed as to how responsibly media debated the issue for the awareness of the people and especially women. Considering the purpose of the study, agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Social responsibility (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956) theories of mass communication have been sourced. Findings revealed that the media did not prioritize the women protection legislation and published a limited number of reports and editorials in selected time-period. The primary coverage focus remained inclined towards “statements” of prominent personalities along-with “activities and events” regarding women protection legislation. It was noted that debatable aspects and provisions of the legislation were neglected in the media. The fact remains that discussions relating to execution, implementation and awareness were much more important rather than reporting mere rhetorical statements or event coverage.

Key words: women rights, violence against women, women protection legislation, mass media and women rights awareness

Introduction

Violence against women: Over time women’s rights have gained much importance and in recent times violence against women has come to be considered a major human rights issue (Ellsberg & Heise 2005; Ginsburg, 2007; Joachim 2000). The United Nations (UN) in this regard, has played an influential role through its human rights campaigns to promote women’s rights. At the moment, various international organizations and women’s movements employ the human rights approach to force various governments of countries to develop and implement policies and laws aimed at protecting women (Hawkins & Humes, 2002). However, despite the presence of various rights, regulations and laws, women remain victims to discrimination, harassment and assault at the work place as well as their homes in several societies (Dunning et al., 2007).

It is often argued that the frequency of violence against women is commonly higher in countries where the level of gender equality is low and the

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rate of unemployment is higher (Xu, Kerley, & Sirisunyaluck, 2011). Probably for the same reason, women have been observed to be frequent victims of physical, psychological and sexual aggression in third world countries. Domestic violence in particular is quite common in countries with gender inequality. Holden (2003) referred to domestic violence as “assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults use against their intimate partners”. Domestic violence has emerged as a major concern as this sort of violence impedes economic and social development of women. Moreover, it undermines the self-determination of women victims (Koenig et al., 2003).

Violence against women in Pakistan: Gender inequality is a common phenomenon in our subcontinent and being a paternal society with most women being dependent on men, domestic violence can be observed as an accepted, rather, an established practice (Koenig et al., 2003). In so far as Pakistan is concerned, the issue of violence against women is quite prominent. A research, conducted by Aurat foundation in 2015, shows that 70 to 90 percent women in Pakistan have to face domestic violence at least once in their lives. According to the report, violence against women is on the rise in Pakistan. In the year 2013, around 7,852 cases were registered. The number of cases increased in 2014 by 28.2% with 10,070 cases being reported. The data reveals that on an average, 6 women and girls were kidnapped and abducted per day, 4 girls and women were raped or gang raped per day, 4 women and girls were murdered on an average per day, 2 cases of killings in the name of so called ‘honor’ took place per day and on average 3 women committed suicide in the country (Aurat foundation, 2015) – and these are cases that are reported, there are thousands of cases that go unreported.

Although, various administrative and legislative measures have been continuously taken by various regimes in Pakistan in order to ensure women rights, protection and empowerment (Asia Report, 2015), however, lack of implementation has always remained as a major hurdle when it comes to improving the situation. Besides, the basic problem is that a vast majority of women are not aware of their basic legal rights in Pakistan (Concern Worldwide, 2013).

Unfortunately, cultural limitations and upbringing also augment this ignorance.

Mass Media and women rights: Media is considered to be the watchdog of society (Birn, 2015) and therefore its importance cannot be undermined in almost all aspects of life. It has the potential to influence the opinion of people (Shukla, 2013) and subsequently transformation of society. Media is especially considered important when it comes to spreading awareness regarding women’s rights. Various researchers argue that awareness can be utilized as an important instrument to influence societal behavior towards women (Migiro, 2009) and in this way, may play a pivotal role in controlling human and women rights violations (Breiding et al., 2005; Gill & Stewart, 2010; Hamzeh et al., 2008; Leppakosk et al., 2011; Lockart et al., 2011).

Social media, in the same context, has its own influence, with the gain of rapid popularity in the past decade, it has gained a wider audience which

encompasses the public as well as higher authorities and it can be used to spread awareness regarding women related issues persuading higher authorities or governments to take action towards gender parity (Loiseau & Nowacka, 2015). Considering the potential of mass media, various non-governmental organizations working for women rights often employ media in order to raise awareness about violence against women (Migiro, 2009).

Therefore, it is of much importance how media report and debate gender related issues and stir relevant stakeholders and forums. However, the impact of media on society, whether in a positive or a negative manner, depends on the way it behaves and responds. For instance, media campaigns can promote women rights, emphasize condemnation of discriminatory behavior and convey the message of zero tolerance for violence against women. On the other hand, media may undermine the position of women and may strengthen stereotypical behaviors towards females. Especially, the way media portrays women has been an arguable case. It has been observed that media images regarding violence against women, like the description of rape, representation of females as sexual objects, or pornographic imagery and their continuous prevalence impacts the public in an adverse manner (United Nations, 2005). Various research studies argue that negative portrayal of women on media has an adverse effect (Purnima, 2011; Martins, & Harrison, 2011; Fernandez, 1992) as compared to positive portrayal or representation (Ferguson, 2012; Simon & Hoyt, 2012; Patowary, 2014).

As far as the Pakistani media is concerned, their main focus has been and remains to be political centric, subsequently leading social issues to be under reported regularly. Therefore, the role of Pakistani media, commendable to quite an extent, is criticized often in lieu of disregarding various societal issues (Zaheer, 2016a; 2016b) like women rights and women empowerment. This current study is an attempt to examine the role of national media towards the promotion of women rights awareness. For the purpose, examination of media coverage during the time period when women protection legislation was proposed, debated and passed in Punjab Assembly, has been done.

Women protection bill: The Pakistani society being close knit and paternal has seen many issues being shadowed including domestic violence, which is deemed to be a personal or family affair most of the time. Therefore it has always been difficult to interfere through policy-making or legislation to hinder domestic violence. On 24th February 2016, Punjab assembly passed a bill titled “The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016.” It was argued that, “The overall objective of the Bill is “to institute a protection system for prevention of violence against women and for the protection and rehabilitation of the woman victims”. It was proposed that the protection of women and mediation after violence would be the duty of committees to be established under this law. This process would involve police, community leaders, doctors, psychologists and family members as well.

It was only natural that the bill would face resentment and backlash from certain elements, religious groups being at the helm of this resentment labeled as “un-Islamic”, “contrary to the teachings of Islam” and were termed as a western

conspiracy to destroy the family system. Since the law authorized protection officers to enter the victim's house to recover or relieve the victim, this provision was labeled to be in violation of the sanctity and privacy of home and family. Additionally, introduction of GPS bracelets for offenders in order to protect potential victims was largely resisted. Contrary to this viewpoint, liberal circles welcomed and appreciated the legislation and regarded it as a good mechanism to stop violence against women (Ilyas, 2016). Women rights activists especially, hailed the government for taking a "right step towards protecting the dignity and self-respect of women" (Sajid, 2016). In the whole process, this legislation remained talk of the town. Media also debated this legislation and its various aspects. It was suggested that government should have created the awareness about this legislation through media so that women might know their rights (The News, 2016).

Research Question

- 1- How did print media of Pakistan discourse the women protection legislation?
- 2- How was the coverage of English language media different from Urdu language media?

Theoretical framework: The study aims at considering the media coverage given to women protection legislation. It has been examined as to what extent the media focused to discourse the legislation and in what way the bill, which became law later on, was conversed. Moreover, it has been observed as to how responsibly media debated the issue for the awareness of the people and especially women. Considering the purpose of the study, agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Social responsibility (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956) theories of mass communication have been sourced. Agenda setting theory concentrates on the aspect as to "how media selects, displays, and transmits information". Theory also helps to get the understanding that the selection of media has potential to shape or reshape public opinion. Likewise, Social responsibility theory enforces an obligation upon media to be socially responsible towards public.

Methodology: A period of two months (i.e. 9th February to 9th April 2016) was selected in order to conduct content analysis of relevant news reports and editorials. In this regard, a total of 240 issues of newspapers were examined.

In Pakistan, Urdu and English language media represent two different schools of thoughts regarding various issues. Urdu media often follows a conservative approach unlike English media, which is liberally inclined. For this very reason, both language media were chosen; selecting two national dailies of Pakistan (i.e. daily Dawn and daily Jang). The reason for preferring these two dailies is that both are widely circulated newspapers of English and Urdu for decades (ABC, 2015). Moreover, they are considered most well reputed and influential newspapers in Pakistan.

In the coding process, news reports were coded into various content categories according to their subject matter. Additionally, size¹, tone and placement (i.e. front page, metropolitan, and other pages) of news items were also studied. News contents in favor of the legislation were coded as “appreciative”, disfavoring contents were coded as “critical”, nonaligned/nonpartisan contents were coded as “neutral”. Inter-coder reliability was ensured and examined by using Holsti’s (1969) formula.

Table: Coding categories for data collection

Content categories	Description
Punishments	Media contents related to the punishments (i.e. imprisonment, expulsion, or fines etc.) against the person(s) involved in violence against women (i.e. offender).
Activities and events	Media contents related to all sort of the activities and events (seminars, assembly sessions, meetings, and walks, etc.) in favor or disfavor of women protection legislation.
Reliefs and support	Media contents related to the relief and support procedure provided to victims against the violence or threats. It may include contents/information about security of victim, shelter homes, women protection center, and GPRS band etc.
Statements	Media contents related to mere statements/announcements/declarations of prominent personalities in favor or disfavor of women protection legislation or its selected provisions
Implementation	Media contents related to the execution and implementation of proposed provisions of the legislation for ensuring women protection. The discussion of implementation may be in favor or disfavor of the implementation mechanism. Media contents related to women protection legislation other than the above-mentioned categories.
Others	

¹ News item with 2-8 sentences was coded ordinary

News item with 9-16 sentences was coded Prominent

News item with 17-24 sentences was coded Extra-ordinary

Results and Findings

Results revealed that both newspapers published around 137 news reports regarding the issue of women protection legislation during the two month time period. The Urdu language newspaper (i.e. daily Jang) gave more coverage to the legislation as compared to the English language newspaper, daily Dawn (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of news reports and content categories

Content Categories	Daily Dawn	Daily Jang	Overall total
Statements	13 (31.0%)	40 (42.1%)	53 (38.7%)
Punishments	3 (7.1%)	7 (7.4%)	10 (7.3%)
Implementation procedure	3 (7.1%)	10 (10.5%)	13 (9.5%)
Relief and support	5 (11.9%)	4 (4.2 %)	9 (6.6%)
Activities and events	18 (42.9%)	28 (29.5%)	46 (33.6%)
Others	0 (0.0%)	6 (6.3%)	6 (4.4%)
Total	42 (100.0%)	95 (100.0%)	137 (100.0%)

While conducting the overall examination of content categories, findings revealed media’s inclination towards coverage and printing of “statements” issued by prominent personalities, lending it the highest amount of coverage (38.7%). Likewise, coverage of “activities and events” was focused upon in reporting and 33.6 % chunk of reports was based on event coverage. Lowest coverage was provided to content related to “reliefs and support” provided by law and “punishments” against offences.

As far as newspaper wise coverage is concerned, the English newspaper daily Dawn gave the highest coverage to “activities and events” and “statements”. Around 73.9 % of the news reports was based on these two categories and remaining 26.1 % covered aspects like “punishments”, “implementation procedure” and “reliefs and support” aspects of the law. Similarly. Urdu language newspaper daily Jang remained focused on the same kind of content i.e. “statements” and “activities and events” and around 71.6 % reports were published in this regard (see Table 1).

In order to examine data statistically, Chi-Square test was applied. Statistical analysis revealed that a significant difference (Chi square value = 12.432^a, df = 5, p= .02) exists between content category-wise coverage of both language newspapers. It means that, to some extent, focus of both newspapers varies in terms of content categories of women protection law (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Chi-Square test

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.432 ^a	5	.029
Likelihood Ratio	13.806	5	.017
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.408	1	.036
N of Valid Cases	137		

a. 7 cells (58.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.38.

The study also examined the placement of news coverage, which was done in order to determine the extent of priority given by both language newspapers to the issue. In overall coverage, it was found that around 31 percent news reports were placed on “front page” and most of the news stories were placed on the “metropolitan page” (i.e. 35.8 %) and subsequently on “other pages” (i.e. 32.9 %).

Insofar as the difference between English and Urdu media is concerned, Urdu media gave more priority to “women protection legislation” issue and placed higher number of the news reports (i.e. 41.1 %) on the front page. Contrarily, English media published only four reports on the “front page” and most of its news reports (i.e. 64.3 %) were published on the “metropolitan page”.

Furthermore, statistical analysis revealed a significant difference (Chi square value = 23.815^a, df = 2, p= .000) between placements of news reports of both language newspapers.

Table 2. Placement of news reports

Newspapers	Placement			Total
	Front page	Metropolitan	Others	
Daily Dawn	4 (9.6%)	27(64.3%)	11 (26.1%)	42(100.0%)
Daily Jang	39 (41.1%)	22 (23.1%)	34 (35.8%)	95(100.0%)
Overall Coverage	43 (31.3%)	49 (35.8%)	45 (32.9%)	137 (100.0%)
Chi Square	(Chi square value = 23.815 ^a , df = 2, p= .000)			

As far as size of the news reports is concerned, results revealed that overall 70.8 percent news reports were published in ordinary size. However, around 22 percent prominent and 7 percent extraordinary news were published

overall. While examining the difference between the coverage of English and Urdu media, it was learnt that daily Dawn and daily Jang published highest number of news reports of ordinary size. Number of extraordinary reports was lowest and each newspaper published only 5 news reports of extraordinary size.

In Statistical analysis, an insignificance difference (Chi square value = 4.080^a, df = 2, p= .130) was found between sizes of news reports of both language newspapers.

Table 3. Size-wise coverage of news reports

Newspapers	Size of news reports			Total
	Ordinary (2-8)	Prominent (9-16)	Extraordinary (17-24)	
Daily Dawn	25 (59.5%)	12 (28.6%)	5 (11.9%)	42(100.0%)
Daily Jang	72 (75.8%)	18 (18.9%)	5 (5.3%)	95(100.0%)
Overall coverage	97 (70.8%)	30 (21.9%)	10 (7.3%)	137(100.0%)
Chi Square	(Chi square value = 4.080 ^a , df = 2, p= .130)			

Table 4 depicts the direction or tone of the news reports. In overall coverage, it was observed that the highest number (56.2 %) of news reports were “critical” in tone, subsequently, 22.6 % carried “appreciative” and 21.2 % “neutral” tone. In comparison between selected newspapers, it was found that both newspapers remained unfavorable towards the legislation most of the time and highest number of news reports was published with “critical” tone. However, daily Jang remained more critical as compared to daily dawn and around 62 % news items were critical in tone (see Table 4).

Table 4. Tone-wise coverage of news reports

Newspapers	Tone			Total
	Appreciative	Critical	Neutral	
Elite (Dawn)	12 (28.6%)	18 (42.8%)	12 (28.6%)	42(100.0%)
Urdu (Jang)	19 (20.0 %)	59(62.1%)	17 (17.9%)	95(100.0%)
Overall coverage	31 (22.6%)	77 (56.2%)	29 (21.2%)	137 (100.0%)

Moreover, Pearson’s chi-square test was applied to data to examine it statistically. Statistical analysis showed a significant difference (Chi square value = 7.493^a, df = 2, p= .02) between both newspapers in terms of tone. It indicates that there were dissimilarities in tone-wise coverage of both newspapers (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Chi-Square test

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.493 ^a	2	.024
Likelihood Ratio	7.531	2	.023
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.108	1	.293
N of Valid Cases	137		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.62.

Editorial coverage: Results show that only ten legislation-related editorials were published in both newspapers during the two months period. Each newspaper published 5 editorials in this regard. Four editorials were in favor of legislation (i.e. appreciative) and five were “neutral” in tone. However, only one editorial was “critical” which was published in daily Dawn (see Table 5).

Table 5. Frequency and tone-wise coverage of editorials

Newspapers	Tone			Total
	Appreciative	Critical	Neutral	
Elite (Dawn)	2 (40.0%)	1 (20.0%)	2 (40.0%)	5(100.0%)
Urdu (Jang)	2 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (60.0%)	5(100.0%)
Overall total	4 (40.0%)	1 (10.0%)	5 (50.0%)	10 (100.0%)

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine media coverage in Pakistan regarding women protection legislation. Since frequency and number of news items determine the priority of coverage (Norris, 1995), whereas, size and placement are significant to comprehend the prominence given to any issue (Ader, 1995; Vliegenthart et al., 2005; Shoemaker, 1984), therefore these elements were examined in the study. It was found that during the time period of two months, both language newspapers published about 137 news reports and 10 editorials regarding the issue. It may be debatable that the media did not prioritize the

women protection legislation and published a limited number of reports and editorials in 120 consistent days.

Findings revealed the primary coverage focus to be inclined towards “statements” of prominent personalities along-with “activities and events” regarding women protection legislation. Although it is equally important to raise such reports but it was noted that debatable aspects/provisions of the legislation were neglected by the media. Therefore, the lowest number of news reports were published on the genuine aspects of legislation like “punishments”, “reliefs and supports” and most importantly “implementation procedure”. The fact remains that discussions relating to execution, implementation and education/ awareness were much more important rather than reporting mere rhetorical statements or event coverage. Over the decades, successive laws have sought to improve the position of women, however, unplanned, faulty or a general lack thereof implementation has always weighed things down. Therefore, implementation was, probably, the most important responsibility of the media to have highlighted and stressed upon.

Urdu newspaper daily Jang prioritized the issue comparatively. It gave more coverage to the issue as compared to daily Dawn and also placed higher number of news reports on the “front page” however, daily Dawn placed most of its stories on their “metropolitan” page. A “critical” tone was favored most of the time while reporting various aspects of the legislation in an unfavorable/opposing manner. Contrarily, the tone of editorials remained neutral and appreciative mostly. The length of most of the stories was ordinary, however, a few extraordinary stories were also reported.

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